

Florida Institute for Saltwater Heritage April 10, 1993

Calvin Bell Oral History Vanishing Cultures Project Funded in part by the Florida Humanities Council

Interviewers: Michael Jepson/Wayne Nield

I 1: Calvin, we start these interviews by asking for your full name and date of birth.

R: Calvin Edison Bell, November 14, '29.

I 1: What was your father's name?

R: Aaron Park Bell.

I 1: And your mother's name?

R: Jessie Blanche.

I 1: What was her maiden name?

R: Fulford.

I 1: What was your father's occupation?

R: Commercial fisherman. And he got in the fish business.

I 1: Was he born here in Cortez?

R: North Carolina.

I 1: When did he move to Cortez?

R: You've got me. I don't know when he come down here.

I 1: Tell me a little bit about your father, what kind of a man was he? Was he a good fisherman?

R: Yeah. He was one of the best. Caught a lot of fish.

I 1: What type of fishing did he do?

R: All kinds. Mackerel fished, mullet fished, seine fished, somethin' of all of it.

I 1: Did you ever fish with him?

R: Yep.

I 1: What type of fishing did you do with him?

R: Like I say, we done some of all of it. Stop-net, haul- seine, mackerel fished.

I 1: Where did you live? What was the first house that you lived in that you remember in Cortez?

R: Right where we're at now. On the corner.

I 1: Can you tell me about that house?

R: It's just like it's always been right now.

I 1: How many rooms are in it?

R: Two baths, one, two, three, four bedrooms. Kitchen, dinin' room, livin' room.

I 1: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

R: Five brothers, one sister.

I 1: What are your brothers' names?

R: Warren Aaron is the oldest one. Walter, Jessie Nathaniel, me, Chester, Eddie, Doug.

I 1: Now, have you ever been married?

R: No.

I 1: Tell me about what Cortez was like when you were a child. What do you remember about growing up here as a child?

R: Wasn't no seawalls or nothin' around. A lot of flats, lot of ditches. Wasn't nothin' covered over. Pretty well like it is right now.

I 1: What was the waterfront like?

R: Well, like I said there wasn't no seawalls along there. Just all marsh and flats.

I 1: What fish houses were there?

R: There was a bunch of 'em along the shoreline. Old Man Green had one. Jess Williams had one. Gus MacDonald had one. Fulford.

I 1: And your father had one.

R: We rented to start with then we converted a net camp over and made one when he started.

I 1: Where was the fish house that you rented?

R: The one by where the Coast Guard dock is now. They tore it down. It's about in the same spot.

I 1: What was the name?

R: I think it was Green's. Old Man Joe Guthrie had it when we rented it. I think my Dad and Green was in the fish business together. Then they went broke and then he started up again.

I 1: Was that Woodrow Green?

R: No, his Dad I think.

I 1: So then he took a net camp and converted that to a fish house.

R: My Dad did.

I 1: He brought that in?

R: That was between Star and our place there now.

I 1: Did you work at that fish house when you were growing up?

R: Yeah, we all did. We'd catch the fish and bring 'em in and pack 'em and load 'em on the truck. We done some of all of it. Then I worked there for a couple of years.

I 1: When you say you worked there, what do you mean?

R: I quit fishin' and just worked there, strictly packed fish. And my brother Chester, he took over and he wanted to in on his own so he quit and bought ... him and Capo went in business together. So then Walter, he took over. Buster and I fished. All worked together.

I 1: What was your first recollection of fishing? How old were you when you first got on a boat?

R: As soon as my Mother would let me go. I was about 10 years old.

I 1: Did your father want to get you out there as soon as he could?

R: Not really. He would take us all the time.

I 1: Did you want to go?

R: Yeah. I was anxious to go. Get out there and see what it was all about.

I 1: Tell us a little bit about the different styles of fishing in those days. It's not quite the same as it is today.

R: We had all cotton nets. Didn't have no hydraulic power. Mostly all by hand. All the nets had to be limed, spread on racks, dried. Did that about every day, every night.

I 1: Was it hard work?

R: Pretty much. We didn't mind it though. We were used to it. Had good help. Had about five or six men to a crew.

I 1: Tell me something about stop-netting. How do you stop- net and what's involved?

R: Take in a shoreline where it's pretty much shallow and we had what we called some deeper net and we'd run the net off the back of the reef and when the tide goes down those fish are forced out into the deep water and you seine it out.

I 1: So a stop net is sort of like a seine?

R: About the same thing. You'd let it sit from the high tide till the low tide and settle those fish.

I 1: So rather than hauling the fish in, you let the tide do the work for you. The tide brings the fish out into the net.

R: Forces 'em right down into maybe a five or six hundred yard hole.

I 1: How would you ... there's a process involved in getting the net out there. You had to haul that seine in a lot of different boats right?

R: Had a lot of different boats to put your shallow net on. It didn't take too much for you to seine net, just three or four hundred yards and you could work those fish down in shallow nets then have little deeper nets for the seine.

I 1: You called it the shoel net?

R: Shallow net.

I 1: So how many people were on a stop-net crew?

R: We'd use anywhere from three to a dozen. A lot of times two crews worked together and they'd have five or six men apiece. Catch a lot fish, use a lot of help.

I 1: How would you find a place to put the net and what was involved in trying to choose where you would place a net?

R: A lot of times we'd go look for the fish. You could see 'em jumpin'. But a lot of times we just caught fish there so much that we'd go right back there on each set of tides. From one tide to the next. Usually about every two weeks. You could pretty well catch about the same kind of fish each time.

I 1: Kind of like clockwork?

R: Yeah. A lot of times you wouldn't even look for fish, just go and set that net.

I 1: Someone told me that there was a procedure or ... if you wanted to stop a certain place like a little island or something, that there was a certain procedure that you had to follow. Can you tell me what that procedure was?

R: Just kind of a gentleman's agreement. You'd put a skiff out. Just an agreement among a bunch of fishermen. Put that boat out when you wanted to stop that place. It was your privilege up until that high water. And if you wasn't there at high tide, well the next guy could take it.

I 1: How long would stop-net crews be out for? Would you go out every day or every night?

R: When the tide was right pretty much every night. The tide and the weather. Pretty much every night. Usually about five or six tides to a set of tides.

I 1: Did you do gill-netting also when you were young?

R: Not a whole lot. Always caught a whole lot more fish with a stop net than ya did with a gill net.

I 1: So as a crew member you were hoping to get on a good stop-net crew because you would make more money?

R: Yeah.

I 1: Would you try to fish with a particular fisherman? Did you have any choice in who you could fish for?

R: When I was comin' up?

I 1: Yes.

R: I just started out with my Dad and my brothers and we all worked together. Then I finally got a boat of my own. When I was 16 years old I was workin' for myself, runnin' a crew.

I 1: What was the boat you had of your own?

R: J.G. My Dad had an old boat named the Deuce and I finally got the Wayne.

I 1: So the J.G. was a launch.

R: It was a launch, yes.

I 1: And then you had ... did you pull several skiffs with that?

R: Yeah, about probably 8 or 10 skiffs.

I 1: That's a lot of net. How long was all that net strung out together?

R: About five miles.

I 1: Really?

R: Nah. That's the reason you settle them down in a certain area.

I 1: Did you ever have any way other than by hand to haul those nets?

R: We finally rigged up a winch about the same as a wrecker. Just a regular winch with an air-cooled motor, transmission and a winch. A nigger-head is what we called it.

I 1: And then you'd wrap part of the net. You'd have what, a piece of rope coming from the net that you would wrap around that part of the winch?

R: About 100 yards of rope. Laid it off, tied into the net and winch it in.

I 1: That boat that had the motor on it, you had a term for that too didn't you?

R: Donkey boat.

I 1: Why did they call them donkey boats?

R: Same thing they used on a farm I guess. Had a donkey to pull the plow.

I 1: Did they ever use donkeys or mules to pull the nets in?

R: I guess they did before my time.

I 1: But you don't remember that.

R: No, I don't remember that.

I 1: You never used donkeys or mules on the beach when you were haul-seining or anything like

that?

R: We never did. In Carolina they did I think.

I 1: Did you ever visit North Carolina?

R: Yeah. Was up there quite a few times. I never did do no fishin' up there.

I 1: So the J.G. was your first launch and you had a crew of your own. Who were some of the people in your crew?

R: Oh, James Capo. It's been so long ago I've about forgot now. All of us boys worked together. Junie Mora and I worked together when I first started.

I 1: Was there a lot of competition between captains and crews?

R: Not too much. We pretty well worked together, everybody. Helped one another pretty much. Somebody'd strike a bunch of fish and all the crews would work together to catch 'em. Not like it is now. Hog eat hog.

I 1: You saw a lot more cooperation when you were younger between the fishermen?

R: Yeah. We all worked together. We'd make a seine haul, take in 20,000 fish, all the people that were there would help catch 'em. And everybody'd share. Today they've got gill nets and each fella wants to do his own thing.

I 1: That was probably a nightmare for the bookkeepers wasn't it? Trying to split up between all those guys?

R: Yeah, it was. Sometimes it took a day to figure a catch.

I 1: Let's walk around here. I want to walk over by some of these other boats because you've got quite a collection of older boats here.

R: Got a lot of relics.

I 1: Were a lot of them built here in Cortez?

R: They was all built here pretty much.

I 1: You've donated a donkey boat to the Institute. Can you tell me a little bit about the history of that boat that we have down there at Fulford's now?

R: That boat belonged to Charlie Guthrie. He fished it till he retired and Dan Mora got it and he fished it until he started shrimpin'. Then Walter got it and he fished it till he went to work the fish

house. Then I got it and fished it on out.

I 1: That boat was built by Neary Taylor in the '30s right?

R: It's about 60 years old. Old man Neary Taylor built it.

I 1: Did he build it for Charlie Guthrie?

R: Built it for Charlie, right.

I 1: Let's come over here and tell me a little bit about these boats we're looking at under the shed here. This first boat, the gray one on the trailer. Does this boat have a name?

R: The name of it's the Varmint. Neary Taylor's son built it. Little Neary Taylor.

I 1: Neary, Jr. built this?

R: I think it was Junior. All I know is it was Little Neary Taylor, that's what they called him.

I 1: What type of boat would you call this?

R: We called 'em just little scooters.

I 1: Could you tell us how it's laid out, where the engine is and what type of a ...

R: It's got just a little six cylinder Chevrolet in it pretty well forward.

I 1: Built into the boat and the shaft goes through the bottom?

R: Right. Just a regular inboard. There's a bed in there that the motor sits on.

I 1: And this boat would be used for what type of fishing?

R: We used it for towin' out net boats around. Shallow draft it and get up on the flat with it. Only drove about 10, 12 inches of water.

I 1: What about this next boat? This white one.

R: That's another Taylor boat. Neary's brother built that, Leo Taylor. Used for the same purpose. Towin' nets out. Used it for a tug boat just to drag scows around with.

I 2: Were these built down there where Alcee lives now?

R: I don't know if you saw that old shed we tore down there. Did you see that?

I 2: I've seen a picture of it.

R: That's where that one was built. Right there. Right in front of the fish house. I don't think any of 'em was built there in that shed where Alcee's at.

I 1: So, when you say that you towed the scowls out with these boats, the scowls then were poled? Did they have motors on them?

R: No. They were pole boats.

I 1: So the nets would be kept there and you would pole the scowl around and put the net out with that, poling it.

R: Yeah. We'd pick it up by hand, pole it. We used 'em for gettin' around.

I 1: The Varmint, do you know how long it is?

R: I believe it's 20 feet. About 20, 22 feet.

I 1: And the width of it?

R: I think about 6 feet.

I 1: And this other ...

R: They started puttin' a little more width to 'em a little later on. When they wanted to go to shallower water.

I 1: How old is the Varmint?

R: I don't really know. That's one of the later ones. I think probably 20 years old.

I 1: What about this white one? Did it have a name?

R: They called it the Squeaker. Jap Adams owned that boat. Had it built. I don't really know what year he had that built. It's probably 30 years old.

I 1: Now the Squeaker, is it plywood construction?

R: Plywood and plank bottom.

I 1: What about the Varmint? Is it plank and plywood also?

R: I believe it's all plywood.

I 1: So the Squeaker was built. Jap Adams had it built. Would he fish it with a crew, did he have a crew that fished with him?

R: He fished by himself. He built it to run a gill-net off of. And then he started fishin' with me and I bought the boat. It's been around. There's two or three different ones had it before I got it.

I 1: This next boat. What style of boat is this?

R: Just another scooter. Marvin Carver had that built.

I 1: And who built this boat?

R: Sam Andrews built this. He was from over in Terra Ceia. They fiberglassed that right away, about the time fiberglass first came out.

I 1: The bow of this boat looks a little different than the others.

R: Different boat builder, got a different model.

I 1: Is that it?

R: All his boats looked the same whether it was a big one or a little one. You could tell the same guy built 'em.

I 1: Is there a name for that type of bow that you know of?

R: Not that I know of.

I 1: This boat has the runners. It's sort of built in.

R: The decks. We called 'em decks. Wash rails.

I 1: These other don't have that. The steering is a little bit different on these.

R: Yeah, they used to use regular old plow lines. They finally got that steering wheel.

I 1: When you say plow lines ...

R: Plow lines. Gee and a whoa, just like a mule I guess. About the same thing.

I 1: Like reins from a mule. This scooter then, do you know what year it was built?

R: I'd say about '50.

I 1: And how long is it?

R: About 20, 22 feet.

I 1: What's the beam on these, how wide are they?

R: About 6 feet. This one may be about 7.

I 1: So all four of these boats are about the same size.

R: About the same. They were all used for about the same purpose. They went out of style. The kicker boats came in and they just tied these boats up pretty much. I collected 'em up.

I 2: So before the kicker boats, this is pretty much the kind of boat we'd have seen out there?

R: Yeah.

I 2: And when did the kicker boats start coming in?

R: It was around '50, '60. Somewhere along in there.

I 1: Does this boat here have a name?

R: No, it doesn't. We just called 'em scooters.

I 1: And the last one there.

R: I don't believe it did.

I 1: It was built by who?

R: It was another Taylor boat. Neary Taylor built that one. The same guy that built this one over here.

I 1: Little Neary?

R: Little Neary they called him. I think he was the older one though.

I 1: Where was it built, do you know? Was it built there at the Taylor Boatworks?

R: That one might have been. I almost believe it was built in his garage. After I got it I had it raised. I raised it 8 inches in the bow and 6 inches in the stern. That was done at Taylor Boatworks. Charged me \$425 to raise that boat.

I 1: Was that a lot then?

R: It was quite a bit of money at the time, but I don't guess there was no loss.

I 1: But it was worth it. Why did you have it raised?

R: It was kinda low. And I was _____ on it. Used in the gulf a little bit. So I raised it up.

I 1: Well, all of these other boats, were they used basically for fishing in the bays or would you take them out in the gulf?

R: They fished 'em in the gulf a little bit. One man would take it and go gill-nettin' when we wasn't workin' in the bay. But it was mostly used just for draggin' things around with. About every stop-net crew had one of 'em so they could tow their nets out, maneuver around, get around with it.

I 1: These boats are a little bit smaller than boats like the Wayne or the Jewel Ann. When was the Wayne built?

R: About '43, '44. Somewhere in there.

I 1: And when did you acquire them?

R: I bought that boat from Frit Pomeroy of Ft. Myers. It was after I come out of the service, probably '52, '53. Somewhere in there.

I 1: It had made it all the way down to Ft. Myers?

R: Made it to Ft. Myers. Guy quit fishin' and went shrimpin'. I went down and bought it from him, \$2500. Mackerel net and the boat and an extra motor.

I 1: Was that a good deal?

R: I thought it was.

I 1: Is the Wayne a good boat?

R: It's paid it's way.

I 1: Where was it built, do you know?

R: It was built right there in front of our fish house.

I 1: And who built it?

R: Same guy that built this boat, Sam Andrews. Kinda got his _____ in the Wayne and that one doesn't it?

I 1: Yeah, I guess it does in the bow.

R: They all looked about the same.

I 1: His bow comes up a little bit.

R: He's got that squared up on the bottom. See how that bottom comes out to a square? That's kinda got it too. Sometimes the old boat builder had his own model boat and just stuck with it.

I 1: You said that after you bought the Wayne you had something done to it and you had Neary Taylor do some work on it. What did he do? He worked on the cabin or something?

R: Oh, he put the canopy on it. Leo Taylor.

I 1: When you would fish the Wayne would you stay on the boat overnight?

R: We lived on it. That's what we used to tow everything around with. We cooked, slept on it.

I 1: This again, was a stop-net crew?

R: Stop-net and we seine-fished it too. Five men.

I 1: How far would you go?

R: We fished from Clearwater to Ft. Myers. Pretty much along the beach. I 1: A trip to Ft. Myers, how long would you be gone from Cortez?

R: Two or three days.

I 1: Who would do the cooking?

R: Whoever got hungry.

I 1: Whoever got hungry first?

R: Yeah.

I 1: What do you think about the changes that you've seen in the fishing in Cortez and these areas? What is the biggest change that you've seen?

R: The types of nets they use I guess. We just used cotton and they use monofilament now or nylon. They won't let us work like we used to with the regulations we've got. And all the dredgin'. The bay bottom's all messed up.

I 1: Do you think the fishermen are more productive today?

R: Not really. I think they keep the fish messed up so much. It don't take so many fish to make a livin'. They use smaller crews. One man can go out and catch a few fish and he gets all the money where we used to work with a big crew and had to wack it up. We caught a lot more fish but they wasn't worth much either.

I 1: What did you use to get when you were younger for fish, for mullet?

R: Three and five for mullet. For the medium or small, three and five. Then we was always on a limit. We couldn't never sell 'em.

I 1: Three and five cents a pound?

R: Yeah.

I 1: What was the limit? How was the limit imposed?

R: Sometimes you'd catch 300 to the ban or 500 to the ban or whatever. It was imposed by the fish dealer.

I 1: Because he couldn't sell them?

R: Right. Didn't have freezers back then to take care of 'em. You couldn't freeze 'em.

I 1: So they would just ice them down or pack them in barrels and ship them off?

R: Yep. Had freezers but there wasn't any around here. Had to ship 'em off to get 'em froze.

I 1: I've heard that you didn't have to ice your fish down in those days on the boat.

R: We never iced 'em. Never carried any ice with us when we went fishin'. We'd catch fish at daylight and bring 'em in at dark and they still felt firm like they were in good shape. Now they feel bloated if you keep 'em two or three hours.

I 1: Why do you think that is?

R: I don't really know. Something to do with what they eat I guess.

I 1: If you would go to Ft. Myers in those days, would you have to do anything to the fish?

R: Just took ice with us.

I 1: I wanted to ask you, all the time you were fishing, did you fish for your father's fish house?

R: Always fished for the Bell outfit.

I 1: And all of your brothers were fishermen too?

R: Right. We all worked together. That's what my Dad said. Told my Mom. Keep all of us together.

I 1: He said that?

R: That's what he said.

I 1: What type of man was he?

R: Well, easy goin'. He knew fishin' pretty well.

I 1: Do you think he was a good father?

R: Yeah, one of the best. Done a little drinkin'. When he would drink he was all out drinkin'. When he quit, he wouldn't touch it. He'd go a year at a time and never touch it. When he got on it he almost stayed till somebody got him off of it.

I 1: Was he a good provider?

R: Yeah, he was.

I 1: What about your mother. What type of woman was she?

R: Just easy goin'. Hard worker.

I 1: Was she ever employed outside the home?

R: No. Worked in the yard. Took care of her chickens. Always had her a garden. Always took care of the family.

I 1: That was a job in itself taking care of all you boys.

R: Had all she could do.

I 1: What do you remember about those days as far as ... did you all eat together as a family or was it hard to get you all together.

R: We stayed together pretty much.

I 1: Would you have a big supper time meal, all sit down at the table and eat together.

R: Yeah, when we were all here. We were never there all at one time. Some of us would be fishin', some would be home. But somethin' was always on the table when we got there.

I 1: Would your mother fix meals for you to take out on the boats?

R: She did earlier. We finally got stoves on the boat. Used to pack a lunch and take it with us. Cold fish, biscuits.

I 1: Do you think life was hard in Cortez when you were young?

R: I didn't think so. Everybody pitched in, we all worked. I didn't really think it was that hard. Just grewed on ya what we done.

I 2: What's the biggest change in life around here that you've seen in your time?

R: Just the type of fishin' I guess. Cortez itself is pretty much the same.

I 2: Do you feel optimistic about the fishing?

R: Might close it down. I believe if they get it on that ballot, they're gonna vote it down. I believe they will.

I 1: How does it make you feel, Calvin? That's part of your history.

R: Well, it really doesn't make that much difference to me. I'm about through with it anyway. My fishin's about comin' to an end. But it doesn't look good for the younger crowd.

I 1: If they don't vote it out will you continue to fish?

R: As long as I'm able I guess. Probably will.

I 1: What is it about fishing that you enjoy the most?

R: Just catchin' the fish I guess. I don't know. Just like to do it. Satisfied mind.

I 1: Bell Fish has changed a lot in ...

R: Yeah, that new buildin'. New boats.

I 1: It started out as a net camp basically.

R: Right. That's all gone.

I 1: What was the next expansion after that first building? What happened next?

R: We had a couple railways there, we hauled boats. Then we went from the net camp and bought Royal Fish Company. That's the old buildin' there, the dock. And we expanded on out and built that block buildin' and freezer.

I 1: What year was that?

R: Oh, 7, 8, 10 years ago maybe. Not that long ago.

I 1: You've got grouper boats and shrimp boats. When did you start diversifying into those other fisheries?

R: That started about in the '50s and we just kept addin' too. Probably we had one or two grouper boats. Started out with one and got another one. Just kept buildin'.

I 1: Who were the captains for the grouper boats? Were they local fishermen?

R: Oh, just like the local boats. They come and go. Can't hardly keep up with 'em. Old Willard Cramer was one. Jess _____. There was a bunch of 'em.

I 1: Do you see a difference between the types of fishing and the types of fishermen?

R: Yeah. The offshore boats seem to have more bums on 'em.

I 1: I've kind of noticed that too. Why do you suppose that is? Is it because they're gone from the community for so long?

R: Mostly drifters from all over come down here and get on these grouper boats. I don't know what makes 'em like they are. I guess they never want nothin'. They never had nothin' I guess. They just don't care.

I 1: Which do you like better? Do you like working at the fish house or do you like fishing better?

R: I like fishin' better.

I 1: Well, what is it about fishing?

R: Just peace of mind I guess. You get out there monkeyin' with the net. Somethin' different all the time.

I 2: Calvin, what can you tell us about this water tank over here? Is that what it is?

R: That used to be Cortez Water Works. Piped water all over Cortez. Dollar and a half a month.

I 1: Was that run by someone privately?

R: It was run by my Uncle Lem. Charlie Guthrie. Used to set up on top of a house. The house is where Alan Anderson lives now. Used to set right up on top of that.

I 2: That little green house with the yellow steps?

R: The one right back of it. You know where Dutch lives? The second house back this way. They had that up there on top of that house. It set on poles and they'd pump the water up to it and then it would gravity-feed down to these other homes.

I 2: What kind of wood is it made of, do you know?

R: Cypress. Pretty wood. Not a knot in it. That thing must be 40 years old. Little Neary Taylor built that.

I 1: Neary Taylor's oldest son, Neary built that. But was it filled with rainwater then?

R: Well water. Sulfur water I guess. It was on tv awhile back. They put that thing together and then they waxed it and kept it cleaned and waxed inside. Paraffin wax. Some of the wax still in there? Yeah, there's some still here.

I 1: How would they get the wax on it?

R: I don't know. They'd melt it or paint it in there or something. Maybe it was to keep it from leakin', I don't know. Keep stuff from growin' on it or somethin'. I don't know what they used it for. That's pretty lumber though, isn't it?

I 1: It is. We're gonna run out of tape here. I might as well have you tell me a little bit about this boat too. This is a skiff right?

R: That's what we call a wash rail skiff. Used to drag our nets around with it. Alcee's Dad built that. Little Neary's Dad, Leo's Dad. We had a fleet of those built at one time. Had about five of 'em. From this size up to 25, 26 feet.

I 2: I've only seen maybe one other one in the Village with the wash rail this wide like the old ones.

R: Is that right? I've got one more like it. Next size up from this one.

I 1: Do you remember when you were young Calvin, were there the sailing skip jacks ... what else did they call them? Sharpies. In Cortez?

R: That's before my time. I remember the skip jacks but they didn't do no sailin'. They had tractor motors and they got down to the Arnolds and Jeeps. Just somethin' to get around with is all they had. Just a little better than polin'.

I 1: We appreciate you taking the time to do this with us. Is there anything that you would like to say

concerning Cortez or the fishing or changes you might have seen or things that you really miss about Cortez?

R: Just hope they don't run us off I guess.

I 1: We hope the same.