

Steve Marshall: We appreciate you coming.

John Campbell: All right.

SM: We are going to ask you a few questions.

JC: Okay.

SM: About life as a fisherman and everything else but we will go ahead and get started. It is February 8, correct?

Multiple Speakers: Yes.

SM: I have been asking that question all day. We are here at the Cortez Maritime Museum. I am Steve Marshall.

Thor Bean: I am Thor Bean.

Shannon Kelly: I am Shannon Kelly.

Deja Brown: I am Deja Brown.

John Campbell: I'm John Campbell.

SM: All right. Go ahead, Thor.

TB: So, when and where were you born?

JC: Right here.

TB: Right here in Cortez.

JC: Right here in Cortez, Yes..

SM: What year?

JC: [19]48.

TB: Did your parents live here?

JC: Correct.

TB: Grand?

JC: Yes.

TB: Grandparents?

JC: Grandparents, one lived in Carolina, and one lived down in Boca Grande.

TB: Okay, all right. Cool.

JC: Great grandparents down in Boca Grande, too.

TB: Oh, wow. All right, awesome. What did they do for a living?

JC: Fishing.

TB: Fishing.

JC: My grandfather had a fish house that he ran in them Boca Grande, and my dad fished here in Cortez.

SM: What is your dad's name?

JC: James.

SM: James.

JC: Yes.

SM: I know you had the nickname, Lightning.

JC: Right. Correct.

SM: I am very curious about how you got that name.

JC: About eight years old. I was working down at Star during the summer vacation from school. We live right by the firehouse down there and the fire whistle went off at twelve o'clock. I was always late to work. So, it got me up. (Gate-boy?), the one that owned Star at the time he started calling me Lightning. He said lightning must have hit me, and for some reason it stuck. [laughter]

SK: Where did you go to school?

JC: Manatee. I went to school right here in this building.

FS: All right.

TB: That is pretty cool.

JC: This building right here was actually the auditorium library and music room, I think. Then

out where the parking lot is, that was the classrooms. There was one building for the classrooms, one building for the lunchroom. All six grades. I was in one building. The first, second, and third was on one end and fourth, fifth, and sixth on the other end.

SM: So, what do you do here in Cortez? I mean...

FS: Did you fish?

JC: Fish, yes, since I was old enough to really walk.

TB: So that is what you continued to do after you graduated high school was continuing to fish?

JC: Correct.

TB: Awesome. All right, cool.

JC: Two years in the Army. Then I come back...

TB: What year is this?

JC: [19]68 to [19]70.

TB: Were you part of the draft?

JC: Yes. Yes, I got the happy letter. [laughter]

TB: What do you do in the Army?

JC: I was a welder.

TB: Welder? All right, that is actually a pretty cool job.

SM: Did you go to Vietnam?

JC: No. Almost. On the plane to go. Yes, right there at the end. I had orders to go. They got canceled real close.

TB: Where are you then during your service?

JC: Germany and Kansas.

SK: That must have been cool.

FS: So, did you like grow up here? Was it a fun time?

JC: Yes, actually it was, it was really relaxed here in the village, going to school here was real

relaxed. All of us walked back and forth, everybody knew everybody. So, it was kind of close.

SM: Right. It was a tight knit community.

JC: Oh yes real tight, real tight.

FS: Had a lot of good friends?

JC: Oh, yes. Still to this day.

TB: That is awesome.

FS: Do you guys get into any types of trouble?

JC: Oh, not us. [laughter]

SM: No, we heard. Do you care to share any of those examples of mischief back in those days? What would you consider mischief back in those days?

JC: Maybe carried away with BB guns. [laughter]

SM: We heard that earlier. What did you use to shoot?

JC: Windows out.

SM: [laughter] Did you shoot any bobbers?

JC: Huh?

SM: Shooting bobbers?

JC: Bobbers?

SM: Bobbers on the end of a pole.

JC: Oh yes. We actually used to swim from the dock down here across to the island in the summertime.

SM: Now, that is pretty cool. Yes.

FS: What else did you do for fun with your friends?

JC: We played a lot of ball right outside the building here. A lot of baseball and football. But those are the only two sports we played.

TB: That is cool. So, after you went to the army did you come straight back to Cortez and

continue fishing?

JC: Correct.

TB: What sort of fishing did you do?

JC: Mostly in the younger part of my career was gillnetting. But then the net ban come along, so we all had to renegotiate everything.

TB: Right. So, did you continue fishing after that ban?

JC: Correct. Still today. Still doing it today.

TB: So, does it affect you a lot? I mean, of course it did, it made you change.

JC: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

TB: Did you have friends and people that you knew that had to just stop entirely?

JC: Everybody. Everybody. There were very few of us that adapted to some other type of fishery to keep on fishing.

TB: That is interesting. All right.

JC: Very few of us were left.

TB: All right.

SM: What do you do now? What kind of fishing do you do now?

JC: In the summertime [inaudible] bait and in the wintertime stone crabs.

SM: That is what you are doing now is snow crab?

JC: Correct. But it's over with we already started bait fishing.

FS: Oh, okay.

SM: Still got a boat you run?

JC: Correct.

SM: Got a crew?

JC: Yes. Correct.

SM: You have been doing this since forever?

JC: Probably five years, six years old. Something like that, when I got started.

TB: Nice.

JC: Actually, my little brother, he fishes with us right now.

TB: That is cool. What is his name?

JC: James Wade. Actually, he was still in diapers the first time I took him fishing.

FS: Are you the oldest?

JC: He got in a heap of trouble over there. No, there's two older brothers, but both of them have passed.

SM: Go ahead, Shannon.

SK: You said you had - you have a crew, correct? Who were the most memorable crew members do you think?

JC: Oh. Not a lot.

SM: Got anybody famous in mind?

JC: No, not famous. They were all good actually. I've been fortunate to have really good crew members that work really hard. Really lucky there, I guess.

SM: Do you have any right now that have been working with you for a long time?

JC: Chris, the other one that's working with us right now. He's been working with us since he was sixteen. So, he's been with us quite a while.

SM: What has been some of the challenges that you remember as a fisherman just being in the business, and what are what are some everyday challenges that fisherman is faced with?

JC: Oh, catching fish is the probably the biggest, but the weather, and you have to produce or you're not in the business long if you don't produce. But the weather is probably a big factor. Everything changes you got to change with time. We can't do what we did twenty, thirty years ago. It's all different. You got to be able to adapt every day.

TB: Do you prefer the way it was twenty years ago?

JC: Oh, definitely. Definitely. There wasn't as much boat traffic. I can remember as a youngster going all the way around Sarasota Bay and never see another boat.

SK: Has there been significant changes in the prices and the profit margins throughout the years of fishing?

JC: Yes, it changes a lot. It goes up and down, and it's like the supply and demand. If there's abundant species of fish, prices are going to be down. If there isn't many around, price goes up.

SM: What is the most profitable fish that you catch?

JC: Right now, stone crabs I'd say is the most expensive fish we catch. They're the most I've ever seen them to the boat right now. But we can catch down there could be one-hundred dollars a pound if you can't catch it.

SM: Right. Did you have a good season this past year?

JC: No. No, the last four years I'd say it's been going down, down, down, every year.

SM: Why is that?

JC: I think it's the octopus. The last four years, we've had a lot of octopus, and when the octopus comes, crabs is gone.

SM: Right. Yes, makes sense. Can you describe a typical day as a fisherman from sunup to sundown?

JC: Long.

SM: What is some of the - go through the process a little bit, some of the things that you have to do, like the procedures and getting going and all of that.

JC: Well, crabbing, you get - you actually get started the day before. You come in and unload your crabs, get the bait on for the next day. Then probably five o'clock you get up, and you pull traps until you can't see no more, which is dark, dark thirty. The time you get home and unload again, it's probably eight, nine o'clock. That night you get home. So, it's a long day. Bait fishing is you don't get started as early but you can have some long nights. I've had nights I get out there at two or three o'clock in next morning time you get unloaded. Especially if all the boats catch fish, then you're there a long time.

SM: It is tough work?

JC: Oh yes definitely.

SM: Why do you keep doing it?

JC: Good question. I guess it's because of what I've always done. I enjoy it. I enjoy it., it's always that thought of making some really good catch and different. It's different every day.

SM: What is it that captivates you? What captivates fisherman or craters this drive to keep doing those kinds of things?

JC: It's got to be a love of the water or something because a normal person wouldn't put himself through what we do I don't think. It's hard work. You're usually wet and cold all the time, hungry, and why you put yourself through that, I don't know. I think a lot I was born into you. That you grew up in it because there's very - there's actually very few that come into it late in life. It lasts very long.

SM: Is it tough on your family?

JC: I think so. Yes, really tough. Because a lot of times you're gone. I still don't have a cell phone to call home tell when I'm coming home. Back in the old days you didn't have the electronics to let them know that you were okay or whatever. [laughter]

SM: Go ahead, Shannon.

SK: Have you ever suffered any injuries associated with fishing?

JC: Yes.

SK: Like, the gut? Spleen?

JC: A (tom weight?) which is a big chunk of lead crushed my hand one time. That wasn't pretty. They thought they were going to have to amputate the hand. But luckily, they finally got some blood going through it and saved the hand.

SM: Which hand was that?

JC: This one.

SM: Now, it looks fine.

JC: They did it. I went to the plastic surgeon every day for about two months. But it was a mess. It looked like a piece of hamburger. I got hit in the head once with a chain, knocked me out. Nothing really serious.

SK: You have not had any skin problems from being out in the sun a lot?

JC: The doc says yes. Yes, yes, I'm fixing, and I've got an appointment now to see a dermatologist. They think I might have some skin cancers from the sun.

SK: Must be hard being out in the sun all day.

JC: It's hard on your body. The first thing a new doctor does when he looks at me, he says,

“you're out in the sun a lot, aren't you?” So, they recognize it right away.

TB: When it comes to the net ban, do you think a lot of it has to do with people not from here moving in and trying to get more recreational fishing?

JC: No, I think the whole net ban was based on a lot of bad propaganda. I tell a lot of people if I'd have seen the information that I saw on TV, I'd have probably voted myself to ban them. But it was, the stuff that they were showing was actually true, but it didn't pertain to us. Just the one commercial they ran about the University of Georgia's shrimp boat. They were trying to catch turtles. They made it look like that's what we do all the time. They were doing research on turtles actually. Then one of them was about the drift net or what drift nets had been banned in Florida for thirty years before the net ban. They weren't even in existence, but they brought that in as a gillnet, the driftnet. But like I say if I hadn't of known better, I'd have probably voted.

SK: So, the media had that big of an influence.

JC: Oh, I think so, I think so. If you see it, if you're sitting there and you're watching it on TV, and actually see a documentary, you're going to believe it. It was actually happening, but it didn't pertain to us.

FS: Yes, okay.

TB: Do you think at this point, almost twenty years later, do you think there's any chance that it can be reversed in any way?

JC: I don't think it will because usually once something like that's passed, it's not changing. No. No.

TB: How much do you think it has affected the fishing industry? I mean, of course, people had to switch the way they fish, but has there been any loss in production or anything like that? Or is there just more part-time people?

JC: I think there's more, a lot more part time people that's filled in the actual quantity of the whole matter.

TB: Okay.

SM: A lot of people have quit fishing full time. You are one of the few that we've met that has not. What kept you surviving as a fisherman after this net ban stuff?

JC: I think refusing to give up is a big reason. It's what I've done, and I don't see how it can be took away from me, one way or the other. I tried gill net after the net ban, but it didn't work.
[laughter]

SM: So, what adjustments did you have to make over the years to be able to still make a profit and still maintain your livelihood?

JC: Change the fishing methods. I never stone crab before the net ban. But I always (purse-sign?) for bait since we've been doing that. I've done that always during the summer. But the stone crabs just filled the void in the wintertime, and to still be able to get a check.

FS: Was it a hard transition?

JC: A lot harder work. Stone crab's a lot of work. A lot of work and you think it's just a seasonal thing, but it's actually year-round because during the summer you're repairing all the traps getting them ready for the next year. So, you don't get a day off from bait fishing, you're working on trout.

SM: What has been one of the biggest changes that you've observed in Cortez over the years? Something that you've noticed.

JC: I think the biggest thing I've noticed, used to I could walk down the street here. Everyone I seen I knew. But anymore there's very few people here in Cortez that I even know.

SM: Do you miss that?

JC: Yes, yes, I think I do. I used to, here in Cortez, as I was growing up, there was never a door locked. You never locked the door. Now you're locking windows, doors, everything else you can lock. But that was a thing when back in the old days when I was growing up, it was the captains would have same crews and he'd go around and wake up everybody in his crew because we all lived right here in the village. The doors were always open. He'd come in, go to your room, wake you up, and you were going fishing.

TB: You think it was definitely better off that way, as a community, in smaller and more interconnected.

JC: Yes, I think so. I think so. Because anybody that needed anything, just ask. Now, you're talking to strangers. It's not as easy I don't think.

SM: If there was one thing you could change about Cortez aside from what you just mentioned, what would it be?

JC: Oh, I don't know. Basically, it's the same I think other than the closeness and the different people and - but I still love it out here. I mean, don't get me wrong. It's still a great little community.

SM: Do you ever spend time talking to the younger generation of Cortez kids and some young fisherman? I mean, do you ever get a chance to?

JC: I don't think they're interested. I really don't. I think I would say, Wade, my younger brother, he's probably the last generation that will take it seriously. Because really, there's not a great future in it, we're losing grounds every day. If I can struggle through it, probably be lucky.

Well, I guess I'm finished but I'd to get a few more years.

TB: Yes. Is there anything else that you want us to know or mention or anything we forgot to ask?

JC: No. Not me. I'll go with what you guys want to know.

SM: Yes, do you have any words of wisdom for these young students here that are fixing to go out and graduate and do big things in life, perhaps?

JC: Stay in school as long as you can and make up your mind what you want to do. Most of all, be happy with what you're going to do. Make sure you're happy at whatever profession you choose. Don't get a job you don't like.

SM: Yes. All right, well, is there anything else that you would like to share with us?

JC: No. I appreciate your guys' time.

SM: Thanks for giving us all this information and some wonderful stories, and it was very valuable. So, thank you.

JC: You're more than welcome. More than welcome.

TB: Gave us a lot more insight on Cortez this time.

[end of transcript]