

Michael Jepson: This is Michael Jepsen. I am sitting here with Ronnie Beckham from Cedar Key. This is part of the In Their Own Words project. Ronnie, one of the first things I ask people to do is just tell me a little bit about their background, where you live, married, if you have kids, and things like that.

Ronnie Beckham: I'm married, four daughters.

MJ: Four daughters.

RB: Four daughters. Been here all my life.

MJ: You have been a commercial fisherman.

RB: Right, third time generation.

MJ: Third generation commercial fisherman.

RB: Yes.

MJ: Tell me, you grew up in Cedar Key?

RB: Pretty much, yes.

MJ: In this area?

RB: Yes.

MJ: Did you go to Cedar Key High School?

RB: Yes.

MJ: Tell me what it was like growing up in Cedar Key as a fishing community. What is it like? What was it like for you?

RB: The life for me was, it was a good life, growing up. Because being a boy, you know how little boys just cared of the water. [laughter] I enjoyed growing up here. I sure did. Everything that I done was on the water with my father. School was all right, but hands on, on the boat is where I'd like to be. [laughter]

MJ: What was Cedar Key like as a community back in those days?

RB: Small, close-knit town. I don't know what the number was, but it wasn't very many, probably 3,000 maybe, maybe 2,000. It was small.

MJ: All fishermen?

RB: Everybody fished, crabbed, oystered. Everything they done was on the water.

MJ: You said your dad was a fisherman. What type of fishing did he do?

RB: He done the mullet fishing. Before they took the saltwater turtle, he turtled.

MJ: He did?

RB: Oh, yes. Oystered mostly, basically oystered. Oyster season, when it wasn't oyster season, he would turtle or fish in the summer.

MJ: When did you start fishing?

RB: I don't know. It's just I've always been there, it seems like. [laughter]

MJ: Your earliest memories were on the boat.

RB: Right. Yes. I was fishing. When I wasn't big enough to drive the boat, I just deckhand for my father.

MJ: But then you did become a commercial fisherman.

RB: Oh, right. Yes. Me and my wife, we commercial fished for all our life. But at one time, we really got involved. We got a bigger boat and fishing day and night, fishing jacks in the morning and the mullet in the evenings and done a lot of fishing. When they took the net, that's where we was at.

MJ: You were gillnetting.

RB: I was gillnetting.

MJ: You say your wife was involved. Did she go out on the boat with you?

RB: Oh, yes. She [inaudible] slickers deckhand with me.

MJ: Oh, really?

RB: Oh, yes.

MJ: So, is that normal? Were wives that involved in fishing in Cedar Key?

RB: She had to be there and do what had to be done that I couldn't do, or I had to hire a man to do that. So, to keep it under the same roof, the money that I had to pay somebody else, went under the same roof. She did make money and save money for the family.

MJ: Were your kids involved?

RB: My kids were involved, yes, all the way through, until they took it. They cleaned my boats just like my father made me, not made me. But my old man had been fishing all day. I've been in school. When you come home from school, you clean the boat. You clean the nets. You sold the fish, sold the oysters or whatever you had to gather. Same thing with me when I got home. The kids got out of school. I was waiting for them. They had to help me do everything until it was time to go home and go do homework.

MJ: So, it was a family business.

RB: It was a family business. Yes, it was.

MJ: That is the way it was with other fishing families.

RB: With all, everybody here, the people that I grew up with was the same way.

MJ: When you think of Cedar Key, are there places in Cedar Key that represent this community that you can think of? There is a common term called sacred places. It could be buildings. It could be just spaces or water. What represents Cedar Key to you? Are there places like that?

RB: This is just home to me. It's just my heritage. I went other places. It's pretty and everything, but it's not Cedar Key. Because I've been to other places and they're nice and everything, but it's not Cedar Key. Cedar Key has got its own little charm. It's just got something. There's a lot of places you can go that has a charm. But Cedar Key has a charm of its own. I haven't found that nowhere else.

MJ: What makes that charm, do you think?

RB: I think it's the environment and the people that I associate with that makes it like that.

MJ: Let us talk a little bit about – now, you were a net fishing family. Tell me about the net ban, how it affected you and your family and your business.

RB: At the time, that's all we was doing is fishing. So, it cut everything off. I just hung in a brand-new net, took me \$1,200 to hang this net. I hung it myself. You buy the materials and the corks and the lids and line. You put it together. I had \$1,200 in the net. Well, they was going to buy our nets back. Well, they wanted to give me \$200 for my net. But I couldn't do that. So, I did sell some nets that was worth \$200, but I couldn't sell my net that I had. Why'd I do that? I just put them in the shed. They just left a piece here and a piece there, until they're all gone. But there is no nets. You can drive through town. Before they took the nets away from us, you could drive by any one of these docks. They had a cypress pole they call a net rail. They had two, three, four nets on each side of the net on all these docks. When you look around here, you don't see no net rails no more. It's like, remember the clotheslines everybody used to have behind the yard? There is no clotheslines anymore. The net deal, you don't see any no net, no more like it used to be.

MJ: That is one of the changes since the net ban.

RB: Right. It even changed the style of boats that were used.

MJ: Really?

RB: Oh, yes.

MJ: In what way? What was that change? Can you tell me a little bit about what you used before?

RB: The boat that we used before is what we call the bird dog with the net table on the back. Well, that's good because your net had to be in the back. Your engine couldn't be there. So, the boat, the bird dog, you seen them, designed with the kicker in the bow so you could actually work on the back. But being there's no nets, now we run a Carolina skiff or a stern-driven boat. Very rarely you see a bird dog anymore.

MJ: Was it hard to convert it to clamming?

RB: Yes, it was. In fact, that's not the boat you really need to clam. A bird dog is not the boat to clam. They've got some now that's 28-foot long they built out of foam. They're a nice boat. But they're not the same kind of boat as a stern-driven boat.

MJ: How did it make you feel? Prior to the net ban, that was a long battle there before it happened. What were your thoughts about that?

RB: Well, I remember when they were going to have this boat deal, and you could go up there and protest and carry the picket signs and whatever. My wife and my brother's wife and a lot of other wives – we had to go fishing or go to work. So, they got together as community, the wives, and go to Gainesville to hold signs, "Save the Florida net." These people come by and spit on them outside the car. Well, how does that make me feel? It don't make me feel real good. It don't make me feel real good.

MJ: So, after it happened...

RB: I couldn't believe those people were that involved. I just couldn't believe that there's people out there that felt that way about us. I don't know. It's hard to see that.

MJ: Why do you think they had that opinion of commercial fishing?

RB: By the advertisements they put on TV.

MJ: Your opposition, the SOS campaign.

RB: Yes. That's what took the vote. Actually, I feel in my heart that the people really didn't know what they were voting on, not the average. They really didn't know what they –I know the

campaigns they showed on TV, well, you've seen them. It was kind of overwhelming. You take an old lady at 60 years old or a person that don't have no focus on that, on TV. They believe a lot of things on TV. They used that to be the judge. That was all wrong. I think we was tricked. It was all a trick.

MJ: Do you feel that they really did not know what commercial fishing was about?

RB: No, not the average person that actually threwed the vote.

MJ: So, what happened after the net ban?

RB: Things got real thin. The clamming was started a little bit before then. I could see that we could make a living clamming. We just lucked out because it's the only river and we got the salinity that we have.

MJ: So, you got good water.

RB: We got good water. Now, Cedar Key, it come out to the best on that. It wasn't good at all. But I'd rather been here than in Punta Gorda or any place down south where you didn't have that option because they didn't even have an option at all. I really don't know what those peoples down there doing now. I don't know even how they made it. How did those people – what's this other place you...

MJ: Cortez.

RB: Cortez. How did they deal with that?

MJ: A lot of them went crabbing. They switched to stone crab, blue crab. Some work on offshore boats. Some quit. Just quit.

RB: Just quit.

MJ: Went on and got other jobs. That is one thing I wondered about in Cedar Key. Did you see that here? Where did people go once it happened? How were they affected?

RB: A lot of them went into the crabbing.

MJ: They did.

RB: Then the society saying that everybody had an option to go to crabbing. They made it tough to get into crabbing, to get into anything.

MJ: So, you decided clamming was an option?

RB: The only option I could see.

MJ: How about other people in this community? Because I have heard that clamming was not – initially, people were a little reticent to go into clamming.

RB: Yes.

MJ: Why was that?

RB: Because it's not the same. It's not the same heritage that you had. You don't make a living the way you chose to do it now. You're going to do it some other way. It was just a feeling of being overpowered or overruled.

MJ: So, there was anger about that?

RB: I'm sure. Yes, I'm sure that there's anger. [laughter]

MJ: What is the difference between net fishing and clamming in just a general way? Would you prefer net fishing?

RB: I prefer net fishing.

MJ: Why is it? What is it about net fishing that you like?

RB: It's like a man going fishing on the river on the weekend or staying home mowing his grass. I'd rather go fishing on the weekend. [laughter]

MJ: What is it about fishing that you enjoy?

RB: I think everything. I don't think I dislike any of it. But it's a joy just to get on the boat and go fishing. You just kind of leave everything behind.

MJ: I can see the difference between clamming and fishing. The operations are very different.

RB: Very different.

MJ: Clamming is – well, let me ask you this, prior to the net ban, could you make a living from net fishing?

RB: Yes.

MJ: You could?

RB: Yes. You said, "Could I make as much money in net fishing I can clamming?"

MJ: Well, no. Could you make a comfortable living net fishing?

RB: I could make a living, a comfortable living, well, probably not middle class. No. It was

hard work.

MJ: More of working class?

RB: More of a working class. Right.

MJ: But what about clamming now? Is this going to be different?

RB: The clamming feels like – I almost feel like a nine to five.

MJ: Oh, yes?

RB: It's one of them deals.

MJ: It is almost like a business?

RB: It's almost like a business or a job.

MJ: But fishing never felt like a job.

RB: Never felt like a job. Never felt like a job. You could make as much money as you were capable of making if you were a good fisherman. Or you make more money. At the end of the evening, you go to the fish house. Everybody stand around bragging about their catch. [laughter] You have to be one of those people to brag who's got a boatload of fish. [laughter]

MJ: You cannot really come in and brag about a boatload of clams, can you?

RB: No, you can't. [laughter]

MJ: It's funny. Has Cedar Key changed since the net ban?

RB: Yes. I don't know if it's from the net ban or if it's just due to the value of property in Cedar Key anymore. But it has definitely changed in the last ten years.

MJ: What changes can you tell me have happened? What are some of those changes?

RB: Used to, when you get on a boat, any boat you went by, you knew them people. Now, you go by a boat. You won't recognize one out of ten.

MJ: Is that because there are just fewer fishermen out there?

RB: Yes, they just ain't there. Just ain't there.

MJ: Where have they gone?

RB: So, most of them, the people that I grew up with, like me, didn't have no option. You had

to clam. That's the most of everybody I know is clamming.

MJ: So, the clamming has become kind of the default sort of occupation.

RB: Right. I'd rather do the clamming deal than I would a 9-to-5 in Gainesville. Or I'd rather pick clamming above any other type of employment.

MJ: Is there other employment other than clamming in Cedar Key?

RB: I don't know. A carpenter, I guess you could be a carpenter's helper or something like that.

MJ: Or else you would have to go to Gainesville?

RB: You would have to go to Gainesville and get a job.

MJ: The name of our project is Resilience and Persistence in Two Fishing Communities, because we think that these two fishing communities still have that flavor of being fishing communities. Do you see that in the families that you grew up with? Do they show that resilience and that persistence?

RB: I don't know. Some cases.

MJ: You think that they will be here in the future?

RB: I don't know. I think it's a done deal.

MJ: Really?

RB: I really do.

MJ: The future of Cedar Key as a fishing community?

RB: It rests on the clams alone now.

MJ: It is clams alone?

RB: Oh, yes. Because that's the only thing. We've still got some stone crabbers. I don't have a stone crab license. But to stone crab, you have to have so many things. To stone crab, they do it offshore. Now you don't need a small boat. You need a big boat and preferably diesel. You have to have a permit per trap now. Instead of buying one permit for X amount of traps, you have to buy a permit for every trap. It's expensive. If you have a bad year on stone crabs like last year and this year, you wouldn't have made a living. So, the option of stone crabbing is not a sure thing because you can have good years and bad years in stone crabbing. One in seven, that's what they claim, one good year in seven. So, it's hard to raise a family on that.

MJ: How do you feel about the changes that you've had to make and your future in staying on

the water?

RB: I've had to change all my life. Because the year that I turned 18, that's the year they took the turtle from us. Because I helped my father on the turtle boat until I was 18.

MJ: Oh, you did?

RB: Oh, yes. Then it's been downhill. They've taken and taken and taken and taken. They've taken it right on down too. The clams will be taken too. This is a short-lived thing. The turtles were short-lived. The scallops were short-lived. The oysterers, they're hanging in there. But still, I've seen years, oystering, you couldn't gather three bushels in a day or five bushels in a day. You can't raise no family on that. I found out, in living in Cedar Key, you had to have stone crab traps. You had to have oyster tongs. You had to have things to scallop with. You had to have the fishing stuff. So, you done whatever the most money was in that season.

MJ: You followed that seasonal cycle of whatever resource was available.

RB: Was available. You had to have the equipment to do that. Because on the water, things come and go, like farming. If you have a bad year oystering, you go stone crabbing. If it's a good year or whatever, the most money you can make at the time. Most of the time, my wife and my children were on board.

MJ: Really?

RB: Yes.

MJ: Actually, you have got all these different skills and different fisheries.

RB: Right.

MJ: But you are being limited.

RB: It's all gone. The clam – I don't know if it's going to be due to the pollution of the water, or the people that's coming to Florida, or if it's just going to be all bought up in the condo dirt. I don't know. But I see an end coming.

MJ: So, what does that say to your kids' future?

RB: It don't say much. My kids are old enough now that they can maybe do enough gathering to compensate for later. That's what I'm trying to put in their head. Because the clamming is not going to be here every day. One day, you're going to wake up. They're going to be like the net ban, the shark ban. I went through the shark ban, where me and my daughters, we fished shark every day, five days a week.

MJ: Really?

RB: We got under this bridge and sold them to the mountain. They didn't take long to take that away from us, but they took that, too. They got out of school. They had a set of slickers. They come down there and put the school books down right over there and come down on the boat with me. They work there. [laughter]

MJ: I have always wondered about the shark market because I never saw it much in public or some – where was the shark market? Where were those sharks going?

RB: They was going everywhere.

MJ: Really?

RB: Oh, yes. There was a shark state pretty much everywhere you wanted to go, even in Gainesville. Then they made it so hard. They only let so many permits out in the State of Florida. They started downsizing from that point on. They still shark fish, but it ain't the little people.

MJ: That has been the history, from what I have seen, of fishing regulations. They have implemented a lot of limited entry and limited trap programs. What is your take on all that, all the regulations that you have had to come up with?

RB: Yes, it's hard. I suppose I can try to understand them, but it's hard. It's hard to accept them. Because before they took the nets away, they told you what size net you could use. They had it so heavily regulated already, it got down to you couldn't have but so many pounds of trout. You can only have so many pounds of this. You can have so many pounds of sheepshead. Before, it was never regulated. You could fish in any size net. Then it got down to the pounds of fish that you're allowed to eat. Then they allowed you the size of the net that you fish, allowed so many juveniles or whatever to escape. I can understand that, but it's hard to live that.

MJ: Were you able to keep up with all the regulations and keep up your permits and everything?

RB: You have to. You have to because the law requires you. They see too that you have that, that you have everything.

MJ: But like when the stone crab license limitation came in, were you able to get enough traps, certificates and things like that to remain in stone crab?

RB: At the time, clamming had come in. I started because stone crab season was bad. Couldn't make no living, stone crab season. Every three years, you had to renew your license. Well, the three years that was bad, I was relying on clam and trying to get started in clamming. They asked me what was the last three years like. Then they give you how many traps they thought would fill that void. They gave me 100 traps. That's the permits I got, is 100 traps. That's not enough traps, not to make a living with. Even if you have a fair year, you need at least 200-250 to make a fair living with it.

MJ: Can you make a fair living today, fishing and clamming and being on the water?

RB: I think we could. We did. We weren't rich people. But we made a living. We weren't on Social Security, nothing like that, food stamps, nothing like that. My family never was like that. They always beat their own out. We could do it again. I'd like to try it. [laughter]

MJ: So, what is the future for you and fishing, you think?

RB: There is no future, not in fishing.

MJ: Well, can anybody make a living cast netting today?

RB: No. When we quit fishing, fish was \$1 pound. You had 1,000 yards of net you could fish with. You cut down to a cast net. The biggest cast net, I think, is 10-foot. That's a 20-foot spread. You can't do too much with that. Now, you can make some spare money. Or if you may need a little money or something, you can do it with the cast net. You can catch 200 or 300 pounds, make a couple of \$300. That's great. If the tide's high tomorrow and the wind blows on the side, you ain't catching no fish with no cast net. So, you can't make a living with a cast net. You can't do it. Not here.

MJ: So, what do you think is the future for Cedar Key as a fishing community?

RB: It don't look good. It's gone. [laughter] In fact, it is not a fishing community anymore. It's a clamming community. As soon as the people around us, the Yankees, are buying in town, and the quality of the water, we're going down there, too.

MJ: Do you think clamming is going to disappear too?

RB: Sure. It ain't going to hold up.

MJ: Well, aren't there people trying to preserve that for Cedar Key?

RB: There are people trying. You ever heard the old saying that money talks and bullshit walks? Well, that's what we're dealing with here.

MJ: You think that that is what is going to happen?

RB: Yes.

MJ: That is primarily because of all the people – you look at the property value of homes in Cedar Key. The value is astronomical.

RB: Yes, it is.

MJ: So, can fishermen still live in Cedar Key?

RB: It's hard just to pay the taxes. It's hard. No, you couldn't. There is no place that relies on

fish anymore. We don't have it to sell.

MJ: But people still think of Cedar Key as a fishing community.

RB: They do. That's because when they come by, they still see old docks and old clam bags and people doing things. It looks good. But I don't know how long it's going to last. I sure don't.

MJ: What about your kids? They are involved in clamming.

RB: Yes, every one of them is.

MJ: What is the future for them?

RB: Like I said, April's – Sambo is my youngest. We'll see. I'm trying to train her for something else because she...

MJ: April.

RB: April, I have a younger daughter than that. She's 15.

MJ: You call her Sambo?

RB: I call her Sambo. Samantha. I'm trying to train her for something else, I sure am, because I don't know...

MJ: Something off the water?

RB: Something off the water. If the clamming goes down, there is going to be nothing else, unless you tropical fish.

MJ: What about fish guides?

RB: Now put yourself in this position. You're a fish guide. You're liable for everybody on the boat. You have to go to the school to get your six-pack license. You can only tote six. They're going to pay you probably \$100 a head, \$600. Sounds like a lot of money. By the time you buy the gas and cater to those people – because you're liable for all those people. By the time you get home, buy fuel, and replace everything that's been broken, you don't come out with a whole bunch of money. So, if you have five fishing parties in a week, which is probably rare, probably going to get two or three, and so the money ain't good, not for the work that you do.

MJ: Because the net ban was promoted by recreational fishermen, do you hold a grudge toward them?

RB: I do as a whole, but you can't as an individual. As the whole angler deal, yes, I'm angry. But as to each person, you can't feel that way because you don't know how you voted anyway. By the way the vote went, I can see how most of them felt. It wasn't good. [laughter] I never

realized that. I'd never believed that had ever happened in my whole life, that they'd actually take the net, that they could do that. I feel like that, to me, is a right. But it's not. The choice to make a living the way you choose to make it. If you make much money or not, that's the way you choose.

MJ: Is there anything you would like to tell people about it that you have not had a chance to say about what happened in that way of life?

RB: I'm just sorry it came down like that.

MJ: Well, that is about all the questions I have got. Unless there is anything else that you think you would like to say about Cedar Key, this way of life or...

RB: I just hope it lasts as long as it does, because I don't see it going on for much longer.

MJ: Well, when you say that – I was just talking to Carlton about this because it seems that you feel that you are helpless in stopping it. Why is that?

RB: As of yesterday, there were \$8 million spent on dirt in Cedar Key yesterday for townhouses. That's why.

MJ: It is the money.

RB: It's the money. They'll buy it all up. A person buys a \$1 million home. You got the next dollar out over there. You've got an old dirty boat with sea squirts, no clam bags on it. He doesn't want to see you over there. He'll pay money for you to leave. You'll leave. All they've got to do is throw money at you. [laughter].

MJ: Well, Ronnie, thanks for doing this.

RB: All right.

MJ: Appreciate it.

RB: Yes.

MJ: You taking the time.

RB: Need anything, give me a call.

[end of transcript]