Participants strut during the adults march at Carnival.

Stiltmen are part of the celebrations. Sometimes, they are 16 feet in the air.

DAWN TRAVEL FEATURE ***Biggest Event of the Year:***

Carnival in St. Thomas

The last two weeks of April is the time when St. Thomians celebrate Carnival, an event as eagerly looked forward to as Christmas in this country.

By Paula Brooks

From the air, the U.S. Virgin Islands, St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John, remind me of three roughly hewn emeralds — buffed and faceted by the wind — lying in a dazzling aquamarine sea.

Their beauty is at once spectacular, yet totally natural and unpretentious. The runway ends abruptly at the foot of a mountain covered with lush vegetation.

The gorgeous greenery is deceptive however, for underneath lies "The Rock," cruel slabs of volcanic ash that helped give St. Thomas one of its nicknames.

The United States purchased three of the Virgin Islands (a small part of the many islands and cays that comprise the Antilles chain), from the Danish in 1917. The natives, African descendants for the most part, were granted citizenship in 1927, and although they can enlist in the armed services, they cannot vote in our national elections.

After touching down on St. Thomas, the most cosmopolitan of the three Virgins, I collected my luggage with relative ease (there were plenty of skycaps), and emerged from the small dim airport into a panorama that made my senses reel!

The sunlight was brilliant — almost as bright as the smiles on the faces of my Caribbean cousins, as they waited to transport visitors to their home away from home.

The air was heavily perfumed with the spicy scent of the flamboyant flower. I began to feel slightly intoxicated by the sights, sounds and odors that assailed my senses. Brilliant red hibiscus flowers were everywhere, and the voices around me were so melodious, they had a song-like quality.

The thought came to mind that this place was ten times better than Fantasy Island — far more beautiful, and predominately inhabited by blacks to boot! It was mid-April, and I was beginning a two week participation in the preparations and festivities culminating in the Carnival Adult Parade on May 2nd.

Carnival as celebrated in the West Indies and South America, is a tradition which began in ancestral Africa. "Carnival began as a celebration of life, rebirth, and new beginnings," explained Leona Bryant, dynamic head of the Ministry of Tourism.

Mrs. Bryant, a vibrant black woman, vividly described the rich history of Carnival. "The high priest was a cult hero in certain West African societies. He danced on stilts that sometimes reached 16 feet, and was called a Mocko Jumbi.

He became the symbol of the elevated spirit. He was the central figure around which the festivities revolved. Through bright costumes and joyous music, the participants attempted to attract the attention and favor of their God."

On a previous visit, friendly St. Thomians had warned me not to miss Carnival, and although the festival was 8 months away, it was awaited more eagerly than children look forward to Christmas.

Now that the time had actually come, I was still not prepared for the whirlwind of Carnival activities that pre-empts everything in the lives of the natives. There was the last minute baking of native pastries and dishes to be sold in the Food Fair, held annually in the market square.

Finishing touches had to be put on the elaborate, rainbow colored costumes, for both the children and adult parades. The Children's Village, with its multitude of games and rides, had to be erected, as well as the adult Carnival Village, which is the heart of the nightly celebrations.

Fifty-odd, gaily decorated booths were in the midst of construction on the periphery of the area that is in everyday life, the Municipal parking lot. All would compete for prizes and sell food and rum.

A huge stage sprang up in the center of the lot, and a red and white big top was soon fluttering in the tradewinds. Even though it was only Friday and the village did not officially open until Sunday, people began to congregate nightly. The revelry was already well under way!

Everyone had been partying since my arrival, so I thought I had some idea of what opening night of Carnival Village would be like. I was dead wrong! The throngs of people eating, drinking and gyrating to a calypso beat, blasting from center stage, was overwhelming!

If Carnival Village is fantastic, The J'Ouvet (jump up) held downtown on the waterfront at 4:00 a.m. Thursday morning is incredible! The entire town turns out to tramp down the street behind their favorite steel band. Don't think about sleeping yet!

Next on this morning's agenda is the Children's Parade. They are divided into marching troupes with floats, just as the adults are, and have every right to be as proud of their special effects! The parade route winds its way through downtown and over to the stadium, where the participants are judged.

The Calypso Tent is the next major center of attraction. Calypsonians from all over the Caribbean had been playing every night for two weeks, preparing for the final competition. They pranced about, making fun of any person, social or political situation that they desired.

This was the night the "Calypso King of the World" and the local "Carnival Calypso King" would be chosen. The Mighty Chalkdust, reigning king of Trinidad, won the international honor and Priscilla, the only woman in the competition, and a local, came in second.

Small Cus became the local King, and local musicians, Eddie and the Movement's "Backbone," was chosen as the 1981

Getting ready for the children's march are these costumed youngsters.

Some of the costumes are elaborate as Carnival preparations continue.