

Bob Spaeth: In case you guys don't know me, I'm a commercial fisherman. I was born and raised in Madeira Beach, which is a fishing village. I was born in 1947. I started fishing around 1960. I did charter boats and some sportfishing. I did the headboats, which fifty or sixty people go out. I did that, and then I went commercial fishing. We would stay out for about two weeks at a time. That's basically my background.

Interviewer: So you were basically in the fishing village, where fishing was kind of traditional?

Bob Spaeth: Yes, on the beaches, when we were grew up here, before it became all condos, it was a fishing village. We had small cottages, just like you would imagine back fifty years ago. That's what Madeira Beach looked like. It didn't have condos or lots of hotels. It was a single-lane road, and we had a one-lane bridge. The basic occupation out there was either you were in the restaurant and tourist business or you were a fisherman. That was the only things that were really going on back in those days.

Interviewer: Have you ever noticed anything in Tampa Bay of any differences over the years?

Bob Spaeth: Yes, there is a tremendous change. When I was a young boy, it was beautiful and pristine. Then, through the years, the bays got polluted and the fisheries diminished. Part of the reason for that, or one of the biggest reasons, is that 92 percent of all the fish are estuary-dependent. That means they start in the bay. As we have developed our area over the years, Tampa Bay has lost 77 percent of their wetlands, and so you can imagine the effect that had. Then, if you add the pollution on top of that, we have a problem.

Then regulators came in the past few years, the past ten years, and the water quality is decreasing. We used to have lots of scallops. I used to scallop in this bay and get washtubs full of scallops, and then they went away. I don't think you could find five scallops there today. Just recently, there has been a rejuvenation where they're starting to come back. I think it's about regulations and people watching the environment.

Interviewer: If you had the power to fix the bay, what would you mostly fix?

Bob Spaeth: The runoff. I think runoff is the biggest thing. When you have the oil on the roads and everything else, the fertilizers that you make the grass grow, the phosphorous, I think those are the things that we need to work on. There are some things you can't stop, but the things that we can control, we should work on.

Interviewer: Did you ever have times where you wanted to yell at another fisherman for doing something wrong, like maybe polluting the ocean or something?

Bob Spaeth: Yes, and I'll tell you what. That's a good question. In the days when I grew up, we were a strong fishing community, and there weren't a lot of regulations, but we used to self-regulate. If you would prefer an example, you would be out fishing and you would have different sizes of grouper. Small grouper that haven't had babies yet and everything, you throw that back in the water. There would be fishermen that didn't care and would take everything they could catch. When they came to the dock, everybody would look at them and call them a baby-killers of those little baby fish.

You would be ostracized for breaking the law and throwing your garbage. We didn't like that, because it's hurting all of us. Hopefully, through the years, we've been able to get rid of those people in the industry.

Interviewer: I am guessing that the reason you started fishing had something to do with your community and family?

Bob Spaeth: The reason I started fishing was I just love to catch fish. I saw fish, and I wanted to chase them. My dad came from Germany and saw Ellis Island. His hobby was fishing, and he had a charter boat. He would take me on the boat, and that's where I started learning. Then, after I went to college, I went back to commercial fishing.

Interviewer: What was the best fishing trip you had with your father?

Bob Spaeth: The best fishing trip I had with my father was king fishing. We went out and caught eighty head of kingfish in about four hours. They were just jumping in the boat, and we had a great time.

Interviewer: What do you enjoy about fishing?

Bob Spaeth: Catching them.

Interviewer: Where is your favorite fishing spot?

Bob Spaeth: I am not telling you. No, that's a good question. There are a lot of fishing spots. Today, with all the electronics -- When I was a kid, it was called dead-reckoning. You figured, I've got to go north for an hour-and-a-half and see how deep the water was and kind of figure out where I was at and then look for my spot. Today, you put it in your computer and then it drives you right to the spot and tells you where to stop.

Interviewer: What are some of the changes in fishing techniques over the past few years?

Bob Spaeth: Growing up, we used vertical line, rod and reels, and then we had what's called a bandit, which is a power-assisted reel that hangs off the boat. Then some people came from New England, and they had a fishery where they longlined, which is you take a line and you put it out a couple of miles and then they stick hooks on the line.

Some people from New England came over here, and we had a real bad fishing year for swordfish. They had longlined on the bottom for tilefish in New England, and so they came over here and put this line down on the bottom, and he came into the dock with 10,000 pounds of fish. After everybody on the dock saw that, he went out and did it again.

Then we saw that, and then everybody said, well, we're going to do that, and it created a whole new industry, which today lands probably 70 percent of the grouper that you get in the marketplace, where it was the other way around. It was like 90 percent was caught with the regular lines. Today, it's been a complete change. It's more efficient, longlining, but there is some drawbacks to it.

Interviewer: Have you fished other than Tampa Bay?

Bob Spaeth: Yes, I have fished in Nicaragua, and I have fished in Panama. I tried that about ten years ago. I took a boat down there, and it's a lot different.

Interviewer: What do you enjoy most about fishing?

Bob Spaeth: I think being next to nature. I think it takes a special breed to be a commercial fisherman like we were, to go out and live on a boat for fourteen days. That's a long time. These boats don't have air conditioning and you've got a couple of bunks and a sleeping bag. It's almost like you're in the service. There are very few showers. You take a bucket or a gallon of water and put it over your head, and you're out there for two weeks.

The parallel I draw is take your shed out back, where you keep your lawnmower and everything in there, and three of you guys go live in there for two weeks. Then you go to work and then go back in. If you saw the boat, that's how it is. There's no newspapers. You take it all with you when you go.

Interviewer: When you're on the boat for fourteen days, do you get sick a lot?

Bob Spaeth: No. Seasickness, I have had a lot of people go with me that got seasick. Occasionally, they got so sick that I had to bring them back home, but usually they can get over it after a while, but it gets rough out there. A person that hasn't been fishing, one of the first questions, if he were going to work for me, I would say, do you get seasick? If they said no, and then they get on a boat and on the way out they get seasick, but that's been a problem with keeping crews, is keeping them healthy and making sure that you don't get a guy that gets real seasick, because you need everybody.

Interviewer: Do you still fish today?

Bob Spaeth: Yes, but not for fourteen days. I go out for two at a time.

Interviewer: Do you usually go deep-sea or just a few miles out?

Bob Spaeth: My favorite fishing is grouper bottom fishing. I really like snappers and amberjack.

Interviewer: Do you use any certain type of reel and pole?

Bob Spaeth: I use a 4/0 with a grouper pole on it, and that works well for me. I use a sixty-pound-test line and a six-ounce lead.

You have to use circle hooks now for bottom fishing, because it's a regulation, and the reason they use circle hooks is if they catch the fish in the mouth more times than a j-hook, and a j-hook is like the regular hook that you see. They swallow it, and it gets down in there. When you try to get it out, if it's a small fish and you're going to throw it back, you kill it. They came out with a regulation that you have to use circle hooks to reduce the mortality.

Interviewer: What is your favorite fish?

Bob Spaeth: Grouper.

Interviewer: From all the crew members on your boat, which one was your favorite or the most memorable?

Bob Spaeth: I had a guy that had a motorcycle accident and he had no legs, and he came down the dock on his stumps. He asked me for a job. This guy walks on the boat and pulls himself down into the fish box and starts shoveling ice. This guy was as good a crew member as I ever saw. It was amazing.

Interviewer: Is there any particular fish that you dislike?

Bob Spaeth: Great whites.

Interviewer: Because they eat the fish?

Bob Spaeth: First of all, you can't keep them, because they're a protected species, and I have had them come up and eat a 400-pound fish. You've got a big fish coming up, and all of a sudden here comes a great white. We have caught a lot of sharks out there. I was a shark fisherman for a long time.

Interviewer: What is the biggest fish you caught?

Bob Spaeth: On a rod and reel, 500 pounds or 550. That was a goliath grouper, and I had a fish on that we never got, but it came up beside the boat, and it had to be twelve or fifteen feet long. It was either a mako or a great white. I couldn't tell, but we were pulling the fish in, and the fish came up and grabbed a thirty-pound grouper. I have also had sharks come up and bite the boat.

Interviewer: What is the longest fishing trip you took?

Bob Spaeth: About fourteen days, except when I went down to Nicaragua. That was twenty-one days. That's a long time.

Interviewer: What kind of sharks did you catch?

Bob Spaeth: We used to target sandbars, but we would catch whitetip and blacktip. With shark fishing, there are so many species. Being a fisherman now, you've got to know so much. I have to identify these different sharks, because you can't keep this one because it's protected and you have to throw it back. If you don't know it and you come to the dock and the officers catch you, it's a huge, huge fine.

Interviewer: Have you ever experienced any rogue waves?

Bob Spaeth: Yes. When you've been fishing as long as I have, you're going to see more than one. We were running along one night, and we were going through the waves. What happens is somehow this big wave will get going the opposite of the other, and it came through and it slapped the side of the boat and knocked the windows out. You have them occasionally, I would say maybe four or five in my lifetime.

Interviewer: Do you usually fish out here?

Bob Spaeth: Yes, I have always fished in the Gulf, I would say 99 percent, and mostly right off of here, between Key West and Panama City, up to 150 miles.

Interviewer: Have you ever seen a great white out there?

Bob Spaeth: Yes. I was sword fishing for part of my life, and that's where we caught a lot of them. The only way you can tell a great white from a mako shark is its teeth. The teeth of the mako look exactly the same, a mako and a great white, but a mako will be like a regular knife, a solid blade. A great white is serrated, like one of your serrated knives. Look at its teeth. If it's serrated, the next thing you do is you go to his pectoral fin. You lift it up. If it has a black spot right here, that's a great white. Then a mako won't have the spot, and it will have teeth that are like a regular knife.

Interviewer: Do you have a boat right now?

Bob Spaeth: Yes.

Interviewer: What type of a boat?

Bob Spaeth: I've got a sixty-five-foot and I've got two thirty-four-foot boats.

Interviewer: Do you have any outboard motors?

Bob Spaeth: I have a crab boat with an outboard motor on it to stone crab. That's an inshore fishery. That's another different fishery. I did it all growing up.

Interviewer: What is your favorite part of going out there and just catching a fish?

Bob Spaeth: I think working hard all day and then finally getting all the fish and catching the fish and having them in the box and being successful that day. The sun is setting and the water is slick calm. It's amazing.

Interviewer: How many years did you fish?

Bob Spaeth: My dad started me at seven, I remember, seven years old. One thing you've got to remember is back then, which you will never see, is there was no regulations. You would go out there and catch fish and you could bring them in. You could sell them to anybody you wanted and do anything you wanted. Today, the big difference is you cannot get a piece of grouper in the State of Florida, or anywhere, unless it's caught by a commercial fisherman, because commercial fishermen, by law, because of the regulations and the counting of the fish, are the only ones that are allowed to sell to the market.

A commercial fisherman actually works for the consumer, the people that buy those fish. We are the only access that they have to get that fish. Your mom and dad can't get a piece of grouper unless they go to the store, or they could go fishing, if they had a boat and a motor and all the money to do it, and come back in and give your fish away and eat it, but that's the only other way you can get a fish. It's kind of strange, but you've got to buy them.

Interviewer: Do you agree with the grouper law?

Bob Spaeth: No, and I'm here with NMFS, but I think that they have some serious problems in the stock assessments of how many -- They try to tell you how many fish are in the water with a crystal ball, and they have all these computer models. What has happened over the years is that the computer models are not the same as what the fishermen are seeing in the water, both recreational and commercial.

I think that they've overregulated trying to be conservative and not wanting to destroy the stocks, but, on that hand, they have destroyed a lot of our jobs, and I think they could do a better job of the science. We just got \$10 million to try to update some stock assessments.

Interviewer: In all of your years of fishing, did anything interesting happen?

Bob Spaeth: We were on the way in one night, and commercial fishing is the second-most dangerous occupation, coal mining being the first. It's gotten better now, but we were coming in during the middle of the night. I was driving the boat, and the mate went up to take down the antennas or do something on the roof. Ten or fifteen minutes later, I went, hey, where are you at? He fell overboard in the night.

All of a sudden, you're running and you've got no lights or anything. I turned around, and I went back to where -- I was just guessing. I didn't know whether I was going to find him. I was scared to death. I turned off the boat, and I could hear him hollering, and I found him. I have almost sunk a couple of times with water on the boat. Things like that happen.

Interviewer: Did anyone give you nicknames?

Bob Spaeth: My nickname was Rotten Robert.

Interviewer: Have you gotten any injuries while fishing?

Bob Spaeth: Yes. I've put hooks through my hand. The worst one was I was in Nicaragua, and I had a circle hook. I was walking around barefoot, which you're not supposed to do, and I kicked the hook and it went through. We were sixty miles off of Nicaragua, and the closest thing you could get in a day-and-a-half would be a veterinarian. They didn't have any hospitals, and so I had to cut the hook out of my foot.

That was the worst injury I had.

Interviewer: What do you think you would do if you weren't fishing?

Bob Spaeth: Selling them. I love fish. I would do something with fish.

Interviewer: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Bob Spaeth: I have two brothers and a sister. My one older brother, he liked fishing. My sister, she didn't, and my other brother didn't. My son is a fisherman.

Interviewer: Has it been difficult to make a profit in fishing?

Bob Spaeth: Yes. It was a struggle for years. Most of the fishermen, it's a tough life. As the years have gone on and with new programs, the price of fish has come up and demand. Back then, there wasn't a big demand for the fish. Today, it's different. We're making more money today than we ever did in the past, and that's a good thing.

Interviewer: If you could go anywhere in the world fishing, where would you fish?

Bob Spaeth: I think South America. I think there are a lot of species down there, on the Atlantic side.

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