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Joe Guidry (JG): This is Joe Guidry on February 8th, interviewing Gus Muench in his home in Ruskin, and he's on little Manatee river, a beautiful place here. Gus, when were you born and raised?

August Muench (AM): Well, I was born in Tampa, June 26, 1936. So, I'm 80 years old now.

JG: Did you go to Hillsborough High School?

AM: I graduated from Hillsborough High School—I went to Hillsborough High School and graduated in 1955. I think Jan Platt¹ graduated in '54, I believe, maybe.

JG: Yes. She's 80, I was wondering if you went to school with Jan.

AM: Well, my problem was I didn't like school. I think my mother spent more time at school than I did, because I failed half the first grade, then I failed half the second grade, so it took me three years to get through the first two grades. And I'd run away from school, and I'd want to go fish in the river. I lived near the river.

JG: So, you loved the water for your entire life.

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An interview of Jan Platt is available as part of the ELAPP Oral History Project collection.

AM: And I didn't like the school. I liked the river—I liked to be outside.

JG: How long has your family been in Hillsborough County?

AM: Well, dad was born in Plant City, and they had their homestead—where Dad grew up was across from the Floriland Theater² drive-in theater. I guess it was the Floriland? Out on Florida Avenue. And right now, that homestead is where the post office is at, right there on Florida Avenue.

JG: So, he was a farmer then? And his parents—?

AM: No, he worked for the post office.

JG: Oh, he worked for the post office.

AM: His dad worked for the post office, and then my dad joined the post office and worked for the post office too. And then, he—my dad went to the University of Tampa and played football with Rudy Rodriguez and some others there—Crockett Farnell.

JG: Mm-hm.

AM: In fact, my dad made little all American playing football at Tampa U. He wanted me to be a football player, but I just—I didn't have any interest, you know? I played at Hillsborough some, but I didn't the power. I wasn't interested that much, you know? But it was good discipline. It was good discipline for me. I really appreciate it now that I look back on it.

JG: So, your family has been in Hillsborough County for generations.

AM: Right. In fact, my grandmother on my mother's side used to own the property where the Ari's Diner was located at the University of Tampa—you remember the Ari's Diner on Kennedy?

29309 N Florida Avenue

JG: Yeah.

AM: That was her property there, and she had a rooming house, a boarding house there. And that's where my dad met my mother, was at that boarding house, because he would eat there. That's how come he met my mother.

JG: Aw, that's so good. Did you go to college?

AM: I started for six months but decided I'd rather work outside or do something else.

JG: And you went to work—

AM: At General Telephone Company. Well, I started at Peninsular Telephone Company back in '56, and worked there until General Telephone merged with—well, actually, I take that back. Peninsular was bought out by General Telephone, and then General Telephone merged with Bell-Atlantic to make Verizon. That's how Verizon came along. But I retired, I was General Telephone Company.

JG: Yeah, you worked your entire career there, but you also—

AM: I was crabbing on the side, fishing on the side here, and decided I'd rather fish than work for the phone company. So, I retired. But I was crabbing at nighttime, and fishing, and hauling crabs to Tampa when I go to work. And it was just a lifestyle that I enjoyed.

JG: What was the bay like? What was Hillsborough County like when you were growing up and when you first started crabbing?

AM: Uh, I have to go back to my childhood when we talk about what the bay was like. I lived in Seminole Heights³ on North Street, and at the end of North Street was a little park, a little city park there, and they had a little eight-foot boat chained up on the river there. And I fished in the river, and I had a little two and half horse kicker I put on my bicycle, and go down to the river and spend all day on the river. I was like a river rat. And

³A neighborhood located in central Tampa marked by early 20th century bungalow homes and historic buildings.

I could go all the way up to the dam, and at that time, they were dumping the sewer in the river, okay? They were treating it with alum, but it made it—it was white. And that was back when polio was going strong too, at that time.

But it was quite interesting. I'd eat the crabs and the fish out of the river with the sewer being dumped into and I didn't think anything about it. But there was a lot of crabs then, and we used to go out to Davis Causeway—it was called Davis Causeway back then, not Courtney Campbell⁴, and get crabs out there at nighttime with buckets and lanterns, and catch speckled trout in the wintertime, along Davis Causeway. It was great fun for a kid growing up.

JG: And despite the sewer being dumped in there, the bay was in pretty good shape?

AM: It seemed to be.

JG: There were a lot fewer people.

AM: The dredging really affected the bay, I think. I don't know if you remember, but there was a big shell—they were mining shell in the bay at one time, where the channel was at? And that shell was brought in over near North Boulevard, where the bridge was at, there was a big shell mound.

JG: I remember that.

AM: Okay, there was a big shell mound there. And that shell came from Tampa Bay. And they were mining it out there, digging it up and barge—in fact, that property there now is vacant. I think they're going to do something with it commercially one day.

JG: I'd forgotten about that. So, you've seen enormous changes in landscape and things through the years.

AM: I've seen a change in the environment of the bay, yes. I could say there seemed to be—there was (sic) more crabs than there are now. There were more crabs back then.

⁴Connects Clearwater to Tampa via State Road 60. It was a privately owned toll road from its opening in 1934 until 1944 when, as part of the war effort, the federal government purchased it and transferred ownership to the State of Florida.

JG: There were more?

AM: Yes. In fact, I used to sell my softshell crab that I was catching to Robert Richards there on the Seabreeze⁵. And Robert was telling me how he saw a change. He said that when he first started shrimping, he would pull his nets between along Davis Island there, in that channel, and he would pull up tons and tons of oak leaves in his net. Okay, well that's detritus⁶. That's detritus. At the same time, he was catching a lot of crabs and shrimp in the bay.

So there was a change there because he stopped catching those leaves in the trap. Because of his nets—because of the development taking place in Tampa. And so, when that happened, when we lost that detritus, or a lot of people call it nitrogen, that was affecting the bay, but actually, I think that was helping the bay. It was helping the bay. Because that's food for—shrimp and crabs eat detritus. Detritus has bacteria on it, and that's food for shrimp and crabs. So, we lost a food source, you might say, because we don't have all that runoff that we used to have. And there's comments saying it's bad, but I don't know how bad it is. I think it's good.

JG: Well, you saw things changing for the worse. Have you seen areas where it's gotten better too? I mean, did it go down and then come back up? I mean, they're generally saying seagrasses—we have more seagrasses now than we did 30 years ago.

AM: I look at the crab population and how it's doing, but then, I'm not an expert on crabs. I catch crabs, and I have concerns about them. But as far as saying that, you know, it's bad compared to what it was, I think it is. But then, I'm told, "Hey, you know, it's not." But it just may be Tampa Bay. You know, I look at Tampa Bay as every time a new person moves around, moves on Tampa Bay, it takes a hit. Maybe just a small hit, but from the runoff pollution, and from extra gas, and everything, the runoff pollution, it takes a hit. Maybe small, but when you start adding all that up, growth does make an impact to Tampa Bay's water quality.

One of the things that I've noticed here in the Little Manatee River this year, is that the river turned brown. Never saw that before—well, I did last year, it turned brown too at a certain time. It was when we had a lot of rain, and it believe it turned brown because of

⁵Seabreeze by the Bay restaurant is an iconic Tampa restaurant and fish market famous for its deviled crabs.

⁶Suspended organic matter that piles up on the seabed floors, also referred to as marine snow. It is a source nutrient for bottom feeding animals and is important to the breeding and growth of many marine animals.

the row crops⁷, increased row crops in the upper reaches of the Little Manatee River. And I'm not sure what the impact's going to be, but what kind of chemicals were runoff in those row crops? Into the Little Manatee River? And also, you got the south prong that goes into Manatee County. The row crop. But row crop production has increased on the Little Manatee River, and I'm not sure what the impact is going to be.

JG: Have you also seen an impact from the increased number of people using the bay? You know, recreation and—?

AM: Yes. One of my pet peeves about people moving to the bay or on the river or creeks is shoreline wildlife corridor. I went and introduced language for the Hillsborough comprehensive plan, SWC Shoreline Wildlife Corridor⁸. And I was actually giving awards to people who protect their mangroves on the river for two years. After two years and six awards, I couldn't find anybody else that didn't cut their mangroves. Everybody wants to cut their mangroves. We have an ego problem, I think, as far as humans, we want to show off our houses and see as far as we can, but we fail to realize the importance of edge habitat. Edge habitat is that habitat along the shoreline that is productive for fish, wading birds, animals, upland—and we don't understand that. And so, we cut it all down and then we have erosion into the rivers and the creeks and the bay, and then we have a loss of habitat. That's the probably the—that edge habitat is the last habitat we have because we've cleared all the uplands for houses and then we go put our seawalls in and destroyed all the remaining habitat, that edge habitat. It's very important.

JG: How did you initially get involved in the environmental effort? I know you're out there crabbing and love the bay, but then, you decided to take another step.

AM: I guess it happened with the uh—back in '86, being on the water all the time, I saw the Indian mounds⁹ out there, and I decided we need to buy an Indian mound. So, I proposed that we buy the Indian mound. And I went to you, Joe, and said, "Hey, I'm gonna take my boys down and do a canoe trip from Manatee County and take—to show the importance of the Indian mound," and—

⁷A crop that can be planted wide enough to allow agricultural machinery in the row. These crops are planted by drilling rather than broadcasting.

⁸A wildlife corridor is a linked habitat of native vegetation that allows for the movement of animals and allows larger animals to establish larger territories. Corridors are critical for the continuation of viable populations.

⁹Indian Mounds are also referred to as midden mounds. They were constructed by the indigenous people using layers of sand mixed with shell and living debris and were used for domiciliary, burial and religious reasons.

JG: You went from Manatee County to—

AM: Yes. Went underneath the Skyway, the small bridge, and then we camped on the island down there, Port Manatee, which you can't do it now, but we camped overnight there. And then came on up and took pictures of kids fish while we had a canoe, and that's how we took those pictures and came up through there.

JG: I remember that. How old were your sons then?

AM: Oh, 14, 12.

JG: That must have been quite a memory.

AM: Yeah. In fact, that's probably between you, Joe, and Frank Sargent¹⁰, y'all got me involved in this environment issue. And that's the truth of the matter because I was writing letters. I don't know, I guess that's why you told me to take some pictures because I'd been writing letters about things that'd been happening in the environment. And Frank Sargent, he turned me in for the Chevron Conservation Award¹¹, and then, your article. And I got involved in ELAPP. You know, it was '86 that you wrote the letter—article about, we need to buy again, "Trust, Try Again" I think it was called. Let's try again to tax ourselves, to buy environmentally sensitive land. And then, the next year in '87, Jan Platt picked up on it and proposed it, and the commission—the Board of County Commissioners passed that, to have ELAPP. And then we went out and sold it to the public to pay. How about voting for this? And it passed. And so that's how the ELAPP program started, was Jan Platt.

JG: Did you ever think that you were going to make in that canoe trip, that it would lead to uh this program that's been around for over 20 years now? Thirty years it is.

AM: No, but it has changed my life, being involved in it. You know, you can't appreciate environment unless you get involved in it. You and I wouldn't be here, Joe, if it wasn't

¹⁰Frank Sargeant is the former outdoors editor of the *Tampa Tribune* and has authored 11 books on the outdoors.

¹¹Created in 1954 by Ed Zern to recognize outstanding contributions to the conservation of natural resources by volunteers, professionals, and nonprofit organizations.

for the environment. And so we don't really consider it, but you have to get involved with it. You have to go out there and plant trees, and sea grass, and oyster bars, and then you start—it starts—it's a learning process. We're not taught that in school. You know, we're not taught that in school. It has to be taught through the family values, camping. That's what's great about camping, is you learn so much about it. I went camping with my dad so many places in Florida. And that's—it started out at a young age I guess. I guess I started out at a young age being involved in the environment. It takes a lifetime to learn it. It's a shame we can't learn it overnight.

JG: Yeah. When you began to push for ELAPP, did you run into many obstacles? Was there much opposition?

AM: We didn't really. I think we started out at the very beginning, the board passed it. We took, I don't know how many brochures to supermarkets, different restaurants, and they passed them across the counter when people were, you know, paying—buying—paying their bill. They would pick up the brochure, you know. Phyllis Velanski was in charge of that group of us that were pushing for the ELAPP program. And we met at the county parks.

JG: And have you been pleased with how the program has worked?

AM: Oh yes. The program—ELAPP has worked very well. I don't see any problems with it.

JG: Every once in a while we've had a commissioner say, well we're taking property off of the tax rolls, or this is land that's not doing anything, or we need to manage. Usually that it—you know, it hasn't been a very common thing but we do have commissioners that say that or candidates.

AM: Right.

JG: But you've never seen that to be a—

AM: No. I have not been—I'm on the ELAPP committee, okay, and with Jan Smith¹², who has been the president for I don't know how long. But uh, we have a group of citizens who get involved in that, looking at different properties and evaluating them. The

¹²An interview of Jan Smith is available as part of the ELAPP Oral History Project collection

thing that I'm interested in today is, um we had Commissioner Stacy White¹³ create the Theodore Roosevelt Hillsborough Forever Conservation Award¹⁴ program. And that's going to award one person, every year, conservationist of the year, okay.

What's going to happen? What's going to happen? It hasn't happened yet. In fact, I think [at] this next commissioner meeting is going to be brought up that we can give two thousand dollars to that person to donate back to their ELAPP property of their choice. In other words, they don't get the money, but they get the—

JG: That's a great idea.

AM: They get to donate the money towards an ELAPP site that they want to donate it to. And that would go towards, you know, parking, signage, picnic tables, and trails of that particular site. And so we're going to do that every year. Now it's supposed to come up for the board, I think on the 15th for approval, I believe, this month. This next board meeting. So this off the record, but anyway.

pause in recording

—and I said, you know, it's not right that I don't pay back something. You know, for that 40 years of catching a resource and not giving something back. And so today I'm able to take what I make on Gus's Crabby Adventures and the profits, then send it back. And I have a goal of one hundred thousand dollars to give to the ELAPP program.

JG: Wow.

AM: And if I don't fall out the boat and drown before then, you know.

JG: When you um, in the initial stages of ELAPP, who were some of the other people that were helpful to you and worked with you?

¹³White was elected to the County Commissions in 2014. In 2015, he was elected to serve as chaplain, and in 2016, he was elected to chairman.

¹⁴An annual award created by Hillsborough County Commissioners to an individual or group who exemplifies dedication to preserving the County's natural resources.

AM: You shouldn't ask me that. You know, Rob Heath¹⁵ was working for the county at the time. And Sally Thompson¹⁶ and I don't remember the names. I can't remember names very well at all. But, Pete Fowler¹⁷ worked for the county; he was involved in that. Ed Radice¹⁸ was in charge at the time.

JG: Were there some organizations?

AM: Local. There was, I don't remember the names. I can't remember names period. So I don't. I have to go back and look at—

JG: But some of the organizations, were there some citizen groups you went to that got involved?

AM: You're best to ask somebody that—how many people [have] we got to interview now in the future.

JG: Yeah.

AM: How many more people you got to interview?

JG: Probably six or seven.

AM: Okay. Some of those, you want to ask them. They know the names. They got it started. Rob Heath especially. Have you interviewed Rob?

JG: Not yet but I will.

AM: Get involved—

¹⁵An interview of Rob Heath is available as part of the ELAPP Oral History Project collection.

¹⁶An interview of Sally Thompson is available as part of the ELAPP Oral History Project collection.

¹⁷An interview of Pete Fowler is available as part of the ELAPP Oral History Project collection.

¹⁸Ed Radice worked as director of Parks, Recreation and Conservation in Hillsborough County for 28 years. Under his leadership the number of parks in Hillsborough County increased from 75 to 205.

JG: Joel

AM: Yeah, get involved with Rob. He can tell you exactly who was involved in that to start with.

JG: Is there anything about the ELAPP that you think the public doesn't understand? Doesn't appreciate?

AM: I don't—you know, ELAPP is not part of the parks and recreation. So, it's—but it's land that I think is underutilized by the public not understanding it. And that's what I'm hoping, that this will happen with this. The two thousand dollars is stepping stone for people to understand how they can donate to the ELAPP program. Okay? I don't think people understand that they personally—they voted it in. They voted in the process. But they—I think there's people out there with money. I had one person tell me, I'm going to put it in my will, money going to ELAPP. I did have one person. And I think there's a lot of people out there who would like to donate money if they just realized that they could. So I'm hoping that it will come out from this donation that I'm making, that there is a way that you can donate to ELAPP and be effective for the environmentally sensitive land in Hillsborough County. I don't put it very well but that—

JG: No, that (JG and AG talking at same time; inaudible)

AM: I think it's a start. It could be a start. I'm hoping Andy can work this in somehow or another. Into hey, there's this—this is the way that the public can get involved in helping these environmentally sensitive lands. You know, we give to libraries, we give to parks, we give to all sorts of things, churches and everything. But I don't think people have understood that they can give to ELAPP. I mean they voted it in to tax themselves. I think there's people out there and could be businesses out there, that have money. And they could help these areas as far as creating the—so public can go out there, park their car, walk through these areas and visit them and learn to appreciate them more. Because I don't think they're being appreciated or understood by the public that much.

JG: What do you think ELAPP's biggest accomplishment has been?

AM: (long pause) Um, the biggest accomplishment—

JG: Or some of it, you know.

AM: Yeah.

JG: It's more than one.

AM: Well we're seeing land that could have been developed, could have been developed that's being protected from development. We saw it in Cockroach Bay¹⁹ area, you know. TECO²⁰ was going to build that power plant down there, and they decided that it would be good for the public to have this environmentally sensitive land. Well, the Little Manatee River, we've seen areas that could have been developed and now is being protected in a natural state.

JG: Yeah, and they were going to put the marina at one time or they wanted to put a marina in Cockroach Bay.

AM: Yeah, I had forgotten about that. That's where I got started. I got started with that. Robin Lewis²¹—

JG: That might be where we first (inaudible) because we really were strong against that.

AM: Yeah, I swear, I forgot all about the marina, but that's right. I did get involved in that. That may be the first place I got involved, was with the marina going in on Cockroach Bay. And Robin Lewis was working for the developer and how they wanted to dredge a channel out through Big Pass²². In fact, that's where you and I fished, in the Big Pass area there where they were going to tear up all the sea grass and put a channel out through there. And luckily that [was] turned down. That's where I really got involved in the environment. I forgot about that.

¹⁹A series of islands in the south eastern region of Tampa Bay located in the mouth of the Little Manatee River and extending southward along the shore of Tampa Bay.

²⁰Tampa Electric Company (TECO) is an energy-related company that provides electricity to the greater Tampa area and central Florida as well as natural gas throughout the state of Florida. In 2016, TECO was purchased by Emera and is now a wholly owned subsidiary of Emera, Inc.

²¹Roy "Robin" Lewis III is an environmental activist/researcher who earned his master's in zoology from USF in 1968. His research on mangrove and seagrass populations showed the connection between seagrass and mangrove habitat and fisheries management.

JG: Yeah. Managed to stop that.

AM: Yeah. And that was a big. That would have destroyed the area. Absolutely.

JG: (JG and AM talking at same time; inaudible) Lycee?? family too. Wasn't it, if I recall?

AM: It was the Lycee?? property.

JG: Yeah. And they had some pull with the commission.

AM: Yeah.

JG: What has it been like working on the bay most every day. I mean you really see it up close, and yet you obviously still love it. You never get tired of it. What keeps you going? And you're still crabbing after all these years. Still bringing out people on your crabbing tours.

AM: Well, I got involved in taking people out on tours back eight years ago. Uh, I had a friend I went to high school with, Bill Rince, and we'd go down to the Keys and dive for lobster every year. And his son, Billy, stayed down there and became a guide fisherman. And then Billy was telling me, his son was telling me. He says, I would take people out going diving or fishing, and I had these few recreational stone crab traps out. And we'd go by and pull them up, get the stone crabs out, go to the beach and get a little Coleman stove and boil these stone crab claws and get a bottle of wine. He said, man they love that stuff.

So I was thinking, well maybe I could do that here. You know, I had a place on water and I could do the crabbing. So that's how I got started was with—because of what Billy was doing down in the Keys. So I'm probably, maybe the only one in country who does this. Take people out, let them pull traps and come back and feed them. And they get the

²²Most areas around the islands are shallow and littered with oyster bars; however, there are some deep exit passes between larger islands. Big Pass is just north of Cockroach Bay entry and is the best known and easiest to reach.

experience that they've never had and never will get again, of being a crabber, commercial crabber.

So we'll catch one or two bushels of crabs, and we'll come back and cook them up, and fry fish and hush puppies and have a big party. And that's part of—eating is half of the tour, okay. But, I was doing that for the Florida Aquarium, for the kids in the summer aquatic camp. They'd have 15 come out [on] two different Wednesdays in June. And we would take them out and they'd pull the traps. Half of them would fish off of the dock and half would pull traps and we'd switch around. And we'd come back and steam the crabs up. It was the number one thing they liked to do for summer aquatic camp, but my wife got sick with cancer and I shut down for a year, taking care of her. So I stopped and I haven't started back, but that's how it—and everybody who goes really enjoyed. I've had people come from Singapore. They had three Chinese come from Singapore. I had people come from New Zealand, from Switzerland, from England.

JG: How do they find out about it?

AM: Well, I have a website, and it goes worldwide. I have people looking at my website from China (AM laughs). All over the world looking at the website. And I have people come from Canada four times in a row now. They come back. They're repeats.

JG: Really?

AM: Yeah.

JG: Now we're on—you have beautiful house here on the Little Manatee, and you told me that you built this yourself. What was—and you've been here 50 years. Where you the only one here when you came here? What brought you here? And tell me a little about how you—

AM: Well this shoreline was dredged up by Henry Willis, okay. Henry Willis was related to Ellsworth Simmons²³ at the time and his wife, I think, was a Simmons, okay. And they dredged up this strip of land along here. Uh and I found out about it and came out and bought a lot on the water. They uh—but since then I've bought two extra lots. So now I've got like 180 feet on the water, but it was—I'm probably the oldest one living on this street. But there was (sic) a couple of houses, in fact there was a house next door next to

²³Ellsworth Simmons was interviewed as part of the Carlton-Anthony Tampa oral history project. The interview may be viewed at <http://digital.lib.usf.edu/SFS0022612/00001>.

me with two odd seawall lots. And when I was building my house here, that sold for ten thousand five hundred dollars, okay? The two sea wall lots and a house, ten thousand—that shows you how prices have changed. And I actually bought an extra lot down the street for—and sold it for 25 hundred. And then when the economy was booming here, a few years back, it was up for sale for 250 thousand dollars.

JG: Good gracious.

AM: But it didn't sell. And the economy went down. But that shows you how prices have changed over time. I could have bought the whole strip along here, but I didn't have no (sic) money. Nobody had money you might say back then.

JG: Well when you bought this, it had been dredged—there was probably no—now you have uh beautiful mangroves along the shoreline. None of that was here when you uh—

AM: There was a few mangroves starting to grow along the shoreline, and I have to admit something. Because the mangroves were growing and I worked for the phone company, I was in charge of underground construction. And we put duct in from Ruskin to Apollo Beach and in the process they dug up all this rock, lime rock. So they wanted to figure out how to get rid of it. I said, "Bring it down and I'll dump it along my shoreline." So they did. And I built my—behind these few mangroves that were growing. And at the time I was trimming the mangroves down, okay. See I wasn't an environmentalist to start with. I was trimming them.

Well the aquatic preserve manager come by one day after I stopped trimming them. She said, "I'm glad to see you stopped trimming your mangroves." Well, that got to me. I said, well, so I let them grow. Okay, I let them grow, blacks, whites, and reds all growing there. And the more I let them grow, the more I appreciated them.

And I saw black mangrove crabs crawling on the trees. The herons would eat the mangrove crabs and [they] provided shade, provided screening from neighbors. And I've learned to appreciate that. Although, it's been a slow process, but I've learned to appreciate the environment by just living here.

If my wife had a choice, she would have said, cut the mangroves down. (JG laughs) But we had different opinion about—I saw the value. I finally learned the value, okay. It's a learning process.

JG: Did you ever think when you took that canoe trip with your sons that it would lead to such an important change in county policy?

AM: No, but I wasn't the one who started this. You have to go back to people ahead of me, okay. Joel Jackson²⁴, Sally Thompson, these people were pushing for it at one time before, if you recall. You know, they were pushing for uh buying land, I think it was. And it wasn't called ELAPP I don't think, but they were ahead of me on this thing. I just happened to come along and—I wasn't the first to start this thing, process.

JG: But you seemed to have had a big impact though. I mean, maybe it was because of the way you put it in a way that—.

AM: This is off the record, right? Or are you recording?

JG: It can be if you want it to be. I'll stop.

pause in recording

AM: (inaudible) in the morning, they fly inland to feed in the wetlands, okay, fresh water areas they feed in the morning. So you'll see flocks of them following the river in the morning, going. At five thirty in the afternoon, they're coming back to roost on the islands. And that's—I like to see that. And the second thing, people don't see the birds on low tide because they can't get to the Cockroach Bay, but from all the grass flats²⁵, all the grass flats on low tide where the water goes out and you have the grass exposed, are thousands of birds. And the public can't see that because they're not out there. They can't get to it.

And that's what I see. I see all those birds of all kinds, wading in that shallow grass feeding. And so the—if there was a way that the bird watchers could get out there on low tide and see that, they would be amazed at how many birds are feeding on the grass flats. That's why the grass flats are so important, shallow grass flats. Because of the birds feeding on those grass flats.

²⁴Joel Jackson, a Tampa city planner, hired by Ed Radice to help with the development of the parks, recreation and athletic centers in Hillsborough County.

²⁵Shallow area of water, ranging from five feet deep to one foot. Juvenile fish of many species live in the grasses for protection.

Now the second largest bird rookery here is in this area, okay. You have the Alafia banks and then you have the second one here in Cockroach Bay area, the second largest on Tampa Bay. We're uh—

JG: Well Gus, we've covered a lot of territory. Is there anything I should have asked that I did not or anything that you'd like to talk about, either ELAPP, Tampa Bay, the environment?

AM: (speaking softly; inaudible) Just going back on my history. My dad took me camping a lot of places. He also taught me how to knit, make cast nets. So I learned how to tie thousands of knots making cast nets. So every weekend we would go uh to what was called Pappy's Bayou. Now it's called Weedon Island Preserve²⁶. Back then it was—we called it Pappy's Bayou. There was an oyster house. There was an old bridge, a wooden bridge that crossed over uh Pappy's Bayou down there. And they had an oyster house there where they shucked oysters.

And there was an airport. There was an old airport there, concrete old hanger. And it may be where they put the new pavilion, new Weedon Island pavilion. I'm not sure, but—and I learned to throw the cast net there and catch mullet, in the net I made. And grew up wading all Pappy's Bayou area. And that was a great experience for me as a kid. Going over there on weekends.

We would take a tub and dump our mullet in the tub, no ice. Put mangrove limbs over it, leaves over it, and push it underneath the mangroves. And then go back wading. We threw a cast net, no hand line, no brails²⁷. You throw the net and you had to pick your fish out of the net. That was interesting. You had to reach your arm under the net and grab the fish and pull him out and stick him in a bag.

So I learned to do a lot of wading on the bay. And that was an experience that a lot of people don't get to do, is wade a lot. That was one of the reasons that I came up with the uh Uzita Trail²⁸, Uzita Walk/Wade/Swim Trail that goes from the Manatee County line all

²⁶A coastal system consisting of aquatic and upland ecosystems. The preserve encompasses 3,190 acres on Tampa Bay.

²⁷Strong monofilament lines that pull the net closed, trapping the fish. This method allows retrieval and capture of fish at the same time.

²⁸An unmarked, 12-mile, wilderness shoreline trail extending from the mouth of the Little Manatee River to Manatee County Line along the western edge of Uzita Conservation Area in Hillsborough County.

the way back up to the mouth of the Little Manatee River. It was the fact that I knew how you could wade. The Indians waded, you know—what would happen back in 1537, I think it was, Hernando de Soto²⁹ started—came into Tampa Bay and landed somewhere near Port Manatee. They came up to the mouth of the river, the ships did, they drifted with the tides because it was so shallow.

But they unloaded like 220 some horses and men, and the men all went inland looking for gold. And they all met back one week later at the mouth of the river, which is—and there was an Indian chief names Uzita, Uzita. And the Indians had lived here for 700 years I guess it was, or more.

It was paradise. It was paradise. You know, all Florida was paradise for those first Indians because they could get the shellfish. And that's why they made all these Indian mounds, out of the shells that they—.

And they didn't have to chase a deer out through the woods to catch—and they'd go out and eat the—dig a stingray or a manatee or a fish and pick up a shell and eat. And it was, to them it was paradise. I really believe that. Until we got here, okay. And it was interesting that when Hernando came in—and the Indians lived here for 700 years. Well they only lasted five years after that, the Indians did because what happened was they brought slave traders in at the same time from Cuba. And so was they'd go through the—they went—Hernando's trail starts here, in Ruskin here. Goes all the way up through Florida into Georgia, and as the went through the Indian villages, they would steal their food, catch the Indians. And the ones they didn't want, they killed because the slave traders didn't want to fight the Indians coming back to the ship. And they came back. So they killed the Indians they didn't want.

So it was a sad trail. It was a sad trail for the Indians, and one of the reasons that they lasted only five years I think, was due to the slave traders, you know. Could be.

JG: Well this Uzita, Uzita walk that you have now. Tell me a little bit more about that.

AM: Well, it's actually, the Uzita trail is actually a very shallow shoreline along all of Cockroach Bay. And I've checked this, and you can wade the whole area. And you can even walk the beaches. What you do is you take your canoe or kayak down there, and you can go to Cockroach Bay Road and put in and go south to the Manatee County line

²⁹A Spanish explorer who, in 1539, led an army deep into the Florida wilderness and up into Georgia, North and South Carolina as well as Tennessee and Alabama.

and drag your canoe and kayak with all your gear in it, okay. And only one place you have to swim and that's across the channel at Cockroach Bay. The rest of it you can wade the whole distance. And it's a pretty hard bottom. Just shelf with your feet³⁰ for stingrays. But you get to enjoy an experience, what the Indians did, okay. The Indians waded that for five, seven hundred years, and so you get to experience what an Indian did, by wading that.

Or you can go north and go over the Manatee County line, I mean to the Little Manatee River and get in your kayak and swim—paddle back to where you started. But you can experience it either way. But you take your kayaks though. Once you get to the end or you get tired, you can get in your boat and come back. That's the reason you drag your canoe or your kayak is to get back to the camp where you put in at. But you get to enjoy nature like Indians enjoyed it.

JG: Now has that been uh designated an official trail or is this just something that you—

AM: No. There was an article written. I took a newspaper—in fact, he—I invited him to come because he worked for the *Observer News*. You can't pull it up anymore. I tried to pull it up anymore. You can't. But I took him down there and he did a story on it. And—

JG: What would you like to see done? Hillsborough County recognize—Hillsborough County Commissioners recognize the trail? Is that what you—

AM: I don't know what it takes to recognize it. I really don't. I really don't. But it's—I've tried to get uh—they had a management plan come up for the—Cockroach Bay management plan come up, and I introduced it to them but they didn't include it. They didn't include it in the management plan although they did include some trails. But I didn't do—I did a hand drawing.

You can look on my website. Look—you can see—I've got all these links on—all the things I've been involved with the environment. I put them in there, okay. From the uh—everything in there. If you look, it's got all kinds of links. And you know, from the Cockroach pavilion that I got built. You know, I gave money. As a matter of fact, I gave 24 thousand dollars to build a pavilion on top of the mountain down here. And that's, that's why we're having the party is to—is something I told ELAPP—when I said, when we get the pavilion built, I'll have a fish fry on top of that mountain to celebrate the

³⁰Stingrays burrow underneath the sand when resting and hiding from predators. Stepping on a stingray results in a painful sting from its barbed tail. To avoid being stung, waders should shuffle or scoot feet rather than walking, thus creates vibrations that will frighten buried stingrays away. Floridians refer to this as the “stingray shuffle.”

pavilion. Well, the problem is of having it up on the top is too much, too much. So, that's why we're having it here.

JG: That should be great. Okay, well Gus is there anything else you'd like to.

AM: No I can't think of anything right now.

End of Interview