

Cookie Cooper

Interviewed by Jen Brown

May 9, 2022

Corpus Christi, Texas

Transcribed by Alyssa Lucas

[Jen Brown]: Okay, we are recording. It is May 9, 2022. This is Jen Brown. I'm here on the Island in Corpus Christi, Texas, and I'm speaking with Cookie Cooper on the Baffin Bay oral history project. So, to start, do I have your permission to record?

[Cookie Cooper]: Yes.

[Brown]: Okay.

[Cooper]: For sure.

[Brown]: Thank you. Um, okay, well, since this is an oral history, can you tell me more about your background and early life?

[Cooper]: Well, I was an Air Force brat. I've lived everywhere, and our last station before moving down to Texas, we were stationed in Limestone, Maine, and up there was a lot of fly fishing, you know, freshwater fly fishing, small trout, and maybe a smallmouth bass here and there and when we moved to Texas, I knew this was where I needed to be, so when my family left and went to Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, I stayed here. In fact, at that point in time, I was going to go to the University of Delaware because that's where all my mother's family's from, and I got down here, and I said, "Well, I think I'm just going to stay here," but it was 1966, which was the heat of the Vietnam War, so I went to enter into the University of Texas. My mom drove me up there and had the grades to get in, but at that time, you had to live on campus, and they didn't have any rooms. They were full, so said, "Fine," so we're heading back to San Antonio, and I see this sign that says Southwest Texas State Teachers College. "Mom, pull in here, pull in here," so we pulled in, same deal, grades were fine, but they had no rooms and all the freshmen had to stay on campus in the dorms, and so "We don't have any room, but we'll call you if something opens up, and we find a place we can get you in, we'll sure do it." So, I was already making my reservation, plane reservation, to fly back to Delaware to go to school up there, and we get the call. They said, "Well, we have a room for you, but you may not be comfortable there because it's not air conditioned," and I said, "Doesn't matter" (laughs) I mean this is August (both laugh). So, I head up there, and I had, you know, I hadn't been here but a few weeks, and I had no idea how hot it could be in a dorm with no air conditioner and just a little bitty fan. Anyway, I got in, and they told me, "If we get a better room, you know, we've got Reed Hall, which is a nice new air-conditioned, brand new, and if someone drops out of there, we'll put you over there," and I said, "Okay," so I suffered through that for a couple of weeks and just about at the point where I wanted to give up, telephone rings in the dorm, you

know, we didn't have cell phones back then, and they said, "You have a room at Reed Hall." Believe me, Jen, I couldn't get out of that dorm, I wasn't fast enough (Brown laughs), got over to Reed Hall, from then on, life was wonderful. You know, my family wasn't affluent or anything, so I worked three jobs, worked my way through high school. I was an underwater gardener at Aquarena. You probably don't know what that is. It's in San Marcos but anyway, it's a major attraction down there and worked in a gas station and I was a proctor at the San Marcos Baptist Academy. And then, I got my business degree, started my own business, been self-employed ever since, and I'm a certified real estate appraiser at this point in my life. Spent a little stint in the oil field and did really well and made a lot of money and then the collapse came, and I lost a lot of money and then it got really good again and then it went down again, and the third time when it went up, I got out. I made a little money and bought a house down here, and that's pretty much, you know, since I've gotten here, I just, I love it, it's where I'm supposed to be, and I don't want to live anywhere else in the world. I've lived a lot of places being an Air Force brat.

[Brown]: What did you like about Texas so much that you didn't want to leave?

[Cooper]: The freeness of it, the openness of it, the entrepreneurship down here. I mean, a lot of our stations were on the East Coast and pretty much on the East Coast everything is related to the union, pretty much all of my friends up there, and all the people that I know that are still up there, my sister still lives in Delaware, are all—they work for a company, you know, it's a corporation arena, where down here, it's free spirited. If you decide you want to go try to do something and make a living creating something new, get after it, and people would encourage you, and sometimes even financially support you and just the weather, I mean, I had enough snow living in Maine for years that I—it wouldn't hurt my feelings if I never saw a snowflake again. And just the people, the people are a lot friendlier. I guess because it gets so cold on the East Coast everybody's bundled up and they're moving fast. They're just har-har-har (pantomimes fast, bundled-up movements) (laughs). Working down here, everybody just has a lot more laid-back attitude, they're more relaxed, they're friendlier, and they're just more fun for me. When I go home to see my sister, it's just different. People up there are—a lot of them don't even know their next door neighbors, so I love it here. I'm in paradise.

[Brown]: And you grew up—did you grow up hunting and fishing?

[Cooper]: Absolutely. It's really kind of odd because my father didn't fish or hunt—well, my father hunted a little bit. We did a little bit of deer hunting. He loved to squirrel hunt. He was born in Elkins, West Virginia, so he grew up in the country, and the reason he left Elkins, West Virginia, was because he saw everybody in his family went to work for the coal mine, and it's just as soon as he was big enough to get on a bus and get out of Elkins, West Virginia, he got in the Air Force. Anyway, yeah, a little bit of that, but my brothers don't fish, either one of them. My sister doesn't fish. I just got the bug, you know, from when I was in elementary school. That's all I wanted to do, was read books about fishing.

[Brown]: Who taught you how to fish?

[Cooper]: Who? Well, I can tell you that my earliest experience with fishing, we had a house that was on a creek, I was probably five. I wasn't in school yet. I was four or five, and my buddies and I would take safety pins and a little piece of string and a stick, and we would go fish in the creek and catch perch. Every now and then, we'd catch one (both laugh), so I don't know if anybody actually ever taught me how to fish. I mean, I've fished with some really good fishermen that—I watched what they did, and they'd say do this or do that or, you know, look at this, look at that, but as far as having somebody that mentored me or kind of took me by the hand, said, "Let's go fishing," I did have some—a friend of my mother's had a brother that took me fishing a couple of times, and he was a bass fisherman. We used to fish with—they made their own corks back then out of wood, and they would use shiners that were probably six inches long trying to catch the biggest bass in Alabama, Georgia (both laugh), or whatever, so that was pretty much it, but once the bug bit me, there was no getting away from it.

[Brown]: And what sort of fishing did you do when you moved down to Texas?

[Cooper]: Oh, I started bass fishing. We moved to San Antonio, and there were a lot of lakes around for, well, for probably fourteen years. That's all I did, was bass fishing. We moved to Gonzales. I got married in school and moved to Gonzales, and I met a friend up there named Bruce McKee who's an excellent fisherman. He's a hardhead, but he and I have been fishing together for fifty-two years now. We haven't killed each other yet, and he and I would just fish every lake around. There are several small lakes around Gonzales and then we'd start branching out, and we'd go a little farther and a little farther and then it wouldn't be unlike us to work until five or six o'clock on Friday, load up the boat, and head out, sleep in a truck, go fishing the next morning, sleep in a truck, fish Sunday morning, and head home. In fact, when we got—after we started bass fishing, we actually started saltwater fishing. That's kind of—we got the bug for saltwater. We just fell in love with speckled trout, and the floundering, and the redfish and all of that, so we would get off work. We had a little flounder boat. We had to be back to church Sunday for the wives, so we'd get off of work, we'd run down to the coast, sometimes in the middle of the week even, we'd flounder all night, we'd come back, clean the flounder, clean up, go back to work, but we were a lot younger then. We could do that. I couldn't do that anymore.

[Brown]: Or make it back in time for church, wow. Um so, do you remember the first time you saltwater fished or fished in Baffin Bay?

[Cooper]: Well, the first time I ever saltwater fished, I had met some guys in Gonzales, and they were going down, and there was kind of an old legend over in Rockport named Alvie Wyatt, and Alvie was Jay Watkins' mentor. I mean, Alvie was probably one of the greatest redfishermen that ever lived, but he knew all of it. He knew all the trout and everything, but that's all he did. I mean, he had a little store there, and he would fish, and they would sell fish back in those days. In fact, anybody that caught fish, you could take them to him, and he would buy them. He just wanted them gutted and gilled, and he paid, back then fifty cents a pound, I believe it was. So, some of my friends—he was originally from Gonzales and some of my friends in Gonzales knew

him well so when we'd go down there, we'd all fish together, and I learned a lot from him. I mean, he was—if I ever had a teacher or a mentor at saltwater fishing, it would be Alvie Wyatt. I mean, he was an incredible man. Back then we'd go fishing, and for all day fishing, Jen, he would take a can of sardines, one of those flat little cans of sardines, a little pack of saltine crackers and then his fishing lures, he would have only—well, he fished bait, but a lot, most of the time, he fished with lures. He would—in his pocket, they didn't have any Ziplock bags or anything like that back then, so they used to have these kind of plastic tobacco holders for pipe tobacco that had a roll up on the end. It kind of could secure. He had that little thing in his left shirt pocket, and he would have like four lures in there. He'd have a couple of 52M28 Mirrolures and maybe two or three gold and silver spoons. That was it (laughs), and you talk about a man that's gotten into some storms. He fished mostly over there in Copano Bay, Rockport, Cedar Bayou, Carlos, Mesquite Bays, and he's dumped that little thirteen-foot Whaler over many a times because he would just go by himself and head out in Copano Bay. Of course, back then, you know, when you're going fishing, you didn't pay as much attention to the weather as we do now and you get off in a storm and turn it over, but he survived. I think Alvie was probably up in his seventies whenever he passed away, but he was a character. I had another fellow named Charlie Stella from Gonzales that he and I made a trip to Mexico, just the two of us, going down there to fish at La Pesca. He told me so many stories about when they used to go to Third Pass, Eighth Pass, all that down out of Brownsville and everything, and he and his buddy, Glenn Story, had an airplane, and so what they would do is, and I know this is hard to comprehend nowadays because of the scarcity of fish, but in those days, the guys, they had a group and like four or five of them would go in an Army Deuce and a Half, which is one of those great big trucks that you see all the soldiers sitting in the back of. They would go down the beach somehow, or down the shoreline, and Charlie and Glenn would take that little taildragger airplane, and they would fly down the coast. They'd actually tie their fishing rods up under the struts on the plane, fly down the coast and when they saw those redfish, they could tell those guys, no cellphones, none of that, no radios, but they could go over and tell those guys, you know, they're going to be wherever you're at because they preplanned, you know, we're going to stop here, and we'll wait here for you, fly down, get down there, and those fish would run, I guess, in a pattern and a certain direction and it took them however much time to get there. They could land that plane and tell them that big school of redfish is going to be here tomorrow or later today or whatever. There were that many of them. I mean, the water, they told me it would just be red for just as far as you could see, just redfish upon redfish. So anyway, they'd do that and get those redfish and load them up, fillet them, bring them back home and be able to feed their families for the rest of the year.

[Brown]: Yeah.

[Cooper]: And, well, Charlie was—these guys were way ahead of their time. I mean, they had an airboat they made, they built themselves before they really had airboats, and Charlie Stella, one of the guys that went in the airplane, took his airboat out, and they went to Port Aransas jetties, took it out, everything was fine and then when it was coming back in, the tide chain had the big waves. That was when his airboat took a dive to the bottom of the channel right there of the jetties. He never built another airboat (both laugh), but he made it.

[Brown]: What year did you start fishing the coast?

[Cooper]: I started fishing the coast in 1970.

[Brown]: And—

[Cooper]: —We went from bass fishing to trout fishing.

[Brown]: What was it like back then?

[Cooper]: Well, I think the three biggest things, I had a little house in Port O'Connor, a little fishing camp, and at that point in time, there were just so few people, and there were so many fish, and the water was so green, just beautiful. I guess that's the biggest thing. When I was there, there—shoot. In Port O'Connor, there were a couple hundred, three hundred houses. That was probably it, so those are the biggest changes, more people, less fish. Uh, the water's not as pretty.

[Brown]: What about Baffin Bay? Do you remember the first time you fished down there?

[Cooper]: Yes, and actually, the first time I fished down there, it's considered a Baffin Bay area, Rocky Slough. You'd probably heard of that or Penascal Point or whatever. Well, at that point in time, we didn't have a big enough boat to come down from Corpus, you know, Marker 37 or someplace like that and head south because, I mean, that was an all-day deal. We had very—a lot smaller motors, instead of taking thirty minutes like these guys can now with these seventy, you know, run seventy, eighty miles an hour. Back then, we plugged along at twenty, twenty-five miles an hour, so we didn't even have a boat. I didn't have one, none of my friends had one, but I had a river boat, a little—oh, it was an eighteen-foot flat bottom aluminum boat with a twenty-horsepower motor, so we decided what we would do—everybody had a four-wheel drive truck because all my friends were rednecks. We were all rednecks, you know, lived in the country, our thing to do in the country was go hunting or go fishing. That was it, so we put that eighteen-foot flat bottom with that twenty horsepower Mercury, which back then Mercurys didn't run as well as they run now. They weren't really a saltwater motor, and we drove down here and then we drove out there to Padre Island National Seashore, we went all the way down the beach, and there was a little trail you could go over between the dunes and get to Yarborough. I don't know whether you've ever been down there. You've been down there?

[Brown]: Um-hm.

[Cooper]: Okay. Anyways, so we'd take that flat-bottom, go over there, put the boat in and then we'd head across and go straight over to—it pretty much is kind of right across from Rocky Slough, out in there, Penascal. We'd go out in there and then go out. We'd get a little bit into Baffin Bay but with that little flat bottom, we didn't go very far and then we'd get back and then of course the wind would come up, and it'd be a lot rougher going home than coming

back. We did that several times. I mean, we'd go down, get off work, go down there and camp out at that little spot where the little tables and things are, go fishing, come back, spend the night again, fish the next morning, go home (Brown laughs). That was my first experience. My first experience actually coming out of Corpus, my friend, Tom Sanders, father-in-law Bill Sharp, and his buddies had a cabin right there across from Twin Palms, right across in the Badlands and all that, on the east side of the Intracoastal, and he had a little, I think it was a sixteen-foot, might have been seventeen, glass front with walk through windshield and a little ski boat, and I think we might of had a forty or fifty horsepower motor on there (laughs), so every time we came, we just chugged down there and chugged down there, and we'd finally get there, and we were fortunate enough at the time that we would stay in the cabin, his father-in-law would be there and there were two more cabins, the Dinklers' and Tom Leslie. Tom Leslie was, he knew as much about the big trout down there as any living human being. Those guys, they all worked for Celanese, and they could fix anything. If you could imagine back in 1970, they had those three cabins there, and they had a solar system to run their pump for their water well, so we could take a semi-fresh shower, and they would tell us where to go, what to do, what was biting, what wasn't biting, so I would say those guys gave us a lot of information they don't have. Another guy that I also learned a lot from, probably more than anybody else down here, well, Cliff Webb and Doug Bird, but I got to actually fish with Doug a little more than Cliff. Doug Bird recently died this past year, eighty years old. He was like the first guide down here. He's the one that, if you know Baffin, you know there's a lot of rocks, and it's dangerous down there, and you can't just go anywhere you want to go. You really have to be careful, and he started out, and I'll tell you a story about him (laughs) if you want to hear a real story. Back then, they've got these little sixteen-foot skiffs with the twenty-horsepower motor maybe, and they'd go down there. He got into the guide business. He was selling used cars at the time, I think, and he got into the guide business because he would go down there by himself, and he was getting the rocks figured out, where he could go, where he couldn't go and then his buddy would want to go with him, the other buddy would want to go with him, and he told them, he said, "Look guys, if I'm going to keep taking you at least y'all can pay for the gas" (laughs), and then it got to be where he said, "Look, I'm just not going to take you anymore because I've got people who want to pay me money to take them," (laughs) and he did that for, I guess, forty years. Anyway, he was as good a fisherman as I've ever known. He went to a tournament in Austin, bass fishing. He fished both sides. In fact, when the brown tide came in, he just quit Baffin because he was strictly a lure fisherman and started bass fishing. Anyway, so I had lived in Austin, and there's bass clubs all over that area, lots of them. Now, I'll fish over there at Town Lake and Lake Travis and all that, so they know that lake like the back of their hand. Well, Doug called one day and said, "Hey, I'm going to come up to Austin and fish in the bass tournament up there." I said, "Really? Where are you going to fish?" He said, "Well, I don't know. I've never been there before." He'd never been on the lake, he came up there, and won first place in that tournament against all those guys that lived there and fished it regularly. I mean, that's how good a fisherman he is. He's phenomenal. He just has a knack for it, and he taught me so much and where the rocks are and where the rocks aren't, where you—I'd ask him, "Well, Doug, are there any rocks in here?" And he said, "Well, I've never hit one" (both laugh). He would never tell you that there weren't any rocks in there because they can be anywhere and as the tide goes up and goes down, you know, it can get more dangerous. Like,

with my little shallow sport, right now, I can ride over top all the rocks and never even think about being—going to hit one, but let that tide drop out a foot, now you're in trouble. So, I would say those people and Cliff has just been a friend for a long time, and he'll just—he's the kind of guy that, he always wants to help you. He's always trying to make you have the best day that you've ever had with him, and, I mean, I've taken my kids with him, and my father-in-law, grandparents, you name it, and he'll figure out some way to help them catch a fish.

[Brown]: Hm. Well, what do you think makes Baffin Bay so special?

[Cooper]: God (laughs), really, I mean, he left us just an absolute awesome place where the water was clear, the fish were abundant, and we've kind of squandered some of that, and I think it's time that we get back to where we were, and I think it's possible. I mean, they did it in Florida at, what, Tampa Bay. That was like terrible, they said, and now it's beautiful, so it's something that we can do, it's just we have to put the time and the money in, and the big thing is, I think, is we need to get some of the politics out of it because a lot of times the Parks and Wildlife will know what the right thing to do, and they'll even recommend, just like with the oyster deal we're going through now. I mean, everybody knows that when you put an extra hundred, two hundred boats on one little oyster reef, pretty soon there's no oyster reef, so if the Parks and Wildlife and the people, the scientists can actually make the decision instead of some politician because maybe they're getting a donation from somebody else. I think it would be a lot better.

[Brown]: Well, I'll come—I'm going to come back to that, kind of what success looks like, but what does Baffin Bay mean to you?

[Cooper]: It means that this is where I want to live. I mean that's a pretty strong statement. That's the allure for me, to actually make my home here, I want to live here, and never want to leave here. It's just—it's a magical place, Jen. I mean, there's so many different opportunities down there that Mother Nature and God have given us to where you can fish with the whole family down there, you can get out of the boat, you can go wade fish, you can go from here, especially with these new boats and the motors we have and as fast as they'll go. I mean, if you want to go, really, to Port Mansfield, you can jump in your boat, and you can go to Port Mansfield. Maybe you'll have to fill up with fuel when you get down there, but a lot of people, especially the guides, they can take a whole family fishing with them, they can run down to the land cut, throw in some shrimp, and they're probably going to catch something. They're catching drum down there or catching redfish or trout. Now, with the new flounder program, I've noticed since that started the last few years, we're seeing more trout, more flounder. Till that program got underway, we'd go out and fish, shoot, we might fish three or four or five trips and then somebody would catch a flounder and say, "Wow, that's pretty cool. Somebody caught a flounder." Well, now it seems like if you're actually fishing for flounder and you go out, you may catch a fish or two today, and the rocks are always kind of—I don't know. That's kind of the mystical part, I would say, of Baffin Bay, is they're there and even—the rocks were so important because that's where the fish are going to hang around, and until the development of GPS, you really had to know where you were going and what you were doing. Well,

nowadays, everybody has a GPS, everybody can buy all the tracks to all the places that they want to go for five hundred or a thousand dollars. So, now, instead of having some places where you can kind of maybe go and get away from some people because maybe they wouldn't want to come right in there to that spot because they didn't know exactly how to get there. Now, they're going to be right there, so instead of you being able to fish a little larger area, and I'm not talking about taking over half the bay or something with you and your buddies. I'm talking about maybe getting where somebody is not within a hundred yards of you or two hundred yards from you and actually get out without somebody running across your line with a power boat. Uh, you know, I've been fishing on the shoreline, on the South Shore, and this is really bad, and I was fishing thirty or forty feet from the shoreline, and a guy on a boat came between me and the shoreline, so I can't really tell you the really bad part about that story. The guy in the boat, I'll tell you, the guy in the boat was in a Parks and Wildlife boat, and I'm going, "Really?" Because it's not like they don't know where they're going. They know they can go out around there. There's no rocks or anything on there, so I think that's one of the biggest things, is that people now are just not as considerate as people used to be, and I don't know whether that's from ignorance or intent. Either way, it's unacceptable because if people are out wading in the water, you don't want to run through them with your boat, and a lot of people will, and they'll come up, "Hey, how y'all doing? You catching anything?" "Not anymore (laughs)," and people are getting increasingly belligerent, you know, like somebody will pull in, and guides included. Some of the guides, you know, they think they own the water. I mean, I'd say a good portion of them think they own—well, I've been here, you know, we were wade fishing, a guide came in there, and I said, "How come y'all are getting so close?" "Oh, we were here this morning." I said, "Oh, what time (laughs)? You know, I haven't seen anybody in three or four hours," and he said, "Well, I'm fishing here. This is one of my spots," and I told him, I said, "Well, I'm sorry. I really apologize, but I think I was fishing here before you were born" (laughs). That's one of the advantages of getting older, you know? You don't have to be really ugly to people, but you can let them know that you don't appreciate what they're doing.

[Brown]: Yeah. That's pretty crazy. So, what is your most memorable experience about Baffin Bay?

[Cooper]: My most memorable one is the one that I was telling you about that didn't have anything to do with catching a fish. Okay, Doug Bird, the guy that I told you was such a great fisherman, he and his son Clark are coming down here to stay in the cabin, and they want me to come down to stay with them. Well, okay, I said, "Okay. Where do I meet you?" "Well, just go ahead, turn in there by old Chatter Allen's cabin, and go down there, and we'll be in the blue cabin," and so I said, "Okay." I go down, and I turn the corner, well, all the cabins are blue. They're all blue, so he said, "Well, there's a big post next to ours," so I say, "Okay." So, I go over there, and I find a cabin, a blue cabin, that's got this big creosote post next to it. I said, "This has got to be the one," so I pulled in, I unloaded all my stuff, and put it up on, you know, they'll have kind of a little deck out there. I put all my stuff up on the deck, get out of the boat, and they had been having some problems with their motor. He's got a Lake and Bay and had a motor that was just not really functioning very well, and so I'm waiting and waiting and waiting, and it started getting dark and I said, "Eh, well, I don't know. I bet they had some problems"

and then I said, "Well, if they did, they've got somebody there, they already had someone there to take them back. Well, I'll go get them. I won't go get them. I will. I won't to go get them. Oh, I'll go get them" and then it was dark, and then a norther hit, a pretty good norther. So, I said, "Well, I'm fine. I know they're fine, so I'm just going to stay here, and I'll go back in the morning. If their boat had to be repaired, we can all squeeze in my boat, and we'll come down," so I'm sitting there and everybody brought their sleeping bag and their bedroll and pillows and all that, and I had all the food, so I knew they had to come to me (laughs), so I'd go to bed, I laid down on the deck of that thing because the door was locked, laid down on the deck, get my pillow, get my sleeping bag, and I'm sitting there and sound asleep, I hear thwup-thwup-thwup (makes helicopter noises). What was that? And I wake up, and there's this helicopter, and it's going way out there, it's got a big spotlight on and way back over there and way back over there, and this is how dumb I am, Jen. I said, "Man, somebody must be lost." I went right back to sleep and then a little bit later, brr-brr-brr (helicopter noises), and every time they leave, it's like twenty or thirty minutes they're gone and then they come back and finally I hear, brr-brr-brr (helicopter noises), and I look up and the helicopters right there. I'm going, "Well, man, I wonder who's lost?" Really, it never crossed my mind that they were looking for me, at all, not even one second. So anyway, all of a sudden, I had my boat long lined, so it was away from that thing where that northern wouldn't beat it into the cabin, and so it's out there about twenty feet from the cabin, and all of a sudden, I look up, here comes this frogman. The water there is just about waist deep, and those Coast Guard guys, they know every section of that. They know where they can get out and where they can't. Frogman gets out, walks over, and that deck is probably about this high off the water, you know, maybe two, two and a half feet. He put his hands on the deck, the next thing I knew, he was standing in front of me. Those guys, you talk about in good shape. He just took one leap, boom. He said, "Are you Cookie Cooper?" I said, "Yes, sir. I am." He said, "Are you sure you're Cookie Cooper?" I said, "Yes, sir. I'm sure I'm Cookie Cooper." He said, "Well, your friends are worried about you." I said, "Why?" He said, "Well, they thought you got lost or you were down at Yarborough or something like that," and I said, "No, I'm fine. I've been waiting for them, but I figured their motor must have broken down because they've been having trouble with that motor." He said, "No, in fact they're right up there about two hundred yards" (laughs). So, I said, "Oh, this is not the right blue cabin" (Brown laughs). So, Clark, Doug Bird's son, gets in his boat. He comes down there, and I mean, waves are just crk-crk-crk (makes wave crashing noise). He said, "Man, I'm glad you're here, glad we found you." I said, "Well, I don't know why y'all even called. You know I'd be all right." They called my son, they called my fishing buddy for fifty-two years, Bruce McKee. Bruce told them, he said, "Don't worry about Cookie. He's the safest man on the water I know. He's fine (laughs)." So, anyway, he comes down, he says, "Jump in your boat, get your stuff, and come on up here with us." I said, "Clark, it's too rough out here to get my boat, pull it up here, and get this stuff in it and come up. Just pull your boat up. I'm going to get my roll, my bed roll and my pillow," and I said, "I'm getting in the boat with you. We'll get it in the morning," so we go back, we go up there, and I have to admit, the bed in that cabin they had was a lot more comfortable than that wood plank, the deck that I was laying on (Brown laughs). Anyway, with the internet now, before I even got up in the morning, everybody in the world knew it (both laugh), and see, they don't have to give two names. They don't have to say Cookie Cooper. They just say, "Cookie did this, Cookie did that, and he was lost," and of course, the story gets all convoluted,

you know, how things happened and what happened so (both laugh). Anyway, that was my biggest experience. My greatest thrill was right there hanging on the wall. That's a ten-and-a-half-pound trout, and it's a replica. I let the trout go. We didn't keep the trout. Although, I have to admit, my buddy Cliff Webb, said, "Ah, man, you just need to get a real mount of this." I said, "No, we're not getting a real mount, just—we're letting her go." He said, "Well, she might die." I said, "Well, if she does, it's going to be on her own terms." She was in great shape. She was just hooked in the lip, and that was the biggest thrill I had because I was with my good buddy Cliff Webb, and my son, and I'd been buying Cliff Corkies. That's kind of a big bait around that everybody was trying to get, and I'd always bring a few to Cliff and bring a few to Cliff, and he said, "One of these days, I'm going to take you and your boy fishing." So, it was just—he called and said, "See if Slade can come down here. There's some big fish on the shoreline," and I actually caught that fish just right straight across from here, so we didn't even have to go to Baffin (Brown laughs), and that was a thrill basically because I got to be with my good friend Cliff Webb and my son. I can tell you a funny story about him if you want.

[Brown]: Sure.

[Cooper]: Okay. My son, because he's a very big conservationist. Like I tell him, "Slade, why don't you just take a couple home, fish to your mom." "She doesn't need them." "Okay." So, anyway, he's got a friend named José, who—José was not a fisherman, and Slade kind of started bringing him down here, and José got the bug, so he's an avid fisherman now. Anyway, my son's fished with me all of his life. He's forty years old. He hasn't caught a ten-pound trout yet. Of course, there's a lot of seventy-year-old people who haven't caught a ten-pound trout. Anyway, so he and his buddy, José, and another man, one of his other buddies came with him, and they're fishing the west end of Tide Gauge Bar. They're lined up there, and sure enough, his buddy José catches a ten-pound trout, (Brown laughs) and my son was so meticulous. He said because the hook was sideways, getting it out where he didn't even drop, you know, spill a drop of blood, let that trout go, so they're—the generation behind us is a lot more conservation minded than I think even the guides now because there's so much on the internet, they're starting to realize that the big thing is not showing a cooler full of dead fish. The big thing is showing the big fish that you let back go, so it's happening, Jen. It's getting better, getting better, getting better. People are more conscious and more wise. I can remember a case where one year we had some winter Texans come down, and they were all camping down there, all at the ramp down here. Anyway, they had their sail lines out, and that night, a school of giant trout came through. This has been, phew, I guess back in the sixties, but a giant school of trout came through there, and they caught a ton of them. Right there, you know, you have the launch at Bird Island, then you kind of have the little area for wind surfing—

[Brown]: —Hm—

[Cooper]: —and all that. Well, they were all camped out along there. Back then, you could just camp wherever you want. It didn't matter. Anyway, they caught just umpteenth giant trout, eight, ten, maybe bigger and filleted every one of them, and I don't think that's something that would happen today, but back then, I guess, if they had the internet, all those people would

have told all their friends and then you'd have two thousand people down there trying to catch one of those fish the next day because it's instantaneous now. I mean, they're in the water with their cellphone in their pocket, texting them, "We're here. This is what we caught. Here's a picture," and then they wonder why all of a sudden there's a thousand people there.

[Brown]: Hm. So, you mentioned your son was a conservationist.

[Cooper]: Absolutely.

[Brown]: You just have the one son?

[Cooper]: I have one son and one daughter.

[Brown]: Okay, and they grew up fishing with you?

[Cooper]: Well, my son, if he didn't have a four-year-old and a seven-year-old, would be here more frequently, but he's an appraiser as well, and he's totally inundated with business. I mean, he cannot keep up, literally, and his wife's a nurse, so between the two of them and trying to take care of those two boys, they've got their hands full. It's a real treat for him when he comes down to be able to go fishing, and most of the time, he's a really, really good dad. He's a family guy. When they come down, he's going to stay with the family. He's not going to run off with me, unlike I was. I have to admit, I would come down and run off and go fishing, so I have a lot of respect for him and they're building a tremendously successful life, but one of these days, I told him, I said, "I went through that same thing. Remember, I had two kids to raise too as well like you do." "Oh, yeah." I said, "I know about all that. I know about one of them is going this way and you're taking one to soccer over there, the other ones going to softball over here, and you're passing each other going back and forth to town. I know about all that, but in another ten years when they get into college, you'll have some time—

[Brown]: —Hm—

[Cooper]: —and they won't want to see you after they're sixteen anyway" (laughs).

[Brown]: So, did you teach him conservation values growing up or?

[Cooper]: Well, that was always a part of our life, but it's not like now. It's just more intense now. People are—let me put it this way, Jen. We never caught or killed anything that we didn't eat. We didn't just go out there to just decimate the population of any species, and we had a ranch, and we had deer on it and turkey, and we didn't go out there and kill every turkey or every quail. It was our whole process to—any time you own land, you're worried about next year and the next year and the next year. A lot of the people that come to the coast, they're just worrying about today, what can I take home, and I understand that. A lot of people like fresh fish or whatever. They get here, and they say, "Well, we want to take as many as we can home." Fortunately, the Parks and Wildlife, since the big freeze, has stepped in, and right now,

you know, used to be trout, the limit was fifteen inches, and you could keep anything over fifteen inches up to twenty-five for trout, and the Parks and Wildlife stepped in and said, “No, no, that’s too many,” so now they’ve implemented new regulations where you can only keep three trout, and they have to be between seventeen and twenty-three [inches]. That’s going to help a lot because that increases the spawning biomass, so I can already see there’s a lot of little fish that are in the bays, and they don’t have to be ten pounds to spawn, the little ones spawn too. They just don’t spawn as many eggs, but I think in another two, maybe three years that we’ll actually have a recovery that’s noticeable and substantial, so I’m encouraged.

[Brown]: Um-hm. Can you talk more about the changes you’ve noticed to Baffin Bay over time?

[Cooper]: The main change in Baffin Bay is the water quality because it used to be clear. A friend of mine named Tom Sanders has a cabin right down there where—on the Laguna Salada, I mean, Cayo del Grullo right where—he’s probably within half a mile of Scott Murray’s house. You have to drive past his house to get to Scott’s house, and he and his son were fishing. He and his son and I were fishing one day at Penascal Point, and we were just drifting along, and this is how clear the water was, Jen. Back then, we just pretty much used gold spoons. I mean, that was the thing in that area, so we’re drifting down. Steven was probably about—his son, Steven, was probably about ten maybe, and the dad was in the front, Steven was in the middle standing next to—well, he’s actually kneeling. They had those ski seats, you know, cushion seats. He was kneeling there, and I was standing up behind my gold spoon on there, and I was fixing to cast, and I looked down, and about three feet under the water, you could see this flounder just laying there on a rock. I said, “Steven, watch this,” and I pull that spoon across, and that flounder hit it (smack), and we put the flounder in the boat, and to this day when I see him, Steven now is fifty, and Steven will say, “Do you remember that flounder we caught off—remember that flounder we caught with that gold spoon that was laying on that rock?” I said, “Yeah, I sure do,” and that’s the biggest change, and like I said, Doug Bird, whenever the brown tide came, he just left. It was that bad, you know, for years, and it’ll be back because we have so much phosphorus and nitrogen coming off the agricultural activities that are happening around the bay, and I think, it seems like when we have a drought, they go away because nothing’s running into the bay, but I would predict that sometime in the future, the brown tide will come back again. It’s been here way before this last event we had. There’s been a couple other ones even in my lifetime, so that’s just part of something nature does, but I think we’re helping her do the brown tide by the things we’re putting in the water, and a lot of those little cities up there, their septic systems are failing. We’ve got a lot of septic systems all around the bays. Everything that came, Kenedy Ranch don’t own and then the municipal sewer systems are failing, and they’re putting raw sewage in the water. I mean, here last year, one of Scott’s friends actually took pictures and took them, said, “Hey, somebody’s got to fix this,” and that contributes to killing seagrass and the less seagrass you have, the less trout you have, but it’s just a vicious cycle. So, I think the water clarity is the biggest thing as far as the health of Baffin Bay and the water quality and as far as the life of Baffin Bay, I think there needs to be a way—Florida does it, and they have different areas where they say, “Okay, we’re going to do some different rules here,” or, “We’re not going to do this,” or, “We’re going to change the limits or

the size limits,” or whatever to where they’re going to have to say, “Okay, this Baffin Bay is closed,” or have a season, okay, where you can fish it after the spawn, but with the fishing pressure we have and with meteoric growth of Texas in general. You know, a lot of those people coming from California like to fish too, so when you start putting millions more people on those same waters, it just makes for a lot of chaos, and I feel very fortunate that I got to be here when it still was pretty much pristine, and there wasn’t a lot of traffic, and I think if you talk to any of the older guys, the septuagenarians and up, they’ll tell you that the two biggest things are the traffic and that people are so inconsiderate. But Jen, with a little work, we can get it back. I mean, well, it’s going to take a lot of work, and it’s going to take a lot of money, but it looks like people are starting to realize what a treasure we have here. I mean, even in Austin, Texas, at the legislature, the governor and those kind of people are starting to say, “Hey, you know, we’ve got something really special here. We need to put some effort into keeping it what it used to be or getting it back to what it used to be.”

[Brown]: What do you think success looks like in terms of restoring it back to what it used to be?

[Cooper]: Success to me would be if I can run into Baffin Bay, and it’s clear again. That’s success.

[Brown]: What about the fishing?

[Cooper]: We get the bay cleaned up, I think the fishing will take care of itself, and like I say, if they’ll leave it to the scientists and let the Texas Parks and Wildlife step in and say, “We need to do this,” or, “We need to do that.” It’s just infuriating to know that the oyster fishing was poor in Louisiana, so all those oyster boats came over here to Texas. It’s just like the bay. We could go fishing in the bay. We can support are local oyster boats, but when you put another two or three times that much on those same little oyster reefs, pretty soon there’s no oyster reefs, and the biologists know it. I mean, the people at the Harte Foundation, they know what’s going on over there, and they stopped it and then all of a sudden for whatever reason, they said, “Oh, no, no. We’re not going to do that. We’re going to leave it open for Mesquite and Carlos and all those bays up there,” so if we can get the politics out and let the people that make the decisions be scientists and people that fish down here. I mean, those guides know. They know when it’s not right. They know when it’s going down. You ask Cliff Webb or like, Doug Bird used to be, they could tell you what’s going on a lot better, sometimes than even the scientists, and a guy like Scott Murray, I guarantee you he could tell you what’s going on back there at Cayo del Grullo as well as anybody that doesn’t have a microscope (laughs).

[Brown]: How do you think we can get younger generations to want to be stewards of Baffin Bay?

[Cooper]: I think it’s already happening. I mean, if you look at the internet and you look at these people, even the guides are starting to get a little antsy about showing a big box of fish because they know that the people coming up, they’re not into that. They want to, I can say in the past,

people actually came down here to get some fish to go home and feed their families. That's not the case anymore. These people come down here for the experience of being out on the water with a good guide that can let them catch a fish or two or three and let them go because it's just as much thrill—it was more thrill in letting that fish go than even in catching it, just seeing her swim off. Well, that's another story I'll tell you. Okay, so my son, he must have taken twenty pictures, tchik-tchik-tchik-tchik (makes camera clicking sound), measured it, got the girth, all that, let her go, and I had a big smile on my face, end of story. So, like, three months later, maybe four, my son calls me. Slade says, "Dad, you've got a package coming today. You need to be home." I said, "Okay," so I was going to be home, and they bring a crate. It's like two feet by two feet by three feet long. I open it up, and that's what was in it, that ten-and-a-half-pound trout replica (Brown laughs). I had no idea that anybody was doing it or anything, but what happened, my friend Bruce McKee, he was fortunate enough to—they found some pretty nice oil on his place, and he had a little extra money, and he's such a good friend that he called my son. He said, "Slade, if you can figure out how to get one of those replicas made, I'll pay for it." I have no idea what they cost. I don't want to know (laughs). Anyway, so Slade found somebody in Florida, and at first they sent him pictures, back and forth, and he said, "No, that's too green, do this, that needs to be done," and when they finally got it done, it's pretty realistic, so that's how that ended up on my wall up there, and I'm very proud of it, and it was a very kind thing for my friend, I call him Doc, Doctor Bruce McKee, to do, and my son did his part too, to have it all come together.

[Brown]: Cool.

[Cooper]: Anyway, I think everybody's aware now in Baffin Bay of some of the sources of the pollution. Some of them are easily fixed if they just, you know, put the dollars in there, I mean, to redo a sewer plant. I think Scott may have said something about—they may have gotten a state grant for one of the sewer plants, maybe at Riviera or something. I'm not sure about that, Jen, but everybody's aware of it now, so the environmental organization of Texas is not going to let them continue to put raw sewage into the Baffin Bay, so that'll be resolved and just—it's a little-by-little thing. It's not like you're going to walk out there and all of a sudden, it's going to be great, but I feel very comfortable with my son and his friends and their friends, his whole universe of people that he knows, they're all committed to giving some of this to their kids. Where in the past, everybody just fished, well, you didn't have to worry about it because it's always been there. We just didn't have enough people to decimate the supply and now we do.

[Brown]: Hm. Well, that's all the questions I have. Do you have any more fish stories?

[Cooper]: No. I just can't think of any right now. I probably have some fish stories, but they'd probably be fish stories (laughs).

[Brown]: Well, is there anything else you'd like to add about your life or Baffin Bay or, um, conservation efforts?

[Cooper]: All I have to add is I think we're on the right trail, and it's like I texted Scott back

yesterday or the other day when he sent me that video of John Sutton and him, all those other old timers. I texted him, I said, "We can do it." Oh, I said, "We can do this," and he texted me back, "Yes, we can," and it's one of his life's ambitions, to get things back because he knows what it was like. I mean, people that fish now don't have any clue how good Baffin Bay was. They think it's good now, and if we would just give it a little tender loving care, it could be fabulous, and like I say, more and more people, you don't see guides throwing out their big ice chest full of fish because people actually get mad about that and then they start telling their friends, "Don't mess with him. Don't mess with him," and even the tournaments, like the tournaments used, for like the Legend's Tournament, they used to run the tournament where you had to bring the fish in to weigh. Well, they keep them live. They have live wells, big live wells, at all these tournament trout fishermen, and they keep them alive, but a certain portion of them are going to die, for sure, because they get extra points if they're alive. Well, they finally figured out, now they have a new system, and I think it's just wonderful that Chad Peterek, who's running the Legend's Tournament, gets in there. They've got these scales now where all they do, when they catch a fish, they put it on that scale, and it evidently, Jen, has the time, the date, the weight, everything else and then they let the fish go right there, so that's really nice, and he would put as many fish in the iceboxes as he could too, but even he, Chad's changing. Everybody's changing. Well, I think the guides, Jay Watkins is a real good example. Jay Watkins, you know, he was a picture man, put up a big picture, show all the fish he could catch. Well, in the last three or four years, he's kind of got his cliental conditioned to where, we're going to go try to catch some fish, we're not going to load the ice chest, and you're going to have a good time, and I have to mention the guy that's really been fighting the fight is a guy named David Rowsey. He's a guide down here, and David has been trying to tell everybody to remember the buffalo forever, and it's finally taking hold. I think—and I'm a lure fisherman. I'll say it right up front. I don't—we don't use bait. I used to, I mean, when I used to fish a long time ago, but I haven't used bait in two or three decades. Anyway, I know everybody has a right to catch a fish however they want to catch it, but I think if they eliminated croaker fishing, for one thing, it would eliminate a lot of guides because there's a lot of people that fish, they're guides, part-time guides, whatever, and a trout just cannot resist a croaker. They're going to eat it, and we never had—people used to fish with shrimp all the time. We never had any big problems with the stock, you know, the trout stocking and our numbers or anything else. They always caught plenty of fish, but with croakers, they're catching bigger, more spawning fish, and more fish and on top of that, in the old days, those croaker that they're using for bait, if they didn't scratch them all up off the bottom and use them for bait would eventually turn into a croaker like that, you know, maybe sixteen, eighteen inches long. We used to catch them in the surf and people used to eat them (both laugh), but they aren't there anymore because they get them all out of the bay, so that would be one thing—if I had the power, I would eliminate croakers as a bait fish and put them back or put them to a sport fish where they couldn't use them because then their kids could catch them when they're a little bigger out in the surf or in the bays they used to be everywhere, and if they keep up, they'll eventually deplete that supply where there won't be any croakers because so many—we have only so many of any species and whenever people start attacking that species, like the buffalo, we can put them into extinction. I don't care what species it is, human beings included.

[Brown]: Anything else?

[Cooper]: Well, Jen, I mean, they're just stories. I think you kind of know where I'm coming from, and I think I'm very encouraged about the people behind us because they are extremely conservation minded, and that may be our salvation. Maybe you have to get rid of all of us old septuagenarians, but never did any of us take more fish than what we were going to feed our family. We didn't go fishing with a guide, put ten pounds of fillets in the freezer, and throw them out the next year because they were freezer burned, and a lot of people are doing that. I mean, we know that. I mean, people tell you, "Oh, I had to throw those ones I caught last year out," but there's hope, and I'm a very optimistic person.

[Brown]: Well, I think that's a great place to stop then (both laugh). Thank you. I'll turn this off.

(end of recording)