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Office of Walter Bell Oral History Vanishing Culture Project
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Interviewers: Michael Jepson/Wayne Nield

I 1: Walter, we start the interview usually by asking you to state your full name and date of birth.

R: Walter T. Bell. August 25, 1923.

I 1: What were your parents' names?

R: Jessie Blanche Bell and Aaron Parks Bell.

I 1: What was your mother's maiden name?

R: Fulford.

I 1: She was a Fulford. Jessie Fulford. Where did you first live? What was the first house that you remember in Cortez growing up?

R: The first house that I lived in or the first one that I remember?

I 1: The first house that you lived in.

R: Oh, you know where we live at the present. We lived in the same spot but the house next to us was on that particular lot at the time.

I 1: That's on the corner of 45th and ...

R: I believe it's 121st. The old house that Curt Johns lived in was originally the one we lived in at the present site. We just moved it over to the next lot.

I 1: You are married?

R: I am.

I 1: And your wife's name is?

R: It's Sandra Scott Bell.

I 1: And what was her maiden name?

R: Scott.

I 1: And you have children?

R: Two children.

I 1: Two daughters right?

R: Right.

I 1: And their names are?

R: Karen J. Bell and Lisa Michelle Bell.

I 1: I know I'm asking you questions that you know I know, but for the purpose of the tape we want you to talk about it. I'm sorry. I forgot to ask you, you also have ... can you tell me the names of your brothers and sisters?

R: Yes. My older brother is deceased. He was Warren Aaron Bell. Lost during World War II. And next to me is Jesse Nathaniel Bell. He's known as Buster or Mack. Then there's Calvin E. Bell and Chester H. Bell and Betty Alice Bell who is deceased. And Douglas Bell. Carl Douglas.

I 1: So Warren, Jesse, Calvin, Chester, Betty and Carl. And you. So there were seven children in your family?

R: Yes.

I 1: Did you all live in that same house at the same time? The one that you were describing earlier?

R: No. I think we moved out of that one about the time Calvin was a baby.

I 1: Before we go on further, I wanted to ask you. You did have a son also didn't you? What was his name?

R: Jeffrey David Bell.

I 1: Let's go back to your father Aaron, and your mother. But I'd like for you to talk a little bit about your father. What do you remember about him? What kind of a man was he?

R: He was a level headed man and seemed like he was pretty smart. Of course, in the later years he got to where he loved booze pretty good and we had trouble with him with that. He seemed to be a pretty good business man and understood what was going on.

I 1: Did he move to Cortez or was he born here?

R: He came from Carolina.

I 1: From North Carolina?

R: Uh huh.

I 1: Do you know the name of the town he came from?

R: It was Moorhead City. Down in Bogue Sound right out of Moorhead City. His family had a little farm down there.

I 1: When did he move here do you know?

R: I believe he said l914 he come down.

I 1: And what was his occupation when he moved down?

R: He was a farmer but when he come to Cortez he began fishin' and I believe that's actually what he come for.

To make his livelihood out of commercial fishin'.

I 1: Did he fish at all in Bogue Sound? Did he ever talk about that?

R: They had little nets they'd set out and just catch enough fish to eat. They always loved those pig fish and mullet.

I 1: Pig fish and mullet up there. So he was a fisher-farmer when he came to Cortez. But when he came here he basically was a fisherman.

R: That was it.

I 1: Do you remember him talking about the early days fishing in Cortez?

R: I've heard him talk about it several times. I know when he come down here he got into the fish business with another fella from here, Henry Norman. And the old Henry Norman house is still right up the road here at 123rd Street Court. It's next to the Thompson place up there. About the second house from the highway. But they opened up a fish business in Bradenton right around the Pier there now.

I 1: This was your father and Henry Norman?

R: Uh huh. I'm not positive just how this went. I believe he and Henry Norman went up there. I know he and Mr. Hawker, this was Everett Hawker's dad that's had Hawker's place now.

I 1: Before Earl Taylor?

R: Yeah. Well, he was in business with Hawker up there too. They were down on the Pier.

I 1: So was he living in Cortez and fishing here and would market the fish in Bradenton?

R: I believe that's the way it was. But I'm not positive. I know the fish house, I know definitely he and Mr. Hawker were there on the Pier. It was a wooden pier about the place where the Pier's at today. But they got a whole load of mackerel and everything went out on railway cars and they were selling them in Georgia. The whole catch of mackerel they shipped spoiled. That put them under. Mackerel are easy fish to spoil anyway.

I 1: Do you remember him talking about that incident?

R: Oh, I've heard him talk about it lots of times. I never did question him about seeing just which one was first. I know he and Henry Norman were in business together and then he and Hawker.

I 1: So this was prior to his having any fish houses in Cortez?

R: Right.

I 1: Did he say why those mackerel spoiled?

R: I imagine it was just the timin' on the railroad and the lack of ice probably.

I 1: After he had that fish house up there, then did he come back to Cortez and establish a business here?

R: No, right about that time was about the time World War I was comin' on and he left here and went to Pennsylvania. I guess maybe you could say he was a draft dodger. There was lots of people like that before World War I and World War II. He got a job with Baldwin Locomotive in Chester, Pennsylvania. He worked there for a couple of years I think and was eventually drafted anyway. I believe he was drafted. It could have been that he joined the Army but I'm pretty sure he was drafted.

I 1: Was he married at that time?

R: No.

I 1: So he did serve then in World War I. Did he ever talk about that experience with you?

R: Not too much. I don't believe he went overseas.

I 1: So then when he came out of the service what happened?

R: He come back to Cortez and this was before my time. He got in the fish business again, he and my granddad and Mr. Green. That was Woodrow Green's father. And I believe there was Tink Fulford and also Jewel Mora involved in that Manatee River Fish Company.

I 1: All five of them? Your father, your grandfather ...

R: I believe so.

I 1: I'll be darned. And this was the Manatee Fish Company.

R: Manatee River Fish Company.

I 1: And that was located where?

R: That was on the old hotel dock where the Coast Guard dock is at the present.

I 1: Was he fishing at that time? Would he go out in the boats

and fish also?

R: Yes. Here's some news from Cortez you might want to read.

I 1: So, he started the Manatee River Fish Company with those other people and your grandfather. Do you remember much about your grandfather?

R: Not too much except that I think had a drinkin' problem. And he became upset about something, I don't know what, and he drowned himself.

I 1: What was your grandfather's name?

R: Captain Nate.

I 1: Captain Nate Fulford. So, how old were you when he drowned?

R: The best I can remember I was about five years old.

I 1: So you really wouldn't remember much about him.

R: I was four or five years old. I remember seeing him the day before he drowned. He and my Dad were talkin' up at his house and he left. It seemed like it might have been a little argument or somethin'. I don't know just what was goin' on. I was so young I don't remember much about it.

I 1: So, how long did the Manatee River Fish Company last? Do you know approximately?

R: No, but I think it lasted till pretty well up in the '30s but I'm not sure. I never did keep up with the times. I know eventually it sort of broke up and Woodrow took it over. Woodrow and his brother Edgar was in with him on it. But it was mostly Woodrow. I know when we were goin' to high school, we worked for him.

I 1: That's what I was wondering. You remember the Manatee River Fish Company and you probably worked there some then when your father was still associated with it.

R: I don't believe he was associated with it when I worked there. It had to be in the late '30s. '35 to '40 I would say. It might have been earlier than that. It might have been '30 to '35, along in there. Because I know I was gettin' about a dollar a week over the price that we'd get for guttin' fish which was ten to fifteen cent a hundred. So we were pretty young.

I 1: So, as a child growing up here in Cortez you would go down to the fish house and work there like a lot of boys did, gutting mackerel to make some extra money?

R: Right. We would beg our mothers to let us go down school nights and work at night and we was supposed to be back in school the next day which most of the time we were.

I 1: But there were times that you weren't?

R: There were times that weren't, right.

I 1: Did your mother not want you to go down at times?

R: Well, she didn't mind except that she was just worried about us. You know, we were real young and down around the docks at night. Of course, there wasn't too much mischief goin' on in those days. But still you could fall and get hurt or fall in the water and drown or something of that sort. That's what worried 'em.

I 1: Who were some of the boys that you would run with and work with at the fish houses during that time?

R: There was the Adams boys and the Pringle boys, the Lewis' and the Bells and the Guthries. Just about everyone around would ... we'd make spendin' money and also the fish had to be taken care of so the fish houses did need us.

I 1: You were ready labor supply then at that time.

R: Right.

I 1: Eager labor.

R: Uh huh. Of course, we were glad to get out of the house you know, like any boy would.

I 1: How old were you when you first started fishing?

R: As a captain or just fishing with my Dad?

I 1: Fishing with your Dad.

R: Oh, I started probably when I was eight, ten years old and I went fishing with him really not as a helper but just to go along when I was probably four or five years old.

I 1: He'd take you out on the boat when you were that young?

R: Uh huh.

I 1: Was your father a good fisherman?

R: He was pretty good. He was never considered the top fisherman, but he was always good and caught quite a few fish. I remember one night my older brother and I went with him, went down in Crane's Bayou and I guess you know how they fished way back. Each man on the crew had a skiff. Had about three or four skiffs and they'd form off and just pole along and they'd hear the fish jump in between them. Then they would all let go at the same time and form a circle. There'd be two fellas here and two back here. They went down in there fishin' one night and my brother, he got upset and he hollered and screamed for hours it seemed like. I joined in with him and of course, we thought that they'd gone off and left us for good. And we were there on the boat alone. And I don't think I was over five or six years old. But

we were scared to death.

Another time I was with him, my Uncle who fished with him too, Man. And we struck down off Sister Keys and they had all picked their nets up and was comin' back to the launch or tow boat whatever you call it. And he was comin' to the boat real fast and I reached my hand out to keep it from hittin' the big boat and my hand got right in between and it just crushed it. I don't think I was over probably eight or ten years old at that time.

I 1: Did it break your hand?

R: It just crushed it and how it ever grew back ... seemed like it grew back perfect ... I don't know how it did it. But it did. Of course, so young and your bones are soft then anyway.

I 1: So, did you learn a lot of your fishing from your father? How to fish and ...

R: Quite a bit. But most of it just on my own just from trial and error. Of course, the last two years in high school I fished for my Uncle Charlie.

I 1: Your Uncle Charlie ...

R: Guthrie. Gill-nettin'. And I learned quite a bit from him about gill-nettin'. But I always liked to stop-net or haul-net, whatever you call it.

I 1: I'm a little confused at times. I originally thought that stop-netting was here first and then gill-netting came in later. But actually there were gill netters here before the stop netters came, is that right?

R: It's all seasonal more or less. The gill nettin' is usually popular from May through December but the haul nettin' or stop netting it was popular while the water was cool or the weather was cool. They used the old cotton nets back then and in the summer time they would really put 'em in the house or on top of the fish houses and net camps or wherever. But they'd usually put 'em up the end of April and take 'em back out in September. Just fished the cool season. But there was different types of fishermen.

There were some gill netters who never did anything but gill-net. Like Charlie Lewis, I guess you know of him. He was what you would call a gill netter. Charlie Guthrie in the later years of his life, he did a little haul nettin' or stop netting, but he was more or less known as a gill netter. John Fulford the same way. In the later years of his life he got to doin' a little haul netting and stop netting. And at one time there was about fifteen crews that had long strings of net and all of 'em caught a lot of fish.

These shoals and bayous and places would be hauled at least two or three times on a set of tides. A set of tides is usually about ten days long. And a lot of times on the second go-round you'd catch more fish than you would on the

first go-round. It seemed like to me, the more you worked a place, the more the fish would come in. I think once you got the trash fish out and just seemed like the water would stay cleaner or clearer and the fish would just come up on the shoals to feed.

I 1: What would be a usual catch when you'd set a place?

R: It just varied from time to time and year to year. When I was growin' up goin' to school in the high school days a big catch would be a thousand or two thousand and later

on it got to where it was four thousand, ten thousand. And in '45 to '50 it seemed like a lot of times you'd make catches of twenty to a hundred thousand. It just seemed like fish just kept gettin' thicker for years.

I 1: Going back to the different types of fishing, was there a different type of skill needed to gill-net versus stop netting?

R: I would say yes. But a good gill netter could probably learn to be a good stop netter or haul netter or pompano fisherman or whatever.

I 1: Why would a man stay with gill netting rather than go stop netting? Was it just that he was familiar with that style of fishing?

R: It was usually an easier way to fish.

I 1: And gill nets were also cotton at that time, is that right?

R: Cotton and eventually linen. Linen was the pride of the nets. Anyone had a linen net was really one of the top notchers.

I 1: Were they more expensive?

R: Uh huh. Probably about double.

I 1: Then was there any special care that you had to take with the linen net, different than a cotton net?

R: About the same, but they would say you'd put pretty thick lime on a linen net and then drag it through the water as you put it on the spreads so it would wash it out and treat it. But cotton nets you usually did the same thing although it wasn't necessary to drag a cotton net through the water. Usually you'd put the boat out from a spread and if you wanted to drag it through the water you'd tighten your bow cable up five or six feet so you could let it drag through the water more or less than to drag it right up on the spread.

I 1: The gill netters, were they going after any specific species, different than ... like stop netting you'd catch about everything. All different species.

R: Right. That's what I liked about it. If one fish wasn't there you'd catch another one. You'd usually wind up

with a decent day's pay out of one or the other.

I 1: But with gill netting if you were going after a certain species you may only catch a few is that right?

R: As a rule they were after mullet. But occasionally they would go after other fish. Blue fish bunch up a lot and occasionally they would go after them. Or sometimes gray trout would get thick and they would go after them. The gray trouting as a rule, you just run your nets sort of in a moon shape and the fish go up tide and you'd beat the fish back down and catch 'em like that. Now blue

fish, they would bunch up on the shoals at night. And as a rule the good fishermen would know 'em when they heard 'em rally up or break the water and most times if they seen 'em one night they would go back and get a larger mesh net the next night and go try to find 'em again. Then catch 'em. You'd use about a 3 3/4 or 4 inch stretch mesh net to catch blue fish.

I 1: So the fishermen would vary their net mesh size according to the type of fish that they were going after.

R: Right.

I 1: When you said beat the fish down, what do you mean by that?

R: It's like drivin' the fish to their net. They would have certain spots where they'd know the fish would be and then they'd go up tide and start runnin' back and forth cross ways from the way the net ... like the net was layin' here, they'd go back and forth and just tappin' their boat and workin' right on towards the net. And when you get down pretty close to the net a lot of times you could see those fish just showerin' around the net. If you would have had monofilament nets then like you do now you would have caught many times more fish because there is a big difference in the fish seein' the net.

I 1: They could see the cotton and linen nets?

R: Right. But they would still catch a lot of fish at times.

I 1: When you say tapping their boats, what would they do?

R: They'd take the oar they pole with and just droppin' it in the boat. Or a lot of times they would jab the bottom with the oar as they were workin' back towards the net. That would drive the fish just like you would see a bunch of cattle bein' driven. Same idea. Same principle.

I 1: So, your father was basically a stop netter?

R: And a gill netter. Well see, a stop netter would fish from September through April and in the summer time you'd use the gill net. And at times he'd pompano fish.

I 1: When you say he'd pompano fish, how was that different from those types of fishing?

R: Well, as I was tellin' ya gill nettin' you usually had three or four skiff that you'd tow along behind with a man for each skiff with a net on it. With pompano fishin' you have the pompano net on what they called the launch or your main boat. And you'd just fish with one net. You'd ride around all over the bay or the Gulf wherever you thought there may be pompano. As a rule pompano would jump but back then they would call it skippin' which they still do at times. You'd see a bunch of 'em skip you just run your net and circled 'em. But you'd only have the one net and usually it was about

six hundred to a thousand yards long accordin' to how long a net you thought you could use and what you thought you could do better with or how much you thought you could afford to buy.

I 1: Did the more successful fishermen, were they more diverse in their fishing styles and did they have more types of nets and things like that?

R: That's correct. Yeah.

I 1: Before we go on about fishing I want you to talk a little bit about your mother, Jessie B. Bell. What type of woman was she?

R: She was a great woman and I don't think there's ever been a better one. About all she cared about was her family and her kids. That's all she lived for. She just tried to do the right things and worry about us gettin' plenty to eat and worrying about keepin' our clothes clean and taking care of the house. And that was about it.

I 1: Did she ever work outside the home?

R: No.

I 1: So, primarily she was a homemaker.

R: Right.

I 1: Did she ever do anything like take in laundry or take in boarders or anything like that, do you remember?

R: No.

I 1: Was she a good cook?

R: Yes she was.

I 1: When you had meals as a family would you all sit down and eat together?

R: Right.

I 1: Would she prepare meals for you to take out when you were fishing?

R: Uh huh. Yes she would.

I 1: What type of meals would she prepare?

R: Usually a sandwich or corn beef or somethin' like that. Just some kind of fried fish. She would always see that we had plenty. He was one of the better and bigger producers around here.

I 1: Tink was?

R: He quit Manatee River and went in, I think he started sellin' to Jess Williams who had a fish house. And then eventually he built an old fish house of his own.

I 1: Jess' fish house was right next to Manatee wasn't it?

R: No, it was right next to Star here. Well, you know the old fish house of ours that we just tore down. That was Star. I think for years and years Burns Taylor owned the buildin' and then Judge Millis went in with him and they started Star Fish. And then some way or another they didn't get along that great and Millis built Star Fish here were Star is at today.

I 1: What did the Star Fish that Burns Taylor ... did he keep that or did he just get out of it entirely?

R: He got out of it. Then I believe Jim Guthrie rented it from Burns Taylor or leased or something.

I 1: As J.L. Guthrie Fish?

R: No, it wasn't J.L. Guthrie Fish, it was Bayshore Fish Company all the time Jim had it. Then eventually he sold it out to the Royal Brothers in Camilla, Georgia. Then Chester was runnin' our fish house and he bought it out from Royal.

I 1: Where was your fish house then?

R: We were out on the end of this street. Dad, when he first started there the last time, he rented the old hotel dock. That was after Woodrow closed it down. There was no fish house there. We went out and caught a big catch of fish when we were cut off from fishin'. I think we were fishin' for Jim Guthrie at the time and he cut us off so we went out and just caught a load ourselves and Dad was good friends with Joe Guthrie. So we iced the fish in there. Then he started in the fish business from that.

Then the old net camp here on the end of this 123rd Street Court and that's where he began.

I 1: You said earlier that he had a fish house down here but you didn't fish for him. To me that sounds strange, why wouldn't you fish for your own father?

R: I said that he had a fish house and I didn't fish for him?

I 1: I thought so. I thought you said he did have a fish house down here but you were fishing with or for somebody else at that time.

R: No, that was before he had a fish house that I was speakin' of. He was fishin' and I fished with him for years while I was goin' to school in the summer time. My older brother got 3/4 of a share and a friend of his and mine, Sam Pringle, received 3/4 of a share and I received 1/2 a share. So between the three of us we received 2 shares. That's when we was fishin' with my Dad.

But my Uncle Charlie was a gill netter in the summer time and he made much more money. So the last two summers I was in high school, I fished with him and probably made I would say three times as much money.

I 1: Were you still getting 1/2 share with him?

R: No, with Uncle Charlie I was gettin' a full share. Of course, my Dad at that time didn't gill net. He would seine fish durin' the summer time and that was never too prosperous. Occasionally they would haul in a bunch of fish. But most of the time the gill netters did much better in the summer time.

I 1: What year was it that your father established the fish house and you started working for that fish house?

R: I believe it was 1940 or '41 that I started fishin' regular. I didn't graduate till I guess it was the first of May, '42. And that's when I started regular, but I fished quite a bit even while I was goin' to school. He opened the fish house with Albert Fugh. After he was out of Manatee River and it folded up, he and Albert Fugh rented the old hotel dock. And they were in business for three or four years and they eventually disagreed because Albert Fugh was never a very hard worker. My Dad was. When he was fishin' he'd fish pretty hard and he had all the family too which pitched in. He just didn't feel like Albert was pullin' his weight for some reason so they split up.

Then it was after that when he started himself with the help of us and I think it must have been about '41.

I 1: So it was primarily a family business?

R: Uh huh.

I 1: Your father was managing and his sons were all helping him?

R: Right.

I 1: There were quite a few fish houses in Cortez at different times. How many were here at the height? Let's see, there are four fish houses today. How many were there in the past, were there more than that?

R: I think five or six was about the most at any one time. They started a co-op at one time durin' the War. A bunch of boys come back after the War and they all went in together. Orie Williams managed that and called it I believe, Cortez Fish Company. That was over about where the Natalie Mora property is now.

Then there was Bayshore, Bell, Fulford, Star. There could have been six or seven at one time. Snodgrass, he had a fish house and Jim worked for him runnin' the fish house for him and then Snodgrass pulled out and Jim continued. That was before he got Bayshore here. It was an old fish house about where Star is at now.

I 1: So when your father started A.P. Bell, did you fish at that time or did you work in the fish house?

R: I fished.

I 1: And Calvin, did he fish?

R: Yes.

I 1: And Chester, was he helping?

R: Chester, when he got out of school he started helping Dad run the fish house and worked at the fish house. I believe he started managin' it when my Dad passed away.

I 1: Now, Warren. You say he was killed in the War.

R: He was lost at sea. He never was found. So they finally decided that he was killed. It really upset Dad a lot and that's when he started his heavy drinkin'. He never got over it which I can understand.

I 1: How did your mother take it?

R: Didn't seem to bother her too much. Of course, I know it hurt her but she could just carry on.

I 1: She didn't show it quite as much as your father.

R: Didn't show it as much and she always despised alcohol because it messed up her family you know, and everytime Dad would bring a bottle home in the later years, if she could find it she'd pour it out. But early years though she put up with it. He would make his home brew and he'd make it right there at the house and get us kids to help him. And he'd also buy Jimmy John Full Shine at times from local moonshiners and he'd keep that there. But at that time it didn't bother him as much. And I guess you can understand that. Usually alcohol eventually will get the better of anybody if they use it and can't control it.

I 1: You called it Jimmy John Full Shine?

R: I believe that's what they called the old clay containers.

I 1: They'd get it in an old clay jug or something?

R: I believe it was made out of clay. About a five gallon pot you might say. Used to fishin' with Dad, there was one fella down at Bowlees' Creek that made it all the time. And he just would never miss on a set of tides, stop in that place. And that boy would always come down there with a gallon of moonshine and us kids with him. He'd bring

us a gallon of milk. He had a dairy farm down in there but he also made the moonshine. By the time my Dad and everybody got their nets up and the fish on the boats, well they would be happy comin' home.

I 1: Would he trade fish for the moonshine?

R: Right. Just tradin'. I don't think anyone had any money. There was about three families here who were pretty well to do, Charlie Guthrie, Millard Brown and Albert Fugh. He was pretty well off I guess. No big money, but comfortable. Everybody else was livin' week to week you might say.

I 1: When you say they were better off, could someone coming into Cortez tell that those families were better off? Did they have more possessions or anything? Did they live in larger houses or anything like that? Did they dress differently?

R: No, you could just tell that they had money to buy their groceries and they would have a car. They would get a radio for their house. I can remember us livin' down from Burns Taylor about a block. He had the first radio in town and when a fight or somethin' would come on or some special news cast we'd all walk down and stand on the road to listen to it. I think he had about the first radio. I believe Millard Brown had the next one. But then I think my Dad had about the third one the best I can remember. But it was something, you know how it is now.

The wealthy always live better or seem to live better.

I 1: That's just what I wondered about Cortez. If as a community most of the people living here were about the same socio-economic level. There weren't any great disparities in wealth were there?

R: No one had a whole lot that was for sure. But some, there was better fishermen and they just I would say had a little nicer home. Just managed a little better or somethin', I don't know what it was. I know when my Dad had the house moved and had the new one built I think it was about, it seemed like to me, it was either four or eight hundred dollars he paid for it complete. I don't remember just what figure it was. But the same fella built it about the same time that Tink Fulford built his and it's built the same. Same size and everything.

I 1: That house that's on the corner of 121st and 45th was built to the same specifications as Tink's house?

R: Right.

I 1: But you've enclosed your porches, I see. When did you start managing this fish house?

R: In July, 1964.

I 1: So you were fishing for quite awhile before you came into the management. What were some of the early boats that you fished here in Cortez that you remember that you had?

R: I started out with the J.G. It was my Uncle Guy's boat and he was an abuser of alcohol too. He was a fine guy and he wouldn't drink for a spell but then he would start drinkin' and he just couldn't stop. He was always so particular about the J.G. It was one of the better boats around. Mr. Neary Taylor built it. He kept that thing so clean and immaculate. About like Mark Taylor does today. He would spend hours cleanin' that boat after comin' in with a load of fish. And he would paint it while it was in the water. A wood boat would be kept that dry and clean.

But this one mornin' just before I got out of high school. Probably February of '42 I met him on the street about 3:00 in the mornin'. We were walkin' from the house down to the docks and I was goin' fishin' with my Dad. And I met my Uncle and he asked me couldn't I get him a drink. I told him I didn't have any idea where to get a drink. I said but how about takin' your boat and goin' fishin' and makin' some money. He said go ahead and take it. And that was a big surprise for me and I did take it and it was I'd say two hours later ... maybe daylight, we were down by Longboat Pass and we filled it up with fish. And that week I think I caught a boatload of fish every day and that first day though that I was down there they sent word down there that he had passed away.

I 1: The end of that week?

R: That same mornin', the first catch I made.

I 1: You're kidding! That same morning he passed away?

R: And then I continued to fish his boat through his sister, my Aunt. They were trying to sell that boat to my Dad or to me or to anyone for $550. And my Dad was tryin' to get it for $400. I told them I wasn't interested in it because it wasn't the kind of boat ... I didn't want to start out small. For some reason I wanted to start out on top and I should have. But anyway I didn't buy it and that week I think for the boat's part I paid my Aunt about $700 and some. I fished it that week and caught all those fish and then the next week a fella from Venice come up and offered $750 for the boat. And my Dad in order to get it had to pay the $750. It was really a bad decision not to jump in and buy it right at the start.

I 1: I would have thought you would have felt that was an omen when you caught all those fish.

R: Well, $500 was a lot of money back then. But I did catch a lot of fish that week. The War was just startin' and it seemed like the good Lord just put an abundance of fish in here. You would think it was because we were the good people, the United States and Britain. You know, the allies. There was just any amount of fish and there was a demand for 'em. Back durin' the '30s you couldn't sell mullet for a cent a pound. They'd just keep ya cut off at times.

One time we caught about eight thousand over at Egmont

Key and we were gonna turn 'em lose because dealers in Cortez had us shut off. But the old head of the Coast Guard Station at Egmont. He told us to use his phone and call around and see if we couldn't sell 'em. So we called Hibbs Fish Company up in Bayborough Harbor. I say we, it was my Dad. And they agreed to take them for a cent a pound. So we went to Bayborough Harbor with our boat of fish and sold 'em and they paid us in cash. I think it was $80 some dollars. And that was really a big day when if we'd have brought 'em back here we wouldn't have received anything. We may have been able to sell a few trout and a few sheephead and red fish and stuff like that.

I 1: That was sort of your first experience with marketing outside of Cortez.

R: Right. I was just along. It was my Dad and the Coast Guard Captain over there. He was the one that really initiated the sale. But seemed like as the War come along the fish got thicker and you could catch any amount and they kept gettin' bigger boats and bigger boats. You'd fill the boats up when you'd go out and along then is when you was catchin' fifty, a hundred thousand right along. Seemed like the fish just kept gettin' thicker. Then it seemed like after the War it sort of dropped down.

And the boats dropped down in size too. Bird Lewis, he eventually built a boat about 50 feet long that would haul about a hundred twenty or thirty thousand fish. And several times we filled that up.

I 1: You said the J.G. was small. How long was it?

R: It was 28 feet.

I 1: And you wanted a larger boat at that time?

R: Yeah, I think that was about the time that Tink Fulford had the Anna Dean built. It was 33 feet I think. Of course, Old Man Neary built two 31 or 32 foot boats. He built one for Charlie Guthrie and one for Millard Brown. They were larger size and then they built the Anna Dean for Tink. Then Old Man Sam Andrews, right here where the boat shed was, he built the Wayne and the Warren, Jr.. Then after those boats he built the Miss Juanita which was about I believe 37 or 38 feet. They just kept gettin' larger and larger. And I wanted one of those larger boats. I should have just ... I wasn't smart I guess you'd say. I should have jumped at that boat and just continue to grow. But I was like a lot of people, I wanted to start off big.

I was fishin' and that's when Mr. Neary built me six boats. All brand new. I had a brand new fleet of boats to fish in. They was somethin'.

I 1: This was after you had the J.G. for awhile and then he built your six boats.

R: Uh huh. That's when I got my stop-net fleet or haul-net fleet.

I 1: What was the name of your launch that you had?

R: The J.G. was the launch.

I 1: Oh, you still had the J.G. and then he built you six skiffs.

R: Yeah. Skiffs or net boats. That's when I started out with the stop-net fleet or haul-net fleet, whichever you want to call it.

I 1: Who worked for you when you had that boat and skiffs?

R: To start off with I had my school mates. There was Billie Horn and B.D. Guthrie and Frank Johns, C.D. Adams. There was some of the Carver boys. Dan Taylor, Barnie Taylor, his brothers and they all worked with me.

I 1: Would they all get a full share at that time?

R: Yeah.

I 1: Then did you sort of run with these guys after you were fishing? Were you all pretty good friends? Did you do things together on shore?

R: Oh, yeah. We'd party weekends mostly. A lot of weekends we'd leave the nightclub and go right on fishin'. It seemed like then you could work and play night and day.

I 1: Not as you get older though.

R: No. Just kind of slow down.

I 1: What would you do for entertainment? Where would you go?

R: We went to the movies occasionally. But most of the time we'd go over to the night spot, Todd's place. That was the most popular one. But occasionally when they opened up the Pines over here at the Pines Trailer Park. Right at the foot of the old Bridge Street. Had a square dance hall in there and we'd go in there a lot. And in Bradenton they'd have the Nick Nack. Several little beer joints and hamburger joints up there we'd go to. Then they had the juke boxes and we'd all dance. In Sarasota they had the skatin' rink we'd go to a lot. The _____ Skating Rink.

And they had a famous sandwich place too. I can't think of it. Just most of the night spots.

I 1: How about transportation. Did everyone have a car then?

R: No. I bought a new Chrysler when I was about 20. When I was a kid growin' up I'd go in the Chrysler agency and I'd see these new Plymouths and new Chryslers and I'd just dream. Hoping someday to have one of those new Plymouths and then when I got to fishin' I jumped right into a new Chrysler. Of course, I had to have it refinanced. The problem was, I let several people drive it. My sister scratched it up one time and I'd let Popeye Lewis use it.

And one time he run into a bunch of mail boxes. I think it scared the agent that I bought it from. And he wanted me ... I don't know why he was afraid. Maybe afraid I was gonna wreck it. But it was insured. But then I refinanced it and paid it off.

I 1: You were making the payments regularly.

R: Right. I never was behind I don't think.

I 1: How much did it cost?

R: Seems like to me it was around a couple thousand dollars. I don't remember for sure.

I 1: Well, for being 20 years old was that the norm? Not very many 20 year olds had cars in Cortez at that time.

R: No. Especially new ones. The Taylors would always rig up those Model T Fords. Barney Taylor, he would change engines in one in one day and go partying that night in it. And before I got a car I used to ride around with him a lot too. We'd go to Jiggs Landing. We'd go out there occasionally.

I 1: Jiggs Landing?

R: Jiggs Landing. There's a little place up from Jiggs Landing. Another camp out there on the river. Just above Jiggs Landing. And occasionally we'd go out to Camp Flying Eagle, Castle Bluff out there. We'd always go in that Model T Ford before I got a car. Alcee Taylor, he bought an old Chevrolet convertible. We used to all pile on it and go partying. Up there at Anna Maria, the nightclub up there now. That was a big bath house and dance hall at one time where all the kids went. The Sandbar it is now. I believe it was called the Sandbar back at that time.

I 1: I didn't know that was an old bath house.

R: Well, it was a great big old dance hall and bath house and everything combined. And we come by there fishin' one night and we could see a little blaze in the window. So we anchored our boat and went up there to see if we could do anything. And when that blaze started they had everything in it just about moved out. All the beer and the drinks and the juke box and everything was moved way out a hundred feet from it.

I 1: Was there anyone there?

R: Yeah, there was people there. I know they had to burn it intentional.

I 1: So, you feel that it was set intentionally?

R: Uh huh. When they started it back they moved a couple of Army barracks in there. That's what started that Sandbar now. They began with a couple of barracks and they built canopys on it and they'd enclose it and then they'd build

on it some more. That's the way it begun.

I 1: When did you get married?

R: I got married the first time in about 1945.

I 1: How old were you then?

R: I was probably 21 or 22.

I 1: And how long were you married the first time?

R: Five years.

I 1: And your wife's name?

R: Was Blanche.

I 1: You had no children from that marriage?

R: No.

I 1: Did you live in Cortez then?

R: Right.

I 1: You were still fishing.

R: Uh huh.

I 1: You weren't drafted.

R: No, I joined the Merchant Marines. I think I had two deferments the first of the War from fishin'. They figured ...

I 1: At that time if you were a fisherman you could remain and fish because they felt that you were providing food for the War effort.

R: Right.

I 1: Did fish sales increase at that time because of the War. Were you shipping fish more than normally?

R: They did increase. There was just a better market and I don't know why. It might have been because so many farmers were in the service. I just couldn't understand except that I just figured the good Lord was takin' care of everybody. Because the fish showed up in 1942. Before that time you just didn't catch many bunches of mullet. I mean eight or ten thousand was just about unheard of. And there was just no fish around to speak of. And then right at the start of the War is when all the fish come in. You'd see 'em just jumpin' all over the bay. Just millions of 'em. I think maybe the bombing and strafing around this area might have brought 'em in. They just destroyed a lot of these islands, using them as targets for these five hundred pound bombs and hundred pound bombs. They had a two mile stretch along Longboat Key and they were just dropping them bombs and shooting down there daily.

I 1: I didn't know that. And you could hear that?

R: They called it the target range. There was three or four planes crashed while they were doin' it. And then there were some bombing Coon Key down the bay here just south of Tidy Island. You can still see the effects of it. More or less an oyster bar where it used to be a big key. I'd say it was about a third the size of this big key off here. And there was one plane crashed in Sarasota Bay.

I 1: Did they restrict your fishing because of the bombs?

R: Had certain areas where you couldn't fish. But you could still go in there at night and fish some. The fish would be so thick. I mean, you better be out by daylight. And they had certain areas that were restricted altogether like in behind Mullet Key. There was times when you weren't allowed in there at all. And you weren't allowed out in the Gulf at night. You couldn't go outside of a pass before daylight and you had to be in by dark. Jess Williams, they took his boat for the duration of the War.

I 1: They did?

R: I guess they didn't take it, but they wouldn't let him fish it in the bays. He went up to the river and he fished right there at the _____ Cove the rest of the War. Just catchin' fish comin' and goin' out of the river.

I 1: In other words, he took his boat out in the Gulf and ...

R: He went out at New Pass before day one mornin' and I don't know whether it was the Coast Guard or Navy or who it was that got him. But they took his boat for awhile but I think they did give it back to him. But he couldn't fish out in the bay or the Gulf after that. He had to stay up the river.

I 1: That's strange. I thought some of the fishermen said when the servicemen came back is when they started the co-op?

R: Yeah.

I 1: Were there a lot of fish here then also, after the War?

R: Yeah. During the War and after the War is when they started gettin' the bigger boats and buyin' the bigger ones. Old Man Lee Haycock up there at Bradenton Marina built the Jewel Ann for Farmer Capo. And he also built the Little Eve for Joe Capo. It was about a 33 foot boat. Jewel Ann was 37 foot. But the way that worked, Farmer was always scared of that boat. He figured it was too big for him. He sold it to ... let's see Joe Capo, I think his brother had sold the Little Eve to Ralph Guthrie. So then Farmer had the Jewel Ann. I think he traded the Jewel Ann to Ralph Guthrie for the Little Eve. I don't know if they traded even or whether he paid the difference or what it was.

But anyway, my Uncle Ralph fished Cortez for years. But

then he went to Ft. Myers and went in the fish business with Snodgrass when he left Cortez. They had started the Dixie Fish Company in Ft. Myers.

I 1: There was a Dixie Fish Company here in Cortez for awhile wasn't there? I thought that Tink had a Dixie Fish Company at one time.

R: Could have. But I don't remember. I know he had an old fish house over there. I think it was his. I know Mr. Adams ran it for him, managed it. I don't remember just

what it was called. I thought it was always called Fulford Fish Company, but it might have been called something different. It might have been Dixie.

I 1: I thought I heard someone mention that one time. Well, let's get back to the Jewel Ann. The Jewel Ann has bunks and a little stove in there. When did they start doing that with the launches?

R: They started doing that along during the War when they got the 30 to 32 foot boats, 35 foot, 37 foot.

I 1: When they started building those larger boats they started putting in bunks to sleep in and things like that.

R: I believe when Snodgrass was here and Jim Guthrie worked for him, I believe that was Dixie Fish Company. And I think when they closed that up Jim kept it goin' and Snodgrass moved to Ft. Myers and that's when Ralph Guthrie, Bill Guthrie ... I guess that was the only two crews that when to Ft. Myers with him. Bill Guthrie, he stayed down there probably a year and he moved back to Cortez. But Ralph stayed right down there with him and stayed in the fish house. Finally, Snodgrass wanted out of it and he sold it to Ralph's and my Aunt. Ruby. She was my Dad's sister. So they continued Dixie Fish Company down there.

And I believe it was Dixie when they left here and went on to Ft. Myers and started Dixie Fish Company over down there. But Ralph had the Jewel Ann and he sort of got some age on him and he was spendin' all his time at the fish house so he sold me the Jewel Ann.

I 1: Was that your next boat after the J.G.?

R: Right.

I 1: Then you started fishing the Jewel Ann?

R: Yes. Of course, my Dad had the Warren, Jr. built and named it after my older brother. But I fished a little bit off and on before I got the Jewel Ann. After the J.G. But for years Bud Culbreath fished the Warren, Jr. and he was seine fishin'. Finally he retired from fishin' and went to work for the ... I believe he drove the trash truck or the garbage truck or whatever. I think that's what he did. So after he left the Warren, Jr. I fished it for awhile. But then when I got the Jewel Ann Buster had become of age and he run a crew and he took the

Warren, Jr. and ran it. Then Calvin go the Wayne, bought it from Joe Capo eventually and he fished on that. So we've just about had a family of crews that kept us goin' you know, expanding a little. The Chester decided in I think '63 that he didn't want to manage the fish house any more or somethin' and then Doug and Betty Alice managed it for awhile. And Betty Alice didn't like it so she stopped and left it with Doug. Then Doug along about June told me if I didn't want to take it over he was gonna close the doors. So, it was more or less a forced job for me to take it. It's always been hard work but it's interesting.

I 1: Which would you rather do? Would you rather fish or would you rather be in here running this place?

R: Fishin' is a lot more fun. Of course, I guess it's as hard work or maybe harder but you enjoy it more. Catchin' fish has always been amazing. You could work night and day and if you made a big catch you were fresh as a daisy. You go out there and ride all day and not catch any and you was so tired you couldn't hardly get home when you come in. I guess its the same way with any kind of fishin', even sport fishin'. If you go out and have a good day and catch fish it's really enhancin', but if you don't catch any then its boring.

I 1: Bell Fish has really become diverse and I want to talk a little bit about the changes that have happened in Cortez with the fishing. When you came into the fish house did they have kicker boats here at that time?

R: No.

I 1: Who brought in some of the first kicker boats?

R: The kicker boats started down around Ft. Myers Beach first of my knowledge. And somehow or another they got started here. I don't remember who had the first one. Could have been Joe Toupin but I really don't remember.

I 1: That was a big change for fishing from what a lot of people say because then you no longer needed the large crews. You could have smaller crews on the boat. One, two, three men on the boat and it changed it a lot. Did you see that when kickers came? Did you recognize that it was going to change fishing?

R: Yeah. And what changed it more than that I think was the netting. The change from cotton and linen to monofilament and nylon and such as that. Together they really made a big change. Made fishermen out of farmers you might say. Or out of people who didn't know a thing about it. And the fiberglass boats, that was a big change too. Because years ago we would turn our boats over and scrub 'em off once every week. Every Saturday afternoon that was our job to keep 'em light. And probably once every two or three months we would copper paint 'em to keep the growth off. But it was spreadin' those nets every day and turnin' the boats over once a week and cleanin' 'em off.

That was a big part of your work, and buildin' spreads too. As a rule we'd take a month off just about every summer to rebuild our spreads. As a rule we'd cut Australian Pines that were growin' around on the islands and keys and bring 'em in and chet 'em down and they were just right to dry the nets.

So now you can fish at least twice as much as you used to and not put any more effort in it.

I 1: That's something I've never really thought about. But those three items have changed it a lot. It reduced your maintenance on boats, nets, everything considerably.

R: That's right.

I 1: Plus then the kickers allowed you to get into shallower water and fish more areas then too didn't they?

R: Well, we could fish the shallow waters but we had to pole along with the skiffs. We had the flat bottom skiffs that were fishin' in just about no water you might say, two or three inches. But runnin' along you couldn't see the fish near as well as you could with the kicker boats. The kicker boats you'd run right up in that shallow water along and you'd see the fish up front of ya. Runnin' along with the launch towin' your skiffs off shore the fish wouldn't be makin' any kind of a sound and they'd run along little basins and you couldn't see 'em. You wouldn't go in to catch 'em.

But I don't know, the air boats would go in shallower water than the kicker boats but they're so noisy.

I 1: Did they have air boats here?

R: They had two or three and they would really catch a lot of fish. But I think they were really detrimental to the fish. They'd get up where there was no water and flush out everything that moved.

I 1: Did you ever have a kicker boat?

R: No.

I 1: You just had a launch and skiffs or a scooter.

R: A little scooter yeah. Towed the scooter along. Most of the time we'd tow our nets out on high water with the scooter. Occasionally with the big boat if there was really a big tide in. Then we used a scooter for runnin' up and down the nets checking them out and seeing how everything was. Sometimes when we'd haul up a catch of fish we'd put 'em on what we called the fish boat. Someone would take the scooter and bring 'em into the fish house while they were good and fresh.

I 1: We were talking about this the other day because they never used to have a fish boat. You just put the fish on one of the skiffs or the launch.

R: On the skiff. You'd usually carry your haul net, what you'd haul the fish up in. That would be a deeper net and

a heavier twine. And we didn't have to start with and we were haulin' it in a stop net. The reason it was called stop net was because you'd take in one of these shallow shoals that would go dry on low tide. And you'd take it in at high tide. But off the edge of the reef where the deep water met the shoal you would run say two or three hundred yards of net and take in some of that deep water. Then as the tide dropped the fish would come off the shoal down into that little deep water. Then you'd have about a three hundred yard net on your skiff that you would take in that little deep water spot and haul it. And sometimes you would run the haul net out to start with. If there

wasn't much trash around or anything you'd run it out there to start with. But if you had a lot of trash why you'd run just a 60 mesh net out. The net you put on the shoal was usually about 30 meshes deep or about five feet. And the ones you run out back of the shoal would be about ten feet or 60 mesh. But then you would take your haul net and it would be about a hundred or a hundred and fifty mesh and you would haul that little spot of deep water up.

Back then they always called it stop netting. But later, about in the early '40s I think Tink brought an old power boat in that they called a donkey from the east coast. Somebody had it rigged up over in that area for haulin' nets. It might have been off of Lake Okochobee. I don't really know where it come from. But that was the beginning of takin' in a lot of deep water. After that they more or less called it haul netting more than stop netting. Because from Coon Key to the point along _____ _____ would be about three thousand yards and we'd have about three thousand yards of deep net. We'd run straight across there and haul it all out. That's one reason we started catchin' a lot more fish I guess. Just using more net and takin' in more water.

I 1: Well, that had to be hard work pulling that net in.

R: Well, we did it with the power boats. It was time consumin'. Before that if we were takin' a big place to haul we would just scatter out along the net. Say ya had two thousand yards of net out, we would go off about a hundred yards and scatter out about fifty yards apart. Four or five of us and we'd pull it ashore across our shoulder. And that was really hard work. That's the reason a lot of gill netters weren't haul netters. But then in later years when they got those power haulers well then it took most of the hard work out of it.

It still was time consumin' and we would have about a four hundred yard cable on your donkey boat. And the net was in hundred yard shots. You'd take your little scooter and run the cable out. The closer you got the compass down to size the smaller cut that you would take every time. But to start with you'd run about four to six hundred yards of line out and catch ahold of the end of the net and you'd pull it in. Then you'd pull it down the shore some and you'd run off and get another two hundred yard back and just kept workin' the compass we'd call it. But you'd keep workin' down until you get it down in about three hundred yard size and you'd take your haul net again and haul it

out.

Years ago you would haul out all that net and if there were a lot of snook in there or red fish most of the time your net wasn't heavy enough to pull them. They would go through the net and let your mullet and trout and stuff out. Then when the nylon come along that would hold most anything. Then somebody come up with a pocket net and then that made it so much easier and the fish would go out in the pocket and you'd have 'em right there in one spot. So that was another improvement.

I 1: Could you sell snook and red fish back in those days?

R: Snook, you could sell 'em but it never was a high priced fish and at that time people didn't know to skin a fish. They used 'em with the skin on and they say it made 'em taste soapy.

I 1: So that's why they call it soap fish.

R: I don't know whether they call 'em soap fish or not. But they'd say they tasted soapy. And sand brim was the same way. They'd say they taste soapy with the skin on. But later years, about the time they learned how to market 'em and skin 'em and everything, then they passed the law that made sports fishin' out of 'em. And I don't think there's any more today than there was back then. I don't think it's helped one bit. Same way with the red fish. When they passed the law to protect 'em and made a game fish out of 'em there was the most around I've ever seen in my lifetime. There were just schools of 'em everywhere. There's still a lot of red fish around but I think when they get a certain size they're gonna leave and go out in the Gulf.

I 1: Were red fish ever a big seller?

R: They were always a big seller but there was a bigger demand when they started to blacken fish. They started that in New Orleans I think and that was the fish they used for the blackened fish. But I think now they've started usin' amberjack mostly. Of course they will blacken anything. Grouper or whatever.

I 1: When did Bell Fisheries sort of diversify into the long line and the bandit boats and the reef fishing boats?

R: I would think it was about 1960. That was when Chester was still managing the fish house. He and Bubba Capo went in together and they called it Bell and Capo. They bought this one boat from Dickie Sermons, the old Dixie Bell, up in Tarpon Springs. That was the first boat they had for grouper to really get into it to market on. Before that when I was a kid Burns Taylor was a part owner of Star. Well, he owned a fish house but he used to go off grouper fishin' and he'd just go daily off three or four miles and catch from five hundred to seven, eight hundred pounds a day. And I guess they were sellin' those back then. But about half the time you couldn't sell.

After Chester and Bubba got this Dixie Bell there was two or three other old boats rigged out and went off and caught grouper. That was about the beginnin' of it, I'd say in 1960. And in 1964 we just kept addin' boats to the fleet.

I 1: So, when Burns Taylor was catching grouper was it that people didn't know the fish or they didn't like the fish? Why was it a hard time to sell do you think?

R: I think it's because they didn't know to skin 'em. They were sellin' 'em whole and probably if they would filet

'em. They would cook 'em with the skin on 'em or something. But it looks like it still would have been good. I just don't know. But I know there was a lot of grouper out there. And Al Millis with Star, he had the Miss Juanita fishin' for him. Mullet fishin' got real slow at times and a bunch of 'em would put a big ice box on their boat and go off and stay out in the Gulf for four or five days and come back in and sell their catch. But then it seemed like in the summer time they were gettin' to where they couldn't sell 'em. And in the winter time they could.

My Uncle put a big box on his boat and grouper fished for a few years there when mullet were so scarce. Seems like mullet come in cycles. They would get scarce one year and they would get plentiful. They always seem to come to a spot where they're doin' a lot of dredging. When they built the Skyway Bridge they were so thick you could walk on 'em around there. Then they built Port Manatee and they got so thick in there you'd see bunches of 'em everywhere. And I think this dredgin' of Anna Maria Island just recently ... I know when they were doin' that the mullet were really thick around Longboat Pass and Anna Maria.

I 1: That beach renourishment they were doing out there. That's strange. I wonder why they do show up for that.

R: I don't know. Well, you know they're vegetarians and they probably eat things that's in that mud.

I 1: What about the shrimping. When did you first start getting into shrimping? The Gulf shrimping.

R: I believe it was '72 that we had the Deanna Bell built. That was our first shrimp boat. Then after that we had the Thunder Bell built. We had those built under the Capital Construction Fund and that worked out real good for us. But then I don't know why it seemed to drop off. We never did get more boats. I don't know why. Just let it go like it was. And we've had the two boats since about '72.

I 1: When you say the Capital Construction Fund. Can you explain what that program was?

R: That was a fund that the government put up. The government would guarantee credit with the bank and you could ... it seems like to me it was a low interest fund and you didn't

have to pay tax on it. It just helped everyone get started in fishin' and shrimpin' I believe. We had about three or four boats built through that fund. I think the Thunder Bell and the Lisa Bell and maybe the Rachel Bell. There was three or four of 'em.

I 1: Where did you have those boats built?

R: The Deanna Bell was built in Alabama. The Thunder Bell was built in Tampa. All of those grouper boats were built in Ft. Myers. The little _____ that you used there for

awhile, that was _____ idea of a boat and he brought that by to show us and he enticed us into buildin' new boats. He had the model 14 feet wide and 50 foot length and I told him be sure and not make it any narrower than 16 feet. So he did widen it out there before he started and it actually would have been a better boat if it had been 17 feet. But they made pretty nice boats. He built a lot of 'em for us. I believe he had his son come in and help him and his son got involved in drugs. I believe that's what put him under.

I 1: I wanted to ask you about the Deanna Bell. You said it was built in Alabama. Do you know where in Alabama?

R: By Labatry.

I 1: Was it a Landry boat?

R: Uh huh.

I 1: I thought I recognized the lines on that. I've seen a lot of Landry boats when I was over there.

R: They say right now he has half a dozen boats over there that has never been put to work. He built 'em with a partner or somethin' and it didn't work out. Or he was gonna have somebody to work 'em and the way I understand it they've never been put to work. And they're just layin' there at the dock and he sets such big prices for them that they never did sell. I guess the fiberglass come along and more or less shut him down. And this Stanley Parker that's here now. He fishes in that area in the summer at times and he says those boats are still tied there for sale. They're 80, 85 foot boats.

I 1: That's a big shrimping port. And there are a lot of steel boats built over there and one day I went down. I'd only seen wooden boats built there at Landry's and I walked in one day and he had his steel boat that he'd started and I looked at him and said Mr. Landry, what's going on here. He just looked at me and said, just gotta go with progress I guess.

R: I guess steel still is a popular boat. They've learned to protect it better in recent years. We had one steel boat. In fact, that's the first shrimp boat we had, I forgot about that one. Little Betty Bell we bought in Tarpon Springs and it was only 50 feet long. Gaydon fished that and caught quite a few shrimp with it. But

you could paint it up and send it out shrimpin' and when it come in it looked like a rust bucket. We had that for three, four, maybe five years and that's about the only boat that I've ever been willin' to sell. We did get rid of it and I guess we were just lucky. Cause it was a mess.

I 1: I notice some of those boats over there in Labatry had some problems. They would rust out a lot, but most of them seemed to withstand it pretty well. I guess they'd have to put a lot of zinc on the bottoms to keep that

from eating through. When you started managing the fish house and Bell's had sort of diversified quite a bit with different types of fishing, you had some grouper boats, tell me about before your diversified. What was a good day for Bell Fishery about the amount of fish that would come through?

R: Different times of the year different amounts of fish. You'd usually get your mackerel during the Spring and then you'd always have a Fall run too. Most times there wasn't as large a run as the Spring run. But I would say probably fifty thousand would have been a big day. But then as the Company grew a lot of days we had a hundred thousand and that was about tops. Occasionally we'd have more than that but our freezer capacity was sixty or seventy thousand a day and then you'd have your fresh fish. Of course, in the Fall a lot of times you'd get a catch of mullet a hundred thousand a hundred and fifty thousand and there'd be other catches besides those. So it was nothin' regular. Different seasons you'd have different types of fish.

The good fishermen would fish would fish the mullet when that season was on and then you'd fish the mackerel and you'd fish the red fish and trout and you'd set a variation of your fishin'. Of course, if you listen to the articles in the paper they state that you catch all the one fish up and then you go after the next fish and then you catch it up and you go after the next one. But all fish are seasonal and the weather controls it more than anything. If you have real pretty weather anytime of the year you'll have lots of fish. If you have bad weather you're not gonna have very many.

Break

Continuation of Interview May 2, 1993
Part II Oral History with Walter Bell

I 1: Walter, if you could talk a little bit about how Bell Fisheries had diversified going into shrimping and grouper fishing. If you could talk a little bit about changes in the environment, changes in fishing regulations, changes in technology that you have seen and how it has affected you and your choices and decisions as a fish house manager.

R: It seems like it's just been a gradual change. It seems like the growing population around here became less interested in fishin' as they grew up. A lot of 'em went

off to college and didn't come back like the older bunch did. For years everybody that grew up here would become a fisherman. So then the offshore boats come in along about 1960 and one or two got started. They did pretty well and just kept gettin' more boats. More and more it seems like it went to the offshore fishing. But it was newcomers that come in. Newcomers that made up the crew more or less. I don't know, as they took the bays away from us we just got into the offshore fishin' more and more.

I 1: Were you sort of forced to go into that because of the changes in the regulations? Or was it a choice that you thought you should make?

R: I would say it was about 50/50. As they took away the net fishin' we knew that we needed to do somethin' else. So we just kept expandin' and then we had a friend come along and wanted to invest some money and he got us started in the shrimp business. He invested in a little shrimp boat and we paid that off to him. Then he wanted to build a new boat, a bigger one. We went along with him in that.

I 1: Who was that?

R: That was Carl Smith.

I 1: Is it harder to find crews for boats than it used to be?

R: I don't know. I'd say it's harder to find good people. But you still find crewmen. Sometimes you have to hire people you don't want to be associated with. Drugs have come into it the last ten, fifteen, twenty years and it makes it kind of rough. The alcohol was bad enough, but mix that with the drugs and it's really a problem.

I 1: Let me go back and talk about red fish. They made red fish a game fish. How did that affect your business?

R: I would say it probably took away about five to ten percent of it. And there was no reason for 'em to take red fish away. There are just so many around the particular time that they did pass the law and made 'em a sport fish. It was more than I've ever seen since I've been around here. And there still is. But I think eventually as they grow up they're gonna move off shore.

I 1: Is your job getting harder today as a fish house manager in trying to market fish because of the changes in the regulations and whatever else is happening out there?

R: No, I don't believe it's any harder to market 'em. I think we're gonna have to make some changes but the shorter the supply the greater the demand so it makes sellin' the fish more easy.

I 1: Can you talk a little bit about mackerel for instance. When they imposed quotas did you lose any markets for mackerel then?

R: I don't believe so. They did fill the quota at one time but we were still allowed a by catch and it seems like at the time of the year when the quota was filled our mackerel season was over. So it was no problem.

I 1: The reason I asked that is because several fishermen have said that they used to be able to fish for mackerel more and catch more mackerel before the quota of course. And once the quota was imposed they said that the market declined because interests like Morrison's Restaurant no longer wanted the mackerel for their menus. Therefore, they said they had been cut off by the fish house.

R: Well, I think the quota affected the East coast more so than it did the West coast because that was always the big mackerel producin' area. The East coast of Florida and the Keys. They had people down there with just fleets of boats. Big boats. And they just depended on the mackerel for the season. They'd usually go down in the early Fall and fish up until about January. And that was a big part of the mackerel business. I think when they put the quota on it made the price so high that Morrison who was a big user of small mackerel, they just went to some other fish. I don't know just what they serve now but they're out of the mackerel business.

I 1: So you yourself have seen pretty much a steady demand for mackerel. It hasn't changed that much?

R: No. Well I said red fish were five or ten percent of our business. Well, I'd say mackerel is not over ten percent. We have two seasons here, Spring and Fall, and it's never been a real big operation. Of course, at times we have fair amounts. The last two years we've had about as many as we've ever had at different times. They would just show up and they would migrate on. Where it seemed like in years past they'd linger on longer. But I really think the weather controls it more than anything else. If you get real pretty weather you're gonna have plenty of mackerel and king fish. If the weather stays bad, the fish will just continue to move. Seems like they move faster when you have bad weather.

I 1: Tell me about what types of fish you market here, that you sell from Bell's Fish House. What's your major species that you handle?

R: The grouper and the mullet are about the two largest items. Of course, shrimp. We have three or four shrimp boats fishin' here most of the time. That's probably another ten percent. I'd say grouper's probably thirty percent and mullet's probably another thirty percent and the mixture of the trout, sheephead, drum and just a variety of bay fish and quite a few pompano at times.

I 1: So it's quite a variety of species that you handle and that go through the fish house? Can you talk a little bit about the relationship between the fish house and the fishermen? Can anybody fish for Bell Fish Company?

R: We've never turned anyone away I don't think. Of course, somebody come along who really don't act like he is smart

enough to catch a fish we might suggest somethin' else. But ordinarily about anyone who has fished who has the legal permits and license or whatever it takes.

I 1: So if a fisherman wanted to fish for you, what would he get in return for fishing for Bell Fish?

R: He would get paid for his fish as he brought them in.

I 1: Would he get docking space?

R: Yes.

I 1: And is that free?

R: Uh huh.

I 1: Does the fish house extend him a line of credit?

R: As a rule, yes. We either furnish all the supplies for them to go out fishin'. Of course, it might be a bad policy, but we've always did it.

I 1: And is that how it is with most fish houses that you know of?

R: I don't know about most of 'em, but the old fish houses usually extend credit to practically all their fishermen.

I 1: And that's the way it was when you fished and when you were young. Did fish houses extend credit to fishermen as long as you can remember?

R: That's right.

I 1: Who do you think makes out the best in that situation, the fish house or the fisherman?

R: I don't know. It's kind of a 50/50 deal. We've had several go in business around here that wouldn't extend credit and it seems like they had trouble stayin' in business. For years and years it seemed like we had to pay tax on our accounts to the fishermen. But for the last few years I kept tellin' the accountant that was just the cost of doin' business just like buyin' a block of ice or a shovel. If you've got to advance the fisherman the money to buy their nets and boats and keep 'em runnin' if they didn't pay you back you could write it off.

I 1: Is there any other benefits the fish house extends to fishermen while they're fishing for them?

R: No. They have no health coverage or insurance of any kind. They're independent.

I 1: Was there ever a time when fishermen were considered to be employees of the fish house and could have been extended benefits that you know of?

R: I don't think so. The insurance companies sort of wanted

to make 'em employees but I don't think they ever have been.

I 1: Tell me, what's one of your greatest concerns as a fish house manager about the operations of your business?

R: I believe right now the net law is about the biggest concern. If they do away with the nets it will take at least fifty percent of our business then we'll just have to get into more imports I suppose. We'll have to do somethin' different. Probably grow smaller, lay off employees and just have to size down is about all I can say.

I 1: So it would severely impact the operations of your fish house if that did go into effect.

R: Yes it would.

I 1: How do you think that would affect the community of Cortez?

R: It would take away eighty or ninety percent of the community of Cortez livelihood because about all the local residents do depend on their nets.

I 1: How does it make you feel that there's a certain group of people in this State who want to ban nets? Coming from a fishing family and having been a fisherman for a good part of your life and now managing this fish house. Can you talk a little bit about how that makes you feel to know that?

R: It just seems outrageous to me. And most of the people that signed the form or whatever to get it on the ballot, they don't know what they're involved in. Of course, everybody feels like you have a right to vote on anything. And I don't think if the public realized what it's all about that they would vote against the nets. Of course, there's a few that will. Hopefully, the majority won't. I suppose it will make some people happy if they just get it on the ballot.

I 1: What's your feeling right now as to how you think the vote would go, say right now at this time? Do you think it would pass or do you think it would be defeated? Do you have any sense of ...

R: Right at the present it might eliminate nets but I think about the time it comes up for vote we'll do enough work to make people realize that the nets aren't bad. Some people think if you choke a fish you've just about choked a human being. But I don't see where catchin' a fish is near as bad as goin' out and shooting a squirrel or quail or a rabbit or somethin' like that. But I believe the people that are sponsoring this no-net law are more or less involved in sellin' sporting goods, fishin' type boats, outboard motors and such as that. Then they speak all the time on how bad a net is which the general public just don't know.

I 1: Do you see a real benefit that can be derived if they ban nets to the recreational fisherman? Do you see any way that they will really benefit from this?

R: I don't. I can't believe it'll help the fishin' and it won't help clear up the bays. In fact, I thought the big nets that we used to use all the time for fishin' helped clean the bays and helped keep good fish in the area. We'd kill a lot of pin fish and shad and catfish and scavengers that would eat the eggs from the trout and the red fish and such as that. And it seemed like all the time we were fishin' there was just an abundance of fish. I don't know why, but the fish became real abundant along in 1942 to '48, '50. Along there. And then just more fish of all kinds here than had ever been before. There

was about fifteen haul-net crews here at one time. All with four or five men to their crew. And all of us would fish the Sarasota and Tampa Bay. Of course, we fished some in Pinellas. We kept catchin' plenty of fish. But eventually they passed laws and they did a lot of dredgin' to eliminate some of the grounds that we could fish. Most places used to you could run a couple miles of net out without any trouble and you could catch your fish real easy. Now you run a mile of net out and you run into a deep cut somewhere. It's just not been anything like it was years ago.

I 1: So the bottom was changed. The structure was changed because of a lot of development.

R: I think so, yeah.

I 1: Do you think that the fish have changed in their behavior?

R: I believe so. We have lots of fish here at times but they just don't seem to stay around like they did years ago. It seems like they'll come in and be around for awhile and they'll move on. I think it's because the boats are all over the bay. They just drive the fish out I think. And it may be that there's not the feed in here for 'em like there used to be. More seawalls and just nothin' for 'em to live on when they get in the bays. Seems like right now there's about as many shrimp around as there was. Some of the boats are catchin' two or three hundred pounds a night. And that's usually what brings fish into the bays I think. Especially the trout and the red fish and the sheephead and such as that.

I 1: Yeah, I think trout eat a lot of shrimp. And probably red fish do too. You've seen a lot of changes not only in Cortez and in fishing, but in the surrounding area with a lot of development that has gone on. In going back to this whole issue of the push to ban nets, do you feel that enough is being done by other fish house owners, the fishermen themselves, their organizations, at this time? Do you think they're doing a good job in trying to combat and fight this push to ban nets?

R: I think so. There's a few bad eggs. But you're gonna have that in any business you get into. Every so often somebody will act up and cause a problem. But it's not the general run of the fishermen. They're pretty good people.

I 1: Do you think that the fishermen are coming together? I mean, I've always had the feeling that it's hard to get fishermen to agree on anything. Do you think that they are coming together and agreeing on things in a way that will allow them to do what they have to do in the future to combat the banning of the nets?

R: I think so. Most of them are workin' pretty hard toward it. There are a few that don't get along too well. But most of them are pretty well together and realize what it's gonna take to keep fishin'.

I 1: Historically, when you think back to when you were younger have fishermen changed any in their involvement in fishing and their attitude toward fishing? Do you think they've changed at all?

R: Not a whole lot. It's still a lot of jealousy when it comes to catchin' fish. It seems like the one that catches the most, different ones will frown on him. I would think it would be the same in any business though. The one that do better are the ones that seem to be not as well liked. I think that would go with any business, hardware business or the banker or whatever you're involved in. The bigger ones always take the brunt of all the arguments or whatever.

I 1: I don't know if I asked you this the last time, but what would you say it takes to become a successful fisherman?

R: Well, you've just about got to be a meteorologist, a lawyer, a hard worker and you've got to know a little about all of it to be a good fisherman. You've got to know the bottoms, the tides. You've got to know the boons. You can't be a dummy and catch a lot of fish. I'll put it that way.

I 1: Is it a risky business?

R: Well, it's sort of risky. But if you watch what you're doin' it's not bad. You've got to take chances and a lot of times you'll overload your boat when you know better. But again, you're tryin' to make a dollar so you'll take chances.

I 1: I don't mean just physical, but also financially. I would imagine it's a risky business at times.

R: It is. You need to be a pretty good manager because fishin' is seasonal. It's probably like farmin'. You're gonna have to live from season to season on what you make to be successful anyway.

I 1: In going back to this relationship between the fish house and the fishermen, that's what I kind of want to get at. Does it take a good relationship between the fish house manager and the fishermen to help him become successful? Does he have to work with you and do you have to work with him? Or is it just mainly up to him?

R: I'd say it's just a workin' agreement between both more

or less. I said we didn't help 'em too much, but we do buy their supplies and nets and boats. A good example is John Banyas. We've invested a lot of money in him but he is a hard worker and I think he's pretty smart when it comes to knowing how to fish, where to go and what to do. So somebody like that you'd invest a lot more in than you would in someone that don't try.

I 1: So if you take someone like John who you think is a good fisherman, you'll extend him a little more credit because you're pretty sure that he's going to pay you back and he's going to pay his bills on time. And he's probably

not gonna sit there with a lot of debt and let is build up.

R: That's about the way it is.

I 1: There was something I wanted to ask you about fishing. Who were some of the older successful fishermen when you were growing up in this community?

R: I would say about the most successful was Tink Fulford. He was about the hardest worker also. And he was more aggressive when he got out in the bay.

I 1: When you say he was more aggressive, what do you mean?

R: He more or less wouldn't take no for an answer. Back in those days we would have ways of holdin' certain flats for fishin'. A lot of times it was supposed to be someone elses grounds when he would come and the rule was you always put your nets in the water at high tide and then you'd start workin' 'em at low tide. But if he heard the fella come who was supposed to fish that area, he'd run his nets an hour or two hours before high tide. And he was just that aggressive. If he knew where there was fish he would go after 'em no matter who was supposed to be fishin' 'em. And he was an all around fisherman more or less. Haul nettin'.

But then there was Farmer Capo. He was supposed to be one of the better gill netters. Charlie Guthrie, my Uncle. He was real good. John Fulford, he was good. And then there was Millard Brown and my Dad was pretty good. Luther MacDonald, Albert Fugh and Jewel Mora. Most all those were top notch fishermen.

I 1: So when you were fishing in your later 20s and early 30s, who were some of the better fishermen at that time?

R: Tink was still fishin' along then. I always thought I was pretty good. I usually caught my part of the fish. Of course, there was quite a few good ones. Charlie Guthrie and John Fulford were still fishin'. Farmer Capo, Joe Capo. Wilbur Lewis was another real good fisherman. He was a real hard worker. Of course, he worked with Tink along in the later years and they were real aggressive.

I 1: Does it take a good teacher for another fisherman to learn from to become a good fisherman do you think?

R: It helps. But I don't think you actually need it. Of course, years ago before anyone would run a boat of their own they would have to fish with somebody it seems like two or three years. But now somebody comes and goes with somebody and he thinks next week he can get a boat of his own and go catch fish. A lot of people try. Some of 'em get by with it. Of course, it's much easier now than it was back when I was fishin'. The cotton and linen nets you just had to take care of those. If you didn't they wouldn't last thirty days. And your boats, you had to keep those painted or scrape the barnacles off of 'em or

the worms would eat 'em up. Now they use the fiberglass so now all they have to do is come down and get in their boat and go fishin'. When they come in they get the fish out of it and that's it. They don't worry about it or anything.

I 1: Who are some of the more successful fishermen today in Cortez?

R: I guess Trigger Mora's good. Blue Fulford. I think Harry _____ and John Banyas. Joe MacDonald. The gill net fishermen we have Dutch. He's pretty successful. I don't know. It seems like to me Marty is doin' pretty well for himself. Tim Thompson. Most of 'em fish by themselves anymore and they just have one boat. The big haul net crews are all over with. They won't allow you to use any amount of net anymore. I guess I would say Dutch was the most successful over the years. But now they're eliminating his nets and he's just not gonna be able to work as hard as he has in the past.

I 1: What do you see as a future for these young guys that are fishing today? What are they going to have to do to stay in fishing?

R: It looks like its gonna come to part time fishin'. Just fish durin' the season when a certain kind of fish are in. Like you could fish about three months durin' the Fall for mullet and you can probably fish a month in the Spring and a month in the Fall for the mackerel. And other times you might have to take a job on land doin' somethin'. In fact, some of the fishermen have started followin' the mullet from one end of the Gulf to the other and they can spend six or seven months just catchin' mullet. I think they'll eventually eliminate that because it just puts too many fishermen in an area. All the fishermen from Louisiana they work right on South and then when the fish start in Louisiana, a lot of the Florida fishermen go up there. It just throws pressure on the fish and it causes confusion and friction between the fishermen too.

I 1: Inner-conflicts there. What do you think about the Cortez waterfront and the other fish houses. What are they going to have to do? Actually, there's only going to be two in Cortez now. Sigma and Bell's. What are you going to have to do?

R: Star is still there but he's more or less just retail.

I 1: What are you going to have to do to remain in business?

R: Well, if they don't ban nets I think we can carry on for a long time just like we're goin'. If they do ban the nets, then we'll get more or less into the deep sea fish. The grouper and the snapper. And just imported fish.

I 1: Are there any alternatives for the fishermen here in Cortez once they ban inshore netting? Is there enough work for them on the offshore that a lot of these fishermen could switch?

R: I don't know just what will happen to a lot of 'em. I suppose a lot of 'em will get into the offshore fish. They'd just about have to especially the ones that don't have any education. Most of 'em are smart enough to hold a job. They like to be their own boss, that's gonna be different.

I 1: I want you to talk a little bit about Cortez. You've seen the community change a lot. What do you think has been the greatest change in Cortez itself?

R: The greatest change I think is, years ago it was just a workin' fishin' Village and I think everyone seemed to get along better than they do now at times. It seems like if a bunch of fish showed up the old timers out here would go around wakin' people up at midnight and tellin' 'em where they could go catch a load of fish. But now sometimes if you want to blow a little ice at 10:00 or 11:00, somebody's complainin' about it. Makin' too much racket, gotta have your rest. We've just been closed in by the tourists you might say. Of course, I don't guess they're tourists anymore if they moved down here and build.

But years ago the only thing there was on either side of Cortez was the woods. And now there's just developments. You more or less have to try to make everybody happy. With fishin' you can't control when you're gonna catch a load of fish. It might be midnight or it might be mid day and when you do catch 'em you're gonna have to put ice on 'em or lose 'em. I don't know. It just seems like it changes more and more.

I 1: Fishing communities have always said to be very close knit communities and when I talk with people from Cortez the say that Cortez used to be that way. Do you think it still is?

R: It still is, but there's always just a few in the Village now who don't want to agree to anything concerning the commercial fishing end of it. Like Sigma wanted to put that freezer in down there. I think if he had put it in there, he wouldn't be in St. Pete today. He worked at least three or four hundred people all Fall. He starts out buyin' fish in Carolina and Louisiana and buys 'em all the way to the tip of Florida. There would have been about three hundred people workin' and most of 'em would have been right from this area. As it was, they come from St. Pete. It would have made it more of a fishin' community. There would have been fish comin' and goin'

all the time. I guess it just seems like to me it would have made it more of a fishin' village.

I 1: Do you think it would have had any adverse impact on the community if Tony had built that freezer?

R: I don't believe so. It would have made it more of a fishin' area. When I was growin' up I always figured this should be a port for Manatee County. We had fairly deep water within a mile of the Gulf. That could have been dredged out and we would have had a deep water port here.

And we could have had it from right around to the edge of Palma Sola Bay clear up to ... well, there was already deep water up to Fulford's. All of this could have had ships comin' in here loadin' and unloadin'. And it would have just made an industrial area instead of a tourist area. The fish houses years ago, everytime we got a high tide, Cortez Road was flooded. And back in I believe about 1939 or '40, '41, the Commissioners in Bradenton got all the fish dealers in this area that brought in the trucks. Didn't have too big a trucks, but what truckin' there was come mostly right into Cortez haulin' fish and that. There probably were fifty trucks comin' and goin'.

They built that road up about two feet higher than what it was previously and that's the base of the Cortez Road now from here to up past 80th Street. That was all hauled in here with those big dirt haulers to build up the highways. And the fishin' business in this area is what got Cortez Road built to start with.

I 1: But if you were to say made this a port or something, the community would have changed a lot. It wouldn't be the sort of quaint fishing village that it is today.

R: It would have been both. It would have been a fishin' village and a sort of an industrial port area. A little bit like Port Manatee I suppose. It would have taken a lot less dredgin' to put it in here than it did up at Port Manatee. They destroyed miles of feed land or bay bottom you know, with the grasses and what not, when they put that port up there. Of course, the same way when they put the Skyway Bridge in, that destroyed plenty of bay bottom. I know Wayne Mead right there next to the Skyway and Terra Ceia Bay. There was scum in front of their property that was six inches or a foot deep and they received a subsidy for it. I think they got thirty or forty thousand dollars for it. Well, they claimed it shallowed the water up there and they had a little old lift like Calvin's got out here to pick their boats up and clean 'em off. And somehow or another they had enough pull in Tallahassee till they got a good grant for it.

They did the same thing where it went across Palma Sola Bay, I mean Sarasota Bay where the Manatee Avenue Bridge is. There was silt there for years after they put that across there.

I 1: So if they were to put these two new bridges in do you think that would have quite an effect on the ecosystem

then?

R: I don't think it's gonna have too much because I don't think they're gonna have to do too much dredgin'. I believe they're gonna use the same fills that they already have. Now, if they was to put it down there to Cocina and go across through the Kitchen over to ... link it up with 59th, that would do a lot of damage. That would really kill that Kitchen flat. It would just be mud flat after they finished. I don't think they would bridge it all the way. They would probably fill and bridge.

I 1: What do you see as the future for A.P. Bell Fish Company?

R: I think it'll be a good livin' for someone. I don't know, it's probably gonna continue for another few years anyway. You can't tell what the future's gonna bring. But you kind of get an idea. Might have to switch around from one thing to another.

I 1: Now Karen has become involved in the business. But as far as the younger Bells, she's about the only one that's really involved isn't she?

R: Yeah. And I think she could manage it pretty well. She seems to have a pretty level head on her. I think she's doin' a good job.

I 1: Do you want to see it stay in the family?

R: Yes, if she wants it. If she likes it I'd like to see her stay involved. When she was goin' to college I didn't think she'd get involved. She was workin' there a little bit with IBM and I thought maybe she would end up bein' there. But she surprised me. You can't never tell.

I 1: Well, she's become a pretty good administrator I think.

R: Good publicity and she seems to, like I say, pretty level-headed and she gets along with people. And she can be kind of forceful too and still get along.

I 1: Now that you're talking about those things tell me, what does it take to become a successful fish house manager?

R: I don't know. It's a pretty hard job. You've got the fishermen on one side and you've got the buyers on the other. Kind of like bein' a sergeant in the Army. You've got to get along with both sides and sometimes I don't know which is the worst. Most of the fishermen are ok, but there are some that's hard to satisfy. The same with the customers. Most of 'em you get along good with, but others are never happy.

I 1: How do you feel about the job that you've done managing this fish house? Do you feel that you've been successful? Do you feel confident that you want to continue or are there any major changes that you would like to make?

R: Not really. I always thought of expandin' a lot when I was first operatin' here. But instead of doin' that we

just held on more or less to what we had and spent as we made the money. For some people who start out overnight they'd be doin' a two or three million dollar business. But it would all be on credit. I never took many chances since I've been here. I've had chances to do a lot of things but I figured just play it safe and just figured we had a livin' made here. No use to gamble it away.

I 1: We're getting low on tape. Tell me about one of the largest catches of fish that you remember seeing? What would you say that was and was there any story behind that?

R: The largest bunch I ever caught was comin' out of the Manatee River. We caught about a hundred a fifteen thousand there one night. Mullet. We had give up and went to bed and the mullet come and started beatin' against the side of the boat. Of course, I had the end of the net. That was a beat seine. Had it tied to the tree and so I just got up, started the boat up, and as I was goin' off fish were black all around me. I was gonna strike one way but then I struck the other and there must have been several million pounds of mullet there in that bunch. Like I say, we caught all the net would hold which was about a hundred and fifteen or twenty thousand.

I 1: Who was on that crew with you?

R: I don't remember now. I don't know. When I first started out I had mostly a crew of young boys with me and as we continued to fish I had all family people. Had 'em just about makin' a livin'. They had children and a house to support. It was a lot of responsibility. I think I fished six men more of my career fishin'.

I 1: Alcee Taylor was talking about one bunch of fish that you set around School Key I think. And you had them set there and then something happened. He said that all that stuff on the bottom started raising up?

R: I remember that. Was he with me at that time?

I 1: That's what he said.

R: There was a lot of this moss on the bottom that started floatin' and just floated the lead line on the bottom of the net to the top of the water. That night we was around the nets tryin' to keep the moss off as the tide was goin' out. And you could just hear those fish roarin' there. We might have caught five or ten thousand, I don't remember how many there was. But most of 'em just went out.

I 1: Then he said the next day someone else caught those fish.

R: Yeah, they caught 'em in a beach seine down around Anna Maria. We were layin' there and we were all asleep and nobody bothered to wake us up. So no one felt too sorry for us. But what really made us that tired, we had to come in. At that time my Dad was runnin' the fish house and when we caught the fish we had to stay in there and

help put 'em up. Ice 'em, take care of 'em. And my Uncle had come in just before we did and he had about twenty, twenty five thousand fish. So before we could get rid of our fish we had to help take care of his.