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Chuck Hawkins oral history interview by Robert Cardin, May 25, 2010

Charles Hawkins (Interviewee)

Robert Cardin (Interviewer)

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Robert Cardin: Good morning. This is Robert Cardin. Today is May 25, 2010, and I’m at my residence conducting an oral history interview with Chuck Hawkins for the Gulf and South Atlantic Fisheries Foundation project through the Fort Pierce fishermen on the Oculina Bank HAPC [Habitat Area of Particular Concern]. Welcome, Chuck. Will you please spell your name?

Charles Hawkins: Charles E. Hawkins. That’s C-h-a-r-l-e-s E. H-a-w-k-i-n-s.

RC: And, Chuck, when and where were you born?
CH: I was born in Wilmington, Delaware, 1947.

RC: And what was your birth date, Chuck?

CH: January 24, 1947.

RC: Okay. When did you move to Fort Pierce area, Chuck?

CH: Early seventies [1970s]. Nineteen seventy, seventy-one [1971], somewhere in there.

RC: What brought you to our area?

CH: My parents went overseas to do a contract for Allied Chemical, and I came over to—moved over here with my wife to look after their property.

RC: Okay, Chuck, and are you married?

CH: Not anymore.

RC: I guess that means you were. How old were you when you got married?

CH: Twenty-five.

RC: Chuck, do you have any children?

CH: Yes.

RC: Can you tell me how many you have and how old they are?

CH: I have one daughter; she’s thirty.
RC: All right. And, Chuck, how much schooling do you have?

CH: Associates in arts degree, associates in science degree.

RC: In what field? Do you mind me asking?

CH: I have a science degree in criminal justice.

RC: Okay. Chuck, do you have any other jobs besides fishing?

CH: No.

RC: Have you had other jobs besides fishing?

CH: Yes.

RC: Could you tell me a little bit of history about your other jobs?

CH: Well, when I first moved here, I managed an ABC Liquors for a while. Actually, I still was an assistant manager there. Then, I was on the sheriff’s office for a number of years there.

RC: Okay.

CH: Had my own business in town here for a few years.

RC: How did that go?

CH: It was fine, ya know? I mean, it was my wife’s business and I was fishing at the time, and she decided she didn’t want to do it anymore, so I ended up with the business.
RC: Did she start fishing?

CH: (laughs)

RC: Chuck, I heard from the grapevine just yesterday you sold your boat, but I’m gonna ask you a question: do you currently own a boat?

CH: Well, I don’t own a commercial boat now.

RC: Did you recently just sell it?

CH: I did. Yeah, was end of the month. I blew the engine in it. I was working on it and somebody came by, after I’d been in the bilge for about a week, and said, “You wanna sell it?” And I said, “Why not?” And they gave me a price, and I said, “Okay,” so—(laughs)

RC: That’s not fair. That’s not right. During the interview, we’re gonna be talking about different boats. Which—what length was this boat, just so—?

CH: The one I just sold?

RC: Yeah.

CH: Thirty-two foot.

RC: What was that, the Gambler?

CH: Yeah, Gambler.

RC: Okay. We might talk about that a little later. All right, Chuck, now I’d like to ask you some questions about the Oculina Bank, and here’s a map in front of us, here; we can use this for references, if you like. But how familiar are you with the Oculina Bank?
CH: Well, that was our summer fishery, and that’s where we bottom fished up until the time they closed it.

RC: Do you know why it was designated as an area to protect, or why they closed it?

CH: Well, supposedly, it was the Oculina coral and that was the only place in the world that it grew, and they were gonna protect the coral.

RC: Is there anything else you can tell me about Oculina Bank?

CH: Well—

RC: You mentioned you fished there.

CH: It was a great place to fish. There were a lot of fish there, there’s a lot of structure, bottom, wrecks, and what we call “peaks,” little fifty-foot high mountain-things that come off the bottom.

RC: And you mentioned wrecks; what, you found some wrecks in there?

CH: Well, there—we fished areas where there was a plane wreck and things like that. Just diverse habitats.

RC: What do you think about the closure of the Oculina Bank to anchoring and bottom fishing? What do you think? What’s your personal opinion of it?

CH: I didn’t care much for it. I didn’t care much for it then, but I think they’ve already got that on record. I was on one of the—I was on the council’s advisory panel for king mackerel at the time, and they invited me to a workshop to speak on the Oculina Bank when they were closing it. So, I had plenty to say that they didn’t want to hear at that point.

RC: So, you’ve both fished and worked on the (inaudible). You’ve got a lot of knowledge of it. Chuck, has the closure of the Oculina Bank affected your fishing, and how?
CH: It certainly affected our summer fishery. That was what we did for the summer, we bottom fished it. And basically, it shut down that fishery, you know? You couldn’t, from Fort Pierce. I never bottom fished much in the shallow water, I was always in the deeper water, and the Oculina Banks is the deeper water. That’s where the structure is, in the deeper water in that 300 feet area. And we fished it from the south end on past to the north end; but generally, where we started was in the Oculina Banks. That was where our start place was off of Fort Pierce.

RC: Right. And, so, you mentioned that you didn’t shallow water fish much and you deep water fished, and that the Oculina Bank closed and stopped your deep water fishing. So, basically, does that mean that it stopped your bottom fishing?

CH: It stopped my bottom fishing, yeah. That’s exactly what happened. And it wasn’t long after that we sold the permit. I mean, there wasn’t any point in keeping the permit when we weren’t using it.

RC: So, if I understand you correctly, without the use of the Oculina Bank, you had no use for your grouper permit, in other words. Is that what you—

CH: That would be pretty well true.

RC: You were mentioning your summer fishery. What would your winter fishery be if it wasn’t shallow water grouper or something?

CH: King mackerel.

RC: King mackerel. And where on this map, where did you king mackerel fish? (referring to map) Up in here?

CH: Jupiter, Fort Pierce, Sebastian.

RC: Okay. Later on, we’ll talk a little more about maybe the months that you did fish in the Oculina Bank. If anchoring and bottom fishing in the Oculina Bank was not prohibited, would you fish there? If it was never prohibited, would you still be fishing there?

CH: Absolutely.
RC: And, of course, for what; can you name some of the species that you would catch in there?

CH: Black sea bass, porgies, grouper, snapper. There were lotta gray grouper there, snowy grouper; occasionally you’d catch a grey tile[fish] there. Porgies was one of our mainstay fish, and then grouper.

RC: Chuck, did you say one of “our” mainstay fish?

CH: I’m talking about the people that fished for bottom fishing on the Oculina Bank.

RC: So, you had first-hand knowledge of other fishermen that would, I guess, fish the same area as you did?

CH: Yes.

RC: So, overall, how has fishing changed since you began fishing in the Fort Pierce area? Overall, not only the Oculina Bank, but is there any other changes you’ve noticed?

CH: Well, there’s a lot more regulations. I mean, when we first started fishing it, you had no quotas or anything like that on the kingfish. There’s a lot quotas now, there’s a lot of government involvement in the fishery on anything. You can’t—one of the bad things that I think of as a fisherman, and many of us do, is that with all the regulations and the qualifying for each permit, instead of being a fisherman, you’re now a king mackerel fisherman, or you’re a shark fisherman, or you’re a sword fisherman. And if you have a bad year in one those fisheries, you can’t move laterally to go—if I’m having a bad year king fishing, I can’t go grouper fishing because I don’t have that permit now. I mean, I sold that permit, but a lot of people couldn’t go grouper fishing cause they didn’t qualify for it. They hadn’t caught it, so they couldn’t move it.

For instance, I had a shark permit when the shark permits came out. I got it simply as an incidental permit, because occasionally I’d catch a shark while I was bottom fishing, and without a permit you couldn’t sell it. Well, then they decided, if you haven’t caught so many sharks between this time and this time, you don’t have a shark permit. Well, I was never a big shark fisherman, but it still cost me my incidental catches of shark when I was bottom fishing; it’s a fish that I couldn’t sell.

RC: So, you were able to fish across the fisheries—
CH: Well, sure—

RC: But because you didn’t have the exact qualifying period of this permit or that one—

CH: Well, whenever they did any of the permits for limited entry, you had to have caught so many fish in the years that they picked to qualify for that fishery. For instance—

RC: A timeline thing. You had to be lucky enough—

CH: For the grouper fishery, you had to have caught—I forgot how much it was in that period of time, but a lot of the fishermen got what they call a “limited grouper fishery at 225 [pounds]” and unlimited. You had a limited bottom fishery that you could not sell, and an unlimited one that you could transfer, and that was just a matter of how many fish you caught.

RC: That was in a year time period. That was, like, the year or two after the Oculina Bank—

CH: I think it was three years. It was a three year time period, and out of that three years—in one out of those three years, you had to catch a certain amount. I’ve caught a certain amount.

RC: And you had to have an active permit between February 18 and December 18. Yeah, there were several different qualify periods within—qualifying factors within that three-year period. So, if you happen to be fishing for something else at that time, you lost out. Do you know if anyone that wasn’t grouper fishing at that time because of the Oculina Bank closure lost their permits or got limited?

CH: Well, I think George Kaul got a limited permit because he wasn’t, you know, a regular bottom fisherman, so didn’t qual—a lot of people got limited permits because they had caught a grouper. Like, they’re king fishing, they catch a grouper, so they qualified for a limited permit—but didn’t get an unlimited permit, so they couldn’t have decided, “Well, now I’m gonna go catch

1 Under Amendment 8, to the Snapper-Grouper Management Act of 1998, a vessel was eligible for a limited access commercial permit for South Atlantic Snapper and Grouper if the holder owned a vessel with a commercial vessel permit for South Atlantic snapper grouper at any time from Feb. 11, 1996 through Feb. 11, 1997, and that vessel had at least one recorded landing of snapper and grouper from this fishery from Jan. 1, 1993 through Aug. 20, 1996. An owner whose permitted vessels had recorded landings of snapper and grouper from this fishery of at least 1,000 pounds in any of the years 1993 through Aug. 20, 1996 was eligible for a transferable permit. All other vessels received a non-transferable permit with a 225 pound trip limit.
a thousand pounds of bottom fish,” because they didn’t qualify for that anymore. So, it’s a limiting factor in the fisheries, for anybody. If they have a bad year kingfishing, “Well, we’ll go bottom fishing.” Can’t do it, ’cause you don’t have that permit anymore. I mean, they did that to all the fishermen.

RC: Yeah, it was ninety-five [1995] and ninety-six [1996] in the grouper fishery, if you weren’t catching groupers or happen to [catch groupers]. And you said you lost your shark permit because you didn’t meet the time frame. Do you know what—?

CH: I hadn’t met the weight frame on that.

RC: During the time frame.

CH: During the time frame.

RC: Do you recall what years that was?

CH: No, I really don’t.

RC: That might have something to do with this, too.

CH: I’m getting to be an old fart now, and I can’t pick out those dates anymore.

RC: We all are, these days.

CH: (laughs)

RC: Well, thank you, Chuck. Have you had any experiences with law enforcement within or regarding the Oculina Bank?

CH: No.

RC: All right. Okay, Chuck, I want to kind of talk to you, you know—
CH: I have had law enforcement pull up on me while I was in the Oculina Bank.

RC: Oh, okay. Well, that’s regarding—what was the conversation? What was the problem?

CH: That was—I was anchored, and—I’m trying to think of the guy on the sheriff’s office that used to ride with the Customs guys.

RC: Rodney Black?

CH: Right! There ya go! Rodney Black. He was on the Customs boat, and they pulled up. I could see the light coming, didn’t know what it was. They finally pulled up alongside of me and just talked to me. They were just—they were checking it out, I guess?

RC: Was that pre-ninety-four [1994] when you wasn’t—were you allowed to anchor there at the time?

CH: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, it wasn’t closed then. I guess that wasn’t—

RC: What year was it in, what we’re talking about?

CH: Oh, yeah. I was in the Oculina Bank, because that’s where I fished.

RC: Let’s break it down a little bit about your history, specifically, about your fishing history. Chuck, what was your earliest memory of fishing, and how old were you? You know, like, fishing with your grandpa at the lake type [of] deal.

CH: Didn’t do much of that. Just—I don’t know, I guess just sport fishing: bass and things like that.

RC: Bass fishing. Do you recall, maybe, an age that you were bass fishing?

CH: No, I really don’t.
RC: Would it be in your childhood, like adolescence or, no, actually—

CH: Probably not. Probably not till I got here.

RC: Oh, okay. Well, Chuck, then how did you learn how to fish? Who taught you?

CH: Got a job with—my original job was with the Currys. Started fishing with Tommy Curry. And then I went off of that boat, to his brother, Leland Curry, and we were kingfishing. With Tommy Curry, we kingfished; with Leland, we started swordfishing.

RC: Okay, so how did you decide to become a fisherman? Your buddies were making money, so you did it?

CH: I may have originally started on a net boat or something, I can’t remember. I was in college. I, at that time, was doing my AA and I was going to Gainesville to be a chemical engineer. And the ten-year period on my VA [Veterans’ Administration] loan had run out, but you could always get an extension then, as long as your grades were okay. But I believe it was President Carter that decided no, after ten years, it doesn’t matter; you’re just done. And so, my ten years had come up and they cut me off, so I went fishing.

RC: So, for the income is what you’re saying?

CH: Yeah.

RC: Okay. Chuck, when did you start to work as a fisherman in the Fort Pierce area? How old were you?

CH: Well, early thirties. I’ve been fishing for over thirty years. Might’ve been sooner than that. Might’ve been late twenties.

RC: Would you say around thirty?

CH: Around thirty, yeah.
RC: Okay, and what did you fish for? You said swordfishing or kingfishing—

CH: Well, I think I may have started out on the *Double Eagle* kingfishing.

RC: Okay, and how did you fish for these kingfish on the *Double Eagle*?

CH: That was gillnet; we’d travel down the Keys [with a] runaround gillnet.

RC: Okay, and who did you fish with on the *Double Eagle*? Who owned the boat?

CH: That was David Tuthill and Roger—I don’t remember Roger’s last name, but it was a couple of guys that owned the boat.

RC: Tuthill, T-u-t-i-l, or something?

CH: T-u-t-h-i-l-l, I think.

RC: How were you related to these guys? Just guys you went to work for?

CH: Yeah.

RC: What kind of boat was it, a big fifty-footer?

CH: It was a forty-two foot, uh—I don’t know what the hull was.

RC: Commercial sloop.

CH: Yes.

RC: And, uh—
CH: It was named *Double Eagle*.

RC: Where did you go when you began fishing? You said you went to the Keys; did y’all fish up here any? Can you show me on this map anywhere you fished up here?

CH: That was mainly in the Keys. We fished down—I went down there. I was the crew on that boat. His crew had quit him, and I was the crew. When we made sets we had crews from other boats come over to help us load the fish.

RC: During what months were y’all doing that?

CH: Whenever they have that kingfish run in the Keys. I guess it’s probably January, February—in the winter.

RC: Winter fish?

CH: Yeah. And then they had pulled in somewhere and taken on a guy, and they decided that running drugs would be a better thing for them. So, I got off the boat (laughs) and they made a couple of drugs runs and then all went to jail. (laughs)

RC: So, how long did the fishing trip last? Not that extended stage you just stated, but when y’all would do the runaround gillnet kingfishing.

CH: Long enough to make a couple of sets down there. They were parked in one of the—I think in Marathon is where they were parked, waiting for this guy to pick them up to hook him up with whatever. I didn’t know what was going on. All I knew, we were sitting there not fishing, so I came home that time and started kingfishing with—

RC: Well, back to the—

CH: Timmy Meyers.
RC: The Keys trip, that was like a daily net fishing thing. And what were y’all catching on a trip, do you know?

CH: Well, the one set we made, we caught forty-some thousand.

RC: Anywhere from zero to 40K?

CH: Yeah. The boat wouldn’t hold, you know, more than thirty-five, forty-thousand.

RC: And where did they sell the catch? Was it down there at Stock Island [Florida Keys]?

CH: Down at Stock Island, yes.

RC: All right. Okay, so how long did you fish for those guys, Chuck?

CH: Probably not much more than a couple of months, and I came back up to Fort Pierce and got on a boat that was owned by Timmy Meyers. We had gone down to Jupiter, but Timmy was kind of a part-time guy; he didn’t want to fish real hard.

RC: And how were y’all fishing with Timmy?

CH: Hook and line; king mackerel.

RC: And who owned the boat? Timmy?

CH: Yeah.

RC: And what’d you say his name—say his name?

CH: Tim Meyers.

RC: Tim Meyers. And how were you related to Tim?
CH: No relation.

RC: Okay. And where did you guys go to fish, Jupiter?

CH: Fished Fort Pierce, Jupiter. But Jupiter, I remember that Jupiter run because we were down there for that. Never could get him to fish a lot, and I’m trying to think whether—one of those times I made some trips with Billy Baird, and I can’t remember whether that was before or after I started fishing with Tommy Curry.²

RC: During what months would you fish with Meyer?

CH: That was just probably a month, you know, ’cause I had family and I needed to work and he wasn’t a hard fisherman.

RC: So, you’re just day fishing for—

CH: Yeah, day fishing.

RC: And you were selling your fish in Jupiter or Fort Pierce or wherever?

CH: Right.

RC: Okay. Well, let’s go on to the next one. Let’s get you some—who’s the next people you worked with?

CH: I probably started fishing with Tommy Curry then.

RC: And Tommy was the—that was—swordfisher?

² Billy Baird was also interviewed for the Oculina Bank Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is O6-00021.
CH: He had—no, we were kingfishing to start with. He had a boat that was the *Kim*, and his brother had a boat called the *Miss Christine*. They were thirty-one foot Stapletons.

RC: Okay, and you hook and line fish?

CH: Yeah. We hook and line fish, and then, when I wanted to switch to swordfish, I went over to his brother and fished for Leland. I fished for Leland for a while. I don’t know how long, but we swordfished, we kingfished.

RC: Well, when you fished with Tommy, y’all were hooking like kingfishing?

CH: Yes.

RC: And it was Tommy’s boat, and I guess you were working for him, a thirty-one Stapleton. And where did you fish with Tommy?

CH: Fort Pierce.

RC: Can you show me on the map? That’s northeast grounds.

CH: Uh, northeast. Mainly northeast grounds, but all the Fort Pierce area around here. They didn’t travel, but—

RC: Well, maybe from the Bethel Buoy here?

CH: Probably Bethel to 12 [Buoy], or in that area, yes.

RC: Okay. What months were y’all doing that? All year?

CH: Yeah. All year.

RC: And how long did these fishing trips last. Day trips?
CH: They’re day trips. When the fish were there, I mean, you’d go out, you know, you’d have thousands, 1500, 700 pounds. There wasn’t a limit or anything; you caught what you could catch and came in.

RC: Hey, Chuck, where did you sell these fish?

CH: I believe we sold those at the co-op.

RC: How many years did you fish for Tom?

CH: I fished for the Currys for probably a couple of years, anyway, because we fished swordfish; and then Leland built a fifty-two foot boat and I fished on that for a while.

RC: And that’s when you went to the swordfishing?

CH: Right.

RC: And how did you fish for the swordfish?

CH: Long line.

RC: Long lining. What did you use? Can you explain a bit about a long line?

CH: Well, at that time, we started out on the Stapletons. We had five miles of line, probably 300, 400 hooks. Run high flyers on the beginning, middle, and the end—

RC: So, you floated your line?

CH: —buoys, and in between each buoy we ran about six hooks, or ten of them when we started out; probably more than that, ’cause we ran an awful lot of hooks for five miles of line.

RC: Right.
CH: We were just starting swordfishing. Swordfishing was just starting down here. You’d catch a thousand pounds a night. I mean, if you didn’t catch a thousand pounds a night, you had a bad night.

RC: Really? (laughs) And how long did you fish with Leland Curry?

CH: Oh, I don’t know; a couple of years, probably.

RC: And while you fished for him, you had a thirty-one Stapleton and then you moved up to a fifty-two footer?

CH: Right. We had the Miss Irene, the fifty-two footer he had built. We had fished that.

RC: Were you fishing out here, out in front of Fort Pierce? Here on the map, east of Oculina?

CH: You’d run down south, southeast a hundred fathoms, and then drift with it; we’d set it out down there and then drift back up to the north.

RC: So, the hundred fathoms you’d actually be coming up outside of the Oculina sometimes, huh? (referring to map) If you got up this way?

CH: If we got up this way, probably, yeah.

RC: Okay. And you said a thousand pounds would be an average night?

CH: Yeah, with the Stapletons. There was quite a few a fish out there then.

RC: And where did they sell the swordfish at?

CH: At the co-op.
RC: At the co-op, also. And how many years did you fish for the swordfish?

CH: Probably a couple of years.

RC: And, Chuck, why did you stop fishing with them?

CH: Well, at one point, I started doing my own kingfishing. I had bought a little boat and started fishing my own boat.

RC: When do you think that was?

CH: (laughs) Oh, boy. Let me think who I was (inaudible). I don’t know. Probably—

RC: Sounds like it was still in the seventies [1970s].

CH: Yeah. It was in the seventies [1970s] somewhere when I started fishing.

RC: Y’all start swordfishing pretty early out here, when it’s seventy-six [1976], or something? George started in seventy-six [1976], I think. Were you doing it before him?

CH: I forgot. Yeah, before George started. I forgot that George had started coming out.

RC: So, were y’all quitting about the time George was starting?

CH: He may have been moving to a bigger boat by that time. I think George had Brant with him and Brant, before, had fished with Leland and me.

RC: That would put us around seventy-eight [1978], seventy-nine [1979].

CH: Yeah, probably.

RC: Okay, and—
CH: Everybody was moving around. You know, you could then.

RC: Right. Whatever met your schedule?

CH: Right. Whatever looked like you could make some money in, you did, you know?

RC: Okay.

CH: Swordfished or net fished or kingfished or—

RC: Then you got your own boat and started king—

CH: Got a little I/O [Inboard/Outboard] drive boat and started kingfishing that. My dad was still alive then, so that was—trying to think when he died. He must have died in eighty-five [1985] or something, so it was before then.

RC: When you got your little hook and line kingfish boat, who did you fish with?

CH: Me.

RC: Just you. And you owned the boat, and how was big was the I/O boat?

CH: Oh, it was probably twenty-two foot or something; it was small.

RC: And, Chuck, where did you go to fish for the kingfish?

CH: In Fort Pierce. I just fished out of Fort Pierce.

RC: And once again, here’s our map of Fort Pierce area; 10 Buoy, 12 Buoy?
CH: Northeast grounds, you know, the kingfish grounds around Fort Pierce; inshore, offshore.

RC: So I take it it’s around from around from the Bethel Shoals—

CH: Bethel Shoals on down to the—

RC: —far northeast. Okay, and during what months were you doing this kingfishing on your own?

CH: That was year-round.

RC: Okay, and how long did your kingfish trips last?

CH: Just a day.

RC: And what would you think an average catch would have been?

CH: Back when I was starting—it’s too scary to even think about it.

RC: Dang, you were good, huh?

CH: (laughs)

RC: Were you still selling to the co-op at that time?

CH: Yes.

RC: Chuck, how many years did you fish for the kingfish?

CH: Well, from then on. From then till about a month ago. (laughs) Actually, I’m still fishing for them! We went out yesterday, the day before. I just don’t have my own boat, but I’m still fishing with Billy.
RC: So, when did you fish in the Oculina Bank?

CH: After I—I started fishing a little bit with Billy off and on. I’m trying to think whether that was between boats, because I had that first little boat, and then I bought the Striker, which was Leonard McBay’s old boat; I don’t know whether you remember that?

RC: Yeah.

CH: And I fished that, and when I sold that, I bought the *Bonnie Sue*, which was—

RC: Thirty-one Stapleton, right?

CH: Yeah, it was. I’m trying to think—Bill Warrick and the *Roto-Rooter*. He had two boats; he had the *Antonio* and the *Roto-Rooter*, and they were bottom fishing them. And I had started bottom fishing in the summer a little bit with Billy Baird. So, then when I bought Bill’s boat, I had already been bottom fishing with Billy Baird, so I was kingfishing and bottom fishing in that boat, and that’s when I got into the bottom fishery.

RC: So, can we kind of estimate maybe when you started bottom fishing Oculina Bank?

CH: Well, I owned the *Bonnie Sue* for twenty-three, twenty-four years, and it sank in—

RC: Aught-four [2004]?

CH: Aught-four [2004].

RC: That figures out to eighty-one [1981]. So, probably around 1981 you started out fishing on your own in your own vessel.

CH: Well, I was already fishing. I had had two boats before that, but that’s when I started bottom fishing. When I got the *Bonnie Sue*, I started bottom fishing.
RC: Back up a little bit. So you think you went with Billy Baird occasionally before that?

CH: Yeah, I did.

RC: So, in eighty-one [1981], let’s say, you got the Bonnie Sue, you were kingfishing in the winter and you were summer fishing in the Oculina Bank?

CH: Summer fishing with Billy, I guess, and his brother, Ronnie. I was on Billy’s boat, the Vicki Ann, which was another thirty-one foot Stapleton. Ronnie had the—

RC: I don’t even remember that.

CH: I can’t even remember his boat, either, but Billy would. Billy would remember it. For a while, Ronnie had the Caracal. I don’t think he was fishing the bottom fish there, ’cause we made a trip up off of St. Augustine [and] Georgia when he had the Caracal; we went up there with the Vicki Ann. So, that was probably before eighty-one [1981].

RC: Before eighty-one [1981]? So, in eighty-one [1981] when you started fishing the Oculina Bank, how did you fish it when you were fishing the Oculina Bank in the Bonnie Sue?

CH: Just had a chart recorder, and go out there, and I’d find a beacon, drop an anchor on it, and fish, and there were fish there.

RC: And what kind of gear would you use, Chuck?

CH: That was bandit reels.

RC: What is that, like, a multi-hook rig? Or a one-hook rig?

CH: They were multi-hook rigs, but pretty much so a couple of two-hook rigs, things like that. We had—afterwards, we started fishing what we’d call a “chicken rig,” but that was something that Billy’s brother had shown us.

RC: Uh-huh.
CH: I guess when I was fishing the *Bonnie Sue*, we had already figured out the chicken rigs and we were using a six, seven, eight-hook rig.

RC: So, anywhere from—

CH: Lead on the bottom for porgies. When we started out, we started catching the porgies and there wasn’t a market for ’em. When we brought these fish in, we started getting the market [price] for them. We were getting a dollar, ninety cents for ’em.

RC: And you were catching those along with your groupers and rigs?

CH: Right, along with the grouper. In fact, mainly we were grouper fishing. I did a trip one time where I just stuck with the porgies, and we got in and found out that we could make money with the porgies. And then we started rigging up for porgies, and we’d catch grouper along with them.

RC: But porgies are in the bottom fish, one of the species, so that was all—they’re all named as the snapper/grouper species. So, you had fished one seven-hook depending on the species?

CH: Well, with the groupers, we had had two hook rigs for the grouper; we catch grouper and amberjack. We catch grey tile with it. With the porgies, you had what we call a “chicken rig”; we catch porgies and snapper and triggerfish and sea bass with those rigs. We’ll put little circle hooks on them, little Japanese circle hooks, and—

RC: All right. Now, that’s on the thirty-one Stapleton, the *Bonnie Sue*, and you owned it. Here on this map, we see the Oculina Bank. This is the southern end; this is what you call Jeff’s [Reef], Chapman’s Reef, and of course goes on up even beyond—

CH: We fished from one end, all the way through it, out the other end.

RC: Okay, from what you said, from one end to the other?

CH: We fished all this area up past—you know, up to the Cape [Canaveral] and on.
RC: On average—

CH: I’ve got bottom numbers that go from here on up to off of Georgia.

RC: But this was always your starting point?

CH: Yeah.

RC: On average, how far do you go offshore for these fish?

CH: Usually, I think that was about twenty miles.

RC: Okay.

CH: It’d be further off, the further north you went. You know, you’d be further off, ’cause we’re staying in that—300 to actually about 250 to 400 is what we fished.

RC: The heart of the Bank, there. During what months of the year did you fish for this bottom fish you said?

CH: I started bottom fishing usually after the Jupiter run of kingfish. So, after that May run: June, July, August.

RC: And how long did the average trip last?

CH: Two to five days.

RC: And how much was an average trip’s catch, Chuck?

CH: Usually around a thousand pounds. You try to fill your box, but sometimes it didn’t happen and you’d come in. But a lot of times, you know, you could do it in two days, three days.
RC: Right.

CH: So, that kind of regulated how long the trip was.

RC: Your box size.

CH: I fished off of St. Augustine and there. I made six and seven day trips, sometimes. But you’re way far offshore, there, a lot further offshore.

RC: And, Chuck, where did you sell this fish? Did you bring them back here to Fort Pierce?

CH: At that time, I think we were fishing—yeah, we brought them back to Fort Pierce. We were coming in and out of Fort Pierce and fishing. I guess I’d fish mostly bottom fish for Inlet.

RC: Inlet Fisheries, here in town?

CH: Yeah.

RC: For how many years did you fish for the bottom fish, the groupers and the porgies?

CH: Well, fished for them up until they closed the Oculina Bank, so, after that.

RC: If you stopped in ninety-four [1994], that would put you somewhere within fifteen years, give or take a year.

CH: Yeah, something like that.

RC: Okay.

CH: I like bottom fishing better than kingfishing. Always did. You didn’t have the hassle or fighting over the fish, or anything else, you know? It was kinda peaceful.
RC: All right, Chuck. Well, I think we caught most of your history. Did we miss anything? Okay. Of course, you were a bandit fisherman, grouper/snapper at Oculina Bank, and it was hand-in-hand with your yearly fishing routine, right? You never depended on one or the other. You depended upon both.

CH: Mm-hm.

RC: Okay. All right. Well, finally, I’d like to talk about how your fishing has changed over time in regards to the Oculina Bank since eighty-four [1984]. I’m gonna read a few different law changes and we’ll see how it affected you. In eighty-four [1984], the Oculina Bank was initially closed to trawling, dredging, and bottom longlining. Did that affect you?

CH: No.

RC: Okay. In ninety-four [1994], the Oculina Bank was designated as a experimental closed area where the retention of snapper grouper species was prohibited, and fishing boats were also prohibited from anchoring. Did that affect you?

CH: That shut down our fishery.

RC: That down your fishery in ninety-four [1994]. Okay, then in ninety-six [1996], all anchoring in the Oculina Bank shut down.

CH: See, it didn’t matter about anchoring. You couldn’t keep snapper and grouper. I mean, in ninety-four [1994], didn’t they—


CH: Didn’t they stop retention of snapper and grouper?

RC: Right, right, right.

CH: So, you know, the fish we were catching—you couldn’t catch it, so you’re done. It doesn’t matter whether you anchor—I mean, for a lot of the years that we fished, we power fished,
anyway. We didn’t anchor. You’d sit on it and just put the pilot on south and hold it in gear, and it just sits you over the spot; you didn’t have to anchor.

RC: So, power fishing is when you keep the engine in gear, but you would try to maintain a position?

CH: Sure. That’s what I say, you put—I had an autopilot on the boat, you have it south, but I also had a remote on it; it was right by me, you could change it a little bit. But you’re just sittin’ there and you’re powerin’, motorin’ over the—just being—

RC: (inaudible)

CH: Sure. It’s just like you’re anchoring, except you don’t have an anchor down.

RC: Okay.

CH: I mean, if they’d had said no anchoring, okay, we could’ve still fished it.

RC: But after retention—

CH: But once they say, “Well, you can’t keep the species,” well, you can go out there and you can ride around, but you can’t catch anything. It’s hard to make money that way.

RC: Did you in good, huh? In ninety-six [1996], Chuck, they prohibited the east and north; prohibited from the trawling rock shrimp. Did that affect you?

CH: Well, by then, we’re done. We’re done in ninety-four [1994], so whatever they do after that, no, it didn’t affect us at all. Once you’re done, you’re done.

RC: Well, Chuck, that brings us on to this kind of management. The designation of marine areas that are close to fishing, such as the Oculina Bank, are being more used more and more frequently as a fishery management tool. What do you think of the use of closed areas?
CH: I don’t particularly care for them. I didn’t like ’em then, I don’t like them now. The same thing I had to say then—you know, to me, the scientists say, “Oh, well, let’s close this area because great things will happen.” The main thing that happens is that the scientists just create their own little private fishing area, ’cause they’re the only ones who get to fish it after that. They go out and get the fish, they can say, “Oh, this is what’s happening,” and nobody else gets to fish it, so we don’t know what’s happening. And I can guarantee a scientist doesn’t know whether there’s enough out there to sell, or anything else, you know?

RC: Well, how do you think closed areas compare to other type of management measures, like quotas and closed seasons?

CH: Well, with the quotas and seasons, you’ve got at least a fishery that you’re looking at, you know? People are going out catching the fish; you can see how the catches are. When it’s closed—I mean, I’ve seen scientists say, “Well, golly gee, look! The catch ratio’s gone way down.” Well, yeah, you’ve closed our fishery! What the hell did you expect it to do?! You expect it to go up? I mean, so many times they come up with—I hate to say they’re just asinine theories, but they’re asinine theories, you know? They look at this data and they’ve done something major to change the data and then they say, “Oh, this fishery’s in trouble. Look, the catches just went down to nothing.”

RC: Well, yeah, if you’ve looked at Fort Pierce grouper landings—

CH: Yeah.

RC: —with the Oculina Bank closing, you would see—

CH: (mimicking the scientists) “Oh, look! It dropped off! Something’s happened to the fish! It’s overfished!” You close it, and then don’t catch any fish, and then—so, at least if you have it open, and you’ve got a quota, or whatever, you’ve got an idea. It’s like right now, where they’re talking about where we better lower the quota on kingfish. Well, if you look at the data, the data doesn’t support that. I mean, more kingfish are being caught now, faster; the quota is getting closed earlier every year, so what do you base the fact, “Oh, we want to lower the quota,” on?

RC: You said they’re easier to catch? Is that what you—

CH: There’s more fish out there, and when we’re catching fish, they’ll be north of us, south of us, a hundred miles all up and down the coast. Everybody’s catching fish. Any way you look at it, you’ve got to figure there’s a whole lot more fish out there than what there were. So, I mean,
there’s a story where they say, “This fishery’s isn’t overfished, it’s not overfishing; we’d like to lower the quota.” It doesn’t make sense.

RC: You’re confusing me right now.

CH: Well, that’s what the scientists are sayin’, ya know? You’ve got a fishery that’s not overfished and it’s not overfishing. “We think we ought to go to ITQs [individual transferable quotas].” Why? If you’ve got a fishery that’s not overfished and not overfishing, why do you want to limit it to different individuals that have a permit? I mean, if a fishery is a recovered fishery—this is America. Okay, you got a healthy, recovered fishery: anybody should be able to get a permit and go become a commercial fisherman and sell the fish. So, why would you want to limit it to just a few fishermen?

RC: Well, like you’re talking about ITQs; you have a lot of history of special fish out here on Oculina Bank. You don’t think you’ll get rewarded for that?

CH: (laughs) Yeah, I’ll get rewarded, all right. You know? But another pole up my butt isn’t the kind of reward that I appreciate, so—

RC: Oh, they go with certain time frames? Just the time frame issue, again.

CH: But some of the data—I can remember going to Palm Beach because they wanted to close the triggerfish fishery. They were gonna ban catching triggerfish, and everybody showed up down there and said, “What are you talking about? There’s so many triggerfish out here we’d like to put a bounty on ’em.” You can’t even get through the triggerfish to get down to where the snappers are, you know? Sometimes you wonder where the information’s coming from, you really do.

RC: Well, I think you’ve mentioned—which do you prefer? It sounds like you like quotas and closed seasons the best. What do you think’s the best way to manage it?

CH: Without somebody being able to catch the fish, so you’re getting a sample of that fish coming in, you’re seeing what age groups are coming in, you’re getting a cross-section of that fish different times of year. When you just shut down a fishery, you’re not getting any information off of that.

RC: Or shut down an area.
CH: Or shut down an area. Yeah.

RC: Well, Chuck, thinking ahead to the future, what do you think fishing in Fort Pierce will be like in ten years?

CH: Nonexistent?

RC: Could you talk about that for a little bit?

CH: Well, right now they’re talking about wanting to do this ITQ; nobody I’ve talked to wants anything to do with it, but that’s never stopped them from doing anything in the past. We’ve talked to people that have gone on to ITQ programs and they’re saying, “You don’t want anything to do with this.” Things that, you know, you end up having to pay for and have to come out that they never tell you about. For instance, percentage of your catch going to pay for the—

RC: Program itself?

CH: For the program itself, right. Or you think you’ve caught so many fish you’re gonna get a nice quota and you’re gonna get a fourth of that, so then you’re gonna have to buy it from somebody else. To me, right now, you’ve got a fishery that’s open. Anybody that’s got a permit can go out there and fish it. They catch—you know, if they’re good fishermen they can catch the quotas whenever the fish are there. When a quota’s filled, shut down, everybody’s had an equal shot at it. But to say, “Well, all right, since you’ve done this, you can catch X number off of your quota”?

RC: Well, how about if I say this, Chuck: since the Oculina Bank closed down, you’re not gonna get no history in of the grouper snapper fishery. How do you like that? I’m being facetious!

CH: I know, that’s—my grouper snapper fishery, I sold that permit in 2004, I believe. Wasn’t using it and was gonna lose it, so you may as well sell it.

RC: Right, and you said that’s due to the fact the Oculina Bank’s closed.
CH: I mean—you know, I live in Fort Pierce. To travel forty, fifty miles to check out a fishery, [is] kind of cost-ineffective.

RC: Well, that’s fifty-eight miles long, I think.

CH: Yeah, it’s longer now than it was. But you get out there, and after you get out there, then you find out, “Oh, the current’s too strong to fish out here,” so you’ve just wasted the trip.

RC: Right. Well, all right, Chuck. Thank you very much for sharing your fishing history with me, and that’ll conclude the interview if you don’t have anything else to say. Is that—we’ve got it covered?

CH: Far as I know.

RC: All right. Well, thank you, sir.

CH: Yes, sir.

*End of interview*