Narrator: John Banyas

Interviewer: Michael Jepson

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Abstract: Conducted on March 5, 2006, by Michal Jepson at the Florida Maritime Museum at Cortez, this interview captures the life and experiences of John Banyas, a third-generation fisherman from Cortez, Florida. Banyas reminisces about the vibrant fishing community of Cortez during his youth, describing the prevalence of gillnets, the busy fish houses, and the collaborative spirit among local fishermen. He shares his personal history, beginning fishing at a young age with his grandfather, who built boats, and later transitioning to full-time fishing after high school. Banyas details the various fish species he targeted, primarily mullet, and the demanding nature of commercial fishing using monofilament gillnets. A significant portion of the interview focuses on the impact of the 1995 net ban on the Cortez fishing community. Banyas explains that the ban, influenced by misleading conservation campaigns, abruptly ended traditional gillnet fishing, resulting in significant economic hardship and job loss for many fishermen. He discusses the aftermath, including his pivot to bait fishing and boat maintenance to sustain his livelihood. Banyas reflects on the decline in water quality and fish populations, attributing these issues to red tides and increased coastal development. Despite the challenges, he acknowledges the community's resilience and efforts to preserve their heritage through organizations like the Florida Institute for Saltwater Heritage. Banyas remains uncertain about the future of commercial fishing in Cortez but emphasizes the community's persistent spirit in adapting to new circumstances.

Michael Jepson: John, what I do usually is I just ask you to talk a little bit about what you know about Cortez in the early days when you were a child, if you came down to the village then, if you were around. What was it like then? What do you remember about Cortez when you were young?

John Banyas: Well, lots of gillnets around, [laughter], a lot of gillnets, boats, a lot of people fishing, people working on stuff, nets being hung in, being worked on.

MJ: You come from a fishing family. Can you tell me about the history and your history in commercial fishing?

JB: Well, the fishing was on my mom's side of the family. I am a third-generation fisherman from Cortez, and my grandfather used to build boats here at N.E. Taylor Boatworks. He had a shop under his house with some railways. He used to build a lot of boats, shrimp boats, scows, all kinds of different skiffs, and stuff.

MJ: How young were you when first started fishing?

JB: I went fishing with my grandfather. The first time I was probably ten or twelve. We grabbed a piece of net from a guy who was throwing it away. We fixed it up and put it on a little skiff and went fishing. [laughter]

MJ: From then on, did you fish full-time as you got older? What's your personal history in commercial fishing? How did you get started? What'd you do?

JB: I fished on and off up until high school, and then, [when] I was about out of high school, I started fishing full-time. I just listened to too many of my grandfather's fishing stories and ended up wanting to go fishing. [laughter]

MJ: What kind of fishing did you do?

JB: We started out just mullet fishing – mullet fishing, mackerel, pompano, a few trout, but mostly mullet for the most part.

MJ: Using what kind of gear?

JB: Using the monofilament gillnet. It was a hard-living, back-breaking long days, but it was fun and worthwhile. [laughter]

MJ: Could you make a living commercial fishing back then?

JB: It might not have been a good living. I mean, you didn't get rich, but you just paid the bills and paid for groceries and put a little money in the bank. It was a living, yes.

MJ: What about the rest of this community? What was it like in those days when you were fishing? Were they a lot of fishermen here? Were they fishing in a similar manner? What was it like then?

JB: Yes, there. There were like four fish houses, and each fish house probably had anywhere from ten or fifteen fishermen to twenty or thirty fishermen, and they were all going pretty strong. Yes, they stayed real busy.

MJ: What was it like out on the water back then? What do you remember about seeing other fishermen out there that you knew? Did you work together? What was it like on the water?

JB: Well, some people would go out mullet fishing, some people would be mackerel fishing, or some people would bait fishing. So everybody was spread out. Everybody worked together. There were no hard feelings or nothing. Everybody did pretty well together; helped each other out, let them know where they'd been, or what they've seen. It worked well.

MJ: What was your impression of the net ban? What was that all about?

JB: Well, the net ban. There was a management process in place. There were gillnet restrictions already as far as the size of the mesh and quotas, which was working well at the time. We had just been in that process; it seemed to be three or four years into it. Most of the biologists were happy with that and the results from it, and then all of a sudden, the net ban came along, where they were throwing pictures of Japanese trawlers catching porpoises and turtles in offshore driftnets and stuff, which was blown way out of proportion of what we actually do around here. So basically, the population got just brainwashed in believing the commercial fishing industry was killing all the sea life for no reason.

MJ: How did that make you feel during that time?

JB: Well, everybody – biologists, biologists with the state, everybody doing research on it just had a lot of time in it and knew what the results were going to be. It could have been just a well-managed fishery, but we never had time to actually let that fall into place before it pretty much just got wiped out.

MJ: How did the net ban affect you and your fishing business personally? What happened after the net ban?

JB: Well, about eighty percent of our livelihood was just gone. Nobody could really do anything after that point; either that or you were automatically turned into a felon or a criminal. [laughter] It just made an honest, hard-working fishermen turn into a criminal overnight. It was pretty sad to see that the state and the general population could turn their back on you because a lot of these fishermen, they fought in the wars, and they paid their dues for freedom like everybody else did. Then they just got shut down because of sport fishermen wanting more fish or developers wanting more land.

MJ: Do you think there were ulterior motives there with the net ban? It was promoted as a conservation effort.

JB: Yes. Well, you look at it now, and you figure, "Well, what good did it do us?" Because the fish aren't [inaudible] over right now out there. Basically, it's worse now than it was when we were gillnetting. To look around, and I don't see as many trout. I don't see as many redfish. Just this past season, I was out looking through the potholes and everything, and you don't see near the fish out there you used to, and the water quality really went to crap because we've had – well, last year, we had red tides about all year long. I actually had to shut down my freezers, where I was processing bait. We let nine employees go, tied the boat up to the dock, and called it quits for the year because the red tide was so bad.

MJ: What happened to the other people in this village after the net ban? What did you see? What were some of the impacts?

JB: Well, I was able to go bait fishing, which is where I was shoved offshore three miles, and nobody else could really adapt to that. They were either retired or older fishermen, where they just couldn't spend a hundred-thousand dollars, get into another fishery, and try to keep going. They were just too old and too weathered to pick a new fishery or to manage something different. So they just kind of fell to the wayside.

MJ: What did the other fishermen do, the other net fishermen, the younger guys?

JB: Everybody pretty much went and found another job, went to the county for work, or got in lawn businesses, or starting building docks, or just did whatever possible to make ends meet. Some of them still tried to fish.

MJ: Can you make a living commercial fishing today?

JB: Well, they say on the amendment it was to regulate gillnet fishing, and they say that you can do it with five-hundred square feet, which is – it's five-hundred square feet and a two-inch mesh, but nothing is going to stick in a two-inch mesh and five-hundred square feet at five-foot deep. [laughter]. It's no net. You just can't catch fish in a five-hundred square foot piece of net. It just don't work. You couldn't catch fish with eight five-hundred square foot pieces of net; it just doesn't happen. With a nylon two-inch mesh, they just look at it and laugh. It's not a viable means of catching fish, so they just give you gear that the rest of the population thought you could still manage and make a living with, and you can't do nothing with it. That's about a piece of net you would hang on your wall – a good decoration. [laughter]

MJ: Well, what do you think is going to be the future for commercial fishing?

JB: It doesn't look like there's going to be any because the water quality is dropping and the red tide is so bad. It's here every year. Last year, we thought it was going to be here for a month, two or three weeks, like typically it's been in the past five, six years. So when it was here all year – that's the first I have seen it here all year long. So I don't know what to think of it. If the

water quality keeps going down and all the fish just keep dying, there's not going to be much of a fishery at all.

MJ: What do you think it's going to mean for this community? I mean, this working waterfront has been here for hundreds of years. How will that affect this community when that can no longer be viable? Is there a way that you see that it could stay a viable fishing community?

JB: I don't know. Nobody can go offshore far enough to catch anything as far as the smaller boats. The population is just overwhelming the fishery in the bay. I don't know what they would do to survive. They can catch a little bit of bait. I guess that's what I've done since the net ban. But you can only sell so much bait; that won't support a whole community. There's three of us able to bait fish out of the sixty or eighty fishermen that were here before. So if the water quality goes and the bait fishing goes, that's just about all that's left. You've got a couple of bait shrimpers.

MJ: What do you think is going to be the future for Cortez Bait and Seafood?

JB: Well, I don't know. [laughter] I hate to say condos or building or housings or other docks.

MJ: You have diversified into the boat works now. Do you think there's a future for other types of keeping this a working waterfront?

JB: Yes, the boatyard I picked up – N.E. Taylor Boatworks, which was my grandfather's business. So I pick that up in the meantime, which has helped a lot because of the growing population and just the development around here. Every fifty houses that are built, at least one person's got to have a boat to want to go out in, a place to tie it, and a place to work on. So it's slowly changing. We've lost three fish houses, and two of the three are now marinas and boatyards, so it looks like its slipping towards boat maintenance and repairs and drydock and storage. Maybe keep a little piece of the fish house to keep it alive to see if anything happens, if anything is still worthwhile. To go out there and catch something, we can still process it, and see what the next ten years brings, and see what happens. It's hard to say. [laughter]

MJ: Is there anything else that you think – the title of this documentary is going to be *Persistence and Resilience in Two Florida Fishing Communities*. We're looking at Cedar Key and Cortez. I am talking to people to see if – there seems to be a perception that there is that resilience, that people want to stay on the water and still try to keep this is a fishing community. Do you see that?

JB: Yes. Everybody is still trying. I mean, even with these five-hundred square foot nets that they've tried to give us, there's still the younger fishermen out there that can still get out there and manage to do it and still want to do it. So, yes, there's still ambition with the people and the community to keep going any which way they can. They've done good with it. I mean, just the cast nets and five-hundred square feet, they've still managed to catch a few. But they're always looking for something different or other means to catch fish or another angle, another approach. I know they've tried clamming around here, and the climate wasn't just right for it; the water quality wasn't just right. Oh, well.

MJ: The last thing I want to talk about is, you've got a couple of organizations in the community that have really tried to preserve this community the way it is. Can you tell me a little bit about that? What is going on in the community in that regard?

JB: Well, we got the fish preserve out there, which was sold to the people here in Cortez, the Florida Institute for Saltwater Heritage. They've done well with that in order to preserve at least what was the livelihood, preserve the memories.

MJ: Alright. That's all I got.

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 8/26/2020