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Fulford Fish Company Oral History Vanishing Culture Project
Mr. Ralph Fulford, Operator

Funded in part by the Florida Humanities Council

Interviewers: Mr. Mike Jepsen/Mr. Wayne Nield/Mr. Al C. Taylor

I 1: Ralph, we usually start these interviews by asking you to state your full name.

R: Ralph M. Fulford.

I 1: What's your date of birth?

R: April 4, 1928.

I 1: Are you married?

R: Yes.

I 1: And your wife's name.

R: Lois Guthrie-Fulford.

I 1: Guthrie is her maiden name?

R: Yes.

I 1: What is your father's name?

R: His name was Walton "Tink" Fulford. Everybody knew him by Tink.

I 1: And your mother's name?

R: Edith Fulford.

I 1: And what was her maiden name?

R: Wilson.

I 1: Do you have any children?

R: We have three children. Have one son, Ralph W. "Rusty" Fulford. He lives in Virginia. Sylvia Bailey who lives in Cortez and Hazel Petrie who lives in Cortez. Have

seven grandchildren.

I 1: Seven grandchildren. That's quite a few. What was your father's occupation?

R: He was a fisherman and he operated a fish company some here too. His primary interest was fishing.

I 1: What was the name of the first fish house that he opened here in Cortez?

R: Dixie Fish Company.

I 1: Do you know the year that he opened that?

R: No, I don't. It was back in the early '30s I think and he went broke and went back to fishin' for someone else. Until 1940, he opened up under the name of Fulford Fish Company.

I 1: I forgot to ask you, but tell me your brothers and sisters names.

R: Older sister is Mary Francis we always knew her, but now she's just Mary Green. And I have sister younger than I am Belinda Porterfield, Irene Taylor. Anna Dean Rettig. A brother Wayne Fulford and Gary Fulford.

I 1: All of your brothers and sisters are living?

R: Yes.

I 1: Going back to your father's occupation. He opened the Dixie Fish Company and that was located where?

R: It was just offshore of this building about 150 feet. Right here in Cortez.

I 1: Can you tell me a little bit about your father? What kind of man he was and his love of fishing.

R: Well, he just loved fishin' and loved to work. He was a workaholic. He wanted to work all the time and he wanted everybody else to work. If you've read Ben's book, The Finest Kind, you'll see in there where one time he kicked the cat and said get up and do something. He wanted everything workin'.

I 1: What was your mother like?

R: Mother was strictly a homekeeper. A housewife. She tended to my father's every need and she took care of all of us. Tried to feed us during the Depression. There wasn't much to eat but fish and grits, but we lived through it. We had one quart of milk a day for four of us.

I 1: For four?

R: Yes. Later she bought a cow so then we had plenty of milk.

I 1: Did you ever have to milk the cow?

R: No, I didn't ever learn how to milk it.

I 1: Who did the milking?

R: My mother.

I 1: Tell me the first home that you remember in Cortez growing up where you lived.

R: Well, the house that I was born in right across the street from the fish house here, about 100 feet. That's the only house I ever lived in til I got married in December of 1945

and we moved from our present location which is about 150 feet from that house. So I've lived right here within 300 feet of the fish house all my life.

I 1: Your entire life?

R: Yeah.

I 1: Tell me what it was like growing up in Cortez as a child.

R: Well, it was a lot of fun. I mean, we had to work especially after my dad had the fish house. After school I had to help work down there. I couldn't do much, but I could drag a basket of fish around a little bit. In those days all the fish were bulked in a room. We didn't use fish boxes. We just iced 'em in the cooler, a layer of ice, a layer of fish. Then when the trucks come in we had to get in their with gloves on and pick the fish out of the ice and weigh 'em out to load 'em on the truck.

I 1: Would you load them just in the truck or would you have boxes or barrels?

R: Most of 'em were loaded in bulk on the trucks. And then I guess probably it was 1943 before we started using boxes. Then we started puttin' them in 100 pound boxes and we'd store 'em in the coolers. We loaded a lot of fix on box cars in Bradenton. We'd take 'em out of the fish house and bulk 'em on a truck, haul 'em to Bradenton, back up to the box car, shove 'em out of the truck into the box car and then they had to be stacked liked corn in the box car. A layer of fish, a layer of ice.

I 1: When you were young and working at the fish house, were there other kids working with you?

R: Yes. Any of the kids goin' to school. After school there'd be a bunch of kids at the fish house to work. Other boys here in town.

I 1: How much would you get paid for this work?

R: Well, I got my eats to start with. That was about it. Cause there wasn't any money. After we had built this place here and I got big enough that I could do some other work, well I'd get enough money to spend to go to town once in awhile. Buy me some shotgun shells and rifle bullets and go rabbit huntin'.

I 1: Did your mother ever do anything else outside the home to help add to the family income?

R: I think she helped a little in the business. Sometime we'd load fish in barrels to ship out on the rail cars and she'd drive the truck to town sometimes. We had two trucks. I'd drive, she'd drive one sometimes. She just drove the truck and then I'd take someone with me and we'd unload the fish out of the truck onto the box car.

I 1: So she did take part in some part of the family business?

R: Yeah. She did. She did a little of the bookkeeping. She'd do the banking. Run back and forth to the bank. Back in those days we paid off in cash. We'd get a check for the fish, but we'd have to take 'em to the bank to cash 'em and bring the money back, cause everybody paid off in cash on Saturday.

I 1: Who did take care of the books mainly?

R: Well, when we first built this place, Woodrow Green was kind of a general manager and he did most of the bookkeeping until my sister Mary got out of high school. Then she did some of it. In fact, she did the payin' off here for one or two summers when she was in college. And then whenever I got out of school, I got married four months before I finished high school, and I was gonna go fishin' with Mildred Brown but my daddy wanted me to stay here and take care of the business cause he wanted to go back fishin'. So that was in early '46 and I've been here ever since.

I 1: Tell me a little bit more about what it was like when you were a child and living in Cortez. What do you remember about the waterfront at that time?

R: Well, at that time there was no seawalls on the waterfront. All the fish houses were built out 100 feet from the shore. Had runways out there that trucks could back out on. And all this along here right where we are, right on down as far as Sigma, was just an open beach. Mangroves covered most of it. But we'd get all sort of mangroves on low tide and gather up fiddlers. Had millions of fiddler crabs. We'd gather 'em up and Al C.'s daddy had a pen where he kept _____ in and we'd put the fiddlers in the _____ pen for 'em to eat. And we'd get old discarded net, old cotton net, and we'd roll it up and make us a roll about six inches big and just wade out in the water, we'd pull it up to the shore real easy and catch some minnows. You could pull them chubs and things right up on the dry beach with that.

I 1: What would you do with those fish?

R: I don't know. We just threw 'em back in the water.

I 1: You were just playing around.

R: Just playin' with 'em. There wasn't anything big enough to sell or to eat. And we'd go rabbit huntin' like I say. After I got up big enough to get a shotgun. We'd go out

where the farms are and Sunny Shores Trailer Park and Coral Shores, and all these places that are now built up. We rabbit hunted all them woods. Coral Shores was a big farm.

I 1: Were there a lot of rabbits?

R: Yes. There was quite a few. We'd go out at night. Wasn't supposed to hunt at night, but we didn't know it. So we'd have us a headlight and we'd go out at night sometimes and 12, 15 rabbits a night.

I 2: Ralph, there's two or three pictures hanging on the wall here that are of interest. Whose the picture behind you?

R: That's my father, Tink Fulford.

I 2: And his father was Captain Billy?

R: Right.

I 2: Did you know your grandfather?

R: Yes. I knew him. He died when I was fairly young. I guess I was about 10 years old when he died.

I 2: What he one of them that immigrated from North Carolina?

R: Yes. He was one of the original, about 4 _____ or 5, I can't remember for sure.

I 2: What are some of the stories you remember about North Carolina?

R: Well, I didn't ever hear much about it from up there ya know, before they come down here. I just heard that it was bad times up there. They wasn't makin' any money so they just got away from the farms that they farmed and part time fished there to I think. And they just left and come down here. A bunch of young men. They were in their early 20s I believe when then got here.

I 2: Have you ever been to North Carolina?

R: Yes, I've been to the old home site where my grand daddy was born. Down in eastern North Carolina. East of Morehead City and further on out to a place their call Straights. It's a body of water they call Straights. And a little ole village where he was raised was called Straights. Close to _____ and you go on down east to Sea Level and several other places out there.

I 2: Do many of the people here in Cortez stay in touch with relatives in North Carolina?

R: I don't know about staying in touch very much with the Fulford generation cause I don't think there's very many of 'em left up there. We go to North Carolina quite often. My wife's got two Aunts there. One of 'em passed away about four years ago. She's got one living Aunt in North Carolina and we go up there to see her some.

I 2: There's another picture over here behind me. There's a

boat up there called the Anna Dean. What can you tell us about the Anna Dean?

R: That was my daddy's boat. He had it built in 1942, about the same time this fish house was built. I think both were in the process of being built at the same time. And that picture was taken in probably the summer of '42. It had my dad on it and I was there holding my sister Anna Dean who the boat was named after.

I 2: That's your father out on the bow?

R: Yes.

I 2: And that's you behind him?

R: Yeah.

I 2: And who are the other people?

R: The man standing up there, one of 'ems my mother's brother Bud Wilson and the other one was Gator Mora. Gator's Junie and Virgil's daddy. He had a couple of daughters and another boy. Then standing behind the cabin in Gray Fulford and Manley Bell.

I 2: About what size is that boat?

R: 33 foot. 33 foot long. It was about 11 feet wide. As far as I know it was the first boat in Cortez with a clutch in it. All the boats before that had straight drive automobile engine. You started 'em up and they started to goin'. You get ready to stop, ya just turn the switch off. But this one had a marine clutch in it. It was an old six cylinder Gray Engine. Al C.'s father and brother Neary, Sr. and Neary, Jr. built that boat. The total cost of that boat at that time was $1,400.

I 2: How many men would it take to work a boat like that?

R: Well, three men could operate certain kinds of fishin'. In fact I've been fishin' on it a lot of times just two of us pompano fishin'. In later years Joe Mora and I fished it quite a bit, just the two of us. But a good crew, the kinda fishin' my dad did, you needed five men. And they had bunks, swingin' bunks, hangin' bunks ya know. With foam rubber mattresses. Had a little gas stove in it. It could carry enough groceries that they could go across the bay and stay four or five days and live pretty comfortable. Most of his fishin' was done just one day at a time. Go out at night and come in the next day some time. Or fish all night mackerel fishin' and come in at daylight, somethin' like that.

I 2: Would you work out in the gulf with a boat like that?

R: Yes. Mackerel fishin' was in the gulf. I helped old Bubba Capo and Trigger and several others on there one night. We caught 6,500 kingfish out on that boat. Biggest load ever brought in was 23,000 pounds of mullet. They were from under the bow cap to the stern. I mean

they just bailed 'em right into the window of the cabin. They took the mattresses off the bunks and just tied a man on the rail so he wouldn't fall overboard and they bailed 'em right out of the net through the window.

I 2: Whatever happened to that boat?

R: We sold it. Joe MacDonald was the last owner of it and had changed some gas connections different than I had it. I had 'em where the gas vented outside. He changed connections where the gas vented in the bilge and he filled it up with gas one mornin' out here at the fish

house and then when he hit the starter I guess a spark from the starter set it off. It just blew up. Two or three men there it blew overboard. Had some 500 pound boxes full of ice. It just picked them up and sent 'em overboard. And it just knocked the bottom off the boat. It sunk in just a matter of two or three minutes. Wasn't any fire, just an explosion. Knocked the bottom off. And they towed it over here in the key and it stayed there quite awhile and then Army Corps of Engineers come in and wanted to clean up a bunch of old boat wrecks over there and they ground it up. Made mulch out of it.

I 1: Was anyone hurt?

R: Not seriously, no. One of Joe's nephews was hurt a little bit, but nothing serious.

I 1: There's another picture here of Cortez. The large one on your wall and it shows the harbor with a lot of net spreads. Can you explain a little bit about when the picture was taken?

R: That one there was a photo made by Harold Smith from Anna Maria Island in 1949. The racks ya see. The spreads that they had to spread their cotton and linen nets. The linen nets had to be spread every day and dried. And the cotton stop nets we used, they limed 'em and spread 'em on the weekend. As long as they dried on Saturday and Sunday night, you could put 'em back on and go fishin' again.

I 1: There are a lot of net spreads out there. About how many were out there at that time, do you know?

R: I don't know. One time we had about 12 what we call stop net crews workin' here. Crews with four to six men in each crew. I'd say an average of about 5,000 yards of net for each crew.

I 1: 5,000 for each stop net crew?

R: Yes. About 5,000 yards of net. My daddy had 38 shallow nets he called 'em. Every net was about 6 to 7 feet deep and then he had 12 to 14 deep nets. They were 60 mash nets would stand about 12 feet of water, maybe a little over.

I 1: So each of those would make up part of the stop and they would use different combinations of nets according to where they were fishing?

R: According to the depth of the water.

I 1: So would he know where he was going to fish and that's how he would decide what net to take?

R: Well, no. They always loaded the shallow nets on one boat and the deep ones on another. They start runnin' nets out, they'd start at the shore, tie the net in the woods or mangrove bushes and they'd go out till he knew where to feel along with his poling oar as they run the nets out. When the water started gettin' too deep for the shallow

nets, they'd just stop them and tie on with the deep net and run them all out. They always took in an area of deeper water so in the morning when the tide went out the fish out drain out of the shallow water into that deeper water. Then they had a big haul net they'd put in there and they'd haul that out and catch everything.

I 1: Can they still stop net?

R: Well, they've about outlawed it. It's just about come to an end I think. With the different regulations, you can put a net overboard but you've got to start takin' it back within an hour. And this kinda fishin' you put the net over at high tide at night and at low tide in the mornin' you started workin' it. Maybe it would be high tide the next day before you got it up. So it had to be out sometimes 18, 20 hours.

I 1: What would the crew do after you got the nets set and you're waiting for the tide to come out?

R: They'd take a nap. They'd go to sleep sometimes. Unless there was a lot of moss. If there's a lot of moss with the tide goin' out, moss would drift out in the nets and sink it. So they'd have to stay up and stay around the nets the rest of the night letting the moss out. Just go along and push the court line down and let the moss go across the court line. Rollin' moss they called it.

I 1: So it was quite a bit of work.

R: Yes, it was probably and 18 to 20 hour job, one operation. I mean, time you run the nets overboard and check 'em out. They'd go around the nets makin' sure that everything was alright and holding and the nets were floatin' good. Then they'd go to sleep and like I say if there was much moss. A lot of times dad would stay there around the nets anyhow, just lookin', drinking coffee.

I 1: He was quite a coffee drinker.

R: Yes, he'd drink it right out of the pot.

I 2: Back to the photograph for a minute and the net spreads. Why were the net spread where they are. Why weren't they closer to shore and how did they go about deciding where to put them?

R: Well, Cortez is a natural harbor in here. I don't know

why, I guess God just made it that way. But from where about the Cortez fleet, Jim Berry's boats, up to right off here, it's a natural slew in here. Just a deeper area. And it starts out about the front of Tim Miller's shed and it goes out to Curt John's old camp out there. And beyond from where Curt's camp is on out, it's shallow water. And that's where they had their spreads. All of the net spreads, the front edge of 'em, the north side, it was deep enough you could put a _____ on there that drew 2, 3, 4 feet of water. But back where the spreads was, on low tide it wouldn't be over a foot deep. Right on the edge of the slew, we called it.

I 2: And if somebody wanted to go build a spread, was there any rhyme or reason for whose space was whose?

R: No, I don't think there was any. Homesteading kinda like out there. They'd just built their spreads and they used 'em all their life. Luther MacDonald was the furthest one out there. I can't remember the order of all of 'em. Jess Williams had some spreads over there. Curt Johns and the Bell family, they had spreads out there.

I 2: I have a similar question. When you look at that photograph you can see all the streets in Cortez are laid out neatly in a grid pattern. Did you ever hear any stories about who laid the town out?

R: No, I didn't. I think some of the streets, like in the subdivision I live in. Well, not a subdivision. They call it the Willis Addition of Cortez. A man named Augustine Willis, who married one of my grandfather's sisters, bought that piece of property that had 17 lots on it. And Wayne's next to me and the house next to Wayne's ... the lot where he's got his rental house on the water ... was the old homestead. That was the Augustine Willis homestead. And the Culbreath family rented that for years. That's where they had the Cortez Grand Ole Opry.

But I think that they just bought the section of land and they divided it till where it's got just one street through there, goes in front of my house. And no north and south streets except 121st that comes by Tony's house down there. And this block, my grandfather bought this whole block from the water through to 45th Avenue. In the earlier days it was called Madrid Avenue.

I 2: Excuse me. 45th Avenue was called Madrid?

R: Yeah. And 46th down here was Bayview. Bayview run from here clear to the bridge. And the other streets they started down by the bridge, Number 1 and this was 5th Street here, where 123rd is now. The County took it over. They didn't think we knew how to number streets. The County took it over. They started in the middle of Bradenton at what is now 301/41 that goes across by the hospital, DeSoto Bridge. And that's 1st Street and they go from there. Either way is 1st East goin' to the east and 1st West comin' this way.

I 2: Do you remember when they did that?

R: Just, I don't know. It was probably in the '50s or '60s.

I 2: Captain Billy, your grandfather, built two houses didn't he?

R: Yes, he built the house that Sue lives in now. That was the original house. And I think all of his children was born there except Aunt Sally. Sally Mora who just passed just last year or so. She was born in the new house. We call it the new house, it's been there over 80 years.

I 2: And why did he build that second house closer to the water?

R: I don't really know unless he just wanted to be closer to the water. And this place, I don't know how my dad come by it. I guess he bought it from grandpaw. And one of grandpaw's nephews owned the corner lot out here or a piece of it. Man Adams owned that. My daddy bought it from him.

I 2: And when was the fish house built?

R: This fish house was built in the last of '41, first of '42. We started tearing the old fish house down the day after Pearl Harbor was bombed. Well, the 8th of December is when we started and we had this one complete, ready to go the 19th of January. Just a bunch of fishermen workin'. Had a couple men here, my future dad-in-law, Earl Guthrie and Walter Taylor was kinda foremans and they made 80 cents an hour. And dad paid the fishermen 50 cents an hour for workin'. It was durin' the closed season on mullet so they didn't have anything else to do. So everybody was glad to get the 50 cent.

I 2: There's one more building on the property we need to talk about. And that's the little shed over here at the edge of the water. What is that?

R: That was a net camp my dad had built. He had an old net camp right in front of this fish house here by them big two palms out there. It blew down in the 1935 hurricane. So he had that one built after that. Two men from Oneco built that. Mr. Powell and Mr. Childers who have both long since died. It was up alongside daddy's house there and then in 1955 we bought a little ole tractor. We needed a place for it so we built an addition to his garage and this little ole house was in front of it so we moved it down to the water. Mr. Nash Pringle and I moved it on rollers. And it has been used as a net camp and there was an old feller Billy Ireland lived in it for several years. And then my Uncle Bill Fulford stayed in it there for probably two years just before he died. He died about 1962 or '63 around in there.

I 2: Was it used as a residence while it was on that site where it is now?

R: Just Uncle Bill stayed in it for awhile. He didn't do

any cookin'. He just slept in it. People would bring him something to eat. Some of his sons here were always takin' him somethin' to eat. And he'd just eat jelly and bread or whatever. He didn't do any cookin' or anything in it. But ole Bill Ireland used it for several years. He was an old bachelor. He lived in there till he was 80 somethin' years old. He kinda lost his mind and they had to put him in the mental hospital over in Arcadia and he died there. I don't know where he come from originally. He just showed up here way back when. He built a camp out over the water and then he left here back in the '30s and was gone for about 10 years or longer. And my dad moved

back from Vero Beach on the east coast. He moved him from there to _____ which is on the outskirts of Ft. Myers Beach. He stayed down there for a few years and then daddy went there and brought him back here and put him in the camp. He fished right by himself. He'd do a little trout fishin' in the summer with hook and line and he had a _____ net. He'd catch pompano and blue fish and mackerel and stuff like that. Never did catch a lot of fish but it didn't take a whole lot for him to live. He did a lot of cookin'. I mean he didn't just like most bachelors eat spiced ham and baloney. He'd get a cabbage and cook it or bake beans. He was a pretty good cook. I ate with him a lot of times.

I 2: There's one more construction out here. This device that you use for lifting boats out of the water. What do you call that?

R: We just call it a boat lift. That was somethin' here I think way back in the early days they had things similar to that here. And Charlie Guthrie built the first recent one here.

I 2: We were talking about the boat lift. You started to say something about Charlie Guthrie.

R: Yeah, Charlie Guthrie built one of those for his own use there and it worked out so good my dad decided we'd build one. So I think we built the first one there in 1951. It just operates with pry poles and it's fairly easy to operate. We used lift Anna Dean out there on it. And there was another boat here, Cathy Ann. Wilbur Lewis had it built. It was about a 36 foot boat with a big diesel engine in it. We'd lift it out there on it. Right now they're in bad shape. We're gonna quit using 'em. The piling is goin'.

I 1: Ralph, you said when you built this fish house it was the mullet closed season. And that was back in the '40s. Can you explain a little bit about the closed season, the regulations you had to abide by then?

R: Well, you couldn't catch any mullet. Originally, as far as I can remember, the closed season started on the first day of December. The fishermen couldn't catch any mullet after the first day of December and the dealers had five days to clear any fish they might have in their fish house out. There was five days. Then after that you couldn't buy any more mullet till the 20th of January. But they'd always

start early on the 19th and they'd have fish on the dock at midnight on the 19th. Like there was fish on this dock here at midnight, the 19th, 1942. In fact, I've still got the original invoice I think here for the first fish that come through this place on January 20, 1942.

I 1: Why was there a closed season? Do you know?

R: Just the State that the mullet needed a closed season. I think at some time in the '50s the State Legislature or whoever's in charge decided that we didn't need a closed season. So they did away with it. I couldn't tell a lot

of difference in the population of mullet when we had one and didn't have it. Now they are thinkin' that we need more so they're closin' the weekends and I think they'll eventually get a closed season back on it. But a closed season on mullet like we used to have would put the wholesalers on this coast out of business. Because we depended on that little shot in the arm with the roe business to get us through the year. And without that I don't see how a wholesale fish company can operate.

I 1: Well, that brings up a topic now that I was going to ask you about later. But I'll ask you now. You're going to close Fulford Fish Company soon, aren't you?

R: Yes. I plan on closin' sometime the end of this month.

I 1: Can you tell me what led up to the closing of this company?

R: Well, for one thing I had a pretty serious stroke back in February of '88 and since then I haven't been up to par for operating the business. And just different things happenin' like a bunch of red tape gettin' involved in it. Ya got all the gas taxes, local gas taxes. We used to pay our wholesaler all the gas tax. He'd bring gas, we'd pay state, federal and local. Any tax, we just paid him and he'd forward it on to the state. And they decided that wasn't enough work for somebody. So they fixed it to where the dealers here has to file those reports every month.

And then the EPA got in onto it on the gas tank regulations. You have to fill forms out on that. And I'm just not up to doin' all that extra red tape, I call it. Book work. And it got to where we just couldn't make a dollar. I had saved a few for my older, older days and the last three years I've taken most all I had in savings and put back in the electric bill to keep this place goin'.

I 1: Have the increased regulations affected your ability to make a living from this fish house?

R: Yes, it has. Weekend closure on the mullet during the roe season's affected it a lot because it seems that for some reason or other we get all of our cold fronts comin' through on Friday or Saturday when we can't fish. It's cut down on production. And other regulations of different kinds. We can't sell. Well snook's been out for years, but then they took the red fish away from us and they're wantin' the trout. I think they'll be happy when we can catch toad fish and catfish, maybe. Then they'll decide maybe they'll want

them for the skin.

I 1: Well, tell me what type of fish do you, or in the past, have you processed at this fish house.

R: Well, our main thing has always been mullet. Mullet's been our biggest catch. But we have processed quite a few pompano during the season and in the spring, March and April and part of May, ya get a few pompano along the beach. We'd get a few boxes of pompano every day. And spanish mackerel. Back in the stop-net days ya got a lot of red

fish and trout. And if you had a variety of fish ya could sell more mullet. If you were just gettin' strictly mullet, when the wholesalers came in to pick 'em up, they didn't buy many. But if you had say 2,000 pounds of mullet, 200, 300 pounds of sheephead and 100 pound of small red fish and a couple boxes of trout, they'd take it all. And most of this other kind of fish, we always had a little better margin of profit than we did on mullet. We paid the fishermen more and we'd make a little bit more too.

I 1: And when you first opened this fish house, was there a market for roe like there is today?

R: No. Well, there was a market for it way back in the '40s. They had a little market for salt roe. Some of the fishermen would slip out and catch a few mullet during the closed seasons, salt 'em and they'd slip 'em out somehow or another. Kinda bootleg 'em.

I 1: Where was the market for salt roe?

R: At that time anyplace that'd buy mullet, just like Georgia. They'd buy 'em. Of course, they didn't bring anything. I've seen old invoices here where they sold salt roe for 25 cent a pound. And this oriental market just brought it back in the mid-'70s I'd say. We didn't get into it until 1980. We were sellin' a few fish to the Georgia trucks all summer. They'd come in and buy a few boxes of mullet every week. And they wanted the roe mullet, so we'd let them have the roe mullet during roe season. We found out they were takin' the roe mullet to Georgia, takin' the roe out of 'em, and bringin' 'em back to Florida and sellin' 'em. So they were makin' the money. So we just decided if they could sell roe we could too. So we went into cuttin' our own mullet and processing the roe. Freezin' it.

I 1: What's your main market for your mullet today?

R: Well other than the roe, the Georgia trade is still I think the main market. Although it's cuttin' down more all the time.

I 1: But historically, that's been the market for your fresh mullet?

R: Right. Yeah. Now for the last ten years we shipped a lot of fish air freight. We dealt with Honolulu for about four years. Sold quite a few fish there air freight. And then since about 1983 we have shipped a lot of fish to

California air freight. Mostly mullet, but they'll buy a few _____, little butter fish we call 'em. A few thread herring. Different kinda fish. It's been a good market for us.

I 1: How many fishermen do you have fishing for you at this time?

R: Well, I wouldn't say cause we got so many people out there that are not fishermen. We've got some that don't fish much. If they can find something else to do they'll go do that. We still have about 12 mostly full-time fishermen.

I 1: Since you've been operating the fish house, what's the most number of fishermen you've had fishing here?

R: Oh, I don't know. At one time we had six stop-net crews. Plus a bunch of gill-netters. So, I'd say at times we've had probably 60 men fishin' out of this place.

I 2: Does the fish house finance the fishermen in any way? I mean what is the relationship between the fish house and the fishermen?

R: In the past fish houses have financed a lot of the fishermen. Buy 'em nets and usually they have an agreement they pay back what we call a half a third which would be a sixth of the cash. It's always customary here that the captain or the boat owner took out one-third for his running the boat and keepin' up the gear. Well, the fish house furnished most of the gear. The captain got half of that third and paid the other half on the gear. Some of 'ems good about that and other ones are not. We've got some fishermen here that even pay in advance. I mean, if they get caught up on our account, they'll keep on payin' so if they need somethin' they'll have it ready. And then we've got others that never catch up.

I 2: How about ice. Do they buy the ice?

R: No, all of our net boats, we've always furnished ice to 'em.

I 2: And you sell them gasoline?

R: Yes, we sell them gas most of the time. That's another headache. Like I said, these regulations that the EPA is puttin' on keepin' all the records and everything. And it's expensive. You don't make much on gas. If you can charge 5 or 6 cents above what it costs ya, that's about as much as you can do. And you can't make any money on it. But I've got a system here that I put in about six years ago. A new tank and a pump and this electronic computerized system here for keepin' up with the gas, we have a card system. Each one of the fishermen has a card with a number he punches in. And then every week we pull the activity reports on it. All the gas that goes out is charged to somebody and since we've had that system we have not lost but very little gas.

But before that we had an honor system and all the fishermen had keys. And some of 'em would forget to lock

the pump back up. Well, somebody else would come on and get gas and not write it down. I think we lost a lot of gas during that time. Most of the fishermen are honest. They'll tell ya what they got and you can depend on it. But we've got some that wasn't.

I 1: Could the fishermen, if they needed a new net, would you order it through the fish house? Would you provide the gear for them or a way to get gear?

R: Yes, usually we'd order it for them and put it on the books and as they caught fish they'd pay it off. I'd

say most of 'em do good at that. Some don't. I've got some fishermen that left, made a little bit of money, that I'll never get.

I 1: Is that typical for other fish houses also?

R: I think it is.

I 1: I wanted to ask you about your father before I forget it. He also had a passion for palm trees didn't he?

R: Yes, he liked palms. He always had a few palms here on the place, old coconut palms. I mean cabbage palms. Got a few coconut trees and he decided he'd ... somebody come along and wanted to buy some one time. He said well, if they want some, somebody else will be wantin' some. So we got in touch with some people in Miami somehow or another. We got 2,000 coconuts. On Halloween day, 1947. And we planted them and two years later we started sellin' a few coconut trees. People would come by from Anna Maria Island and order 'em. I'd dig 'em and deliver 'em and plant 'em. Back then we was gettin' $5.00, $7.00 apiece for 'em. Now, the same size palm, you buy it out of a nursery in a can and it costs ya $25.00 to $30.00.

We sold a lot of 'em over the years. The freeze got a lot of 'em. The freeze of 1958 we had quite a few hundred small trees and that night it got down to 25 degrees. The next mornin' when the sun come up the palms turned brown. We said we had instant brown coconut trees. Since then I have raised a few. I still plant a few seeds.

We had a disease that come through down in South Florida back in the '50s. It killed most of the palm trees. It never did get this far out to the coast. But they found some coconuts in Jamaica called the Malayan Coconut that were resistant to the disease. They originated in Malaysia over in the Pacific. And we'd get the seed from Jamaica of these Malayan Coconuts and plant 'em and they were resistant to the disease. But the last couple of years I haven't been able to get any of them seeds. I've got two or three bearing trees here that I've started from seed and I'm gonna plant some of them. Try to keep a few of 'em.

There's no big money in it but you know, once in awhile if you can sell $300, $400 worth it helps pay the taxes.

I 1: Going back to when you built this fish house. It was right at the beginning of World War II. How did the community

look upon the start of that War? Can you tell me a little bit about that? What it was like being here at that time?

R: Well, nobody liked the War. But we had a lot of volunteers that left Cortez and went in the service. In fact, the mornin' after Pearl Harbor was bombed I looked out and saw Molly Guthrie comin' ashore from out to this boat in a skiff with his waders. He took his waders home and went and joined the Navy. It was that way right on. I don't know how many people we had in Cortez. I thought it was about 90 some out of Cortez in World War II. But some said it wasn't but 50 some. I think it was more than that.

I 1: Fifty joined from this community?

R: Most of 'em joined. We had a few draftees. But there was some out of every family. I wasn't old enough for it. And my daddy was too old, I guess. They didn't bother him. And some of the fishermen go deferments because they were producing food. Fish was pretty vital during that time. Meat was rationed or they took what meat they had for ... I don't know what they did, for the servicemen or whatever. But some of 'em said they didn't get much of it either. But it was a sell for fish and I think that God seen the need for it so He provided the fish at the same time. There was a good sell for fish and there was a lot of fish.

Of course, they didn't bring any money. They were cheap. Fish, when they got up to 7 or 8 cents a pound for mullet, we thought we was really doin' something.

I 1: How many fish during that time would you process through this fish house in a day?

R: It wasn't unusual to pack 50,000 pounds through here. I have seen over 100,000 pounds go through in a day. We had usually three to four regular workers here and then when we'd get a lot of fish we'd go in town and pick up five or six black people. Back in them days they were Negroes. But they's black people now. And we'd bring 'em out and work 'em a day, sometimes they'd work two or three days straight. We had usually three or four residents here, family people, workin' here at this house. And besides the school kids it would be four or five of us boys as soon as we'd get off the school bus and changed our clothes we was down at the fish house.

We'd work till 10:00, 11:00 at night. If I worked much after midnight I could stay home the next day and work. But sometimes we'd work till 2:00, 3:00 and didn't feel like goin' to school.

I 1: You did other jobs besides just hauling the fish as kids working in the fish house. What other jobs did you do?

R: Well, we gutted fish. Mackerel, blue fish, trout. Everything mostly except mullet and pompano had to be gutted. And it was the kids' job to gut fish. A lot of the boys would spend the night at the fish house. The fishermen would bring fish in durin' the night and they'd gut 'em during the night. A lot of times the fish house workers would stay at the fish house all night, weigh the

fish when they come in. Back in them days we weighed 'em before we gutted 'em. Some of 'em. Some of 'em they weighed 'em after they was gutted. Weigh 'em in, then we'd gut 'em and then we had to re-weigh 'em to box 'em up or whatever.

During World War II we shipped a lot of fish in barrels. There was a couple brokers for the fish distributors in Jacksonville. And later Jack Yeomans, who was manager of Atlanta Fish in Atlanta, Georgia. He moved to Jacksonville and opened up a brokerage house. And we'd just call in

what we had in the mornin' and durin' the day he'd call us orders back for 'em. Maybe we'd have two barrels go to Philadelphia and two to Memphis and two somewhere else. I've had times here there'd be maybe 10, 15 different orders for 2, 3 barrels of fish. We had two trucks here and they'd haul 18 barrels each. And a lot of days we'd fill both of them trucks full to take to the express office.

I 1: When you say barrel, what do you mean?

R: Wooden barrels. We'd put 200 pound of fish in 'em. You'd put about six inches of ice in the bottom, pack it down good, put 100 pound of fish and then you'd put about six inches of ice in the middle, pack that down good. Then another 100 pound of fish and then you'd pile ice on it and you'd git on 'em. Then we had, kinda like a burlap cover that had kraft paper on top of it. And you put that over and you'd take the top ring off so ya could put that paper down and then you put the ring back on and put about 7 or 8 nails around it to hold the top ring on. Barrel hoop they called it.

We'd take 'em in and just put 'em on kind of a little ole dolly they had out there and they'd back 'em up to the car when the train come in and unload 'em in the box car. Usually if they were goin' up the east coast they'd stop in Jacksonville. I understand they had a place there they re-iced. They just cut out that barrel cover with a knife and just put a chunk of ice in there. Maybe 20, 25 pound of ice. That's the way I understand they did it. Now, I never did see it but that's what I've heard. That they did re-ice 'em en route.

I 2: How would you find a buyer all the way up in Philadelphia? Or how would they know you were here to contract for a sale?

R: Most of these orders I guess went through a broker. Florida Fish Distributors, a man named Robidai, started that in Jacksonville. He was there for 100 years I guess. He did a lot of that. He had several people workin' for him and they were just steady on the phone. I can remember a lot of it was done by telegraph. We'd get orders in. Western Union would call us on the phone and give us orders for these fish that they had sent to the telegraph office. And we paid the broker. Like Jack Yeomans in Jacksonville or other fish distributors, they charged 7.5% commission. And if you ship the fish to the New York market. We had several

buyers up there. Myer Fish Company was one of 'em. And then they had Century Fish Company and Blue Ribbon. Some of them are still in business. Way back there was some other ones. I can't remember all of 'em. But you'd ship fish on consignment. You just put 'em in the barrel and let 'em go. They'd get up there. Whatever they sold for ... that New York market took out 12.5% commission. And then they'd take out for the freight. We sent everything freight collect. They'd take out freight. If there was anything left, we'd get it. Sometimes you wouldn't get enough out of the fish to pay all the freight and commission. But we've had a lot of orders for fish like that in the barrels on the

train. Later they got these big semi's. When they started them in business several companies ... the first one I remember is Stancill up above St. Pete. They'd haul fish to New York for $2.75 a box. And now they're runnin' something around $10.00 or $12.00 a box.

I 1: There's a lot of concern for the quality of seafood. And I have heard recently that the fishermen never put ice on their fish in the old days. Is that true?

R: That's right. I fished two summers here when I was in high school. 1943 and 1944. We had a 28 foot boat and we'd fish from here to John's Pass. That's up above St. Petersburg. Out in the Gulf. And a lot of times we'd make a strike at daylight at Mullet Key Dock, catch a few fish. Maybe 200, 300, 400, 500. Bail 'em right in the bottom of the boat and we'd fish from then till we'd get in here. About 3:00, 4:00 in the afternoon. Sometimes we'd have 1,500 pounds of fish. Sometimes 2,000, 3000 pounds. No ice. And the fish would still be good.

We caught 28,000 pounds at the Indian Rocks, if ya know where that is. There was two boats there that day. Albert Fugh was there and we bailed both boats full of fish at Indian Rocks and brought 'em in here and unloaded 'em and they sold as fresh fish. They weren't the quality we get out of these boxes when hoist 'em out with that hoist but they sold 'em.

I 1: Have you ever heard of any problems with the quality of the fish that came through the Fulford Fish Company?

R: Very little. Very little. We've had compliments on our fish. Our fish are as good as they are in Florida. We've always tried to get fishermen that take care of the fish. Take enough ice to ice 'em good and since they've got these hoist-out boxes, we encourage 'em to put 'em in there as soon as they catch 'em and when before they get in go ahead and bail it full of salt water. Put more ice on top and saltwater washes fish. Keeps 'em better than fresh water does. My daddy would never consent to washin' fish with fresh water. We always had an old pump and we'd pump it right out of the bay to wash fish with.

I think it cuts the slime off the fish better.

I 1: The saltwater?

R: Yeah.

I 1: Tell me what a typical day is like for you at the fish house? Can you sort of describe that? What time you arrive and what goes on when you get here?

R: Well, in the last few years I haven't been too early gettin' out here. But our crew usually gets here about 8:00 or a little before and sometimes we have fish in the cooler that the fishermen had put in there durin' the night. They all have keys to our cooler and they hoist the fish out and put 'em on these little dollies and put 'em in the cooler. And we get 'em out and fill the boxes full of water if they

don't already have water and start washin' the fish, packin' 'em out of this cold water into the fish boxes with ice in the bottom. Put 100 pound of fish in the box, put 'em in the cooler with ice on top and stack 'em up. And then we start to try to sell 'em. Either we have regular trucks comin' in or we get on the phone and start calling. And then if we've got more fish than we think we've got orders for we just go ahead and put 'em in freezer boxes and put 'em in the freezer.

And the fresher you freeze a fish, the better he's gonna be when you take him out. Up until probably '75 there wasn't a freezer in Cortez. And we always tried to sell our fish fresh. Well, if we keep 'em five or six days and haven't sold 'em then we'd think about freezing them. Well, the fish had already got old and we'd send 'em to St. Petersburg and have 'em frozen and they're not gonna come out any better than when they went in there. So we had a lot of problems with frozen fish for years. Even after we got our freezer here, where we could freeze 'em fresh, the dealers or wholesale people we sold to were kind of leery of frozen fish because they didn't think they'd be fresh.

I 1: Tell me a little bit about mullet. Because mullet's a little bit different than other fish. It doesn't keep as well or as long?

R: Well, mullet maybe don't keep as long as the deep sea fish, grouper and snapper, but ordinarily mullet will keep as long as any fish. Mullet are vegetarians so we've always figured they didn't need gutted, ya know? Because they didn't have other fish in 'em. Where as mackerel and trout and all these other fish eat shrimp and small fish that decay pretty fast. And if you didn't gut 'em well those little fish in there will start to decaying and it would cause the other fish to rot. But I think that if you get a mullet fresh, put it in that cold ice water, keep 'em cold and take 'em out of there and put 'em in the freezer. When they come out they're in good shape.

I 2: What do you think the best way to prepare mullet is?

R: A mullet fried is hard to beat. But we broil some and smoke 'em. They're really good smoked. But a good mullet during August when they're good and fat, ya clean 'em, salt and pepper 'em, put corn meal on and fry 'em. They're hard to beat.

I 1: You're the President of the Cortez Village Historical

Society. Why did you become involved in that organization, and what is it all about?

R: Well, we just try and preserve some of the historical value of the community. I don't know exactly how I did come about being President. They just needed somebody to conduct meetings. That's about my job. I mean I don't try to go ahead with any projects. My sister Mary's been real active in it. And we've got several others. Doris Green, she's our Official Historian. And we've got some other people that's come in here. Seems like we've got some people in the trailer park that's more interested in it than the natives are.

I 2: Ralph, if you're closing the company here this month, what do you think's going to happen to this historic fish house?

R: I don't really know Wayne, just exactly what will become of it. Two of my sisters own it. I'm just payin' them rent on it just month to month. So I haven't discussed with them just what they are plannin' to do with it. I think they would sell it if they had a chance.

I 2: Do you think anyone is likely to try and operate another fish house on this site?

R: I don't know whether they will or not. I've heard two or three say they thought something might happen like that. But, I don't see where it's feasible. It's just not enough in it. I mean, we didn't have a freezer big enough here to really get into the bait business, ya know? We could freeze 8,000 or 10,000 pound at a time and it took two days to freeze 'em. So, 20,000, 25,000 pound a week is our limit. Where some of these other freezers ya can put 40,000 pound at a time in there and turn a big wholesale volume. But, it's just got to where there wasn't enough in it here for me, so I'm just gonna phase it out.

I 1: Ralph, you said that you thought about going fishing and then your father said he'd rather have you here at the fish house. Are you glad that you decided to stay with the fish house? Or would you have rather gone fishing?

R: I don't really know. I think I could have probably done as well fishin'. The way it's been see, I didn't learn the fishin' trade. I had been fishin' a lot but I don't know a lot about it because I haven't been out there like people my age have. I would have fished with someone else. I don't know what was best. I made real good money here a few years. I operated the business as a family until until 1980. In 1980 I bought what little bit of equipment was here from my mother, leased the building and went in for it myself. I had bought a piece of property here, sold it, made a little on it. So I bought the freezer boxes and started putting freezer units in. Invested all I had in it. I made real good for three years in the roe business. But I have since put it all back into that and bad investments. People come along, caught me in a bind, stalking' oil wells that produced salt water. And we had plenty of that already here.

I 1: Did you enjoy the time you spent here at the fish house?

R: Oh, yeah. I have enjoyed it. I guess it's been about as good as anything else we've had. We've had a good livin' out of it. I've got a fairly decent little old wooden house there that's nearly 50 years old now. But it's warm in the winter and cool in the summer and it's dry. And we usually have enough to eat. So that's about all ya can ask for.

I 1: I wanted to ask you how you met your wife and can you tell me a little bit about her?

R: Well, we grew up together. She was born here in Cortez. So we've known each other all of our life. Just grew up together.

I 1: Has she helped you with the fish house at all? Does she do any of the bookkeeping or anything like that?

R: She's never done any bookkeeping. She does some bankin' for me. Runnin' back and forth to town gettin' supplies we need and she has worked in the roe business. She has cut the mullet to get the roe out of it ever since we started that. In fact, she was our chief cutter here for a couple years.

I 1: In this business you have to hire temporary labor. Is it hard to find the temporary labor supply when you need it?

R: Lot of times it is. Now when we were really ... about three years we processed a lot of roe ... we had people lined up from one year to the next. Several grandmas who was our best helpers. And then we had other people we could call in. It wasn't too hard. Now, the last two or three years it's been yard to get good people to work.

I 1: Do you think that's because of the type of work it is or the hours, or do you know any reason why it would be hard to find people today?

R: I don't know what it's all about really. People that don't want to work, they're just not gonna work. I mean people that don't have a job don't want one. Most of the people we've had to work here, they've done us a pretty good job. We've had some that just didn't want to work. But our best workers have been the grandmas.

I 1: Are these women that have been raised in this area and come from fishing families?

R: Yes, most of 'em are. We've had one or two that come in from Bradenton. Well, Orrie Williams' wife for instance. She was married to Orrie who was born and raised here. She helped us a couple years some. My wife and Loreal Rhoden who was a Culbreath. They have both been real good workers here for us. And we've had several other ladies that's helped us. At one time for a couple years we had 18 people workin' here durin' the fall. Like this past year we didn't have to hire any extra labor except one day. We've had three, what I'd call fair days of work this roe season. One day we processed 1,200 pound, one day

1,000 and one day 700. But back in '83 to '87 it was some days we'd pack 3,000 pound of roe.

The most we ever packed in one day was 4,060 some pounds. But it wasn't unusual to pack 1,500 pound a day. Quite a few days like that. But we had more people fishin' and ya got so many people out there now that fish get busted up. So many people are just out runnin' around in them boats they scatter the fish around where ya can't catch 'em. We don't know what all the answers are. Everybody's got a different story.

I 1: Going back to the Cortez Village Historical Society. They have played an important role in trying to maintain the integrity of this fishing community. Can you tell me a few of the events that have happened in this community that they have attempted to remedy or address some of the issues?

R: Well, we had the new Cortez Bridge thing goin' in. I think we had a part in keeping that from goin' through. There's a high-rise, four-lane highway which would kinda mess up our town. And then we had the Cris Craft Boat Works that wanted to come in and take over half of the town. And we stopped that. I guess that's the main projects.

I 1: Didn't one of the fish companies want to put in a larger operation? Did they oppose that?

R: Yes. I wasn't too much involved in that at that time. That's when I'd had the stroke and I wasn't able to get into it. So I didn't know too much about what was goin' on there.

I 1: And the Albion Inn?

R: Yeah, the Albion Inn. We tried to save that. Saved a piece of it. I don't know yet what we're gonna do with it, but we've got it. A lot of work went into that. Several people did a lot. It's not what ya know in this here politics it's who ya know.

I 1: Do you remember the Albion when you were young?

R: Yes. I never was in it much. I went in the kitchen a few times. But part of it, the part that was saved there, was a post office. And that was my main interest there was goin' to the post office.

I 1: You would pick up the mail there?

R: Yes. I had a paper route when I was 10 years old, deliverin' the Grit Paper. Had 18 customers, I made 2 cent a paper, and we'd have to go to the post office to send off our orders every week and send our ... 3 x 18 = 54 cents into the paper company.

I 2: Was the post office in a store or was it just ...?

R: Well, as I remember it, it was just a post office. I can't remember when a store was there. But I'd go get me an envelope. I'd take my order blank for next week's paper

and I'd put two quarters and four pennies down and glue a piece of paper over it. And you could mail it for I think probably 6 cent. Where if ya got a money order, the money order cost about 20. So I wouldn't have much left out of my 36 cent that I'd made. But then I had one or two customers that got me for about 20 weeks paper. So that took a lot of my profit. So I started out in business and didn't do too good.

I 1: I've heard a lot of stories about livestock. Did your father have any livestock or anything?

R: Mother bought a cow. I don't know what year it was. Probably '38 or '39. Or it could have been 1940, I don't know. When we first built this place I know we had the cow. I don't think we had it very long before that. She bought an old cow and she produced a lot of milk so we all had plenty of milk to drink then. Mama didn't get up too early to milk her, but the ole cow give her a lot of milk when she got out there. Sometimes it'd be 10:00 in the morning when she'd milk her and 10:00 at night when she'd milk her. She had an old kerosene lantern she'd take out there and the old cow would give her milk.

That old 10 quart bucket, she'd run it over. And we had pans of milk in the refrigerator. A lot of nights daddy would go up there and get one of them big ole cans that hold a gallon of milk, bring it down here with several cups and we'd just dip it out of that pan and we'd drink that gallon of milk before you could turn around.

And we made a little butter. She'd skim a little of the cream off of each pan and save it for butter. We'd put it in a two quart jar and shake it to make butter.

I 1: You'd just shake it to make the butter?

R: Yeah. We didn't have a churn. Ya just put it in there and shake it.

I 1: Did you usually have breakfast? Did the entire family eat breakfast in the morning?

R: Well, not always. Sunday mornin' everybody ate breakfast. But when we'd go to school we'd get up a lot of times and do for ourselves. And a lot of times she'd get up and cook us whatever we had to eat. A lot of times goin' to school we'd just have us a bowl of cereal or somethin' like that. A lot of days I'd drink three quarts of milk. Get up in the mornin' and drink a pint of milk or more. Come home after school and drink another pint or so. That's after we got the cow. Now before we got the cow we had one quart a day for four of us. There was a Burt Warner who lived off of 75th Street, about where the tennis court is now. Across the street from that. He had a little dairy out there and he'd deliver milk over here to Cortez and all around.

I 2: You mentioned Sunday morning breakfast. Did you family attend one of the churches here in Cortez?

R: Yes, we attended the Church of Christ all my life. A lot of times Sunday mornin' we'd have grits and fried liver with gravy. That was a big thing for Sunday mornin' breakfast.

I 1: Did you have your evening meals together?

R: Yes. Everybody was there for supper. Goin' to school a lot of times we'd carry our lunch. We'd have a couple sandwiches. Some kinda meat sandwich or scrambled egg or peanut butter and jelly.

I 1: Was your mother a good cook?

R: Yes, she was a good cook. She didn't fix a lot of fancy food, but she could cook grits and mullet. Of course, that's about all she had to cook, in them days anyhow.

One time during the War sometimes there'd be four or five trucks from Georgia. Had one customer from Cedar Key, Florida who hauled up to Alabama. They'd come down here and just park their truck out here and wait for fish to come in. Some of 'em would sleep in their truck and a lot of times we'd have an extra bed there at the house. Some of 'em would sleep there. But mama would cook dinner for a lot of 'em. Sometimes there'd be four or five truck drivers out there for a noon meal.

I 1: Would they sit down at the table with the family?

R: Yeah. Everybody would come there and sit at the table and eat. Of course a lot of times all of us was in school. All four kids. They paid her a dollar a meal for dinner, lunch we call it nowadays. It was dinner then.

I 1: What were holidays like in Cortez? What was Christmas like?

R: Well, we always got a present or two. We'd have plenty to eat. Nothin' big. I remember one year I got a Daisy Air Rifle. I think mama had saved golden coupons, got that for me. I got my first bicycle my ninth birthday. A little ole $21 Montgomery Ward bicycle. But a lot of kids learned how to ride a bicycle on that little ole thing.

I 1: Would there be a big meal for Christmas?

R: Oh, yeah. We'd have a big meal. A chicken or whatever. Several Christmases I remember we went to Ruskin. My daddy had an old fisherman friend there that gathered and sold oysters. And we'd go to his place. Mr. Hall up there on that Little Manatee River. We'd just go down to his place, we'd get a bushel of oysters and just get out there in his front yard next to the river bank and roast oysters and take crackers and pickles. Just have us a big oyster roast. It was usually our family. We'd always take one or two more with us. One of our cousins, Jerry Guthrie, he went with us quite a bit. I don't know. Just whoever happened to come along.

I 1: Have you seen Cortez change much?

R: Well, I've seen it change too much.

I 1: In what ways?

R: It's got too many people. I can remember times I could sit down here with a piece of paper and start at the schoolhouse and write the name of the family and tell ya how many people lived in their house, from there to the bridge. But now I go to the post office some mornings and I don't know a third of the people I see. I mean a lot of it's been good

as far as some things. I mean some people have benefited by it. As far as our wholesale fish business, the influx of winter people don't help it. Cause we just don't wholesale enough fish to outfit the seafood restaurants. I don't think our restaurants promote native seafood as much as they should. Most of 'em have got their fancy shrimp and lobster and things like that, when they could be sellin' more mullet.

I 2: Ralph, those of us who get to know Cortez at all begin to feel that it's a special place. Do you feel that way and if so, what do you think makes it special?

R: Well, it's just a nice little place to live. And we've had a lot of people that moved in there who've really been an asset, just like you two people have been really an asset to our historical society and our other organizations. And we've had a lot of other people move in who have done good for us. The people down in the trailer park. They've never tried to interfere with our industry.

I 1: What do you see for Cortez in the future?

R: It's hard to say. I think the so-called sport fisherman and conservationists as they call themselves, they're gonna put the wholesale commercial fishing industry out.

I 2: Ralph, I know you've been to other places. What do you think maybe makes Cortez different from other places. Or what is it that we should be trying to preserve here?

R: It's hard to pinpoint it all Wayne. I mean I just think that we're more or less a big family here. And we've got several organizations that I'm a part of. Just like the church. I'm a part of that. The fire department. I've been part of the fire department ever since the day it was organized. And the O.F.F. organization. I've been part of that ever since it come here. And things like that I would hate to leave. And I don't plan on movin' away. I just plan on maybe, after I get out of this, if I can get a few dollars together to ride around a little bit. See some other parts. Got a grandson in Kansas I'd like to go see. One in Virginia. My son's in Virginia. A granddaughter in North Carolina.

So, I mean I like to go other places and look around and see what other people are doin'.

I 1: I wanted to ask you Ralph. The two large houses that were

built by your grandfather. There aren't very many two story houses in this community any longer. But there used to be. Didn't there?

R: Yes, I think it was because they just had large families. Maybe planned on havin' large families and they just needed room for 'em. The little ole house in North Carolina where my grandfather was born, it was a small house. It had a real steep roof on it. Real high gable. And they had sleepin' quarters up there. Didn't look much like sleepin'

quarters to me, just a floor and overhead with ceiling rafters and just looked like maybe a place for three small rooms up there. And with all the kids there was involved I don't know how they packed 'em all in the house.

I 1: Did you think it was ever crowded in your house?

R: No. It was never bad in our house. Well, to start with my three sisters had one big old room there together. And I had a little room that was later the bathroom. And then later they built a little room on the front porch there and I had that for several years.

I 1: What happened to the other two story homes in this community?

R: They were sold and some of 'em was tore down. Old Charlie Guthrie's house, I understand that was two story. And they just took the top story off of it. And Jess Williams' house at 123rd Street Court where they've got those apartments. That was a two story house.

I 2: The house where Sue lives, is that the first house that your grandfather built right when he came to Cortez?

R: I guess so. I'm not sure that he built it, but I think he did. Probably in Doris' book she might have more information on that. Whether he built it. Now this one, I'm quite sure he built it. Now with this house, I didn't think about it till Doris mentioned it, all the rooms are the same size. It's got four rooms upstairs and four rooms downstairs and they are all the same size.

I 1: When they built these homes and like when you built this fish house, was there a plan or a blueprint to it?

R: No, on this place I don't know where ... I know there wasn't a blueprint. I think daddy just set down and maybe Walter Taylor and decided about what they wanted it to look like. And they went to buildin'. Poppin' down piling and puttin' the boards on. I don't think there was a lot of plannin' to it.

I 1: Well, I don't have anymore questions unless Wayne does. Is there anything you'd like to say Ralph.

R: No, I don't think so. I think we've covered everything pretty good.

I 1: Well, we thank you for taking the time to sit down with us.

R: You're welcome. I appreciate what you two are trying to do for the community.

I 2: Thanks Ralph.