2007

Great Kingfish Captains of Fort Pierce, Florida, Tell Their Stories

Terry L. Howard

GREAT KINGFISH CAPTAINS

Of Fort Pierce, Florida,
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by

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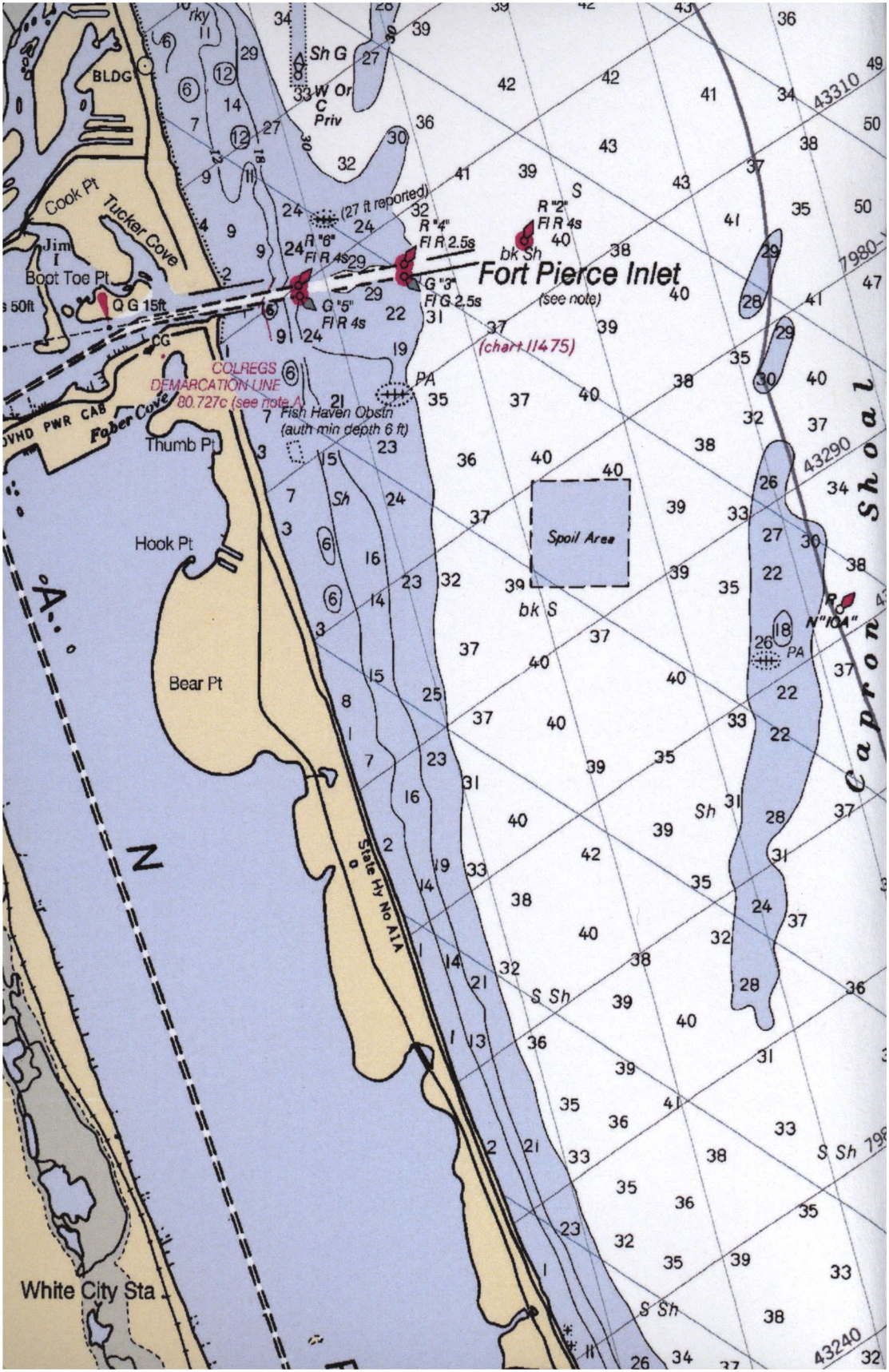
Fort Pierce Inlet
(see note)
(chart 11475)
Cook Pt
Tucker Cove
Jim I
Boot Toe Pt
Q G 15ft
50ft
BLDG
CG
R "6" Fl R 4s
R "4" Fl R 2.5s
G "3" Fl G 2.5s
G "5" Fl R 4s
R "2" Fl R 4s
bk Sh
(27 ft reported)
COLREGS DEMARCATION LINE 80.727c (see note A)
Fish Haven Obstn (auth min depth 6 ft)
Faber Cove
OVHD PWR CAB
Thumb Pt
Hook Pt
Bear Pt
Spoil Area
bk S
PA
Sh
S Sh
State Hy No A1A
White City Sta
Caprons Shoal
43310
43290
43240
7980
7988

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The sunrise photos at the beginning of each chapter were taken by the author east of Fort Pierce, Florida, the Sunrise City.

The Kingfishermen
By Terry Lynn Breig
August 1988

Go down to the boat in the chill before dawn with your
Hood pulled up and your fishing boots on

You put up the groceries and check the oil
Cast off the lines, put the coffee to boil

Your muscles are stiff and your hands are all sore, but
You're gonna make it, you've done it before

Take a moment to look at the sun on the rise
The colors exploding, bring light to the skies

But the moment passes, it's time for the hunt
You pull on your gloves, stand up with a grunt

You rig the lines and toss them all over
Not much hope today, the seasons bout over

The diving plane rises and you start to pull in
Just one magic circle, how long has it been?

In a flash it happens, all lines are tight
Then the tiredness deserts you and you circle right

Shovel ice, a new spoon, damn, we need a new line
We must keep 'um coming and not waste any time

You pull till the sweat runs down your face
And fish blood spatters all over the place

The unhooker box full, a fish flops to the floor
We better unload 'em and then catch some more

We grin through the sweat and the blood and the work
And then they slow down, we get ready to jerk

The bug line's our favorite and if we have our way
We'll be high hook at the end of the day

The boxes are full, we ice some on the deck
The bite's about over and the boat is a wreck

So we turn the bow home, set the pilot to steer
Here come wind and rain, get the foul weather gear

You sharpen the knife and I'll get the slicker
I'll hand them to you cause that way it's quicker

So in darkness we gut and shovel and pack
Now the rain's in our face and the pain's in our back

We'll do it again in foul weather or fair
We maybe high hook or just get a share

Why we do it? I guess we really don't know
But before daylight tomorrow we'll be ready to go

Preface

In 1996 and 1997, I ran and finished the New York City Marathon. Those marathons were two of the greatest experiences of my adult life. They taught me that you don't have to be a super athlete to finish a marathon. You just have to be hardheaded. I also learned that anyone can do anything that they set out to do. I am a public schoolteacher and a commercial hand line King Mackerel fisherman. I've done both for well over a quarter century.

During my many runs before, while training, and even during the New York marathons, I entertained thoughts of writing a book about commercial King Mackerel fishing. Because I am such a slow runner, I've spent an inordinate amount of time thinking about such a book. So, while trudging through the 26.2 miles of streets in New York City in 1997, I decided that if I could run this marathon, then I could write a book. It took several more years to get started. Finally in 2001, I set out to tell the story of hand line commercial Kingfish captains from Fort Pierce, Florida.

This book is divided in seven chapters. Chapter One describes commercial hand line King Mackerel fishing in Fort Pierce waters and the adjacent fishing grounds.

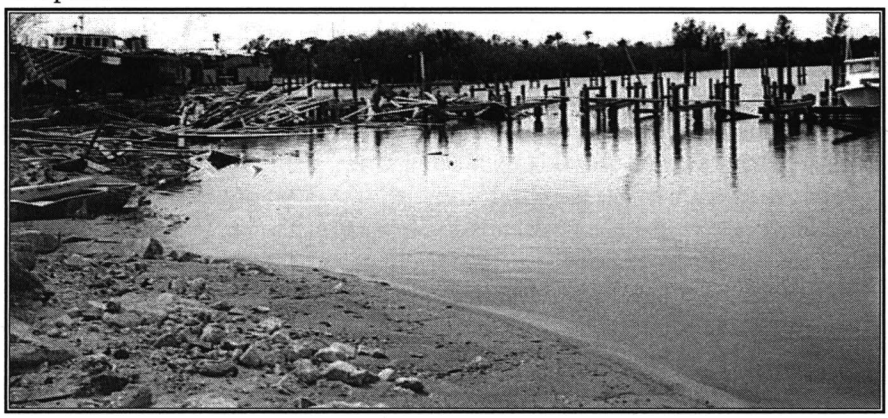
Chapters Two through Six, the real heart and soul of this book, are a compilation of lengthy interviews with five of Florida's great senior commercial hand line Kingfish captains. These interviews subsequently took on a life of their own and evolved into five extraordinary biographies. Each captain lived his dream. While I have edited some of their stories to allow the book to flow and read more smoothly, the rich texture of their narratives remains. They herald lives well lived. Conducting these interviews was pure pleasure. All their stories are captivating, compelling, and different. In the final chapter I share some of my experiences from nearly thirty years as a commercial Kingfish captain.

This book is oral history, biography, fishing tales, war stories, tragedy, adventure, and fun. It cannot and should not be confined to any one description. It is my hope that this book introduces the reader to a wonderful way of life that is rapidly diminishing. It is also my hope that the reader derives as much pleasure from reading these stories as I did from telling them.

Much has happened in the years since I began this project. The most tragic events were the losses of Roger Farlow and Tommy McHale, two of the captains interviewed for this book. Not only were they fishing legends in this area, they were also good people and are greatly missed by their families and friends.

In 2001, there were two commercial fish houses still operating in Fort Pierce; Hudgins Seafood and Inlet Fishery. Then in 2002, Hudgins Seafood, which had operated fish houses in South Florida for over fifty years, closed its last waterfront fish house. Now only Inlet Fishery remains.

In 2004, Fort Pierce suffered two direct hits by major level four hurricanes, Frances and Jeanne. These hurricanes completely destroyed Inlet Fishery's docks and buildings. Glenn Black, the founder and owner of Inlet Fishery, and a lifelong commercial fisherman himself, rebuilt the business within months. However, his health had not been good. The loss and subsequent rebuilding of his fish house was hard on Glenn. At age 71, he died in August 2005. He lived long enough to see his Inlet Fishery back in operation.



Inlet Fishery, destroyed after Hurricanes Frances and Jeanne.

Inlet Fishery's fish house in 2006 rebuilt after the hurricanes of 2004 and 2005. View from the water with Kingfish boats moored at the left.

Glenn's family has since sold the Inlet Fishery's waterfront property. Fortunately, a long-term lease agreement to keep the fish house open was part of the sale agreement. For the time being, commercial fishing is still viable in Fort Pierce.

Inlet Fishery's fish house. Regis Trefelner holding a forty-pound Wahoo caught on the author's boat.

In the summer of 2005, it looked like things were getting back to normal. The Kingfish began to show in Fort Pierce. But along with the Kingfish came the Porpoise. Kingfish were biting but the Porpoise problem was worse than ever. They attacked almost every fish before it could be landed. They would explode from the water behind the lines and the chase was on. The Porpoise would nearly always win and take the fish.

Sometimes a Porpoise would jump and begin to charge towards the line even before the fish was hooked. Just after seeing the Porpoise jump and charge, the outrigger would shake with a bite. How Porpoises know that a Kingfish is about to bite is a mystery.

King fishermen are fond of saying that someday someone is going to be seriously hurt by the Porpoise. In August 2005, I was pulling in a fish as fast as I could with the Porpoise following. As usual, the Porpoise got the fish ripping the line out of my hand. As the line flew out of the stern, I noticed that the cable was wrapped tightly around my big toe.

"So this was it," I thought. "The cable is going to pop off my toe at the base and maybe even flip it out of the boat."

A week earlier, Billy Baird got his finger caught in the cable by a Porpoise. The cable cut his finger to the bone. At first he thought he had

lost his finger. The same week Jimmy Reeves was hit by a flying paravane. He required several stitches in his hand as a result. So now it was my turn—my toe. So I was the one who was going to be seriously hurt. Then, miraculously, the Porpoise ripped the fish off the hooks, and the line went slack just before the tension reached the cable that was still wrapped securely around my toe. Someday someone is going to be seriously injured by those things.

The fishermen I interviewed for this book told many strange and interesting stories. Since completing this book, I learned some interesting new details about Ronnie Baird's strange tale of the ocean and sky lighting up one night while fishing off the coast of Cape Canaveral. The story is intriguing, and I have no doubt it happened. Like the time Steve Lowe's swordfish boat dropped fifteen feet into a hole in the ocean, something happened, but we may never know exactly what. Steve Low relates these fascinating tales in chapter three.

When two captains interviewed for this book, Steve Lowe and Johnny Jones, were growing up in Fort Pierce, thirteen commercial fish houses existed. Today there is one remaining fish house but there are seven public boat ramps. On a holiday weekend every boat ramp is filled to capacity and overflowing with trucks and boat trailers parked along the adjoining roads. These numbers put a terrible strain on the fish populations.

There are fewer than thirty hand line commercial fishermen left in Fort Pierce. Luxury condominiums, restaurants, and marinas have taken over waterfront real estate that once housed commercial fish houses. Fresh water intrusion and pollution is putting an ever increasing strain on the Indian River Lagoon and coastal waters, the spawning grounds for coastal fish. The future of hand line commercial King fishing in Fort Pierce does not look good.

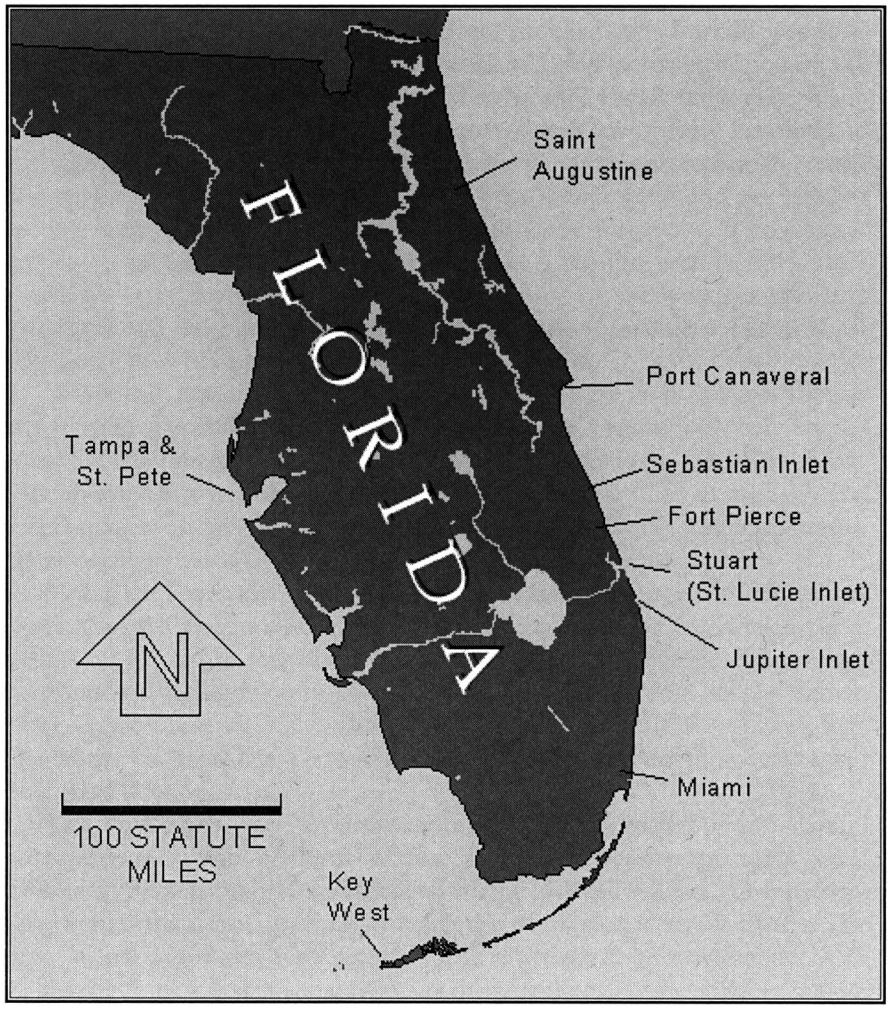
Yet, fishermen are optimists. In a perfect world, with careful management by the National Marine Fisheries Service, the once great schools of Spanish and King Mackerel might gradually return. Commercial King fishermen might once again catch their limits on a regular basis. The price of fish might stay high so that these catches will be worthwhile. With the freeze on new commercial permits, the permits that fisherman now own might someday be valuable commodities worth thousands of dollars. Maybe federal, state, and local governments will work together to hold back in reservoirs and filter polluted fresh water before it enters the lagoons and coastal waters. And maybe someday, the Porpoise will leave our fish alone. It could happen—in a perfect world.

In October 2005, Fort Pierce was again hit by a level three hurricane. This time it was Wilma that destroyed the newly rebuilt dock at Inlet Fishery. The fishermen turned to and rebuilt the dock. The last commercial fish house in Fort Pierce is still hanging on.

My respect and admiration for the five men interviewed for this book has grown stronger. They are all proud, kind, good-hearted people. They are all highly intelligent, masters of their trade and classic commercial captains. They are all fishing legends. It has been a privilege for me to interview them. It has been an honor for me to fish along side them over the years in the waters off Fort Pierce. I only wish I could have completed this project while Roger Farlow and Tommy McHale were still living.

Lastly, I want to say that you don't need to be highly intelligent to write a book. You just need to be hardheaded.

The Florida Peninsula



Chapter One
Commercial King Fishing

Hook and line King Mackerel fishing is the most ecologically sound and sporting type of commercial fishing that exists. Each fish is caught and fought by hand, one at a time, by a lone fisherman. It is gutted and covered with ice soon after landing.

Each morning, long before sunrise, a small handful of boats from Fort Pierce used to set small bait gill nets in the Indian River Lagoon between the Florida mainland and the barrier island. These fishermen would catch baitfish called Bunkers or Pogies, or more commonly known as Menhaden. These would be put on an ice and saltwater brine immediately to keep them firm. Later they would be filleted and cut into four strips to be put on two hooks behind a sea witch and trolled.

Due to the current ban on gill net fishing in Florida waters, now King fishermen throw a cast net for Mullet which are used for bait strips. Spoons work when fish are more plentiful. When fishing with spoons, hook-and-liners can catch fish faster because they don't have to re-bait the hooks between bites.

Once the bait is caught, still long before daylight, the "charge" begins. This is the most exciting part of the day. The captains begin their race to the fishing grounds on the edge of the Gulf Stream, ten to twenty miles offshore of Fort Pierce. They must first negotiate the often dangerous inlet in darkness, unable to see the size of the seas beyond. After passing through the jetties and avoiding the sea buoys at the mouth of the inlet, the captains steer as fast as they dare, depending on the conditions, toward their day's

fishing grounds. In the darkness with only their instrument lights for company, they race on to what they hope will be a "big day." Their goal is to find a spot where the Kings are biting and to catch more King Mackerel than anyone else. In the starlight, they ready their lines and cut bait.

First light is followed by a spectacular sunrise over the Atlantic, as the hook-and-liners begin their day of fishing. On a good day, they fish two or three lines, continually cutting bait, while circling Loran numbers on a spot where the fish are biting. If the fish stop biting, they search for a new spot. They steer the boat with a tiller in the stern. As fish are brought aboard, they are taken off the hook with a de-hooker mounted on the kill box. The fish fall into the box and die. Sometimes fishermen mark Kingfish on their depth recorders, but they won't bite. In this way, the fish conserve themselves.

At the end of the day, the captain with the most fish is the happiest when he passes through the inlet on the homeward passage. He knows he has caught more fish than some of the best and most skilled commercial fisherman on the east coast of Florida.

Commercial King Mackerel fishing is addictive. The fishermen who do it develop a powerful passion for it and find it hard to quit. Those who stay with it, live to catch fish. Nothing makes a King fisherman happier than to see his outrigger shake and his line come tight. This thrill is compounded when the fish are biting well, and the fisherman goes from one line to the other line, pulling fish. There's nothing like it.

Commercial Fishing Methods

In commercial fishing, as opposed to charter fishing, fishermen catch fish to sell. They are not paid to take people with them. In fact, they usually do not like to have others on the boat. Most prefer to fish alone. It's a very sporting form of fishing because the fishermen troll for their fish and catch them one at a time by hand. They fight each fish individually. Every fish is different and behaves differently. Therein lies part of the sport.

Most King fishermen troll two lines behind two outriggers. These lines usually consist of thirty to forty feet of stainless cable attached to 16 to 24-ounce planers. The lines behind the planers vary with the fisherman. Some use all monofilament line behind the planer while others use part mono and part #8 or #9 wire attached to a swivel. The lengths of these lines vary too, though they are usually between one hundred feet and two hundred feet. If fish are biting well, a #3½ drone spoon is often used. Usually, though, a strip of bait (Mullet or Pogey) is put on two hooks behind a sea witch. The bait strips are quartered with the tails split.

Sometimes fishermen will use "rigs" which are crossed wire devices with four small spoons or tubes attached at the ends of the wires. When a

fish strikes, the outrigger shakes and the planer rises, bringing the fish up. The fisherman then pulls the fish into the boat, de-hooks it, re-baits, and feeds the line out again. A third line is attached to an electric reel mounted under the canopy or in the cabin of the boat that holds two hundred to two hundred, fifty feet of #8 or #9 wire. Bait, hooks and sea witches as described above, or a feather hook, called a jerk bug, is attached to this line. A switch for this reel is accessible in the stern, as is a stern tiller to steer the boat. In fact, everything the fisherman needs to fish is within reach in the stern cockpit. When catching fish, he operates from here.

While trolling from one place to another in search of bites, the fisherman usually stays at the wheel in the captain's chair in the cabin. A depth recorder and a C-Loran and/or a handheld navigational device (GPS) are usually the extent of his electronic gear. Of course, he also relies heavily on a compass.

Fishing Grounds

Fort Pierce, Florida, the Sunrise City, home to about 38,000 people, is located halfway down the east coast of Florida between Daytona Beach and Palm Beach. It is the county seat of St. Lucie County. During the mid-nineteen hundreds, the Fort Pierce Chamber of Commerce billed it "The Fishing Capital of The World." Located just east of the north end of Lake Okeechobee, it has perhaps the biggest and safest inlet on Florida's east coast. The inlet here cuts through a barrier island called Hutchinson Island.

The large estuary between the barrier island and the mainland is known as the Indian River Lagoon. These grassy flats are a rich nesting and spawning ground for all kinds of saltwater marine life. The Indian River Lagoon has more protected species than any other estuary in the United States. It is said to support about 4,500 different species of plants and animals. The Intra Coastal Waterway passes north and south through the Indian River Lagoon.

Often, in the spring and summer, the waters in the lagoon near the Fort Pierce Inlet are as clear and pristine as the waters of the Florida Keys or the Bahamas. Off shore of Fort Pierce are several rich fishing grounds. One area located north of the 12A buoy begins just east of the Fort Pierce Inlet in forty-five to fifty-five feet of water and follows an intermittent reef south to the 12A buoy, which is approximately southeast of the inlet. This area is known as "north of 12."

In 2002, dredging of the Fort Pierce Inlet was performed to maintain a required twenty-eight-foot depth in the inlet and turning basin for large cargo ships. The material dredged was dumped in the area north of 12 and along the Capron Shoals that run southeast of the inlet. This practice,

according to many divers in the area, has blanketed healthy reefs with a thick layer of fine silt that has not dissipated.

Other reefs and wrecks lie to the south of Fort Pierce and mark the start of the Stuart fishing grounds. Stuart is the home of the St. Lucie Inlet, which is in Martin County, south of St. Lucie County.

Approximately ten miles east of the Fort Pierce Inlet is the western edge of the Gulf Stream current. The offshore bar here is an intermittent reef running north and south of St. Lucie County in about ninety feet of water. An inshore bar runs parallel to this in about seventy-five feet of water. The inshore and offshore bars run from southeast of the Fort Pierce Inlet to about twenty miles north northeast where the Bethel Shoals buoy is located.

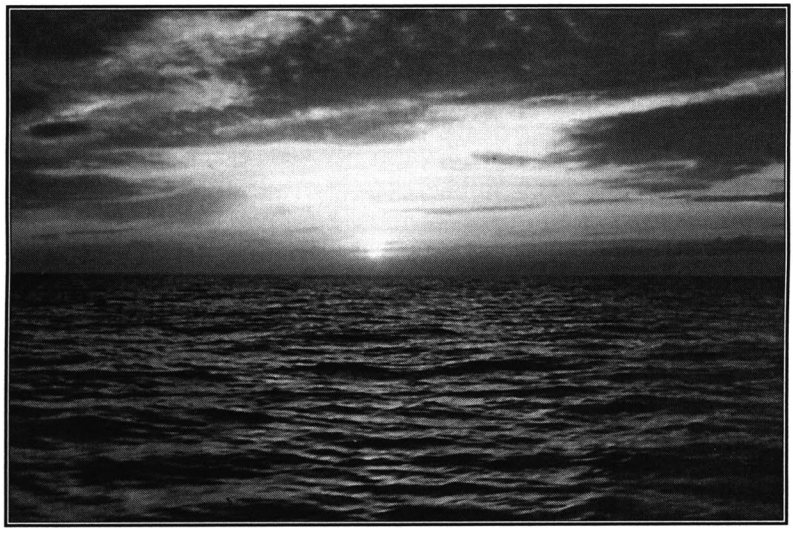
During WW II, German U-boats would navigate by the light at this buoy. They knew where they were because the Bethel buoy was shown on all the charts. They would lie on the bottom during the day and surface at night to sink Allied ships passing along the coast in the shipping lanes.

North of the Bethel Shoals buoy is the south end of the Sebastian fishing grounds. The Sebastian Inlet, located in Indian River County, is the next inlet to the north of Fort Pierce. Its fishing grounds extend north twenty to thirty miles to the area off Cape Canaveral. During the past few winters, many east coast King Mackerel boats, including many from Fort Pierce, have fished out of Sebastian. The Kingfish have been showing there.

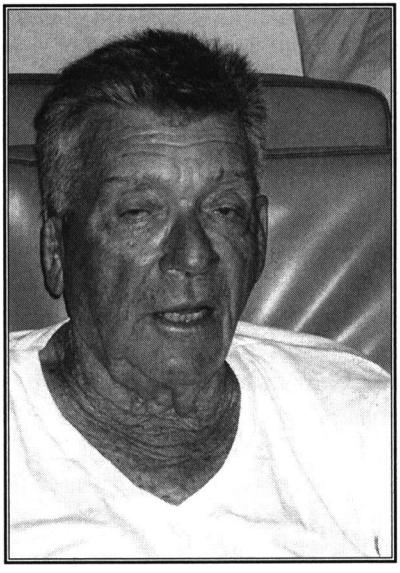
The western edge of the Gulf Stream is on the beach in Miami, only a mile or so off the beach in Palm Beach and is located gradually farther offshore to the north. In Fort Pierce, it is around ten miles east of the coast; in Sebastian, it is close to fifteen or twenty miles offshore; and in St. Augustine and Jacksonville, it's forty to fifty miles off the beach.

In the fishing grounds off the Fort Pierce Inlet, like the waters off all of the aforementioned inlets, are many individual rocks, wrecks, and reefs known to the fishermen. The area along the beach itself is known for large Kingfish or "smokers."

The fishermen in the following interviews know these waters every bit as well as the mailman knows the addresses along his route. These waters have been their hunting grounds for many decades. The following interviews are their biographies. Two of the captains interviewed were born and raised in Fort Pierce. Three others followed the fish here after first trying their hands at other vocations or commercial fishing elsewhere. Three of the five spent heroic years in the Armed Services during World War II. Their stories chronicle the history of commercial hand line King Mackerel fishing off Fort Pierce, Florida during the latter half of the twentieth century.



Chapter Two
Roger Farlow



Born in 1919, Roger Farlow fished whenever he could until his death. He died during the lull between Hurricane Frances and Hurricane Jean in the fall of 2004. Both hurricanes made direct hits on Fort Pierce.

Roger Farlow, born December 4, 1919, in McLeansboro, Illinois, was the oldest of the five King fishermen interviewed. Although he sold his King fishing boat upon retiring at age 80, Roger still fished. He purchased a seventeen-foot Carolina Skiff with a sixty-horsepower outboard, outfitted with outriggers and trolled for Spanish Mackerel when they were running along the beach, as well as Amberjack in the river, in the Fort Pierce Inlet, and along the beaches.

When Mackerel and Jacks were not running, Roger used rods and reels baited with sand crabs to catch Pompano. For recreation, he liked to plug fish in the Indian River Lagoon for Trout, Snook, and anything else that would bite: he also fished fresh water for Bass. When recreational fishing, Roger often filed the barbs off his hooks so they would not harm the fish.

When his wife, Elizabeth, was living, she and Roger used to fish in Bass Master Tournaments when he was not in the ocean King fishing. His living room was full of Bass tournament trophies. Roger was also an avid tennis and Miami Dolphins fan. But most of his time was spent fishing.

Roger had been a B-24 bomber pilot during WW II. After many missions in the Pacific theater, he found himself in Okinawa, Japan, for the end of the war. While there, he witnessed the mushroom cloud over Hiroshima.

I called him in the winter of 2002 to ask some follow up questions for this book, but he hardly had time to talk. He had just lost a large fish near the Fort Pierce Inlet. It had taken all the line off one of his reels, and he'd had to re-rig the pole. He wanted to get ready to go back out the next day to get that fish. At 82, Roger still lived to fish.

When I interviewed him for this book, Roger lived alone in the small cement block structure house that he and his wife had shared for much of their lives. The walls were covered with pictures of himself and his wife Bass fishing, pictures of his two daughters, a painting of his first Kingfish boat and shelves containing trophies from Bass tournaments. In front of his easy chair was a large square coffee table cluttered with boxes of hooks, fishing line, swivels, pliers and sundry other fishing tackle, along with the daily newspapers, sports pages, and *Florida Sportsman* magazines. Reels and fishing poles surrounded his chair.

During one interview session we had to wait for the end of a fishing show that was on TV so Roger would not miss the catching of another Bass on the show. Once it was over, he was ready for the interview. During another interview session Roger and I both lamented that since it was a nice day we should be out fishing rather than sitting there talking about it. Such was the passion. In the following passages Roger tells his story.

The Tackle Shop

I got out of the Army in 1946, and we got ahold of a fishing camp up in Wisconsin, the wife and I did, and we stayed up there one summer. I liked it, but it was very limited, you know. My mother and dad moved to Fort Lauderdale in '47, so we came down to visit them that year. We liked Florida, so we just decided we'd move down here, and in '48 we settled in West Palm Beach. My dad and my mother moved up to West Palm, too.

I'd always been interested in fishing. I'd been fishing all my life, and we decided to make a tackle shop. At that time there was an old wooden bridge across the river at Blue Heron Boulevard in Riviera Beach, so we bought a lot at the west end of the bridge on the south side of Blue Heron Boulevard and built a concrete block building there for a fish house, a bait and tackle shop really. We did buy a few fish.

We built that in August of '49, and the hurricane came down. We just had the walls of the bait and tackle shop up at that time, so the day it was supposed to hit, we got the people down there and they poured the concrete cap around the top of the building. That's all that saved it because that night the '49 hurricane hit, and it was a terrible storm. Winds were up to 160 miles an hour, and water from the river covered up Singer Island. Of course, there was hardly anything over there then. There were no houses, and the water was clear up to U.S.1 the next morning. That's a long way from the river.

So, we got the building finished, and I ran that for the next year, worked in that bait and tackle shop. Right across the street, Courtney Hardin had a commercial fish house, right across Blue Heron from us on the river, and Mack and Stanley Pender were fishin' for him at that time. They were the best on the coast at hook and line King fishin', so I went over there and watched them almost every day when they'd come in. I'd go over there and watch them unload four or five hundred pounds of Kingfish and sometimes three or four hundred pounds of Snapper and Grouper, and I thought, "Man! This is for me. That's what I want to do." (Laughs)

I didn't know exactly how to get into it, and Vincent Cartwright was a native there at that time. He had always been a fisherman, and his family had always fished. I got him to take me out King fishin', and he took me two or three times and taught me a little bit about it.

Mack and Stanley Pender's daddy was seventy years old and he had built, there in Riviera Beach, a little boat for King fishin'. He put a fish box in it and a little inboard motor, and he fished it for a few months there. Then he decided it was too much for him, and he decided to sell it. So I bought it from him for $700 and I started King fishin'. That first summer

that I fished, I did pretty well. I mean there was a lot of fish back then. They weren't too hard to catch, and I did very well really for a newcomer.

Becoming a King Fisherman

I fished the ocean for Kingfish—strictly for Kingfish. Hell, I was makin' up to $250 a week, and that was big money back then. So I said, "That's for me." I fished that boat for just about a year, and I decided it was time to get into it better. I had a guy there in Riviera build that boat, the *Anita*. It cost me $3,000, but I got it finished. I think he charged me around $2,000 to build the boat; then I had to put a motor in her. I bought a straight 6 Chrysler from Harold Covar that he had rebuilt. I got the motor for $500 and ended up with less than $3,000 in the whole rig.

That was in '53. So then I really got into it full time, didn't do anything else, and stayed with it for the next 48 years. The reason I started was because of watching Mack and Stanley Pender unload those fish there at the fish house. We bought fish, mostly river fish, Pompano and Snook. At that time Snook were legal, Redfish too, all kinds of river fish were legal to sell back then.

We had the fish market there and we sold what we could, but the surplus we sold to Hudgins Seafood Company every day. Hudgins Seafood sent a truck around every day, and Hudgins furnished us with the fish boxes and whatever supplies we'd need. Of course, it was a good deal for us. It wasn't any problem to try to sell the fish or anything. You had a ready market. What we didn't sell in the retail market, Hudgins just came and picked up. He gave us a small profit, you know, nothin' big. Hudgins also had a restaurant at that time. Hudgins was a big, big outfit. You know, they were a big wholesale outfit, sold all up and down the coast.

World War II Remembrances

Well, in 1941, when the war started, I was twenty-one and my wife and I had been to a movie in West Frankfort, Illinois. It was about thirty miles from where we lived. We come out of the movie about one or two o'clock in the afternoon, and I had the radio on in my car. The first thing we heard was the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and I knew right then that I was going to try to get into it. You know, as a young fellow, I didn't have any realization of what a war was really like, and it all seemed kinda glamorous then.

When we got home, I went and tried to enlist in the Marines first, and they wouldn't take me because I had flat feet. I think that's what it was, the best I can recall. (Laughs) Since I couldn't get into the Marines, I went and enlisted in the Air Force and they took me.

That was in 1942. At that time it was the Army Air Corps. It wasn't a separate service. That was 1942, and they didn't call me up until January of '43 when I actually went into the service and they sent me out to

California, naturally. That's where I was. I was in the west for all of my training period which was about a year. I went through flight training, primary flight training was in Phoenix, Arizona, at Thunderbird Field, and then I went to advanced training in twin engine planes in Texas. I graduated as Second Lieutenant in late 1943.

Roger Farlow, second from left top row, with bomber crew in Angaur, Palau Island, in 1944. Roger was the co-pilot.

We got assigned to a permanent crew, and I was the copilot. A guy by the name of Bill Smith was the pilot. We left Sacramento, California on the last day of December in '44 and the first time we started out, we were flyin' a new B-24 down to the Hawaiian Islands.

We got out about an hour and lost an engine and had to turn around and come back. Then the next day we took another plane and flew to Hawaii and spent six weeks on Kauai in the Hawaiian Islands training there.

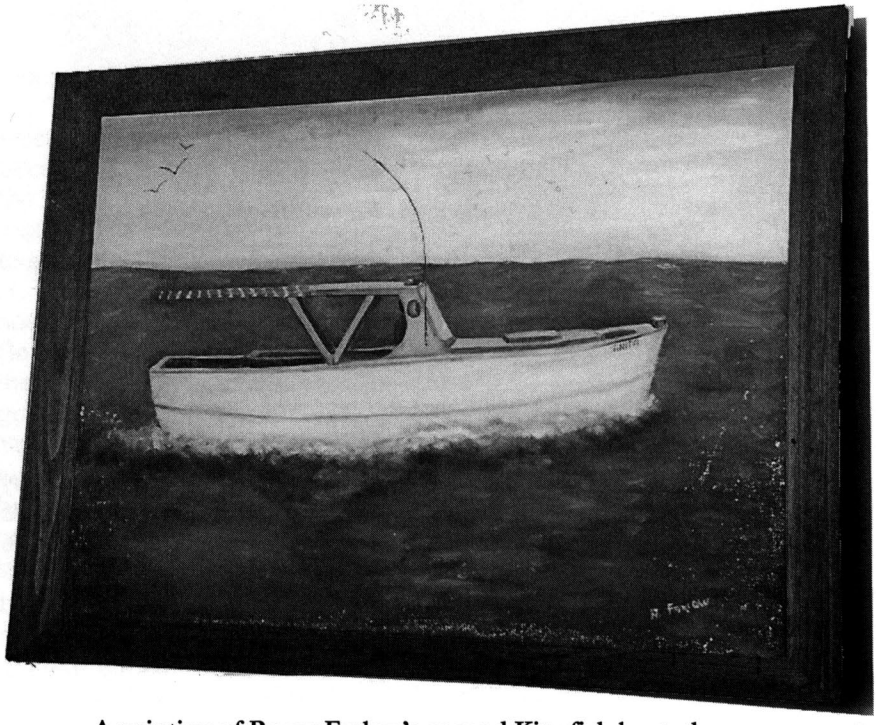
Then we went on down to the chain of Islands to Angaur in the Palau chain that had been taken from the Japs and had an airfield there. From there I flew a couple of missions against Corregidor in the Philippines. It was a long trip. We had to stage at one of the Philippine Islands to get gas to make the trip; it was more than twelve hours each way. That was a B-24 bomber. We flew some missions against some of the smaller islands there that were still occupied by the Japs, and then as soon as they took Okinawa, they moved our wing down to Okinawa, and that's where I was until the war ended.

I was in Okinawa when it ended and the last mission we flew was on the Island of Kaishu. We had orders that day to not go within a hundred and fifty miles of Hiroshima, and they didn't give us any reason; they just said, "Don't."

It was a real clear day that day, and we saw this huge mushroom cloud comin' up from Hiroshima and we talked about it. We said, "Boy, there must have been a huge B-29 raid that day!"

But we didn't know a thing about it. We didn't know what had happened that day until we got back and learned that they had dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. We saw the cloud plainly. God, it was up to 50,000 feet or more. You know those huge mushroom clouds. We thought there had been a huge B-29 raid probably, and it was just one plane and one bomb.

The *Anita*



A painting of Roger Farlow's second Kingfish boat, the *Anita*, hangs on a wall in his living room. He paid $3000 for this boat. Most of the fishermen interviewed had pictures or models of their boats in their homes.

I fished out of West Palm Beach until about 1960. Then I moved the boat up to Jupiter and fished out of there for more than ten years. The fish were gradually movin' to the north, and you know, most of the fish were, during those years, off Jupiter and Fort Pierce in the summertime. It was just easier and more convenient to fish out of Jupiter.

All during the '50s, when I fished off of Palm Beach, most of the fishing at that time was south of the Palm Beach Inlet down towards Lake Worth, off of the Breakers—in that area and the old Palm Beach pier. During the summertime and the early fall, you'd catch a few fish up

until about eleven o'clock. Then I would always stop and anchor and Yellowtail fish for two to three hours. I could generally catch anywhere from 50 to 150 pounds of Yellowtail.

I carried a grinder and ground up Bonita for chum and used monofilament line. I always carried sand and made chum balls. You could gradually work the Yellowtail up to where they'd be up in the water and you could catch 'em fast. And they were there. They were always there—the Yellowtail were. They wouldn't buy one under 12 inches. That was the size, kind of a self-imposed size limit by the fish house, so the smaller ones I would keep and use for Kingfish bait, and man, they were the greatest Kingfish bait ever was; you'd filet 'em just like you would a Mullet. Strip 'em, and they caught 'em. Man, I'm tellin' ya that was the best Kingfish bait I ever used.

The Yellowtail are still down there, but not like they were at that time. They're nothin' like they were back then. You know, there are so many sport fishermen down there now, and gradually they got to be more and more and more pressure on 'em. The pressure just gradually made it tougher and tougher to catch enough to do any good commercially.

I started out with Norman Pender. He had a fish house and his brother had a fish house, but I fished for Norman for about ten years, and then I left him and went to Jupiter. I fished for his son, Clinton Pender. He had the fish house there in Jupiter, and, hell, I musta fished for him for close to fifteen years out of Jupiter. I didn't really move around much from fish houses. I sold Hudgins quite a lot of fish, especially when the fish were down in Boynton during the mid '50s. They picked 'em up down there. Hudgins sent a truck down there and picked 'em up, and I did sell him fish all during that period.

I sold my bait and tackle store. It had cost my dad—he had put up most of the money—it cost him about $12,000 to buy the land and build that building there, and we only kept it a couple of years. He sold it for $25,000, and the damned property is probably worth close to a million now.

Moving to Fort Pierce

I put together that Stapleton boat in 1973, and that's when I moved to Fort Pierce. I moved because it was gettin' tough down below there, you know. There was a lot more Kingfish from Fort Pierce to Sebastian than there was down our way, except during the spring run at Jupiter. That continued right on; the May and June run down there was every year. Some years were better than others, but, for the most part, most of the year Fort Pierce and Sebastian were the places to be.

So I just decided that rather than runnin' back and forth all the time and havin' to stay up there, it would be better just to move up there, so we did. I found this place here, and it suited me. I mean it was close to everything, so we just bought it and moved up here.

The Fort Pierce Inlet was better. Oh God, yes! That Jupiter Inlet, especially back then was a real pain because the sandbar in front of the inlet shifted continually. The passage through the bar would gradually work from north to south until it got all the way down to the south. Then you had to run straight down the beach to get out, and, then, all of a sudden, it would be back up to the north again; it just continually shifted. That sand on the bar out there just shifted continually.

It could be dangerous too. There was one boat. I can't remember the guy's name now, but he got caught in a ground sea on the bar there. The boat capsized and come floatin' right down through Jupiter Inlet upside down. I don't remember the guy's name. He got out of it alive, but it sure did a job on the boat.

The Fort Pierce Inlet is probably the safest on the East Coast, at least in the area that we fish between Sebastian and Boynton. That period that I was talkin' about was back in the '50s when I still had the *Anita*. There were times in the wintertime when the fish were so plentiful off of Fort Pierce that you didn't have to circle, you could just go straight ahead for miles and pull fish the whole time.

Harold Covar and I went side by side. I believe it was in about 1956 or 1957 on the northeast grounds. The Kingfish were jumpin' by the thousands; we went straight ahead, and each of us caught over 2,000 pounds and were in by one o'clock. The boats that stayed out there that day caught up to 4,000, but nobody had any ice. Harold and I both come in with about 2,100 pounds and got in at about one o'clock.

You had a choice back then. You could get an extra penny if you gutted the fish, but, hell, nobody wanted to gut the fish for a penny, so we didn't. Ten cents a pound in the 1950s was the going price. That first summer I fished, I made from $100 to $300 dollars a week when a good wage was $75, an extremely good wage. From then on, I stuck with it for the next forty-eight years. It was something I really, really enjoyed, something that I could put all my effort into.

Porpoise Problems

All during the '50s and probably before that, I don't know in the '40s, but I think even in the '40s, the spring run of Kingfish during May and June was always at Hobe Sound inshore of the old wreck buoy and not at Jupiter where it had been from about 1960.

Anyway, that spring of '59 the fish were biting great at Hobe Sound, 800 to 1,500 a day was average. Almost all the fleet at that time was from Riviera Beach. The Porpoise were so bad that spring that the boys started bringing cherry bombs with a lead tied to each one, and when they lost a fish, they would light it and drop it overboard. It made a hell of an explosion. I mean you could see the water comin' up.

This went on for the whole run that spring. It didn't get rid of the Porpoise. The Porpoise took the fish right on. It did slow 'em down some,

but evidently it ruined the Kingfish, because the next year the fish were in front of Jupiter Inlet, and they've been there ever since. It may have had more effect on the Kingfish than (Laughs) it did on the Porpoise.

Back then, when there was so many fish, the Porpoise wouldn't stop the fish from biting. The fish would bite right on because the fish were just coal black on the paper depth recorders, you know, just a solid mass of fish there. Sometimes the boat would lose 25 to 50 head to Porpoise a day and still catch a thousand pounds of fish because they didn't stop 'em from biting.

The Porpoise would rip the fish right off the line. A lot of times you'd get the head back because the Porpoise will take a fish to the bottom and break the head off before they eat the fish. Sometimes they pull it off, and if the hook is hooked securely in the fish's jawbone, well that's what you get is the jawbone. (Laughs)

We've always had that problem of Porpoise. Back then, years ago, there was no Porpoise in Fort Pierce. You'd never heard of it. It was, I believe, well up into the '70s before the Porpoise really moved to Fort Pierce and started takin' fish.

The first bad summer I remember, I had that Stapleton, so that was after 1973, and we did have a summer here when the Porpoise were really terrible, I mean as bad as they are today, and there was a lot more fish for 'em to take too.

The *Anita* Sinks

I remember a time in 1962 I fished south of Boynton this particular December and came back to Riviera with 900 pounds. Tied up the *Anita* at the Riviera Beach city dock. That was about average for an evenin's fishin'—900 to 1,200 or 1,300.

I came down the next morning and the boat was sunk. The boat was not really that well built. It was a great Kingfish boat, but it was built very light. The stringers were light, and the boat leaked pretty damn bad. The bilge pump had failed that night and the boat sunk, so I decided it was time to get another boat.

I went down to Miami and bought a hull identical to the one that Jack Campbell fishes today. I bought it for $2,500. Don't know the name, but they were built in Miami an there was at least three of 'em in the Kingfish fleet. I got a guy to help me and we started fittin' it out in January and didn't finish it up until almost April.

During that period I fished another guy's boat a little bit during that winter, but the fish were biting great at Jupiter. God, every day was anywhere from 500 to 1,000 pounds, just one bug line. Everybody fished one bug line, that's all, straight ahead fishing at Jupiter, and I missed most of that season. I caught a few fish—not very much.

When I got the boat finished in April, the fishin' was over in Jupiter, and I immediately came to Fort Pierce. There was not a fish to be caught

in Fort Pierce that whole spring, and I just about starved to death. I'd just spent all my money on that boat, and I had to go borrow some money from the bank to carry me over, but it came back like it always does, and I started catchin' fish again.

There were periods when there would be practically no fish in the areas from Fort Pierce down to Jupiter and Palm Beach. The fishing probably would have been good at Sebastian and the Cape, but back then we didn't hardly ever go up there. In fact, the only time I ever went to the Cape was in about 1958, I believe, because the fishing was so bad in Fort Pierce where we usually fished.

It was Mack and Stanley Pender; Harold Covar and Mud Henderson and myself. We went up to the Cape because the fishing was so bad. There weren't any fish at Fort Pierce. Nothin'! So we all went up there and fished a couple of days, and a damned northeaster came down and caught us and that was the end of that. The fish had been moved back down to the south, and we all had to come back to Fort Pierce.

We didn't go in the Sebastian Inlet at all. We went all the way from Fort Pierce to the Cape, and the day we went up there, once we got above Sebastian, we trolled the rest of the way, and everybody caught about 150 pounds on the way up there, enough to pay for the expenses.

We all had plenty of fuel to get up there. We didn't use too much fuel back then. We didn't run fast, and I had that straight six Chrysler; in fact, that's what most everybody had back then was a straight six Chrysler, and they weren't that bad on gasoline. None of us had any problem goin' all the way. We went from Fort Pierce to the Cape.

We had the regular fleet, you know, the people who fished every day, the real commercial fishermen. Back then, the backbone of the fleet was Mack and Stanley Pender, they were the best and they led the fleet. And Harold Covar was another mainstay.

The Jupiter Fleet

Oh, the fleet out of Jupiter was huge. God, there was hundreds of boats. Back there in the '60s, when the fish were really biting good, there'd be at least, I'd say, 200 to 400 boats every day on those fish. Sport boats, commercial boats, drift boats, charter boats, every kind of boat, and the only way you could fish would be go straight ahead. It would be impossible to circle like the boats do other places. So everybody just fished straight ahead.

Everybody headed to the south and fished straight ahead into the current. If you got off the fish, you'd turn around, run back and start over. If the fish were markin' on the recorder, they were coal black forty or fifty feet thick on the bottom. That's how thick the Kingfish were down there. Sometimes they absolutely wouldn't bite. Sometimes the damned fish wouldn't bite.

It's been said that hand line King Mackerel fishing is probably the most environmentally sound form of commercial fishing because if they were not biting, fishing didn't harm the fish. It helped the fish actually. We fished for many, many years, solid bunches of fish, up until 1978 so that there was never any real depletion to the fish.

The *Sumaran*

Roger's boat, the *Sumaran*, a thirty-one-foot Stapleton, burned and sank in 1982 in fifty-five-foot waters off Fort Pierce.

I had that little boat from 1963 until 1973, ten years I kept it. In 1973 I had that Stapleton built down in Miami, and I sold the boat like Jack's to a guy in Sebastian, and he fished it for years and years and years. He was kind of a part-time fisherman, but he fished it for many years.

I bought a thirty-one-foot Stapleton with a diesel engine. It was one of the nicest boats in the fleet. There's no doubt about it, because I hired a guy by the name of Bill Perry that summer of 1973, and we put the boat on a vacant lot there in Riviera Beach. I hired him for $150 a week, and he and I put that boat together and I mean he was good. We did a great job on it. The boat had a shower, hot and cold running water, you know, good bunks. It really was a nice rig.

When I had the boat built, I had them build it with half again as much glass as they ordinarily put in the Stapleton. It made it much slower, but,

man, it made it so steady. That was a great Kingfish boat. You could fish in any kind of a sea. No rollin' around in that boat. It was fine as could be.

Fishing was good. In fact, it was very good up there in the '70s. The price of fish had gone up considerably. Let's see. I think it was up in the 1950s. Gone up to maybe sixty or seventy cents a pound during the scarcer periods, which was, you know, pretty damn good.

The Whale

Well, I was on the Ten-minute Reef just east of the Fort Pierce Inlet trolling and I saw this Whale blow about a quarter of a mile away. He was probably about forty feet long and I was in a twenty-six-foot boat. They had been showing pretty regular down there north of 12A buoy. This one was right in close there about two to three miles northeast of the buoy.

I saw it blowing up, and I thought I'll just troll on over there and get a close look at it. I trolled over, and I never saw it. All of a sudden it sounded up out of the water, and it raised my boat up out of the water. I could feel the prop striking its back—just throbbing. The boat just kind of slid down off its side at a 45-degree angle.

I never saw the Whale again. It scared the hell out of me though. I guess it scared the Whale too. Before that, I had seen a few Whales, but I have never seen any since. Before that, we were seeing them pretty regular north of 12 in the wintertime. The same kind, Right Whale is what it is. We have seen a number of them over the years.

The *Sumaran* Fire

The *Sumaran* was named for my three daughters, Suzanne, Marilyn, and Anita. That boat was the third King boat I had.

I was coming in from fishing. I had it on pilot running reasonably slow, and about half the way in the engine quit. I started to raise the hatch cover, and I saw some smoke coming out of it. I closed it real quickly and put it on the radio that I might have a fire.

I thought I should raise it again. It was just a little bit of smoke. When I opened the hatch again, it just exploded in flames. The cockpit just filled with flames and drove me back toward the stern.

The engine box opened from the back, you know; it raised straight forward. I couldn't get forward to get a life preserver. I couldn't get to the fire extinguisher in the cabin. It just filled the whole cockpit with solid flames, and there wasn't a darn thing I could do about it either. It got the oxygen in the air. As soon as I raised the lid, the air hit, and it just exploded into flames.

Rescue

Boat sinks, man saved

U.S. Coast Guard attempts to save a 31-foot fishing boat Saturday afternoon failed when the boat sank off North Beach.

Although the Coast Guard's search and rescue boat managed to put out a raging fire on board, the "Sumaran," a 31-foot fiberglass Stapleton commercial fishing boat powered by a diesel engine, sank before a tow line could be attached, according to a Coast Guard spokesman.

Captained by William (Roger) Farlow, of Fort Pierce, the boat was 10 miles off North Beach when the fire started. Neither he, nor the Coast Guard, have been able to determine the cause.

Farlow said he jumped overboard as soon as he realized he couldn't control the fire. He was picked up by a man in an outboard boat called the "Little John."

"I have no idea who the man was," he said later. "I was okay while I was in the water and didn't have any trouble staying afloat. I could see two or three boats running toward me, but they seemed pretty far away."

He was in the water 15 minutes before the "Little John" got to him. Soon afterward, the "Leprechawn," captained by another fisherman, Jim Ryan, took Farlow. From there, he watched as his boat burned and Coast Guard men tried in vain to save it. "It burned nearly to the water line on one side," he said.

The search and rescue boat went out at 1:22 p.m. and returned at 4:30 p.m. "The intensity of the fire was so great, the best we can surmise is that it burned a hole in the hull below the waterline," a Coast Guard spokesman said.

Ryan brought Farlow ashore at about 4 p.m. He was uninjured except for minor burns to his hands and said he didn't need treatment at Lawnwood Medical Center.

Farlow said he plans to get another boat, "but I don't know when."

An investigation is continuing.

I got to the back of the boat and tried to decide what to do. I just stood there until the flames started coming back there. Then I decided I had better get out of there, so I jumped overboard. I swam away from the boat about a hundred feet. I was afraid the tanks were going to explode. But you know, actually, that diesel won't explode; it just burns. Wouldn't make any difference anyway, I still would have had to get off the boat in another five minutes.

So, then, I swam around there. I paddled around for about ten minutes, and then I saw this outboard coming. He ran right up to me when he saw me in the water and picked me up. We called the Coast Guard. Jimmy Ryan, a King fisherman, picked me up from the outboard and carried me in.

First, we hung around for the Coast Guard to get out there, and then, when they got the fire out, the hull was floating and the bottom of the boat was all that was left, no sides or anything. The part that was in the water was the only part that didn't burn. That was one hot fire, let me tell you. That was a great boat.

I never did know, but I am positive it was probably a pinhole fuel leak in the fuel line and it sprayed fuel on the hot exhaust all day probably. The fumes built up, fumes all in the bilge, and it finally killed the engine. When the air hit it, it just exploded into flames. I am sure that is what happened, because it really couldn't have been anything else. It's very dangerous because that is what will happen. Fumes will build up, you know, and when it gets air, it will explode. Evidently, it had been going on all day, because when it got strong enough, it killed the engine.

Kingfish Nets

Roger told me that the most dramatic change in King fishing came with the onset of nets in the industry. When the net boats began striking Kingfish here, it nearly wiped out the fish. He remembered in 1978 the circle nets set north of 12A sea-buoy off of Fort Pierce. In two days they caught over "one million pounds of Kingfish." He said that "No amount of fish can withstand pressure like that."

After circle nets were outlawed in the '80s, the same boats began using long drift gill nets and continued pulling in large hauls of Kings. The great schools of Kingfish were gone. Maybe, in time, with careful management the numbers of fish will rebuild. I hope they do.

Roger had a VHF radio in his house and would monitor the Fort Pierce King fishing fleet after he sold his last Kingfish boat. Often he would

converse with the King fishermen about football (the Miami Dolphins), tennis, and of course fishing. At eighty-two, he still fished commercially, often with his son-in-law, Brian, in his seventeen-foot Carolina Skiff and sixty-horsepower outboard.

In the summer of 2003, I remember him being excited about the new Russian women's tennis star, Anna Kornikova, and telling his friend George Kaul about her on the radio. George and the fleet were having a slow summer day of King fishing offshore.

At the end of the summer of 2004, Fort Pierce was devastated with direct hits from two powerful hurricanes, Francis and Jeanne. During the four-week lull between these storms, Roger was diagnosed with incurable cancer. He was told that he would not have long to live and that he would be confined to bed for the duration. He had also been suffering from Leukemia.

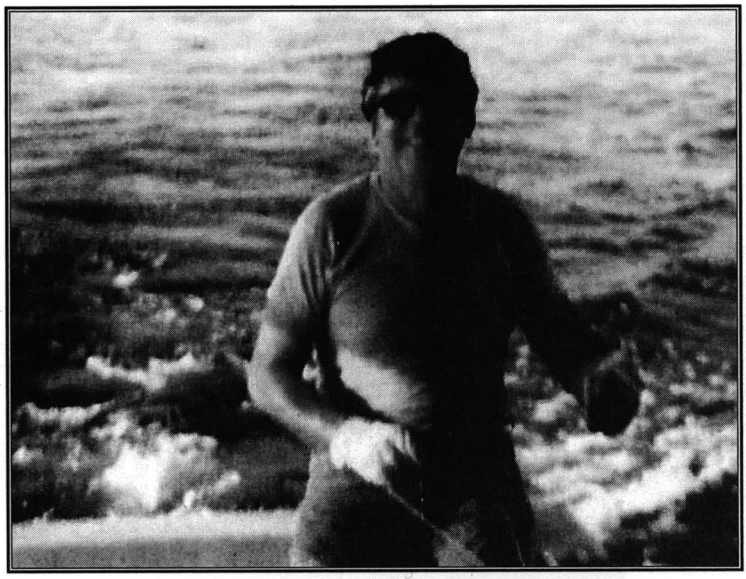
Not able to be self-reliant was too much for Roger. While his family was boarding and preparing his house for the onslaught of the second storm, Hurricane Jeanne, which was bearing down for another direct hit on Fort Pierce, Roger took his own life with a revolver.

Brian Schmidt, his son-in-law, best friend and fishing partner, delivered the eulogy at Roger's funeral. In it he said, "Where does a person begin to describe this unique individual? ... he allowed me to become part of a beautiful family. From that first trip out through the last outing we had, we had an association where we enjoyed each other's support and companionship, both on and off of the boat. Some would wonder how two sometimes pretty stubborn guys could manage together for so long. Well, probably because our wonderful friendship meant emphasis on "Best Friend" and Father-in-Law with the emphasis on Father. Love of family and love for fishing—that was Roger. Fishing, Family, and Fishing, that was Roger.

"The family was glad to see someone with Daddy to help him – I don't think so! I was glad Daddy was there to take care of me. Fish in great numbers and his fishing wisdom at breakfast. When he would express his opinion everyone listened.

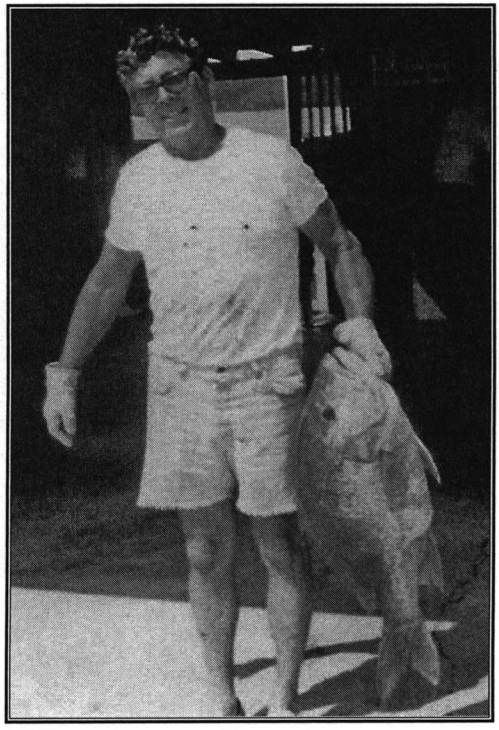
"Certain stories I would hear a number of times—and not to bore me. He would nicely ask if he told me and I would politely say "no"—but there was always the next one or some new additional twist to an old one. It was great to hear these but even more enjoyable to see him relate to those past experiences. Boy 'o' Boy, I'll miss that. I have the utmost respect for Roger and the true feeling of love and admiration. Everyone that knew him had the utmost respect and admiration for Roger Farlow."

Roger in captain's chair of *Sumaran* in 1975.



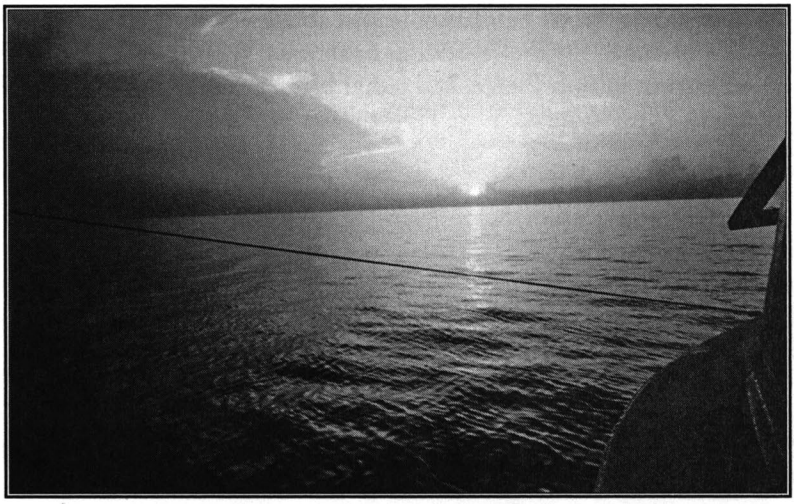
Roger on the stern of the *Sumaran* in 1973

Roger's grandson with two Stingrays caught at Riverside Marina in Fort Pierce in 1977.

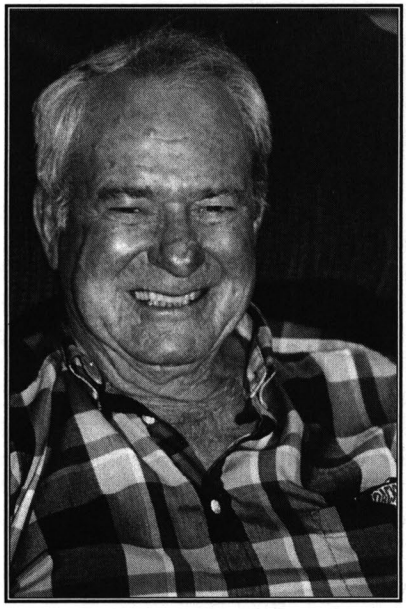


Roger in 1993 with a twenty-five-pound Snapper caught at the south end of the offshore bar.

Roger Farlow and a Shark caught from a row boat while on vacation in Marathon in the Florida Keys in 1940. He said, "The Shark dragged us all over the bay."



Chapter Three
Steve Lowe



Steve Lowe at his North Beach home in Fort Pierce in 2002.

Steve Lowe was born February 8, 1936, in New Smyrna Beach, Florida. Steve is the youngest of the five King fishermen interviewed. He grew up on the waterfront in Fort Pierce. His father had a house and a fish house on the mainland (west) side of Fort Pierce's old South Bridge from 1938 to 1964. Both were destroyed in the 1949 hurricane that Roger Farlow spoke of.

From his earliest years, Steve found that he could make a better living from fishing than from anything else he could do, and he liked it better. Nevertheless, for much of his career, after his father became ill and later died, Steve ran the family's wholesale fish business, which had been moved to the west end of Fort Pierce's North Bridge.

Steve has since sold that business and property and now King fishes full time. He keeps his Kingfish boat, the *Lora*, on a canal behind his house on North Beach in Fort Pierce. Steve has fun fishing, and his is usually one of the first boats in from fishing each day. Even though he leaves the fishing grounds early, as a rule, he catches more fish than most other boats that stay out all day. Steve is considered by many to be one of the best King Mackerel fishermen on the east coast of Florida today. He was among the first hand line King Mackerel fishermen in the area and has a wealth of knowledge about Fort Pierce and about commercial fishing off Florida's east coast.

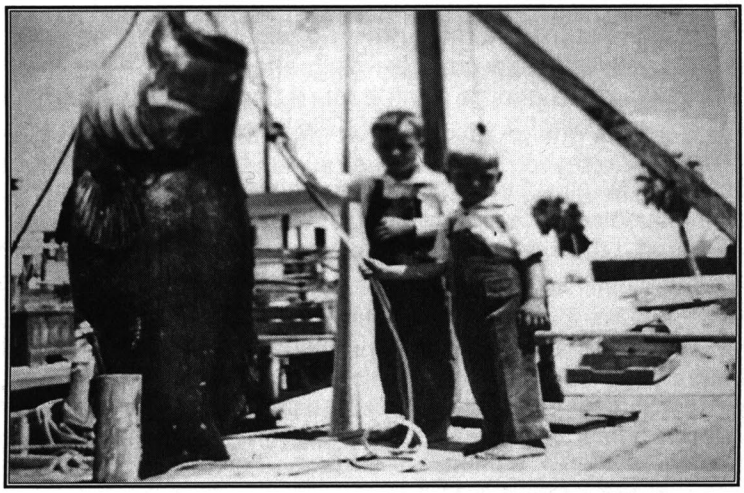
Early Fort Pierce Waterfront

I used to fish on the river. Oh yeah, on the South Bridge we caught a lot of Snook. We could sell them back then. Yeah, they were marketable. They were eighteen cents a pound. We would catch 'em anywhere. We caught them several different ways. We caught them on what we called cane poles, an eighteen-foot pole with a wire line, live bait; and then we caught them on rod and reels with feathers, casting; and then we caught them trolling up and down the bridge in a little boat, a little skiff with an air-cooled engine, a 5-horse Briggs & Stratton. Of course, we put the engine in it ourselves. We did all kinds of stuff with boats (Laughs) because we didn't have anybody to do it for us. I've caught as high as 500 pounds of Snook out there in that little boat. We got eighteen cents a pound for Trout and Snook, big Trout, but mostly Snook. I could probably have 100 pounds of Trout out of 500 pounds of Snook, and it was a lot of fun.

We had an ice machine there at the fish house, and I believe it was 1950 when my dad put it in. It was one of the first ones. Before that, we went to the Royal Palm Ice Company and got it. It burnt down. That's

mainly where we got our ice. When we got a lot of fish, we would go there and grind it up and shovel it on a truck. There were no blowers, it was called shoveling. (Laughs)

In the late '40s, after the war, when they could get out in the ocean again we caught Snapper, and then the King Mackerel boats started up here in early 50s and we had several Miami boats that came up every winter to King fish.



Steve Lowe (left) and his brother Ray stand by a large Goliath Grouper caught in 1942 in the Fort Pierce turning basin. It has been years since any large Goliath Groupers have been caught in the basin

Snapper Fishing

There was a bottom fishing trip with Riley Beatty about 1956, and we went out on a Snapper trip. This was a fifty-foot boat. It had 371 Gray Marine Diesels. They call them Detroits now, but they were Gray Marine then. When I was fifteen years old, we had Chrysler Crowns, Chrysler Royals—all gasoline. That's what I first fished with in the ocean. But this boat, this fifty-footer, was the first one I went on with a diesel. I did run one for Homer Curry and it was later than that, and it had a, I forget what kind of diesel it was, but it was a terrible engine on a Nova Scotia boat.

This boat, Riley Beatty's, had been a rum runner during Prohibition. This was a very fast boat; it had two Pierce- Arrow gas engines in it at that time. It ran like 30 knots, and this guy, Riley Beatty, bought it in Miami and rebuilt it and made a fishing boat. Of course, he was a real good fisherman, excellent. In fact, he taught me how to pull wire, and he was the best man I'd ever seen with wire. I have never seen anybody that could even compare with him.

We went on this Snapper trip and we got out, probably off of Melbourne, in 30 fathoms, and it started blowing, and it got rougher, and

rougher, and rougher. So, we come in to Grant Pines, about five miles off the beach, and we anchored up in there. This guy would never come home. It didn't get too rough. You just stayed there until it got calm, and then you go fishing.

We anchored up there for like two days, and I'm sitting on the stern of the boat. We're on a little rock, and I'm catching chicken Snapper. We didn't catch many; a couple days there we caught a couple 300 pounds.

Then the next morning when we got up, it was slick calm and we saw this boat going east. He'd almost go out of sight and then he would turn around then go west. He'd go in to within about two miles of the beach and he'd turn around and go back east. (Laughing) We couldn't figure out what he was doing! It was myself, Riley Beatty and a guy we called Beetlebaum.

Riley says, "Well...," everybody called him Squeaky because he had kind of a squeaky voice. Riley said, "Let's get the anchor and start looking around. I think them people are catching Kingfish in that boat."

So Riley gets his wire out, and he puts out probably at that time 160 foot of wire and we start motoring off to the south towards this boat. Riley starts jerkin', always jerkin', like JW (Johnny Jones). Always jerkin'. He was jerkin' a bug—a sisal bug. Made out of sisal rope. It goes through the eye of the hook, and you wrap a piece of soft Monel or stainless around it and tighten it up. Then, you can catch... it's all according to how good the fish are bitin', but you could catch a couple of hundred pounds of fish on a bug. Riley! HA! He caught a million pounds like that! (Laughs)

So we start going down the ocean, and he starts jerkin', what we call jerkin', and he caught a fish so he had a steering station in the stern, had a steering wheel. He turned it and turned the boat in a circle.

At about seven that evenin', we left that circle and came back to Fort Pierce and had 7,000 pounds of Kingfish, and this guy Beetle, all he did was tie bugs. Riley fished in the stern, and I fished up on the side of the boat, midship on the starboard side, as we were circling to the right. My jerk line leader was twenty foot from the bug. And I caught a lot of fish with the lead in my hand.

A lot of the time I threw the bug out, and fish would jump with it and you could look down in the water, where the slick of the boat inside the circle, where the boat was circling, and it was just like that. Literally, millions of Kingfish. The water was just black with fish. Yeah, just black.

And then, we went in that night and went back the next day. Before daylight we went back up there, and we had 6,000 that day, and then it blew a livin' gale for about two weeks, and that was the end of it. It was in the spring of the year when the fish were movin', and they were gone. That was it.

That other boat trolling back and forth, that was Thee Davis and his brother. The boat's name was the *Scat* and Joe Roberts's dad built that boat. Old man Joe Roberts built that boat. It had a Buick engine in it with

a car transmission, and when they shifted gears in that boat, you oughta heard it grind! (Laughs)

As far as I know, the *Scat*'s still fishin'. Yeah it's still fishin'. Yeah, Flash had it. You know, Flash had the *Scat*. He sold it two years ago to some guy before the hurricane, and it sunk during the hurricane at the dock, but I think it's still fishable. I think it was thirty-two foot.

Steve Begins Commercial Fishing

I King fished for several years before I ran the fish house. My dad ran the fish house. I got out of high school in '55, and I went to work for a contractor building sea walls in Faver's Cove. Albert Fletcher out of Vero and I had twelve guys under us, and we built concrete sea walls which are still there today. I made $100 a week, and I worked five days a week and had two days off.

One weekend, my dad had this boat. It was a Snapper boat. It wasn't being used. At that time the Snapper fishin' had kinda died out and everybody was moving north to the Cape. I took this boat out on the weekend. I took it out on a Saturday, and I caught a thousand pounds of Kingfish. Trollin', yeah, with spoons, and they were ten cents a pound.

I'm thinking, here I'm workin' five days a week tryin' to keep this crew together, making $100, and I can go out here in one day and make $100. Somethin' ain't right here. (Laughs)

I went out on Sunday and caught another 1,000 pounds and went back to work Monday and I told Albert, "I'm giving you my notice."

And he said, "What do you mean?"

I says, "I'm quittin'! I'm through."

"Oh, no! You can't do that!" He says, "I'll give you $100 a week raise."

I said, "You should have done that a couple weeks ago. It's too late now."

I gave him my notice, and the next week I didn't show up for work. And then I King fished, and, you know, Snapper, Grouper and Kingfish, and from then until my dad got sick, I believe in 1968, and that's when I started runnin' the fish house.

Lowe's Fish Houses

Our second fish house was by South Bridge. When I first started fishing in 1956, it was still on the west end of the Causeway. Right there in the corner where Simonsen's Restaurant used to be. That's where we had the fish house. Later on Hudgin's rented that from Joe Tierney. Hudgins leased that fish house. That was our fish house. We built that fish house, the sea walls and everything. We built everything there. But that was the second fish house.

The first one was west of that. It was all wood with wooden docks. I got pictures. You can look at it. And then, I think we sold that out. My dad sold out in '64, and we moved over to Better Seafoods on the east end,

on the Causeway, over by Baywood Fisheries, where Chuck's Restaurant is now, just to the west of Chuck's Restaurant is where we were at. Better Seafoods was the name of it.

Courtney Harey had it, and it went out of business, and my dad leased the building. That's where we went, and we stayed there until 1968, and then we moved over to the North Causeway in 1968. We leased the property at first from Lou Fisher who owned Fisher Seafood at the Cape. He owned that property and then we built all the docks there and the buildings and everything. Hell, I sold it out in 1988. We finally bought it from Fisher. There was somebody else trying to buy it. (Laughs)

Steve Lowe's home and his father's fish house, located on the mainland (west side) of the old South Bridge in Fort Pierce, were damaged in the hurricane of 1949.

Steve Commercial Fishes

I fished from the mid 1950s to 1968. Denny Magaren and I built a twenty-four-foot boat in 1958, and I put a 6-cylinder gas engine in it at that time and was, I think a 96-horse. It was a Universal, comparative to a Chrysler Ace which is 96-horse, and I ran it for two years with that motor in it and they came out with a 283 Chevrolet V-8. They were all raw water-cooled. Everything was raw water then.

I pulled that 6-cylinder engine out and put a 283 Chevrolet in it; my dad handled Universals. At that time, that engine cost $1,000. That was a lot of money. (Laughs) But that little boat would run thirty miles an hour with that engine in it. It was the fastest thing up and down the coast. Everybody tried to outrun it. (Laughs)

Denny had his own boat by then. But we did fish together in the wintertime, we'd go bottom fishin' a lot of times and catch Snapper and Grouper. Other times we would Kingfish until the fishing slowed down and then anchor up for Snapper and Grouper.

(In 2001, Steve spread Denny Magaren's ashes on the northeast grounds off of Fort Pierce.)

The First Navigational Devices

Either that or if there wasn't any Kingfish bitin', then you'd go bottom fishin' and you could do real good at it, but not anymore. (Laughs) Because the GPSs. I think the worse thing that ever happened to fishin' was Lorans and stuff like that. GPSs, Lorans...they're terrible.

Fathometers and color scopes, that's fine. Unless you put that over the fish, you don't know where he's at. But the GPS tells you where the home is he lives. It's like lookin' in the phone book; you can find anybody's address.

When I went Snapper fishing off New Smyrna and St. Augustine up in there, all we had was a compass. We had bomber radio direction finders out of the Second World War, RDFs, and we went by the lights on the beach because we could tell by the illumination that we looked at 'em so much, you know Vero, Fort Pierce, Melbourne, the different shapes of the lights, and that's what we went by.

At night we would hunt bottom according to a compass, and the radio direction finders, they were just about useless, because if you were 180 degrees off, you didn't know it! (Laughs)

And then we had Lorans out of bombers. They were the first Long Range Navigational Aid, that's the first time they had 'em, in the bombers, and we bought 'em surplus. You had to be a mathematician to use one of those damn things. They came out in the late '50s.

The only ones that had 'em were the Snapper boats. You know, they were advertised how great they were and everything; well, they were a piece of garbage. If lightnin' struck within a thousand miles, that thing went... (Makes noise).

You had to go through four stages with this creature. It had loops and you had to turn the buttons and line the loops up where they matched. And then ya switched and you went to posts, like fence posts. We went through four stages of this, and if at any time there was lightnin' somewhere, it was all gone. (Laughs) It was really interesting, so you were better off just knowin' how to read a compass and remember where you'd been and what the bottom looked like. All we had was bottom markin' fathometers, but they didn't mark fish.

Changes to King Fishing

Well, I think what's impacted it recently in the last ten years is all the groves that have moved away from Orlando and moved within five miles of the coast in Fort Pierce, Indian River and Martin County, because we get all the pesticides off these groves right into the estuary and right into the ocean. As you can see right now, the water turns brown out there ten

miles offshore and every bit of this is off these groves and this has a super effect. You've never seen anybody run a water quality sample out of Taylor Creek. You've never seen it, and you won't see it because the industry is too big. They don't want to hear about it.

Everything has an effect. Every hook has an effect on the fishin'. I still think it's more to do with the runoff from the groves in the last ten years, bigger detriment than the nets. The nets impacted King fishing for a time, but I think that that was a situation where it's a recoverable thing. There's just too much pressure on the fish— pollution and pressure. We got 800,000 boats registered in the state of Florida. Sport boats. And if each one of them catches one Kingfish, how many pounds do you think this is? (Laughs)

Two per person. If they catch one! If they go one day a year, it's 850,000 boats that catch one eight-pound Kingfish. If there's five people on the boat, if they only catch one, that's five. The figures are astronomical! (Laughs)

The fishing tournaments are detrimental to it too, because they're going for the big fish. They may catch 20 to 30 fish in each boat, and if they catch a 25-pound fish and it's their first fish, they put him in the boat and then they catch a 15-pounder, they cut him loose because they got a bigger one. And then they catch a 30-pounder, well, where does the 25-pounder go? This goes on all day for two to three days of these tournaments. You don't think they're going to catch two fish, that's all they're allowed, and come home? I know I wouldn't! (Laughs)

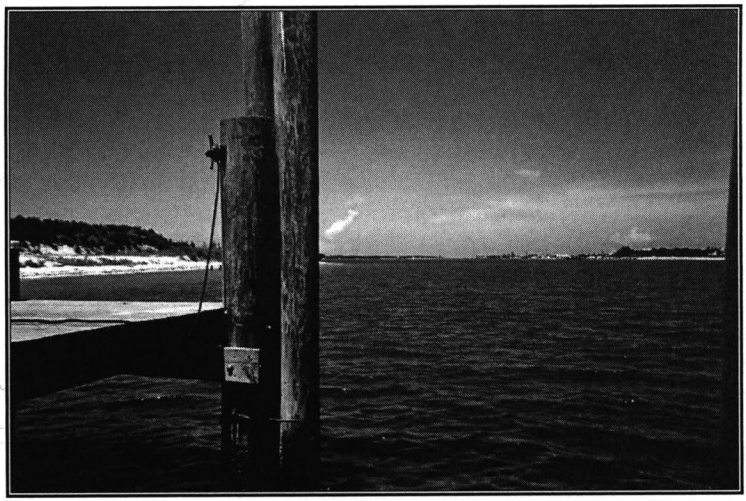
Storm Stories

One of the worst storms I ever saw came over the fish house when I was just a kid. My dad used to rent boats. People would rent 'em and row out in the river and fish. We were standing in the fish house one day, and this boat he'd rented was out in the river, south of the South Bridge, and they were anchored up. And in come a squall and the lightnin' killed the two people in the boat. We were standin' there watchin' it, and it was just like that (snaps fingers). It didn't hurt the boat or anything. They were dead. They were just cooked! (Laughs)

I've been in lightnin' storms in the ocean. I was out fishin' a guy's boat, a little eighteen-foot boat, and I ran to the northeast ground, no fathometer, nothin'. I had a soundin' lead, and I ran it. After daylight, it started getting squally, and I'm throwin' the lead to see when I gettin' somewhere near a hundred foot of water so I can start fishin'. I got out there and it was the worst lightnin' that I'd ever seen. I got in that little ol' cabin on that boat, and it seemed like that was the only target in the world for all that lightnin', and this went on for an hour. Everywhere ya looked it was hittin' the water, and I just knew that I was never gonna come out of that! (Laughs) And I came out of it. I don't know how. It just was meant that I wasn't supposed to be there. I was in the right place.

And then I got struck by lightnin' Sword fishin' years later down off of Lake Worth. It struck the radar right over my head in a fifty-three-foot boat. It went right through everything on the boat. It took all the electronics out—the radio, radar, Loran, everything, power steering. It was the crack and the flash; it was instantaneous, just like that. That was it.

I had two guys on the stern of the boat just started puttin' line out, had a mile of line out, and I had it on the pilot and the boat went in a circle because it blew the pilot out. It took me about an hour and a half to get the rudders back straight, but I came on home. That was night, and it was just at dark. There was one little cloud and one bolt of lightnin' and that was all it took.



View of the Fort Pierce Turning Basin from the port fuel dock. The inlet can be seen in the distance. This is near where Steve Lowe saw two people struck and killed by lightening when he was a child.

And Bobby Christiansen and Short Day (Gene Hayes) were right there, and they got to lookin' for me. Course I couldn't talk to 'em 'cause I didn't have a radio. I finally got the rudders straight on that thing. I came back to Fort Pierce, and they were still lookin' for me. They called the Coast Guard, called my brother at home, and they wanted to know where I was at, and he says "He's out fishin'."

They said, "Well we can't find 'im out there."

He said, "Well, that's where he went."

And then they came down, and I had the boat tied up at the fish house. I got back in to the fish house about midnight; of course I couldn't talk to anybody, but they were still lookin' for me! (Laughs) They knew I was right there someplace.

Al Tyrrell was in a storm when he first started fishing here. He was fishing north of 12. The sky just turned black as far north and south as you could see. Everybody else went in. He was out with his pregnant wife and his two-year-old baby in the *Tempo*. That was the name of his boat. It was a wooden boat—little ol' twenty-two, twenty-four-foot boat. I remember the boat well, and the pregnant wife, and the little kid. (Laughs)

Well, we were smarter than that, we all came home. Al never was too smart at things like that! (Laughs) He was a former Marine, I guess. He was on Okinawa, Tarawa, and I guess that takes somethin' out of ya. You're fearless when you been there! (Laughs) That's right, that's what I say, you're fearless. You've already been there, and everybody in the world tried to kill you.

I was back in, I wasn't out there. I wasn't dumb enough to stay out there in that. When you're used to the old Northwesters, when you see 'em comin', they were a black ribbon in the north and you'd watch that ribbon and it kept gettin' bigger and bigger and bigger. And when you saw that, you'd better get to the dock.

But in the summer, you get the squalls that come up, the line squalls, and you see this huge cloud comin'. And when you hear all this thunder, you know there's lightnin' where there's thunder. Well most people go home. Some don't.

He made it in around nine o'clock that night, just from north of 12, and he couldn't run, he had to just idle in to it. He finally got under the inlet when the storm subsided. Everybody was wonderin' where he was at. He was at the other fish house, the one on the Causeway. That's were he first started fishin'. We were all lined up there, watching him come in, and I noticed a plank out of his boat was completely ripped out just above the water line. Right (Laughing) Al got caught in a lot of storms. Al was kinda stubborn.

Big Fish

I caught a 78-pounder, a Wahoo. That's as big as I want. I don't even want him today! (Laughs)

Recreational fisherman, well, he's got a drag. A commercial fisherman doesn't have a drag. They got a fixed gear, and the only give to that is if it's nylon lines on the outrigger and monofilament line on the paravane. That's the only give you got. The rest of it is wire and cable and you cannot stop a fish that big very often.

On a rod and reel they can do it because the fish can run. They let the line out, they run the boat around to follow the fish and wear the fish down. But on the fixed gear it's pretty hard. Very carefully! (Laughs) That's how I caught the 78-pounder.

Well, you gotta be unlucky or lucky; I don't know which you'd be. You never slow the boat down. No, no, no! If you've got that fish on there and

you're going a certain speed, if you slow the boat down, he'll outrun the boat and he will really get strong then. He'll run ahead of the boat and jerk you all over the place. He knows he's got slack.

I caught that fish on a #3½ drone spoon, and I didn't even have a gaff hook, and you know how I like a gaff hook. I had a #4 drone spoon hangin' on my cuttin' board in the stern of the boat. This is in the little boat that Denny and myself built, a little twenty-four-footer.

Harold Covar was right beside me trollin' south, probably on the Loran today, probably around the 300 line. Trollin' south side by side and this creature hit that outrigger, and I let him sit there and drag for a minute. We were usin' leads then. We didn't have paravanes (Laughs) and the lead was standin' straight out of the water.

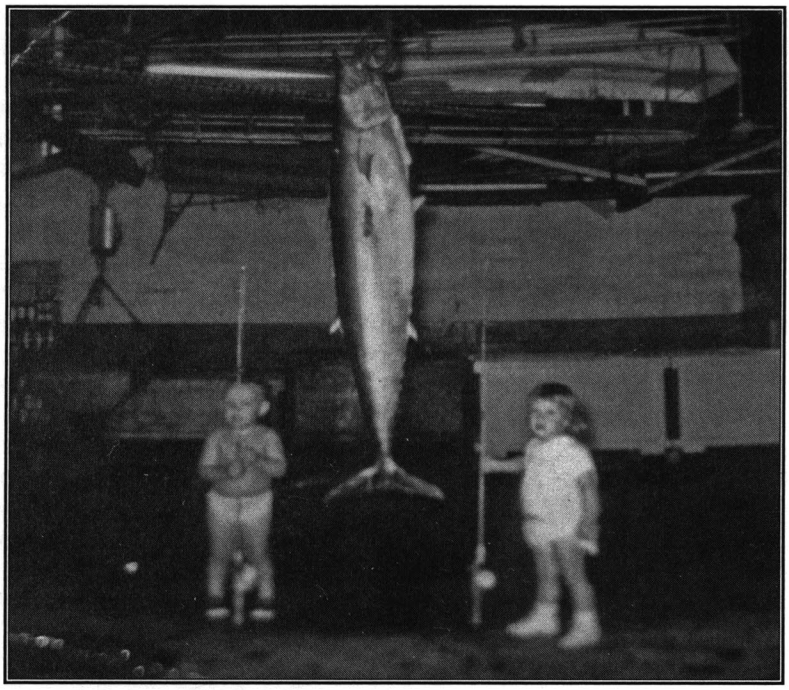
I thought, "What in the world have I got now?"

So I started pullin' and this animal come up there. He was over six feet long and I saw 'im, and I got him up and got his head out of the water, which I could have never done today. I got 'im up beside the boat and he was swimming beside the boat. I got this #3½ drone spoon in his jaw, and it's hooked good.

I thought, "I can't lift him with that!" And I didn't have a gaff.

I looked around and that #4 drone was there so I grabbed that thing and reached out and stuck 'im right behind the head with it and I held 'im with that one. Then I got ahold of the wire right down at the spoon, and I just drug 'im over. (Laughs) I used another spoon as a gaff hook (Laughs). That's all I had. Because I couldn't get 'im in the boat with just the one spoon. He's 78 pounds jerkin' and jumpin' and the wire's only 120-pound test, so one snatch and he'd o' been gone.

And Harold Covar wanted to know what I had caught because I put it in the kill box. Drug 'im over the side, and dropped his head down there, and his tail's sticking a foot and a half out of the end of it and he says, "What'd you catch?" (Laughing)



Steve Lowe's seventy-eight-pound Wahoo was gaffed with a #4 drone spoon.

Big Catches of Fish

It was nothing to catch a thousand pounds. That was a poor day in the winter. The captain with the most fish had to buy a bottle of rum for everyone at the fish house. High boat bought the bottle, a bottle of rum every day. And I bought many, many bottles.

Everybody'd sit around and drink the bottle of rum. Boats pretty much came in about the same time. Everybody was in usually by three-thirty in the afternoon, latest.

But one of the biggest catches I ever had, I never left the dock until late. In 1970, with the *Laura Ann*, I left the dock at the North Bridge. It was two years after we moved over there, at eight o'clock in the morning, and I was back to the dock at two o'clock in the afternoon and had 3,500 pounds.(Laughing) It was work. (Laughing)

I've had people try to buy my boat in Sebastian. I'd have 2,500 to 3,000 on the boat, hadn't even unloaded the boat, and they wanted to buy the boat with the fish on it. Really! And, you know fish then was only twenty to twenty-five cents a pound, and all they could see was dollar bills. Twenty-five hundred pounds at twenty-five cents a pound, 365 days a year. They didn't understand that it was work. (Laughs)

We had contests; we had rivalries with who would catch the most and just, all kinds of little contests—but it was fun; it was a lot of fun. Competitive, real competitive. Today it's not as interesting to me anymore. Everybody's so greedy. (Laughs)

I go out there to enjoy it now. I used to have to. I raised kids and built houses and bought cars. Fishing now, I just kinda enjoy it. It's why everybody wants to know why I go home at ten o'clock. Well, I've enjoyed it all I wanted to. I go home.

Sword Fishing

Well, I believe it was in 1976, and I borrowed Bobby Crane's net boat. I put my long line on his net roller and our long line in 1976 was two miles of line. We thought we had the longest line in the world. And we went out there. We didn't know anything about it for Swordfish. Just like a Trout line. You hooked the hooks on and the buoys on as the line's runnin' out. And we didn't know anything about it.

We didn't have any type gear to find it, no lights, no radar. All we had was a compass and a CB radio. We put this thing out at dark and we were told by the northern fisherman that you had to have it up before daylight or the sharks would eat all your fish. Well, we didn't know any better so we'd put it out at dark, and in the middle of the night, we'd start pickin' it up, like two, three o'clock in the morning, and the net roller is only probably ten inches in diameter and it's not real fast. We'd roll the line up on that and unsnap everything off as it came to it. And that's how we started Sword fishing, and we'd catch five or six hundred pounds a night.

At that time they were a dollar and a half a pound. Yeah, they were high priced. Then we got involved in bigger fisheries slowly, and I borrowed another boat the next year, a forty-eight-footer. The first one was a thirty-six-footer, the *War Eagle*, from Bobby Crane's brother, Henry. And I put four miles of line on that. I got a reel then and put that on it.

Today they got forty and fifty miles of line on boats. Four miles was for, you know, the boats that were getting into it; that was a lot of line, and the *War Eagle* was a forty-eight-foot boat with a V-12 turbo diesel in it. It'd run twenty-six to twenty-eight miles per hour. So I fished it that summer in 1977 and 1978, I believe and caught a lot of Swordfish that year.

One night, I made a set with four miles of line. I forget how many hooks; I think I had 300 to 400 hooks on it, which wasn't a lot of hooks compared to today. I had 23 fish that weighed 4,700 pounds cleaned and dressed at a buck fifty a pound.

I paid the crew. Each crew had four people, three people as crew and myself, and everybody got nine hundred dollars for the one night—equal shares to the crew.

It's all different now. The company boat gets the money; the crew doesn't get anything. (Laughs) Fifty percent for the boat owner. A hundred bucks a night or somethin' for the crew. If they're lucky, if they're real lucky.

But then I went the next year in '79 to a fifty-three-footer, Buddy Daniels's boat, the *Lady Lynn*. Two 1271 turbos in it; it would run 35 knots. He Mackerel fished in the winter time. He liked to Mackerel fish. And the first year I fished it, I took it up to Merle's Inlet, South Carolina, and I fished it up there for, let's see, August and September. I fished it down here in June and July and up there in August and September, and I paid him boat share of twenty-eight thousand dollars.

I quit Sword fishin' after I used Buddy Daniels's boat, the *Lady Lynn*, in 1980 because I could see the fishery going downhill rapidly. Oh, we used to catch two thousand to three thousand a night, but it dropped drastically to five hundred pounds, like that. And then you had to go for a week at a time. I was runnin' a business at that time, and I could only go two or three days a week. I couldn't do it. So I dropped out of that and went back to my standard, King fishin', which I'd done all my life. (Laughs)

When I first started Sword fishin', the common catch was two thousand to three thousand a night. That lasted a couple of years, and then the gear got more sophisticated. They got into light sticks, and that was the new thing in the gear.

Walter Knight was the one that brought the light sticks. They illuminated the bait, above the bait, and squid and fish would get around the bait, and that would attract the Swordfish. He would come down to the boat at night or in the daytime to go fishing. He'd have a briefcase where he had the light sticks and nobody knew what he was doin'. He was catchin' very little, and, all of a sudden, he was catchin' more than anybody, and we knew somethin' was wrong. (Laughs)

Then we started usin' light sticks, and then everybody started catchin' an equal amount. I used to sell those light sticks. They come three hundred in a five gallon can, and I don't know how many hundreds of thousands of 'em I sold. (Laughs) But it got to be a necessity to have light sticks. You just about had to have 'em to catch the fish.

But the catches still started goin' down—they still dropped off. You could see, and they started losin' just like any fishery.

They started having more sophisticated gear, lighter, longer drops on the line and then they started gettin' into radio beacons on the line because you had so much line. They got up into twenty and thirty miles of lines, and they'd put two or three radio beacons on it, and if the line got parted off, then you could set the RDF and go find the line. Before that, if the line parted off, you just lost the line (Laughs).

The catches still declined. Yeah, they declined and the value went up, the price went up, but the catches declined according to the gear you

had to take then, had to have. You had much more money in your gear, right? So you gotta weigh this out of the decline.

We figured when we first started, it cost three-hundred dollars a night to go: bait, fuel, ice. And in the '80s when the gear started gettin' more sophisticated, you figure it cost a thousand dollars a night to go, with your light sticks, your beeper buoys, radars, bait and ice, and your hooks; the specialty hooks were a dollar, fifty-seven apiece. It got very expensive to go, but they produced fish, and, like I say, the value went up, but the catches went down and the effort was greater.

I got out; 1980 was the last year I went Sword fishin'. Then I concentrated on running our fish house. I sold the equipment. I had everything, I had the fuel, ice, bait, tackle, anything you wanted. I sold it all, and then bought the fish (Laughs).

Strange Happenings

It was on the *War Eagle*, a forty-eight-foot marine management hull with a 1271 turbo in it. It was a fast boat, I'd say 27 knots. I had Gene Hayes and two more guys I don't remember on the boat and we put the line out. This was the four-mile line.

I always watch my line. I never let anyone else. We had little strobe lights on the line and pole, and that's what you had to watch. They'd go to sleep and you'd lose it, and you didn't know where it was, so I didn't let anybody watch my line. I always watched my line.

You'd drift off the line during the night and you'd crank up and idle back down the line. You don't tie off to the line because if you got a big fish, he'd break the line off. It was a free-floating line.

One night, I cranked up the boat, and I drifted off the line about a mile and I could see the strobe light, the end light, and the wind was out of the southeast, probably, maybe ten miles an hour. There were two to three foot waves, and I started idlin' down the line, probably goin' three or four knots.

I'm just goin' down the line to go to the other end and drift back, going off into the southeast, and all of a sudden the boat fell. The boat didn't go on. The boat fell. The whole, complete boat was out of the water, and it was just dropped like off of a building in a hole (Laughs). When it hit the bottom it broke all the windows out of the cabin. And these guys down in the cabin were on the bunks sleepin', and they hit the roof. The boat dropped so fast they went off the bunks and hit the roof.

They came climbin' out of the cabin on their hands and knees wantin' to know what happened.

I said, "I don't know what happened."

And there was no wave. Never was a wave! When the boat dropped, I was still idlin' along. There was no up and down, any motion

whatsoever, just the little waves. It hit just like you fell on the floor. It was in the black dark. You couldn't see anything.

It broke all the windows out of the cabin, though. It broke all the dishes in the cabinet, threw everything out on the deck, and these guys come out on the deck and they wanted to know what happened.

And I said, "I don't know what happened."

They said, "Well what did you hit?"

Laughing, I said, "I didn't hit anything!"

It's a Bermuda Triangle story, it really is. There's a lot of different stories that a lot of the guys have passed on, and most of em' have been really, really different. That was enough for me. I didn't like that one.

Tide Rips

And another thing, in the Carolinas, when we went to Merle's Inlet, and were fishin' offshore there, 125 to 150 miles from shore, and you'd go out there and sit at that time on the *Lady Lynn*, I had thirteen miles of line. We set the line one night from the east to the west and the crew went to bed, as usual. I'd watch the line.

It was real calm, and I heard this noise like waves, and I couldn't figure out what it was. Of course, I had radar then and you could watch the radar reflectors on the line and everything. And I looked at the radar and the line was turnin'. It's not layin' like it was. It was laying southwest to northeast, and it turned to a south and north position. I didn't know what was goin' on (Laughs).

Eventually, this rip got to me; it was a tide rip and this tide rip had six-foot seas in it. The boat just flopped and just bounces all the way out, and this could be a half mile wide. And when the tide rip went by, it was calm. Slick calm again. But when the tide rip went by the next morning, which is probably four or five hours later, we picked up the line and the line had completely turned around. Thirteen miles of line.

The tide rip. That's the way those tide rips are. We were fishin' south of Cape Hatteras, and the line would go ashore. When one of these tide rips would catch it, it would just push it right to the beach and hang the bottom, because you know, they were fishin' sixty-foot deep; it'd hang in the bottom and all kinds of weird things, but that's a phenomenon, that's really an experience. No, you've never seen it out here, no, nothin' like that. I've been all up and down the coast and the west coast, and I've never seen anything like it, except right there at Hatteras.

Blips

But then we were up there one day doin' what we would call steamin' back south to make a set against the tide, and I picked up these objects on the radar and I told some of the crew, "They are some big objects, I don't know what they are, but they're big."

And we got down there and you could still see em'. You couldn't see em' on the horizon, but I had a seventy-two-mile radar and I could see em' off shore thirty miles on the radar. I thought, these things have to be big to show up that far.

That night, we set the line, and I'm sittin' there watchin' it and...it was ships. It was a big blip on the radar. You looked at this thing and it was a quarter of a mile long on the scale on the radar. You think, "What is that?"

Well, that night, I'm sittin' there watchin' the radar and everybody was asleep, and you know, you'd watch the radar and you'd watch the high fliers and the other boat's lines. This radar was a really nice piece of equipment. All of a sudden there were three blips on the radar, three miles from me. Not big, but small blips. What is this? There was nothing' there ten minutes before.

Well, come to find out, the next day we figured it all out. The next morning we're pickin' up the line and here three Navy jets come. At cabin level, that boat was about twelve to fourteen feet above the water. I looked at the pilots when they went by, and they shook that boat like ... (Laughs). They were doin' like 600 knots, and we didn't know what it was. Well, it was the 65th Fleet on the maneuvers, and they were usin' us for targets.

They had submarines too. The submarines disappeared; they went back down. Well, we had carriers, cruisers, everything out there! That's what all those blips are. We had a cruiser come at us. I don't know which one it was, but he was comin', and I mean he was comin' straight at us. And he turned that boat hard over starboard, and you know that ship's 800 or 900 feet long, and it banked like an outboard, with a sea like eight foot that hit us after he turned and went the other way. And we found out that they were usin' us for targets. They said they do that all the time. Well, it looks like they'd be telling, you know (Laughs).

They didn't come near us, just one cruiser. The rest of em', we could see off on the horizon, but they never came near us, but the cruiser launched the planes and they came makin' passes at us, and the cruiser, I guess, or whatever, but I know they'd wake ya up when they went by. Them Tomcats are awful noisy when they're doin' that (Laughs).

Ronnie Baird's Story

I cannot tell it like Ronnie could tell it. It was an awesome story. It was like he was out there off Cape Canaveral one night and the sky, in the middle of the night, turned green. The whole place over the boat lit up and the whole ocean, the water was lit, and he didn't know what was goin' on. Scared everybody to death and nothin' happened and then it went away eventually, according to him, and then they picked up the line the next mornin'.

There's a lot more to it than I know, but anyway he was at the dock at the fish house two or three days later, and this man walked up to him and asked him, "How did you do three nights ago?"

He was playin' cards and he turned around and said, "Oh, we didn't do very much. We had these green lights."

And the guy said, "Yeah, I know."

And he's lookin' at his cards and he's thinkin', "Well how the hell does this guy know?" And he turned around and the guy's gone. He has never seen the guy before or since. (Laughs) Ronnie passed away last year, but it really was a story. You couldn't make up a story like that.

Ronnie died of a rare form of cancer in 1999. His wife, Marsha, manages the retail fish market at Inlet Fishery (and also makes the best fish chowder in the world). She told me that the experience changed Ronnie's life. It had caused him to become more devout in his religious faith. His brother Billy confirmed this. Bill said something definitely happened that night in the ocean that was unexplainable.

I met Ronnie's son, Ronnie Jr., while attending Tommy McHale's funeral. He told me that his father had said it was unusually still and calm on the ocean that night. Just before nightfall, a flock of large, strange looking birds flew over the boat. They were not like any birds that Ron had ever seen. Ronnie Jr. also told me the man who showed up on the dock the next day to ask about the strange lights on the ocean the previous night, but then vanished, was albino.

Collision with a Submarine

That was the *Proud Mary*. The sub ran into the Swordfish boat off the Cape. It was an English submarine. It was over here, and it was goin' into the Cape for missiles studies or somethin'. They came out of the Cape and the *Proud Mary* was comin' south and they hit him broadside.

Now how they'd do somethin' like that with all the gear they got on one of them submarines I don't understand. (Laughs) They were comin' out of the Cape and they were on the surface. They were on the surface and they ran right into the right midship on the *Proud Mary*. It's a wonder

it didn't kill everybody on it, but they made it, they got in. The boat was torn up. (Laughs) I don't know whether they hit the hull, the surface, or just the coning tower. Whatever it was, it made a big hole.

Cuban Rafts

I found a couple of Cuban boats floatin' around out there that I towed in, but that's pretty common. I mean that wasn't a disastrous thing. For a while a lot of Cuban rafts were floating around. I saw a lot of them. I never brought anybody in off of 'em though. They picked 'em off south of Miami and took 'em to Chrome Avenue and sent 'em back and now they gotta build a new raft. They left all those rafts out there for us to run into. They sure did! (Laughs)

I did get some paddles off one raft and gave 'em to my grandson David. This is the only thing I ever got off one of 'em. They had all kinds of junk on 'em. Some were metal frames as I recall, I mean if you ran into 'em, they'd tear the bottom out of your boat running. It could be a mess. They were all kinda different. Whatever they could strap together down there, I guess.

Near Sinking

I never lost one, I came close a couple of times, but I always figured out how to keep it floatin'. Well, I had this boat when I was a youngster, my dad had it. The name of it was the *Sally B.* It was a Snapper boat, a thirty-six-foot Carolina hull planked with white cedar. It was tied up at the fish house, the old fish house on the causeway at the west end of the old South Bridge. The docks run southeast and the boat had been tied up here a couple of months in the summer.

I was workin' for this construction company, and I decided I was goin' fishin'. I didn't know it, but the planks had opened up above the water. The copper paint was, you know, six or eight inches above the water, and there was a seam. Of course, the sun in the afternoon just baked this wood dry and the planks opened up and there was like a quarter inch seam there.

I took this friend of mine, Bill Johnson, and we were goin' Mullet fishin', then goin' out to catch some Grouper one mornin'. We were goin' out of the inlet before daylight and I heard this buzzin' sound, and it had a 45-horse Kurmath engine in it, 4 cylinders. Gasoline, twin ignition. Had a distributor and a magneto. Double spark plugs in there and a big fly wheel on the front, and I heard this buzzin' and it was below deck, the engine was, and I was standin' there and I hear this zzzz zzzz. I couldn't figure out what it was and I raised the engine box up. Well, it was the flywheel hittin' the water. (Laughs)

And we were right at Dynamite Point and Bill says, "Oh my God, we're sinking!"

And I says, "Well, we are going to, if we don't do somethin' pretty quick!" (Laughs) and I just turned the boat hard over to the north and run it up on the beach onto an island. We pumped it out and we came back to the dock. We had to swell it up to seal and it was fine, but that was a thrill.

A Sinking

(Laughs) We had a sinking out there, and Bobby Christenson picked a crew up off it. George the Greek and another Greek sunk. I forget the name of the boat now. It was a forty-four-foot Thompson, and they were Sword fishing', and Bobby C. was out there and he picked up the crew. Lucky for them because they were in about a thousand feet of water.

Collisions

Jack Albinson ran into a pretty big boat. (Laughs) He was readin' a book! He was concentratin' on his book, and I guess he had it on autopilot or had the wheel tied, and there he was! He hit him! (Laughs) I think it was a freighter. I don't remember what it was (Laughs)

We had one guy here, Dutch Stossal, and I forget the name of his boat. He had a forty-four-foot Thompson, and he ran on the beach twice. Once north on the inlet and once south of the inlet comin' in from the tile fishin'. He liked to get into the Early Times on the way home. (Laughs) Then he'd take a nap. And he got off both times.

And then we got Elmer Stokes. He kinda got up on the beach. Of course he said the waves washed him up there, but Elmer's been fishin' up there all his life. I think there was a nap there for sure.

Humorous Stories

There were a lot of humorous stories, but you really don't think about 'em until you're BSin' and there's no fish bitin' and then you think of 'em (Laughs). There's one that Riley Beatty, the guy that taught me how to handle wire King fishin' was off of Miami. This was in the late 1940s or early 1950s and the boats were out there, and they were what we call jerkin'. It was all hand line then, and this one guy caught one fish and he thought, "Well, I'm gonna really fix Riley up."

They didn't have any radios or anything then, so he hooks this fish on his line and he's watchin' Riley, and he heaves him overboard and Riley's off there and he seen him and he starts jerkin'. He pulled that fish in several times, threw him in the box, and Riley looked at him and he starts sufferin'. This guy kept on goin'. Nobody caught a fish but him. Carol Miller was his name.

Riley took that spot and caught 600 pounds of fish where there weren't any. (Laughs) That was quite a joke on them! I believe Riley could catch fish in a tub. That man could catch fish anywhere (Laughs).

The Contest

Then there was Kenny Griffin. Yes. We were big competitors. We were bloodthirsty competitors. I mean this was serious. We would... well, everybody else would come in with 2,000 to 2,500 pounds of fish we'd come in with 3,000 to3,500 pounds of fish, and this went on for several years.

At Sebastian we were fishin' up there in '72. Harold Covar was there and he was tellin' everybody how good Kenny was, and man, he's the best there is in the Neptune Marina there at that time.

So, one mornin' I went out to Pelican Flats which is twenty miles northeast, over twenty miles. It's just southeast of the Cape. I slowed down right at daylight and there's Kenny Griffin sittin' right there beside me. We had CB radios then. I went on and called Harold.

I said, "Harold."

And he answered, "Yep?"

I said, "Your hero's here right beside me. Now, we gonna see how good he is."

And we proceeded to fish. As the day went on, I'd switch from spoons to bait, back to spoons and back to bait. Me and Kenny sittin' there catchin' fish. We switched because they quit bitin' spoons. They slowed down. Then you put the bait back and so on.

Around five or five-thirty in the afternoon it's gettin' late in the winter, you know. It's gettin' just before dark. I had a circle goin', and my big box held 3,000. Well, I had one bin full and another bin half full, un-hooker box held 1,400.

This was the *Laura Ann*. It's still at the Cape. I sold it to Frankie Breig, but anyway, I left Kenny there probably forty-five minutes before dark and started in, and he was still there, and he fished 'til dark. He got in about two hours after I did, and I think he had 3,100 and I had 3,500.

Quart of Rum

I beat him, oh yeah. I told Harold we were gonna see how good he was. (Laughs) We never heard how good he was anymore! (Laughs) That was in 1972. We used to have, years ago the camaraderie, or whatever you call it anyway, but the guys were all buddies and everybody was friendly and anymore it's a dog-eat-dog thing. I mean, nobody's friendly.

At my dad's fish house, we probably had most of the Kingfish fleet fish there. All the Palm Beach boats and the Miami boats, and boats from

here. That's when the fishin' slowed down in Palm Beach. And it got hot up here. Yeah. That's about when Roger Farlow moved up here.

And that's when you got the rum out every evening. Every day we'd come in, and we didn't fish hard like these guys do today. We were usually in the summertime in by one o'clock. Everybody. They were in, and whoever caught the most fish bought a quart of rum and this went on every day. You know, there'd be fifteen guys there, and a quart of rum didn't last long. (Laughs). And I bought many a quart of rum. (Laughs) Roger bought a few himself. He sure did. (Laughs) We both bought a bunch of 'em. (Laughs) Oh, yeah.

10,000 Pounds of Grouper

I had a twenty-four-foot boat that I run from Fort Pierce to the Cape to Pelican Flats and caught 2,800 pounds and was back here at four o'clock in the afternoon. Well, I had the fish layin' all over the deck; the box was full. It was pretty common. I put 1,800 pounds in an eighteen-foot once out here. It had a 45-horse Gray Marine engine in it, and it had a little trunk cabin on it. I threw the fish all down in the cabin (Laughs). I did a lot of that.

Well, like you were talkin' about the boat carrying the fish, the *Laura Ann*, the day me and Flash, Charles Bowan, caught the 10,000 Grouper, that's a thirty-foot boat and we had em' all on there, 10,000 pounds in one day. That's the biggest catch of Grouper ever caught out of here.

Steve Lowe guts a 10,000-pound one-day catch of grouper caught off Jensen, 1973, "...It was the biggest catch of grouper out of here."

That was in '72 or '73—10,000 pounds of Grouper. Yellow Edge and Warsaw Grouper. We were bottom fishin' with reels. Yeah, with deck reels down off Jensen on Push Button Hill. We had over 6,000 Warsaw

Grouper headed and gutted and 4,000 Yellow Edge and Snowy Grouper. We didn't gut em' on the boat. We had a box full and the deck full. Well, I got pictures of em', me heading em' there on the platform. That was the day (Laughs).

Those are some amazing catches, but you had to use a little common sense then. Kenny Griffin, my competitor, I told him about this rock. When I was a kid, we had this Snapper boat and during Lent, my dad would let one boat go for Warsaw Grouper. That was the only time of the year you could sell em' for better than ten cents a pound. They would go catch 5,000 to 6,000 pounds, you know, three or four guys on the boat in one day, back in the early '50s. I was just a kid, and they told me, "You can see the trees good from where this place was at," and they didn't have anything; they went by landmarks. They didn't even have fathometers then.

This was off Jensen Beach. Now today it's called Push Button Hill on account of what we caught off that thing (Laughs). But when I caught em', they were big money; they were twenty-five cents a pound (Laughs). Today, Grouper are worth three dollars or more a pound. Gray Grouper at three dollars. Probably the Snowys would be like two-fifty and Yellow Edge the same. They're very good eatin'.

And I went down there one day. I was off Jensen in shore fishin', me and Flash and Charles Bowan, and I said, "I've got a pretty good idea where it's at."

I put the boat on the pilot and took off runnin' off shore and Ken Griffin was dead over my bow when I seen 'im. Ken Griffin was there. And when he saw me, he took off runnin' south. He was comin' out of Jupiter, and I got on the radio and I said, "You're too late," and we had caught three or four thousand.

The tide was runnin' real hard that day, and we caught three or four Warsaws. I just looked at the rock over on the fathometer to see what it was, how big it was and off the south edge of this rock is 600 feet of water. It came up to 240 feet on the top and it was like three miles long. And when we went down there, we caught Grouper.

You power fished into the tide, most of the time. You kept the boat runnin' on the pilot. You set it on pilot. You stem it into the tide and idle the motor down, and you just go to the bottom and come up, go to the bottom. For three miles you'd back up, and then when you got to the north end of it, you'd run back south and do the same thing over again. You're goin' into the current. But you still are backin' up. Oh yeah, the current runs five knots out there; there's lots of tide.

The reels are out the side of the boat. They're not on the stern; they're out the side. You're just into the tide and backin' but with it. You're idling just tryin' to hold it against the tide as much as you can fish without the lines sweepin' up off the bottom. It was a three mile strip. And then you run back to the south. That was quite some fishin'.

The charter boats out of Stuart used to come out and sit there and take pictures of us puttin' these 200-pound Grouper in the boat. They'd come over and give us hooks, great big hooks, saying, "You gotta have these kinda hooks to catch these things," and we had 'em layin' all over the deck.(Laughs) They were trying to tell us how to catch 'em?

"Okay, thank you!" (Laughs)

Don Chason was one of the guys down there, and he was the one who supposedly discovered this Push Button Hill. He died in a helicopter crash. It was quite somethin'. There was nothin' there no Red Snapper, no Gray Grouper, just Yellow Edge, Snowy Grouper and Warsaws. Today it's fished out. You might catch one there.

That year, at Sebastian, me and Kenny had the little contest goin'. I told him "I'm gonna find that rock you been fishin' on and I'm gonna clean it off," and I did. I cleaned it off. One day there was nine boats down there fishin'. We told everybody where it was. They ruined it. (Laughs)

Indiana Rock

Same with Indiana Rock. I named that rock. We found some Hoosier fishermen there. Three of 'em. Three of 'em at one time. Three boats, all of 'em were from Indiana. Ronnie Baird, Jerry Harrison and one other one, I forget who it was. So I named it Indiana Rock, but I caught I don't know how many tons of Red Snapper off that rock before they ever found it. That's northeast of Bethel Shoals. I haven't even been on it in probably fifteen years.

It's so common now; it's on the charts on the tackle stores. (Laughs) You can't have that and have fish on it. It won't work, but I hit that rock one afternoon in '73 or '74 with Chief Ansalmo Sante and in three hours, we had 97 head of Red Snapper that weighed 2,700 pounds.

Right in that period of time, I was catchin' 100,000 pounds of fish a year in that boat and in the boat before that, I was catchin' 100,000 in a little twenty-four-footer. In fact, my dad had a contest, and I didn't even know about it.

When Flash fished with me, I gave him his share and put it on his book. I didn't give one check to me, but when I gave him a check, I put it on his book. Well, I didn't know about it. I'd gave him a third of whatever was caught; it was a third because the boat got a share, I got a share and he got a share.

Well, I didn't know about the contest and at the end of the year, I won the contest. I had 85,000 pounds of fish on my ticket, plus what Flash had put on his. I don't know what it was, but BC Davis, he got 'em all on his ticket and then he paid who was with him out of his fish so it would go in his weight. I didn't know my father had this contest goin'. I got the paper with the winners on it and a little old imitation gold boat.

That was the prize. High class. I didn't even know about it. I didn't know I was in it.

As kids, we could catch plenty of Channel Bass, Mango Snapper and Snook, but my dad was in the fish business in New Smyrna before we moved down here in 1938 and he ran a business up here. He came down here with another man who bought this place and then he bought it from him. Charlie Byce was his name.

I went out in the boat with him in the river and did a lot of fishin' when I was just a kid and we'd catch a lot of fish with a hand line. (Laughs) He wouldn't let me use a rod and reel. I was too little, so I used a hand line. (Laughs) Rod and reels weren't too thick around here during the war, you know? (Laughs) That's when we had to fish in the river mostly.

Squidders

Squidders for Kingfish and squidders for Mackerel are two different things. When squiddin' Kingfish, you use a block tin squid. It's heavy, probably weighs three or four ounces. You drop this down to the bottom, go real slow, dead idle or drift and then you jerk this thing up and down. They call it a squid. Block tin squid is what they call it. But you work this thing comin' up. You don't jerk it and keep comin' with it. You drop it back and it's quite an art. It is like a lead with a hook on the end. Right, with a hook, you pour the lead around a hook.

Squiddin' for Mackerel was different. They trolled for Spanish Mackerel. Squiddin' Mackerel. That's a different kind of squid. It's a small squid. I've got both of 'em. It was a block tin squid. That's what they call it, a squid. I don't know why they called it a squid because it sure don't resemble one. It's just a piece of metal with a hook in it. They troll this for Mackerel. It flashes like a drone spoon and Mackerel love it.

King fishermen are happiest when they were running from line to line pulling fish. That's good fishing; that's what ya do with Mackerel. But with King Mackerel, you troll spoons, strip baits, whole baits. But squids don't work near as good trolling. You jerk a squid from the bottom up when there's a big bed of Kingfish and you can catch a million. Every time you go to the bottom, you get one. You drift over 'em. Drift or just idle real dead slow.

And there was two or three men when I was a youngster. They were older and they were experts at it. There was one guy in Palm Beach that we called Slim; he was a black man about six-foot-four and he was an artist doin' it. Another one named Buddy Miller was an ex-Coast Guard man and he was an expert at it. Buddy was out of Miami. Slim was out of Jupiter, out of Palm Beach and they were two of the best.

In fact, a lot of people didn't know how to do this. It's quite an artistic thing when you do it. It's not like jerkin' your bug like you do out there all the time. That's just a constant motion. But this a drop it and you pull it part way and let it back part way. And this is on wire. All wire. You pull it

in the bottom of the boat and then you gotta get it back overboard without kinkin' it and these guys were good.

I've caught 'em squiddin' with Buddy Miller. I'd catch him off of Boynton one day. He had a Willis Jeep motor in his boat with a Jeep transmission still in it, and I don't know what gear he put it in, but it would just sit there and stem the tide. Course, I couldn't do that, but I would work down toward him and I was barely goin' against the tide.

But I didn't have any Kingfish squid. I had Mackerel squid that I used there. Small ones. And I caught a thousand pounds of Kingfish on Mackerel squids. Dead slow, drop 'em in the bottom. Jiggin'. Well, what they call a Butterfish jig up north. That's similar to a Kingfish jig.

The Keys

In Key West, in the '50s, we would go down to No Man's Land (between Key West and Cuba) and the Cubans would come out of Cuba. That's no man's land. West of Key West there were a lot of Kingfish. That's what we called No Man's Land, and the Cuban smacks would come up for ten or twelve days at a time, or maybe longer, I don't know. Smacks, sailboats like and they had dories and they squidded Kingfish.

They had a lot of Red Snapper in Cuba. They would trade you Red Snapper for Kingfish. And then they wanted the block tin squids 'cause they were scarce in Cuba and they couldn't get them. They would trade Matusalem rum for these block tin squids and we had plenty of 'em, so they had plenty of rum. (Laughs)

It was '56 or '57. Hell, I was only nineteen. Yeah, I was fishin' in Key West when I was 19 years old. There was nothin' there then. When I fished out of Marathon, all that was there were a railway and three fish houses. That was it. Ernest Hemingway was probably around there somewhere, yeah. (Laughs) But there was nothin' there, I mean nothin'. Well, there was the old fort, Fort Jefferson. We used to go there and anchor up because it was calm and we caught a lot of fish out there. That was Marathon in the Florida Keys. I think there was a Singleton that had a fish house there, Fisher, East Coast Fisheries. There were three or four fish houses right there.

Iced Fish

We didn't use ice or salt or anything. We'd just throw 'em in the boat and bring 'em in and unload 'em that night. Ice was not prevalent then. I've seen net boats down there, the bigger net boats at that time, you know. A forty-foot boat was a big boat, and they'd have 40,000 pounds of Mackerel on the boat in a net and they had to gut their own Mackerel. I've seen 'em layin' there; we'd go fishin' for two days and they were still layin' there. The quality of fish was not nearly as good as it is today.

Quality control. We had that implemented back in the '60s and the state got involved. The federal government was gonna do it.

The Department of Natural Resources in Florida said, "If you do this, we will not pounce upon you and enforce it," and so the state, through Southeastern Fisheries and Organized Fisherman, got together and made some guidelines where you had to ice your fish and gut them. It helped the product. It created more sanitary conditions in the fish house.

When I was a kid, I used to gut Mackerel. The United Fish Company and Peterson Fish Company was huge, and they iced 200,000 to 300,000 pounds of Mackerel on the floor, a wooden floor, dock like. And we had these holes all the way around these huge rooms and these fish were stacked to the ceilin', to the rafters.

I'd stand in a corral or a hole. Down in a hold. It'd come up to your waist, and you would gut Mackerel till the pile was gone, sometimes for three for four days. You didn't get out of there unless you got somethin' to eat. When I started guttin' Mackerel, they gave us ten cents for 100 pounds to gut 'em. I was twelve years old. They'd call us out of school to gut Mackerel. When they had the Mackerel run on whatever time, in the winter usually, they'd call us out of school, certain ones, because they did it all the time and they knew who it was, and on the intercom they'd call ya out.

Growing up in Fort Pierce

Dan McCarty School. The one I went to in the first right on through. I started at the east and got out the west end. We used to walk to school, and I hid my shoes. One day I came back from school and my shoes were gone. Boy, did I get a serious ass whippin' when I got home without 'em. (Laughs) Well, I left 'em in the woods.

My father was very strict. Oh, yeah. When he said do somethin,' you was supposed to do it. Not like today, they turn around and argue with ya. (Laughs) You couldn't do that. But, no. He was fair.

I remember one time, I was a little kid, seven or eight years old and we were playin' on the river shore. There was a board drifted up on the shore, a big two-by-eight or two-by-twelve or somethin', and it had a bunch of nails in it, and I was runnin' around there and I stomped on it. One of those 20-penny nails went right through my foot out the top. (Laughs) And I couldn't pull my foot off of it. It was dinner time and I'm thinkin', "Now how am I gonna get this board off my foot?"

And my dad (Laughs), time had come to eat; he opened the door and said, "Alright kids!"

Well, everybody else showed up and I didn't. He opened the door, "Steve, where ya at?"

I said "I'm right here!"

"Get over here!"

I said, "I can't."

Here he comes. "What do you mean you can't?"

I covered my foot up with dirt. And he said, "What in the hell are you doin'?"

I said, "I'm stuck."

He reached down and pushed the dirt off. He said, "Yeah, you're stuck." He grabbed me by the leg and jerked it out. (Laughs) He said, "Come on, let's go."

We used turpentine on everything. Turpentine, yep. Turpentine on any cut or anything. And Echinacea, we had Echinacea. You can't even buy it today. Liquid Echinacea. Tincture of Echinacea. And boy when you poured that on a cut, somebody better'd be hangin' on to ya. Cause it cauterized it. But you never got any infections. It was a liquid. You could find it in any drug store; now you can't find it. It made iodine look like nothin'. We never got tetanus shots. We never had tetanus shots. We used that Echinacea and turpentine. Everything was turpentine and Echinacea. That turpentine, if you got a skin irritation, that'd set you on fire. (Laughs) But Echinacea was the thing. Everybody had that.

And then we had uh, oh what was it? It freezed. It was in a little brown tube and it had a spigot on top, and we used it on ringworm. It freezes it. It turns white. We had it. We had it right there in the house. Had it in the tackle shop because people were always getting hooks in 'em. Greatest thing in the world! Ringworm and fish hooks. You get a fish hook in ya, it hurts! Well, you just take that and freeze it; then ya pull the hook on through. (Laughs) It would work.

Echinacea, because that's the greatest stuff for Sting Rays; you get a Sting Ray stuck, that's the only thing I know if that would stop it hurtin' and you know, gettin' swelled up. That Echinacea, that was the greatest stuff. But today you can't buy it. No, no. It seems like anything that works they get rid of. (Laughs) I've been tryin' to find that.

Steve also told me a story that he heard from Roger Farlow during one of those "rum" afternoons after fishing.

He said, "They were flyin' B-24 Bombers, and they were in groups of three at different altitudes because of the antiaircraft. And I don't know whether the guy was above him in the group or below him in the three groups, but one of the bombers took a direct hit, right in front of him, and he was lookin' right at him when it happened. And we got him to tell us that, but we could never keep him talkin'. Then him and Al Tyrrell were both on Okinawa at the same time, but they never knew it for fifty years! (Laughs)"

Hurricanes Frances and Jeanne

At seventy-one years old, Steve Lowe may still be the best King fisherman on the East Coast of Florida. Though now he fishes for enjoyment, and often comes in early.

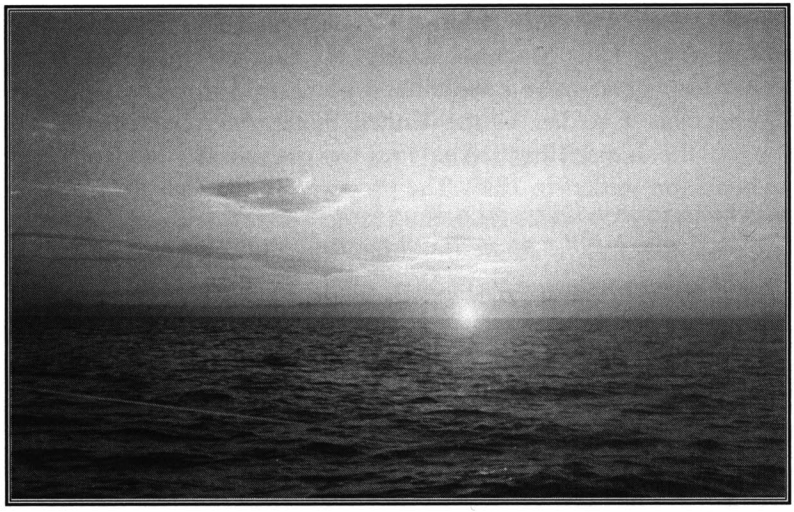
Steve stayed in his house on a canal on North Hutchinson Island in Fort Pierce during the two hurricanes of 2004. I sat with him during a break in the clean up shortly after the first hurricane, Frances. I was allowed on the island only because my parents had a condominium on the island near Steve's house.

The experience had been difficult for Steve. During the storm his wind gauge blew away in a gust of wind exceeding 150 miles per hour. His boat, *Lora*, docked twenty feet from his back door in the canal began to hit a piling. Steve said he tried to get to the boat during the storm, but only got as far as a post in his patio that had held a bird feeder. He said it was all that he could do to hang on to that post and not blow away. He made it back to his house. *Lora* would have to make it on her own. The piling knocked a three-foot hole in the hull just above water line, but the boat did not sink. The roof of Steve's house breeched and water came in causing extensive damage to the interior.

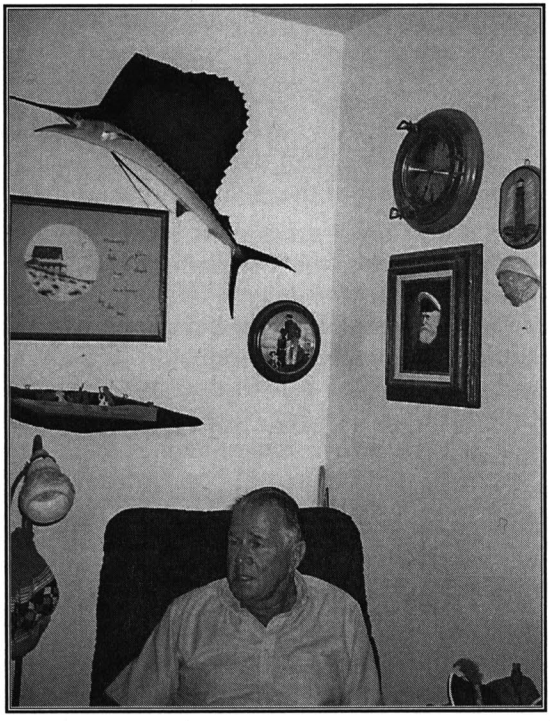
Four weeks later, Hurricane Jeanne made a direct hit on Fort Pierce. This time Steve's boat was undamaged, but his house, still an open wound from the first storm, was nearly destroyed. It took more than a year for Steve to complete the new roof and dry wall required to get his house back in order.

Steve Lowe is one of the toughest men I know, but the hurricanes of 2004 were hard on him and his lovely wife, Adell. They were hard on all of us on the water in Fort Pierce. It's good that Steve is back fishing again.

This is a model of Steve's present Kingfish boat made by Lester Revells, another Fort Pierce fisherman. The real boat is docked in the canal behind Steve's North Beach home in Fort Pierce.



Chapter Four
Johnny Jones



Johnny Jones is at home in his favorite chair. His home is on the Indian River property that has been in his family since the 1850s.

Johnny Jones was born August 17, 1927, and is a mainstay of Fort Pierce's hand line King Mackerel fishery. He lives on the Indian River on property his great-great-grandfather homesteaded. His great-great-grandfather was a soldier in the United States Army, stationed at Fort Capron on the Indian River. The fort was established after a Seminole Indian attack on settlers in 1849. The property on the Indian River Lagoon has been in the Jones family since the 1850s. Today it is located in St. Lucie Village, a municipality of about a thousand people just north of the city of Fort Pierce along a mile-wide section of the Indian River lagoon.

Johnny has fond memories of growing up here on the waterfront and still relishes it to this day. Now he likes to see the sun rise over the Atlantic Ocean while beginning a day of King fishing.

John cries, "Hallelujah" on the VHF radio when he catches his first fish of the day because he is so excited. Now, the whole fleet has adopted "Hallelujah" as a way of reporting their first fish of the morning.

John is a dogged competitor when it comes to catching fish and is known for jerking the bug line on the electric reel all day long. If fishing is slow, most fishermen will let the bug line drag or take the bug off and tie on a sea witch and trolling bait. It is then called a "float line."

Not Johnny. He'll jerk that bug all day long! He told me he loves to jerk it and feel the whack of a Kingfish biting the bug.

If Johnny catches one or two fish in a spot, he is liable to spend hours circling that spot patiently waiting for more fish to rise up and bite, and they usually do. Most fishermen do not have his patience and will give up on a spot in short order. At the end of the day, Johnny usually has more fish than anyone else, and most of the time, he is the last boat to give up on the fish and start in.

His famous quote on the radio when someone starts talking about going in early because no fish are biting is, "It's early yet!" As often as not, Johnny will catch a late bite of fish after everyone else has gone home. Other fishermen either ask Johnny's permission to go in early or try to sneak in without telling (when no fish are biting) to avoid Johnny's disapproval. He doesn't give up easily and expects the same doggedness from the other fishermen.

This is all in fun, though, because everyone knows Johnny Jones is one of the nicest people on the ocean. In over thirty years in St. Lucie County, I have never heard an unkind word about Johnny. Newspaper articles have been written about him and his love of King fishing. He and his family are the main subjects of the fishing chapter in Lucille Rights's *A Portrait of St. Lucie County, Florida.* He has lived a wonderful life here, and truly appreciates the bountiful natural resources of the Indian River Lagoon, the Atlantic Ocean, and Florida's east coast. This is his story.

Growing up on the Indian River

Well, I was a lucky kid. It was such a beautiful environment to grown up in. I was very fortunate to have the river as a kid. I was born in 1927, August 17. I spent my whole life on the water.

As a kid, one of the things we learned was to wear shoes in the river. My granddaddy would cut out canvas and make shoes, and we would wear those in the river for Stingrays and gettin' our feet cut on oysters and stuff. That is what we wore in the river, all us kids. My brother and I and three cousins, Myron, George and Wade Wilson grew up together, and we just stayed in this river.

My great-great-grandfather came here a long, long time ago. I really don't know. He was James Paine. The earlier family came here in 1857. They came here, and that was due to the fort bein' up here, (Fort Capron, 1850 to 1859). He was an officer at the fort, and then he liked it so much here, he never left, and that's how he got started. He sent for his family who came down from Charleston on a steamboat, and he built the first trading post where the Langel house is now, about two hundred yards north of my house. We have a letter he wrote to the captain with instructions on how to move his family here.

But the river, that was one of the first things we learned. Of course, we had cast nets and gill nets, my granddad and me. I was like his shadow. I followed him a lot. I was with him all the time and he taught me to throw the net.

I know one time there were three large houses here that senators had built for their winter retreats. Three senators from Philadelphia built mansions on the Indian River at what is today St. Lucie Village. Between the Russells and the Paines, they owned most of what was the village at that time. Two mansions are still there today; one burned down.

When it was cold up north, they'd come down here. In the summer, I'd go over in their boat house. They had a two-slip boat house with a sun deck; it was like a regular house. We're talkin' a large building, and it was probably out two hundred feet out in the water where it was built. I would get up early in the morning and go over there with my cast net and catch fish and then I'd sell 'em. One mornin' I went over there, and I'll never forget it.

The boat slips were all under roof. These yachts they had, they didn't want sun on 'em, so they were stored in there They'd take 'em out and go fishin' and so forth, and they always had 'em parked in there, but in the summertime when they went back north, they took the yachts back north. So, I'd go over before sun-up and throw the cast net.

One morning, I had so many Mullet in it, they were just millin' around there. I had so many Mullet when I tucked it up, I couldn't lift it out. I was just a kid. I musta been about a hundred pound. I tied it off and came home and got my granddaddy, and he came over and pulled the Mullet out. That's how we got 'em out. I'll never forget it.

It was just such a place for a boy to grow up; it's just a beautiful place. As time went on, we duck hunted in the wintertime. We had decoys we'd put out. We'd go out to the island, me, my granddad, and a fishin' buddy, Bill Russell, and he was deaf. I mean you had to holler to even get him to hear you speak. You could always tell where they were out in the river because you could hear 'em holler (Laughs). My granddaddy tryin' to get somethin' across to him.

Catching Turtles

One of the things we did, we got two types of turtles. We had a pen down front of the dock in front of the house, and I live on the same property that all these generations have been on. We had a pen and we would get the diamond back terrapin and they'd get shipped north for terrapin soup. We'd put 'em in this pen and feed 'em crabs until we got enough to ship. You know, we got 'em with a net, that's how we caught 'em.

You had the net size and you'd catch 'em and they were like, I'm just guessin', three or four pounds, somethin' like that, and you just kept 'em 'til you got enough of 'em and then you shipped 'em.

One time, my job was to take the crabs and crush 'em up and throw 'em into the turtles, you know, to keep 'em fed and in good shape. I was messin' there, crackin' up one, and he clamped down on me and you never heard such hollerin'. My granddad came a runnin'; he didn't know what had happened, but the crab had a hold of me. The only way he could get him off me was to crush 'em. These were blue crabs. They'll turn loose once you crush 'em.

But we had that type of turtle we caught, and then we had Loggerheads, which we caught for food. Back then it was not against the law to get them. We had a net similar to the nets the fishermen use for a Mullet net, only a larger mesh. This was a run out net. It was about a couple hundred yards long, maybe three hundred. Back in those days nobody had motors, not the normal people here in Fort Pierce. We sailed or either rowed, and the way we went after the turtles, we had a net flatty and the mesh in this net was like eight inch squares, real big.

You see the old-timers, they used nature, and they took care of it too at the same time. They were some of the best conservationists ever around and didn't know it. I mean, they didn't realize it but they saved. They didn't waste anything.

And when the tide started in, we'd go up the river and just row along, and the turtles would come up and blow, and we'd get out to the channel,

which is the Intercoastal Waterway now, and we'd just ease north with the tide. When it'd change, no matter where we were, we'd come back home because you had to row, and we came back with the tide.

Well, the turtle usually blows three, four times, sometimes five times. They'd come up, get air and go down, and they'd be down just a few minutes and then come back up. That's how you'd get the direction on which way they're goin'. And then, you'd get even with him and run the net out around in front of him and as you circle it up, you got him inside that was because you've determined the direction he's travelin'. They'll go along, you'll see the course.

They do not always get caught right away. They'll be in that circle, but they just don't run right into that net. Then you'll see the corks bumpin' as they go along it, but eventually their flippers would get caught in it.

We used 'em for food. My granddaddy's daughter Manuela Jones Wilson had nine kids, and his son, my dad, had two of us boys, so there were quite a few mouths to feed you know. We'd go once a week, or whenever we needed to get 'em, and if you said we were gonna get three that day and no more, that's what we got, three.

We'd be comin' back, I'd say, Papa! Papa! There's a turtle!" I always called him Papa. I'd say, "There's another one!"

And he'd say, "No, we save him for next time. We've got all we want for today."

And they never wasted anything. They were strictly for food. See, you didn't have any refrigeration, other than ice. That was the only refrigeration we had at the time. You could get block ice. You had your block ice from the ice plant.

Conservationism

To show you what I was saying about them bein' conservationists and didn't know it, this house we're sittin' in now, he'd have us dig holes in the yard. We'd do it and we'd dig a hole and we'd have a whole bunch of holes in rows out here. If we got the turtles, he'd bury the shells; the head and the part of the flipper you cut off and throw away and we'd put one in each hole and then you'd cover it over and stick a stake on it.

When you got 'em all filled up, you planted watermelons. We'd plant a garden there. And that was the fertilizer. You didn't go to K-Mart or Home Depot (Laughs) or something and buy your fertilizer because there wasn't any. It was strictly a deal that you used what was here; you didn't waste anything.

We used everything. Oh yeah, everything, and you never wasted anything, even the water that we watered the garden with. We didn't have spigots and hoses and pumps and stuff like today's times where we can water everything. We'd take a fifty-five-gallon drum and cut out both ends and dig it down in the ground. The water would come up into the

drum and you'd dip it up and carry the water with a five-quart pail and put it on the garden. You didn't have to go deep, and once you sunk that fifty-five-gallon drum down in there, the water came right in it. It was a great way to save and besides, it was the only way back then to get your water for your garden.

But then they didn't waste anything. They planted gardens and used what was here for fertilizer, the waste that you normally have, and it was all utilized.

Gill Netting in the Indian River

We mostly net fished on the river. We had the gill nets for Mullet. We caught a lot of Mullet, and had nets we used to set right up Chamberlin Boulevard near where the bridge went across. They got it all built except the drawbridge in the center and the1928 hurricane came and tore it all down. It just ripped it apart and they never built it again, never finished it. That was it.

We used to set nets at those bridge pilings. I remember settin' 'em, yeah. I was just a little monster then. The hurricane tore the bridge up, but those pilings stuck right there for years and years. We set the nets by the debris from the bridge, and the fish were just plentiful around them. Sheepheads, Snappers, and everything were there. You'd set it around there. One time we got a Sawfish. They've got a flat bill, and the teeth that are there are like a cross cut saw, and did he cut a hole in the net. I'm tellin' you, my granddaddy was glad to get 'im out. (Laughs)

There used to be some Sawfish in the river, but that was the only one I ever saw, and I was lucky enough to experience it, but there were a lot of fish around the old bridge and in the inlet, where it went through into the ocean. They used the palmetto trees for the bridge pilings, and they were there for years.

That was near the old Indian River Inlet. It closed naturally, and then the new Fort Pierce Inlet was dredged across a narrow part of Hutchinson Island adjacent to Fort Pierce. The new inlet, still used today, is said to be the widest and safest inlet on Florida's southeast coast.

Duck Hunting on the Indian River

Across Chamberlin Boulevard was where that duck blind was I was tellin' you about, goin' into the old Indian River Inlet there. There was an island right on the north side, and the Stetons who used to live at the other end of the Village had the next blind up, and it was great sport goin' out to those duck blinds. We had like fifty or sixty decoys, and then old Bill Russell, my dad's partner, had sixty, and you put all them decoys out and draw those ducks in. They'd call 'em, they came.

The duck blind would remind you of a bunker in World War II, only it was trees, natural. They had a deck over a piling that we worked down

by hand, just a small piling, you know, maybe five inches in diameter. Then they'd build a deck and put in gun racks and a bench. Then they had it cut out. That's why it kinda looked like a bunker during World War II. You just peek out there. Then when the ducks would come in, you'd pop it to 'em. (Laughs) Old Dr. Clark was a doctor. He used to go up there all the time with my granddad; he loved it. There were more ducks then.

They used to fly the river, now they fly the ocean. Too much development and everything pushed 'em onto the ocean. Oh Lord, you could sit out there in the wintertime on a good, cold day and before dark, there'd be big Vs, one right after another of ducks flyin' south. Now you see 'em in the ocean that's what used to come down the river. They used to come right down the river.

Trapping Raccoons

Another thing we used to do in the river was where the little drainage ditches went up between the north end of the Village, now—which was just St. Lucie at that time, and it's St. Lucie Village now—at the north end of what was just woods, we trapped raccoons and skinned 'em out and sold the hides. Not right where this house is, but down in front of it next to the river, we had a little ol' shed there, and that's where we did all that.

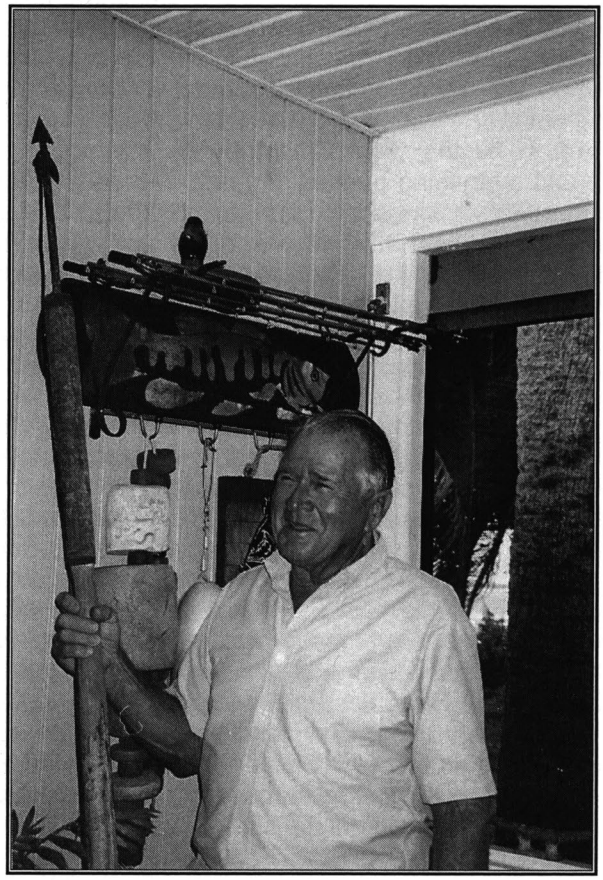
Granddad would let me dress one and cut the skin off, but if you nicked it, they'd deduct however many nicks and take off so much, so he always skinned and I had to do the tackin' out. He had frames made, and you'd stretch 'em on that and use arsenic to cure the fat so they wouldn't smell. It would eat away the fat. And then you packed 'em until you got your shipment ready. I don't know where he shipped 'em to, somewhere up north. I don't remember the place because I was just a kid, but we used to do that and that was interestin'.

Sea Cows

Oh yeah. It was, I presume, legal because everybody used 'em to survive on. Like I say, they didn't waste 'em. There were lots of 'em; nobody went out to kill more than one. There were no fast boats to cut them with propellers, so there were quite a few of 'em, and it was a means of survival. You have your meat because you didn't have anything like deep freezers today where you can keep everything, but you couldn't do it back then. What you killed you ate. Only one sea cow would provide a lot of meat.

There was my Aunt Manuela and her family, nine kids, and ours, so it took a lot of meat, and then of course, they gave everybody some. Back in those days, they shared. Neighbors got part of it and it was passed out among the neighbors up there, which were few at that time,

so it was easy to do. Now, there's lots of people in the Village of St. Lucie. That's the way it worked. My granddad was a great guy.



Johnny holds a harpoon that his granddaddy used for sea cows. "What you killed, you ate...one sea cow would provide a lot of meat."

Trout Fishing

As the time went on, we trolled Trout here in the river and that was interesting. We had a rig using a broom and cane poles, and we made a frame. It had five poles and two outriggers, two the same length, the second one, and then the middle one longer. As it went back, it created a fan-like effect. You had monofilament line you put on there and a feather which never rusted. They had rust-proof hooks, and they were a great thing to have.

We've caught lots of Trout trollin'. My dad caught lots of Trout here doin' that, and my brother and I too both trolled for Trout. Then as time went on, there was a lot of traffic on the river, and it's hard to catch a Trout with the speed boats and everything.

Way back we used to just troll on our sailing boats. First we put in Briggs and Stratton motors then Onans. We used the Onans a lot. It was air cooled, and we just had an open boat.

You'd put this rig in the back and these poles were into the frame. Once a Trout got on the outriggered one, he'd go to jump and we had a rubber hose attached to this frame you made. You'd fold the pole over and get the line. Then we had a little cut in that rubber where it folded. You'd stick the mono, and we had a little knife cut. You'd just pull the mono down into it. Well, that held it right there. Then you'd pull the Trout in, unhook him, and throw your feather hook back out.

Sometimes you'd have five on at one time. It was just like King fishin' we do now. You go around in a circle. You got a little buoy, same way, only it was just a cork; it was small. You just threw it overboard, mark your spot if you got fish. If you got a couple bites, you'd drop the buoy. Throw the buoy over, just the same as in the ocean for Kingfish.

That was a great time, man. Up the river on Blue Hole flat, you could take the family and they could have fun. You could make a day's pay doin' it. It was fun.

There are lots of Trout today, so I won't say there were more. They're so restricted today. As I understand it, there's an in between size they can keep. The ones under, they have to turn loose. The big ones they have to turn loose, too. They've got this range. I do know that it's a split thing there where they have to be a certain size to keep today.

Ed Black is a good friend of mine and a good Trout fisherman, and spent many, many hours out there Trout fishin'. They use Pigfish a lot of the time. When the Pigfish run, usually in May, the Pigfish start showin' up, and then they'll use Pigfish for Trout. The Pigfish grunt, and that's why they call 'em Pigfish. You'd throw him out there. You had a little cork about three foot from the pig and you pop it. You just give it a little jerk and it pops, and well, that makes that Pigfish grunt, and that Trout, POW, he's got him.

I never did like that kinda fishin'. I tell you, you had traps that catch your crabs, you gotta catch your crabs for the bait, so you'd set your crab traps, then you get your bait for your pots for your Pigfish traps. The Pigfish traps are about twelve by twelve, somethin' like that, square foot. Little square thing with little holes in 'em so the Pigfish can go in there. You use the crabs for the bait. So now you're up to settin' them overboard, so you put those overboard and you'll catch the Pigfish when they're there. They'll go in those traps.

Well, you pick all these Pigfish, and of course nowadays it's different than it used to be. They even had old boats that were about worn out, and they would take and bore holes in 'em and put the Pigfish in there to

keep em' alive cause it's a big area. It's the same as boats built with live wells in 'em today. They have holes through the bottom the boat and the water circulates. Well, it's the same principle and they did that. They'd use the whole boat for the Pigfish to keep 'em alive. They'd anchor it out. You can leave it next to the beach.

If you take and you catch all this bait and the wind comes out of the west, you go down to go fishin' in the mornin' and every bit of it is dead. I mean it will kill 'em deader than a doornail. If that boat's in shallow water in a west wind, it'll kill 'em and they'd lose all their baits, so they started anchoring those boats out to keep their bait. Then they'd go out there and dip up what they wanted. They'd always have bait that way, see.

Now when I say boats, these are like little boats, you know, twelve foot boats, somethin' like that. Something that is about worn out and you just bore holes in it and sink it. Just anchor it out where the tide's runnin' good so it keeps them alive. Yeah, you'd hate to do all that work and then lose all your bait, you know, because here you go out there to go fishin' and it's all dead.

King Fishing

They had V nickel hooks, and they wouldn't rust. But then as things speeded up in the river with faster boats, we kinda moved to the ocean. My dad retired young because he had had a lot of time in before he went in the Coast Guard, and then he retired, so then he went King fishing and started Trout fishing, too. When it got real slow out here, he went to the ocean, and then we all learned from what he learned.

He King fished the same way we do with spoons and jerk line—jerk, jerk, jerk. We didn't use long lines either; you only had the short lines. Shoot, you know, about a hundred foot, a hundred and ten foot you'd catch fish, and the more you add, then everybody's gotta do it, you know, keep addin' and now you got longer lines. We used to pile the wire up on the floor. We pulled many a fish by hand. We didn't have any electric reels.

Nowadays the lines are longer and of course there's more traffic, more boats, everything. You see way back, with Kingfish, you didn't hardly get anything for 'em, like eleven cents a pound, somethin' like that. There wasn't a market for 'em at that time, and as it developed, more people got into it, and there was a good supply bein' caught, so the market built up, and they got a good market where they could depend upon it. Then it went up to like sixteen cents, and there was a gradual increase in time, but for a long time the Kingfish weren't worth that much.

Squidding for Kingfish

You got those lead squids, but with King fishin' 'em, what we would call a squid for King fishin', I've got 'em in there. They are poured out of

lead with a hook poured into it. It's mounted right into the lead as you're pouring.

Down at Palm Beach and usually in Jupiter, well, there used to be an old ball there. We called it the old ball, and it was there for years and years. It was just a landmark. There are flat tops right in front of it, and they're still there. Those flat tops on the beach there, a lot of guys fish them. You hear 'em say flat tops. They are rentals right on the beach, but there's no trussed roofs on anything. It's just flat top roofs, you know. The guys say they're fishin' off the flat tops. Well, that's where they are, right straight out in Juno Beach. There used to be an old ball there years back. Everybody used that as a landmark.

Old fishing spoons and lures in Johnny Jones's home. The cream colored ones in the center are made from Sea Cow ribs — "nothing was wasted." — Johnny holds a Sea Cow rib alongside them. To the right are Kingfish jigs known as "Squids."

Oh yeah, Bill Farlow, he would know all about that ball. Well, Steve Lowe probably would, too. That's where they used the squidder bait.

Well, these lead squids. Whenever you're doin' it, you're a squidder. They'll fish with a jerk line in the mornings up until the fish quit biting in the heat of the day, around noon. Then they stop and drift, and they'll drop the same wire line you been jerkin'. You put the squid on that and you drop it down and you pull in maybe three or four pulls and stop, three or four pulls and stop. And sometimes, you'd get up within eight feet of the boat and that doggone Kingfish, he knows it's gettin' away from him and then, Wham! He'll hit it. I mean you'd better be hangin' on because there were some big ones, too. Kenny Griffin was one of the best down there. He was real good. He's got fish houses now and everything. He's really done well with the fish business. Yeah, he was really good at it,

and he was a young kid then. Lord, he could do it, and I mean it was work. He let this down close to bottom and then you'd just pull it three or four times and stop, and boy, that was somethin' about the way that lure would do; they would grab it. They had a technique. They were really good at it.

King Fishing in the Gulf of Mexico

Yeah, well I was a carpenter until we got the kids raised, and then once they were out of school, I started King fishing. Before that, I King fished on weekends or if there was no work in construction. A lot of times there was no work and you got to go fishin'. I never took a day off. I was doin' somethin' all the time. That's how I got into King fishin' really and I loved it. It's just so peaceful to get out there and see that sun come up, the beauty that's there, and you just know that's what you're meant to do, just somethin' you know.

I traveled some. From Cape Canaveral to Boynton is a far as I ever fished. I've always made a livin' fishin'. A lot of 'em travel. They'd go on the west coast and catch so many over there. There's piles of Kingfish, but you've gotta go a long way out in the Gulf. It's real shallow. You've got to go a long way. Forty or fifty miles. I've never been over there and done it; it's just too much.

Porpoise in Fort Pierce

We run nine or ten miles here, sometimes fifteen miles. Yeah. I know you've heard these guys out here say how hard it is now because the situations with the Porpoise and well just everything, you know it's a harder grind now. Years back, you didn't have 'em like that. Down at Jupiter there were a few. Now the Porpoise are everywhere. They're bad. They hit Frankie Breig up there today and he's an old timer. He was off Sebastian, and he didn't have hardly anything. He said he knew he could of had 200 pounds without a doubt. I know this fishin' out here, and days go by there, I know good and well I could get 200 to 300 pounds easy and you don't do it because of the Porpoise.

I've heard that the Porpoise that are taking fish here at Fort Pierce are related to Porpoise that were once in captivity and have been released, but I don't know. I've heard that but as far as fact, I really don't know.

It seems like they've got real bad here, and they seem to be increasing more and more. The young Porpoise see the older ones take fish. They follow the fisherman, and they can jig a Kingfish and they got their meal. Well, the little ones are watching the older ones. They're gonna do the same thing their parents did, and you're just training more and more all the time. They're migrating to the north, too. I mean, they never had 'em in Sebastian, and this year they've been bad there.

One thing I found from experience and fishin' Kingfish, a lot of people will probably think you're just telling a fish story, but you can hook a barracuda and that Porpoise will not touch him; he won't come. He'll maybe make two leaps and quit and that's it. He won't get 'im. Kingfish are very similar to the same lines as barracuda, as far as structure goes. When you hook a Kingfish, they take three to five leaps and look out, hang on, because you won't see him. All of a sudden he's got ya and if he just takes the fish, it's not quite as bad. It's bad enough, because that's your income. Then when he takes your line and all your equipment like they do, it's really serious.

They can really hurt you, too. They hurt me. I lost two and a half months last summer with a broken finger from it. I had my jerk line hangin' up. It was slow, and I saw a fish hit it. I walked back and reached up to take it off the hook. I had it hangin' on, and when I did, my hand was actually on the outside of the rafters, and as I lifted it off, there was so much pressure—evidently, it seemed to me as though I was going north, and we were probably heading south—because the pressure was so great when he took it, it stretched the monofilament line and something had to go. I mean it did go, and that swivel come back and broke my finger. I was out two and a half months. The swivel was tied to the monofilament, and the monofilament stretched and then shot back. And away she come back, like a bullet. If it had hit me in the temple, it would have killed me.

I know a boat that has the swivel imbedded in the carlings on the boat. That's what rafters are. Carlings on a boat. That's your rafters. Yeah, but that boat had the swivel imbedded in there. It was Jimmy Ryan, and he never dug it out. He just left it there for a conversation piece. And it was imbedded in there. I mean you would've had to take a knife and dig it out; it was so imbedded in the wood.

When they grab the fish, using the sudden jerk will just pull him off the hook, but it's when they hit forward of the fish, they're chargin', and sometimes they get a well-hooked fish, and somethin's gotta go—somethin's gonna break. It's got to, and that's when you lose your tackle. And if you lose it, with a boat out these days, you're talkin' like forty to forty-five bucks to replace the whole thing. So I mean as far as the economics of it, it can get expensive. The paravanes, the cable, snap swivels, sleeves, mono, wire, everything's gone. Lead heads, the whole works is gone. Sometimes. They don't always get the whole works, but usually a lot of times, it'll just break and you'll lose part of it.

Straight Line Trolling for Kingfish

In Palm Beach, that's what I say, and that old ball there was a landmark. Sometimes you'd fish for hours and you wouldn't think you'd moved a mile because the Gulf Stream current is so danged swift down there. It's just swift goin' north; going south against the current, the Gulf

Stream, and you'd just be steady pullin' fish the whole time and never turn. Whenever you run out of the fish, you won't get any bites and then the lead boat usually starts back. It'll work its way out of the fleet, and zoom with the tide, he's gone back. He goes back to the end and gets in line again, and here they come back in the same line. Just steady pullin', never turn.

In Fort Pierce it's kind of a different fishin' here. It's just a custom to circle and you stay right on the fish, especially with the equipment we got today. We used to have buoys, and it was nothin' to go out there. If your three lines were tight with fish, you threw your buoy overboard and you circled that buoy all day long. When you went in, you picked your buoy up and went home from fishin'. You had your catch. There were no limits. There were many days there you had a hundred head, seven to eight pound average.

Many a day you'd catch anywhere from a thousand to two thousand; 2,184 is the most I ever had by myself. Out here, one day's fishin'. I think they had the Co-Op then. It was during that period, probably in the '70s, '76, somewhere along there. The fish were here. We always caught a lot of fish here. There's not a day you couldn't go out there during the summertime that you wouldn't have a couple hundred pounds, and usually with the supply and demand, you got a better price. In the summertime, we picked out a lot of good days, just goin' out there pickin' fish, but you can't do that today. You go out there and a third of your fish or more are taken by the Porpoises.

The Manta Ray

I remember a funny story. I was thinkin' about it earlier. My son, Tommy, and I went out; he was fishin' the Australias. Another guy owned the boat, and Tommy was fishin' on percentages. I was in my boat, and we'd gone out in the afternoon to Grouper fish. I'd found some Grouper and anchored up. I got a couple on and got 'em, so I radioed him, and it was just turnin' dark. He came back and anchored. We were maybe ten to twelve foot apart. Well, we just talked back and forth from boat to boat, you know, and our stern was about even.

We were sittin' there, and we'd get a bite once in a while. We'd catch a nice big Grouper, and all of a sudden, I said, "Tommy! Your anchor's dragging!" I said, "Look at ya! You're goin' down current!"

He said, "Dad, my numbers on the Loran, they're the same."

A Manta Ray had gone under my boat, slammed forward under the bow, and come under the anchor rope. It got caught between its two horns. You know, how they have 'em. The Manta Ray's got those two things that stick up, and it was actually pulling me.

It was just like a motor was runnin'. I was leavin' Tommy. I thought his anchor was draggin' at first, by the tide, and it was the darnest thing though; it was an eerie feeling.

When he got off, I just laid right back alongside Tommy. It drifted it back, but I was like two or three boat lengths ahead of him. And it was just like I had my motor on runnin'. It was the darnest thing. It was a funny feeling. So we were talkin' about it, and we couldn't figure it out.

We came in and one of the guys in there had done a lot of bottom fishin'. He said, "Oh no, that was a Manta Ray." And he said "Let me look at your rope." He looked at it and said, "Yep. You see that slime?" There was a black looking slime on it. "They'll do that. They'll smell your bait where you're fishin', and they'll come swimming through. As they go against the tide and under your boat, your anchor's right up dead center, and they'll hook on 'em, and then they just drag you. A lot of times they'll come off like that one did." He said, "Sometimes, they'll pull the anchor loose even before they get off, and you've done lost your position."

But as that was, he just slipped off but it was an eerie feeling. Man oh man. Yep.

Hurricane Irene

Oh yeah, I went through Hurricane Irene with Tommy's boat when it came through here two years ago or year and half, whenever it was. We didn't get a good weather report. It was supposed to go west of the lake (Lake Okeechobee) but it came out right through St. Lucie. Look at those new docks it tore down north of us here.

And Tommy's boat was gonna get up on the dock; it was breakin' lines, and it was gonna be a gonner. It chewed one piling down. You go out there and look at that piling now, and it looks like it had been cut on a forty-five where it ate it off and up and down.

I told Jake, his boy, my grandson, Jake and Debbie, our daughter, "You take care of my boat. I gotta get your dad's boat out of here."

Jake and Deb were holding on to each other to stay on the dock and hold the boat off the dock. Carolyn, my wife was in Washington, D.C., at the time and watched the eye of Irene going over St. Lucie County on television.

And I went out in the river on the flat side here, north of the North Bridge, and I idled into it until it was over. It blew in that river. They said over in the marina here that it blew 108 miles an hour, and that's up in at the marina. That big party boat had a wind gauge, and it said it was 108 up in there.

I was right out here on the flats, right where we go when you come out to cut and turn, right on the flats there. It was blowin' so hard I couldn't see anything. My daughter Deb said, it's a good thing Mom isn't here.

I did see someone. I could see that big party boat that had that weather gauge on it. I could see they had lights all the way around it; it was big, like a drift boat. They had lights all the way around it, and I

could see the light all the time, so I knew about where to stay the distance. It was tied up over here right at Riverside's dock.

Yeah. I could see that light, and as it pushed me back, I gave it a little juice and pulled myself back into it and kept positionin'. I tried to stay pretty close to that marker there because with that light on the boat, if you were close enough, you could see it, but it was blowin' so hard. I stayed as close to that as I could. It was the one point I had to hang onto.

Irene was comin' right down the river then, straight out of the north. I rode out that hurricane. In the *Hard Jerk*, my son's boat. Yeah, but we were gonna lose it. If it ever went up over the top of that piling, it would've come right through its bottom and you could kiss that boat goodbye.

Tommy, my son, was in the hospital. He couldn't do anything. His son, my grandson, Jake, and daughter Deb Wagner and I did it. I took a knife and cut the ropes and took off. I couldn't have gone up on the bow. I'd a got thrown off. It was blowin' so hard. My boat was there. I said, "Jake, please take care of my boat. Do whatever you can do to take care of my boat. I'm going."

Johnny's Kingfish boat, the *Carolyn D*, is tied at his dock on the Indian River Lagoon

My Boat

My boat rode it out. The only thing it tore up was a little of my rub rail and a place on the stern which I fixed with no problem. That north wind comes right down on it, sideways. It was poundin' us.

Really, it's a tough boat. Well, I built it. It's a Stamas, made over in Tarpon Springs. These other Kingfish boat hulls are Stapletons. It was made for two inboard outdrives, and I got pictures of the finished hull. It's

a pretty thing for a sport boat, you know. But of course, I just got the bare hull and made that commercial boat out of it. It's really worked well. I've caught a lot of fish in that thing.

Ocean Storms

Oh Lord, yeah. One day I was comin' in and, there was some bad lightning. When we was out there one of those things popped. Oh, it was horrible lightning out there. And you know how these boom boxes boom in these cars, BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! They turn it as loud as they can get it, and you can feel it in your bones. That's just how that lightning did. I felt it in my chest.

I told 'em on the radio, "My Lord! I can feel that in my chest." It was poppin' out there.

But one time I was comin' in, and it was blowin' pretty hard. In fact, they said there had to be a little twister there. You think, well it's raining and lightning, and everything is real bad. Well, it was blowing so hard that the rain was just almost straight across, sideways.

I had it on the pilot comin' in and tryin' to stay away from it. A bolt of lightning hit within fifty yards off my bow, quarterin' off my bow, and it blew a hole in the water. I believe my boat coulda dropped in it if it had hit right at my bow like that. I saw the hole. It was right there.

I mean the rain was straight across. You could just look out there and you could see it. Man, I mean it blew a hole in the ocean straight down, BA WOOM, and the flash and the noise was together. I mean it was happenin', boy! It was there, and that's as close as I ever came to gettin' hit.

Now Al Tyrrell, he's been the most unlucky guy in the world. He's been hit three or four times with lightnin'.

Now, you were talkin' about rough water. One time we had all gone up, so some of 'em went in, but there was Al Tyrrell, me, and four or five more boats that kept workin' north. We hit the fish up at Bethel, and they were bitin' spoons. We all had good catches, but it got so bad.

The seas came up really quickly. I would say they were six to seven foot, and Al Tyrrell came off one and dove down. His boat was fairly new then, and it ripped his deck up on the bow, just peeled it up. That's how much force there was in that water when he came shooting down off that. It mighta been eight foot, too.

I mean, there was some big seas there all at once. It just happened quick. I hadn't even gutted my fish. I just took off for the inlet. We were all tryin' to get back there, and I gutted when I got inside the inlet. It was so rough it was unbelievable.

Big Fish

The biggest fish (Laughs) I had was a fifty-five-pound Cobia gutted. That's probably the biggest one. I've had Kingfish, forty-six and a half pounds, two of 'em, gutted. Apart, different times. I had one forty-six pounder and that was the largest Kingfish I ever had. That was gutted.

Yeah, they were really large, but I had one on down at Jupiter. That thing looked like a log down there, it was so big. He saw my boat and then he went down, I had to put knees under the gunnel and just hang on, and he broke the wire.

If I had known he was as big as he was, I would have played him a lot longer. I would have dragged him a while and tried to work him up. I don't know if I wanted him though anyway, because he was so big. But that's the biggest one I have ever seen. It was down Jupiter.

Fishing in Jupiter, Florida

I fished down at Jupiter, and we'd go into Hudgins at Palm Beach. I'd anchor up and split shifts, was how we worked it. Now with a split shift, you would unload your fish somewhere around noon, let's say, noon to two o'clock and then that was the end of that. You'd go back out and about two-thirty and three o'clock, you're back fishin' again and you fished 'til dark. And a lot of 'em in this day and time, those younger ones, fish a lot longer than that. But that was what we did during that time and we'd fish until dark.

Well, I'd come in and anchor up and gut my fish up and ice 'em down, pack 'em, and everything. Then I'd go to get me somethin' to eat and go to bed and be up the next morning at daybreak and go back out.

Of course, in Palm Beach and Jupiter, you don't have but just maybe fifteen to thirty minutes to get out there. I mean you're right there. It's just close. Down there in Jupiter and Palm Beach, you're so close you don't burn hardly any fuel compared to here. Then you fish all morning until basically eleven to twelve o'clock. Then you come in and you unload. It's a night/morning deal instead of fishin' all day and unloadin' in the afternoon late. It's a two-way thing you do.

Of course, the fish were there. I mean, boy, there was always fish at Palm Beach. I stayed there quite a while that last year, and did real well, but it was hard on me because I stayed on the boat. We didn't have but one car then, and I stayed there on the boat. Carolyn would bring me down supplies, and we'd spend the afternoon together. I would go out before dark and start fishin' again, but we caught a lot of fish there, a lot of fish.

Rescues

I've seen 'em. I've seen Cubans out there, but the Coast Guard was already supposed to be on the way. But Lord, one time I was in a smaller boat I had; it was a Sunday and I had taken Carolyn and her mom and dad and we had gone for just a boat ride down the Intercoastal toward the South Bridge.

You know the current runs pretty strong right there when you get to that intersection at South Bridge goin' out to the inlet. It's a pretty hard current.

These two guys came flyin' through there in an outboard, and they hit that current. It flipped that boat and they both went sailin' through the air, and the one guy couldn't swim. The other guy was tryin' to hold him up, and he almost drown because the one who couldn't swim was beatin' him down.

Well, I saw what happened, and I rushed right there. I grabbed him, and he says, "Get him in, he can't swim." He says, "He's about done, get him in."

So he hung onto the boat, and I pulled that guy in. He just laid on the deck, I mean he was out, and I got the other one in then.

I took 'em into a bait place right there at the end of the bridge that used to be there. Parker's. I took 'em in there and by that time, here came the Coast Guard, but I done had 'em and took 'em in. The boat was floatin' off, and the Coast Guard got the boat. I'm sure that one of 'em would have drowned, and that one would have probably drowned the other guy, because the current was some kinda steep in there.

That's the only rescue that I ever did in the boat that I can recall. Well, you know the inlet is a treacherous place anyway. A lot of inexperienced people will be goin' with the tide, like the tide is runnin' out, and they will want to anchor. Instead of going down and turning, coming up back into the tide and dropping the anchor out and going back on the rope, they just throw the anchor out. Well boy, when that thing's goin' with the tide, and it comes into that rope, that boat does a number. I mean, it's gotta make a complete turn, and it doesn't always do it. It will roll it over a lot of times. And you gotta really be safe when you're in a boat and don't know what you're doing.

Bales

I've found bales floatin' out there. I never brought one in. I never called the Coast Guard. The first ones I found looked like croaker sacks. I just took 'em and ripped 'em open and sunk 'em.

And the last one I found was oh, probably two years ago. I had my buoy out, and I was tryin' to get a bunch of fish. Instead of watchin' the Loran, I just threw a buoy overboard, because there weren't any boats there but me.

Well, the Coast Guard saw it, and they came and stopped right outside my circle and was watchin me. All of a sudden they took off runnin' south as hard they could go.

And it wasn't thirty minutes until here came a bale floatin' by my buoy. It came from off shore and floated by my buoy, so I swung around and got it and pulled it up. It was like you put it in a compactor, if you think of tobacco bein' in bales, just perfectly rectangular, pushed just perfect, and when I cut it, there was five layers of material. It was sittin right up yeah and was like an olive or a GI color.

I grabbed it and just cut it open and looked at it. Even the stuff was like tobacco, the way it had been processed. And I sunk it.

That's the only three I ever found, and I sunk all of 'em because if I sink 'em, I know where they go. I was so against drugs that I just cut 'em open and I didn't have to worry about it because it was gone.

Live Baiters

You can't throw the buoy to fish now. There's too much traffic. It isn't just that. A lot of 'em are live baiters now, which everybody's got to do their thing, but in my circle, I don't want any live bait goin' through.

You throw a buoy out and you circle it. Well, they'll go down tide and drift right through, and as they go through with that live bait, they draw the fish. The fish leave your buoy and follow 'em along, and then you don't get any more bites. I very seldom ever throw the buoy anymore. It's gotta be a weekday and absolutely nobody around.

My dad was good at it. Boy, he could fish a buoy. Even today, when you don't use a buoy, if you keep those numbers in mind say you go a mile away, then later on, half hour or an hour, you go back to that same number, and darned if don't start catchin' fish again. That happens a lot of times. The fish rise up and bite again. I've found that to be the case.

Humorous Stories

Old Harold Covar, he's dead now. He was a good King fisherman. That guy could catch Kingfish. He lived in Palm Beach. They used to call him the clown of the fleet. We'd all be on a straight line troll down there. You know, stayed with the current, and you'd go right into it and fish for hours sometimes without even goin' out.

He had an old reel that sounded like a freight train goin' by when he'd cranked that thing up. Well, everybody knew when Harold had one on because that thing would go Clankety! Clankety! Clank! It'd just make a heck of a noise, that reel, and he'd take a dead fish and hook it on his line. Then he'd slip it overboard and let it back. Then he'd clankety, clank, up in the box he goes. He'd take 'im out and slip him back up there again, and he would do that and he drives 'em crazy.

They'd say, "How's Harold catchin' all those fish? Look at 'im!" He was a clown boy, that guy was a character. I sure liked him. I miss 'im. He was a good guy.

God

Well, gosh. The open air, just feelin' free out there. I mean, it's just so nice to be out enjoying what I'm doing'. And any time you can get up at four-thirty in the morning, every mornin' rolls around, and can't wait to get to the boat, then you know you must like it because the hours are not always great! (Laughs) When that sun comes up, you know it's somethin'. Boy, there's got to be a God, or somethin' boy. It's just so beautiful.

Baits

When I first started King fishin', spoons were mostly all you used. Oh yeah, you just never would have bait, just drag spoons, but see it's like live bait. Once they started using strips, everybody had to use strips, or the guy with the strips is gonna be catchin' the fish, and you're not, and that's the way it goes.

Of course, the live bait is better than the strips, and you see how they catch those fish with live bait. The live baiters go by ya, and a lot of times they take your fish with 'em. They'll bite that live bait; they love it. And you can't blame a Kingfish. If there's a fresh minnow out there, boy they're gonna nail it before they nail that ol' stuff.

The Little Boat

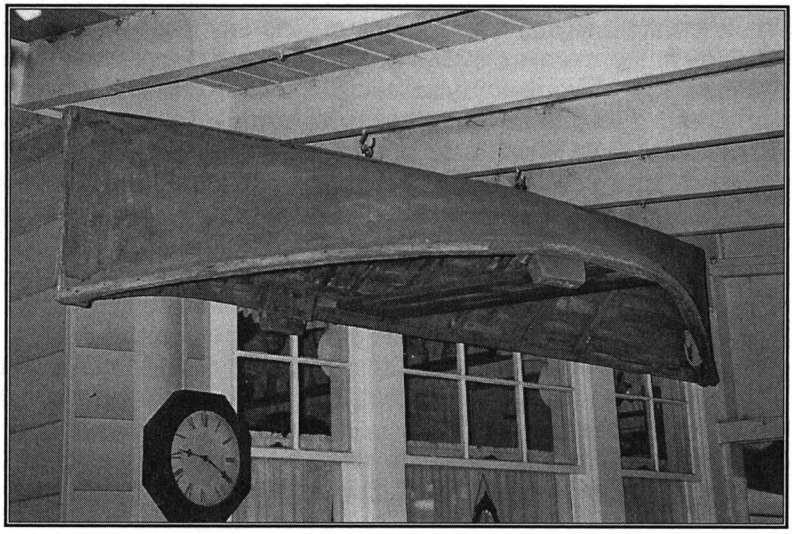
I've got the canoe, and I say canoe. It's really not a canoe. It's built like a canoe, but you row it. I've got the boat over in our old house that my wife and I raised our kids in. My daughter lives there now, and I've got the boat.

That boat, you went everywhere. And we got Mullet and Oysters in it. We did everything out of that little boat, but it's a work of art and to think that all that lattice work held up all those years. We rowed it; there weren't no motors.

Nobody had motors. That sailboat was a luxury we had. We trolled Trout in it. We used to take the sea cow hide, and we'd strip it and the hide is white. Kingfish love it. They made good jerk bait. We'd take these strips with the sailboat now and we'd make 'em like, oh I'd say seven inches long, somethin' like that. And you'd take just the white; you'd cut the dark outside off, and you'd just use white hide.

You'd take the head of it and dip it in Mercurochrome, and you'd hold it there long enough so it would saturate into it; it penetrates and then you take it out. So here you actually got a redheaded plus. You'd take

this with one hook and you'd put it through the bait. It's cut just like our jerk baits, to a point, wide to a point on the end, a triangle. And then you put the hook in Mercurochrome end of it, the fat end. We used to use nylon line, 'cause way back there wasn't any mono, so we used nylon line and you'd troll with that. With the sailboat there was no noise, so you'd just be easin' along and you catch some nice Trout.



Hanging from his screened porch is the canvas skiff that Johnny, his father and grandfather used to hunt and fish from in the lagoon. John's father also used to drop John and his grandfather off in the Savannas at Midway Road in Fort Pierce and they would hunt and fish in the fresh water estuaries all the way to Jensen Beach where John's dad would pick them up again in his truck when he got off work.

But later on, when we got the motor, which was when my dad got where he could and was retired, you know, and he could fish. He fished his time out. But that sea cow hide made some good troll bait, though, and it made good jerk baits too for King fishin'.

Squid

We were fishin' Kingfish, and Alan Osteen was just a young boy then. We had the light over the stern of the boat, and we'd use a bait cast net, a small mesh for bait, and the squid would come up and circle your boat. They'll go clockwise and all of a sudden, the lead will turn counter clockwise, and then he'll go clockwise and the whole bunch will go. Well, we'd throw the net out over 'em as they went by and they'd drift back in. Sometimes we'd have hundreds of 'em in the back end of my boat. The

jelly would be thick on the deck. You know how they got ink in 'em? It's the weirdest thing. It was interesting to watch at night. Yeah, and then the leader would turn and go clockwise.

You put leads on it and put it down for Kingfish, and we use 'em for bait, the squid. You could hang 'em off the outriggers, anything, you know, thirty foot down sometimes, forty foot. You gotta use lead to keep it down. And then as you're pullin' that squid up, a lot of times to see if he got your bait off, the Kingfish will grab it. I'm not kiddin' ya. Eight to ten foot from the boat. It'll scare ya to death when they hit that thing at night.

Little Boat Fishing and Hunting Trips

He'd drop us off in the morning, Granddad and me, by Midway Road. And we'd go all the way to Jensen in the Savannahs, where the camping area is today. We went all the way down through there. A canal was dug from pond to pond in the Savannahs and the water was connected all the way through by the flow up and down through the canal. I'd sit in the front with a shotgun and shoot ducks.

Oh yeah. Oh, what a time, man oh man. It was beautiful too because there were no houses, not anything, just nature. Alligators were there, yep, ducks, coons, all kinds of ducks. That boat there is a historic thing, and like I said. Old Joe Roberts, he's talked many times, he'd get to laughin' so hard thinking about that little boat.

Biggest Catch of Kingfish

There was one Wednesday, and it was really a rough day. The biggest part of the fleet at about nine o'clock was gone home. It was so rough. Like four boats were left, and about one o'clock, the fish start bitin' spoons. We'd pull the jerk lines in. Didn't even mess with 'em, and we had 1,900 pounds—1,900 from one o'clock 'til when we came in. We got in just before dark, but they bit so fast and the seas were so big, you could see the Kingfish runnin' through the seas and the Sharks are in there, you know, after 'em, and you could see 'm.

Actually, I ain't kiddin', the waves were so high. You know how you see these swells. You've been out there when you wouldn't see the boat next to you, and all of a sudden there's a guy right there next to you. You don't see him when the waves go between ya, and that's how it was that day. You could see the fish in the waves.

We pulled those fish, and we got so much weight, the water was comin' in the scuppers in the back. Of course, it would drain back out. I mean it was rough, but we pulled 1,900 and those guys that went in early liked to have died.

I mean, they thought, "Holy Cow! Why didn't I stay?"

You gotta know, you see, that's why I always stay late. If you ever notice, I stay. I'm about one of the last ones. Sometimes it pays off that

way. I have a reputation for staying late. But there's a reason for it, too. A lot of times it pays off by staying.

Those fish sometimes, you know, they'll bite real quick in the mornin'. Then you'll go for hours and don't get any, maybe three or four fish. And you know you go, "Oh god, I'm tired of doin' this. I'm goin' in." You can't do that. You gotta stick it out. Usually they come up again normally; it's their habit if you're out there.

Catching Kingfish

I'm seventy-four years old. August the 17th, 2001, I was seventy-four. And I still enjoy gettin' up to go to work every morning. I can't wait; it's so beautiful. Oh, it's so great! I like the jerk line. You're a direct hook up there. Man, I love that jerk line. And when there's lots and lots of fish, you can take a jerk line and when you started catchin' 'em, you can shorten up and you wrap it, just maybe put fifty foot there and just jerk it, and you have it right back off the boat. You can see the fish comin' at it, when they eat it. You just shorten your line up and jerk it. Believe me, you talk to some of those guys you've talked to, and they'll tell ya. You sure can. That's why I'm so used to the jerk line. You get it goin', you know, you speed up and make a tighter circle, and you can just bail 'em.

Yes sirree. Yep, fishin' is so great. Where else could you have fresh air, sunshine, everything that the Yankees come down here and pay big bucks for to enjoy. We got it for nothin'. It's right here. If I had wishes, I don't think I would wish for money or anything. I think I would wish that my health would always be great. As long as my health is good, I can make money. If your health goes, then you're out of business. That's always the attitude I've had, and look at it that way. As long as you've got good health, you can get out and make a buck. It takes a pretty lazy guy not to get out and earn a livin' if he's got good health, and there's nothin' like King fishin', nothing like it.

Oak Trees in Johnny's Yard

The oaks drop their acorns. I used to come home from school and pick up a five-quart bucket of nothin' but acorns. You always had a hog you raised from a pig. When it came time for gettin' cold weather, that's when the acorns came; we'd feed him acorns to fatten' him up. We didn't buy him nothin' like corn or somethin' to make him fat. You had it right there in the yard. You just had to pick it up. We fed him, and when it got cold weather—they never butchered in hot weather, they always butchered when it was cold—they'd butcher the hog. Yep.

They got a stick that goes between their legs, and you sharpen the point on each end. You'd spread the leg. Well, they raised him up and butchered him, skinned 'im. First, what we used to do, I never will forget, we took a white brick and rubbed the whole hid down. Just dipped hot

water on 'im and rubbed it and the meat, you know how a nice ham's got pretty skin on the outside? That would come out just beautiful, just like that, and that's how they did it.

They utilized everything they had. They didn't go get nothin'. I know every inch of this piece of property, from one end to the other. I've got a lot of good memories, man o'man.

World War II

That was way back. I was in school then. Motor power, see there were sea skiffs around then that were around Mackereling. Well, I'm sure people had to fish during the war. They even had old flathead Buick sea skiffs. They could run.

I have a funny story. My dad was down with the Coast Guard; he was stationed here. He was in the lighthouse service. It was under some branch of the government. He used his own boat and would take care of the lights in his own boat. Well, when the war started, they put him in the Coast Guard.

My mom had clothes out here in the yard right next to where we are. It was just two poles with a wire strung across. She had maybe five or seven wires strung on it. They had no dryers then, just washers and wringers, then you hung them up.

The Navy had a mock invasion and landed right here, and when the guys all went running through the yard, the clothes lines wiped them out. That wire got them, and they told my dad about it. We got to laughing about it.

Dad said, "Well, that's my wife; that's where she hangs her clothes."

It was funny though, but not to those guys. They couldn't see a wire at night. They came charging in there, making a beach landing at night and WHAMO, they hit that wire.

Once a ship was torpedoed here and shook the windows. When it hit that first one, it shook the windows. We knew it. You can ask people around here who have lived in Fort Pierce for a long time. They will tell you the same thing.

The windows you have today are tighter. We had double hung sashes with weights and cords. The windows were looser so you could work them. If they were put in tightly, with the paint, you couldn't raise and lower them. They would be stuck. So we had the weight and cords.

That charge, when it hits those things, it carried. Many of the men got burned badly with that oil. The oil caught on fire, and they were wiping oil away from them. Oil and the sharks; they had a lot against them once their ships were hit.

They brought a lot of the twenty-three survivors in here to Fort Pierce. Right down at the turning basin. They unloaded them there, and they took them to the hospital. Many were in terrible shape.

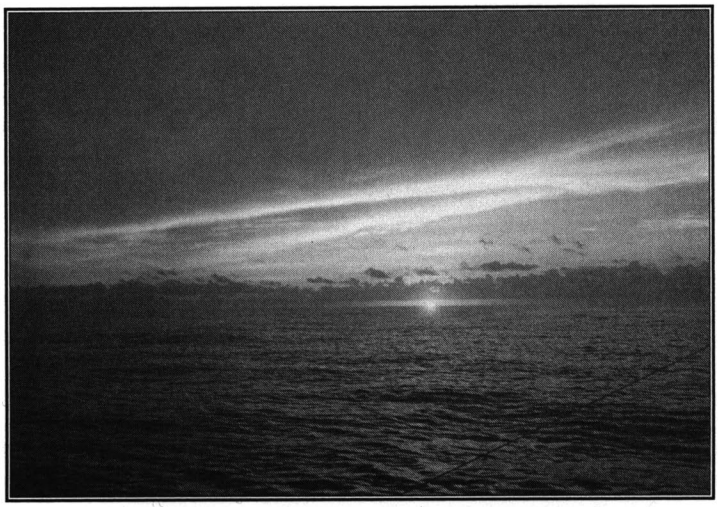
Hurricanes Frances and Jeanne

Like Steve Lowe, Johnny Jones's home suffered some damage from the hurricanes of 2004. There are three houses on Johnny's family property on the Indian River. His son Tommy, a King fisherman, lives in one, his daughter Debbie lives in the old Jones home, and Johnny and his wife Carolyn live in the new home right on the Indian River Lagoon. His home is like a museum, with many artifacts from past generations—items from lives lived on the Indian River.

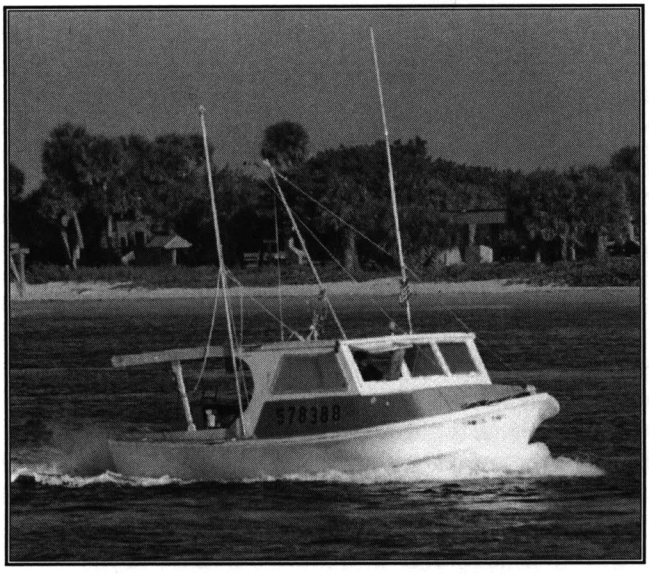
Before the storms, Johnny and Tommy took their Kingfish boats across the Indian River and tied them in the mangroves, like fishermen have done during hurricanes for years in this area. Their boats sustained only minor damage. Johnny, like most King fishermen, spent much of the year after Hurricanes Frances and Jeanne repairing his destroyed dock and sea wall, and the damage done to his family's homes. Johnny is a master carpenter.

He was finally able to resume fishing with the remainder of Fort Pierce's ragtag commercial Kingfish fleet in late spring and summer of 2005. He and his family recovered and finally have things back together.

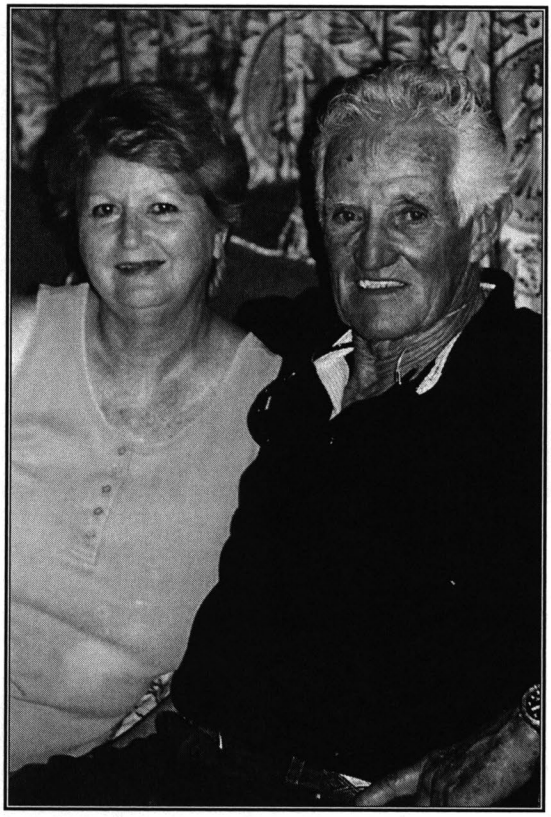
The 2004 Hurricanes were hard on Johnny and his family. And, like Steve Lowe, it was good to see Johnny back on the ocean in 2005, King fishing once again.



Chapter Five
Al Tyrrell



Al Tyrrell's last boat, the *Carol Ann*, a thirty-one-foot Stapleton, heading out of the Fort Pierce Inlet.



Al and his wife, Emma, at their Fort Pierce home in 2002.

Al Tyrrell was born on August 15, 1924, in Brooklyn, New York. He served in the Marine Corps in the Pacific during World War II. He, like Roger Farlow and other American combat veterans, prefers to recollect the more positive experiences and shelve the darker memories of the war. Al once told another fisherman that while he was in the Pacific during the war, his boots completely wore out. They were rags. One day he shot a Japanese soldier coming over a hill. The body of the soldier rolled down to where he was. Al said the dead soldier's boots fit him perfectly and were very well made, so he wore them for the rest of the war. Only a handful of the men in Al's unit returned from the Pacific after the war.

Al and his present wife, Emma, raised seven children. For many years, when you saw Al fishing, you would see the little heads of his children bouncing around the boat. His wife and children have experienced many adventures at sea with Al who likes to travel up and down the Florida coast following the Kingfish. He keeps his boat in Fort Pierce only when the fish are biting best there.

From his early years as an avid swimmer and competitive sportsman to his time as a Marine in the Pacific where he spent much of his spare time on the water and fishing, Al Tyrrell has always had an affinity for the sea. He seemed to be destined to become a hand line King Mackerel fisherman. His story is a fascinating tale. His biography is an amazing adventure.

Boot Camp

They gave us the last of the boot training in Camp Elliot, California, and you know they ran us up and down mountains up there. And then shortly after that we boarded ships for overseas. They didn't keep us too damn long in there, ya know, because everybody in those days was needed.

They wanted everybody because the Japs were in pretty good control of the war in the early part of it, and our outfit went overseas quickly. We landed in American Samoa first and just stayed there a very short time.

Actually, we weren't an outfit; we were the first replacement battalion to replace and divide into other outfits when we got there. We were going into extensive jungle training in Samoa and then when we got into French Samoa, part of our outfit was split into the 8th Anti-Aircraft Amphibious Battalion, and the other half went into an amphibious tank battalion that went into Guadalcanal.

They took the smaller guys for the tank battalion because of limited headroom and all; so the small guys went into the tank battalion. They went into the Guadalcanal and got slaughtered really. They had got stuck on what you'd call a coral reef goin' in there, and they got lots and lots of casualties. A lot of guys in our outfit were killed.

The fellas I originally went with, some of then went to the tank. I was in the 8th Amphibious Corps, and we had all kind of 20s, 40s, 60 millimeter guns and 90s for anti-aircraft. That's what we were separated into. After we got trained, they gave us so much time in jungle training there, then they shipped us.

Gilbert Marshall Islands

We made our first landing in the Gilbert Marshall Islands; that's Tarawa and Abemama and another little island. We came in there, and they wouldn't tell us where we were goin' until we got there.

We'd ask, "Where are we goin'?" and they didn't tell us. Top secret. We landed in there, and then the boys who landed in Tarawa got a lot of action and a lot of boys got killed.

I was right next to Tarawa. It was adjoining Tarawa and it was called Abemama. It was this Gilbert Island. Tarawa was there and Abemama was right next to it. It was adjoining, and it was really a one-day landing, and there was a lot of action for one day.

Then everything seemed secured; it was possibly longer on Tarawa, but we were on Abemama. It was pretty well secured in a day and a half. I was in on it. There were probably hundreds and hundreds of battle wagons and ships there when we came in; we went down in full combat, and we went on the landing. On landing craft, Tarawa was terrible. Abemama was not near as bad as Tarawa, but anyway, everything was secured in one or two days and settled down.

They had a lot of snipers up there, and the first night we got into Abemama, they were bombin' us, and the first bomb that was comin' down, I could hear. It was just like it was comin' down on top of me. I could hear the whistle of the bomb comin' down, and I thought, where in the hell am I going to jump to? You know, it was all jungle and palm trees. Nowhere to hide. We couldn't hide anywhere. It was rainin' like hell, so I saw a crevice around a palm tree, and I jumped in the crevice there. About six guys from our own outfit jumped there too, trying to get away from this bomb. It actually exploded right close to us. Killed a bunch of guys and the colonel of the outfit. That was the first night we were there. Killed a bunch of 'em and you know, we went through that nightly. Every afternoon they used to come over and bomb us. We dug foxholes and stuff like that for shelter.

We didn't have many problems on the beach landing. We had a Marine recon force go in ahead of us. They went in on a submarine; it was kinda light opposition there in Abemama. The only thing that they left was a bunch of snipers who did kill a bunch of Marines. They bombed us every time the weather was right. Japanese bombers, and a lot of guys were killed with bombs and stuff like that, but ah...it pretty much settled up in a couple of days.

Then after it settled down, we would work around in the outfit for one day, and they'd give us a couple of days off. We built the galley and built this and that to get ready and just tried to get things straightened out and build our place where we were gonna live.

Now the strange thing that happened is we were roamin' around the island, and there was a guy called Frank Danelli who was in our outfit. He was from New Jersey, and while we were roamin' around, we ran into a bunch of natives on the end of the island. It just so happened that these natives could speak fluent English.

One guy was what they called the king of that island, and he was a British subject since it was an English owned island. The Gilbert and Marshalls were English owned. And he was real nice to us and, of

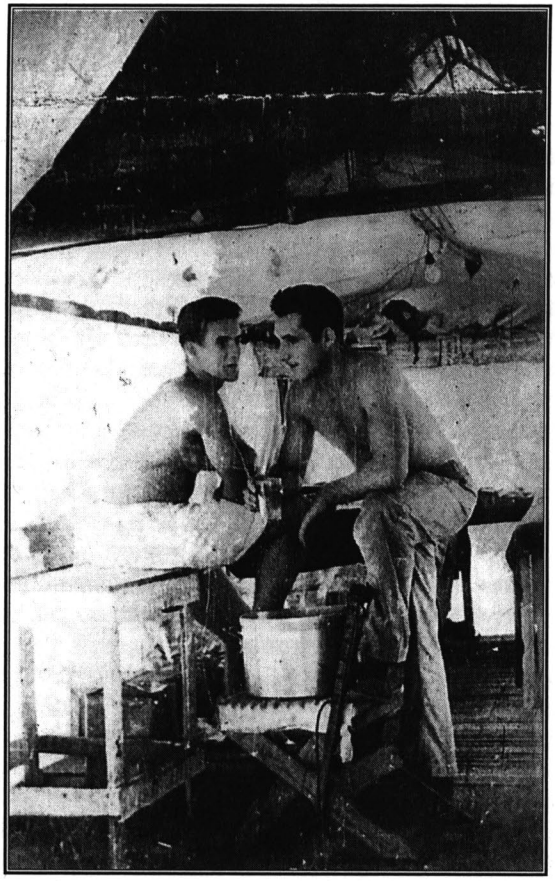
course under the circumstances, probably because we had on full combat gear and everything else.

He had a book there that had English on one side and Gilbertese on the other. He gave us one of those books, and Frank and I learned Gilbertese really fluently after we were there just a short time. And Frank was really good.

The king asked us where we were living, and we told him we were livin' in fox holes in the dirt.

He says, "Oh, I'm going to have my men come down and build you a grass hut."

And he did! The next morning, he had four natives down there, and before the sun went down, we had a grass hut for four Marines. We were the only guys who were livin' up out of the ground.



Al (left) and a Marine buddy, Frank Danelli, stationed in the Gilbert Islands in 1943, lived in a hut built by Gilbertise natives because Frank and Al bothered to learn their language. The other Marines slept on the ground in tents.

The other officers were pissed off when they saw that, but they let us have it, anyway. This was after all the action was shut down, you know.

We had some lumber and stuff and we built a frame, got a couple of truck tubes and built a bed, wove a bed out of the truck tubes and they gave us the old GI mattress. They issued one of those, and we just threw it on top of the tubes and we had a little bed there. That was super, super good.

Before that happened, I skipped over one thing. The snipers who were on the island had killed twenty-one Marines by cuttin' their throats. Every time a guy would go out to go to the john or somethin' in the woods like, they would find 'em the next mornin'. He would have his throat cut. They got twenty-one of 'em.

So, what happened was the lieutenant in our outfit, for about a week straight, made it so that we had to be in a circle with our M-1s cocked and loaded, full gear and we were head to head. The heads were in the middle and our bodies were spread out around. There were only a few snipers, but they were killin' a bunch of Marines, you know, so that's how the lieutenant had us, in a circle. Our heads were in the center and we had our rifles along side of us cocked and loaded, and that's the way we slept. We didn't get too damn much sleep. That was one incident, a little incident there. Yeah. After everything settled down ya know. It made ya kinda jittery.

Well, Abemama wasn't all that big. It was nothing like Okinawa or any of those other big islands. Okinawa is this big mountainous area, covering a lot of territory. This was more of an atoll that was probably fifty miles long, pretty small. It had a beautiful lagoon, and on one side of it were these terrible breakers with a coral reef.

Several guys made the mistake of tryin' to swim in 'em and drowned. I was one of 'em, but I made it back. They had these huge suck holes in 'em, great big holes in the coral, and the undertow would pull you down. And it was so forceful that it was hard to swim against it. Yeah, it would suck you back or suck you in the hole, and several guys drowned there because they weren't used to swimmin' in that kinda stuff. Anyway, the undertow was terrible. I was a hell of a good swimmer, and I had a hard time gettin' back to where I could stand up.

We finally got the snipers. Well, they found there were only a few of 'em on that island, but they finally got 'em, you know. They finally killed 'em, but they caused a lot of damage and a lot of problems. Twenty-one Marines, just in our outfit.

Our battalion. A battalion was 1350 men. I think it was around 1300. Yeah. In the Gilberts, there wasn't too much happenin' there. We used to go down to the beach there in the Gilberts. There was a big dock there.

I forgot to tell you this, but nobody had any clothes on there. They all had those grass skirts you see in the movies. The women didn't wear anything on top. So when the Marines hit the beach (Laughs), we were

astounded! Here's all these native women runnin' around without anything on top, and that was the way it was.

They had no money, not a dime. They didn't have any currency or any stores, no clothes or food except what they had on the islands, and they ate breadfruit, bananas. I think they had a few chickens. They made nets out of twine and caught fish. It's like a beach scene they used, and that's how they lived.

The Japanese treated them terribly. They were real happy to see all of the Americans come in. The Japanese were terrible with the women and terrible with the people; they were happy to see us come in. They didn't have money, but it was astounding because here you have all this money in the United States and you go back on one of those islands and here's people without money, TV, cars, nothing, not a damn thing. They were the happiest people I have ever ran into. They had no bills (Laughs). They were just as happy as they could be. That's a fact. I don't know how they are now; they probably made it a tourist stop now, but they were happy people. And that's just the way it was.

Oh, this guy Frank Danelli was kinda of a funny, ingenious kinda guy. He got ahold of a half a stick of dynamite and he went down to this pier. Some of the big boats used to come into this pier. It was deep water and you could see all those fish down in the water. I mean all kinds; it looked like ten or twelve different species of fish, and the pier was right there by the little native village.

We told 'em we were gonna try to get some fish. So, we went down to the end of the pier, and Frank had his flashlight battery he hooked up to his flashlight. He had a detonator on the half a stick of dynamite and let it down about thirty feet.

Well, all those fish came around that stick of dynamite and he kicked it off. Rocked that whole thing, and here comes the fish, floatin' up to the top. You've got all these native boys divin' in and gettin' these fish. We had a big fish fry that night. (Laughing) Yeah, that's the truth. I was a little bit on the wild side over there. Everybody was.

At the time, I was single (Laughs). But I had traded this Gilbertese native for an outrigger canoe. I gave him a sack of rice. I don't know how I confiscated it, but I gave him a sack of rice for this outrigger canoe and on our days off, Frank and me and another guy used to go around the outside of the island. It was just like a little sailboat canoe, an outrigger sailboat, and it took us awhile to learn how to float around. But we did. We went to some of the other islands and stuff like that and came back. People were real friendly there, and it really wasn't too bad after everything settled down.

Oh, yeah. I think we were there six months and a lot of the guys, you know, they had families, and they wouldn't run around like I did. I used to roam around a lot on the island. (Laughs).

We all had girls that would do our laundry after everything settled down and do most anything for a candy bar, any damn thing. They

wanted to do anything for you. They were real friendly people. But that was the way it was there in the Gilberts.

Kauai, Hawaii

Then we went back. We left the Gilbert and Marshall Islands and went back to R and R in Kauai, a Hawaiian island. Our outfit landed there in a place called Kapaau, and we spent maybe five months there. The guys were on one day of work and two days off, so on my two days off, I really got into fishin' heavy there in Hawaii.

I met this Hawaiian-Chinese guy who had a bunch of boats and a bunch of nets. His name was Estero, and when I first met him, he wanted me to go with him up the river to catch Mullet. They had a lot of Mullet there in 1943. So, we went up there about sundown, on the Kapaau River.

He put his net on the bank, and he strung it across to the other bank. Then he went up the river a ways, and he put his net down there in the bank, and put it on the other bank so that everything inside of that area was trapped. He had two nets out, I think they were all nylon or cotton nets. Anyway, I think they were just cotton nets. Anyway, then he had a weight and we went around inside. It was just like a cannon ball and scared the fish, and inside of an hour, we probably filled that whole rowboat, about a twenty-two footer, and took it back to where he lived.

Then he called these guys and told 'em he had the fish. He used to sell 'em. After that, I used to help him fish on the beach. He had some Hawaiian guys who used to spot these fish in the lagoon in Kauai and they had real tall towers, like a lifeguard station on the beach.

They used to sit on these towers right at daylight, the first hour. They'd spot fish; then they'd called him, and he'd get the boat down the river. He was located right on the river mouth. He had two guys rowin' it. He had one boat piled full of net. One boat had the net and the other boat he had two guys rowin' it out the inlet. There was an inlet there goin' to the Pacific. It was a lagoon and it was pretty clean.

He rowed around to where the guys had seen these fish and they dropped the net on the beach (it was like a beach scene). They rowed around the school of fish, came around back to the beach, and then I helped 'em on one side. There were three guys on each side pullin' the net in, and we pulled it in all the way to the beach. It was solid, sandy bottom and it was solid full of fish. I mean they looked like Bluefish to me; they were greenish.

And the people who were goin' by in cars would stop, come down, and buy 'em right out of the net. There were hundreds of people, just buyin' em right out of the net. The Hawaiian people ate fish six days a week. That was the main dish. They ate fish all the time.

So I helped him off and on. Then he got to know me real well, and he let me have a boat anytime I wanted to go fishin'. On my days off, I'd take it out to go fishin'.

I thought what I was catchin' was Pompano. It looked like Pompano to me but it might have been a Permit, I don't know which. I was catchin' Pompano right there inside the inlet in a calm spot. I caught quite a few of 'em. I was catchin' em on hook and line. I'm pretty sure it was a cane pole. Yeah, that's what I had and he used to give me anything I wanted because I was fishin' for the hell of it. I wasn't fishin' for any money, you know.

I got to like it. He was an old-timer. I was only probably twenty then, and he was about sixty-five or sixty-six, and he had been in the fishin' business for a long time.

Swimming

I used to swim the river and back. I'd swim for miles and miles. I could swim like hell. I didn't think about Sharks. That's the crazy part of it. There were plenty of Sharks around, but up the river I never thought there'd be any Sharks. I'll tell ya one incident I had. In those days I didn't think about Sharks in the water. It's only since I've seen so many in the ocean here that I knew damn well there was plenty of Sharks over there in the South Pacific; there's loads of 'em.

I had an incident one time that happened in French Samoa. I took a dive and was trying to take a swim. I was swimmin' for about a mile in the lagoon off French Samoa. I was takin' it easy. I was just breast strokin', and all of the sudden, I made a big kick in the water and there around me were thousands and thousands of fish that showered up like that.

I said, "Holy Mackerel!" I didn't know all these fish were around me, you know, and I said, "I'd better leave!"

So I started swimming back toward the pier and my buddy, Frank Danelli was on the pier.

I looked back, and Frank says, "There's a Shark in back of ya, Tyrrell!"

I looked back there, and there's a damn Shark, a big Shark fin in back of me! I just kicked it into second gear and I went like crazy for that pier and made it. That Shark just came up to that pier and turned around and went back.

I said "Oh, my God!"

I didn't think a Shark was in that lagoon that day. You know there were plenty of Sharks there, only I had never seen 'em, but that sucker was big. I don't know what he was, but he was a big Shark. He wasn't hungry enough to eat me (Laughs).

I never was on a swimmin' team. I just used to swim. I liked to swim. I swam for miles. I used to swim out to the sea buoy off Coney Island

where the ships came by and sit on the buoy and (Laughs) then swim back.

They'd wait until I used to swim out there, way out there and the lifeguards used to come out after me and say, "Are you in trouble?"

And I'd say, "No, I'm not in trouble. I'm just swimmin'."

And they'd say, "Oh, I thought you were in trouble." (Laughs)

This was after I got out. I used to swim all the time. I never had a problem givin' out at swimmin'; I probably would now.

But gettin' back to Kauai. It was a beautiful island and that's where I first started to really fish. I started to fish when I was a kid. You know, just use some thread and a safety pin, but when I was in Kauai, we really caught a lot of fish there, caught a bunch in the nets. I wasn't a hand liner in those days. (Laughs) Well, they gave us a rest there in Kauai for a long time, and you know there was nothin' much to do.

A Buddy

One of my buddies was there; he was called Dixie Hogdkins, and he was in the Marine Corps ahead of me. He was Korean Marine, and we were sleeping in a tent there in Kauai and he got sick. He had asthma real bad and he'd start wheezin' and couldn't breathe. I called the corpsmen and they got him, took him to the hospital, and he went back.

Well, I saw him one time after we left Kauai. We went to Pearl Harbor, and he was in the hospital in Pearl Harbor. I went to visit him, and he was a good buddy of mine. In fact, I got in touch with him about a year and a half ago; maybe it was a little longer. He was still up there. He was from Virginia. Yeah, he was in my outfit, and I visited him in Pearl Harbor.

Then our outfit was going out. We didn't know where we were going, but we were going to Okinawa, and we didn't know it. I got back from the hospital in Pearl Harbor and I almost missed the boat. We were on liberty. I think it was an eight-hour liberty or somethin'. I got back there and the ship I was going to leave on, the troop ship, was already out there anchored. It was at the dock when we got off for liberty. He was out there ready to go, and I had to get a Navy guy to run me out there. I finally got on the ship and we took off to Okinawa.

Okinawa.

We went to Okinawa, and it took us thirty-two days to get there from Pearl Harbor. We were in a convoy of ships. There were several ships that were watchin' us, like Navy ships. Destroyers, I think. Yeah, there were a couple of escorts there, but the ship I was on was pretty packed up with Marines and Army guys and mostly I'd say seventy-five percent Marines.

There was a lot of seasickness, plenty of it. In fact, I never slept below deck, ever. Only one time, and that was on the way back after the war was over. The other times we were goin' overseas to Okinawa and different places, I slept on top of the deck because when you went down below, these guys were seasick. We really didn't know where we were goin'; they didn't tell us nothin' 'til we got there after thirty-two days.

It seemed like at least half of 'em were seasick down there. I went up and got my poncho and all my stuff to sleep on, an ol' mattress and just put it up on the bow. It was a great big ship, you know, a hundred-fifty-footer. I just slept up there.

Most of the guys goin' over there were just playin' cards, shootin' craps, whatever, but we played mostly cards in the daytime. There was nothin' to do, you know. We were just riding overseas.

Thirty-two days is a long time, but you know, we got there on a real rough day and it was like ten-foot seas. They had a landing craft there for the guys. They went full pack, helmet, M-1 strapped on their back and heavy boots, cartridges on the waist, everything ready to go.

I do remember this one guy. He very different from all the rest of the guys, but it was a natural thing to do. He said he was prayin' for everybody. He was goin' around, and he came up to me and he says, "Tyrrell, I'm gonna pray for ya."

I says, "Okay there, buddy, we'll get in there all right."

I was going down a rope ladder with some others. The seas were pitchin' that landing craft up and down and everywhere. One was swamped, and a bunch of guys drowned. They would hold about thirty guys.

I came down the rope ladder and grabbed onto this Navy guy's hand. He was one of the guys who was on the Navy landing craft. He grabbed my hand, and I got one hand on the rope ladder, and the other on his hand. I went to step onto the landing craft.

Well, the sea went up and broke our grip, and I was lettin' go of the rope ladder. I went down, thirty feet straight down. With all that stuff on. I had a helmet on, cartridges, M-1, you name it, boots. I don't know how in the hell I made it. I went down so far.

I said, "Well, I'm gonna try like hell to get up," and, hell, I just forced myself. Bein' a good swimmer, I got up near the top, and two Navy guys grabbed me by the back and threw me into the landing craft. I was damned lucky to get in. You know, I saw those propellers goin' when I came up, and I just missed one of 'em, and they grabbed me and threw me on there. That's a bad start, I'm tellin' you.

So we went into the landing in Okinawa; it was April 1st, I think, 1945. The opposition on the beach wasn't a hell of a lot. The only opposition was inland. The Japs were all in caves, very dug in, and we didn't have a hell of a lot of opposition on the beach, but we were part of an anti-aircraft unit. We had 20s, 40s, 60s, 90s in our outfit, and it took us a long time to get situated on a cliff in Okinawa.

We were guarding what they called Yontan Air Force Base. It was an Okinawan Air Force Base, and Bill Farlow actually was there exactly the same time I was. We were guarding the Yontan Air Force Base against the Japanese messing with the Air Force. We didn't know we were there at the same time until we got back, actually, but I didn't have any fishing experiences there, but I had a hell of a lot of other stuff.

We went into caves. We went up there in the mountains on night patrols and stuff like that, and I was guardin' with a guy. I always ended up with some wild Marine. They were good though.

This guy was a sharpshooter. He got decorated. He shot twenty-one Japs in one night. He was on an outpost, and I was out there with him. It was an outpost, kind of away from the main place where all the anti-aircraft guns were located. There were already a few guys out there, and the Japanese raided it one night. Joe Bryant was real, real, good, and it was like I said, he killed twenty-one in one night alone. I wasn't there at the time. I would go out there on different days, but he was somethin' to go on patrol with. He had sense, even though the fighting there was partially over because most of the fighting was done on the south end.

A lot of Japanese and a lot of the Okinawan families were pretty much surrounded. They killed, I think, they said in the neighborhood of fifty thousand Marines and Army personnel on Okinawa. That was mostly on the south end.

I was on the north end. There was resistance there, but it was nothin' like the south end. When the Japanese got trapped, the families would dive off the cliffs committin' suicide because they thought that we were going to kill 'em anyway. They didn't know any better.

I was out on the south end a couple of times, but at one time I was ridin' with a bunch of guys comin' back from the front there and tryin' to get a ride back to my outfit. There were eight bodies back there just layin' back there in the back of the truck, and I was ridin' in the back of the truck with 'em. There were a lot of casualties there, fifty thousand, at least. Yeah, in the early morning.

He was very good. He was from the mountains in North Carolina, and he was a heart attack guy. He was really a sharpshooter. I went up in the mountains with him, and he would be running an' I'd catch up with him and I'd say, "Joe, where ya goin'?"

And he'd say, "I smell 'em, I smell 'em."

He was just a natural at finding the Japs and a natural hunter, and we went on night patrol together. I would love to see him again if he's still alive, but I don't know how I could get ahold of him.

Frank Danelli got separated from me somehow. He went back on a medical. He caught malaria in I think it was Samoa, French Samoa.

They had a lot of disease there, a lot of tuberculosis. They had DE fever. I caught Dengue. I had DE fever in French Samoa and passed out. I went to the medics there, and they gave me some Adavaran and somethin' to bring down the fever. It was a hundred and five. I passed

out. But that's what the doctors say today, flipped my heart out. I have an irregular heartbeat, and it goes back to the days that I had DE fever. The doctor down there in the VA told me that a high fever sometimes makes your heart go on an irregular beat. Yeah, that's what I've had, I figure but it's the result of havin' that high fever.

Frank Danelli got separated from me because of malaria. There were several guys who went back with malaria. Malaria's the big thing in Samoan Islands. They had a lot of rain, a lot of mosquitoes, and they had a lot of disease in French Samoa. In pretty much the rest of the islands like the Gilberts, Marshall Islands, they didn't have any disease, hardly any. They had fewer mosquitoes, very few mosquitoes, hardly any, and French Samoa, American Samoa, British Samoa all had these real high mountains and waterfalls and a lot of standing water and stuff like that.

I had a lot of time off in French Samoa and it's kinda wild. We used to make our own booze because they wouldn't ration us. You know, only the officers would have any booze, and once in a while they rationed us beer, but it was always like, a weak, weak beer where it didn't have any effect on ya. You know, it wasn't potent.

A lot of the times we made our own stuff out of raisins in French Samoa. We had plenty of foodstuffs there because we weren't into any enemy territory. So, we made wine in barrels, and one of the guys was an old time guy who knew how to still it off. We'd run a copper tube with a string and actually still off straight alcohol out of the raisin and applejack. It's the way we did it, and we had what you might call white lightnin'. They didn't ration us any beer, but we made our own stuff.

That was when I saw a lot of things happen over there. It was like another world actually. I mean, there were blood and guts on one island, and there was crazy on another, and you'd come back here and you'd think it was a dream. You'd just say, did I really go through all that? You know you just wondered if you really did.

We used to make our own stuff and have parties when there was nothin' doin', of course. There was a French missionary farm up there on the side of the mountain there. I got ahold of a horse one time up there. Frank Danelli was right there with me, and I was gonna try to ride this horse. I didn't know if he was wild or not. He was just runnin' out in the field you know. I got a piece of rope and made a halter out of it. Jumped on that sucker and took off ridin'. I was crazy in those days.

I had a few drinks, and I slapped the horse on the back, and he took off at a dead gallop, down an old dirt road. I didn't know where the hell I was goin', but the horse knew where he was goin' because there was a little trail off to the side and that horse went off that trail like he was goin' at a full gallop. All of the sudden he turned one way and I went the other, flyin' in the air. I went down on my side and skidded. I think I still have scars on my side where I skidded on that gravel dirt road.

I made my way to a little village right near the lagoon. I went in there and asked a family if they had anything to put on it because we were pretty far away from the camp at that time. I was bleedin' pretty good, you know.

And this young pretty little girl about eighteen or nineteen came to me and says, "I'll get ya somethin'." So she got me some seaweed out of the ocean and put it on my side and stopped the bleeding.

That was just an incident, you know, that happened. I was really crazy. After you're on those islands a while, there's nothin' to do, especially in Samoa. What are you gonna do? You know there's nothin' really to do, but when you're in another place, it's a different story; you know, it was all together different. There was a large amount of guys getting killed and everything.

Yeah, like I said, we landed in Okinawa. That guy who came up and said he was gonna pray for me went to a lot of guys and said that. Well, he went off his rocker. When we got in there, I saw him roamin' around like he was in space. He was lookin' around in the air, and I asked the captain there, "What's wrong with..." I forget his name right now, but I said, "What's wrong with him?"

And he said, "Oh, he's gone. He's completely lost it."

He lost it because when we came in on that landing, there were probably battleships layin' barrages in. There were dive bombers layin' bombs in. There were hundreds of ships, our ships, layin' barrages in on Okinawa while we were landing. Yeah, we were goin' in, in the middle of that barrage, and it was just too much for this one guy. You know, he just lost it; they sent him back to the States, and I never heard what happened to him, but he went out on a medical.

I stayed in Okinawa until the end of the war. A lot of guys were killed, and I was lucky. I was one of the lucky ones who made it back home. The fact is they dropped the bomb on Hiroshima while I was in Okinawa. It was like a small earthquake. You could feel it in Okinawa. You were just across the China Sea from Japan, and it was like a tremor.

I said, "Man! Feels like the earth is shakin', man."

That night, they announced that the Japanese had surrendered after they dropped the A-bomb. You knew they had surrendered when every gun went off on the island. But, the bomb felt like a little earthquake.

I was there from April 1st to August 20th. We traded stuff with some of the pilots there. We had all kinds of souvenirs; we had Japanese swords and flags, and I wore a pair of Japanese boots. Wore them because they were better boots than our boots. They had hard nails in 'em. You could climb mountains in 'em. They were real good boots. This Jap soldier was dead, and he looked my size. I noticed those hard nails and I just took those boots and they fit me perfect. I just wore 'em. You could climb up the mountains real well with those nail boots. Our boots didn't have 'em. I'd go on patrols in the mountains, in squads of about eight guys. I was on a BAR (a large caliber automatic weapon) at one time, standing

automatic. I was on a fifty-caliber machine gun on the beach in the Gilbert Islands.

At the end when we boarded ship for Seattle, our original platoon sergeant was there. He was a six-striper, and just for the hell of it, I went up and asked him, "Sarge, how many boys are left out of our original battalion?"

And he said, "Twenty-six out of thirteen hundred."

That was all that was left. I was one of the twenty-six, and I said, "Boy, I'm lucky."

A lot of the guys did go back with malaria. On medical. There was a lot of malaria over there. There was twenty-six of us that got back in one piece. That's what he told me.

The Sarge was one of 'em, yeah. He was Indian. A regular American Indian. He was pretty good.

Yeah, there was a lot of stuff I went through over there. It pops up in my mind every once in a while. I think of it, and it's just like another world. You just say, did it happen? Did it really happen? And it's just like another world, you know. You come back to the States and it's altogether different. For a while though, it was very, very wild. Anyway, I got to do a lot of fishin' in Kauai, you know, with that old Hawaiian.

I probably never knew Bill (Roger) Farlow in those days, but it's possible that I coulda traded him a Japanese flag, or a Japanese sword, or something. I had traded for a Thompson Sub-Machine gun. I had, let's see, a Thompson Sub-Machine gun, a Reiser Machine gun, and I had what they called a grease gun. The grease gun shot forty-five caliber, and they weren't worth a damn, but they were all right at close range.

I picked up a Thompson machine gun from the Air Force, and we traded off for a lot of whiskey because we didn't have our own. The pilots had whiskey. They all had whiskey. Yeah, and we knew it, and we'd always be over tradin' off with 'em because we were right near Yongtan Air Force base in Okinawa.

Bill Farlow was on a bomber and he was at a lot of different places, but Okinawa was one of 'em, and he was there exactly at the same time as me and Frankie Breig (another Fort Pierce King fisherman).

Frankie Breig was in the Navy. He was in the lagoon off Okinawa when the bomb went off. And the Kamikazes used to hit their battle wagons, about sundown, you know, right before the sun went down. You'd see 'em hittin' those big battle wagons, and you'd see these big explosions. Those guys would go dead center into them things suicidal. It's just like the Muslim terrorists are now. They're the same exactly. They don't give a damn about dyin'; they think they're going to Heaven and that's the way the Japanese were. Exactly the same.

They surrendered over there, and two weeks after they surrendered, they put us aboard the ship for Seattle. Some guys stayed there and went into Japan for occupation of Japan, but they sent us back. Our outfit

was over there about three years. We were over there a long time. We had made more points than we needed to get us back.

You know, they go on a point system. If you have so many points, they were supposed to send you back, but they didn't send us back. They kept us. But anyway, we were one of the first ones after they dropped the bomb to be sent home.

Seattle, Washington

We got back to a naval base in Seattle, and there was a bunch of people there when we got there. They were cheerin' and this and that. They held us in a concentration camp until they checked us out for diseases and mental stability. I don't think we got out for liberty until six months after we got there.

Yep, on my first day out they said, "Tyrrell, you had too many of those native girls over there. You don't know how to get an American girl."

I said, "How much money you got on ya?"

They said, "I bet ya a hundred bucks you don't get the first girl!"

So we got liberty. I went and met these two girls right off the bat, two pretty girls and took 'em for a drink, and we were walkin' down the street and saw these four guys who were there.

I said, "Hey buddy how 'bout these girls!" I had two nice girls. Yeah, everybody was lookin' for a girl after bein' overseas that long, you know, and we had a big time.

Puget Sound was beautiful comin' in. We came between Seattle and Vancouver (the Straights of Juan De Fuca). There was a guy Salmon fishin' right there, right there where we came in. I was watchin' 'em. You know they have outriggers out catchin' Salmon right there. That's beautiful country. Oh God, it was pretty. The only thing I didn't like about it was there was a lot of rain, drizzly rain.

After the War

From there to fishin'? It was a while.

I was twenty-one then. I was overseas quite a while, and then they shipped us down to San Diego. They asked us if we wanted to reenlist and I told 'em, well I was thinkin' about it, but I wasn't sure, so they didn't discharge me in San Diego. They shipped me into Bayonne, New Jersey, and I want back to New York. I decided that I was gonna get discharged, so I got discharged out of Bayonne, New Jersey.

I was a sergeant. Yeah, and I met a girl in New York. Her name was Joan, and we got married. Well, when the ones that I enlisted with came back, we had one party after another, you know, just celebrating that they got back. There was a couple of guys who didn't make it back, but

most of 'em did. So, we celebrated and partied and I don't know how long I partied for. Probably a year at least. I just partied, partied, partied.

You know, one guy would come back and we'd say "We'll have a big party for ya!" So we had a big party, and I met this girl. She was seventeen, and I was twenty-one. All of a sudden I got married. She was a nice girl.

Restaurants in Florida

We had four kids and came to Florida in '45. That's when I got out from the service. I got into the restaurant business in Daytona Beach. I was just workin'. I wasn't in the fishin' business at all. I was in the restaurant business for quite a while before I got into fishin'. Anyway I managed the kitchen in a place on the beach. The two owners took care of the front, and we packed 'em in there. We sold seafood, you know.

Then I got hooked up with another guy who was building a huge restaurant that seated three hundred, fifty, and he wanted me to manage it. So I quit the one job and managed this other place for him. He paid me twice as much as I was makin' with this other guy. And I never was doin' any fishin'. I was runnin' this big restaurant that seated three hundred, fifty people.

The restaurant business is tough. I don't know who hasn't been around it, but it is a tough, tough business. Long hours. I worked eighteen hours a day, seven days a week, worked my butt off. And the guy was a builder. He built forty-six motels on Daytona Beach. He was a multi-millionaire.

It was kinda like a play toy for him, the restaurant, and I told him that it would be a good thing if we had a program, a sports radio program, and so we put a sports program on every night in the restaurant. We had a lot of race care drivers; a lot of guys who were top-notch race drivers. And we'd give 'em, you know, a steak or somethin' like that, and they brought a lot of customers in. It was a radio show. It was run right in the middle of the restaurant there. The guy had a mike right there goin' around talkin' to people and also talkin' to the racers, whoever we had in there for the night.

One day I saw this guy. I was lookin' out the window. It was like he was in for a lunch, and I was lookin' out there, and I said, damn if that doesn't look like Jack Dempsey. I was lookin' cause I used to like to watch the fights, you know.

So, I walked out there and I said, that's gotta be Jack Dempsey. Nobody looks like that. So I went up there and I said, "Are you Jack Dempsey?"

He said, "That's me."

I said, "How'd ya like to be on a radio show tonight? I'll fix you a great big porterhouse. It'll be the best steak you ever ate if you and your friends wanna come back to dinner tonight."

He said, "That's a deal."

So I called up the announcer for the radio station we had, and he worked up a thing on what Dempsey had done and all of this.

As soon as he got in there, there weren't more than fifty people in there, and that place packed up solid. I mean it filled up, the whole place filled up when Jack Dempsey came in. He was real popular, and it was right in the wintertime when all the tourists were there anyway. But, we had a lot of sports figures come in there; we had a sports program. We did real well.

That's what I did. He sold the place for big bucks, and then I ran two more places for him in Tampa. I ran two drive-ins, but they were western drive-ins. We had started one of the first drive-in restaurants. They used to be popular back in the '50s. We had a sign of this Las Vegas Cowboy out there. It was called "Henry's Round Up" and it was in Tampa.

I sorted out the girls and picked out the prettiest and put 'em in shorts, cowboy hats, and western shirts, and white boots. It went over big and we packed 'em in. When we weren't busy, we had three or four girls sit out on a triangle wooden fence right on the road, and they used to bring the people in.

I was still married to Joan, but I was in the restaurant business, you know, full scale. We started another one in Dale Mabry right in a four-way intersection in the middle of Tampa and it went big, too, so I was runnin' both places. I had managers for both places under me.

And I went through that with him, but this guy was a rough and tumble guy. He was a drinker and a millionaire. He had two El Dorados, an airplane and all that jazz, you know, but he expected you to work your eyeballs out for him. The problem workin' for him was he liked to fight, and we used to get into these terrible fights every once in a while.

He hit me one time in Daytona. I was runnin' his place, and he was three hundred, forty or three hundred, fifty pounds, big brute. And he didn't like somethin' I did. I don't know what the hell it was. I was so damned busy, I couldn't hardly be bothered with him, but he was half drunk, and he had kinda a bad attitude when he was drunk.

He called me over there and he was sayin' somethin' to me. We had words, and he got up and hit me and knocked me to the floor. I got up, and he knocked me down again. Then I got mad, and I hit him one punch, knocked him through two glass doors, and jumped him and pounded 'im. They took him off to the hospital in an ambulance. Anyway, I had another fight with him when he broke my leg and put me in the hospital.

So, when I got out of that situation, I sat down with him one afternoon and said, "Henry, I'm not gonna be able to work for you anymore. I'm gonna kill ya next time you mess with me. Or you're gonna kill me. What in the hell do I want to be workin' for you when it's a life or death situation? I'm endin' it right here. I'm gonna give you two weeks notice." That was in Tampa.

He liked to fight all the time. He was a barroom brawler. He was a big, big guy and it was terrible. I mean, he was beatin' most everybody, and the cops were afraid of him. One cop came up to him one time, and he took the cop's gun and walked down the street. The cop had to call backup, and they finally rounded him up without killin' 'im, but he was that way. He was just a drinker and a wild man, you know, with too much money. He was somethin' else.

So, I finally got away from him. Got into a place on Bayshore Boulevard on Tampa Bay. Beautiful location. This place, the guy who owns all the pancake houses in Florida had a chance to take it over and make into either a pancake house or a separate restaurant. The guy who had it was a pretty wealthy guy, and he owned the property. He owned the restaurant, but he didn't know how to run it. He had no business sense at all.

So, when I took the business over, it was doin' nothin', and they were losin' money. They were about ready to close, and I took it over and said, "Well, first of all you don't need these bright lights in the dining room. We're gonna put all candlelight in there. And it's overlookin' Tampa Bay, and it's gonna have better atmosphere there."

I put all colored lights in the trees and out back where the drive-in was. There was a drive-in in the back, and it had a beautiful dining room out front. Then I hired a bunch of good lookin' girls. You had McDill Airforce and you had Tampa there. All these beautiful girls attracted all the guys in the Air Force who went in there. Then I put a DJ in the lot in a glass enclosure, and he was the most popular DJ in Tampa. It attracted all the kids.

I had so damned much business that I had 'em lined up goin' down the street. On weekends you couldn't get in. I had a cop directin' traffic, then breakin' up all the fights. It boomed, and we did real well for several years.

Then I figured I'd just get out of it and start my own restaurant. That was in the late '50s just before I got with Morrison's. I quit that place because it gave me too much pressure from the topside, this guy Hal ran the pancake houses. I built the damned thing up from nothin', you know, and he was just too overbearing. He didn't appreciate nothin'. He had too many restaurants, you know, and he was always comin' down and givin' me a hard time over nothin' really. So, I just figured I'd get out of it.

I went with Morrison's Cafeterias. It's a good outfit, real good, and I went through a lot of training with them, willin' to do every damn thing in the restaurant. I always did a lot. I learned everything and went through the training program.

And on one of the training programs, I went up to Thomasville, Georgia, and catered the Baltimore Orioles; their team had Spring Training there. I did that for one season. It was real good. I had all the ball players there, and they'd tell me what good food it was. I used to

give 'em a lot of steak, anyway. But, I mostly followed Morrison's Restaurants' recipes.

Morrison's had a book full of recipes, and you'd followed their recipes, but we could vary sometimes. I'd give 'em some nice big steaks and the ball players used to love it. I went through that, went with Morrison's and finally was transferred to West Palm Beach.

Start of Commercial Fishing in Florida

That's when they gave me two days off and five days of work. I bought a boat called *Tempo*, and on the two days off, I started fishin'. That was 1961, and I used to go out and I'd see all these boats catchin' fish. Back in those days they used to use whole Mullet. They didn't use featherheads, nothin' like that. They used whole Mullet and double hooked 'em. Small ones, that's what they used. Anyway I used to catch a lot of fish, but you'd always be happy catchin' Mullet for bait. We cast netted Mullet. There was a lot of Mullet around. That's how I got started.

The two days I had off at Morrison's, I started fishin', and I was actually makin' more money fishin' the two days than I was the rest of the week with Morrison's, so I said, "Hell, I love fishin'. I'm gonna quit that and start fishin' full time."

I didn't know how tough it was. You have your ups and downs fishin'. You have your bad times, and I really wasn't really good when I first started. I really just started usin' the boat in the wintertime. I was fishin' for the Pender's. Larry Pender was the best fisherman; he was from the Bahamas.

There were some real good fishermen. They had wood boats and they were really good. Steve Lowe was always one of the best King fisherman on this coast. I watched him put 3,000 pounds on the dock, him and Kenny Griffin. They used to try to outdo each other. I remember the time they went to the south end of Sebastian Rock and they both had over 3,000 pounds. That was one day's catch. That tells ya what kind of fish were around in those days.

Big Catches

I went to Daytona. Frankie Breig was a traveler, and he could travel from Carolina to Louisiana. He can tell you about some fantastic catches. He's caught 5,000 pounds in one day. But Frankie was in Jupiter, on a Jupiter run, and he disappeared, and I said, "Where's Frankie?"

They said, "Oh, I don't know, he disappeared."

So I was tryin' to find Frankie because that particular year Jupiter was dead, dead as a door nail. So I called all the fish houses on the East Coast, all the way up to St. Augustine. That's where I found him. He didn't tell anybody. One of his buddies in a sport boat up there in St. Augustine called him, and said there was a tremendous amount of

Kingfish around there and he just took off, didn't say a word. I called up there.

He was fishin' for Leonard's, a Shrimp company up there. He was unloadin' there. I said to the guy, "Is Frankie Breig up there? You got a Frankie Breig fishin' for ya?"

He said, "Yeah, he just unloaded 3,200."

I said, "What?"

He said, "Yeah, he went back out, and he just unloaded."

I said, "Oh, my God!"

So I took off for St. Augustine and we got up there, and by the time we got there, he had another 3,300 unloaded and was on his third catch when we got out there with him. I think I had 1,800 and then he still had another catch over 3,000. He had somethin' like 10,000 pounds in three trips.

We went pretty far out there, and it was in May. We fished up there all through June, and it was pretty good fishin'. That year was a real good year for St. Augustine.

That was the early '80s. Yeah, and that's how I started fishin' in Daytona, too. I started fishin' that whole area from St. Augustine to Daytona, and I hit it pretty good in Daytona one year. There were only three or four of us, actually, from Fort Pierce who went up there, Lewis Wells and Tris Colket. There were two other boats, but I can't remember the names. They're out of fishin' now.

Anyway, we hit a run of fish that lasted from 1982 to about 1986. It was like a four-year run of fish. I stayed up there. I fished up there in the summer time and the wintertime. They were super winters. I mean it started in November, and you'd catch 'em and they were biting heavy. There was a lot of fish up there in those four years, and I had real, real good catches. That's when, you know, we were catchin' 1,500 to 2,500. We usually stayed a day and a half. I would stay overnight. Sometimes we'd fish one day. If we loaded the box up in one day, we'd come in, but it was a tremendous run of fish, and it was just an oddball thing that I went there.

I stayed on the boat. If the boat was botherin' me too bad, I'd rent a motel. You know, you could rent a cheap motel at certain times of the year in Daytona. They weren't high priced. We fished out of the Ponce Inlet in Daytona. When we were runnin' out of St. Augustine, we ran out of the regular St. Augustine Inlet there.

Yeah, we caught lots of fish up there. Lewis Wells, myself and Tris, and this other guy. I can't even think of his name, but we killed a lot of fish. It used to be that you would go up there in November, and it was better up there than it ever was anywhere else down here.

They had a hard time givin' us a good price. What we used to do when the price was bad was carry our fish. We'd rent a five-by-eight U-Haul, and the fish houses up there wouldn't pay hardly anything for the fish. We'd put our fish in the U-Haul, and we'd separate 'em with the

canvas and ice 'em down real good and we'd take 'em down to Fort Pierce to Triple M Seafood.

I'd call the guy up on the phone, and I'd say, "We got 6,000 to 7,000 pounds of fish. How's the price look?"

He'd say, "It looks good. We ain't got any fish down here." And it was wintertime fishin', and he'd say a dollar, thirty-five, a dollar, forty.

I'd say, "Okay, we'll be down there today, We're loadin' 'em up."

We'd put 'em in the U-Haul and take 'em down the highway. Take 'em down 95 and unload 'em at night at Fort Pierce. That is how we handled low price in Daytona. It was a lot of work, but it paid off because we did good, Triple M had damned good prices.

The Bottomless Spring

Yeah, that place is called the Springs. It's an artesian well that comes up in the ocean, and most of the people who fished the Daytona area and St. Augustine area know it, but a lot of people don't know it down here. They don't know there's a well out there, an artesian well. It's got no bottom on the ocean, but actually I fished around it on one side and the other.

When you pull up on a calm day, you can actually see the well water comin' up and bubbling up in the ocean. You can see it; it's like you come to one side of it and it'll mark ninety foot, and then you come across to where the well is, you don't mark anything. You don't mark the bottom. There's no bottom. My recorder marks like fifteen hundred foot, but I never would mark the bottom on it. So, there was a bottomless spring there, right there, and I don't know how deep it went.

It was fresh water comin' up, and they told me before that, the Red Snapper and Grouper, the bottom fish used to hang around that area for some reason, and they used to make huge catches of Red Snapper around there. I did catch a lot of Kingfish right outside the springs.

One time Lewis went up there, and he caught a really big catch, 2,200, somethin' like that. But it was, you know, just on the outskirts of those springs. Yep. It's actually offshore of Flagler beach. About twenty-two miles offshore of Flagler. Yeah, it's a real strange place.

Strange Experiences

I've run into a few empty boats, just driftin' down the ocean, outboards. But you'd look in there and there's nobody there. Nobody, nobody in it, and I'd just let her go, you know, didn't bother with it.

My son, Stevie, and I were comin' from Daytona one time and we got caught in a real bad storm. He had his boat there, and we ran into a tremendous squall. It was like halfway between Cape Canaveral and Daytona, and we'd run through a real killer squall and Steve, ever since

we got hit by lightnin', kinda gets spooked by lightnin'. There was lightnin' everywhere, so he takes off like a shot.

I had to say, "Steve, where are you goin'?"

He says, "I'm leavin'. I'm goin'."

I said, "You're not gonna get out of this stuff." I said, "Come on back and we'll anchor for the night, and we'll try it in the morning here."

He said, "Okay." and he came back, but lightning was everywhere.

On the way back, he ran into a boat that was turned upside down. There was nobody in it, and he didn't see any people, but it was turned upside down. It was about a twenty-five-footer, and he was gonna come up to it, and this squall just closed in on him and he lost sight of it, you know, but it did happen to him. Then he came back over to where I was and just anchored the rest of the night. That was another bad, bad storm. I don't know if there were any people on that boat, or what, but I told 'em about it when we got into the Cape. Nobody had been reported missing or nothin', so I don't know what it was doin' floatin' out there.

Tow-Ins

I pulled a bunch of people in. Probably the one that I remember the most is two young kids who were divin'. I went out on this real, real rough day. Nobody else went out but me. I was in Palm Beach, and I went down to the Breakers. It's real clear water, and people like to dive there.

Well, I started trollin' and I came up and saw this boat anchored. These young kids were shoutin' and screamin' at me and wavin' their hands, you know, and I came up along side of 'em and one kid was real sick. They were like eighteen or nineteen years old.

And I said, "What's goin' on, what's wrong?"

He says, "My motor won't start. We been here all night and my buddy is sick as a dog. Can ya take us and haul us back in?"

And I said, "Yeah. Yeah, I'll pull ya back in."

They'd been out there all night long, couldn't get the boat to start. They were anchored, and the kid was sick all night. Sea was rough as hell.

So I got ahold of their anchor line, and I said, "Hey, you guys get into my boat and we'll tow you in." They were real, real happy to get into the boat.

But I towed a lot of guys in. I towed A.J. Brown in from the Cape a couple of times. I towed George Kaul's daddy in twice, Cleve Lewis in twice. 'Ya know, different guys.

I've been towed myself. Georgie Kaul towed me in, and through the years I probably towed in at least a hundred since 1961. Yeah, I pulled a bunch of 'em in and I got pulled in myself. Steve Lowe pulled me in a couple times. Yeah. I forget. I pulled Kenny Griffin in one time on the West Coast. That was a long time ago, in the sixties. He had an old

wooden boat, but Kenny was always a hell of a fisherman. I pulled him in way back.

Bales

Oh hell, there was always a lot of drugs on the ocean, back in, let's see when they were prevalent. I went out there one morning, and I hit a whole square of pot. A bale. I hit one and stopped. It was just daylight and I looked in the ocean and there was one bale here, one bale there, another bale there. I could see with my eyes probably fifty bales.

I don't know which of the boys was fishin' with me. I said, "I'll be damned, look at that!"

I listened on the radio and Tommy Drawdy was next to me. He hit one, or ran into one, and he called the Coast Guard. So I said, "Well, that tells me somethin'. I'm goin' fishin'. I'm gettin' out of here!"

Because what they'll do is make you stand by all day until they get that stuff picked up. Yeah, well this is what happened. I went fishin', and I caught a couple of hundred pounds of Kingfish.

Then I came back to the inlet, but there was a Sheriff's department up there flying and also a Coast Guard helicopter. They must have got the news, you know, and then they had a Coast Guard boat in the inlet stoppin' everybody. Not one boat got by.

They came up on my boat with an M-16, and these young guys, and I said, "Oh Jesus! I hope they don't get too nervous." I said to the one guy, "I know what you guys are lookin' for. You're not going to find it on this boat, but go ahead."

So they went ahead and looked around, and they said, "Okay". That was it. That was the biggest bunch I've seen on the ocean.

King Fishing Is an Addiction

You always look forward to the next day. I like it. I like fishin' out there. I like it in the ocean, away from everybody. I think fishermen are clannish. They stick together and it's just a new thing every day.

You never know what you're gonna run into in the ocean. You might have a decent catch one day and do nothin' the next, but I enjoy it anyway. I enjoy it even if it's rough. It doesn't make a bit of difference to me. If it's calm, well, fine. I enjoy it all the more, and I just look forward to it every day. I don't think I'll ever get tired of it really. It's just a new thing.

Primarily, I like to travel a lot, and if I was younger, I'd do a hell of a lot more travelin'. I like new places to go in the ocean. I thought seriously about going to Destin this year, but my damn back was out. I was screwed up big time, so I said, "Well, I got a bad back this year, so I don't know if I'll go or not," but you know, you never know what's gonna happen out there.

It's just new and different everyday, not the humdrum life that other people lead. I've managed restaurants for years before I started fishin' in 1960, and it's just different. You get away from all that, and I think you can enjoy the ocean a lot. I do. I think I enjoy that better than anything, except maybe, you know, a good lookin' woman. It's my second favorite thing.

But, yeah, everything is so different every day. You never know what the hell you're gonna run into. One time Lewis Wells and I were fishin' off Jupiter after a hurricane. Boxes of bananas were floatin' all over the ocean. Lewis was pickin' up bananas. The fish were bitin', and he was pickin' up bananas! I was catchin' the fish like crazy, you know, just one right after the other. And he's pickin' up bananas.

I said, "What the hell are you doin' Lewis?" He's pickin' up bananas, and the fish were bitin'. But like I say, you never know what you're gonna run into.

Cuban Rafts

Oh yeah, we had Cuban rafts. You were liable to find a Dolphin around those rafts. There were a lot of Dolphins caught around those rafts. They'd play there.

Yeah, I remember that year and different years would bring different things. It was always new to me. I like to travel. Like I say, I like to go here and there and everywhere. If I were probably ten years younger, I'd be on the West Coast because I think that's where the main bunch of fish are now.

Nets

Fishing in Fort Pierce has definitely gotten worse. The Fort Pierce fishery for Kings has gotten way worse than it was in the '60s and the '70s. You know, it's just because of the amount of Porpoises that you have out there that you can't make a good catch like you used to.

The effect of the nets on the fish has made a big impact on 'em. The Shark nets, which they still have out in the ocean, make a big impact. The fishin' went downhill big time. You know, back when we were fishin' in the sixties, you could catch 2,000 pounds. It's unheard of anymore. It's past tense unless they stop the Shark drift nets. That might help.

I don't know what they're gonna do with the Porpoises. You can pick 'em up and relocate to the West Coast or somewhere, but it's not like it used to be here.

Strange Catch

We spotted a jet airplane up there in St. Augustine. Stevie, my son, and I were goin' out of St. Augustine one day, and it was in the

wintertime. It was after the quota started, and they cut the quota down here, so we went up to St. Augustine because they were catchin' fish up there.

Well, the other guys were out and ahead of us, probably forty miles off, so I was runnin' out there and watchin' when I was goin' out. It was a real slick, calm day, and I saw this huge bunch of bait, a pile of bait on top of the water. All of a sudden I saw Kingfish come up there.

I said, "Stevie, we're gonna stop right here and try this."

And we started trollin'. By probably twelve or one o'clock, we had 124 head of Kingfish that we had caught right there where all the bait was, and among that I caught a twenty-five-pound Snapper.

I think we were trolling bait at that time, and what I did was take the numbers down, the Loran numbers. I actually threw a buoy on that spot, and we fished that night and we had like, I think it was 250 pounds of those great big Red Snappers that we caught at night after we anchored.

We stayed there another day, and we caught another bunch of Kingfish. It wasn't as many as we caught the first day, but we had a good catch, like 500 pounds the second day and we anchored again at night.

Stevie got ahold of somethin' and he stopped pullin' on it because it was on the bottom of the ocean, ya know. He says, "Dad, I got somethin' here, I don't know what it is." He stopped pullin it.

And I said, "Let me give you a hand."

So we both pulled it. We were on the same boat. We finally brought it up. It was from the wheel on a plane, a strut, the thing that sits down the whole wheel. We pulled that up, and then we pulled up another little tin box. The reason we knew it was a jet plane is this guy I'd seen out of Daytona dove on it—those Loran numbers—and said that there was a jet engine and scattered parts down there.

It was like eighty feet of water, and every year we went up there after that, we could anchor on that spot and catch Mackerel. It was a hot spot. All around it was sand, and on that one spot was an engine. There were some scattered parts from the plane.

It was very unusual he dove on it, that guy. He dives by himself. He doesn't have anybody else on the boat. I said, "Sid, if I were you, I wouldn't be divin' by myself like that." He said he'd been divin' so long it didn't make any difference to him.

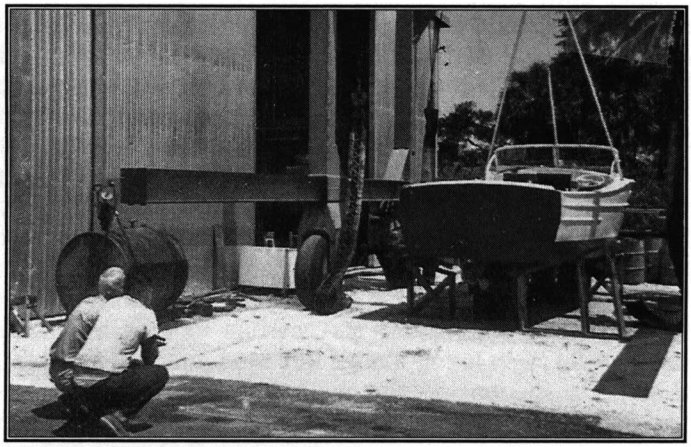
The Big Storm

Back in Riviera Beach. I was docked down there next to the Port of Palm Beach. Well, on the two days I was off, I used to run up there with Maxwell Pender, Stanley Pender, and all of them. They would be catchin' a thousand and I'd be catchin' two hundred. They were so good, and that's when I was first starting in anyway.

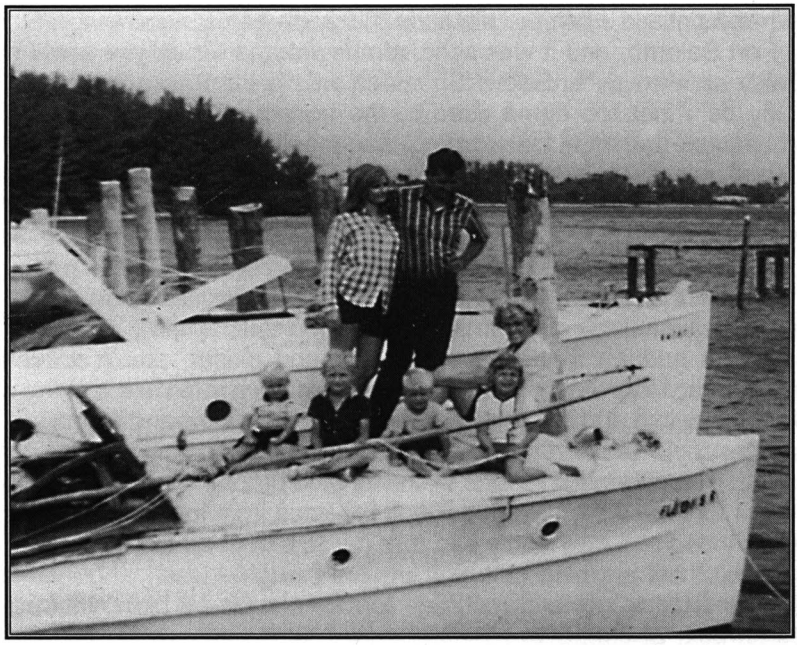
It was primarily when I started down there off Riviera Beach, the prime place to fish was from Jupiter to Palm Beach, and that's where I

primarily learned how to King fish down there. It was Jupiter south and it still is today. I got a little better at it and then. I think it was summer of '61, I was fishin' down there.

In the summer of '62, I went to Fort Pierce for the first time. We used to fish for Charlie Lowe. That was Steve's dad and he was located there, right there on the point there where Chuck's Seafood is now, (on Fort Pierce's South Beach Causeway). Well, that day my wife and I and a whole crew of boats went out of Fort Pierce. I think Bill Farlow, Steve Lowe, and everybody was goin' out. That was September; the day that we were caught in that storm, was 09/22/1962, (The Fall Equinox).



The *Tempo* 1962. "Tough little boat. It withstood seventy-five knot winds and forty to fifty-foot seas — unbelievable."



Al and his family pose on the *Tempo* in 1965. His children are from left: Tom, Rickey, Corey, Chuck, and Carol Lee

My wife fished with me all the time. She fished with me full time. At that time, I only had one little one and he was two years old, so we just took him. I didn't feel any danger of any kind. I didn't know how bad the ocean could get. Really. I had been fishin' just a year. It was '61, and in '62 I was in Fort Pierce. I was about thirty-five years old, somethin' like that.

Well, we went out, just like we'd always been goin' out. When I got to Fort Pierce, I didn't know a damn thing. Not too many people would tell me anything either. We were fishin', and I didn't have anything. I had no equipment on the boat. I didn't even have a radio or a fish finder. The only thing that I had to get back and forth with was a compass. That was it. In those days, not too many people had radios.

So we went out there and it was a beautiful, beautiful morning. We started catchin'. I always used to go southeast which would take me relatively to the south end of the offshore bar, and I would see the light blinking on 12A buoy. That's how I knew I was primarily in the right position there. Bein' green at it, you know, I would always go in that direction. On the edge of that offshore drop was a 12A buoy because there was a treasure boat sunk there.

I started catchin' fish that day, and I think it was about eleven o'clock I noticed everybody takin' off. The whole fleet was in that area and leaving. There were a lot of boats that were catchin' fish mostly for five to seven hours.

Then I noticed off in the distance this huge black cloud that reached from Port Salerno, and it was solid, all the way as far as you could see, probably all the way to Bethel Shoals. It was a tremendous black front, and my bein' not too damn used to the ocean and bein' only fishin' a year, I figured that thing looked like it was movin' to the north.

You know, my wife kept tellin' me, "No, that thing's comin' this way."

I said, "Ah, it's going to the north." And we kept catching fish. You know, I was catchin' 'em pretty good on spoons. You hate to leave when they're bitin'. Oh, they were bitin'. They were biting.

I saw all these guys leavin', and I said, "Well, I'm still catchin' fish, so I'm gonna stay here."

All of a sudden that thing got closer and closer, and I could see lightning everywhere, this purplish black front. It was terrible lookin', with white streaks in it and lightning all the way to the water, and it was just as far as you could see and just no break in it at all, and I said, "Oh boy!"

Well, what stopped me was this cold wind that hit. This icy, cold wind hit, and I told me wife, "We better pull the lines in; it looks like it's gonna blow."

I didn't think anything of it, you know. I thought I was just gonna take off, so I started to go, and it started to blow. I mean it blew. I think fifty miles an hour at first, then rain and then it increased. The Coast Guard said it was seventy to seventy-five-mile-an-hour winds, and it sustained that velocity. Then seas picked up and it got really terrible.

I couldn't move forward. The seas got so big that I was goin' up, and when it got there, a full blast, raining, it was even hailing at times. It was about two in the afternoon. Yeah, and the seas got so damned big that when I was goin' up the front, I was looking at the tops of 'em.

I'm lookin' straight up, and I was saying to myself, "I wonder if my boat will go over backwards." Because I was on a real vertical angle goin' straight up. Now this is no bullshit. I was goin' straight up; the waves were packin' up and breakin' on top real hard, and I was sayin' to myself, "I wonder if I'll make it over this next one," you know, and it was at a vertical. I was goin' up, and my boat, a twenty-six-footer, was halfway up the sea, and figured I had almost a boat length to go to get over the top, and when I hit over the top of one of them seas, I would just go on into the next one. It was terrible.

The boat had a Chrysler gasoline engine, and it was sputterin'. I had it at a high idle and tryin' to buck the sea, and I was tryin' to make sure that it didn't conk out, you know. I had times that the engine did conk out on me, so I was kinda worried about it conkin' out on me then.

And I told my wife to get down to the bilge. It was rainin' so hard it was takin' on a lot of water, and she was down there and kept the bilge cleaned. Then it got so ferocious that I actually asked her to give me the life preserver. I had a couple of life preservers, and I told her she better put one on.

She went completely apart. She panicked, and she started prayin' and it was terrible. She got hysterical.

I said, "You just stay in the cabin and keep the bilge pump clean and leave the rest to me."

I was steering from the back of the boat. My front steering broke where I turned from the front at the wheel. I was in the back, and I was catchin' all that rain. I had no canopy or nothin' over me. The whole back of the boat was open. The compass was up front, but you know the direction of that sea was comin' from the northwest. I was just goin' into it, so my main concern right then was to go into it, to get through it, and to get home. Finally, after hours, I wondered if we would make it because it was the worst.

It lasted from two to about seven o'clock and that's a pretty long time. And the seas were tremendous. I finally got through it, and it subsided. It was about seven at night, and I started in, and I could see the old water tank in there right before dark. The inlet was dark, and it was hairy.

I never have been in a storm that bad since, and I've been in a lot of storms. It was terrible. Like I say, I got to the inlet and the Coast Guard was waitin' for me. Charlie Lowe had called the Coast Guard. They shined a light on my boat and came over the loudspeaker and asked me if I was Al Tyrrell.

I told them "It's me."

He said, "We've been lookin' for ya, but we couldn't get out there, and we wouldn't have been able to see ya in that storm." So they never did come out after me because it was too horrendous, I think even for the Coast Guard to come out there.

Realistically, they probably didn't expect to see me come back in because that was such a little boat that survived the storm, that old wood Chriscraft. We got to the fish house and everybody was lined up at the fish house. Nobody went home. They were all there, and they didn't really expect to see me, I guess.

But I pulled in there, and my wife was so happy to see land, she said, "If I ever get on land, I'll never go back in the ocean."

Well, she says she gonna fish this year, and she did fish after that. I finally convinced her to fish, but it was a real bad experience for both of us. And the little guy, Chuck, you know he's forty-somethin' years old now, but he was only two then and he didn't realize the dangers. He fell asleep. I had him in a life preserver, and he fell asleep inside the cabin in a life preserver, so he was lucky he didn't remember anyway. He was in good shape.

Oh yeah. It had a plank that popped out. I didn't know it until Steve Lowe came up there and said, "Al, look what happened to your boat."

And it was popped out. It was just above the water line. Fortunately. It was lucky. That was one bad time, one bad storm.

Struck By Lightning

It happened in this boat here, this Stapleton (he points to the picture on the wall). We all went fishin'. I think around August 19, I believe in 1981. All the guys, Steve Lowe, Bill Farlow, even Moby, the guy who has Pelican's Seafood. Well, he was out there. The whole gang was out there and a bad storm came up.

I never did think much about lightning. I never was worried about it, I've gone through a lot of it, you know, lightning storms, "Oh, it's not going to hit me," you're always thinkin' that. You go right through it and nothin' happens. For years and years I did that.

But this particular time, I had *Carol Ann* and Stevie with me. She was fourteen and he was eleven. This storm started to blow, about fifty miles an hour and it began to rain like hell. It was a summer squall. I saw a few lightning strikes in there. I had to turn around and go into it.

When you're sideways to it, the rain just gets ya soaked. It'll go sideways into your boat. And it would get everything wet. You'd get soaked, so when you go into it, you know, you got the rain comin' into your windshield instead of goin' inside your boat. And then you're goin' into a sea; it's not a following sea; it's a head sea. So, I was goin' into it and kinda slowed down.

It was gettin' nasty, and all of a sudden this flash of lightning hit my antenna and shook the whole boat like a stick of dynamite. I mean I thought my gas tanks were blowin' up because it shook the boat so bad.

Well, I never did close my eyes. I looked back at my daughter, and she was standin' right in back of me. She had her eyes closed and her fingers in her ears, you know, and her face was all squinched up.

I said, "Carol, we've been hit by lightning."

And that lightning came down the antenna and blew the antenna apart. It came down to the radio and melted the radio out. I had no radio then. It went down into the fathometer and screwed that up.

It was a funny thing. I had a pretty fast reaction. I looked down at the floor, and this black smoke was comin' out where that lightning was goin' down the wire into my engine.

Then I heard my engine sputtering, and I thought, "Hell, I'd better turn it off before it blows up or somethin." So I turned it off.

And that thing hit on the three windows of my boat. From the lightning, there was circular fire on each of my windows. I don't understand how it didn't come inside the boat. It was outside the windows. I had these Plexiglas windows, but it was outside the boat and it was circular. I had never seen anything like that before.

When lightning got close, I'd never seen that fire like it was, but it was a direct hit on me. That's the reason I saw it, you know, and it's a wonder it didn't get inside and hit me, or my daughter, or Stevie. Stevie was running around in the boat in bare feet.

I said, "Stevie, go put your boots on." I said, "This is a bad storm here."

So he went and got his boots on. They were rubber on the bottom for insulation, you know.

So I said, "Sit in the corner over here until the storm goes by."

So he sat in the corner, and that thing hit. When it hit, I asked him to do somethin'. He was white, and then he turned color. He got absolutely weak from that thing hittin', you know, but I don't blame him. He was only a kid.

Now, I was floatin' around out there, you know, in that storm, and I said maybe somebody would come by, so I put a life preserver on my outrigger and stuck it up in the air.

Here came a shrimper and he was headed up north. I tried to get him to stop, you know, and maybe tow me in or somethin'. At that time, I didn't try to start it.

So I said, well, let me look at my engine, and let me try it one more time and see what kind of damage was done to it. I turned the switch on and the voltmeter registered way down there on a ten, and that means it's damn near dead. But I cranked it and it went off.

I took off, and the first guy I caught on the water was Moby because I didn't know what was going to happen as far as my motor went. I pulled up alongside Moby, and he was headed in.

And I said, "Moby, how about following me inside the river? I've just been hit by lightning."

He said, "Okay, Al."

And he followed me all the way in. When I got to the dock, I was real happy.

Waterspouts

Yeah, I did run into a waterspout. I had another boat; it was a Lue boat with a leaky tiki. I mean I had three pumps on it, and it was an old boat, and it leaked like hell. This was before the Stapleton. It was in between. I had three boats, one called *Tempo*, the one I have now, *Carol Ann*, but it was called the *Hanging Skiff* and was black, and I fished out of Jupiter at that time mostly.

I was out there one afternoon in Jupiter and this storm came up, a killer, a pretty nasty storm. You don't have to run far in Jupiter. But the fish were bitin' pretty good. Bigger fish were bitin', and it was in May. It was the old traditional spring run down there.

That was, let's see, I got that boat in 1965, so it was right around the early '70s. I'd say 1973. And at that time there were plenty of fish around. The guys, they did real well in Hobe Sound and Jupiter both. I had anywhere from 600 to 1,500 in a day. That was a spectacular year. It was May of 1973. It was a hell of a spring run.

Al's second Kingfish boat was the 1971 *Miss Carol Ann.* "Leaky Teaky, three bilge pumps going most of the time."

This particular storm I got caught in there, I didn't see it. I couldn't see any of those things that spin around, you know? You know a waterspout puts out little hairs first, like clouds; little clouds come down like little hairs. Little twisters. Then they form together. I didn't see any of that because it was raining pretty hard. I was underneath in the cabin driving the boat, you know, into this storm, and I didn't really see it.

I looked back, and all of a sudden I heard this huge crack. I looked back and my dog-gone canopy was spinnin' up in the air with the two steel supports that were holdin' it. The metal was actually cracked in two where the pipe went down into the part that held it. That force of wind just cracked that steel right off and the canopy went right up in the air.

I was shocked that it happened, and after the storm subsided, I came around and picked the canopy up and started into the dock. I got it back on the boat.

That was a waterspout, yeah. I was very close to another one in Hobe Sound that came up in back of my boat, oh about a hundred yards,

and the force of water goin' around and goin' up into the sky to me sounded like a jet airplane. A huge roar came off that. It was suckin' that water up. Of course, I took off full blast away from it. I didn't want to get caught in another one. That was another pretty close call.

In that particular year of '73, there was a tremendous spring run, but there was also a lot of bad weather. There were a lot of storms that produced hail and stuff like that.

The Big Nets Strike Kingfish

That was about the year the big nets started striking Kingfish. I don't remember the year the nets came in, but it was pretty close to that anyway. Yeah, they pretty much devastated the King fishin'. They'd catch 50,000 pounds at a whack. You know all about that. I've been all through that. Back then, we would catch unlimited. We'd catch 1,500 to 2,200 pounds and there was plenty of fish around, but when big nets came in, they would get a whole school of fish in one set. Circle 'em up, set 'em and they'd catch 50,000 to 52,000 pounds in one set. That disrupted their whole scheme of migration and everything else. It was the downfall of the fishing on this coast. It really went downhill rapidly. It was terrible after the circle nets.

That was the circle gill nets and then came the drift nets. They still use 'em, they call 'em shark nets now, but they catch everything in 'em. You name it, they catch it, Cobia, Wahoo, Sailfish—they catch everything. I don't really see how they allow it in the United States. They were banned in most every country in the world; it really took the fishin' downhill.

It's real tough anymore, but the only way I could survive, if I was young again, and I had the boat to travel, I would hit every big run of fish there was, like Louisiana. I would travel. They don't use any nets there. They catch a million and a half pounds inside of five weeks. Strictly hand line, no nets.

Well, in the West Coast and Key West they still do catch 460,000 in the nets. They still have the netting goin' on there. There is a net quota down there, but they realistically don't need it because Louisiana proves that. When they can catch in five weeks a million and, almost a million and a half pounds on hand lines, what do ya need the nets for? Nets catch everything else, the bicatches of every other fish. They gotta throw so many fish overboard. You know, it's a waste, it's a big waste.

Well, I don't think hand line fish compares at all to the quality of net fish. When he's caught in the drift net, he's laying in the water a while, and what kinda fish would lay in warm water all night? A hand line fish is thrown in the box and he's iced down quickly, gutted and iced, and it's not that way with a net fish. It lays in the water all night, and how could it have good quality?

If you're young, you can scrap out a living in a given place. You got to be flexible to do various things. Snapper-Grouper fishin' is primarily downhill here because of all the divers. Hand line fishermen used to be able to survive catching Snapper and Grouper, but anymore, I don't think so.

Loran's pretty much done in the Snapper-Grouper. They just go to a Loran reading and, you know the Snapper hang out there, the Grouper, too, and the divers nail 'em spearfishing. Yeah, you know, the divers see 'em and what chance have they got? (Laughs)

Well, hell, any afternoon, I used to catch 300 pounds of Grouper after we King fished and you don't do that anymore. So did Bill Farlow. Now, you put your anchor overboard and if you catch two Grouper, you're lucky. (Laughs) That's the way it is. It's past tense.

I think the West Coast is on the upgrade, upswing, because they catch their fish in a hurry. In five weeks they catch their quota in Louisiana and they don't catch another Kingfish after that. So, you've got the whole eleven months, ten and three-quarter months, where they don't catch the Kingfish, only the spots, so it gives the Kingfish a break. But, they have got a lot of fish over there.

In the wintertime they (the Kingfish) come in close, just like they do here. They do in various places on the East Coast, but in the summertime they're pretty far off. I was talkin' to a couple of my buddies who are over there right now, and they go as far as a hundred miles and they do catch.

They have a quota of 3,000 over there for one day. Usually they catch them in one day, but sometimes it takes two. Now, I don't know. They didn't catch the quota this year because they had so many Snapper over there that everybody skipped the King fishing and went Snapper fishin'. They got a load of Snapper over there. For Snapper, they just use those electric reels, Bandit Reels.

Big Fish

Well, I don't know if I told you this one. I was trolling out there around the northeast grounds one time. I was really going home. It was in the summertime, and I had Chuck with me; he was about twelve, and I think the other one was Terry. Actually, I had ten kids and I raised six of 'em King fishin'. The other four I was workin' in the restaurants.

We were comin' in from King fishin' and I was trollin' in. You know, everybody trolls in to save fuel. I had a feather head out on a float line.

I said, "Chuck, you hold onto this."

He sat up on the fish box and just wrapped it up and was just kinda dozin' off, you know, and all of a sudden somethin' hit it and dragged him up against the back gunnel, and he was screamin', "Daadddd!" (Laughs)

And I said, "Oh, wait a minute, Chuck."

I grabbed it and it was somethin' big. I took a double wrap on it and I started about reelin' it in. I felt this big pull down, you know, like it was a great big fish. So I said, "Oh, Chuck, I tell ya, this is too big for you. You take it easy. We'll let this fish hang up here for about ten minutes, fifteen minutes."

So I let him hang up there. They get tired of fighting, you know, and after about fifteen minutes, they usually fight themselves out and get kinda weak. So, after about fifteen minutes, I started pullin' him in, and I pulled it up along the side of the boat, and hell, he was seven foot long. He was a big Wahoo with big stripes on him.

I told Chuck to go get the gaff and have it ready. He ran around the boat and finally got to the gaff. I stuck it in the back of the Wahoo's head and pulled him up and dropped him on the floor. He was seventy-five and a half pounds, a nice one. Yeah, he was a beauty. That's the biggest Wahoo I've ever caught.

I've caught a lot of Kingfish that were fifty to fifty-five pounds, quite a few, you know. We had a run in Hobe Sound one time just before the quotas went in. I don't know when they went in, but it was like ten years ago. There was a run in Hobe Sound there that was all from fifteen to fifty pound fish. I mean every third fish was like a forty-pounder.

I was catchin' 'em on the bug mostly. Yeah, I had 1,800 and I lost, let me see, how many did I lose to the Porpoise? Eighteen great big fish to the Porpoise. The Porpoise were right there. There was a gang of those things. There were thirty boats, and the Porpoise were goin' crazy. They were takin' huge fish from me, but I stayed there. I stayed right in that spot, a big black mark on the recorder. There were plenty of fish there and I had 1,800. I wound up with 1,800 pounds. A lot of them were forty to fifty-pounders. They were big fish.

Porpoise

The Porpoise would take off with the fish. They just got a hold of the fish. They're too smart to get hooked. Yeah, they're real smart. A lot of times when they're hooked too good, they get so strong that they'll break the fish right off at the back of the head. You've seen that. They just leave the jaws on the hook. I don't know how they do it, but they pull so hard that they just pull the fish apart, and they've been doin' that out here for years now.

I got hit by a paravane one time. It flew by me and hit me in the side, but I never got hurt real bad. A lot of guys have. They can hurt ya. There's no doubt about it. Porpoise are terrible.

Big Catches

I think it was in the '60s. Steve Lowe had big catches. I will never catch as much as he has caught. He's had as much as 3,500 in a day,

but my biggest catch in a day's time musta been in Daytona and I never, ever caught anywhere near what he caught. One of my boys was with me on one trip. We went out of Daytona and the fish really bit, too. They were big fish and they just bit all day, and we stayed overnight and fished 'til ten a.m.. We were runnin out of ice. I filled all my boxes up, every one, right to the top, even the unhookin' box. I wound up with 2,780 pounds.

I was comin' into the dock and this guy I know in there says, "Al! You look like you're sinkin'! What's the trouble?"

I said, "I got too many fish on the boat!." He was a local in Daytona and I was listin' over to the side. I had one of my gas tanks on that side, and then I had a load of fish that made me list over the side even more.

My Stapleton still has the same box in it. It'll hold 2,500 without a problem. I've had a lot of 1,800 to 2,200 catches there, 2,200 pound catches up there. A lot of 1,800 to 2,000 pound catches.

1987 – The Space Shuttle

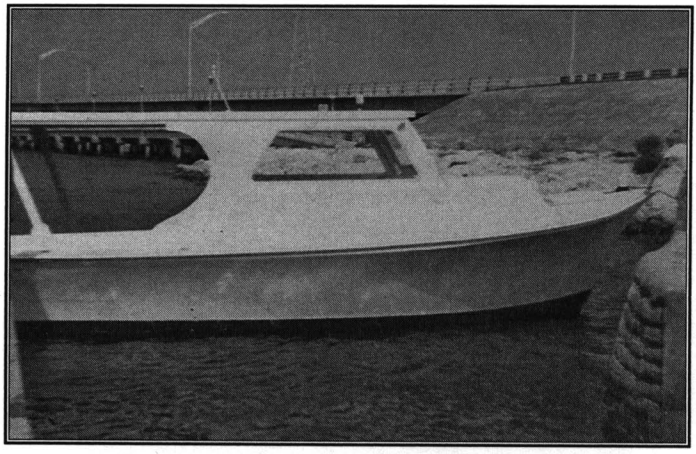
We were fishing out of Daytona when the space shuttle blew up. There were parts of it everywhere. It was actually southeast of Daytona, a little north of Cape Canaveral, so when it blew up, I guess everything floated up to the Daytona fishing grounds. A Coast Guard boat was out there and asked us to look for the pieces of the shuttle. We would just go from one piece to another. We ran up on the nose part of it, and this helicopter came and hovered over us.

I said, "What in the world?!"

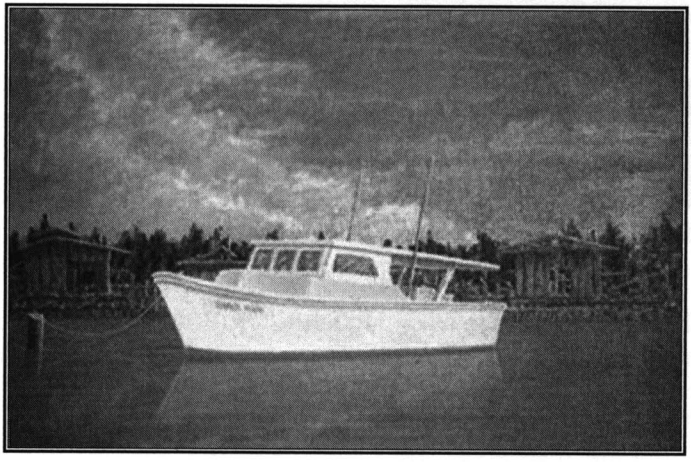
He didn't advise us there would be a helicopter come over us, like there was. I looked up there and saw a guy with this object over my boat. I said, "What the hell is he doing?"

So he goes, swoom! And he throws this thing, and it went poof, a smoke bomb, so the Coast Guard could locate the object. So that's what we were doing, and it was a mess. There were pieces of that shuttle everywhere. There were four boats out there with us fishing, and they were all helping the Coast Guard locate these pieces.

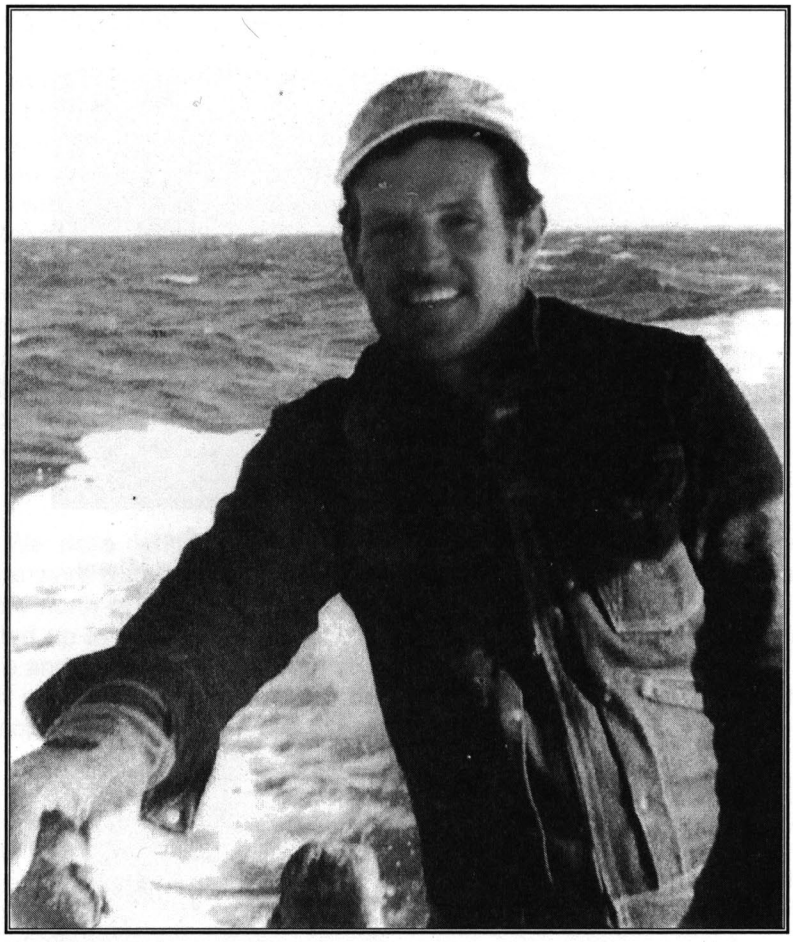
It was a pretty bad, sad thing. I remember it. I saw the smoke and everything. I didn't see the pieces coming down. We just saw them there. They were right on the fishing grounds where we fished, and we saw all the pieces. They found everything right there in the southeast Daytona fishing grounds.



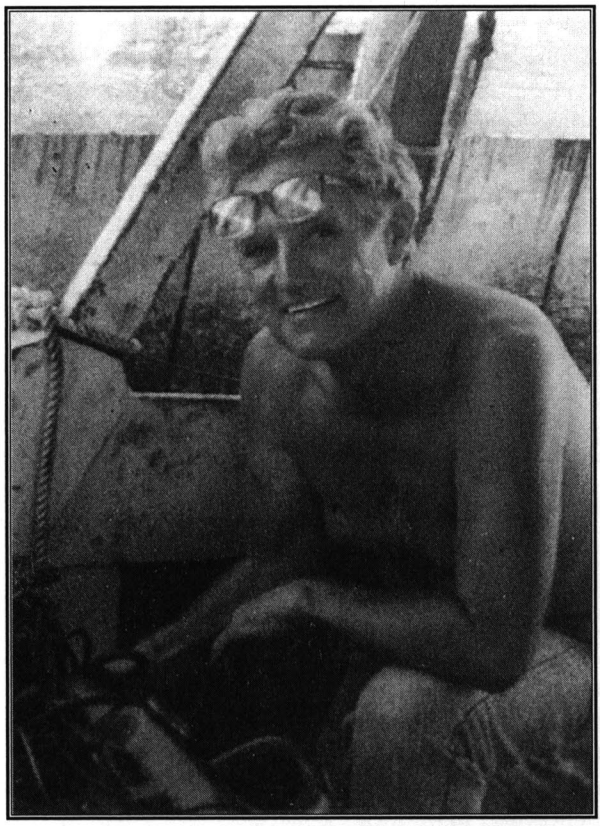
Al's present boat, the *Carol Ann*, is a thirty-one-foot Stapleton, launched in 1973. Stapletons are made in Miami.



A painting of the *Miss Carol Ann* is in Al's living room.



Al fishes off Naples, Florida, in 1967 in a twenty-five-foot skiff.



Al puts a Chrysler 400 in the *Carol Ann*, the thirty-one-foot Stapleton in 1982

In the summer of 2003, Al Tyrrell put his boat on a semi rig and trailed it to Louisiana for the Kingfish season in the Gulf of Mexico. He tied his boat and sold his fish at a dock on a river twenty miles from the entrance to the Gulf. From there he would run thirty to forty miles out into the Gulf of Mexico to the fishing grounds. He carried 250-gallon steel drums of gasoline, and would usually make two-day trips, anchoring out at night.

He said you would have to look out for the oil rig tender boats that run at high speeds and will run over you if you're not careful. Al said he did "real good" in Louisiana in 2003. At that time he was nearly eighty years old.

In June of 2004, Al was returning to Fort Pierce from Port Salerno when he apparently hit something near the mouth of the Fort Pierce Inlet.

It tore his shaft and coupling apart from the engine and tore apart his stuffing box. His boat was sinking. He called Jimmy Reeves on the radio. It was late in the afternoon and all of the other fishermen were already home. Jimmy Reeves just happened to be at the fuel dock.

Jimmy told Al that "if you're really sinking, I had better call the Coast Guard," because it would take a long time for Jimmy to get to him and he didn't have a pump. So Jimmy called the Coast Guard. They sent a Zodiac with a large pump to Al. Jimmy said it shot out of the Coast Guard Station like a bullet. They got a pump to him; he pumped out and stayed afloat. Jimmy towed Al in to the marina where he hauled out for the repairs. Al nearly sank the year before off Daytona Beach.

Other fishermen worry about how many lives Al has. Steve Lowe says that Al is fearless, as a result of surviving in the Pacific during WW II.

Al's family rented a hall in Fort Pierce for August 14, 2004, to celebrate Al's 80th birthday. Al's fishing buddies were there. The hall was filled with fisherman from all over Florida along with Al's many children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

His son, Jacob, a former disc jockey, was the MC. Fittingly, the large mural on the wall on the back of the stage was a tropical beach scene. His son narrated a moving slide show of Al's life. Everyone applauded at the striking pictures of Al as a young marine. They showed a picture of Al and his young family coming to Florida in 1955 in a Cadillac convertible—little heads were sticking out all over.

Al's daughter, Carol Ann, a beautiful night club singer, sang for him. Family and friends told many stories. Jacob told of a fishing trip, like many, when the children huddled in the stern to discuss whether Dad was really going to go out. It was blowing and no other fishermen had left the dock. It was just too rough, but Al went. The ocean was so bad that they came off a wave and the mount for the captain's chair snapped off. To the children's dismay, Al simply threw the chair overboard and went on fishing. Rough weather never bothered Al.

Late in the tributes, Al's young granddaughter stood up and said, "I love you, Grandpa. I love to come to your house, but you're never there. I love to play with you, Grandpa, but I miss you. You're never there. You're always out fishing." She highlighted the downfall of an otherwise wonderful way of life. Commercial fishermen are away from home a lot.

Then they danced. Al danced the most. He is very good at it. It was a great party and a wonderful tribute to a man whose life is the stuff legends are made of.

In the picture on the party invitation, Al is holding a fifty-five-pound King Mackerel caught off Jupiter during the 2004 spring run.

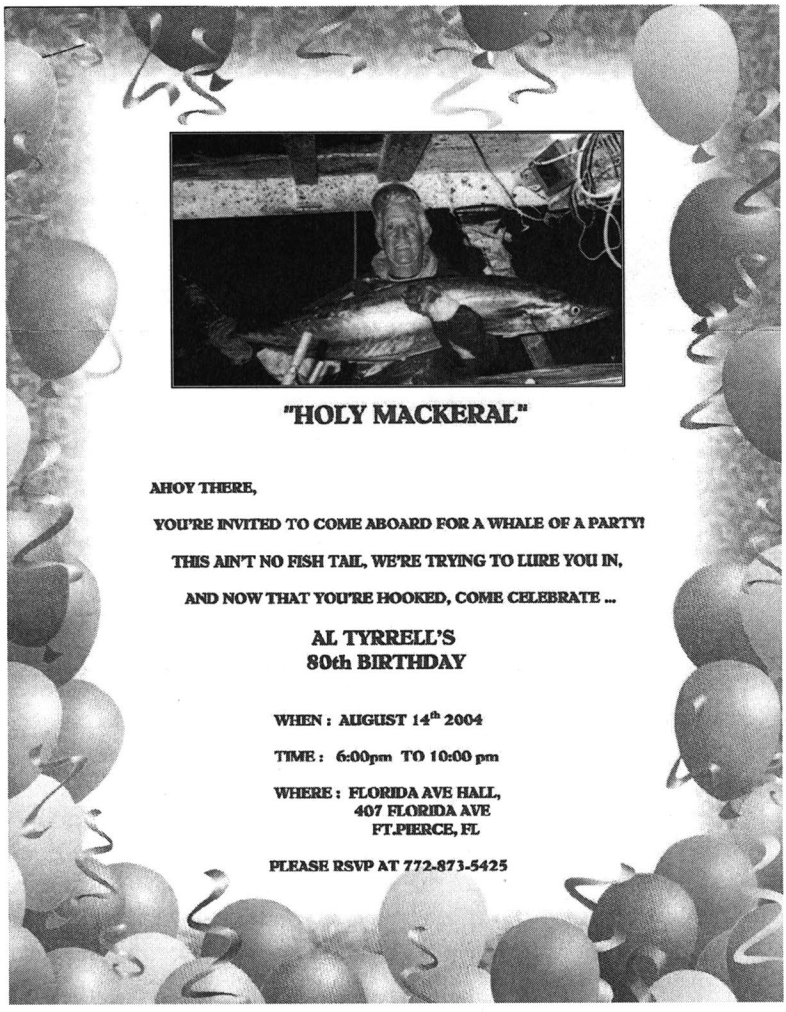
Late one afternoon in the summer of 2005, I was one of the last boats unloading at the fish house. Not many fish were caught. The wind had

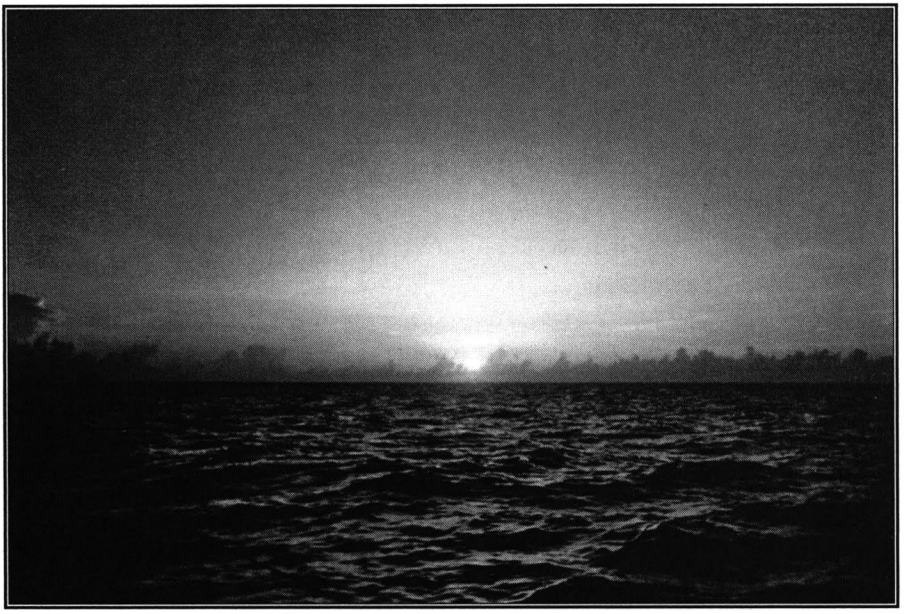
picked up and the ocean had become rough. Everyone headed in, except for one boat. The fellow unloading the fish at the fish house asked if there was any other boats out.

"Just Al Tyrrell," I said. "He was heading north toward Bethel Shoals when I left the fishing grounds."

He said, "That old man is tougher than all the rest of you guys put together."

"Yeah," I said, "you're right."





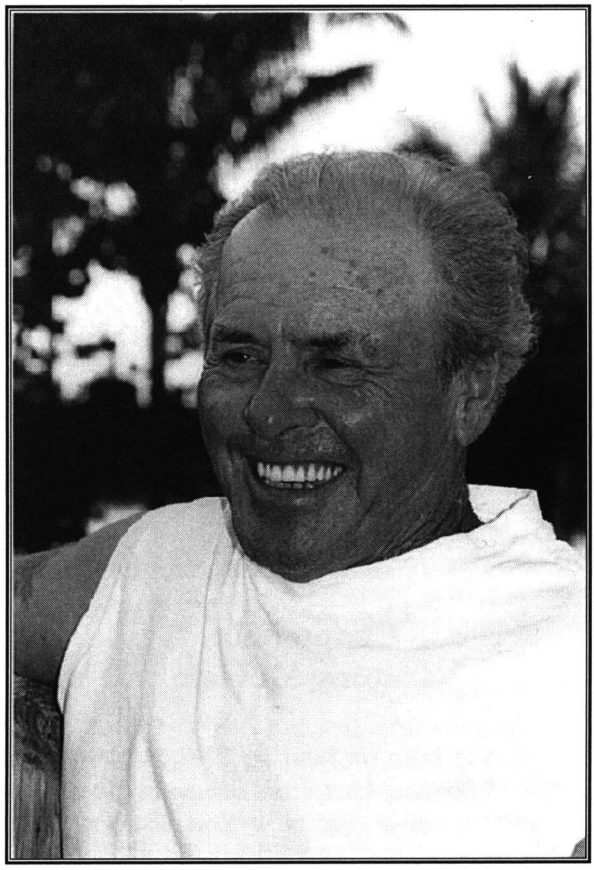
Chapter Six
Tommy McHale

Tommy McHale was born on June 21, 1932, in New York City on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. He started fishing in the lakes and ponds of Central Park and progressed to the New York Harbor, Sheepshead Bay, and the Jersey Shore. Some have argued that he was Fort Pierce's best hand line King Mackerel fisherman.

A common saying about Tommy around Fort Pierce is, "The fishing is not as good as it used to be here, but nobody told that to Tommy McHale."

It seems that no matter how bad fishing gets, Tommy still caught a lot. Like Johnny Jones, a New York newspaper once wrote a series of articles about Tommy entitled "Man or Myth, Fact or Legend."

Tommy nearly always caught fish. Like the other fishermen, age did not slow Tommy's enthusiasm for fishing. At seventy, he still out-fished the competition regularly. He survived broken bones, waterspouts, collisions with the jetties, near sinkings, lightning, predators of the deep, islands of trash, and divorce. Nothing diminished his passion for fishing.



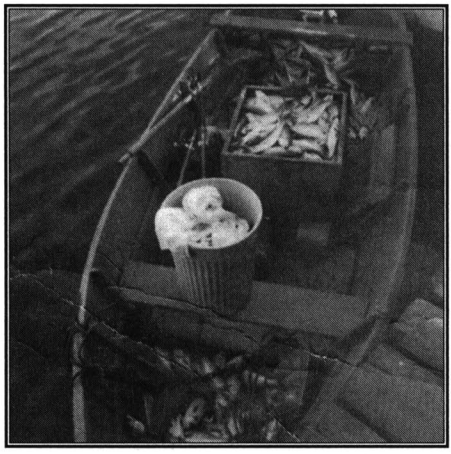
Tommy McHale on the boardwalk at the Fort Pierce Inlet in 2002.

New York

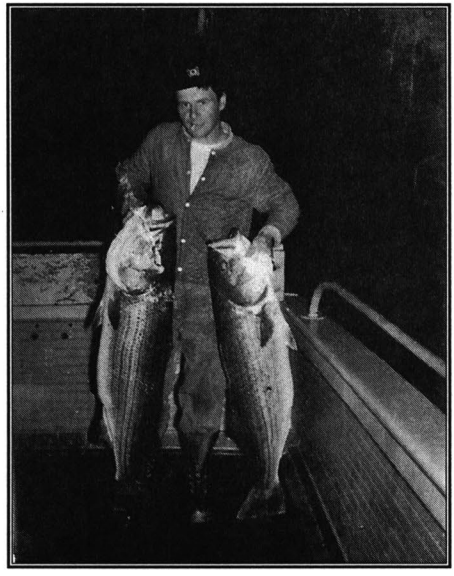
I started fishing in New York. I couldn't tell you exactly what year it was, but it was years ago anyway, because I'm seventy years old now. My first boat was a fourteen-footer and before that I fished off bridges, piers, you name it. I fished in Central Park when I was a kid. I lived in the heart of New York City. I lived on the East Side of New York City, 95th Street and 30th Avenue, and I started fishin', like I said, in Central Park, catching, you know, the smallest kind of fish.

After that, I moved down to a place called Sheepshead Bay, which was right across the street from the water, and I worked on charter boats and head boats and all that. I did a lot of that at first. I worked on the charter boats. Then I started fishin' for myself commercially, catchin' Striped Bass, Bluefish, whatever, and I did that until I moved down to Fort Pierce.

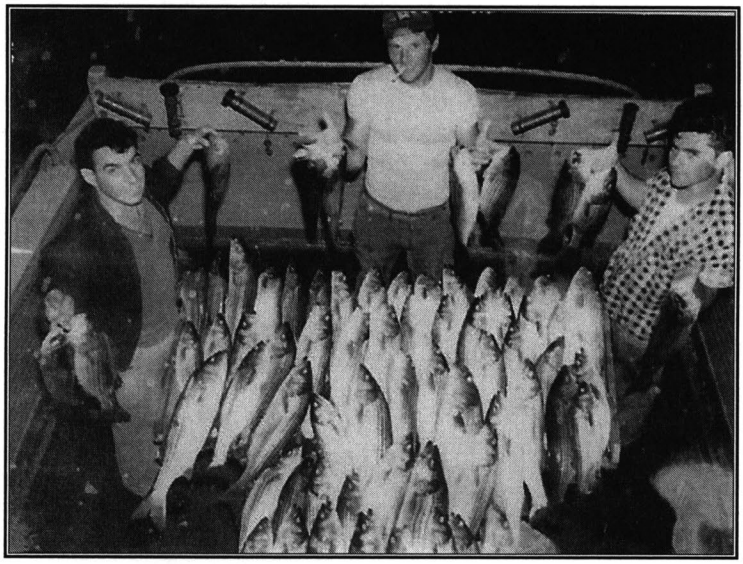
When I lived in Sheepshead Bay, I fished in Jamaica Bay mostly because I was limited to where I could go with the size boat I had at the time. Once I started workin' on the charter boats and head boats up there, I realized what was outside the bay. The bay was good for certain times of the year, and then after the fall came, the fish would migrate up and down the coast. Then they left the bays, so now I had to go outside. I caught Striped Bass, Bluefish, and Codfish. I trolled some. I did a lot of what I called diamond jiggin' for Striped Bass and Bluefish. For Codfish I would anchor and fish with clams, mostly.



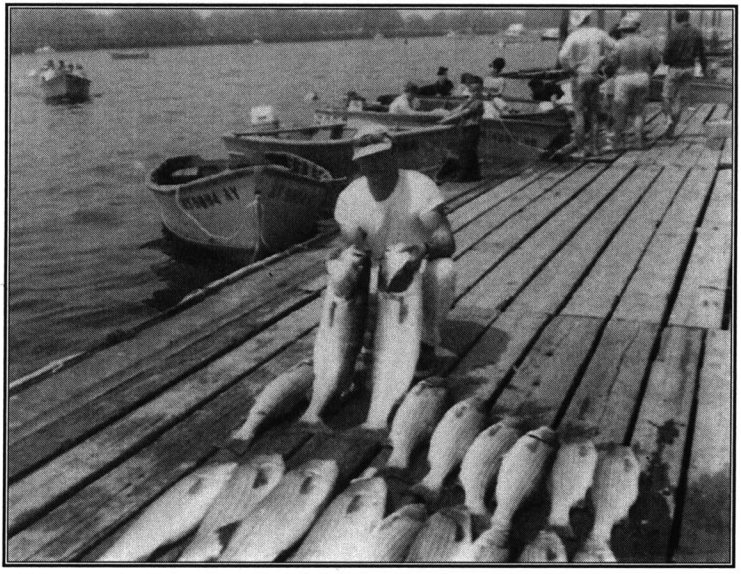
Another great day of fishing for Tommy McHale in New York.



Striped Bass

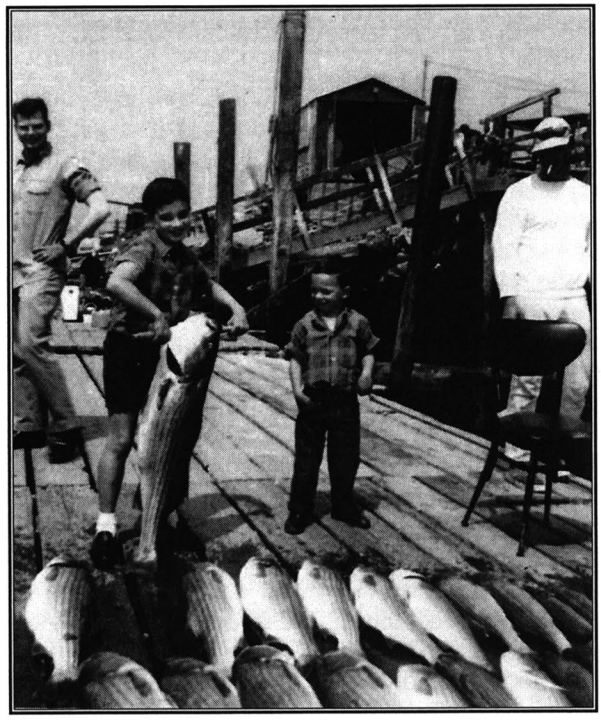


Tommy is center with bluefish



One of Tommy's first commercial boats is the grey one, second from left.

Another fine McHale catch from Sheepshead Bay.



Tommy's step-son, Albert, who today is a commercial King fisherman out of Sebastian, holds one of Tommy's Striped Bass caught at Sheepshead Bay, New York, just outside of the city.

Tommy McHale becomes a "legend" as a commercial fisherman in New York. "I worked on charter boats and head boats. Then I started fishing for myself commercially, catching Striped Bass, Bluefish or Cod."

Some had depth recorders, but at times it wasn't important, but depending on what you were fishin' for, it really didn't help you a lot. It's like everything else. Local knowledge of the bottom was more essential then because we didn't have a whole lot of electronics back then. The electronics we had then were very limited. People who had 'em were the people who had charter boats and head boats. They were the only ones who could afford that stuff when it first came out.

We fished by what they call ranges. When you found a piece of bottom, you would take a range off the beach. You would line up two things this way and two things that way, you know east and west, north and south, and that would put you on a piece of rock or a piece of bottom. That's the way all the old fisherman did it and all the old sea captains, I mean charter boat fishin' and all. They didn't have the electronics; they did it all by what they called range.

At times we would go out of sight of land, but they had binoculars, and they would get up on the top of the cabin of the boat with a pair of binoculars and look ten miles in at the beach to see if they were where they thought they had to be.

During the Second World War, they would not let anybody fish outside because of submarines. So, after the war was over, there were numerous wrecks out there because the Germans actually came up into New York Harbor or close to it and sunk a lot of ships. There were numerous wrecks out there and as these captains found 'em, they didn't have Lorans and the electronics, so they took ranges off the beach, and that's how they fished the wrecks.

Of course after the war, after nobody was fishin' out there for many years, the fish stocks filled tremendously. Everything was over abundant, fish wise, because nobody had been allowed. The draggers weren't allowed out and nobody with a net was allowed out, so when the hook and line fisherman came out there, it was like heaven. There were fish everywhere.

I did that for a long time, but I hated to leave, to tell you the truth because I was good at what I did out there. But my wife couldn't handle the cold weather, and she wanted to move to Florida.

The Verrazano Bridge in New York Harbor

I fished at the Verrazano Bridge before the bridge was there. There was an old fort up there and old piers and stuff had been there for years and years. There was a tremendous amount of fish around those piers that nobody ever fished for. I used to go up there in my little fourteen-footer and then my sixteen-footer and catch 400 or 500 pounds of fish a day, just jiggin' up and down with a diamond jig.

Once they built the Verrazano, well, fish will go to the nearest structure, you know. When they took the fort away and they built the abutment around the Verrazano Bridge, of course fish congregated around that. If you're a fisherman, you know that when they left here, this is where they went.

So I used to go up there at night mostly, and everybody dumps garbage overboard. I'd be runnin' up there at night, and I would run into solid islands of timber and stuff washin' out of the river. I couldn't even run. I'd have to stop the boat while all this stuff went around me. The water was so polluted, even though the fish were there. I would go anchor up, and every time I reeled my line in, I had to have a rag on to keep the oil off. The rag would be black. When I pulled my anchor up, the anchor rope was solid black from the oil comin' out of the river.

The Verrazano was an exception, because it had what they called, I'm trying to think of what the name of the bottom was that kept the water clear on the bottom. It wasn't a spring; it was the bottom of the river, which was there forever. A special type of bridge bottom filtered the water. I really can't think of the name of it right now.

When they built Verrazano Bridge, they put a rock base around the main structures. Well, that rock base had an opening. I used to take my boat, go inside the opening, and then there was a walkway on top of the rock base. The walkway went to the main structure, which had an elevator in it. Of course at the time, I didn't realize it. It brought people who maintained the bridge up and down, but I would drive inside of that and tie my boat to that little overpass. I would catch fish from the overpass and drop them down into the boat. (Laughs) You know, I don't know how to explain it, at the time, as young as I was, but it was great because nobody else wanted to do it and nobody else was there, and I

had it all to myself and it was great fishin'. There were tremendous amounts of fish that came through there.

Nobody else in New York, as big a city as it was, knew about this spot. But, many years after I left there, they found out about it. Anyway, what I used to do at times was go up there in the daytime. I would catch these Grass Shrimp up in Jamaica Bay and take them out there and chum these Striped Bass and I had 'em right behind the boat.

Anyway, I found out years after I left there that it got to be such a thing that some guys would anchor there on a spot. They would have somebody come out and bring 'em bait and take their fish back to the dock because they didn't want to pull the anchor. They didn't want to lose their spot. (Laughs) I couldn't believe all that, but when I was there, I had it all to myself, you know. I never saw a boat out there.

The Wave

All the giant ships came into New York Harbor, the Queen Mary, you name it, Queen Elizabeth. All those ships came in there. One night I was standing on the rocks there and one of these big ships, I forget which one it was, the Queen Mary I think, came in. I didn't realize the wake was gonna come up these rocks. When I did, it was too late for me to realize, and it washed me right off and the tide was boilin' in and out of that New York Harbor; it washed me from one end of the rocks to the other.

Somehow, I still don't know to this day, I managed to get a hold of a rock and get up because once I cleared those rocks I was gone out to sea. You know, there was nothin' else in between. You don't realize, like I was tellin' ya, I had a death grip on my pole. When I finally got up the rocks, I still had the pole in my hand. (Laughs)

But I did a lot of that kind of fishin' up there, you know, at night and in a lot of different places, and I caught a lot of fish. Nobody even knew about that fishing, what it was all about, but the fish were there. I could go out and catch 500 pounds of Striped Bass at night with a rod and reel all by myself, and I did it right well until it got so cold I couldn't handle it anymore.

Tunnel Work

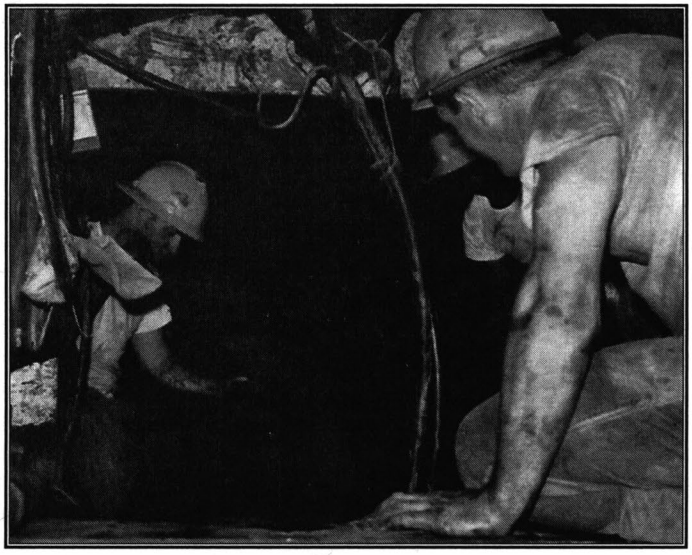
I did a lot of tunnel work, what they called "sandhog" work. In the wintertime when Cod fishin' got to be unbearable, small boats especially got to be so cold you couldn't do hand lining anymore. I had a Union book and what they called a "sandhog" card, and I worked a lot of tunnels under the Hudson River. A couple of jobs under the Hudson River were a thousand feet down. You had to go a thousand feet on the New York side to get down under the water far enough that the water wouldn't be pourin' in the tunnel.

We'd tunnel towards the Staten Island side. They also had a shaft, that's what they called them, on the Staten Island side. They were comin' towards you. And there's different bottoms. Some places they call soft ground, which is all sand as you are tunneling, and some jobs are all rock, and I didn't really care for those jobs because they were a lot of dynamite.

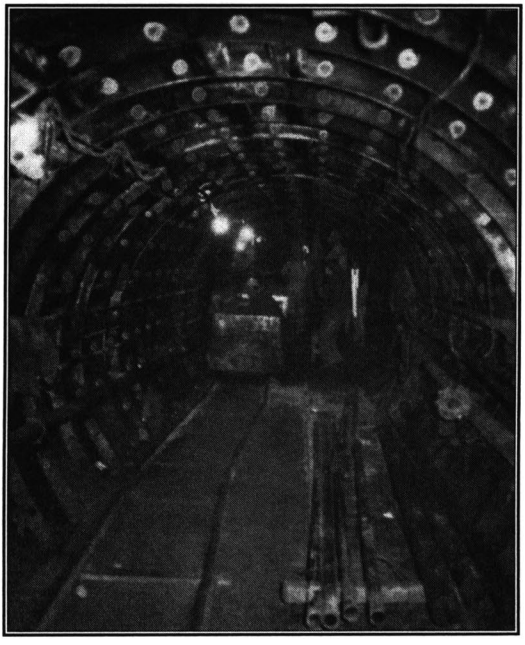
You had to drive what they call "face out" and load five hundred sticks of dynamite. They put holes in the whole face of the tunnel with air hammers; we would drill them. They would start off with a short drill, and it just kept getting longer, you know, as they pulled 'em out. When the drilling was done, you would put in the longer drill bit, and they would drill that until they got as far as they wanted to go.

Then they would load dynamite in the whole thing, and when they shoot that thing, and when you shoot five hundred sticks of dynamite a thousand feet underground, the concussion keeps going back and forth. It knocks your hat off, and of course, they want you right back up there as soon as they finish the shot. You would get up there, and there would be nothin' but smoke and all that rock dust from the dynamite, so you couldn't even see. Everything looked yellow. As they progressed, they strung lights down in the tunnel, you know.

But anyway, that's getting' away from fishin'. I only did that when I had to. As soon as I could look up the shaft and see the sun shinin', I was out of there. (Laughs)



Tommy McHale working in tunnels under New York City Harbor.



Cod Fishing

I took my sixteen-foot boat into the ocean for Cod. Believe it or not, sometimes in the middle of winter. They had, in a certain part of Sheepshead Bay, what they called a clam barge. Part of it was sunk down in the water and it had a little house on it. They would fill it with clams, and all these charter boats and head boats that were in that area would come there to get their clams for fishin'.

So we would go down there in our little boat in the mornin', and the guy who ran the barge knew us. We were always there before he got there, and we would scoop our own clams out. They had a big dip net. The draggers used to come in and load the barge, and we would scoop the clams out and sit there and open em' at three o'clock in the morning in ten degree weather. You know, freezin' to death, we would open all those clams.

Then we would go out, providin' the weather was half decent, seven or eight miles down the beach and anchor up. We would save all the shells from the clams we opened up and just throw em' all around the boat because it was all open sand bottom.

Schools of Codfish would come along, and when they would hit those shells, they would stop and mill because of all the chum. The Cod were in close, probably no more than two or three miles off the beach. These fish migrated up and down. That was what we did.

I had a car, and we used to load all those fish in the trunk. We'd go up different parts of town and open the trunk and sell all the fish out of the trunk of the car. We got top dollar. Back then, anything was better than at the market. Back then, they'd probably give us a quarter a pound for Codfish, or we could get so much per fish.

Then money was money, you know what I'm sayin? If we made a hundred dollars for the day, that was big money! Yeah, back then, you're talking forty years ago, forty-five years ago, it was good money. We sold the fish in New York, Sheepshead Bay, in the Rockaways, wherever we happened to be fishin'.

Back then, we used what they call Skimmer Clams that the draggers brought in. We used to pick 'em up at the barge, but there were also Clams in the bay, regular chowder Clams, eating Clams, and we had access to them. A lot of times, if we knew we were going out tomorrow, we'd go in the bay and dig a big bunch of those Skimmer clams, I mean the hard-shell clams, because they didn't cost us anything. They worked good, so we'd go in there and get them. It seems like a lot, but Skimmer clams were like two, fifty a bushel. We'd get a whole bushel of clams for two, fifty, and that was a lot of money. We would spend five hours digging' rather than pay two dollars and fifty cents for the bushel of clams. (Laughs)

But like I said, I fished for everything up there, Striped Bass, Bluefish, Codfish, and I was real good at it. I was good at that kind of fishin'.

Florida

Then I moved down here to Florida, and when I came down here to Fort Pierce, it was kind of a tight-knit clan down here in those days. Nobody would tell you anything; nobody would show you anything. The one thing I found out is after you're a fisherman, your skills follow you wherever you go; if you're a fisherman, you're a fisherman. I don't care where you go. It ain't gonna be long before you learn how to catch what's available.

I had it tough for a while here in the beginning, but it was in the '60s. Before the nets, this place was absolutely amazing. Fort Pierce was an amazing town, the fishin' was unbelievable. I've seen days when you go to the sea buoy one night off the Fort Pierce Inlet and catch 1,000 pounds of Kingfish. Goin' up and down Pepper Park, right here on the beach, I've caught fifteen-eighteen hundred ridin' up and down the beach. Straight line trollin' right up and down this beach right here. You know, it was incredible.

Back then, like I said, money was money. But, money's not everything when you are a fisherman, you know what I mean. It's in your blood. The money you gotta have to survive, but it's somethin' that you gotta do. That's what I did, you know. I remember when I was fishin' twenty hours a day and making five hundred dollars a week, I thought I was on top of the world and I was. (Laughs) At the time it was great. I used to call people back home and tell 'em, "My God! This place is like paradise here!" And it was.

If you talk to some of the old-timers, Sherman Merritt and guys who were here long before I was, they caught Kingfish for ten cents a pound. They caught a thousand pounds and made a hundred dollars and that was a great day. Back then it was good, and they didn't have to go anywhere to do it.

When I came down, fuel was cheap. You could go to the Gulf dock, and diesel fuel was thirty cents a gallon. If I caught one fish, I was even. (Laughs) Anything after that was profit. That's the only way you could make it. Net fisherman would bring in Mackerel by the thousands and thousands of pounds for two cents, and five cents was a big deal.

Nets

The nets weren't targeting Kingfish at that time. That all came about later. They had the OFF (Organized Fisherman of Florida) then. They started OFF shortly after I was here, started by Steve Lowe, Sherman Merritt, Ish Taylor, and a bunch of old-time fisherman because the nets

were tryin' to get into King fishin', so they started the OFF. The hand liners started OFF to keep the nets out, which they did.

They did a good job of it at first, but what happened was they were also not allowed to use power for the nets. It was a law they all got passed. So that really stopped the nets from making tremendous catches of Kingfish.

I, myself, went to a meeting with Gene Hayes, Roger Farlow, and Tony Stormant and all the other old-time fisherman. The boats wanted to use power rigs. I always figured they knew a lot more than I did, and they had a meeting saying that they wanted to do away with the power law, but they were not going to target Kingfish. The power rigs would only target Spanish Mackerel.

They said, "We won't target the Kingfish." The net fishermen are saying this. If you vote our way, let us use power, we won't bother the Kingfish; we just want it for Spanish Mackerel. So those guys listened to that, and they went along with it considering this was going to be a good faith deal.

The first thing the nets did was head for the Kingfish, and that was the end of us really. I mean, 50,000-pound catches of Kingfish a trip. The pressure was too much. The fish couldn't handle it. Probably ninety percent of the fish are within twelve miles of the beach, and with the spotter airplanes, the fish didn't stand a chance.

I mean, the way we were doin' it, you know, the fish would bite in the morning. Then you would still mark them solid, and they wouldn't bite. Out of all the fish that were there, there were only so many stupid ones that would bite and the rest of them, they smartened up. Fish are not stupid, you know, and then they might bite again in the afternoon.

Hand line King Mackerel fishing conserves the fish. There's no way hand liners could decimate the stock. There is absolutely no way because nature takes care of them. I mean a lot of things are in their favor when you fish the way we fish. The water has to be right; you couldn't have muddy water. You had to find 'em. You didn't have airplanes to find your fish. Maybe the whole fleet would fish in one little area.

Now, when the nets and the airplane come around, they showed me that there were fish in places that we wouldn't even like up on the sand. You'd see them settin' a net over here and over there.

The whole hand line fleet was right in one area. There were fish goin' up and down the coast year after year, and we never even realized they were there. The migratory route of these fish is run by the younger fish. The younger fish follow the older fish down, and that's how they learn to migrate.

But, when you break up the migratory route, like the nets did, after that it's all hit and miss. Everything has changed. You used to be able to figure out fish to the day as to where they were goin' to be, not today. It's not that way now.

With the nets, there were so many fish wasted. I saw so much waste. When the net fisherman came, at first they didn't have the Kingfish nets; they had Mackerel nets.

Well, a net's a net. It's made to fit a certain size fish. So they would set the net around a big bunch of Kingfish. The fish that fit in the net they caught, but all the big fish in the net drowned, and laid on the bottom. I used to watch 'em pull the nets over the rollers, and all the big fish were just fallin' back in the water because they were just hung by a piece of nose or something, and they didn't care; they just took the money and ran. It was terrible. Big money was made, but there was too much waste, too much waste.

I know what they did. I saw what they did. I was here through the whole thing, and it was terrible. After the circle nets were outlawed for King Mackerel, then came the drift nets which were just as devastating, if not more.

The drift nets worked mostly in the summertime. After so many years, they finally realized by the tagging program that we had a summer stock of fish that lived here. The migratory fish came and went, but there was a stock of fish that lived here all the time.

They started drift netting. We found out by what they were doin' that the fish would come in shore at night to feed. We didn't realize what was goin' on. We were hand linin' fish and would go offshore in the morning. It might be ten o'clock before the fish started bitin'. Well, those fish came inshore at night. They fed up, and then they slowly worked their way onto the offshore bar, the ninety-foot drop. Then we would start catching the fish late in the day out there a lot of times.

But those nets would go out there at night inshore, north of 12 and places like that, and catch 15,000 to 18,000 pounds. A lot of those fish were tagged. At first, they were turning in all these tags before they realized they were shootin' themselves in the foot. So they stopped turnin' the tags in because, you know, this was tellin' 'em they were catching all the summer stock of fish that lived in this area.

We'd catch nothing. There's no way you can go over the same grounds that the drift nets had been over all night and catch anything. What they didn't catch, they ran off. It didn't matter if it was legal or illegal. They did it any way they could.

It was a terrible time to live through because I lived through the same thing up north when the nets showed up there. The nets fished off Pogies for years, Bunkers. When they started gettin' scarce, they started goin' for the food fish, Striped Bass, Bluefish.

And I'd be out there catchin' fish, and they'd come along and set the net right around me, circle my whole boat. I only had a small boat then. I had to tilt the motor up, push myself over the net, and watch them bail thousands of pounds of fish out of the net into their boat. I might catch 500. They'd catch 20,000.

I was right on top of the fish. They would realize I was on top of 'em. They just got away with that for so long, and then of course they fished them out, too.

Then it got hard for everybody, not only the few hand line fishermen like myself, but also the charter boats and the head boats up there; that was their livelihood, too. The big nets decimated fishing up North, and they did the same thing down here. They took the money and ran. Once the fish were wiped out, they disappeared. Most of these fishermen here came from the West Coast of Florida. Once they decimated the stock there, they came here and decimated this stock.

Of course, a lot of them are out of business today. They took the money and ran, but it was a crime. It was horrible to see it, you know, it really was.

The Co-op

It was great here before the nets. I started fishin' for different fish houses. Then the Co-op opened up a fish house, owned and run by hand line King Mackerel fishermen. Everything immediately changed. The prices immediately got good.

When you've got control of the fish, you can name your price with Fulton Market in New York which buys most of the Kingfish. They have to deal with you, and they are finally paying you what you deserve. They didn't like that much, but the quality of the fish was good, and the Co-op paid really good money for fish.

Everything you caught was worth somethin', and they were smart. If the price was too low in New York, they'd take a chance and put the fish in the freezer. I've done that many times. You could put 10,000 pounds a week in the freezer and still sell some. Then they would sell 'em in the summertime, and we got a really good price for 'em. It really worked well. It just showed you what fish were worth. I mean, here it is twenty to thirty years later, and we ain't getting a whole lot more then we were gettin' back then. I was gettin' a dollar, ten in the Co-op for Kingfish and I was catchin' 2,000 to 3,500 pounds a day and I would bitch (Laughs) because I thought it was too low to be makin two thousand dollars a day, but that's the mentality of fishermen.

Drift Nets

We always think we're not getting' what we deserve. That's what broke my heart when the nets showed up here. I would go out this inlet, and I'd have to run five miles out of my way to get around the drift nets just to get to the offshore bar. I would go out and struggle for a few hundred pounds of fish and came back to the dock, and they were there with thousands of pounds of fish. The fish house was payin' them the same money they were payin' you.

No ice; the fish just lay in the net all day. It took 'em all day to pick 'em out; the fish were like rags. It was garbage. I don't know who ate 'em. (Laughs) I don't know where they went. I don't have a clue, but our fish were iced, hard as a rock, beautiful fish. They were payin' us the same price.

Fulton Fish Market – New York City

I had nothin' but bad dealings with the Fulton Market. It was run by the Mafia mostly.

I fished at night. I was a lone fisherman. I came in and packed my own fish. There was a barge on the water that had a big ice machine and cooler, and I had a key. I would come in and weigh my own fish. Just a regular fish dealer owned the barge. I had to chop my own ice. I'd come in the middle of the night with 400 to 500 pounds of fish. Then I'd have to take a big piece of ice and put it in the big ice choppin' machine. I would weigh my fish, pack 'em in ice, and put 'em in the cooler. I knew exactly what was in those boxes.

Every time I got my check, it was short, you know. So after a while, it started getting to me. There was always 10 pounds short in every box of fish they shipped. 50 pounds short for every 500 pounds.

So, anyway, one time I called up there to New York. I said, "You know, every time I ship you guys fish, it's never right. I know it's right because I weighed 'em and packed 'em myself."

And so the guy said to me, "Look-it, don't complain. You just take what you can get, and don't give us any trouble."

Well, I wasn't that way. I kept givin' him a hard time, you know. All of a sudden, one time I shipped up 500 pounds of fish. I'm waitin' for my check. No check, so this is what they were trying to tell me. Either you take what you get (Laughs) or you don't get nothin'. I was kind of a renegade about that thing.

There were several Blue Ribbon fish markets. Everybody in Fulton had a different Blue Ribbon. They had guys who would come down in a big Cadillac wearin' suits. You would drive up to the barge with your fish to unload, and he would be standin' there with cash money, you know, sayin', "We're gonna give ya…"

And I'd say, "I don't want your money! I ship 'em to who I want to ship them to."

And they hated me. (Laughs) I figured one of these days I'm gonna wind up dead, you know, because who am I? I am a fisherman and these guys were the Mafia. Every truck that went to New York had to pay the Mafia X amount of dollars before the truck was unloaded. Every dragger had piers down there in New York Harbor for the offshore boats. They could not unload any fish off those boats until they paid their money. And that's the way it was.

The Mafia had their own stands down there at Fulton Fish Market, and they went through every box of every truck that came in and took one or two fish out of the box that went to their store. They sold those, you know. First, the truck driver had to pay to unload the truck, and then they took a fish out of every box, which they made more money on. That's the way it worked. They had a hand in everything. They probably still do. That's what you had to put up with up there.

The New York City Aquarium

One time, they wanted Striped Bass alive to put in their tanks, so they offered me so much per fish. I don't remember what it was, and they gave me this big cart that I had to tow to the fish grounds, and as I caught each fish, I had to put it in this cart. It was big, screened on the bottom, and it had a door on top. I'd catch a fish and throw 'im in there, and when I was done, I had to tow it back to the dock. They would come down with a truck that had a big live well in the back, and they would transfer the fish to that and take 'em to the New York Aquarium.

It was interesting because I used to go over there to the New York Aquarium and watch them grow and see how they fed them. You would see what was goin' on when you were fishin', like you would get a bite, and all of a sudden he wasn't there. You'd say, "What the heck is this?" And then when you fed them in the tank, you could see where the fish would suck up the bait. You know, if he didn't want it, it came out just as fast. They just blew it back out again. I assume a lot of the fish do the same thing, but it all happened so fast.

The Museum of Natural History

Well, early on when I fished in Central Park as a kid, inside the Museum of Natural History, they had this big pond with all these exotic goldfish. I'd go fishin' in Central Park, and I would catch these Perch, and I would wrap them in wet newspaper and put 'em in my pocket and on the way home, I would go into the museum. I would let the Perch go in the pond with all their exotic fish. I guess they never figured out how they got there, the Perch from Central Park. Sometimes, I'd sneak in a big Catfish. I guess they could never figure out how they got there.

I fished in a couple of lakes in Central Park, Castle Lake, Rowboat Lake, they called 'em. At Rowboat Lake they rented boats, and at Castle Lake they had a big castle on top of all these rocks. I always climbed down in places that nobody else would think of goin' because you know, that is where ya get a bite, where there's no competition. It's the same here.

The Good Life

You know, fishin' is the good life. You know that. It's somethin' in your blood. It's not the money; money is only secondary, or at least it always was to me. Money was somethin' that you had to have to exist.

I'd rather go out there and have a good day fishin on the water. I don't care how long it took or how hard it was, but back then it was competition between all hand line fishermen. Everybody lied. Nobody was catchin' nothin', but everybody came in with a thousand pounds (Laughs), you know, and that's the way it was.

We had a CB radio and the old Lorans, the A Lorans, as they called 'em then. Those things were horrible. You had to line up and get a bite. You had to line up these humps before you got a reading on where you were.

Back then, a lot of guys went fishin' and made money because you didn't have to know all that much. There was enough so that even somebody who didn't know anything could catch enough to make a day of it. You could accidentally stumble into a bunch of fish because there were bunches of fish everywhere. You didn't have to know a whole lot about it. If you did, though, that was a lot better for you.

Big Catches

I guess 1,500 to 1,800 up to 2,500 pounds were my biggest catches. That was one day. In those days they would call a six-hour bite or five-hour bite. It was steady, just line to line to line, just back and forth. You were in the middle of winter and it would be freezin', but the sweat would be runnin' down. Just pull, pull, pull and in those days, it was shorter lines. Everything was short. You know, we'd have two paravanes, one out each side of the stern on the two outriggers. We didn't have Porpoises and Barracudas, so on the two outriggers we didn't even pull them in very far and the fish come up slidin' on top. We were too busy just pullin' the short lines thirty feet.

We could pull a fish, dehook 'em, throw 'em back, knock the cannon ball overboard. We didn't even have to think about it. If there was a fish on the other line, you knew it. All spoon fish. And we'd pull that fish in and dehook him and throw the line back in, and we automatically went to the other one. Every once in a while we'd look out there and see a fish on the outrigger slidin'. We'd pull him in.

Fish follow other fish that are hooked. I can tell you that for a fact because if I was pullin' the fish on the bug, I could tell you exactly where the paravane was comin' up as soon as the fish passed it because when there's a lot of fish, there's ten fish behind every fish you bring up to the boat.

We'd start in a circle catchin' the fish, and the tide was runnin'. We might drift five miles circling and never lose the fish. They'd just follow the boat as it circled right down the current.

If we pulled all of our lines out of the water, we were in trouble. When I've done that, I've seen the box was full and everything's jumpin' on the floor, so I'd say, "Man, I gotta stop and pack these fish in."

I'd pull my lines in and get everything straight, and throw my lines back in the water. Now I can't get a bite, because I lost 'em. Now I gotta start over, find 'em and, get 'em worked up again.

The only time fish get stupid is when there's a lot of competition in the water. They want to get their bait before others do. When you're pullin' the fish, they're all runnin' up there, and whatever else is out there, they want to nail it right now.

Fishing Today

Now the way fishin' is today, it's a whole different story. When fish get scarce, they take the prime spots; that's why I go down to that wreck. If I don't catch any initially, I know at the next rock I might get a bite. Before we were in-between rocks, we could get bites, but now, you have to go from spot to spot because when the fish get scarce, they take over the prime spots. They take the prime rocks, and they take over prime spots. You have to go from rock to rock to get a bite and then they get cute when there's no competition.

Now it's up to you to out-fox 'em, which isn't always that easy. Sometimes you have to sit there and sit there and work 'em up. Once you got 'em goin', sometimes they start to get careless. It's not that easy when they are scarce, but when there's a lot of fish like there used to be, then it's the only time they get stupid, when there is competition.

Fish are smart, they really are. You might catch six fish on this rock; then you can't get another bite because they wise up. You get away from there and come back a half hour later, and you catch five more fish on the same rock. Then they wise up again and get cute. That's the way it is. They are not stupid.

You gotta change your color and your depth. You slow the boat down, and you catch three right away. They wise up to that. You put the long cable on, and you catch two more, and then they wise up to that. That's the way they are.

Biggest Kingfish

The biggest Kingfish I caught was a sixty-eight-pounder a couple of years ago. He was probably at least seventy when I caught him. I couldn't fit him in the slaughter box. I just threw him on the side and iced him on the side of the boat. I couldn't get him in. (Laughs)

You know the funny thing about that was I've caught fifty-pounders, I think up to sixty pounds inshore here, one of those smoker fish. Well, nobody could catch those big fish. I caught 'em inshore here. Anyway, that is a whole different story.

But this day I was out there on the offshore bar and I was jerkin' a bug. I got this bite, and you know sometimes you can tell by the weight that this is heavy. I started him in on my reel, which would pull anything, and I pulled him a little ways. He wouldn't come anymore, so I let him back down and then a few minutes later I tried again, but he wouldn't come. He came so far and he stopped.

I said, this is a piece of garbage. I don't want him anyway. I thought it was an Amberjack or shark or some junk. Anyway, I just dragged him around. This is the day before the big Kingfish tournament they were havin' here.

Finally, I pulled this thing up. When he popped out of the water, the thing was like a giant. I gaffed him, and there was a tournament boat out there practicing right along side of me.

He was yelling, "Look at that!"

I couldn't get this thing over the stern. I just about dropped him down and dropped him in the back of the boat.

George was sayin' on the radio, "I caught a thirty-pounder, and he almost killed me."

I said, "Yeah, I got a fifty-pounder." I thought, fifty pounds. I thought I was exaggerating. He was sixty-eight pounds.

Said to myself, "What a shame. I'm probably gonna get a dollar a pound. Tomorrow this fish is worth about $30,000 to $40,000." (Laughs)

I swear to God, I would have rather seen one of them catch him than me. Really. Because it wasn't enough money. At the fish house, they packed him in the box, and they had to cut out the back of the box because he stuck so far out of the box. (Laughs).

I probably never would have got him, but he swallowed the damn bug all the way down in the gut, and I guess that slowed him down. But that slowed him way down. It really did.

Biggest Wahoo? I think you probably caught bigger Wahoo than I have. I caught 'em in the forties. I never really caught anything bigger than that.

But see I fish a lot different. I use monofilament almost strictly, and we had many days where my outrigger just went BONG! You know, and it's gone. I mean with a rod and reel you can wear those fish down, but it's hard the way we fish to get anything bigger than that in the boat.

I probably never would have got him if he hadn't swallowed the bug, but I have caught fifty and sixty-pounders right here along the beach fishin'.

Well, you know when I fished down this beach years ago, same thing used to happen to me. I used to have fish pop my lines left and right. It'd make me cry.

I'd say, "What the hell was it?" I'd troll down that beach. I'd have two Kingfish on at once and they'd be thirty or forty-pounds apiece, you know, and all of a sudden, I'd lose one. POW! And everything was gone.

And when the guy on *African Queen* started fishin' down there with plugs, Stan Bloom, he was catchin' fifty to sixty-pounders regularly. Showed you what was there, but our tackles couldn't handle it. You need rod and reel.

Those big fish, which were the breedin' stock of fish, the big fish on the beach, which most of the fisherman couldn't catch, was the way it should have been, because that was the brood stock. I'd go down to that beach and see a thousand fish, forty-pounders, jumpin', and you couldn't hardly get a bite out of 'em which is the way it should have been. You would have liked to have caught 'em, but you couldn't.

This one guy started that drift net fishin' down there on the beach. He was catchin' thirty or forty-pound fish. You would go in Hudgins Fish House cooler, and they would look like cord wood stacked up. They didn't have boxes or nothin' to fit 'em in. They just piled 'em up in the cooler right up to the ceiling, these big, giant Kingfish.

That's what really hurt. They caught 'em for nothin'. That wasn't even the worst part. They got very little for the Kingfish. That was the beginning of the end.

A Waterspout

I lost my canopy and boat windows. One of them came through my boat and it ain't nowhere to be, I'll tell you. (Laughs) When it took my canopy, I thought that was the end of me. I stood back there and just watched everything crumble around me. I mean, all the structure on the boat like match sticks; everything is just disintegrating. Just like a tornado. You hear all this loud noise, and you look around and see everything, and your structure and everything just being torn apart and disappearing. My windows blew out and took off; it was just incredible.

I was up at the wheel. I was runnin' the boat, tryin' to get in and when that one hit me. I had been near 'em a couple of times, but this particular one, I didn't see it comin' because I was headin' towards the beach.

I saw this little rain squall develop into the southwest, and I didn't really think much of it. It kept gettin' bigger and bigger, and it grew into a monster and came directly out in the ocean. It was a storm.

When I got to the beach all the trees on the beach were layin' down. It blew all the overhead roof off Black's Fish House.

I knew there had to be at least seventy-mile-per-hour winds when I was out there because the ocean went from flat calm to what looked like ten-foot seas. I was in a bad way because when it blew my canopy off, my outriggers fell in the water. They were attached to the boat. Now they were under the boat. All the structure from the canopy was in on top of me, and I couldn't run the boat because I could hear the outriggers

bangin' on the prop. I had to take the boat out of gear. The minute I did that, it turned sideways into the seas.

Now I had to crawl out from under all this stuff and try pull all that stuff back in the boat so I could turn the boat into the wind and at least jog into the wind. When I finally did get all that stuff back in the boat somehow or another, the wind was blowin' so hard, I couldn't get the boat around. I was at full throttle and the boat was goin' nowhere. I couldn't get it into the wind. It was just blowin' so hard that I could not turn that boat.

I finally did. For a while, it was just layin' on its side and the water was comin' in. It was crashin' in the boat and fillin' up the boat. I was tryin' to pull all this stuff back up and I had to crawl back under what was left of the canopy and all the stuff that had collapsed in on top of the boat to get back to the wheel.

Meanwhile, I put out a distress call for the Coast Guard. Well, they came out, but they couldn't find me because they couldn't see this far (Tommy held his hand in front of his face) in between the wind, the rain, and all the squall and lightnin'. They finally caught up with me, but by that time the storm was just startin' to go by.

What I always remembered was the Coast Guard boat pullin' up to me and sayin' to me, "Man. It looks like a bomb went off in that boat."

It was nothin' but just sticks; everything was demolished. It was a waterspout that came right over top of me. I could just see my fish box and windows and everything disappear. It was so fast. It just sucked everything out of the boat.

I had two pumps, you know, but the way the water was, they just couldn't keep up. Once I had to take it out of gear, it went broadside. Now the waves were just comin' in. While I was just tryin' to get the boat around, it was just fillin' up the boat with water. If I went over, I would have had all this stuff wrapped up in my wheel, and I was in trouble. I took it out of gear, even though I didn't want to.

Truthfully, in that particular waterspout, I thought that was the end.

Fishing Widows

The fishin's what ruined my life. It was my life, but it ruined my life. It has happened to many fishermen before me and probably will happen down the line.

I came down to Florida with five hundred dollars in my pocket and what I know and went on from there. I fished twenty hours a day and made good money doing what I was doing. It was only because I was puttin' the hours in.

I was never what you'd call a rough-water person. I was never a true fisherman in the sense that there were a lot of things I could have done that I didn't do, but I just put the hours in.

I learned how to catch Kingfish, but it ruined my life in the long run. I never took the time out to do what I was supposed to, and I only blame myself. I don't blame it on my wife but, I thought I was doing what I was supposed to do, which is work.

That's what I thought I was supposed to do, work and make more which was fine with me because I was happy at what I was doin'. But she wasn't, which I didn't realize. I thought she had everything she wanted. She had a nice house and she had all the money she wanted. She bought what she wanted and she did what she wanted. I thought everything was great, but in the back of her mind, it wasn't.

I didn't realize I should have taken time to go on vacations when fishin' was slow. Everybody else was on vacation, but I was still out there fishin', and it destroyed my life.

I really loved her. I was really in love with her. If she had left me twenty years ago when I was younger, I might have been able to bounce back, but I doubt it, (Laughs), you know. So, anyway, I've never been able to come back.

A lot of wives get tired of fellas fishin' all the time. As I said, I'm not the only one. There's a lot of people, but it destroyed me.

My life was so complete. I could have retired tomorrow and lived comfortably. And on top of that, for thirty-five years, I was home every night. I didn't drink or smoke, I didn't do any of that. I was in the best shape of anybody. I ate nothing but health food for thirty-five years. I never drank liquor or coffee. I went to the health food store and got everything we ate. That's the way we lived. I was in the best shape and in the best health. Mentally I was good and thought I was doing everything right, but sometimes it just doesn't work out that way.

Fishin's a hard life. It's hard on the wives. We had the marshes up there in New York that we fished. They used to call the wives the *Grass Widows* because they never saw their husbands. They were always out in the marshes somewhere fishin'. I did the same thing here.

Fishin's a hard life for a woman, you know. For the man it's good. You're a fisherman and you like the water and the ocean. It's in your blood, it's on your mind, and that's all you know and all you want to know. You don't turn around and look back.

Women, it's a whole other ball game for them. It gets to a point where they begin to realize, I'm fifty now and I still haven't done anything. You know what I'm sayin'? I'm still sittin' here waitin' for you to come home and it's not good.

And they're right. I'm not condemning them; they're right.

Fishing Tournaments

Well, the way it used to be was they were only allowed to bring in one fish. If they caught a twenty-pound fish, they kept him and then when they caught a thirty-pound fish, they threw the twenty-pound fish back in

the water. I understand now that they're allowed to bring all the fish to the dock and just weigh the biggest one, but before that there was a lot of waste that went on. Then when they went out and practiced on 'em, I guess they probably released 'em alive.

I imagine when there are two hundred boats in the tournament, then you got so many people at the time, they can only bring in so many fish per person, a lot of fish go back overboard dead. They're the big fish, the spawnin' fish, so it can be a big waste.

Conserving Small Kingfish

Our fish have to be twenty-four inches long. The way I did do it, I have a small gaff with a small hook on it. I take that gaff and unhook the hook. Just turn, reverse the hook, and usually it would fall back out into the water. That way I would seldom harm them.

A lot of fisherman grabbed 'em, and you can hurt a fish pretty badly when you're tryin' to unhook them. I guess some guys de-hook 'em in the box and then maybe throw 'em overboard, but that's a lot of trauma on the fish.

The Tiller

I still do it the way I always did it with the tiller bar. If the steering isn't too loose, it isn't too bad. I don't have to work too hard to steer. If you have real loose steering, the minute you get off the tiller bar, you have to make all those steering adjustments. By watching your machine, I watch the Loran, and which way you drift and which way the tides pushin' you, you get back on the number pretty quickly.

A lot of people today like the hydraulics steering because wherever you put it, that's where it stays, and it holds itself until you want to come out of the circle, or adjust it a little bit; it's easy. You don't have to work so hard on that tiller bar.

Of course, this very leg that's hurtin' me, I had a big tumor taken out of it which I think is from pushin' on that tiller bar for so many years in that one spot. It's right there where I push on the tiller.

Wear and Tear on the Fisherman

Out fishin', you're on your feet for hours and hours at a time. When I fished hard, I fished hard. I fished twenty hours a day; I mean (Laughs) I was up at two in the morning, three o'clock goin' out for bait and then back in with the bait and jumpin' in the other boat. Then I was goin' out on the grounds at the crack of dawn and not comin' back to the inlet until black dark. It was a lot of hours. Then when you're workin' the bug, you stay on your feet the whole time. That's why so many fishermen, like

Roger and Frankie Breig, their knees are gone and they had them replaced. So many hours.

And handlin' a lot of fish, it's all double the work. Your handlin' fish, the same fish, three times at least. When you catch 'em, then you put 'em in the slaughter box and you have to gut 'em after a little while and ice 'em. Then you get back to the dock, and you have to unload them. You handle the same fish so many times in one day, and when you got a lot of fish, it's a lot of work.

But, of course it was enjoyable work. That's what I wanted. I always was a fisherman. An old-timer once told me "happiness is bites." (Laughs)

The other old saying they used to say was, the fish said, "You gotta go where I am and catch me while I'm there." That is a true statement. (Laughs)

Two Lines

Most boats fish three lines for Kingfish. I fish two. I've always done that, especially with this boat. My boat kinda narrows in back, and I circle pretty tight. Any more lines I'd wind up pickin' up the other line. A center line is too close. I have the other line rigged now, but I can't get myself to use it, to put it in water. I got it rigged now, but I still fish just two lines.

Hitting the Jetty

Well, everybody to this day still thinks I'm lying about it, but this is the way it really happened. There was a bunch of boats goin' out the inlet. I was in all the wakes and everything, so I pulled over close to the north jetty and I hooked it up, wide open, and I was runnin' right down along the jetty. Then the darned Clevis pin came out and broke in my steering, and when the boat hooked like it did, it threw me right out of the seat.

With my boat, if I let go of that steering it just whips right around. It didn't have any steering, and it just threw me on the floor. By the time I jumped up, I was climbin' the rocks. I was on my way up over the jetty. I was up on the rocks.

I didn't know there was a ground sea that morning, and was gettin' pretty close to the end when I hit. A big wave came and put the boat right on its side I was just ready to jump out. I was holdin' on, and the boat up righted. The next big wave came in and washed it off the rocks.

The lights were on for the boat pumps, so I thought I was sinkin'. I figured as hard as I hit it, I had a hole in the boat, but actually what happened was the pumps from the jolt had broken loose out of their settings and the switches were on. I thought they were pumpin' water, but they really weren't.

I did have some damage on the side above the water line, and the keel had some damage. It was a wooden keel, but I didn't sustain that much damage for as hard as I hit that solid rock.

I can't remember the name of the other King fisherman who towed me back to the dock. Let's see, I think it was Ronnie Krusis that pulled me off. Right. I was thinkin' of another guy that use to fish, but I think it was Ronnie.

Roger's Fire

I towed in plenty of boats. The only one sinking, and somebody got there first, was Roger Farlow's boat. It caught on fire. I was about two miles from him, and he called me and said he was on fire. I turned around and saw the flames back there. By the time I got my gear in the boat and took off to get to Roger, he had jumped overboard because the flames had gotten bad.

Jimmy Ryan got there before I did and took him out of the water. There was no way anyone could get near that boat. I mean, all I had was a small fire extinguisher, and I couldn't get near it. That boat burned furiously. I guess diesel fuel or somethin' was feedin' the fire. By the time the Coast Guard got there, it was right down to almost the water line; there was nothin' left.

I saw one burn in Jupiter when I was down there once. Most of the time in those situations, you really don't have the stuff to help. You can help the people, but you can't really do anything about saving their boats.

The Jupiter Inlet

I've had a lot of bad trips in and out of Jupiter Inlet, especially comin' in at night. When it's real rough, that inlet is always bad; it's never stable. Sometimes you had to come on and run along the beach for a half a mile before you could go out, and you'd be draggin' the bottom. People are standin' in the water there and you're goin' by 'em. And you feel the boat draggin' and a good southeast wind.

You say, "Boy, if the engine quits now, if the boat gets stuck here, I'm goin' right on the beach." You know, comin' in that Jupiter inlet at night, they had no lights on the jetty, so you couldn't see them until you were on top of them.

You know, when you're younger and all, you can do all those things. It doesn't bother you as much. You seem to have some kind of survival skills that get you through those things.

Smugglers

I've seen the smugglers run by me at night in the speed boats with no lights on. I'd see 'em tearin' down the ocean. A couple of times they

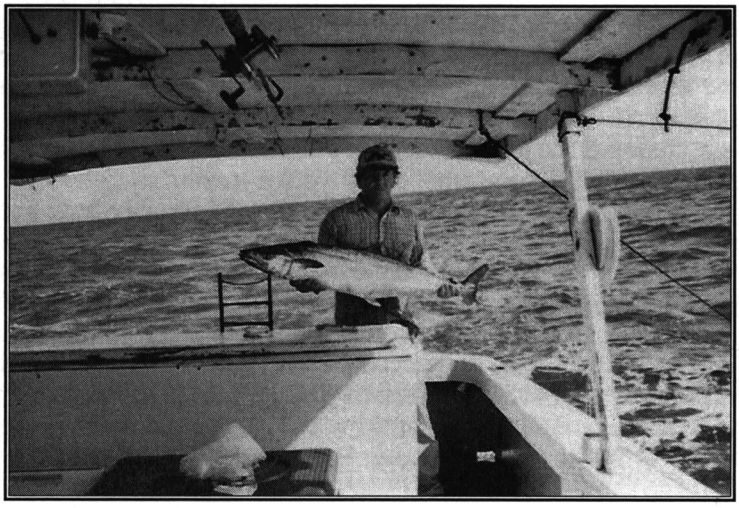
missed me, but not by much. (Laughs) I assume they saw me, but they acted like they didn't. They came so close, but it's always a shock when you see 'em come out of nowhere speedin' by ya.

But I actually never really saw anybody passing anything or transportin' anything like that, but a lot of people have. Oh yeah, this was the inlet they all used at that time. I've been stopped so many times by Customs; it was unbearable, especially if you'd be runnin' to the fishin' ground. They're bitin' somewhere and you're runnin' to get there. Then they stop you and it's a half an hour. They bang into your boat and then get out and go through the whole boat. They write up a big ticket and keep you there a half hour, at least, or more while you're dyin' to get to the fish. (Laughs)

But that's what you had to put up with. A lot of it was ridiculous because they knew I kept my boat right next to the Coast Guard station for years but they would stop me every other day. It wasn't like I was a strange boat or somethin'. They saw me comin' and goin' all the time.

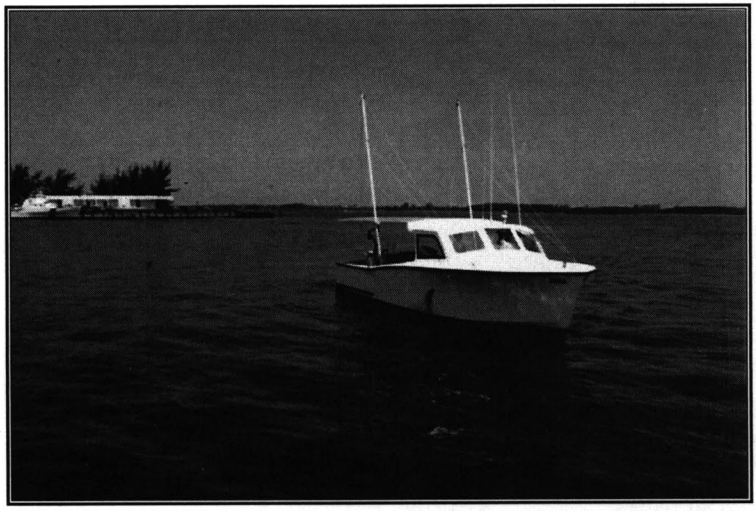
The End of King Fishing

I'm sure everybody told you the same thing. A lot of people put it to pollution and bein' part of the problem which I don't doubt it is. But of course, the big nets is what really broke up the migratory routes of the Kingfish and nearly ruined King fishing all together.

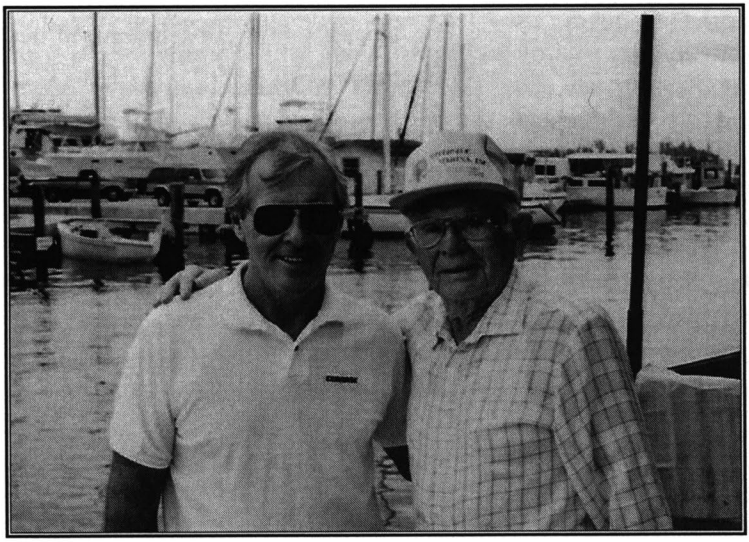


Tommy holding a large Kingfish while fishing off Fort Pierce.

Tommy unloading a catch at the fish house.



Tommy's boat the *Zora*. His son, Albert, is fishing this boat today out of Sebastian, Florida.



Tommy McHale and Cleve Lewis. Cleve told me the biggest big fish story of this book.

Most of my interviews with Tommy McHale took place in the Jetty Lounge, a popular bar on South Beach in Fort Pierce. After Tommy's wife left him, he spent a lot of time there. The divorce crushed him. He never got over it. He got a DUI and had several small wrecks with his car. He began to have seizures or blackouts. The doctors thought he had a brain tumor.

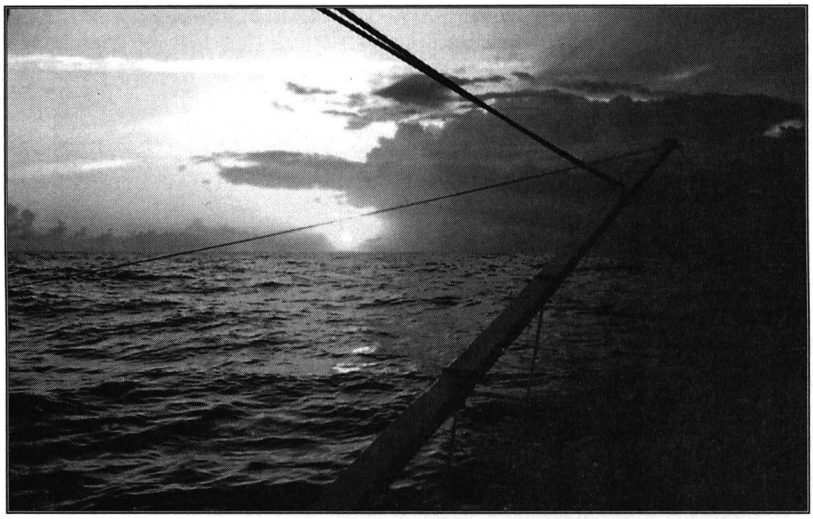
In the fall of 2004 his stepson drove him to Jacksonville for brain surgery. Tommy never recovered from the surgery. He died in 2004. The doctors found no tumor and now believe that Tommy had an aneurysm. His body was cremated and at Tommy's request, the ashes were spread on the fishing grounds between Sebastian and Fort Pierce. A service was held for Tommy on a head boat in Sebastian, where Tommy's son lives and commercial fishes.

It was a clear spring day on the Indian River. A northeast breeze was blowing and Porpoise and sea birds played around the boat. Fishermen from up and down the Florida coast came. They told Tommy McHale fishing stories. There were many. Most had to do with Tommy complaining about poor fishing, and then showing up at the dock with a boatload of fish, more than anyone else.

Jack Albinson told of driving to Jupiter with Tommy for the spring run of fish. They would leave their boats in Jupiter and drive down each morning to go fishing. Jack finally got tired of Tommy talking about fishing all of the time and said, "Tommy, if you can't talk about anything but fishing, don't say anything."

Jack said that, and Tommy never said another word on that trip to Jupiter. Tommy McHale lived to fish.

One Sebastian fisherman, a part-time preacher, played the fiddle. Another played the guitar. They accompanied the fishermen as they sang "Amazing Grace." It was a fine tribute to a great fisherman.



Chapter Seven
The Author

Hand line commercial King Mackerel fishermen have the best jobs in the world. Make no mistake; I am not one of the greats, I am a relative newcomer to the business. I am a schoolteacher who fishes during vacations. My grandfather was a farmer and schoolteacher. I always liked that combination. So when I moved from Indiana to Fort Pierce in 1971 to assume a teaching position, I decided I wanted to commercial fish to supplement my teaching income. Hand line King Mackerel fishing looked like the most exciting and sporting form of commercial fishing. I purchased my boat in 1982 from an old-timer named Sherman Merritt.

Sherman Merritt

Sherman Merritt was one of the first to make a living as a hand line King Mackerel fisherman out of Fort Pierce, Florida. In fact, the biggest big Kingfish story I ever heard was told by Sherman Merritt, but more about that later.

Sherman's father was the St. Lucie County Sheriff who captured the notorious Ashley gang on the Wabasso Bridge in Sebastian, Florida, in 1929. The entire gang died in a shootout with Sheriff Merritt and his deputies on the Wabasso Bridge. Apparently, there was a question as to whether they died before or after they were handcuffed.

While I was negotiating the purchase of my boat from Sherman, I asked him if his father was the sheriff who captured the famous Ashley

gang. Sherman stopped what he was doing, looked me in the eye, and said, "Yes, he was, but it was the *infamous* Ashley gang."

I let the conversation drop there. I was negotiating for the purchase of his vessel.

The author's commercial Kingfish boat, the *Miss Fannie*, originally owned by Sherman Merritt

My boat is a twenty-four-foot Stapleton. Al Tyrrell and Roger Farlow both had thirty-one-foot Stapletons. Stapleton hulls are made in Miami and are popular commercial fishing hulls. It is a displacement hull with a full keel and is one of the safest and most stable, small, deep water, commercial vessels. My Stapleton can handle the same big seas that the thirty and forty-foot vessels can handle. Sherman told me that.

Sherman was often aggravated at my slowness. I had pretty much decided I wanted to buy the boat because I was sold on the Stapleton hull. I as much as told Sherman that, and he got mad at me.

He said, "Dammit, look at the power plant, not at the hull. The power plant is what you need to pay attention to!"

I said, "You mean the engine?"

He replied, "Yes, God dammit!"

The engine was a 318 Chrysler Marine gasoline engine. It was raw water-cooled and had a lot of hours on it. It lasted about three years before it gave out. At the time, I was impressed simply by the fact that it started and ran.

During the nearly thirty years I have owned the boat, I have put four engines in it, two used 318 Chryslers and one new 318, all raw-water cooled. Cooling an engine directly with saltwater reduces the life of the engine.

Finally in 1992, I installed a new 150 horsepower Isuzu diesel, complete with a heat exchanger. This engine is cooled with fresh water.

When I began fishing, I was determined to find my own fish rather than just looking for the boats and the fleet. After selling me the boat, Sherman would spend many of his afternoons at the fish house. While there, he was always interested in my catches and how I was doing.

He didn't say much, but one day when I came in with no fish while the rest of the fleet was loaded down with Kingfish, he told me, "You just find the fleet! Don't take off on your own. You find the fleet; that's all you need to do."

He was right. I lost a lot of money trying to find my own fish in those early days. His advice was always good. Another time he found me washing the boat with a fresh water hose from the fish house. He said, "Dammit! Get that hose off there! That fresh water will rot that boat!"

He was right. Where I had been spraying the fresh water, the wood deck rotted. Since then, I never spray a boat down with fresh water. Saltwater dries out the wood and keeps it from rotting. It paid to listen to Sherman.

Sherman outlived his wife and raised seven children. His main source of income in mid-life was the Merritt Fish Market on Orange Avenue in Fort Pierce, and he also ran a boat yard on South Beach in Fort Pierce. He built up the Stapleton, my boat, in 1971, late in life with the idea of fishing in retirement. Much of the wiring and structure has lasted for thirty-one years. It's a testimony to his craftsmanship.

Sherman fished through the heyday of King fishing in the seventies. He lived at the home of one of his sons in Fort Pierce. In 1985 he was reading a *Reader's Digest* magazine and taking a nap in his room when he died of heart failure.

In August of 2001, I was talking to Lester Revels at the fish house about Sherman Merritt. Lester has fished all his life in Fort Pierce. He told me that when he was young, he once went King fishing with Sherman. They hooked a large Kingfish. Lester was pulling it in, but he was struggling with the heavy fish. He said that Sherman, old at the time, told him to move over, took the fish himself, pulled it right on in, and put it in the boat, easy as that. It was a fifty-three-pound Kingfish. Sherman had a reputation for catching big fish.

My Start

I didn't know much, and other fishermen weren't generous with information. I had fished some on weekends with my friend, Moby Paul, who taught me a lot. He has since sold his Kingfish boat and now owns a successful seafood market in Fort Pierce. But once I bought my boat, I was

on my own. I had no C-Loran or VHF radio. I had only a CB radio and a Sitex paper depth recorder. Moby had about the only other CB radio in the Kingfish fleet, so aside from Moby, I was not in communication with the other fishermen.

In the early eighties, there were still some large schools of Kingfish around. When large schools were in an area, it would seem like hundreds of boats would fish them, mostly commercial boats but many sport fishing boats as well.

Fishermen jockey for position over the fish. Once they establish a circle, other commercial fishermen respect that space, although arguments for position do erupt from time to time. Sport boats usually know to stay out of a King fisherman's circle. Sometimes, however, sport boats don't understand this unwritten rule of this kind of fishing and violate a fisherman's circle. When there are a lot of boats fishing an area and a commercial boat has established a spot where he is catching fish, he hates to lose that spot. When sport boats come through his circle, he has to change his direction, stop his troll, or lose the spot and circle to keep from colliding with the sport boat or tangling lines.

Usually the commercial captains can gently herd the sport boat out of his circle. Waving them away or passing extremely close to them also conveys the message. Sometimes, however, a boat becomes very persistent and believes he has the right to that King fisherman's established spot.

In this case, the King fisherman, usually reluctantly, simply passes by the stern of the sport boat. The cables and paravanes on the commercial boat cut off or take all the line from the sport boat's fishing reels. This is a last resort to keep the sport boat out of a King fisherman's established circle.

Buoys

When I first started fishing, I did not have a Loran, so when I caught a couple of fish in a spot, I would claim that spot by throwing a buoy consisting of an empty Clorox jug and around one hundred feet of line attached to a lead weight. Throwing the buoy establishes that spot for you. Today, King fishermen fish Loran numbers rather than a buoy.

My Big Catch

I had one memorable run-in with a sport boat on a weekend back in 1986. For several days, the entire Fort Pierce and Sebastian fleets were fishing an area off Vero Beach. It seemed like hundreds of boats were there, both commercial and sport boats.

A neighbor, Norman Bradley, used to go with me and fish my second bug reel. We had established a spot on the edge of the fleet where we were

catching fish. I had thrown the buoy, and we were catching one or two fish every circle. This was what we always dreamed of, great fishing. A great spot. As it turned out, these were two of my biggest fishing days ever. I had over 750 pounds each day.

As we fished, a sport boat began intersecting my circle and fishing all around my buoy. I had to stop and change course several times to keep from hitting him or taking all his lines. I tried waving him away, but he ignored me. This boat would not stay out of my circle, and I was on perhaps the best bite of my career.

I became angry; I waved and shouted. He told me that I didn't have to cuss but continued to get in my way. I guess he and the other fellows on his boat were embarrassed by my language. I just got madder. Finally, he trolled right over my buoy right in front of me. I had to stop to keep from ramming into his side. I let my boat drift right by his stern, under his lines between the tip of his poles and the lines. As his lines were dragging across the bow of my boat, I ran up to my bow with a knife. When one of his lines came over the bow with a fish on it, I cut the line and took the fish. I held up the fish and again screamed at him to stay away from my buoy and circle. He finally got the message and left after telling me one more time that I didn't have to cuss. So, I screamed another stream of obscenities.

My mate, Norman, a little shocked and amazed at my behavior, moved into the cabin during the interchange. I was a little surprised at myself, too, since I'm normally very timid. Maybe I was wrong to get so angry. The fisherman probably did not understand. Often, especially early on, my fishing checks got my family through some very hard times.

Anyway, those turned out to be two of my biggest days ever. I had over 1,500 pounds of fish for the two days.

Nets

In the mid-1980s, I was able to participate in some of the last big catches of Kingfish before the onset of the nets. I have to agree with Roger Farlow and Tommy McHale when they said the big nets practically wiped out the great schools of King Mackerel that were here, first using airplanes and circle gill nets and later using long (three to eight-miles long) deep drift gill nets.

At first, the large net boats would not set their nets in areas being fished by hook and line fishermen. Then as fish became more scarce, the nets began moving in at night on the areas fished during the day by the hook and line fishermen. The hook and liners returned to these areas only to find roller rig net boats loaded with King Mackerel returning to the dock. There were very few fish left when hand liners returned in the morning after the nets had done their work.

In 1991, the National Marine Fisheries Commission outlawed circle gill netting of Kingfish in Federal waters. The same roller rigs then used the huge drift gill nets. At night, they would drift through the areas fished by hand liners the previous day. Once again, there would be nothing left the next day for the hand liners. In fact, it would be difficult even to navigate through the many miles of drift nets to get back to the fishing grounds in the morning. It was an ugly time for hand line King Mackerel fishermen.

These large net boats contributed greatly to increasing prejudices in Florida against all net fishermen. In a movement led by angry sport fishermen, a referendum passed in 1998 outlawing all net fishing in Florida waters. It put people out of business who had been commercial fishing in Florida for several generations. With strict and careful regulations, net fishing might have continued to successfully co-exist with sport fishing and hand line commercial fishing. But the largely unregulated slaughter of great schools of King Mackerel by large net boats in the late 1970s and 1980s fueled the anti-net sentiment that swayed Florida voters.

Today there is some hope. All Kingfish nets are illegal. Now strict limits to the size and number of Kingfish that can be harvested commercially are enforced. When yearly quotas for an area are caught, King fishing is shut down. Because there are now so few fish here, the yearly quotas on the Treasure Coast are seldom met, so the fishing rarely shuts down.

Kingfish are far scarcer in this area today than they were when I began fishing my own boat in 1982, and there is nothing like the great schools that Roger, Steve, Al, Johnny, and Tommy used to fish in the 1950s through the early 1970s. I believe that hook and line fishing alone would never have depleted, or even put a dent, in these great schools of fish. With the current quotas and catch limits, I'm certain that this is true. One can only hope that the fish will one day come back.

Fishing seems to be slowly improving in the waters off Fort Pierce. Porpoises, pollution and freshwater runoff are growing problems for King fishermen today.

Storms

I have never been in a storm like the one described by Al Tyrrell with forty-foot seas. I have never been struck by lightning or hit by a waterspout. I have never seen lightning blow a hole in the sea like Johnny Jones. But I have been in some bad storms.

While running toward the inlet, I have had severe summer squalls engulf me from the north and lay my boat on a side angle while I was heading west. I've had the wind blow so hard that loose pieces of my fiberglass canopy sounded like playing cards in the spokes of a bicycle

because they flapped so hard. I've been in winds so strong that I had to take the heavy tops off my ice boxes and put them on the floor in the cabin so they would not blow away. I've had lightning hit all around me with simultaneous thunder that sounded like steady cannon fire. I've been in storms that had so much electricity in them and on the water, I was shocked by touching my metal steering wheel.

Once, during a summer when my daughter, Miss Fannie, fished with me for her summer job in high school, we found ourselves in a blinding storm with such severe high winds and lightning that I had her don a life jacket and rubber boots in case lightning hit the boat. But all in all, I've been lucky.

Waterspout

I have seen many waterspouts from afar, unlike Tommy McHale, and Al Tyrrell who have experienced them up close and personal. In September 2001, Bob Ferber told me about a close encounter he had with a waterspout. He said he and Gary Warner on the *Buckaroo* watched a real dark, concentrated, nasty looking storm move offshore south of where they were fishing.

Gary, who was watching the storm on his radar scanner, came on the radio, and said, "You know, Bob, I think that thing is turning around and coming back."

Bob said it kept getting darker behind his boat as he was trolling in toward the inlet. He wasn't paying attention to it for a few minutes; then he began hearing a roar. He said he turned around and about fifty yards behind his boat was a solid wall of water, and it was the biggest and closest waterspout he had ever seen. A solid wall of water at least a hundred yards wide extended out of sight toward the sky. To the south of it was another one angling out from the larger one behind his boat. He quickly pulled in his lines and ran for the inlet. I have seen a lot of nasty weather, but I've been lucky. My boat has always handled it well.

The day I spoke to Bob about the waterspout, he was also nursing an injury to his finger inflicted by a Porpoise. His finger was cut and swollen. A Porpoise took a fish he was pulling in, and the paravane shot out of the boat. On the way, it hit his finger. He said the finger had been twice the size just after the injury. And when I saw it, and the swelling was still huge.

Porpoise

I have been lucky as far as injuries go, too. Twice, though, in the recent past I have been hurt by Porpoises. In the summer of 2002, a Porpoise grabbed a fish I was pulling. I was trying to hold the line down behind the transom until something broke, but before I got a good hold on it, it shot

out of the boat. The paravane struck me on the triceps and hip as it flew out, cutting a strip of skin out in both places. I felt like I had been shot. I had to get on my knees and rest my head on the gunwale to keep from passing out. Though there was a lot of blood, there was no serious damage. I do have a scar on my hip.

In the spring of 2003, a Porpoise stretched my 125-pound monofilament leader and broke it at the swivel sending the swivel like a bullet right at my chest cavity, an inch below the soft part of my neck. It left a golf ball size knot or welt on my chest. The shape of a swivel was carved out of the skin on top. The swelling subsided in a week or two, but a swivel shaped scar remains today. Once again, I was lucky, unlike Johnny Jones whose hand was shattered in a similar situation when the swivel hit his hand.

Big Catches

My largest two-day catch was the one I mentioned earlier off Vero Beach when I had the run-in with the sport boat in 1986. I have had more than 700 to 800 pounds on the boat a few times, but I've never caught more than 1,000 pounds on any one day like Roger, Johnny, Al, or Tommy and certainly never 3,500 pounds like Steve. Their catches still amaze me.

The Gaff

I've never caught anything like the seventy-eight-pound Wahoos that Steve and Al landed or anything near the sixty-eight-pound Kingfish caught by Tommy. Those are all once-in-a-lifetime fish. I did lose two Wahoos at least as big as Steve's and Al's that I foolishly refused to gaff. But there was a reason.

In the spring of 1983, the first year that I owned my boat, the large smoker Kingfish were showing up along the beach in Fort Pierce. The gill nets hadn't yet gone after the big kings on the beach. Those fish are rare there today. Anyway, I decided to try my luck with the big fish, and I got lucky. On the ledge that drops from fifteen to thirty feet of water near the beach in front of Pepper Park on Fort Pierce's north beach, I caught six Kingfish that weighed 226 pounds (two weighed 24 to 25 pounds, two weighed 39 pounds, one weighed 47 pounds, and the largest weighed 53 pounds), and I never used the gaff.

Moby Paul had taught me to pull big fish steady and hard. He said don't let them turn on you. Keep them coming straight away because once they know they can turn on you, they'll beat you. As long as you can keep their heads straight coming toward the boat, they won't realize their

advantage. Moby always said get them in the boat quickly and let them do their fighting in the fish box.

That's what I did, and it worked. I was slow trolling with 200-pound test of clear mono line. For bait, I had caught some fresh large silver bunker in the river before daylight that morning. I was also using #10 double strength hooks.

Because of the low freeboard on my boat, by keeping the large fish moving forward, and with the spring-like action of the 200-pound test mono, all the fish nearly shot into the boat, although I didn't even try to get the 53-pounder into the box. I just got him over the transom and onto the deck where I laid on him to be sure he did not flip overboard. It was a day I'll never forget. But it also convinced me that I didn't need to gaff big fish.

The following summer I hooked a large Cobia, maybe 40 to 50 pounds. When I got him to the stern, I tried to use the gaff. I somehow managed to knock the fish off the hook and lost it. That only increased my aversion to using a gaff. I have caught many 30-plus-pound fish without the use of a gaff and became convinced that I didn't need to use it.

On the last day of summer before reporting back to school in 1989, I hooked a large Wahoo on the northeast grounds off Fort Pierce. The reason I knew he was a Wahoo is because the water was gin clear, and when I saw stripes on him, I stopped pulling to look at him in amazement. That was a mistake. In that moment, he turned sideways, de-hooked himself, and swam away. I was sick. He was huge.

Amazingly, one year later, almost exactly, near the same spot on the last day of the summer before reporting back to school, I hooked another large fish. I suspected that it might be a Wahoo and was determined not to let the fish turn. I pulled him straight away and steady right on into the boat. It was a 54-pound Wahoo. Once again, I did not use the gaff. So my gaff always lay on the bunk in the bow cabin. I determined that I didn't need a gaff for big fish.

Then came mid-June of 1998. I had just finished a school year and was ready for summer fishing. The sea was flat and clear. Fish were scarce.

Bait gill nets were now illegal, so I had no bait. For years, we used #3½ drone spoons. It seems that spoons work better with wire leader, and wire is more difficult than mono to see in clear water. I had just put my lines in the water and was trolling slowly to the east across the ledges north of 12. Almost immediately, my starboard line came up and went straight out, a sign of a big fish. When I began pulling, I knew it was something very big. I braced myself in the corner of the stern and began pulling steady and smooth. It was difficult, but I did not let him turn. Steady and smooth is as important as fast when pulling big fish.

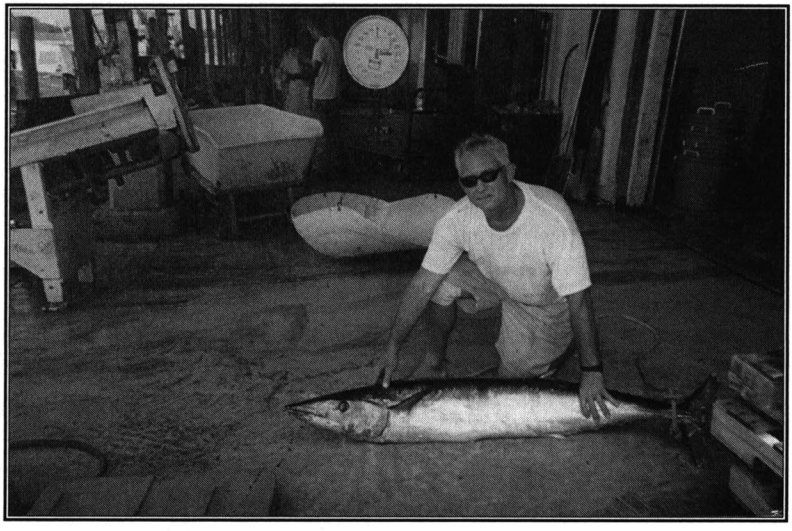
Anyway, I fought him well and pulled the biggest Wahoo I have ever seen up to the side of my boat. He was way longer than I am, and his head

was huge. He was much bigger than anything I had ever seen or caught before, and he was tired. I had him. So I lifted his head up to pull him into the boat, but he didn't budge. Instead, the wire broke right at the spoon. He flipped his tail and swam away with the spoon still in his mouth. A once-in-a-lifetime fish. I was sick. When I told the other boats on the radio what had happened, they blasted me for not using the gaff.

I still thought, however, that given another chance I could boat a really big fish without the use of a gaff. Well, the very next day, I was rigged exactly the same with long wire leaders and new spoons, and believe it or not, the very same thing happened in the same area on the port outrigger. The line was straight back and really tight.

I braced myself in the stern and began pulling. Once again, I fought him well, smooth and steady, and again, it was the largest Wahoo I had ever seen. He was huge. His head had the girth of a horse's head. My gaff was in the cabin. I thought that I could land him without it. If I could get his head up just a couple of feet, I could pull him over the gunwale. It was not to be. He was too heavy. This time the double strength hook on the spoon bent sideways, and he dropped off and slowly swam away. His dead weight was just too much.

When I got to the dock that afternoon, I mounted my gaff in the stern on the transom. I have gaffed several fish since, including a couple of 30 to 40 pound Cobias in the summer of 2002. King fishermen still tease me on the radio about not using a gaff. I don't pay much attention to the ribbing but should I ever be fortunate enough to come face to face with another 70-plus-pound fish, I will use the gaff, guaranteed!



A fifty-five-pound Wahoo

Hammerhead

When I first started fishing, there were a lot of gaps in my knowledge. On my first day out, I could not remember how long to make the wire leaders on my outrigger. With only a CB radio, my friend Moby Paul was the only person I could talk to. I did not want to sound ignorant by asking a question to which I should have known the answer, so I put the same amount of wire on my outrigger as I had on my electric reel, seventy-five turns on 225 feet of wire. This was more than a hundred feet too long, I later learned.

The fleet was fishing on the northeast grounds. The boats were all catching fish up and down the reef in ninety feet of water. I could not find a place on the reef without getting into someone's way, so I moved east of the fleet off the reef on the sand. I began catching fish, so I threw my buoy to claim my spot. The other boats quit catching fish where they were, so the fleet began to form around me, and they began to catch fish, too.

Moby later said he couldn't understand why I was pulling so much wire. It was taking me forever to get each fish to the boat. I had wire everywhere in the cockpit.

I began pulling in some fish that were chopped off, which is usually a sign of sharks or barracuda. While reeling in one particular fish, I felt it get real heavy, but it kept coming up toward the boat. I had wire all around me and was standing in a pile of it. The fish felt strange, heavy and not normal. When it finally came to the surface in the center of my circle, I saw him. It was the biggest Hammerhead shark I had ever seen. It looked like "Jaws" and his head was at least four feet from eye to eye. He shook his head slowly from side to side, and the wire connecting his mouth to my hand caused my hand to go back and forth slowly. I realized I was wrapped in and standing in wire connected to this monster. I was in shock.

I dropped everything, extricated myself from the wire, and moved quickly to the cabin before he decided to sound, which he did almost immediately. My wire flew out of the boat and finally broke at the swivel. Thankfully, I was safe in the cabin. Since then, I have always made certain to pile all wire and line in front of me at my feet so I am out of the way if it suddenly reverses and heads back overboard!

I had a little over 200 pounds that day. The other boats had 300 to 500 pounds. Nevertheless, I was proud of my first catch and proud to be a King fisherman.

Drifting Buoy

For many years after I started fishing in 1982, I used only a buoy to mark my fish. Practically every other Kingfish boat was using a Loran to

mark their position. An old fisherman friend of mine, "Uncle" Bill Summerlin, used to refer to King fishermen as the electronic fleet. He said they couldn't catch fish without their electronics. As a net fisherman, he was not particularly fond of hand line King Mackerel fishermen. Prejudices or gulfs often existed between commercial net fishermen and commercial hand line fishermen.

Partly because of "Uncle" Bill Summerlin's influence and partly because of the economics of my "shoestring" commercial fishing operation, when I began fishing I was in no hurry to buy a Loran. I was determined to catch fish using a compass, a buoy, and a depth recorder (my only electronic device). I think I caught just as many fish in those days as I do now with a Loran. Looking back, a humorous experience convinced me it wouldn't hurt to have a Loran, a global positioning device, on board my boat.

The fleet was fishing on a large bunch of fish near the Hurricane Rack, in shore just northeast of the Fort Pierce Inlet. I caught a couple of fish on the south side of the fleet, so I threw my buoy, claimed my spot, and began catching fish.

After a time, the fleet began moving in and around my circle. I figured they saw me catching fish and were trying to get closer. Several boats began to crowd me unmercifully. I gave them some glaring stares but refrained from giving glaring hand signals. Finally the entire fleet had engulfed me, and it was all I could do not to hit other boats.

I was becoming really steamed and was about to resort to hand signals when I noticed that my buoy wasn't leaning in the current. It was bobbing straight up and down. This could mean that there was no current, which was unlikely, or the buoy line had been cut by my paravane and the buoy was floating freely through the fleet.

I checked the buoy and found that the latter was the case. I had been circling my free-floating buoy right through the center of the fishing fleet as it bobbed along with the current. I sheepishly pulled in my buoy and wound my way out of the fleet. The other boats must have thought I was nuts. It wasn't long after that I purchased my first Loran.

Respect for the Fish

Hunters, farmers, fishermen or anyone who kills live creatures as a way of life must, at times, wonder what goes through the minds of their prey. Hand line King Mackerel fishermen unhook their fish on a stainless de-hooker. The fish then drop into a kill box where they die in front of the King fisherman. They don't die quietly either. They flop around wildly, then more slowly and sporadically as death nears. They then go into a violent convulsion or seizure until dead. It's not fun to watch and is the down side of commercial fishing. My love for the challenge, competition, and sport of

King fishing overpowers and trumps my empathy for the dying fish or abhorrence of the killing.

Once on a calm summer day with nothing biting, I was trolling slowly east across the reefs north of 12 when I saw a Kingfish skyrocket a hundred yards or so behind where my starboard line was trolling. There was nothing unusual about this, but as I watched, he jumped again closer to my stern off to the starboard. Then he jumped again, closer still, parallel to and even with my starboard line. He jumped again coming right up the starboard side of my boat just outside my outrigger. It was as though he was curious and watching me. We looked into each other's eyes as he passed by. He jumped once or twice more after he passed and that was it. I have never seen a fish do anything like that before or since.

All the fishermen I interviewed have great respect for the intelligence of fish. I share that respect and often wonder what the fish are thinking.

Biggest Kingfish Story

Ninety-three pounds is the world's record Atlantic Ocean King Mackerel. It was caught off San Juan, Puerto Rico. I have heard of 70-plus-pound Kingfish being caught off Fort Pierce, but the biggest Kingfish story I ever heard was told to me by Cleve Lewis, an old time King fisherman. According to Cleve, this is the way Sherman Merritt told it to him:

Sherman said he had put his lines in the water early one morning just outside the Fort Pierce Inlet to the north, near the beach. There was about a four-foot ground sea, which is usually not good for fishing, but there was no wind and the surface was calm. Sherman was trolling at a very slow idle while he was putting out his lines. He was just barely moving forward.

Immediately before he could get the second line in the water, the first line came up and straight out, a sign of a big fish. He said the paravane, line and everything was out of the water, straight and tight. Sherman said there was no way he could budge this fish. In fact, the slow forward motion of the boat stopped and reversed. The fish began to slowly pull the boat sideways. Sherman said the line was singing it was so tight.

Somehow, nothing broke, and after a long time, the fish seemed to tire from pulling the boat. Sherman began taking in line and wire ever so slowly. He said when he finally saw the fish, it was the biggest Kingfish he had ever seen in his life and he had no idea how to land it.

Then he saw that he might be able to use the ground sea to his advantage. With the tired monster at the stern, he waited until the stern of the boat was in a trough of the sea and the fish was at the top of a ground sea wave above the transom. Then he pulled with all of his strength. Sherman managed to get the head of the great fish onto the transom. It was then that the fish gave a powerful flip, hit its head on the gunwale, knocking

out the hook, and slid back into the ocean. Sherman told Cleve that he'll never know how much that fish weighed, but when it hit its head on the gunwale of the boat, its eyeball popped out and bounced into the boat. Sherman said that fish's eyeball weighed 50 pounds!

A Good Day

There have been many great King fishermen from Fort Pierce. George Kaul, younger than the gentlemen interviewed for this book, is considered by some today to be the best commercial King fisherman on Florida's East Coast. As I said earlier, I do not pretend to be in a league with the fishermen I've interviewed for this book or with George Kaul or some of the other full-timers. But from time to time, on occasion, I beat the fleet and catch more fish than anyone else on a given day.

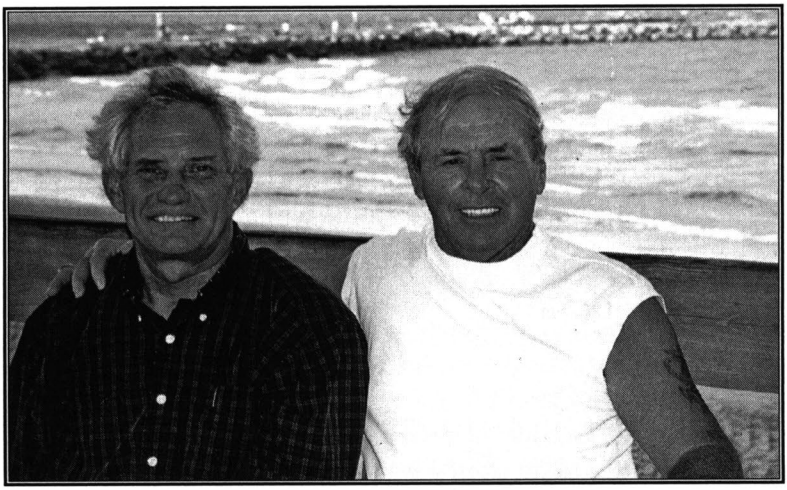
It's a wonderful feeling when it happens. Word gets out up and down the coast of Florida that you were high boat in the fleet for the day. For that one day, you're recognized as the best fisherman on the Treasure Coast. When it happens, it feels like a million dollars. For George Kaul, Tommy McHale, Al Tyrrell, Johnny Jones, Steve Lowe, and Roger Farlow, beating the fleet, being the "high-hook" has been a common occurrence.

One of my best days during this past year was a rough day in November. Twenty-mile-per-hour winds were blowing out of the southeast. I hadn't been fishing in a while and was determined to go, no matter what. All the other Kingfish boats stayed in because of the weather, except for George Kaul.

For some reason, I believed that the fish would be at the south end of the offshore bar. I like to think that George was following me, but in all likelihood, he also had information that the fish might be there. Anyway, we both pounded our way through the high seas. I caught two fish immediately and reported it to George. Shortly thereafter, he reported catching a couple, too. We both proceeded to catch our limit of seventy-five head by eleven a.m., despite the very rough seas and occasional waves breaking into my boat.

George caught his limit a few minutes before I did, which is normal. I caught mine shortly after and followed him in. For one day, I was as good as the best. It's like competing against and matching passing yards with Dan Marino or matching baskets with Michael Jordan. For one day, you matched the best.

I don't know how many pounds I had that day. Neither do I recall how much money I made, nor do I care. That's not why we King fish. Winning at anything is matching or beating the best. The chance to win is the big reason why King Mackerel fishing is the greatest job in the world.



The author, left, and Tommy McHale with the Fort Pierce Inlet in the background in the Fall of 2002

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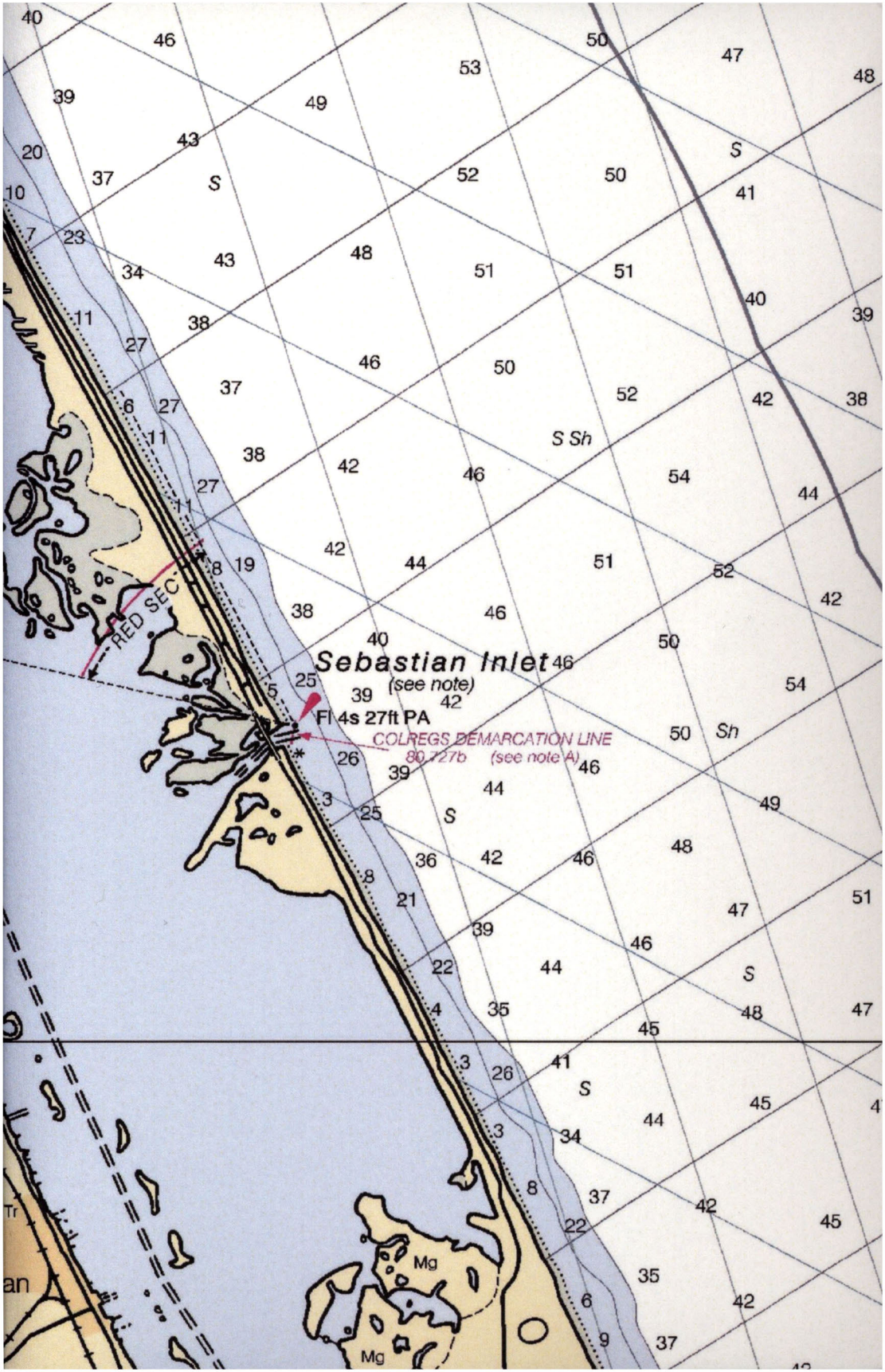
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