

Ray Bently: – let this contractor in Alabama. He sent some trucks down, and truck drivers. They had quite a bit of excavating to do. They worked there, I think, a day or so, and over the weekend. Then they come for the weekend. Over the weekend, they sent trucks and drivers down. Over the weekend, those trucks all disappeared. Every one of them gone. Nobody knows anything about them whatever. Nobody. They were sitting down there Monday morning wondering where the trucks were and what they could do. They couldn't do anything because they didn't have any trucks to work with. Finally, one old conch just had nothing to do with the job at all. Just come up with the crazy idea that maybe if those truck drivers went back to Alabama, the trucks just might come back. [laughter] So, the contractor got the idea. He sent them back. You know what? Every one of those trucks come right back next to them, right back where they were. They went to work with the conch drivers. I don't know whether you know it or not, but at that time, just about everybody in Key West was just about broke.

Karen DeMaria: On welfare or...

RB: On welfare or whatever.

KD: When was that?

RB: 1932, [19]30 or [19]32, somewhere right in there. I know I worked on there during in [19]32. They probably started in [19]31 or something, early [19]30s anyway. Everything went fine. Nobody got mad or anything. No. They just...

KD: They were proud people. They used to be a proud people.

RB: Yes. They ran Key West, like Key West bank. The Conch wanted Key West. It would've gotten a little bit longer. This was in 1932. I went down there to work on the plastering. I wouldn't have been there if there'd have been any plasters in Key West. But there were no plasters in Key West. So, they had to get them from some other places. So, they got some plasters from...

KD: You were allowed to come in and work, right?

RB: Yes.

KD: [laughter]

RB: Now my brother lived right across the street from there. He had the Ford agency in Key West. Now, he didn't own it. He was running it.

KD: The Ford agency?

RB: Yes.

KD: Which was what?

RB: Which was what? What now?

KD: Ford? What was it?

RB: Ford automobile.

KD: Okay.

RB: Yeah. That's right. He ran it. At that time, it was the oldest Ford agency in the United States. Do you know Key West is one of the oldest towns in the United States? You know that.

KD: Yes. Used to be one of the wealthiest too, back in the wrecking days.

RB: What?

KD: Used to be one of the wealthiest –

RB: Yes. Always --

KD: – back in the wrecking days.

RB: Yes. Key West has gone up, and down like that several times already. Get almost broke. They used to do a lot of cigars but would kill you. You probably know those things.

KD: Yes. We have the wrecking, cigars, drugs, now tourism. What is the next one? [laughter]

RB: I don't know. I wouldn't be surprised if some of the tourists don't stop coming down sometimes though.

KD: Why do you think that?

RB: I don't know why I think that, but it could happen. I don't want to leave here. I love it here.

KD: I love it here too. My husband cannot make a living right now. My husband is sitting at home, but our boat is sitting at the dock waiting to go out fishing. He cannot go out because the water is green and dirty. He is a spear fisherman. He shoots fish. He cannot see the fish to shoot because the water is so bad right now.

RB: Is that right? I don't know that.

KD: It has not cleared up in months. It is not supposed to be that way now.

RB: No.

KD: It is supposed to be clear.

RB: Oh, yes, it does.

KD: It is the wintertime [laughter].

RB: My Claire and I used to fish out here quite a lot. You could see a dime on the bottom, 20 feet down, on a clear day and a sun shiny day and the right kind of bottom.

KD: Right. But see, back when you used to fish, when it was windy, and the water would get stirred up, it would calm down in a day or two.

RB: Yes.

KD: Now.

RB: You don't do it.

KD: You cannot do it. Did you ever notice, during the course of a year, changes that occurred in the water due to the seasons? Wintertime, it might be different than the summertime?

RD: Yes.

KD: What did you notice?

RB: Well, I don't know how to tell you this, but the water would be clear sometimes. We used to have places out there around – as far as Rock-Glade out here. We were out there fishing one day, had the boat. I looked down and see a great, big grouper right under the boat. I baited my hook and put it down there. When the hook and the bait got down to the fish, he had to move over a little bit to keep it from hitting him. He stayed there and watched that for a couple of minutes, I guess. He came over, took it. I was excited. So, I give it a jerk, pull it right back out of his mouth, didn't hook him. [laughter] Well, I got up. I pulled it up. He went and swam up like that and went right back down the same spot. So, I hooked its bait a little different and put it right back down under the boat. Put it right back down to him. He took longer that time. Finally, he couldn't take it any longer. He came over and got it again. I was learned enough than the other time to let it stay there for a while. First thing you know, he took off. I jerked it and hooked him. I forgot how much he weighed now, quite a bit. I don't know how much it weighed. But I fought him like nobody's business until I got him in. I've forgotten how much he weighed.

KD: They are a stubborn fish too.

RB: Yes, sure. They fight. But we could see right down to the bottom as clear as anything. It's a whole lot deeper. I think that water over there was about 20 feet deep. You could see a dime on the bottom.

KD: You told me stories about turtles. Do you ever see manta rays or big sunfish or porpoises or manatees, any of those other odd...

RB: I don't know anything about those fish.

KD: Okay.

RB: My boss didn't want to fish for anything but fish he can eat.

KD: Smart lady.

RB: [laughter] A lot of people loved to fish even though the fish isn't good to eat. A lot of fish that they're eating now weren't edible when [inaudible].

KD: Like what fish?

RD: Pompano? Is it pompano? It's a very popular fish now. Is it pompano? Yes, I think that's it.

KD: Yes. That has gotten popular. That just became a popular fish.

RB: Yes. When I came here, we used to get in a school of pompano. We wouldn't try to catch them. You couldn't eat them. What are you going to do with them? If we caught them, we'd turn them back loose. Sailfish that they eat now. I can't remember names. I can't remember. I just can't. There's a fish that's quite popular now, real good nowadays. You ought to be able to talk to this guy that used to live right down here. He helped me build this house. He was a sponger. He was all kinds of fisherman. But he used to do a lot of sponging when the sponging was good here.

KD: Do you remember his name?

RB: Yes. His name was – they called him Sonny, Sonny Larson. You ever hear of him?

KD: Yes.

RB: But his name was William, of course. Nobody hardly knew what his name was. He was Sonny Larson.

KD: That is another thing down here. There is a lot of people that have names or nicknames that have nothing to do with their real names.

RB: That's right. [laughter]

KD: Yes. I talk to people. They tell me, "You should go talk to this person." I said, "What is his name?" "I do not know his full name, but we used to call him this." So, then I spend time running around asking other people, "What is this guy's real name," so I can go find him. So, it is something. [laughter]

RB: Yes. His best friend didn't know his name. Lots of times that's a fact. We had some spots out here in the back which we fished a lot. I wanted to tell you that that girl in there loved to fish better than anything you ever saw. When we were first married, and she wanted to fish so bad, I said, "If you want to fish that way, you've got to learn to bait your hook and fix your lines and take your fish off the hook and all of that stuff."

KD: Fillet it.

RB: Well, she never cleaned fish much.

KD: I do not. [laughter] That is why I have a husband. [laughter]

RB: I did most of that. She would learn to – she learned to do fixing. She could fix them just as good as I can. She always wore a big pair of overalls, blue jeans.

KD: Like the old farmer overalls.

RB: Yes. I had a head on the boat. She never had time to go to the head. But as soon as she got to the house, then she couldn't get off the boat fast enough. [laughter] She didn't have time out there. She had those things on. She would sit on the boat, on the seat like that and get the fish right between her legs and work on them. I tried to do it for her, most of it, but I couldn't do it all the time. She'd come home with her fish scum all around here. It didn't worry her one darn bit. You can imagine when you put them like that, they got all over you. They're scum.

KD: That is right.

RB: [laughter] I'll tell you, I never saw anybody like to fish.

KD: Yes. My grandfather was a big fisherman. When I was a little girl, I learned how to drive the boat at the same time I learned how to walk it seems. I just always had a fishing pole in my hand. I was always fishing as a kid.

RB: Yes. You liked it that way too.

KD: My mother was divorced from my father. So, my grandfather was my male influence when I was a little kid. That is always true. My grandfather and I would go out fishing all the time together. But I never filleted a fish. Never. That is the man's job.

RB: She would do it. She could do it. But then she would do it. I tried to help her all along because I wanted her – because she loved to fish so good. I loved to see her catch fish. But I told her she had to learn to do that. So, if she had to, she could do it.

KD: That is right.

RB: She did.

KD: It is more fun when you do that part all yourself anyway.

RB: Yes.

KD: Before I moved down here, I lived in Jacksonville. I went out fishing with a bunch of my male friends on a head boat. A couple of them never really fished before. Do not ask me how or why. I sat there and taught them how to bait their hooks with squid. That is what the head boat was using, was squid. So, I would sit there and bait their hooks and my hooks. Then we'd fish. When they would catch a fish, I was the one that had to take the fish off the hooks for them because they did not know how. It was like, I spent that day trying to teach them. Now, it has been six years since that first time. Now they are pretty good fishermen. They know how to do it themselves. It is the same time...

RB: That's what I told her. You've got to learn to do it if you're going to do that much fishing.

KD: That is right. I have not fished at all down here with a hook and line or even a handline.

RB: You don't know how to use a handline.

KD: I have never really used a handline. My husband's got a really nice pogo, wooden pogo that he had made. But every time I go out fishing with him, we are diving. We do not spend much time actually fishing. So, it is something I need to learn. I have told him he needs to teach me.

RB: To do what now?

KD: He needs to teach me how to use a handline properly so that I do not cut my hand and so I know how to.

RB: Yes. That's very important.

KD: One of our best friends, Peter Gladding, he is a commercial fisherman in Stock Island, Key West. Peter and his wife Mary are handline fishermen. They have a 43-foot-long boat, an old Torres, which is one of the old Key West boats. Peter and Mary go out fishing for a week at a time, to Tortugas, by themselves, just the two of them. They catch so much fish. You hear these people saying, "All the handliners, the reason we have got to use fish traps, the reason we have got to use all these other fishing gears is because we cannot catch fish handlining." That is bull. Because this couple catches more fish...

RB: Take a real good commercial fishing, you won't see a pole on a boat.

KD: That is right.

RB: This guy I'm talking about now, he didn't want you to even put one on the boat.

KD: That is right. The only time there is a fishing pole on our boat is when we have a scientist

come on the boat. We do some scientific charters now, research . We bring scientists out so they can go and look at things and stuff. That is the only time we had fishing poles on the boat. Otherwise, it is either handlines or spear guns.

RB: You can catch them many more fish with a handline than you can a pole. After you catch them, you can, with a handline, pull them in, take them off, and catch another one.

KD: My husband was out in the South Pacific a couple months ago, in New Guinea. He was fishing with some people. He brought over his – from here, he brought his pogo. He has got a wooden handline pole. He brought it over to South Pacific with him. On his boat, there are four other guys. Three of those four had nice fishing poles with the reels, sport fishing poles. They got into a big school of wahoos. Over in the South Pacific, there are a lot of sharks. A lot of sharks. So, they are fishing. None of the guys with the fishing poles caught a fish that they could bring in. By the time they reeled it in, the shark had gotten the fish. All they would be left was the head. All the pictures you see of the fish they caught were from my husband and his handline. Because just like you said, in the boat. Sharks did not have a chance to get the fish. It was funny because...

RD: Handline fishing is not the fun part. That's not the – but for Claire and I, it was. She got to where, after a while, she would use a [inaudible]. But when she got into something real good, she would have that handline there.

KD: It is more of a fight. It is more like you are really fishing when you are using a handline.

RB: [laughter]

KD: I watch my husband. I just am amazed to watch him do it.

RB: He's done it a long time, huh?

KD: He has done it since he was a kid, yes, so, probably about 30-something years. Everywhere he travels, he brings that no matter what. If he cannot fit clothes in a suitcase, that is fine with him as long as he has his handline. [laughter]

RB: Good.

KD: I remember the Natives in the truck.

RB: You ought to know Jack Steadman.

KD: I think I know of him. My husband knows Dick pretty well.

RB: I bet you that if that's Dick Steadman, how old is he?

KD: I do not know.

RB: You don't know.

KD: I have not talked to him yet. I was given his name, and his phone number to call. Somebody gave it to me. I asked my husband if he knew him and if he would be a good person to talk to. He goes, "Oh yes, yes, that is him, definitely." I do not know how old he is. I would say he is got to be over forty. I do not know.

RB: Not a young man.

KD: No, he is over forty, and I would say probably fifty or sixty.

RB: He could probably tell you some stories better than me even.

KD: Do you remember any freshwater springs out in the water, especially back here? Remember hearing any stories about freshwater springs?

RB: I have heard of them, yes, but I don't remember a thing about.

KD: What did you hear?

RB: I don't know.

KD: Earlier I thought of this, your brother moved down here, ran the car dealership in Key West, and then I guess he was on the county commission or city commission.

RB: He was on the county commission. He was chairman of the board of county commissioners.

KD: How did the Conchs accept him? Did it take a while?

RD: Well, not too long, because he'd come in and just was one of the Conchs, you know what I mean?

KD: He fit right in with them?

RB: Yes. Pretty well. Of course, I'm sure he had to – being in a dealership of a car – no, he fit in pretty good right away. I was going to tell you, I got off when I was at the – and I told you about the trucks – when I came down here, was later. The building was up and ready to plaster. One of the Conchs had built a little stand across the street. He made donuts and coffee and sold it. He would come through the building at 10:00 and at 2:00 and sell us donuts and coffee. The contractor decided he's taking up too much of the time. He told him he couldn't come back in the building anymore. Okay. That's okay, no problem. So, the next morning – my brother told me the night before, he told me what was going to happen. He says, "Everybody's going to get down off the scaffold and go across the street and get their donuts and coffee." He said, "You'll come with them." I said, "I don't care for that coffee." "Don't make a damn difference whether you like it or not, if you throw it out. Come over there and get the donuts and coffee. Because,"



he says, "if you don't, you won't be very popular around here." [laughter] So, next morning, everybody got down across the street and had their donuts and coffee and come back at my door.

KD: Your brother was smart.

RB: You know what happened? Contractor comes back, and says, "Okay, it's all right, come on back in." [laughter] Because you know what I mean.

KD: It took more time for those people to get down and go across.

RB: Yes, sure. He knew that would happen. [laughter] I had something I said in my mind I was going to tell you. I should've written it down. [inaudible] What are the stories in that piece that I gave you there? Let me see that. I might think of something else. You don't care about mosquito stories?

KD: Actually, yes, because a lot of times mosquito stories relate to other things. I will listen to a mosquito story.

RB: Well, now this story happened in Homestead. But it's the same story that's in here. It could have happened just as well here as it could have happened in Homestead. I went to work for (Mr. Chrome?) when I was nineteen years old. I was just about twenty. My brother had given me money to come down and go to work for him because he worked for Mr. Chrome on the railroads. He told me all about how to – where to come. There was another story. Do you know the thing about Pigeon Key?

KD: Very little. I know that it was one of the main areas when they were building the railroad. That is about it.

RB: I don't know much about other than when they built all those buildings, maybe not all of them, but the old ones. They were built right there on Pigeon Key. You know why they were built on Pigeon Key? Because there weren't so many mosquitoes over there. Mosquitos, you see, it's out there in the ocean by itself. The wind blows the mosquitoes away. They aren't got any place to hide. I'm sure there were mosquitoes there, but they weren't near as bad as there were other places. But this was what I was going to tell you. I went down. I got to Homestead at 5:00a.m. on morning train. I knew how to get out to the grove. I went out there, and they put me to work. This old man was cutting the dead wood out of the trees, big grapefruit trees. Put me to picking this stuff up and taking it over to the road. So, the truck – every so many rows of trees, there was a road. Put it along that road so the truck could pick it up. Put me out there. I don't wear white duck pants. I could look down, and they'd turn black. You couldn't see your pants. They were so thick. You didn't hit a mosquito like that. You pushed them off like that. I'm no kid. I never saw mosquitoes like that. I'd seen mosquitoes, plenty of them. You just couldn't do anything. I decided, heck, these damn mosquitoes will kill you. [laughter] I got afraid. So, the more I thought about it, the more – I'm right by myself. The more I thought about it, the more concerned I got. Finally, I said, "I don't believe anybody could work out here in these mosquitoes like this."

[end of transcript]