

Narrator: Bob Rich

Interviewers: Suzana Blake

Location: Miami, Florida

Date of Interview: January 15, 2020

Project Name: Endangered Fishing Traditions of the Greater Miami Area

Project Description: Broadly, the project seeks to preserve the rich history of endangered fishing traditions in the Greater Miami Area. These oral histories expand our knowledge and enrich our understanding of the region's fisheries as well as the role that fishing has had in shaping the region's economic and cultural life. Our goal was to interview key individuals connected to the fishing history of Miami, including commercial and for-hire fishers, fish dealers/processors, fish markets, and bait and tackle shops. Geographically, we aim to cover major fishing areas that are endangered and undergoing rapid change. These include the following: Miami River, Coconut Grove (Montys), and Haulover Park in North Miami. The first collection of interviews is focused on the Miami River. These interviews are conducted in English and Spanish.

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Abstract: On January 15, 2020, Bob Rich was interviewed by Suzana Blake at the Southeast Fisheries Science Center. Rich shared his personal and professional history, focusing on his involvement in the maritime industry in Miami, particularly around the Miami River. He discussed his father's founding of a marine electronics business, which he joined after school. Rich reflected on the evolution of the business from selling simple marine equipment to adapting to technological advancements like GPS. Rich described the diverse clientele his business served, including fishermen, yacht owners, and even drug traffickers, which provided him with a wealth of stories. He detailed significant changes in the Miami River's commercial fishing industry, highlighting a pivotal event in the early 1980s when overfishing led to a dramatic decline in Spanish mackerel populations. This event, coupled with urban development and increased competition from imported seafood, shifted the local fishing focus to more sustainable practices, particularly lobster fishing. Rich also mentioned the socio-economic changes along the

river, from a working waterfront to more commercial and residential developments. He reminisced about the rich history of the area, including interactions with various colorful characters and notable establishments like Captain Tom's and East Coast Fisheries. Rich emphasized the hard work and resilience of local fishermen and the ongoing tension between preserving the river's working character and the pressures of urbanization.

Suzana Blake: I can hear you very nicely. All right. It's working now. Today is January 15, 2020.

Bob Rich: I don't need my lawyer, do I?

SB: No. [laughter]

BR: Okay.

SB: We are here with Bob Rich at the Southeast Fisheries Science Center, in the Annex. We are going to talk to him about his book, the Miami River, his life and his experience as a business owner in the maritime industry in the Miami region, and specifically on the Miami River. So I would like to start by asking you a little bit about your personal history, like where you born, where is your family from, how did you get into the business of selling maritime equipment, and then we'll go into talking a little bit more about the book you just wrote.

BR: Okay. Anyway, well, I'm basically from here, went to school here, from a little on up. My dad, at one time, was an engineer for Pan Am, but he was the independent type. So he gets out and starts this little business, which turned into – just evolved into selling marine electronics. The whole industry was very small then. You didn't even need a radio and a depth finder and so forth, but it's changed now with GPS [Global Positioning System] and so forth. Over that whole sixty years or so that he started the business when I got out of school and so forth, at a certain point, I decided to join that business. So I did. Anyway, our business serviced pretty much, as I say in this book – sooner or later everybody is going to need a radio. So we got to know everybody – the cargo guys, the yacht guys, the speedboat guys, the drug guys, the fishermen, and everybody. So I met a lot of different kinds of characters, and at a certain point, a few years ago, I decided I'd like to put some of those stories together. I ended up with about two hundred stories with the different characters. That's where we are. I've got the fishermen, which is actually kind of a small part of the river – the commercial fishermen. You've got sport fishermen in a little different niche. Anyway, I've known a lot of them, and that's as good a background I can give you – without going into every detail, right?

SB: Here is my supervisor, Matt McPherson.

Matt McPherson: Hi, how are you?

BR: Hi, Bob Rich. Nice to see you.

MM: Matt McPherson. Nice to meet you.

SB: We just started talking.

MM: Oh, you did? Did you start officially?

SB: We did. Do you want me to pause it?

BR: No problem.

MM: What

SB: Do you want me to pause it for a second?

MM: Well, yes. It would probably be a good idea.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SB: Okay. So let's go back. I think I restarted, but it's okay. So again, this is the interview with Bob Rich on January 15, 2020. So you were telling me about the fact that you inherited the job from your father in a sense. He started it, and you worked with him.

BR: Well, I worked with him. I didn't inherit it from him.

SB: Right.

BR: I worked with him. He passed away a couple of years ago. Not that this is really relevant to it, but the business of what we were in changed a lot, too, like all businesses change, and evolved into something that we didn't really fit in as well because the products became more widely available and didn't require as much technical knowledge. So, I don't do it anymore. Or actually, I do it from a computer in my back room, a little bit.

SB: So, it has changed to an online business.

BR: Well, a little bit.

SB: It used to be on the waterfront.

BR: Just to keep interested.

SB: Where was it located?

BR: We were on the Tamiami Canal. You know where that is, right?

SB: Yes.

BR: We were right next to Bertram Yacht in a building that is now Hopkins-Carter Marine Hardware. We sold it to them. That's where our final location was. We had a couple. My dad didn't start there.

SB: Where did he [start]?

BR: He started in a little tiny place over on Eighth Avenue.

SB: Okay.

BR: You know?

SB: It was never located on the Miami River.

BR: I'm sorry?

SB: It was never located on the Miami River, per se?

BR: Well, the Tamiami Canal is the Miami River.

SB: Is the Miami River.

BR: I mean –

SB: Yes. That's what they –

BR: Technically, it's I suppose –

SB: Right, it's a continuation.

BR: I suppose that actually, technically, the Miami River stops at about Twenty-Seventh Avenue. It disappears into some weeds because that other thing is called the Miami Canal.

SB: Right.

BR: But we all call it the Miami River.

SB: That's interesting.

BR: Yes.

SB: Got it. Alright. So, what have you noticed or experienced in terms of – you had mentioned earlier that the commercial fishermen are actually a small portion of the Miami River economic activity. Has it always been like that?

BR: No. Well, no. Of course, way back, we didn't have any tourist industry, or hardly any sportfishing industry, or any of that, or cargo. So what boats there were, were fishing boats. I guess you talked to the guys from Casablanca as well, right?

SB: We are trying to.

BR: Okay.

MM: We did. We went to –

SB: We've got in touch with them.

BR: Because they now bought a building which had been vacant for maybe twenty-five years. Basically only used for crime movies and stuff. It was called Captain Tom's. It's right down the street from where Casablanca is. That was a famous restaurant and fishing – the fishermen would come there and buy fish. It was a seafood market and restaurant. It was one of several that were down the river – East Coast Fisheries, down further, which was there for many years. A guy named Schwartz came down from up north and started it. Had it going for a long time, and anyway, it – you know, things changed, and somebody wanted the property. So one weekend, they bulldozed the building. It went down. Even though it was designated historic, nobody would know anything about it. So that's what happened to that one. That was a fishery, a fish house.

SB: When was that, more or less?

BR: That was in – not that long ago. Maybe this century. Everybody thought the building was kind of neat, and it had a restaurant. It was out of code and so forth, but it was a great fishing dock, too. Commercial fishermen came there – not just lobstermen, but people who would bring mackerel and bring snapper and grouper. I guess maybe a pivotal moment in the fishing industry here was in the early eighties – it's in here somewhere. Well, back for a long time, along when I was a kid, it was a ritual this time of year to go in Biscayne Bay and catch Spanish mackerel. There still are some, but it was – people would go out on the weekends and catch what they wanted for food at home and to have dinner. Well, at a certain point, the perfect storm of things, they migrate during the winter. There was a giant migration of these Spanish mackerel. At the same time, I think it might have been Pete (Schwartz?), or other people, decided what we're going to do here this year is we're going to use spotter airplanes to spot these schools. So, you had an unusually large amount of fish, and the airplanes, and the roller nets. What happened was they caught about three million pounds of these things in two days. Brought them to the dock up the river to East Coast Fisheries, and of course, you can imagine what that was like about a week later. You know? For years later, there were hardly any Spanish mackerel, because it was just one of those unfortunate events, right? That put a lot of fishermen out of business. Plus, it wasn't too good on King mackerel either – put them out of business, the fishermen out of business. Anyway, one of those events that can sometimes change history a bit.

SB: Right. So before that, the fishing was focused on King mackerel?

BR: Sorry?

SB: Before this event, a lot of the recreational fishing?

BR: Oh, it was recreational fishing –

SB: As well as commercial?

BR: – but it was also commercial fishing but on a much smaller scale. It was not with airplanes and giant roller nets and things like that. So it was on a scale that was sustainable, let's say, right?

SB: Right.

BR: Which is, I guess, what everybody wants, right?

SB: Yeah.

BR: I mean, why don't you keep it that way? When you put it out of balance, then you – well, I'm not telling you what happens. You know what happens, right?

MM: So you were saying that that event was really the beginning of the end of that fishery.

BR: I'm just saying it could have been a pivotal event.

MM: Pivotal event.

BR: One of many. I mean, obviously, the growth of downtown Miami and the money is what changes things a lot. So who's going to have a dock where he's going to get a couple of thousand dollars a month from six fishing boats, when you can sell that to somebody who can put up a bunch of loft apartments for attorneys, right? That's how that works.

MM: So there used to be a whole – you said there was a whole series of seafood markets all in that area?

BR: There were seafood markets.

MM: So East Coast Fisheries was one of the big ones, and then Captain –

BR: Captain Tom's.

MM: Captain Tom's.

BR: I'm just naming a couple of them. But there were restaurants, which now have changed to – you've got Garcia's, Casablanca, Kiki, and, of course, they changed too. They've become a little different scale. They're not quite as blue-collar as the old ones were.

SB: So the old ones were –? Interesting. Was there anything that was more like the fancier restaurants in the past?

BR: More what?

SB: Fancier?

BR: Well, Captain Tom's was a restaurant for everybody. I wrote a story about him in here. I never knew it until I did the research, but all kinds of famous people went there – Hemingway and Bogart and President Truman, and so forth. But it was just a family restaurant. It wasn't valet parking and all that kind of stuff. It was just a restaurant. Captain Tom would give bait to the kids so they could fish in the river there while they were waiting for a meal, and so forth. So homey, but it did have the celebrities who would come here. For whatever it's worth. All up and down there river there were little places – sometimes right on the river, but commercial fishing to my knowledge, was, in my lifetime, not a huge thing there because they started moving over to Watson Island, to Miami Marina – or before it was Miami Marina – and to other parts of the Bay in Miami – the commercial fishermen did. Obviously, they've got to find places that are cheap or reasonable enough, but they want to be close to a market. So Casablanca and Garcia's, those guys were fishermen before anything, and the restaurants came afterward. Why not? Right? Captain Tom's is the same way. So the lobster fishing has been the one that's been the most durable. I'm not quite sure where they go, because there aren't that many lobsters right around here. Down in the Keys, there are. It's a very well managed fishery. You guys are familiar with the lobster wars of the Seventies, between the Bahamas and the Cubanos. No, you are not?

SB: I would love to hear about it.

MM: No.

BR: Well, actually, it goes back a little before that, because when the Cubans came, your lobster fisher was just your regular old redneck fisherman, guys. The Cubans came. Well, they'd been fishing for lobsters in Cuba all their lives, so they were pretty good at it. They came in, and it became a competition there. The old guys didn't like the Cubans, and the Cubans –it was one of those things. They had a little strike, and they had this and that. The Cubanos finally won. The other guys kind of faded into doing other things.

MM: Who had the strike?

BR: Well, they had a loosely organized association of fishermen. Then the buyers, who were maybe four or five buyers of big wholesale houses, became a cartel. So they said, "Wait a second. If you're going to strike, we're going to strike, and we'll get our lobster from Nicaragua." It all got settled. But at about that time, Bahamas got its – what do you call it – the full independence. They were sort of semi-independent from Britain. They got their full independence. And they immediately established an EEZ. Is that what it's called? Economic?

MM: Exclusive Economic Zone.

BR: Exclusive Economic Zone? Well, these Cubans weren't used to that. They had been fishing in the Bahamas. They were still going over there and fish. And it became what was called the Lobster War. There was a little bloodshed, and some guys went to Fox Hill in Nassau; there was a bad prison, and this and that, too. Finally, the poaching got to a reasonable level. It's still done, right? But when it first happened, the Cubanos didn't say, "Yeah, so?"

[inaudible] Anyway, that changed the dynamic of the lobster fishing a bit here because those guys would just go over there, and they've got a lot of lobster in the Bahamas, right?

MM: Right.

BR: So was one of the events that changed it. So you've still got your lobster guys here. See the traps all stacked up. There is a guy named Lazaro Priegues. Do you know that name?

SB: Yes, for sure.

BR: You know him, then?

SB: No.

BR: You don't?

SB: Well, we've –

BR: You've talked to him?

MM: The son, maybe.

SB: We didn't get to talk to him, but we have him on our list, the Priegues family, yeah.

BR: Okay. Well, I mean, they are very famous for establishing – all of a sudden, he was the King of Lobster, you know? He still lives over in the Spring Garden area. I don't know if – see, I'd walk by where they were, and I know they had two kids, too, who weren't as excited about fishing as he was. They had property along the river there, by the Miami River Inn, the strip next to the First Street Bridge that's being rebuilt. I'm pretty sure that the kids decided that, well, that property is worth more to us than for us to go out fishing. So they were going to put up the fishing – last time I looked there, there was no fishing gear left there. So I think they might be going out of the lobster business. Which is one of the things you're talking about here, right?

SB: Right.

MM: Right.

BR: So nowadays, you can go into a Whole Foods Market or something like that, and you can get fish from anywhere in the world, and lobster from anywhere in the world. We don't really have to have – we don't have the need so much for local product anymore. I mean, it's good, it's better, but it's competition, too. I think a lot of the lobsters in Whole Foods come from Nicaragua. Right?

SB: Do you happen to know – and you might not know this – but you said when the Cubans came, things changed, there was more competition all of a sudden, for the same resource. Do

you happen to remember anything about the way they used to fish, how it was different, the Cuban fishing? The tools they used, the gear they used?

BR: They used the same old wooden traps that everybody used, which are the only legal traps you can use here because they deteriorate.

SB: So they had to adapt.

BR: But I think fishing, a lot of comes down to who works the hardest? [laughter] It's hard work. You've got to be out. You come in; you don't just go home. Sometimes you've got to fix your gear; you've got to get up early, you've got to go out there. We're talking about lobstering. My experience with fishermen is there are some guys think like fish. They know where to go. They just have it in them. I've been fishing with guys – I had no idea what they were doing, and all of a sudden, put your line over there, and [inaudible]. But I think with the lobstering, it really comes down – well, those guys, those Cubans that made the effort to get here had some work ethic, and so they worked hard. I'd say that's ninety percent of it: being there, being on time, working hard. Maybe the other guys had been taking it for granted a little bit. I don't know.

SB: Have you ever met any of the old-timers, the pre-Cuban lobster fishermen?

BR: Not of the lobster fishing guys.

SB: Any other commercial –?

BR: No, but I've got something written here how they changed their lifestyle. But of regular fishermen, I did. Oh, yes. I had a guy who was a good fisherman. This guy's name was Captain Tom – another Captain Tom. Captain Tom (Hamlin?). Captain Tom (Hamlin?) worked out of Pier Five with a charter boat. Captain Tom (Hamlin?) had polio when he was younger, so he had a hard time getting around – crutches and stuff, but he was built like this, looked like a Spencer Tracy kind of a guy. He was a great fisherman. At a certain point, he just got tired of taking people out fishing. So he went into commercial fishing. He got a little Bertram, a thirty-one foot Bertram. It's kind of a fancy boat for a commercial fishing boat, but he rigged it up as a yellowtail boat. He got those things; you call them flopper stoppers that go out on the side that keeps the boat from rolling. I went fishing with him once over at the Cay Sal Bank. He might have been poaching; I don't know. I was a kid. [laughter] It was the Bahamas. But we fished all night, he and his mate, and I'm just trying to get out of their way. They were hauling in yellowtail snapper. It's a beautiful fish to eat. And you've got to catch them with hook and line; you don't catch them with nets. But they become very active. You just got to throw something in the water and *boom, boom, boom*. So he's an old school fisherman that I knew, and it was work, and it was an all-night trip back to Snake Creek. Then, with these fishermen, and this goes for fishing probably everywhere, but when the catch is good, you come to the wholesale house, a lot of boats there lined up in front of you, bringing their boxes of fish off, and the price is starting to go like this, right? Now you're there, and, of course it's the other way around. When the price is like this, there's no fish. So, you know, it's a tough deal, right?

MM: Yes, yes.

BR: So fishing – and you guys are studying fishermen and so forth – it’s something I guess you’ve got to really like. Because these guys don’t get rich doing it, but they’re independent, and they’ve got their own way of doing things. That’s all just my opinion and observation of these guys, but I’d say that probably fits a lot of them, you know? Yes. Most of them, a lot of them anyway, are missing at least one finger.

MM: Wow. That was the kind of fisherman that there were along the Miami River before –?

BR: Oh yes, Tom was. Tom Hamlin was.

MM: He was on the river?

BR: He was, yes. They ran out of here. But then he moved his boat down to the Keys, to Snake Creek, which is down near Islamorada.

MM: Right.

BR: And the Keys has got probably more commercial fishing now going than here, because here, recreational mostly, right? I mean, maybe the Keys is, too. This is a question. I really don’t have the answer to some of that.

SB: Right.

BR: But all I know about is some of these people –

SB: What you observed, yes.

BR: Some of these people on the river and how I watched – like that East Coast Fisheries building? Well, you can’t tell where it was anymore. I mean, it’s now some kind of an apartment. I don’t really like it, but it’s there, it’s changed. I mean, the whole lower river is a canyon now of buildings and all the little things are gone. But there was a lot of marine industry down there, not just fishing, but repair, boatyards, all that kind of stuff. And fishing boats need a boatyard, too. They can’t afford to go up to GlassTech or Bertram. Can’t afford that, right? So they’ve got to go places where they can get things done, within their pocketbook. So I guess I can’t tell you much more about those fishermen other than the ones I’ve met. There are others as well, like Tom, that I’ve met or I knew, or my dad knew. They’re all in a way cut out of the same khaki cloth, you know.

SB: Did a lot of them move to the Keys? Is that a pattern, them moving to the Keys?

BR: The Keys? I don’t know. I would say a lot of them were just – they were of an age that they just kind of like retire. The younger guys, more aggressive, they’re going to go where they can make some money, whether it be the Keys, West Coast, somewhere, or not even get in that business. Because, as we talked about, the fish that we can buy from South America, Ecuador, or Costa Rica – dolphin – mahi-mahi I guess they call it here, but dolphin, the stuff you can get in the store now, very little of it unless you go to the docks, is going to be local, and there’s

plenty of it. But these guys, they work for a lot less, ship it up here, and so forth. Frozen. So, with all of these dynamics, transportation –

SB: Labor costs.

BR: – and storage, ways of keeping fish, it's hard for a – unless you just have it in mind, I want fresh fish right from the dock, well – which is great. You used to be able to come right over here to that marina right here. Maybe you still can. Can you go over there and buy fish still?

MM: Yes, a little bit.

BR: (Crandon?).

MM: They have a small –

BR: Okay. Well, if you want to go to that effort, it's fine. It's going to be right out of the water, right? So, anyway, that's that.

SB: Have you noticed an abrupt change, besides the one you mentioned in the '80s when you think that the focus on fishing switched more towards lobstering because other fish became unavailable? Did you notice any other pivotal moments in the history of Miami River? Not only in terms of type of fishing but kind of type of businesses that are there, or people? How did the community change?

BR: Well, there's a constant conflict between the people who believe that they'd like to see a working river, and actually think a working river is more interesting than a sort of a Disneyland, an Epcot river that's got, you know, all of this fake stuff. But that goes on – that's been going on, and it's a battle between money and people. Basically, I'll boil it down to that. So the downtown portion, of course, is – there is so much money, it's just done. As you move further up, more commercial enterprises, and that's what I happen to like, but that's just me. But that conflict has been going on and will – you can pick up a financial magazine and talk about Miami. It will say, "The new hot spot, the Miami River." If you go further up, though, further north, it's more difficult for the developers because it's not as attractive for their buyers. You've got junkyards and bad dogs and stuff like that. So that's a bad and a good. It helps a little bit to balance things out. But as far as my knowledge of the fishing industry on the river, I really always think of lobster first. It seems to be the – I guess because it's very visible. The traps are stacked up everywhere. Actually, one interesting place – if you went up the river, you'd always see these traps, particularly out of season. But in season, [inaudible] gone because they are in the water. There is a place – do you know where Spring Garden is?

SB: No.

BR: Well, Spring Garden is right – if you go past Garcia's and Kiki and whatever that other place is there – Seaspice. Right. You go up to the end there, and there is a bridge, Fifth Street Bridge, a low bridge, and on the other side of that, there is a residential area, an old residential area. Been there from the beginning. It's still old houses. It's called Spring Garden. Right on

the corner of it, there is a point; it's a park now. Before it was a park, it was owned by a guy, and he rented it out to these lobster fishermen. Well, they weren't really lobster fishermen. They had a gang. These guys all wore a gold lobster around their neck because they were [inaudible]. But they were dope smugglers. But they stacked the lobster traps up like a fort.

SB: Amazing.

BR: You wouldn't even notice it. You had to go inside like this, like a maze, like a topiary, and inside they had a clubhouse and a giant safe and everything. And they never got caught. They just faded away. You know? Probably had fights. I don't know whatever happened, but they're gone. It was called the Lobster Trap Fort. Some people knew about it.

MM: That's funny.

BR: Anyways, it's kind of a funny story, but you'd go up the river, and even in lobster season, nobody noticed, "Why are these traps all still here, stacked up?" Anyway, I don't know much more I can tell you about the fishing. That's it.

SB: Well, tell me about the people you encountered in your day-to-day interactions with the business and the people you write about in the book. You said that you interacted with all kinds of people including –

BR: Yes, sure. Of course, because we –

SB: I'm interested more specifically with the people who also lived in the area. How did that change throughout time? How your clients all change through time?

BR: Well, I think anybody – you wouldn't know because you're too young, but Miami has obviously changed over all these years, from a rather simple place to – well, just look and see. It's different – a lot more money to start with – immense amounts more money. You can't count it, and who these people are, they're just a different breed of cat. They have big boats. Back in the old days, a big yacht – I mean, guys who were like real corporate guys and everything, seventy-foot yacht, that was it, man. Well, now, you see some stuff around here that two-hundred-and-fifty-feet. They're building a – Merrill-Stevens – you know where Merrill-Stevens is, right?

SB: I'm sorry?

BR: The boatyard. It's a shipyard. They were sort of like in the middle of the river – the main people there, right? Speaking of billionaires, a Turkish billionaire bought a few years ago, and he is redoing it. He is putting in a new Syncrolift to haul two-hundred-and-fifty-foot-plus yachts and paint them. For a million dollars, to get your boat painted. So that's a change that we've all kind of like seen, gone through. Some neighborhoods stay the same, like Spring Garden and parts of Coral Gables and stuff like that. It's different. Anyway, I don't know if I answered your question about how it's changed. The river has changed because, well, obviously, the community has become a lot more Latin. Not just Cubanos, but everything – Venezuelans, they

come with the money or did – and you know, all those people, and they come here to buy the condos and the cars and everything. So that's all had a trickle-down effect on the whole – everything.

MM: Is that regarded as part of Little Havana, down there? Some of it?

BR: Well, Little Havana – well, Little Havana is sort of – well, it still is Little Havana, but see, as neighborhoods change, people become more successful and everything, they move out of those neighborhoods. So Cubans have spread out everywhere, to Coral Gables and so forth. What was Little Havana is now Little Dominican Republic and Little Nicaragua and Little El Salvador. Because you can tell because you look at the restaurants and a lot of times they've got a flag on the window to let you know we've got your food here, your pupusa or whatever you want. But Eighth Street was Little Havana, up to about Twenty-Seventh. Now, they talk about like East Little Havana is now one of those hot neighborhoods, I guess. So if you want to invest in real estate, you want to invest in East Little Havana. I don't know. You guys have been around Miami a bit, and you know how neighborhoods change.

SB: Very fast, yes.

BR: People come in with money and so forth. I mean, look at Wynwood. What was it ten years ago? Nothing. But now you can't drive through there on the weekends, right? So now they're talking about Little River and North Beach and this – all these neighborhoods changing. They change, the people change. West Coconut Grove, which used to be Bahamian and Black, but they can't really – they are being moved out by people coming there and putting townhouses in for the lawyers. It's off the river, but I mean, it's basically a change in the community. The river is – most people don't even hardly know it's there until they have to wait for a bridge. Don't even know of its existence. But if you take a ride up the river in a boat, even today – twenty years ago, ten years ago, five years ago, today, maybe ten years from now – you'll find it's one of the most interesting six miles. I don't know if you've ever done one of the Paul George trips?

SB: You recommend that?

BR: Yes. A guy named Paul George is a real historian. All I do is I've met a lot of characters. But this guy Paul George is – he's a professor. A social scientist like you, I guess. He has written books. He's got a book called *Along the Miami River*. It doesn't probably go into some of the characters that I know, but it goes into what happened in 1710 right here, that kind of stuff. He does a river tour about once a week from Miami Bayside.

SB: I've got to do that.

MM: Oh, yes.

BR: Definitely worth it, if you want to get a first-hand view. It's nothing like being on the water. Do you want to do it even better? Get in a kayak. I've got a couple of kayaks I'll loan you. Do the river in kayaks.

MM: I would love to do that.

SB: Yes.

MM: That would be fun.

BR: It's awesome. Yes. Then, now you're looking up at the sides of ships, too. You see things from a perspective, which is way different. That's a trip. I have friends – I think I mentioned it on the back of this – that come from up north down to Miami to visit. We had a boat – I have a boat, kept up on the Canal, and they always – the first thing they want to do – you've got a lot of things to do in Miami – they want a trip down the Miami River to see things. When Dick Nixon was President, he used to stay over here in Key Biscayne, with his friend, Bebe Rebozo. He could do a lot of things as President. He was fascinated with Miami and the Miami Cubans. It's true stories that Bebe Rebozo had a little houseboat called the *Coco Lobo*. Nixon would say, of all things I want to do, I want to go up the Miami River in the *Coco Lobo*. I want to see the Cubans. I want to see this. And he did. He'd just go up to people. I mean, it's moments where his protectors were not sure who these people were coming up to him. There are weapons lying all around, and everybody is drinking. Here is the President, "How are you doing?" Right?

MM: Is there some particular reason he was fascinated by that community?

BR: Well, I think he was fascinated by their experience. Because that was way back, and it was something. This whole society had kind of like moved here. They just plopped down and started their own community, and got it going. And they worked. Again, to get back to that, they worked hard. You show up on time, and you work hard – two pretty key things. There are two guys – I'll tell you about fishing on Biscayne Bay – and they are part of the Miami River because they brought their crop, sold it up there by Captain Tom's. I mentioned before there was a dock there, called Lummus Landing. There was a park there called Lummus Park.

SB: It's still –

BR: It's by Garcia's and Casablanca, right.

SB: Yes, it's still there – the same name.

BR: Yes, Lummus Park is still – oh, yes. But Lummus Landing, where the people would – the Seminoles would come from up the river with their stuff to sell there, these guys –

SB: That goes that back in time?

BR: Oh, yes. Yes, way back. These two gentlemen were named – the two brothers – one was named Sir Lancelot Jones, and the other was named King Arthur Jones. That was their name. Their father, Israel Jones, had moved here, and they homesteaded down in Elliott Key, back a long time ago. Israel Jones's father was a slave. Israel Jones was a sharecropper. He made a little money, but he wanted his sons to grow into things. He was a reader. So he said, "I'm going to name them big." So he named them Sir Lancelot and King Arthur.

SB: Amazing.

BR: And they owned the southern end of Elliott Key, and they planted lime trees, and they were good. They planted lime trees and pineapples. At one time, they were the biggest key lime producers in the entire state, which meant the entire country.

MM: Wow, right.

BR: And the pineapples were great pineapples, like Bahamian pineapples. Really good pineapples. They would bring a boat up the Miami River and sell them. They also were, obviously, good fishermen. They were the type of people who understood fish. Because there are stories about people who – if you look them up, you’ll see a lot of people have written about the Jones brothers, the Jones Family. They are famous. I knew one guy – well, I knew him, but I didn’t know this story until later. Alex Balfe, he was the President of Merrill-Stevens. He was a big shot. He would go out fishing with Sir Lancelot. The way he put it, he would say, “I tell you, Sir Lancelot, I don’t want any grunt.” A grunt is a small little fish. You know what they are, right? The orange mouth? “I want a grouper.” And Lancelot said, “Okay, Mr. Balfe. Throw your line over there.” They’d always have a grouper, wouldn’t get a grunt. So these guys – talk about people who know how to fish. Me? I just go out there and kind of hope for the best. These guys, they know. They think like a fish. I mean, I’ve gone out sportfishing with guys on their big boats. Pretty boring. Real boring, actually. Fishing for big fish. But the mate, the guy who rigs the baits and everything, they’ve got a sense of when it’s going to happen – you’re going to get a marlin or [inaudible] or something [is] beyond me. I tell you, it’s thinking in another dimension. That’s fishermen, good fishermen. There are people who have – actually, there is one fishing guy who was on the river that I know, and they moved to the Keys. He has become a fishing guide down there. But they used to fish. They had a little boatyard on the river, their family did. Grandfather was a rum runner. Anyway, they ended up with a little boatyard, lived on the river. Lots of fish still in the river – [inaudible] and tarpon and stuff. He was a good fisherman, and at a certain point, he was actually going to go in the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation]. He moved to the Keys and became a bonefish guide. He’s one of those guys. When I’m fishing with them, they just kind of know. I can look at it, and all I see is really beautiful sky, water, and everything. This guy sees where the fish are. Guys in the Bahamas do that too. If you’ve ever gone fishing in the Bahamas with a guide?

MM: I haven’t.

SB: I haven’t either. I never went fishing anywhere. [laughter]

BR: Well, you want to – you need to. To get your head around these things, invest in the experience of fishing with a person who knows about fish. Actually, I have – there is one guy I know – a one-eyed guy. Not one-eyed – one eye is kind of like crazy – named Ricky Resto. Now, Ricky, I have known as a fisherman through our company. He would always come to us to get a new depth finder – you can see fish. But this guy is that guy who could – I could take you – some guy who owns twenty shopping centers and an eighty-foot boat and has got every reel and everything. Ricky Resto could go – do you know what a Cuban yo-yo is?

SB: No.

BR: The yo-yo is –

SB: I know the yo-yo, but Cuban yo-yo?

BR: That yo-yo. A yo-yo is a spool of line like this. These guys can, without a rod or anything, they just, with the right flick, the line goes out, and fish. It's about as basic as you can get.

MM: It's just a line on a basic spool.

BR: Yeah, it's on a –

SB: On a reel, yes.

BR: Yes, it's on a spool.

MM: They just throw it out, and then they reel it back around.

BR: You've just got to reel it back in. Yes. It's as basic as you can get. Ricky Resto could take one of those things, and against the guy with his six hundred thousand dollars worth of gear, and outfit and clothes, reels, whatever – it would be no contest.

MM: They called it a Cuban yo-yo?

BR: Cuban yo-yo, yes. You've got guys in this building who fish with Cuban yo-yos. I guarantee you.

MM: Oh, I'm sure, yes.

BR: Right, right. Or who knows what they are. If you're going to – your project is interesting, but you need to actually touch fish. That's as – what's his name? Dennis Miller says, "You've got to touch Indians," to get the real feel of it.

MM: Yes, yes.

BR: Right. Because what I'm telling you is really secondhand, too. I'm admitting that I don't know that much about fishing. I used to like to fish. Now I don't like to catch them anymore. I've done my catching and stuff, but I just go out there. But I'll send you Ricky's email address. He's a Cuban guy, and he's been around commercial fishing and working for patrons who are going to pay him to take him out and catch fish. He's not a captain as much as a fisherman. But this is the kind of guy who could give you a lot more insight – from first-hand knowledge – about these changes that you're talking about. Like I said, I've got in here guys with cargo ships, and I've got dope smugglers and racing boats and all that kind of stuff, sailors. So they are all boaters, and everybody likes to eat fish.

MM: Ricky? His name is Ricky?

BR: Resto, R-E-S-T-O.

MM: R-E-S-T-O, okay.

BR: Ricky Resto.

MM: Yeah, well, I think he would be –

SB: Yeah, interesting.

MM: – an interesting person.

BR: He is one I could put you in touch with. A lot of these other guys are dead. Tom Hamlin and so forth, and obviously Captain Tom, and the other Captain Tom. There's lots of Captain Toms on the river.

SB: That's funny.

BR: There's a bar up on the river – it's still there – called Tom's Marine Bar, near our old office on Seventeenth Avenue, on the river. One of my friends, the guy who – a real boater, not a fisherman – a guy named Latham Smith. He built a tugboat out of scrap iron on the river here fifty years ago and is still operating it. He's got six more, too, that he built.

MM: Oh yeah?

BR: Anyway, but Latham said about Tom's Marine Bar once, he said to me – he said, "Every bar stool has a captain." The way it is, everybody is a captain.

SB: Of something, for sure.

BR: Right. Anyway, what more can I tell you?

SB: Yeah, I think any recommendation of people that we should talk to.

BR: Ricky Resto.

SB: More besides Ricky Resto, and you said the historian.

BR: Okay, let me see. It's got to be in the fishing sort of realm of things here.

MM: Yes.

BR: Well, you've talked to Luis. The fellows at Casablanca, you're talking to them, the two brothers there. Let's see, people who are still around who would be willing to talk. You want to

talk to people who have something – and Lazaro Priegues, but of course, you've already been in touch with him or tried to be in touch with him.

MM: So Lazaro, is he the father?

BR: He's the patron, right.

MM: The patron, right. Then his son is one that was a state congressperson?

BR: Yes, I think so, right. Yes, I think they're going to –

MM: So that's who we've spoken to, the son.

BR: So he's probably not very interested in fishing, right?

MM: No.

BR: Exactly.

MM: He just buys lobster.

BR: He's interested in property. Sure.

MM: Yes.

SB: No, I mean, he's in the business, but not actually –

MM: He's a dealer.

SB: He's a dealer.

MM: I mean, they have a fish house.

BR: Yeah, they do.

SB: He's keeping the – yes.

BR: Anyway, I've never talked to him. I know that Lazaro and these guys come from Batabano, down on the south side of Cuba, which was a famous sponge place and fishing place. These guys are like *The Old Man and the Sea*. They're like Santiago in the book, right? That's who they are, right?

MM: So we should see if we can figure out how to – some of these older, you know, Cuban fishermen, seem somewhat reluctant to be interviewed for some reason. We may have to take some time to figure out how to –

BR: Yes. They've all got their own reasons, right? And a lot of people – some are just shy, and some don't want their secrets out, whatever their secrets might be. So, anyway, those two people. Let's see. Well, I know a guy. He's a freelance guy who does what I do – or did – he used to work for us. Guy's name is Roger (Otano?), and this guy likes to talk, but he knows everything, and he knows everybody.

SB: What does he do?

BR: He is a marine electronics guy, but he is maybe the best and last and first technician on the river. He came from Cuba, way back in the old days. Another one is – now, these guys aren't really fishermen, but they are going to know everything – and that's Nelson Fernandez and his company called GlassTech.

MM: Okay. Yes. Well, we're interested in fishing and all the associated sort of activities.

BR: Well, GlassTech is the most successful boatyard on the river. You can't get in there. I mean, you can't squeeze in there, and they're not cheap. It's way up by the Tamiami Canal, right on the Canal, right at the border there, and it keeps getting bigger. Nelson Fernandez Senior and Junior. I have written about them in here. I guess Junior was born here, right? But Senior – I'll just tell you a story about him, to give you an idea of who he is, of his type of person. He came over here in nineteen – well, right after Castro. They said, "We don't like the looks of this," and they were coming over here, at like twenty years old. They get over here to Miami. By now, there are fifty-thousand Cuban refugees in Miami, so work is not easy. So he and a couple of buddies decide, "Well, this is too hard in Miami, let's go to Chicago." So these three Cuban kids – this is 1960 when the whole country didn't speak Spanish. So in 1960, they go to Chicago, this time of year, and start looking for work, don't speak English, nobody speaks Spanish. So one of the people they met told Nelson Fernandez Senior – who is now in his mid-eighties – says, "Okay, I'll tell you four words, and with these four words you can survive in Chicago." What are those four words? "Apple pie and coffee." True story. So the reason I know this is because I was in his office and talking to him about his history and everything for this book. I'm looking on the wall, and there is a picture of this fifty-three-foot Merritt Sportfisherman, which is like a really, really nice boat. I look at the back of it, and the name of it is "Apple Pie and Coffee." He sees me looking at that, and then he tells me that story, about what happened sixty years ago, or whenever it was. Yes, sixty years ago, right? So, after a few months of the wind coming off of Lake Michigan in January, they decided to come back to Miami. Nelson goes to work in a little factory doing fiberglass work in Hialeah. He meets a guy named Richard Bertram. He helps him put together his first boat, and one thing led to another. He became the foreman, became this and that and everything, and eventually started his own business, which we have now. But in the meantime, he got first a little boat, and then another boat, and a little Bertram, another boat. Every one, he named "Apple Pie and Coffee." Right? He remembered that. He remembered that lesson, and he remembered those hard times. And now, here he is, living in the Gables Club and he's got a fifty-three foot Hatteras. Or Merritt – better than a Hatteras. Again it gets back to that same thing – hard work, right? A girl I used to go out with, her brother is – I don't know if you know – her brother is named Mike Fernandez. But Mike is a billionaire now. But this girl, her name is Pilar – remember that back then, they had come over from Cuba. They had to go a roundabout way, ended up in Manhattan for a

while, in Washington Heights, getting dragged around by the kids in the street. Everything [inaudible], get back to Miami. Their dad opens a liquor store and a this and that. But when I knew her, this girl worked three jobs. She had three jobs, right? Like I say, her brother now has Simply Healthcare and all these different things for him. He and Andy Garcia – it's all in here, in the stories, but the actor, they are friends, and they wanted to do a story about Hemingway's captain, Santiago, who was the model for *Old Man and the Sea*. So they searched around the country, and they found a boat, exact boat of the original 1935 *Pilar*, up in upstate New York. The boat is now up here on the Miami River, being restored to make this movie.

MM: Oh, wow.

BR: It's all about the story of the boat, the story of the fisherman. It's truly a fishing story, right? Anyway, my point of all of that was that it comes down to this – come here with nothing and you're not just going to sit around, right? These people all worked hard. Hard, hard, hard. I guess it doesn't always pay off, but in these cases, it did.

MM: Well, that did, yes.

BR: Yeah. Anyway, Nelson Fernandez – I'll send you the emails for these people. Do I have your email address?

SB: No, I don't think so, but I'll text it to you.

BR: Give it to me because texting is hard for me on my Blackberry. See, I have a Blackberry.

MM: You still have a Blackberry? [laughter]

BR: Yeah.

SB: Oh, that's very telling for somebody who worked in the technology industry.

MM: Oh my gosh, yes.

BR: It works. It's a phone.

SB: Perfect. That's all that matters.

MM: I used to have one just like that, yes. But it was a while ago.

BR: Right.

SB: Well, I'll give you one of my cards. If I can find one.

MM: I don't know. [inaudible]

SB: There you go.

BR: There you go, yes.

SB: That's great.

BR: So your middle name, Dumitrita, that's sort of like Eastern European?

SB: That's correct. I am from Romania, yes.

BR: From where?

SB: Romania.

BR: Romania, okay. I had to say you had a little bit of that Eastern European something.

SB: Accent? Yes.

BR: Or something, yes.

SB: My name is betraying a little bit.

BR: What does C-J-MAS mean?

SB: CIMAS [Cooperative Institute for Marine and Atmospheric Studies].

BR: Oh, C-I, right.

SB: I told you that I am a contractor for NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] Fisheries.

BR: Right.

SB: My contracting agency is the University of Miami, and CIMAS is one of their institutes.

BR: Okay.

SB: It's the Cooperative Institute for Marine and Atmospheric Studies.

BR: Got it, okay. We used to do all the work for their boats.

SB: Oh, for UM [University of Miami]?

BR: You know, the radars and things like that.

MM: Okay.

BR: I had a lot of meetings with different associations and stuff. The best thing to have a meeting for me will always – was – where is it, is it this way?

MM: RSMAS [Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science] across the street.

BR: Was at the Commons over there. I told Suzana yesterday, or the day before yesterday, for my new book, *Biscayne Bay*, I wanted to reacquaint myself. I was over there for lunch because I like cutting over there, sitting on the patio, and looking out Bear Cut.

MM: It's nice, yes.

BR: It's a great place.

MM: It's a great view, yes.

BR: I mean, you can't beat that view anywhere.

MM: They fixed it up.

BR: Right. The view is what it's all about there.

MM: The view is beautiful, yes.

BR: Right? Anyway, that whole operation started – nobody has ever been able to tell me. Maybe you can find this out. What does the G stand for in F. G. Walton Smith? The F I know is Frederick. I found that out. That wasn't easy.

SB: Walton Smith? Where did you see that, and what do you mean?

BR: Well, F. G. Walton Smith. You know who he is?

SB: No. Should I?

BR: F. G. Walton Smith is the guy who started the Rosensteil School.

SB: Okay.

BR: I mean before it was Rosensteil.

SB: Right, right. Walton Smith.

BR: Walton Smith, right.

SB: This is some history of the –

BR: He's got three first names and two last – whatever. But nobody has ever been able to tell me what his middle initial is, G. F. G. Walton Smith. His picture is hanging up there in the Commons when you walk in, right?

SB: Right. It's telling how much time I spend there. [laughter]

BR: But when he started that in 1943, is when that whole concept started of the school, laboratory, institute, whatever you want to call it. The president of the university knew the guy. He was from – well, he was English, but he was living in the Bahamas. Somehow they had met on a boat, had like interests in the water, and he said hey, we've got to start this thing at my university. The University of Miami then was pretty little. So he hires this guy, F. G. – Frederick G. Walton Smith, to run it for him. Now you've got the trivia that nobody else knows over there. It started, the original office or laboratory or whatever you want to call it, was a tiny – I don't have it in here, it's in my next thing – was a tiny little houseboat docked behind a private residence on Belle Meade Island, over in Miami Beach. That was the beginning of this thing.

SB: Interesting.

BR: I mean, a houseboat as big as this room, right.

MM: Wow. When did they come over here?

BR: I don't remember, probably in the '60.

MM: Okay. Same time as this –

BR: But I can't tell you exactly.

MM: This was built in '65.

BR: Okay. I don't know. Then, of course, you know about the International Oceanographic Foundation? The IOF? You've got to look this up, because it's important to your research because it was started by him as a foundation to – Oceanographic Foundation, IOF. You know where the MAST [Maritime and Science Technology] Academy is here, right?

SB: Yes.

MM: Yes.

BR: Well, that was – before that building, it was called Planet Ocean, remember that? Remember Planet Ocean?

SB: I don't, no.

BR: This is all before your time?

MM: No, no. I've only been in Miami for five years, so I'm still learning.

BR: Okay. Well, Planet Ocean was probably one of the best attractions in Miami. How it failed, I don't know. Lack of funding or something – I have no idea. A guy named Tom (Otto?) ran it, a friend of mine. But it was an interactive museum. They had submarines like the Alvin, and these deep-diving things – 30,000-foot units.

MM: Where MAST Academy is now?

BR: Yes. Right. They had all kinds of – it was a great place. It was the public arm of the International Oceanographic Foundation, which was the brainchild of F. G. Walton Smith, who started this whole Rosensteel School of – R-S-M-A-S – Marine and Atmospheric Science, right. So this is your employer. You should know this stuff. There might be a test, you never know.

MM: Yes.

SB: I'm going back to school.

MM: Go over there and see how many people know this stuff.

BR: Right. But if you ask anybody over there, you know, the people who are walking around with their tablets and their beards and their – you know, the whole academic look. F. G. Walton Smith. I wonder how many will know who he is.

SB: Right.

BR: It's the guy who started the whole thing, got the whole ball rolling. I guess he was a good – the timing was right, he was a good promoter, the University of Miami was growing, a couple of writers right after the war down here in Miami. I would have to go to their names to remember them – but one of them famously said, "Miami, South Florida, we have the most diverse and the best opportunity to study marine science anywhere in the world. We should have at least one university dedicated to it." That was part of the spur, because he was a big writer, to get this thing sort of into second gear. Because it started over there in a houseboat, then they moved into some offices over at Coral Gables. You know, probably a couple of guys and an aquarium, and a picture of a fish. But now, it's probably one of the top institutions of its kind in the world, right?

MM: Yes.

SB: For sure.

BR: Right.

MM: We have a building full of people who studied over there.

BR: Yeah. Right.

MM: At NOAA.

BR: Is there anything more I can tell you?

SB: Yes. I wanted to go back a little bit earlier. Before we even started recording, you started talking to me about being on the board of directors of the fishing association. Can you tell me a little bit about how you got –?

MM: GCFI [Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute?].

BR: I don't know how I got to be on that. Because we were sort of –

MM: I'll be back in just a second. I'm going to see if I can [inaudible].

BR: – a leader in our business. Through dollars, we were a big dealer.

SB: Got it.

BR: So I got to go to a lot of shows and be in a lot of things, and so forth – The Marine Electronics Association. I don't know how that actually came about.

SB: Do you remember more or less –?

BR: They just asked me once and said, "Do you want to be involved in this?" Maybe because I said something about something once, and some guy who had some influence said hey, "I'd like to have you on the board of directors." I said, "Sure, okay." That meant I had to do this paper, which I did.

SB: Do you remember more or less what period was this?

BR: Oh, '80s.

SB: In the '80s?

BR: Yes, pretty sure. Because I think I only went to two – there was probably one here – conferences, because obviously, they were in places I want to go to, like Cancun and Jamaica or someplace.

SB: But the issues were, as far as you remember, in that time were related to territorial rights for fishing [inaudible].

BR: A lot of it had to do with that, but I think the point I was trying to make in my little presentation was that these islands had growing populations, so a lot of pressure on the fish. So what I was hoping was that our equipment would allow the fishermen to catch X number of fish, but not every fish, but then allow him to have a second source of income. The guy had to live. And he couldn't fish if we just told him, "Well, you can only go out there and catch three fish

today.” Not going to be [inaudible]. So you have to have reasonable fishing limits, but then they’ve got to have something else – some other way to survive and to make it worthwhile doing this, right?

SB: Right.

BR: That was my point. It’s because you go to Trinidad or some other – I had an office in Trinidad for a while, and we supplied all the service for the shrimp boats. I don’t think there was any restriction. I don’t think they had any rules at all down there. They’d go out and fish down off of Guyana, and I guess there are still lots of shrimp down there, but you know, there were no limits or seasons or this or that. You just did it. Like the Bahamas, when they became fully independent from Britain, the US government said, “Well, we’re going to help you out, so we’re going to buy you twenty shrimp boats. And they’ll set up their own company. Well, of course, everybody’s brother became part of that company who knew nothing about fishing. It was just all just graft and corruption. We did that for them for about eight years, and they – actually, the government company finally didn’t pay us. I liked Trinidad. It was a great island. But lots of fish, but also no – it was just go, do what you want, to a certain limit, as you obviously know. Is Romania on any water? The Black Sea?

SB: Black Sea, yes. I live too far from the Black Sea to know anything about that.

BR: So your experience with water is really here, right?

SB: It’s very limited, yes.

MM: Since you’re writing a book on the history of Biscayne Bay, there’s a –

BR: Oh, cool.

MM: – a little book that talks about the history of the lab here and federal –

[TAPE PAUSED]

BR: 1943. Major step. The University of Miami established a marine laboratory and research. Doctor F. G. Walton Smith, a British marine biologist – page one.

MM: Is it page one?

BR: Yes.

SB: So you should know that, too.

MM: There has always been a, you know, a strong relationship, I think, between the University of Miami and RSMAS.

BR: Sure. I hope so. Wasn't there some kind of Navy facility here at some time? There was. I can't remember when it was.

MM: Probably, yes. Anyway, there was always that strong connection. They tend to set up these kinds of federal labs near proximity, oftentimes, to universities, so they can work together and so forth.

SB: Anyway, I don't have any more questions. I don't know if you have any.

MM: No, I'm good.

BR: Done?

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Molly Graham 7/28/2020