

# **Jim Fallon**

## **Beneath the Surface of San Diego: A History of Perspectives & Innovations At Depth**

**19 March 2014**

**Oral History Recorded by:  
Ashleigh Palinkas**

A: Hello. It is March 19th, 2014. I'm Ashleigh Palinkas. I'm sitting here with Jim Fallon and his lovely wife Judy. So Jim, are you from San Diego? Were you born here?

J: I wasn't born here but I moved here when I was 10 years old in 1951.

A: In '51?

J: Yeah.

A: And when was the first time, either here or elsewhere, that you wore a mask in the ocean?

J: It was here. I was, I have to think back. I would have been in junior high school. I was probably about 13. 12 or 13. And we used to go to Birdrock and dive for abalone. I went to PB junior high school, so I was a local beach boy.

A: Did you go to Point Loma high school?

J: No, Mission Bay.

A: And who were you diving with?

J: At that time, let's see, a guy Bill Curtis, Chuck [Grabowski], myself, Ted [Patchen], and that was about, and Randy Chapman. That was about it.

A: And this was just free diving?

J: Yes.

A: Did you have snorkels?

J: Yes. We wore navy sweaters that we would buy at the Navy surplus store down at Market or in PB, or in, I forget what it was. I've got to think about these things.

A: Yeah, take your time.

J: Anyway, we could get those black navy sweaters because we didn't have wetsuits

and they were cheap. We were kids. And got abalone, just shuck them on the beach, eat the meat, throw the shells back in the water and that was it.

A: Call it a day.

J: Yeah.

A: Aside from going down to get abalone, I mean, did you take the time to look around? Were you interested in just kind of seeing, looking at the fish and...?

J: Not at that time so much. At that time we were just on a mission to get abalone. Yeah. Later on got into spearfishing and got into photography and got into all the other things that went with that. When I started working at the Diving Locker in 1959 or '60 and I was the first employee that they had. Chuck Nicklin ran the store but then I was the first one that started working with him in the store. The first outside employee, I guess. And of course then it was the scientific diving consultants that owned the store. It was all the guys from Scripps, primarily.

A: So once you began diving regularly in San Diego, where did you dive the most often?

J: Depending what I was after. We'd dive primarily La Jolla along from Casa Cove south. We didn't really do too much at La Jolla Cove until later on. It was mostly at that time it was basically just going out for abalone and started spearfishing and then started going out off of the Cove and then when we started diving with aqua lungs we'd go off the shores out to the canyon edge and that wasn't spearfishing. Now you're talking about looking and that was photography and stuff and it was just going out and looking primarily. It was not shooting. We were shooting pictures and that's it.

A: Being curious.

J: Yeah.

A: Yeah. So what kind of animals did you see that most of? What were the most abundant in the early days?

J: Well, we didn't have the seal population we have now. We had a few seals and they stayed more on Seal Rock. Nothing in the Children's Pool or none of that area was covered with seals. And it seems there was a lot more baitfish around. And I'm trying to think. Yellowtail was quite prominent. White sea bass were always a prize. And halibut. But then when we started diving deep, off the Shores when they'd come in and lay their eggs you know, then the squid would come in and lay eggs and the halibut would follow it and then you didn't want to shoot them because they became more for taking pictures of and how they evolve, so times change. But that was, actually you know if you go back I think the first time I wore a mask in the water was down off of Pacific Beach Drive in PB. We used to go out and spear stingrays right into the surf line with big pole Spears. So I was probably, God, 11, I was

probably 11. 11 or 12. There was a Jack-in-the-Box there on the corner. We would just go out take long 10 foot 12 foot pole spears and spear them and stack them on the beach. It was just, there was no, it was just to kill. That's all it was.

A: They're not good eating or anything.

J: No they were just sting rays.

A: Reducing the risk of stepping on them, right?

J: Sure. But that is the first time I had a mask in the salt water. Because it was just in the surf line. You could almost stand on them. And that was the first time, the first time I had a mask on in the ocean.

A: Awesome.

J: I forget about it.

A: So you mentioned, you know, when you first began diving that there wasn't the seal population that there is now. I'm wondering if you noticed any other changes in your most regular dive sites over all of the years that you've been diving?

J: Well, abalone have really gotten scarce. The limit when I started diving was five. And it was never a challenge to do it. I can remember when old alligator head used to go across. One time Chuck Nicklin and I were on the beach, just laying on the beach on a sunny afternoon and we had a challenge to just go right out in the Cove right between it and Goldfish Point and stay inside that, closest to the beach, see who could get their limits first in that shallow, you know, it wasn't any deeper than eight feet, six feet probably. And they were there, you could do it. It wasn't easy, but it wasn't difficult either. Now I doubt if you find an abalone in there. We used to get them and put them back down. We weren't taking them, but it was just to see who could get five first.

A: Yeah. Right.

J: Now I said I doubt if you'd find any. Maybe you would that it's in a preserve now, maybe they are coming back.

A: Yeah, they are coming back. I've noticed some greens in the eelgrass off Marine Room, saw some big ones there and occasionally diving in the Cove I see a couple.

J: Though we used to have an area we called The Lot. It was north of Birdrock, north of, between Birdrock and you know the little cove that is north of Birdrock and just between that and South Windansea. There was a beach access. There is a little pie-shaped small lot and that was always prolific for abalone. Always. You would not have to go out more than six or eight feet of water. All eelgrass. And they were just prolific. I'd love to go out and look now, see if I could see anything there.

A: Is there still beach access there?

J: Yeah. There still is. It does have beach access but it's very small. Most people don't even know it's there. You almost walk into a person's backyard. I mean, it is a pie shape, just if you walk out here then you have to walk along the edge of a person's yard to go down on to the, to go out, but it was perfect.

A: So, I'm sure I can predict the answer, but what's the biggest fish that you've ever seen here in San Diego?

J: Black sea bass. And probably 370, 380, in that range.

Judy: Where was that whale shark?

Jim: Yeah, they were off here, we saw a whale shark, yeah.

Judy: We swam with that whale shark.

Jim: Yeah, off of La Jolla when they came, there was a school of them. Chuck McLean took a lot of pictures. George [Kuzmakof] was out there. We had a whole boatload.

A: What year was that about? Do you know?

Jim: That would've been in the early 60s. '62? I've got to think when I went to Australia the first time. Probably '62, '63.

A: Great.

J: Yeah that's the biggest I've ever seen out here.

A: Oh yeah. Did you ever, what about Sevengills? Did you see a lot of those and maybe notice those decline?

J: What?

A: Sevengill sharks?

J: No. I'm trying to think no, I can't even picture. I almost got eaten by a Dusky, round dusky off Coronado Islands one time. Harv Beales saved my life, God he yelled, we were off the tip of North Island and he yelled and I thought he'd landed a fish on the surface. I spun around and I put my fin right in this guy's mouth that was coming up to get me and all I can remember seeing is going away how big around he was. And he had been harassing divers there and so we went back over with Bob Shea, Chuck Nicklin, myself, Joe [Heron]. There had to be one more. I can't think if it was, can't think of who it was. And Bob Shea was a lieutenant in the lifeguards at that time. He ended up Captain of them. But when he saw that shark came he saw it and he was out of the water and into the boat so fast! And I had been

down in Australia before since then and I brought back a shark stick that had the shotgun shell that you put in it to, more defensive protection purposes than anything else, but they had that, a bunch of spear guns and all this and that shark when he saw the size of him, I mean it was a big shark. It was interesting. It didn't ever, it came up at me that time and Harvey saw it, I saw it going away. I didn't see it coming up. I just felt something hit my fin and turned and looked down and he was already going away.

A: Wow!

J: But it was a bad one.

A: Did you have any particular concerns about laws or regulations back then, that you either felt were too strict or not strict enough? Or nonexistent? I mean, hunting or access restrictions, safety, training requirements, anything?

J: No. Not really. It's funny, if you grow up here in San Diego, you grow up diving, you have everybody jump in the water at one time you might not see them till you got out of the water. The buddy system idea was not, I mean you'd go in with somebody and you'd look around try to stay somewhere in the proximity of them, but not that close, especially when you are spearfishing or something. You don't want to be real close. So it seems odd, I went down to Mexico when a guy was qualifying and I got chewed out by the instructor because I wasn't right in the guy's back pocket the whole time. I thought, whoa, this is different. But no, I, no.

A: You know the reserve was implemented...

J: That was good.

A: That was a good thing? You supported it?

J: You see the decline in, all along the caves there was always a beautiful area. It's always been beautiful. You would see juvenile white sea bass. You'd see a lot of juvenile fish in there. And it was always just a pretty area, and so when, the idea of implementing it was a good idea. I don't know if the whole idea of extending it up and down the coast is a good one. But I think you've got to protect the species. But you also have to let people go out and enjoy and do what they do. They've cut the limits back to you know, like diving for abalone and everything has changed tremendously. So and you have the fisheries that are growing them, didn't Dave Leighton still...no he quit that one a while back. He had a business up in Cayucos.

A: Doing abalone hatchery work?

J: Yeah.

A: Okay, so could you describe your perfectly ideal San Diego dream dive? You can do maybe one that you actually dove and then one that would be perfect that you still would like to dive, or wish you had.

J: I haven't been in the water here for other than body surfing in years. So I haven't looked at it in that way. When San Diego has 40 foot visibility or more, it's absolutely gorgeous. The kelp beds are gorgeous. I think they are my favorite area to go and snorkel in. Just to dive through there, you see so many fish of all kinds. The calicos, the señoritas, there's just, the opal eye, you see so much in the kelp forest. That's, I feel that's some of my prettiest memories and I'd like to see it again. I don't know. I just like to go and look and see. Now, the only place I dive is over in Hawaii where it's warm.

A: Right.

J: And so, and that's just going out and looking at turtles.

A: Is there anything you wish that you or other divers in San Diego had done differently, maybe as far as fishing or...?

J: No, not really.

A: Yeah.

J: No, other than like I said when I used to stack stingrays and stuff, most of the time divers are very conscientious of the environment. If you shoot a fish you are shooting it to eat, not just to stack it up. Other than when they used to have diving competitions and that was more going out for quantity. Although, the fish were given away to charities or whatever, to be used. It was really not, if you look back now you'd say that was not something that you should do.

A: Yeah.

J: And I guess that would be something I would change. But the idea of going out and getting a fish for food is not bad to me, whether, whatever it is.

A: I agree.

J: Usually if you do that you are looking for a big fish, not a little fish. So...

A: Sure.

J: You're letting the little ones grow up to be big fish.

A: Right, yeah. A lot of divers that I've spoken to and that I have read histories from, Jack's [Prodanovich] oral history along with many others, it was common for divers, or at least San Diegan divers, to advocate for, you know, "Why don't we judge it based on the three biggest fish, as opposed to the poundage of the bag?"

J: Yeah it was.

A: So that was a surprise to hear that that wasn't implemented considering so many people would've preferred that. Who knows.

J: Well, see, San Diego is just one of the small areas. We had, LA would come down, the people all the way from San Francisco would be down here for the dive meets because they'd all want to get away from there, I guess. And Catalina had a lot of dive meets. So we would go up to Monterey. They were all over the state.

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{Later conversation}

A: I keep hearing that Fiji is some of the best diving around.

J: Yeah. I was there, '61 or '62, going through. I spent a month on Suva, the main capital. I don't know. I spent a month there. A guy, Tony Chess - another diver - and I jumped ship and spent a month there living on the beach and moved in with the neighbor who brought us in because we could spear a lot of fish. Moved in and spent over Christmas there. On the beach. That was fun.

A: That's awesome! Sounds like fun.

J: I have a [inaudible] with me from way back when and a wedding dress from one of the girls and it was neat. It was very neat.

A: Cool. Okay. I have a few more questions if you don't mind.

J: Go ahead.

A: So I might jump around a little, but getting more to the technological side, what gear developments were the most influential in your diving experience overall?

J: When I first started working at Diving Locker we have a lot of regulator overhauls. Tons of them. And the AquaLung of course was the one that everybody had then. But the single hose regulator, Health Ways actually brought the first one that I saw out and ScubaPro branched off after them. And that was a big change. It made it a lot easier for everybody, the maintenance. Photography has gone just, the first cases with a big old Rolex submarine, submariner cases, those great big green things that had the [role o flex] cameras in them. God. And now the camera, everything is just, the little Go Pro in your hand goes everywhere. Of course wetsuits were, opened it up to everybody and I've never had a dry suit. But wetsuits opened it up, give everybody a chance to go in the water at all times. And I don't know, those are probably about the main that ones I can think of. The camera---

Judy: Didn't you actually make them?

Jim: We made wetsuits, yeah. Yeah. That's how I started. Working at Diving Locker, going to help seal wetsuits.

A: I'm interested in your opinion about the Go Pro and how it's essentially enabling--

J: Anybody to do it anywhere.

A: Anybody to go out and be an amateur photographer. Do you think that that's a good thing?

J: Yeah.

A: Do you think that will lead to more people being more conservation minded? Or it might compromise "artistic integrity"?

J: I don't think it has anything to do with conservation. Think it just allows everyone to share their, whatever it is, skiing, surfing, diving, jumping out of airplanes. It gives you to share with the world what you are doing and why you're doing it. What you see. What is the attraction. So I don't, I don't think it's neither good nor bad. It's just a great thing. I guess it is good. I guess I would have to change my mind. It's a good thing. That's what photography is all about anyway. And it's not, you know...professional photographers - which I've never been - they see the picture in their mind. They know how to frame things, how to, where the subject and everything should be. And that is an art. But the Go Pro is like me, I take snapshots. I am a snapshot photographer, not one that sees the picture.

A: Yeah, me too. Now, as I said, more jumping around a little bit. Did you ever think of ways...I have to ask because I'm a scientific diver: did you ever think of ways that diving could be used for science? Were you ever during a dive thinking, "Huh, I wonder why that is doing that, or..."?

J: I used to do a lot of stuff off of Scripps Pier with, we put down grid squares and measured to take everything in there and the guys, God, the little guy I used to work with there, and did some diving in the Great Lakes following cables across, you know, but it was business diving. You know, any time you're diving you're so aware of what is out there and it is always awe-inspiring. Even when you are diving at the Caymans and you saw the whole school of squid, baby baby squid, tons of those big, they are just spectacular. And it's stuff...you always...

Judy: 10 gazillion eyeballs coming at you.

A: That's so cool.

Judy: It was! It was no neat.

Jim: So yeah, I think it's always in the back of your mind but it's not anything you work at. Meter squares, but who in the hell was the guy's name? He worked at Scripps, he ended up going to Australia. He and his wife lived over in Broome. God. He was like, Jimmy Stewart, had that position there.



A: Is he still there?

J: Oh gosh, no. He's been dead for probably 12 years.

A: Koala?

J: No, I know Bob Koala. He last worked up at Monterey.

A: Yes. I wonder if I can find it in my notes here, I have so many names written down.

J: Barbara can, did you talk to Barbara Allen?

A: I am meeting with her on Friday.

J: She can get you in touch with Koalas probably, if he's still around. She's got a book that thick with everybody in the world. She knows everybody.

A: Yeah. I suspect, she actually was the one who put me in touch with Frank Leinhaupel, who just gave me wonderful stuff.

Judy: You're going to have a great time with her.

A: I foresee me working pretty closely with her moving forward.

Jim: She knows tons. She is quite a lady.

A: Yeah.

Judy: I love Barbara.

A: Okay, then my last question is: any close calls? What was probably the scariest...

Jim: That was the closest, was over on Coronado Island with the shark. That was the closest. Skin diving off of [Punda Bunda] way back I got a pinched nerve in my ear and the only thing that, the only reason I am here now is I hit bottom and I found where bottom was and I just pushed straight up and broke the surface and got it out. But I have tinnitus. I've always had it since then, from it. But that was the scariest, because you just lost all equilibrium and I was just free diving. And we were after lobster. That's the other thing that has gone down as far as the numbers is lobster.

A: Sure.

J: Lobster used to be easy to get. But now, but anyway that was the only other one that was close. Where it was bad.

A: If you could pick, let's say five of your favorite dive buddies, is that even possible?

J: No, George is, too bad George isn't around. He's over on Molokai, but he and I have always been, since high school very close. Lived together for a short period of time when I got divorced and all. He's easily one of the best because you can jump in the water and forget about him, go off and he's, there's no fear or worries.

A: Yeah.

J: And I always enjoy diving with Chuck [Nicklin]. We did an awful lot of diving together. Those would be the two main ones. That is about the two that I really...

Judy: Did you dive with Dallas?

Jim: Very little. Dallas was more surfing, he was more of a surfer.

A: Did you and Chuck [Nicklin] both kind of get into photography at the same time?

J: Yeah, Ron Church was the one, Ron was the photographer and he set up in the back of, the old Diving Locker that was first set up by the scientific diving consultants was up on Cass Street and in the back we had built a darkroom and Ron had his darkroom back there. And that's who really got Chuck going into it. Lamar Boren is who got Ron Church going into it. And so I, I was in the Underwater Photographic Society here [in San Diego] and I had a, I was vice president or something for a short time, but I was never, I just drifted around in all kinds of stuff. I never was too serious about anything.

A: Yeah.

J: And so love taking pictures. I've got some that I took that I just like, but it was not really my main focus. Like I said, I'm a snapshot photographer. I'm not, did some deep dives with Ron doing gorgonians off of, in the South Canyon there. I found the first really rocks in the South Canyon way back at about 160 feet we found this whole pile of rocks kind of, gosh, Raul Garcia and I.

Judy: What about that old Indian village out there? Did you guys discover that?

Jim: No, no. That was always there.

Judy: What about "Fallon's"....

Jim: That was the rocks. I'm talking about the deep rocks in the South Canyon. The North Canyon always had those rock walls that were beautiful but the South was the mud Canyon and about 160 feet I found this area in the market and people start going back and it was rock. There's a rock Canyon there and it was the deepest, the first time when I found it and started diving it, a guy Raul Garcia and I went down and it was 160, the first time I ever know that I was aware that nitrous narcosis

because both of us saw this big shark, big shark at that depth. We remember looking at it watching it go by and never thinking about it ever again. Never crossing our minds and we talked about it after we got up we said, geez, why didn't we watch and see because it could've turned around and come back. We saw this thing. It was a big beautiful guy, he cruised right on by.

A: A white shark you think?

J: It had to be something like that because it was that big. It was just big. But never crossed our minds again. We kept on looking at whatever we were looking at and we were not collecting anything. We were not shooting anything, we were just diving. And, but it was the funniest thing and I ran into him, I don't know 10 or 15 years ago at the Del Mar Fairgrounds, I went to a gun show there and he was there and we started talking and we were laughing about that, that we saw it go by and it never crossed our mind again. Never, you think if you see something that big you'd be worried about it, but we weren't. That was when you know you have nitrogen narcosis because you'd think because you were just well, there's a shark, tough.

A: That's great. That's a great story! So, were there a lot, are there a lot of animals on the rocks in the South Canyon?

J: There's a lot more, it's pretty there. Had all kinds of corals and gorgonians and just, it was just much prettier because there was so much life there.

A: Right.

J: Of course we didn't have anything to light it up or see the colors or what it was. You just go down there and everything loses its color. It was just very really interesting because big rocks, a big rock area.

A: Cool!

J: And I never, I came up and had the bearings on it, and I don't know if it was Jimmy or -- I can't, a guy with a B, was it? Who ran the Diving Locker before Jimmy? Was it Batzloff? Was that his name?

A: He ran the diving locker before?

J: Before Jimmy did, Stewart. It was, I want to say Batzloff was the guy's name, but it was something like that. And his son.

A: Conrad Limbaugh?

J: No, Connie was there too. Connie was there.

A: At the same time.

J: Yeah. Connie was also a student.

A: He was studying and diving. Right.

J: And then, gosh, I can't think of it. I want to say Batzloff was the guy's name.

A: That does sound very familiar. It's going to drive me nuts.

J: Well I don't know, he was much of a diver too, anyway I knew his son, too. I knew right where he lived in PB.

A: Would it have been Bill Batzloff?

J: I think so.

A: That's got to be it. Bill Batzloff!

J: What did he do?

A: He was a Bottom Scratcher and ran the dive locker. The SIO dive locker as principal lab...

J: Yeah, okay that's him, that's...

A: Mechanic.

J: I think I told him where the coordinates of it. So then they went out and started diving on it.

A: That's so crazy. I turned to the exact page of my notes that it was written on.

{laughter}

J: I know where he is, where he did live.

A: Yeah, that's from my notes on Jimmy Stewart's oral history that was recorded in 2001.

J: Batzloff, good! Now if I could remember the little guy's name that I used to dive with off the pier all the time that was at Scripps.

A: Well I have another name, Al Stover.

J: That's him, Al Stover! That's him, yes, Al. God, I couldn't -- I used to do, we dropped meter squares down and all around and would go, anything in there we would...Al Stover, good for you. I, God.

A: I've done some research.

J: Glad to know that. I forgot his name, but he and his wife moved to Australia. And, gosh. Boy, good. I can picture him, but I could not put a name to him.

A: It's horrible when you just can't quite grab it!

J: But I spent a long time...

A: Yeah. I mean this is like a whole notebook full of chicken scratch and it was just, I can't believe I opened it to the right page.

{laughter}

J: [Inaudible]

A: Funny. Great. Well I think this is wonderful.

J: Good.

A: You know, all the stories are exactly what I'm interested in and looking for. So, Frank [Leinhaupel] had invited me to a get together at the 300 block, you know, they meet up on Wednesdays in the summer time for picnics. So my boyfriend and I went and we were all excited and we got there and it was just Frank and Suzy because---

J: Usually there's more but everybody's getting old.

A: They're pushing it back to starting later in April when it gets a lot warmer. The south wind had kicked up so bad that afternoon so the four of us just ended up going back to Frank and Suzy's and shared the beer and snacks we brought and had a really great time.

J: Barbara will tell you when the start of summer party is and I think it's coming up.

Judy: You'll get all kinds of people.

A: The transcriptions, what ends up being archived at the Maritime Museum for this year might not cover it all, but I want to continue...

Jim: Yeah but at least it's---

A: It's recorded forever and it can be finalized later.

J: It's on paper, it's down at least it's there---

A: Exactly. That's the main point of the project.

J: Somebody else can go back and do it if they have to. Yeah, that's good.

A: In 40 years someone can be interviewing me. And she can be in charge of it all.

J: That's right you can give her your notes and say, here, make something of this.

Judy: Good, a worthwhile project. That's great.

A: Yeah, I mean it's important to me as being, I'm a third-generation San Diegan, so I really wanted to do something that...

Jim: So is she, aren't you third or second?

Judy: Yeah. Well this job you are doing, it must be, after a long time working on this you feel like you know some of these people.

A: Oh, sure.

Judy: And working with a lot of phantoms, too, people that are gone. And it's kind of neat. You're really doing an interesting thing.

A: Good, thank you so much. Because it's too late to change the focus of my project. So it's good to know.

{laughter}

Jim: [Inaudible] here tape this and...

A: And Barbara [Allen] sounded enthusiastic.

Jim: Barbara knows everybody in the world. So, at some point, I mean if you need any name or phone number or address, she's got them all. She has, she's a wealth of knowledge.

Judy: You're doing great. I'm anxious for you to meet her. You will really enjoy her.