

Florida Institute for Saltwater Heritage 1/22/93

Thomas R. Fulford "Blue" Oral History-Vanishing Culture Project Funded in part by the Florida Humanities Council

Interviewers: Mike Jepson/Wayne Nield

I 1: Blue, could you first tell me your full name, your address and date of birth?

R: Thomas Roland Fulford, Jr.

I 1: And what's your address here?

R: 12405 42nd Avenue Drive West, Cortez, Florida 34215

I 1: And what's your date of birth?

R: April 17, 1931.

I 1: What was your father's name?

R: Thomas Roland Fulford

I 1: And he's deceased?

R: Yes sir.

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

R: Letha Garner.

I 1: And she's deceased at this time too?

R: Right.

I 1: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

R: No, I'm a spoiled brat.

I 1: What was your father's occupation?

R: He was a fisherman part time and a merchant, store keeper, grocery store keeper. He was crippled when he was a young man and was unable to handle the rigors of a fisherman's life very much. Especially when he was a young man, it was really hard around here. He had a store he minded and eventually owned.

I 1: You said he was crippled. What happened?

R: He fell out of an oak tree, right where Wayne Nield lives today.

I 1: How was he crippled?

R: Collar bone was driven up into his lungs some way and he suffered some kind of damage they never were able to fix.

I 1: So he ran a store in Cortez?

R: Yes he did.

I 1: And what did he sell in that store?

R: It was just a general store. Everything that was sold in the 1920s up till he died in '34. He was still managing that store.

I 2: Which store was that?

R: Well, it's not there now. It blew down I think in 1936 during a tornado. It was an old block building and a water spout came across Cortez, moved several houses off their foundations and blew that old concrete block store building down.

I 1: So you were pretty young when he passed away.

R: Yeah. 2 1/2, 3. Something like that.

I 1: Tell me a little bit about your mother. What did she do? Was she employed at any time?

R: The only employment I know of other than takin' in washin' and ironin' was she worked at the post office with Bessie Guthrie for a number of years. I just learned the other day she told me she got \$5.00 a week out of that.

I 1: \$5.00 a week for ...?

R: Post Mistress work.

I 2: Was that the post office that was in the Albion Inn?

R: Yeah, it was in the Albion Inn and where they moved it to after the Coast Guard took over. After they sold it.

I 1: Tell me a little bit about the first house that you lived in, in Cortez.

R: Well, Doris Green told me a few months ago who built it but I've forgotten the girl's name. I think the girl she played with there was Shirley and it was built in 1925. Mother got it for taxes after my daddy died, for \$125.00.

Break

I 1: Tell us a little more about that first house you lived in.

R: Just a run of the mill white clapboard house at that time. My first remembrance of it. One of the few memories I have of my daddy was on the back porch by the old pitcher pump. It used to be there to provide water for us. It was brackish but we drank it anyway. The only thing in Cortez that would cure what was ailin' ya was Watkin's Salve and Castor Oil. And mother was tryin' to give me a dose of Castor Oil and daddy walked up. He called her Nig. Nig, let me have that bottle. I remember it just as good as if it was yesterday. He took that Castor Oil and he threw it down by that pitcher pump and there was some old Eveready batteries layin' there and it hit those batteries and broke. I was the happiest kid in the County when that happened. But after he died she got back on track again. I couldn't drink orange juice for years, she poured so much of it down me with orange juice. Part of the good ole days I guess.

I 1: Then you lived there by yourself with your mother for how long in that house?

R: Well, we lived there from the time he died till I got married in 1951.

I 1: Did your mother ever remarry?

R: Yes, she did. I think she married in '46 and my stepdad died about three years later.

I 1: So you were fairly young when your father passed away. Who did you start fishing with when you were a kid?

R: I was fishin' with my Uncle Tink Waldon Fulford. Ralph's daddy. If I had a daddy he's the closest one I knew. Very little I remember about my own. I remember that instance I told ya about ... the Castor Oil. And one time my daddy took me fishin' and I caught a blue fish on the side of Longboat Pass a little ways and that's about the only two vivid memories I have of him. I wouldn't have to read about them, I can remember those times. The others I can read about.

I 1: Do you ever remember being at the store with him?

R: No, I don't ever remember that.

I 1: Well, tell us a little bit about your Uncle Walton Fulford, Tink.

R: I guess he's about, or I'm about as near like him, as any- body could be. He didn't know anything but work. Worked all the time. Stay out in the bay all the time, didn't know when to quit. I'm just

about like him. He tried to do it all but he couldn't. He passed away and I'm tryin' to do it all but I don't guess I will either. There'll probably be work here when I'm gone. He tried to catch all the fish, but he couldn't. I didn't try to catch 'em all but I caught all I could. I tell ya that. I'm still after 'em. Still wantin' to. He was a fine man. Didn't have much to say. I never could carry on a real conversation with him. Always Sonny do this or do that or do the other.

Seems like when I was fishin' in the crew with him I was the only one's name he knew. He wouldn't call anybody else's name. But it was always Sonny when it was time to do this. Sonny, get up and cook breakfast. Sonny, make a pot of coffee. Sonny, go pick up those nets. Sonny, paint that old scow. Everybody could see that too and they used to joke about it all the time. It was alright. I hate to see those days pass. I really missed him when he was gone. Dreamed about him all the time. Dreamed about the old boat I used to fish with him on, the Anna Dean. I guess they was the best years of my life. Cortez used to be a good place to grow up in. Didn't have to worry about drugs. The only bad thing we ever did was sneak out behind the school house and smoke a cigarette maybe. Didn't have access to any beer or whiskey or I guess we would have tried that. I was 38 years old before I ever took a drink of whiskey. When I was 14 I thought I had to smoke cause a lot of other people were doin' it. I tried it and when I got 16 and found out I didn't have to, I was one happy kid. I sure didn't like smokin'.

We had a nice place to play and it was just a pretty place. The water was clear. Ya could see bottom all the way across the sluice. Mango snappers, pin fish up around the docks all the time, play along the shore where there weren't any docks. Catchin' chubs, chasin' fiddler crabs. Huckleberry Finn situation all over again.

I 1: You don't think Cortez is a nice place to grow up today?

R: Compared to everything else it still is. It's relative. Compared to New York City or Washington, D.C., Cortez is a haven. A place of refuge for a troubled soul. But even at that it's not like it was when I was a kid.

I 1: Tell me a little bit about your mother. What type of woman was she?

R: Well, she was about as hard-workin' as she could. She lost her leg I think in 1919. They amputated her leg from an earlier gunshot wound.

I 1: Could you tell us a little about that, how that happened?

R: I understand she was about 3 years old when it happened, livin' in Bogue, North Carolina. And one of her sisters came in to the old house and slammed the door and it jarred the shotgun loose from its rack and it fell and hit the floor and discharged and tore off a part of her leg between the knee and the thigh. The inside of her thigh. And it messed up circulation to the lower part of her foot so bad that they eventually had to amputate. That's what happened. When I was born she only had that one leg and she had to care for me. Then when I lost mine she told me more about her earlier life. How she used to use a chair for a crutch. She'd put her knee in a chair and throw me across one shoulder and take the back of the chair with the other hand and move around with it. The chair would sort of be her crutch.

Then several years later she got a wooden leg. A fella come by sellin' wooden legs and it was really wooden too. It wasn't like this one I've got, plastic and metal high tech components. It was just an old wooden leg. She wouldn't try it when the man was there. But she told me when he left I put that thing on and run all over the house with it. She was so pleased to be able to have the freedom of movement and walkin' around like she did.

I 1: Let's go back to your early years fishing in Cortez and you worked with your Uncle Tink. You say you worked on the Anna Dean. What type of a boat was that and what type of fishing did you do?

R: It was a 33-foot wooden boat. It was built right here in Cortez. His first boat was the old Ralph. I fished with him just a little bit on that. And then they built the Anna Dean some time in the early '40s after World War I started. He built his fish house and then they built the Anna Dean, the Three Sisters, the Wayne, the Orange _____ and those boats were built in Ball's Fish House, or Ball's Boatways. That's where Walter Bell's Fish House is located now.

I 1: These were all boats that were built for Tink?

R: The Anna Dean, the Wayne, the Three Sisters. The Three Sisters was John Fulford's boat I think. I think Anna Dean and Wayne was the only ones that Tink had built. And of course, they were named after his latest two children. Anna Dean was born durin' the War and Gary too, if I'm not mistaken. A long time ago. But they were built right in Cortez. The Wayne's still there. Wayne's still in Cortez. Anna Dean was lost in an explosion at the dock. They gassed up the gas tank and it ran over and when they hit the starter she blew up.

I 1: Was anyone hurt?

R: Nope. Nobody got hurt. Everybody got out. Joe Mack and Harry Mofield were on it and come skittering out like rats. I guess they were glad to get out. I think Boogie's got one or two of the board off the old boat, but that's about all that's left to it.

The fishin' we did? He did everything there was to do and he knew how to do it. He was crazy about blue fishin'. He used to take me out there. Me and my brother-in-law, Buck Jones, when we got a little bit older, probably 30 years old. And he would run out in that old boat whether he saw one or not. He could just think he smelled one. He'd run that net out and he'd rather catch a blue fish I think than smoke his cigars or chew his apple tobacco. That was another thing about him. His apple tobacco. A kid better not walk by the dock barefooted. Cause if he did he got apple juice between his toes, tobacco juice. He was accurate too. Boy, he could hit a fly ten feet away. He'd put it right between that kid's toes. He loved to play with kids like that.

When I was kinda young and ridin' on the Anna Dean, it had a cabin on it. He'd stand in back of that cabin and look around the corner and look up front at the wind blowin' in your face. If he caught ya not lookin' he'd spit right back that way and let that wind catch it and blow it back in your eyes. He really enjoyed tantalizin' kids like that. All of 'em did. Oh, Earl Guthrie, he was the same way. He used to get me by the toes and he had a grip I believe he could break a coca cola bottle just squeezin'. He'd get you by the toe and you'd cry and beg and he wouldn't let ya go. Blue, how ya like that? How does that

feel? He'd tighten down, squeeze on that thing. All old fellas from North Carolina. Of course, Earl came from North Carolina. I think Tink was born here, probably born over on Perico Island. I don't know for sure but I believe that's where he was born before they moved to Cortez. Before my granddaddy moved to Cortez.

I 1: Did they talk about fishing in North Carolina much?

R: No, never did hear 'em talk about it. I used to hear 'em talk about mullet runs where somebody'd get in an old tree a quarter mile from where the net and the boat was and they'd start hollering down the shore when they saw the mullet comin'. Get ready, here they come! Ya didn't have to worry about anybody else runnin' in ahead of ya and cuttin' the fish off when they headed toward your run. There was your fish. Didn't have a motor boat, just had a row boat sittin' there on the shore with a seine on it and when the fish came by they just run out there. They had several of those runs staked around the sound different places and that's the way they worked.

A far cry from today. He stop-netted, mackerel fished, pompano fished and I did it all with him. I was thinkin' about stop-nettin' with him the other day. Stop-nettin's a rather complicated operation. It takes a lot of doin' and a good crew. But he'd get up in the mornin' and he always wanted a half a dozen eggs for breakfast. Grits and bacon or ham or whatever we had. We cooked on the boat. When he did he'd get the skiff and pull off. Wouldn't say a darn word, just get in that skiff and shove off and we had to know what to do.

All of us did. We'd been to those places before. I was the donkey man. I run the donkey. I'd break the nets loose and start pullin' that net, cuttin' it around to where we would eventually catch the fish. But we all knew how to do it and caught an awful lot of fish. We'd get the fish caught up in the haul net. We wouldn't have 'em put in the boats ready to take home and he'd take off, go somewhere and light some lanterns so he'd have a system set up for the next night if he wanted to go. Or that same night, matter of fact. Sometimes during a set of tides we wouldn't get but just a few hours off out of 48. Work a stop one day, unload the fish, then there'd be a few hours before high water and we'd get to eat supper, wash our face and let our hands start hurtin' real good and we'd go back down.

I always remember that too. We got through workin', a little bit of inactivity with your hands and you go down at night to go fishin' again and you take ahold of one of those ropes to untie a boat or somethin' and you'd feel like your hands were on fire. You could hardly touch it. I guess the sights and sounds and feelings that don't ever escape your memory. I haven't thought about that for a long time. Just came to my mind.

I 1: It sounds like Tink put a lot of effort into planning his fishing expeditions and when he was out there. Like you say, he was constantly working and thinking about it.

R: Yeah. He was a sly one too. It was really fierce competition. There was Aaron Bell and John Fulford and Julius Mora and Uncle Tink and probably more stop-netters around there that have slipped my mind now. I think even Willard Brown stop-netted some and of course, Joe Capo was there and Farmer. But in those days everybody used cotton nets. Natural fibers. Flax or cotton. Had to spread those nets cause if you didn't spread 'em they'd rot. Had to lime 'em, put 'em out in the sun and dry 'em.

And when a fella got through fishin' for a week he'd always come in and pull his nets out, ya know. When he pulled his nets out you knew he was through for that week so you could relax. And Tink would come in in the morning, pull those nets out. Everybody else would start doin' it and he'd start grinnin'. By the time they got theirs on the spread he was puttin' his back on again. He had us do that a lot of times. Tryin' to hog somebody. We had a system, an honor system of putting skiffs out. And that skiff, if it was anchored in an area where a man intended to fish, it was legally his until the tide started out. That skiff would hold it till high water. And if that man wasn't there by high water it was fair game for anybody who wanted to operate there. And so that's what he'd try to do. He'd try to time it just right so he could get his nets back on. Nobody else would see him and he'd get up to somebody else's place where he wanted to fish.

That's what we called hoggin' each other. And everybody got a kick out of it. Everybody tried it. They thought they really accomplished something if they hogged somebody. Got their place. Sometimes it paid off and sometimes it didn't. That was just part of the game. There was no violence, no ill will about it. That was just part of life and the way it was.

I 1: How many people were part of a stop-netting crew?

R: Took five to do it right and do it good. Gear was heavy, a lot of it. Took at least five.

I 1: What was involved in stop-netting, can you explain a little bit about how it was done?

R: Yeah, we called it stop-nettin'. The way the law defined it, it wasn't really stop-nettin'. The law defined it as shutting off a bayou, creek or lagoon or canal or waterway or channel in such a manner as to prevent free passage of fish. But we never did do that. We would always run our nets down the shore on the high water. If the tide was high there'd be three feet of water on the grass flats and the fish would get on the flat and they'd put what we called shallow nets around those shoals, on those grass flats. And we had what we called 60 mesh nets that we run out in the deep water. And when the tide would go out then those fish up on that shallow part would go out into the deep water. And then we'd take a seine or we called in a haul net, and pull those fish out of that deep water. And that's what we called stop-nettin'. It wasn't really stop-nettin' according to the law because we never stopped the free passage of fish by cutting off any of those particular bodies of water that I mentioned awhile ago.

It was a good way of fishin'. It's the best way of fishin'. I wish they'd do it today. Minimum of damage to the environment. Didn't hurt the bottom at all. No propellers runnin' over it for hours at a time choppin' it up, chewing it up. The net dragging across the bottom didn't hurt anything and it harvested a mixture of fish. It created a balance. For every food fish ya killed, for every good one ya killed, a dozen or so predators that would have preyed on his egg and on the juvenile fish and their eggs too, cause that's where those fish layed their eggs in that bay. Nets were designed so that the little bitty stuff could go through and we'd catch the ones that were big enough for our use. The ones that were what we called trash fish now, we'd get \$.15 a pound for 'em. But then we'd throw away pin fish, catfish, shad and stuff like that. All that of course, preyed heavily on the game fish, trout, red fish, sheephead, snooks were allowed to be sold commercially in those days. And it was just a good way to fish. The best way, in my opinion that there is.

Break

I 1: We were talking about stop-netting as a type of fishing and what it is exactly. How you do it and what types of fish you were catching. What are some of the other types of fishing that you did with your Uncle when you first started? You said pompano, and how does that differ?

R: Well, we used trammel net in those days. Old cotton tramble net. They had 6/20, 9/20 and 12/20 twines. The higher the number, the bigger the twine. Most of the time we used 6/20, make the trammel net with inside walls would be 4 1/4 inches I think is what it was and the trammel walls themselves, the outside nets, were about 10 inches. And you'd just find the fish and run that net around 'em. It would catch all sizes. He had some old heavy 12/20 like that that we'd use to catch everything if we was join' where there was a lot of big blue fish. We called 'em bank loafer pompano. Four or five pounders. They'd just take up on a place and hang there with it till somebody caught 'em or run 'em off.

That's what we caught but they was probably just a lot of big ole pompano in the area kept movin' around from spot to spot. But it was really fun to catch those big ole fish. Sometimes he'd ride all night long and run that net overboard and I'd be so sleepy I could hardly hold my eyes open and hopin' he didn't see a pompano skiff. And if I saw one, I wouldn't tell him. I didn't want to run that net over. Sleepy, sittin' there cold and shiverin'. Feelin' like ya'd break if ya ever moved. Sayin' he's got to get cold and go home after awhile. But it was fun.

I 1: Did you use gill nets then also?

R: Yeah, we had some gill nets. Of course, I guess Uncle Tink bought the first nylon that was ever bought. I think he bought it from Boogie's brother, Leo Taylor. 278139 nylon net. I remember that. Helped him hang it in. Man that thing would catch pin fish, small mash like it had. We didn't understand that nylon net. It was the strongest thing anybody had ever seen. Ya couldn't break it to save your life, but it would get plum full of holes when you run it overboard. Uncle Tink and I can't either, understand why a net so strong would get so many holes in it. That ole linen net and that ole cotton net wouldn't get holes in it as long as it was new. As soon as it started gettin' rotten you could tell because it would be full of holes.

I 1: There's a story about stop-netters and gill-netters in Cortez. A little small feud that happened. Could you explain a little bit about that?

R: Well, the feud was before my time. I think that feud that led to the dynamiting that's been so popular or unpopular. Gave the Village so much notoriety. It was in 1930. Of course, I wasn't born till '31. But it was between the gill-netters and the stop-netters. Gill-netters thought the stop-netters were killin' everything, catching all their fish, which they weren't and so they would try to get stop-netters put out of business. They'd bring the law to 'em when they run their nets overboard and everybody was just fightin'. Like I say stop-nettin' was against the law. But what they really were doin' was not stop-nettin' by strict definition.

But it caused that fight. But the two really co-existed very well. When I started fishin' there were still a lot of gill-netters around. I did a lot of gill-nettin' myself after I quit fishin' with Uncle Tink. But

I never saw where one got in the other's way. The way they gill-netted in those days, why you could fish all day long before a man was gonna run his stop-nets that night. And it wouldn't make any difference. The man would still catch fish. The way they do it now it would be a problem indeed because they've got these kicker boats that they buzz all over the flats with and what they don't catch in nets they chop the heads off or scare 'em to death or run 'em in a hole so they don't come out for a couple of weeks.

So, the way they gill-net now is a far cry from the way they used to do it off of a skiff. Towin' four skiffs around and then stoppin' when ya saw the fish and poling out there. Poled out and caught 'em.

I 1: You said that it was competitive. There was a lot of competitiveness when you first started fishing. Was it between crews that fished from the same fish house or was it between crews from different fish houses?

R: It didn't seem to make much difference. If you could hog that guy like I talked about, you hogged him no matter where he was from. A lot of times crews from the same fish house, and the other ones too, would work together on an area. If somebody didn't have enough net or they felt they were goin' to make a good catch of fish, two crews would get together and do that operation. It was competitive. I guess fishermen are sort of like hunters. There's somethin' about goin' out in the woods and findin' that ole big deer and trackin' him down and gettin' him by yourself. You don't like anybody else in on the kill. Fishermen are a whole lot like that. It does something to your ego when you think you've done it by yourself. Or if you can steal it away from somebody else in a legal manner. Gets the adrenalin flowin'.

I 1: What were the early fish houses in Cortez when you first started? The names of them.

R: I remember Uncle Tink's and then there was Star Fish, Uncle Willis worked there and my Uncle Jim had one. And that's about the only ones that I can remember that were there. I do remember some others but who else owned 'em I don't know.

I 1: Well, describe the waterfront of Cortez as you remember it when you were young. What was there on the waterfront?

R: Just the regular net spreads, net camps. Fish houses, places to tie up your boats and so forth.

I 1: The Albion Inn was there?

R: Oh, yeah. The Albion Inn was there. Got some fond memories of that place. My mother used to work there as a maid or a helper or what, I don't know what she was. It just seemed to me like, from what I can remember about it, even the guests were helpers. When dinner was served they would all get up and bring their plates into the kitchen. It was just sort of a family affair. Sometimes there'd be twenty, about as many guests as would be at the place at the time. That was good. That big old wooden stove about 8 feet square and Uncle Joe Guthrie, he raised all the chickens and ducks and turkeys. I don't know where they got the vegetables. I don't remember a vegetable garden.

I remember little Jackie Mora workin' with him and had a lot of fish. Everybody would catch fish. The guests did a lot of fishin'. They'd always bring 'em there. Aunt Mabel would prepare 'em. Boy, she could cook. She couldn't read or write, but boy she could cook. I'll tell ya that.

I 2: Did you say that your father was a hunting guide?

R: Not a hunting guide, he was a fishing guide for awhile there at the Albion Inn. That's where he met some doctors who sent him to Cincinnati and Philadelphia to try to fit him with braces and some kind of therapy that would correct his deformity. He was bent over real bad and he was in a lot of pain. I don't think they were ever able to get that collar bone back out of that lung. It had been driven in when he fell out of that tree when he hit the ground. But he did work like that for a long time. I remember his little ole boat.

I 2: Blue, did you tell me one time that your father lived over the top of Burton's Store?

R: That's right. I didn't never know that, but Paul Taylor told me that he lived there when he was workin' there at Burton's Store. Interesting thing about it, Doris related it in her book Fog's Comin' In, that daddy had a silencer on his pistol and he'd shoot holes in Mr. Brown's water tank. Got a big kick out of that. I don't think Mr. Brown thought a whole lot of it. I don't know that it made me particularly proud of him to learn that, but I guess it made me realize where I got some of my mischievousness.

I 1: Who was Mr. Brown?

R: I never did know Mr. Brown. The only Brown I knew was Willard Brown and possibly it was his daddy. I don't know who Mr. Brown was. He was gone before I hit the scene. I understand he was one of the early pioneers and probably had the first store and some of the first properties that was along the shore. I think the old Burton's Store and the post office was one of the first commercial buildings that was in Cortez, if I'm not mistaken.

I 1: What was the first boat that you owned? Did it have a name? That you fished with?

R: No, the first one I didn't. That's an interesting story. There was an old man named Bill Ireland that Uncle Tink befriended. He found him in Ft. Myers someplace. I don't even know where the old man came from, that old hermit. Uncle Tink befriended him and brought him up to Cortez and set him up in a camp and he had a little old boat wasn't much bigger than a skiff with an air-cooled engine in it. And when Bill Ireland died, that old boat went to another man named Mr. Keys. And I always wondered why Doris didn't mention him in her book. But she didn't. He lived there in front of Gray's house where Forty Fulford, we called him Forty. He lived there on the shore, a house just inshore of it. Somehow he got that boat. And then after he died I wound up with it. That was the first thing I ever had to go fishin with.

One of the few times I heard Uncle Tink. He never said nothin' good me, but I never heard him brag on me or say anything about me ... but I came in one day and had a box that would hold about 400 fish. Came in one mornin' and I had it full and Uncle Tink had a visitor down on the dock and he said, yeah Sonny's got him a box full of fish. He says, he comes in that way every mornin'. That made me feel

good. That old boat was somethin' else. I didn't keep it very long. I think it had a 9 horse air-cooled engine, it was hard to start, it was belt-driven. The belt would slip and come off, get loose just when you think it's goin' the belt would jump off. Ya'd have to stop.

But after that my first boat with an engine in it, a Studebaker engine, I got in the late '50s. A boy over at Bayborough Harbor in St. Pete had built it. And I got that little boat and brought it over here. I think it was 19 feet long, about 5 feet wide. But I could haul 3,500 fish on it and I would fill it up quite regularly. I was gettin' old enough then to know how to fish and I used that for four or five years and then in 1965 I built what was called Little Terri. It was 22 feet long, 7 feet wide and I had 10,400 mullet on it one time. And I filled it quite regularly too. That's when Larry and Paul were just gettin' in their prime, 17, 18 years old.

I 1: Let me stop you here because we haven't talked about your children. But you have three children. There names are?

R: Larry and Paul and Terri, born in that order. Of course, Terri's a girl. The boys fished with me until they got tired of workin' so hard. Larry told me he wasn't goin' to work as hard as I worked. He was gonna do something else when he got out of high school. He went into the carpet business and worked at that three years and I guess he decided that was harder than fishin' so he came back to fishin'. And that's what he's been doin' ever since.

Paul used to fish with me. I got a kick out of him. He's 40 now and we were out there one time and he said I'm 26 years old and this is the first time I've ever been fishin' in the winter time and it wasn't cold. Larry'd been to Colorado or somewhere and come back with three great ole big parka damn coats so everybody could wear 'em and stay warm. We had some good times fishin' together. Kinda knitted the family as close as it was.

I 1: Now, Larry still fishes today. Are you glad to see him carry on that tradition?

R: Yeah, I'm glad. Especially right now. He's a big help to me. I doubt if I could find anybody that could help me as much as he does on the boat. He don't cut me much slack. He's down on me pretty hard all the time. But he knows what to do and he knows how to do it. And even if he complains about it he still does it. So that's a good thing. Keep my mouth shut, ya know.

I 1: Well, he had a pretty good teacher.

R: Laugh.

I 1: When did you get married?

R: 1950 or '51, I don't remember.

I 1: And your wife's name is?

R: Wanda.

I 1: And what was her maiden name?

R: Jones.

I 1: Can you tell us a little bit about when you first met Wanda and how you came to marry her?

R: I don't really know. We kinda grew up as kids together, went to the same school together. She went to Englewood for awhile. They lived down there. Then her family moved up here and built a house and we were just goin' together. It just happened that way, ya know? I guess I was just a fiercely handsome guy and she just latched onto me and wouldn't let me go. Anyway, we've had a good life. I don't regret it. It's been a good one. Can't say we never did fuss and fight, because we did a lot of that. But we always overed it and after 40 some years I guess.

I 1: You were involved early on in the Union, attempts to unionize the fishermen. Could you tell us about that?

R: Well, there were several attempts to unionize the fishermen. They all fell through and I was a part of it. They'd form a union and try to go on strike. That was always for price control. Tried to get more out of our fish. We thought the dealers were not payin' as much as they could. We were tryin' to get a higher price for our product. That never did work out. We'd strike for six weeks sometimes and then the dealer would entice someone to go fishin' and as soon as one boat untied from the dock, everybody was gone. They didn't care about the strike or nothin' else. They just wasn't gonna let somebody catch fish when they weren't out there tryin'.

The unions never did work. But in 1966, '67 we had formed what was called the Organized Fishermen of Florida. That's a trade association that was interested mostly, not mostly but entirely, in keepin' the bays open for fishermen to fish in. Fightin' legislation, promoting seafood products and workin' on something besides price control. I think in 1970 I became President and Executive Director of that and held onto that job for nearly 10 years.

I 1: Who were some of the people you worked with early on in the formation of the Organized Fishermen of Florida?

R: The lady founded it was Mrs. Jimmy Robinson. She lived in Everglades City and I remember all those early days very well. She was runnin' around and talked about her fishermens. That was one of her pet things. Her fishermens. She was workin' for 'em and she did a fantastic job. Not too long after that came Mary and Tootsie Barnes. Mary of course, was so dear to every- body's heart. She passed away very suddenly and unexpectedly. A cerebral hemorrhage I think they said caused her death.

The fishermen didn't lose interest then but I was tryin' to think if she died before or after I gave up. The pressure just got too great on me. There was too much goin' on in Tallahassee and the Organization didn't have enough money to pay my expenses. I had to go up there and work and then come home and try to make a livin' and the family was just about grown, but we had mortgage payments and all that. And it was just more than I could do. So we elected this new man who has been

with us since '79 I think, Jerry Sampson.

I 1: What do you think of the Organization? Is it still serving a good purpose?

R: I think it's the finest organization the State's ever had. Bar none. It's had more participation by fishermen and dealer alike. It's well known and well respected because of its stance, because of the people ya have representin' it, the way they conduct themselves. There's, in my estimation, right now no one or no other organization that could take in and fill its place.

I 1: The Organized Fishermen of Florida find themselves today in sort of a precarious position because there are attempts by certain recreational fishing lobby groups to ban nets in Florida. Could you talk a little bit about that and how you feel about that?

R: Well, the SOS Program, Save Our Sealife, is really not that at all. That's just a smoke screen. To say we need to save our sealife, we have to imply that it's lost. Nothin' wrong with the sealife population in the State of Florida now. They say sealife, they're not talkin' about just fish. They're talkin' about birds and manatees and turtles and dolphin. It implies that if we don't eliminate nets, Save Our Sealife of course goes back to banning nets. And they say that if we don't ban these nets then all this stuff is gonna be destroyed. The truth of the matter is we don't harm that sealife in any way.

The way they try to play on public sympathy and emotion is to bring a picture in from some other part of the nation or world that will show mammal entangled in a net, dying or gasping for air and say if we don't vote to ban the nets then this is gonna happen all over. That's not happening in Florida. There's been intense effort the last few years to document, well just the last year I guess, to document the number of mammal deaths that are occurin' because of Florida fishermen's nets. And there are practically none.

I read just this week, the Organized Fishermen of Florida have had a researcher workin' on that. Trying to document it. And out of 500 manatee deaths in the past 18 years, I think there were 13 of 'em attributed to commercial activities. The vast majority of 'em was killed by recreational boat propellers. No documented evidence of fishermen with their propellers harmin' any manatees. One was caught in a cast net, the recreational type. Evidently he took that cast net away from whoever threw it over and eventually the net strangled or drowned him or starved him to death or something. But when the body was found, the net was wrapped around him so they decided that that's the way he died. The evidence would seem to indicate that.

But in my 47 years of fishin' with net I've been involved with one dolphin death. And most fishermen have not even experienced that many interactions with dolphin. All ours were good. They come up around the boat, they eat the fish that get out of the nets through the cork line or through the holes. And we'll throw 'em fish just to watch 'em play. And they run behind the boats and just put on a show and have a good time. We don't bother dolphins and they don't bother us. There was a time that under the law today I guess we would have been in jeopardy because when they get around a large school of mullet they tear 'em up, bust 'em all to pieces where you couldn't catch 'em. But all ya had to do was fire out across the water with a shotgun with some number 6 birdshot in it and they'd hear that blast and they'd take off. And they'd be 200 yards away from ya and there's no way the shot ever even

got to 'em. But that of course, would be called harassing today. Other than that, that's the only run-in I've ever had with porpoises. We never hurt 'em. The one that I helped kill was entangled in my net. His flipper caught the lead line and we didn't know it till we got to the net.

I 1: Do you think that Cortez fishermen have been treated unfairly over the years and are misrepresented?

R: They've been misrepresented by the sports group. Sports people are a selfish group. In all the years that I was lobbying for the Organized Fishermen of Florida and all the years that went before, and all the years that have followed since I quit lobbying, we have never, never tried to take anything away from the sportsmen. We have never tried to close any area and say this is ours, you can't come in here. We have never tried to take any species of fish ... these are ours, you can't catch any of 'em. We've always had the attitude of live and let live. We take what Mother Nature has out there, we use it wisely and well, and try to make it last as long as we can. And we can make it last forever and for all generations if they'll just keep the bays clean where the fish factories are, I guess what we call it.

We've been accused of takin' and takin' and not puttin' anything back. That's the good thing about it. You don't have to put back. You don't have to make any investment if you'll just keep stuff out, don't put anything in it. That's the problem. Keep all the pesticides, fertilizers and industrial waste out. Keep the bays clean and they'll always produce. The main thing about it is to leave the bays there. Don't pump 'em up on the high land and expect 'em to produce fish because they can't.

I 1: Do you like being a commercial fisherman?

R: I love it. Ain't nothin' like it. The challenge every day to go out, fish the weather, see if you can catch fish. There's still that same hunter instinct. Ya might not have done anything if you can outsmart a fish, but I tell ya they'll try to outsmart you and don't think they're not. And if you can put him in the boat, there's a certain sense of accomplishment there. Whether its just that basic conflict of killing your first dinosaur like the Neanderthal Man was or whatever. I know he must have felt good when he could drag a hunk of dinosaur meat home to the kids in the cave. I guess we still possess those basic instincts.

More than that, contributing to the economy. Every dollar. There's something about it. I just heard this recently that I never thought about, for every fish that the fisherman takes out of the water and sells, it generates new money for the economy. It's actually new money. Now the people who buy hooks and buy gas and buy boats and beer to drink while they are out fishin' and tackle and so forth, that's not new money. That money was there somewhere and if they didn't use it for the activities I've just mentioned then they'd do it for somethin' else. Golf or huntin' or skiing or something. That's the way the money would be used. And so they're just recirculating the money. But when we catch a fish and put him in the market, we've generated new money. That's something that's never been there. And for that reason alone it seems to me like we should be allowed to fish and contribute what we can in that way. I think we've been treated unfairly by everybody in the recreational area.

I'm not gonna say everybody, I'm gonna say all the major organizations and their spokesmen. I have an idea that there are a lot of members who don't feel like Carl Wickstrom.

I 1: Well, its obvious that you like fishing. Is it different growing up in a fishing community like Cortez? Can you tell me a little about that?

R: I don't know if it's any different or not. I mean it's somethin' that we're used to and like it. I never grew up anywhere else so I don't know how ... I visited my Uncle's farm but I think that's why I liked it. Because I could visit North Carolina and break the back of suckers and pinch heads off the back of worms and ... my cousins who lived there had to do it and they hated it. They despised it, but I liked it for six weeks at a time for some reason. Cause I knew I was goin' somewhere else and didn't have to stay there. But growin' up in Cortez was a wonderful experience. Just couldn't beat it.

The net spreads to play on and the tin boats to build and ride. Try to put a sail on 'em. The major accomplishment was swimming across the sluice, it was about 150 yards and man when you got to where you could swim that far you was ahead of the class. I mean, that was somethin' else. To swim from the fish house docks to the net spreads. The only way to get there was by boat and the kids would swim. We didn't get on no boat, we wanted to swim over there. That was a big deal.

I 2: There's some buildings I'd like to ask you about in the harbor. Some of the net camps. What is the building that stands out in the harbor in front of the Star?

R: That's the remnants of Kurt Johns' fish camp. Kurt Johns and Dewey Capo. They used to fish for Uncle Tink and they built that durin' World War II.

I 2: How was the net camp used?

R: Just used it to store nets in. They liked 'em out over the water cause it kept rats out. Rats were a real hazard in nets. Cut 'em up just like knives goin' through 'em. Had less chance of rats gettin' in your nets out over the water in a camp like that. Fish houses were just infested with rats. Up in the loft all the time where they store the nets.

I 2: Are there any other net camps down there that you remember seeing?

R: I don't think so. That's the only one I can remember that's there right now. I was tryin' to think along that shoreline used to be a net camp or a house out over the water. Somebody lived in it and they moved it ashore. And then the one that Billy Ireland used to live in, it's still down there. Sittin' on the shore back of Ralph's property.

I 2: Who built that one?

R: I don't know who built that. I think I helped with movin' it ashore and settin' it up. It was on land and then after Bill died Uncle Tink built a garage there and so they pushed that shed back on the edge of the seawall, or that old camp. It's been sittin' there I don't know how many years. 'A long time. I think Alcee and Ralph and myself, we were most of the workforce around at that time. It's more than likely that we did it.

I 2: There's some buildings at the other end of the harbor that are called Charlie Guthrie's Complex. Do you remember those?

R: Oh, yeah. I probably remember when they was built but I don't know how old I was. I know I was there when they were built. I can remember Charlie runnin' back and forth from his big house down to his camp. That's where he stayed. He came to the big house to eat. I don't know if it was to see his wife or dog, but he came up there once or twice a day around meal time. And he set down there. Charlie was a good fisherman in his days. He caught an awful lot of fish. He was one of the early stop-netters and gill-netter and everything combined.

And then I suppose for 20 years he just had a little one- man boat and he trout-fished. All he caught was trout. Or that's all he tried to catch was trout. He got the catfish and stuff like that every once in awhile. But he was what we would designate a trout fisherman. That's what he did mostly. I helped him hang net and I helped him pull out net a lot of times under that little camp that he bought, or that he built. He had a little _____ there. He had a little lift-ways that he'd rent to young fishermen who were just gettin' started, charge us a few dollars to back our boats up there and we'd scrub it off and get it out of the water and paint it. He was pretty good to us.

I 1: What's a lift-ways?

R: Well, it's ... I don't know how to describe it. It was four posts in the water with cross bars. There's one down there. The best thing I know to tell ya is to go look at Calvin's. Calvin's got one down there now.

I 1: But there's jacks on each end right? And you'd jack the boat up out of the water.

R: Yeah, it's jacked up, beam goes across it to put the bow of the boat on one end and the stern on the other and ya lift it up by means of poles. It is a type of jack but it's not really a jack, just use a fulcrum device and a lever I guess is what ya use. Pick it up and then stick a pin in place and let it down and catch another hole, stick a pin under it and let it down. It's just a procedure that goes up and up and up. You do a lot of lifting with a system like that.

I 2: There's some other structures or what's left of structures sticking out of the water down there and people tell me that's what's left of the net spreads. We've seen pictures. Can you talk about how the net spreads worked?

R: Yeah, I was noticing that the other day. I went by and I saw those posts. Those big posts sittin' out there with the cement around 'em? That's where the ways was that I was talkin' about. He had that there. But the spreads were an important part of the fishin' village. Without them we couldn't have survived. Because you had to have some way to dry your nets. If you didn't dry 'em they rotted. Everybody had a spread. That whole harbor was _____. I think the latest picture I have of it was taken in 1960 and even then it was _____ with those net spreads. There was cotton nets out drying. It was a real pretty sight. Without them you couldn't survive.

I 2: Did you have to lime them every time you used them?

R: Always did. Sometimes if you pulled it on and went fishin' one night you'd pull it out without limin' but you never went over two days. Takin' too much of a chance. Lime was too cheap and it was too easy to do to take a chance of that net. Nets cost so much and fish were so cheap. You did your best to take care of it.

I 1: How did you lime the nets? What was entailed?

R: Well, ya just bought lime. It came in 50 pound bags. That was another chore when I worked for Fulford Fish Company. Go to town, load the truck up with lime and bring it down, stack those bags in what we called the lime room and the oil room. And ya used 'em out of there as ya needed 'em.

Lime of course, is just a powdery flour-like material and you'd put the lime in first and it didn't take a whole lot. You'd use maybe 10 pounds of lime to lime a gill net. And you just mixed it with water till you got the consistency you wanted it and then you just poured it all over the net. You'd have two people on the spread pullin' it out and somebody in the boat throwin' lime on it all the time. So it washed it all the way through.

I 1: So the net was in the back of the boat and you'd just pour that mixture on it? How thick was the mixture?

R: Well, ya just got it like ya wanted it. Didn't have to be real thick. Ya didn't want it too thin. It's just something ya learn. There was no particular 2 to 1 or 4 to 1 or anything like that. Ya just put some lime in your boat, start throwin' water and somebody'll say that's enough or you quit or one or the other. But liming wasn't real hard on a fleet of stop-nets. When you'd pull them out, you'd put a bag of lime in a skiff and two people or three would stand on the side of the skiff and let water come in till it was almost sunk and then stir it up good and throw it through the nets. That was one of the key things to keepin' nets good and strong. In fact, it was the key thing.

I 2: If somebody were building a net camp or a spread out in the water, was there any understanding about where you could build and where you couldn't? Whose space was whose?

R: From what I can remember, it was the first guy there. That was always his space. I guess when they started they just kept goin' like this. I think the last fella that built a set and come in with the big gear was Rudy Waldron and there wasn't any more room around the harbor. So he put his spreads out on this lump over here. Of course, it used to be a _____ bank with trees on it but it's all washed away now. But he built his net spreads over there. There wasn't any more room.

He could have gone but it would have cut off a natural sluice that boats used when cuttin' across the kitchen flat. He didn't want to do that so he just went over on that lump. I think it was in Doris' book. I think I saw a picture that showed that little island and Ruby's spreads. And that's the first time I'd thought about that in a long time.

I 1: We're getting close to the end of the tape, but I did want you to mention ... going back to your love of fishing. It's risky business financially and there's a lot of physical risk. And you had an accident one

time. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

R: Not a whole lot to tell. Just got my leg caught in a rope. The loop of the rope caught right around my leg, pulled me up through a block and just sawed it off. That's all there was to that.

Financially, most of the risk is taken by the fish houses. I took mine. I say I took mine. The latest venture the _____ which I've had for about 10 years I did all that on my own. But in my early years the Fulford Fish Company financed me and I left that company to go back fishin' for Sigma and I didn't owe 'em a penny. That's something I think you can brag about. There's a lot of fishermen owe astronomical debts to fish houses. That's how they get fishin'. They'll bankroll 'em, buy their net and boat and the fishermen will bring their fish in to sell 'em. Some of 'em are very unscrupulous and will walk away leaving a tremendous debt with the nets torn up and the boats in disrepair and the motors broke down and that's not really a good thing to do.

No contracts are ever signed that I know of and everything was done with a handshake. But everybody must have come out of it alright. It was a shame that some people, a lot of fishermen, had the attitude that the dealer was rich anyway or he wouldn't be a dealer. And that he owed him that. But I never did feel that way. I figured that everything I asked him to buy was an honest debt and I always paid it.