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Billy Baird oral history interview by Robert Cardin, May 27, 2010

Billy Baird (Interviewee)
Robert Cardin (Interviewer)

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Robert Cardin: Hello. Good afternoon. This is Robert Cardin. Today is May 27, 2010, and I’m at Billy Baird’s residence conducting an oral history with Captain Billy Baird for the Gulf and South Atlantic Fisheries Foundation project with the Fort Pierce fishermen on the Oculina Bank HAPC [Habitat Area of Particular Concern]. Welcome, Billy. Will you please spell and state your name, please?

Billy Baird: My name’s Billy Baird. B-i-l-l-y B-a-i-r-d.

RC: Billy, where were you born, where and when?
BB: I was born in Creekmore, Kentucky in 1943, February 18.

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

BB: Permanently, in 1970, although I was down here as a kid in fifty-seven [1957], fifty-eight [1958]. I saw some commercial fishing with Charlie Lowe’s seafood, and I’d fish off the old South Bridge. So, it was sort of implanted during that time that I like the area and everything. Then, I came down again in sixty-one [1961] for about ten months, worked at a fruit packing house.

RC: When was your first time down here, you said?

BB: Fifty-seven [1957], fifty-eight [1958], the winter.

RC: We hear a lot about Charlie Lowe’s Fish House; was that right there by Inlet Fisheries?

BB: It was actually on the old South Bridge, the point there on the south point.

RC: Right.

BB: So, I went in there a few times and see these big red snapper—other fish, too; but the reds, they were the most interesting.

RC: Got you attention huh?

BB: (laughs) Even as a kid, yeah.

RC: Well, then, let’s ask you this: What brought you to Fort Pierce?

BB: I came down in May of 1970. My family had moved down in sixty-nine [1969]. My brother Ronnie just got out of the Navy, and my older brother, Roger, he commercial fished in the late sixties [1960s], kingfishing. So it began there, and I started kingfishing with Ronnie.
My marriage didn’t go well, you know, for about four years. So we divorced, and that was one reason I came down here, too. But other than that, I was down here to find a job. So—

RC: Come down with family to fish?

BB: Yeah, mm-hm.

RC: This isn’t really in the interview, Billy, but your name—the Baird name keeps coming up when anyone talks about the Oculina Bank. So anytime that you’ve—we’re really not supposed to talk about people in third party. But any time that we have an opportunity to talk about some of your brothers, any time you want to make reference to Ronnie Baird or Roger Baird or David Baird, please do so. The name is synonymous with the fishing.

So, how old were you—you’re married now, and how old were you when you first got married?

BB: Twenty-three.

RC: Twenty-three.

BB: Yeah.

RC: Okay. Billy, do you have any children?

BB: I have one son. He’s forty-three. He lives here in Fort Pierce; in fact, right up on Palm [Avenue].

RC: Right here in the neighborhood. (laughs)

BB: Right in the neighborhood, yeah.

RC: Sounds like your family likes to hang tight, huh?

BB: (laughs) Yeah.
RC: Well, Billy, how much school did you go to?

BB: I went through high school.

RC: High school?

BB: Mm-hm.

RC: Do you have any other jobs, besides fishing, now?

BB: No, that’s it right now.

RC: Okay. In the past, have you had other jobs besides fishing?

BB: No. I had one little side job, but that was early seventies [1970s]. But that was maybe three months, and then I got right back into fishing. (laughs) It paid better to (inaudible) fish.

RC: That was a little side job wasn’t it?

BB: It was a little side job in plastics.

RC: That doesn’t even work out to a day a year. (BB laughs) Well, Billy, do you currently own a boat?

BB: Yes, I do.

RC: What kind is it?

BB: It’s a Stapleton. Tip to stern, it’s a thirty-one [feet] Stapleton.
RC: All right. Well, now I’d like to ask you some questions about the Oculina Bank itself.

BB: Okay.

RC: And let me ask you this: How familiar are you with the Oculina Bank?

BB: I still have numbers in my mind about where I fished, caught fish, caught grouper, snapper, because you know, you’d make little notes. We caught a lot of porgies. That was primarily our main objective, because they got to paying a pretty good price for porgies. And then we’d get, of course, scamps, snowies, and sea bass, things like that.

RC: And you got your snappers, too, out there, didn’t you?

BB: Yeah.

RC: Yeah, I remember seeing some of the catches.

BB: Yeah.

RC: Porgies are part of the grouper/snapper fishery. Where or when was that developed? Do you have any idea? You said the price got better. Was it a developing—

BB: We would catch an incidental porgy on a large hook. And of course they’re not, you know, two or three pounds, maybe a four pounder. It’s usually—that’s a real big one, but we’d catch one once in a while. But we weren’t targeting, because they weren’t that good of a price. They weren’t marketable.

RC: Uh-huh.

BB: And then, later on, they started bringing probably eighty, ninety cents a pound, and that was, I would say, in the early eighties [1980s], which was a good price. My brother Ronnie lived in Cape Canaveral, and he—90 percent of his fishing was bottom fishing. I mean, he did some kingfishing, but probably 80, 90 percent was bottom fishing. He found out how you could catch the porgies better with what we call a porgy rig. So we could catch, you know, five or six at a time, going down, when you’re—
RC: So now you’re catching twelve or fifteen pounds.

BB: Yeah, yeah, on a lift.

TH: That’s starting to add up, like the groupers.

BB: Yeah, yeah. So it made it profitable, instead of bringing up one at time, one or two on a hook.

TH: On this map here, this outline is Oculina Bank. I believe there’s quite a porgy fishery up to here, wasn’t there? (indicates)

BB: Yeah, it was real good. Once in a while we’d get on small ones, and we’d just pull off ’em if they were, like, a pound. We’d just pull off ’em and look for—you know, we’d want to catch, on average, two pounds anyway. And that’s what they generally would average, two, two and a quarter.

RC: All right. So that’s like in [the] eighties [1980s] you all actually developed your own porgy market around here, it sounds like.

BB: Mm-hm.

RC: Okay. Billy, do you know why the Oculina Bank was designated as an area to protect?

BB: From what I understand, it was the coral. I’m not positive that’s the entire reason, but I believe it was because of the Oculina coral.

RC: Okay. Is there anything else you can tell me about the Oculina Bank, like what do you know? Like it’s—it says good fish in bottom; there’s good coral in it.

BB: Well, there’s good points and bad points, because we would be shut down if the current was too strong; we couldn’t even fish it.
RC: Right.

BB: So, it was protected on its own in certain times. We’d have to pull in, you know, twenty-seven fathoms, which there was good rock in there. But it was more—in that area, you’d find your snapper and grouper and a few porgies, but the main place for your porgies was out there in the forty-five fathom area.

RC: Right. Well, I guess the Gulf Stream probably swoops in there quite often in that area?

BB: Yeah, yeah. It’d come in there, and depending on how deep the current ran—you know, if it ran over three knots and it ran deep, it was almost impossible to fish.

RC: (inaudible)

BB: Mm-hm. Yeah.

RC: But other than that, it was a fairly productive area, in your experience?

BB: Yeah, mm-hm. Yeah.

RC: Okay. What do—

BB: [We’d] fish about two days, two to three days.

RC: Billy, what do you think about the closure of the Oculina Bank to anchoring and bottom fishing?

BB: Well, it put me out of business, as far as being in this location, because you had to go all the way up to Sebastian even to fish in the allowable area.

RC: So it was a matter of, like, moving or fishing here or something?
BB: Yeah. It just made it a lot harder to want to go out there and fish. We could just go straight out and fish a little north and south, you know, you could be on the bank out there and be productive.

RC: And I guess, probably, if you wanted to keep fishing and went up to the Cape [Canaveral] or something, then you were jammed up with a lot of other boats that were [there]. Did it consolidate the boats?

BB: There was a few bottom boats up there, but that’s it. You know, it’s a large area up there because you’re getting further offshore.

RC: All right. Okay. You kind of answered this, but has the closure of the Oculina Bank affected your fishing, and how? You said it shut you down in this area. Okay, well, I think you answered that one, didn’t you? Well, what adjustments did you make when the Oculina Bank closed? How did that affect you? Did you switch your efforts or move?

BB: No. I had to switch more to the kingfishing, yeah. So, that put more pressure on the kingfish.

RC: That’s something you could do here in the Fort Pierce area?

BB: Yeah, mm-hm.

RC: Okay. If anchoring and bottom fishing on the Oculina Bank was not prohibited, would you fish there?

BB: Yeah.

RC: This one; isn’t that (inaudible)?

BB: (laughs) Yeah, I would still have my reels on the boat.

RC: What about today? It’s not much wind; would you be out there today?
BB: There’s a possibility. (both laugh)

RC: How would you fish there? I guess—

BB: If the current wasn’t strong and the fish were biting really well, I’d anchor up, you know, and have about 600 to 800 feet of rope out.

RC: Uh-huh. How did—

BB: But sometimes I’d just go from one spot to the other and just motor fish. And that worked real well, a lot of times.

RC: Did you fish with, like, rod and reels or Bandits?

BB: Bandits, mm-hm.

RC: Okay. Can you tell me a little about your bait or your rigs that you might have used?

BB: We used mostly squid.

RC: I’ve heard some guys say they used one hook, and some guys said they used five hooks. Did you—how did you fish ’em?

BB: I would use seven hooks, and I would bait the top hook. It would be a big circle hook and I’d put a larger bait on there. A lot of times, I’d catch grouper on that top hook.

RC: Okay, and what—your other hooks, you’d be catching pink porgies and stuff?

BB: Yeah, mm-hm.

RC: So you put down a combo rig, huh? (laughs)
BB: I mean, I had two-hook rigs, also, if I was on anything that looked productive with the larger fish, with the snapper and grouper.

RC: Or jacks [amberjacks]?

BB: Or jacks, mm-hm.

RC: Okay. Overall, how has fishing changed since you began fishing in Fort Pierce?

BB: Well, the regulations have really made an impact. So, that would be the main thing right there.

RC: And by that, you’re referring to things like this Oculina closure and seasons and area closures in the seasons?

BB: Yeah, mm-hm.

RC: Okay. Have you had any experience with law enforcement within or regarding the Oculina Bank?

BB: Well, unfortunately, I did. I was on the north end, and I could see the boat inshore there. He was probably in the thirty fathom to twenty-five fathom range. I made just a few drops, and they came out there and issued me a ticket for fishing on there.

RC: So by north end, you mean you was barely in it or something?

BB: Yeah. I was—

RC: When was this?

BB: You know, I can’t remember the exact year. I would say it’s been probably around eight years ago. It just—
RC: It closed in ninety-four [1994], was when that law went into effect.

BB: Okay. It closed in ninety-four [1994]. Let’s see—

RC: I’ll be honest with you: it hadn’t been closed a month or two, and I heard about it. (laughs)

BB: Yeah, okay. I can’t remember exactly, you know, at this time.

RC: So, you had a red snapper or something?

BB: I had just a—actually, we didn’t have any on there, because (laughs) they got me for dumping fish. I had about a half dozen porgies, and that was a big mistake, you know, throwing ’em out. They had their binoculars and I think they saw it; they were looking for floating fish. Of course, they weren’t floating, but that was an additional fine. So, it was just a bad decision to not have ’em on the boat, because the only thing they would have got me for was being in the waters and having some fish, I guess.

RC: Okay. So, I guess it was around back in the—was it close to the closure? Had it just happened?

BB: Okay—

RC: Ninety-four [1994] is when they made it—May 14, I think; it was in ninety-four [1994].

BB: Okay. So, it would have supposedly reopened in aught-four [2004] if it had the ten-year leeway.

RC: That was the ten-year.

BB: Yeah. So, I think it was probably—I’d say probably 2002, I’d just guess, maybe 2000. It was eight, ten years ago. Time flies, so, yeah. (laughs)

RC: I remember. It seems like a lot longer ago than that to me, because I remember people talking.
BB: It could be.

RC: When it first happened, there was a thirty-day grace period or something like that, and it didn’t seem like another thirty days. But anyway, this is your story, so excuse me. So, the question is: Experience with law enforcement? Yes, you did. You had, you said, half a dozen illegal fish or something like that?

BB: Yeah, yeah.

RC: Okay. I’m sorry about that.

BB: I was on the north end and I was hoping they’d give me a break, but they didn’t give me a break.

RC: Were you just barely in it, or didn’t realize you was in it?

BB: Yeah. Well, I’d gone on the north side, and I was gonna just drift my way on up into the legal territory.

RC: Oh, okay.

BB: Yeah.

RC: Back then, I had a problem with—I knew LORAN numbers and they came out with a closure in GPS. And back then, I—if you look at this end, here it goes from 240, but way down here, it’s at the 260. See how the LORAN lines cross this?

BB: Right.

RC: And that always really messed me up on the ends. That made me scared of the ends.

BB: Yeah.
RC: Did you have a GPS back then?

BB: Yes.

RC: Oh, okay.

BB: Yeah, I had a GPS.

RC: Okay. Now, I want to talk about your fishing history, you know, your history itself. Billy, can you tell me the earliest memory of fishing and how old were you, like fishing with your grandpa at the lake or something like that?

BB: I grew up on a farm in Indiana. So, we had little farm ponds, catch catfish, bluegill, bass.

RC: So, you’re talking about three, four, five years old?

BB: Yeah, five, six years old. Yeah, it started then.

RC: I think that most people started that way, it seems like.

BB: A little cane pole, yeah.

RC: How did you learn how to fish, Billy?

BB: My dad; he taught me how to put a worm on. (laughs)

RC: That was the easy part, till tying the knot, huh?

BB: Yeah.
RC: Billy, how did you decide to become a fisherman? I mean, do you remember a point in time when you said, “Man, I want to do this for a living”?

BB: I think—when I came down here in fifty-seven [1957], fifty-eight [1958], I did a lot of bridge fishing, my brother and I, Ronnie. And we’d catch different types of fish off the bridge, and I just loved it. We fished out on the old south jetty, you know, catch a few redfish and things like that, bluefish.

RC: But Roger was the first commercial fisherman?

BB: Yes, mm-hm.

RC: So, in fifty-seven [1957], was he already doing it commercially?

BB: Well, actually, he was in the Air Force at that period of time and he moved down here probably—permanently, after he got out of the Air Force. Around sixty [1960], he came down here to live. He sold insurance for a while.

RC: Did that help to make you decide you wanted to fish, you saw your brother was doing good?

BB: Yeah. I’m hearing stories, kingfish stories, yeah.

RC: Did seeing the checks on Fridays and—

BB: And he got with an old friend, Gil Reeder. I don’t know if you knew Gil, but this goes back in the seventies [1970s], and he—Roger—wouldn’t give up, and he’d go out there. They actually hid their kingfish gear back then, from what I understand. But Gil, he was—Roger was persistent, so Gil showed him how to rig up and how he should do it.

RC: So, he showed you some of those traits?

BB: He showed some, yeah, mm-hm. And that was probably around—probably, 1965, you know, when Roger got him a little kingfish boat.
RC: All right. When did you start to work as a fisherman in Fort Pierce?

BB: Seventy [1970], I—

RC: How old do you think you were?

BB: I was twenty-seven, yeah. When I came down, it was like—you know, Ronnie, he needed somebody on the boat anyway, so I started fishing, kingfishing with him.

RC: Okay, y’all fished for kingfish. How did you fish ’em? Was that a net or trolling fishing?

BB: Hook and line, yeah.

RC: Hook and line.

BB: Mm-hm.

RC: And is that—some of the guys are talking about they troll lines in the water. Is that what you were doing?

BB: Yeah.

RC: Plainers and baits and stuff?

BB: Right.

RC: Spoons?

BB: Mm-hm.

RC: Okay. And you fished with Ronnie. Who owned the boat, then, Ronnie?
BB: Actually, it was a partnership with my father at the time.

RC: Oh, really?

BB: Yeah. Because Ronnie just got out of the Navy and it was a lot of money. It was a thirty-six foot T Craft, you know, so it was a fairly large boat. At that time, it was a good-sized boat.

RC: Right. Then, where did you go fishing when you began fishing? Was it here in the Fort Pierce area?

BB: Yeah, mm-hm.

RC: Here we have Bethel Buoy and 12 Buoy.

BB: That was the main areas we fished, and then we started fishing out of Sebastian, probably in seventy-one [1971] or seventy-two [1972]. The fish seemed to—you know, they used to get down in the Palm Beach area there in the sixties [1960s]. But later on, there started being some real good fishing in the Sebastian area, so we’d go up there.

RC: So, you fished the Sebastian area. Did you stay here or did you just follow the fish?

BB: In the wintertime. They would come down to Sebastian in the wintertime, lots of fish, back then.

RC: Moved with the fish a little bit? Oh, good.

BB: Yeah.

RC: During what months did you fish for the kingfish? You said, winter in Sebastian.

BB: Yeah. Well, summertime, you know, all through the year. And then, I would say 1971, we’d put a couple hand-crank reels on, and that was the beginning of going offshore, learning rocks. And that was with the old (inaudible) LORAN, so it wasn’t accurate, you know, like—(laughs)
RC: Spend all day finding the same spot.

BB: Yeah. You’d have to search, yeah. It was a zigzagging search area.

RC: Well, back to you and Ronnie kingfishing. What were those, day trips? How long would a trip last?

BB: Well, generally, just like it is today. We’d get up early, fish till the afternoon, come on back in.

RC: And what do you think your average trip catch for kingfish was back then?

BB: I’d say, if you take the winter catches and the summer catches, because the winter catches were so large back then, we’d get 1,500, 2,500—

RC: A day.

BB: —even up to 3,000 a day, yeah. So, it’s kind of hard to average in. But it would be—

RC: Well, so, you’re saying that up to 3,000 in the wintertime and up to what in the summertime?

BB: Well, even summertime was—you know, it was like today. Sometimes you wouldn’t have that great of a day. But then you’d have the good days of maybe 400, 500, 600, too.

RC: So it’s easy to say you averaged 500 pounds or better a day?

BB: Yeah, mm-hm.

RC: Throughout the year.
BB: Yeah.

RC: Or better.

BB: Mm-hm.

RC: Okay. Where did you sell these fish at, Billy?

BB: It was Charlie Lowe’s Sea Foods.

RC: We hear that name a lot.

BB: Yeah. Later on, he moved over there on the North [Beach] Causeway.

RC: Right.

BB: And that’s where that was—I can’t remember what year, but when I came down, he was already over there, in seventy [1970].

RC: Well, Billy, you talk about kingfishing with Ronnie, how many years did you all do that together?

BB: I’d say three years.

RC: When you stopped, what did you—why did you?

BB: Well, I got better opportunities running other boats. And then, I got my first boat in seventy-five [1975]. It was a little twenty-four foot Stapleton.

RC: Well, you were running other people’s boats.

BB: Yeah.

BB: Yeah, mm-hm. And then, I worked the boat up in Sebastian. It was like a sixty/forty deal, which seemed like a good deal to me, and it was.

RC: At the time, yeah.

BB: Yeah.

RC: And what, were you kingfishing up there?

BB: Yeah, kingfishing, mm-hm.

RC: Would you—and who owned that boat?

BB: You know, it was sort of like a company boat. The guy had—

RC: Fish house boat?

BB: —three, four, five boats. I just remember his name was Brown, but I don’t remember the company or anything; it’d be so far back.

RC: Okay. What kind of boat were you fishing for him?

BB: It was a twenty-four Stapleton.

RC: Okay. Using the map then, were you fishing out of Sebastian or did you come back down here through—

BB: Yeah. It was strictly—mostly off the pines, you know, up there.¹

¹ This refers to the area offshore of a stand of pines, which can be seen onshore.
RC: So from north of Sebastian Inlet, would you come all the way down here to Fort Pierce?

BB: I’d come in as far as Bethel [Shoals]; that was about as far as we got.

RC: Bethel, okay. Okay.

BB: Yeah.

RC: Was that a year-round thing also?

BB: Yeah. That just lasted about a year. I actually took the boat down in Jupiter for the May run, one time.

RC: Were you day boat fishing then?

BB: Yeah.

RC: How were you doing on that boat?

BB: I did reasonably well, you know.

RC: Still at 500?

BB: Making some paychecks. Averaging 300 or 400 a day, I’d say.

RC: So, you’re one-man versus the two-man?

BB: Yeah.

RC: Where were you selling those kingfish? In Sebastian?
BB: Yeah, in Sebastian and Jupiter. They had an outlet just west of US 1.

RC: Do you remember the market’s name?

BB: Lots of boats, and it’s been too far, too long ago, yeah. (RC laughs) I don’t remember the company. (laughs)

RC: Okay, Billy, and you said you fished with this guy for about a year.

BB: Yeah.

RC: And you stopped fishing because you went and got your own boat, right?

BB: Mm-hm.

RC: So, what did you fish for then, once you got your own boat?

BB: Kingfish.

RC: Okay, and you were trolling. You fished with yourself and you owned the boat, and it was a twenty—didn’t you say a Stapleton, twenty-four?

BB: Yeah, mm-hm.

RC: Once again, where were you fishing? Did you come back to Fort Pierce or come back to Fort Pierce or stay in Sebastian?

BB: It was mainly Fort Pierce because the fishing back then was extremely well. You know, lots of fish before the nets were involved. So, the fish were plentiful.

RC: Was this—when you got your own boat, were you fishing it all year around again?
BB: Yeah, mm-hm.

RC: Okay. How long was—were you still day fishing in your boat?

BB: Yeah.

RC: How was your average catch in your boat?

BB: Well, it's—

RC: About 300 again?

BB: Yeah. It was about 300 for the days you could get out.

RC: When you came back here to Fort Pierce fishing your boat, who were you selling to then, Charlie Lowe’s, still?

BB: Yeah. It was back at Charlie’s, mm-hm.

RC: Okay. For how many years did you fish for kingfish? Does that—

BB: From then to the present.

RC: From then to the present, okay.

BB: Yeah.

RC: I know the Vicki Ann; when did you get the Vicki Ann?


BB: Yeah, mm-hm.

RC: Now, you have the thirty-one Vicki Ann, that’s seventy-nine [1979]. You ought to know it by now, huh?

BB: (laughs) I know it well.

RC: So, Billy, you’ve talked about the different boats and different people you fished with in the kingfishery. And earlier, you started to refer to getting hand cranks and actually fishing for the groupers. When did that start?


RC: Okay. You fished with hand cranked bandits.

BB: Yeah.

RC: Who did you fish with when you were doing that?

BB: My brother Ronnie.

RC: Okay. And then, let’s try to tie all this together. It was Ronnie and it was the thirty-six foot __

BB: T Craft.

RC: T Craft. Where did you guys go to fish?
BB: For the bottom fishing?

RC: For the bottom fishing.

BB: Yeah, anywhere from southeast on up to Sebastian. That was our main area.

RC: What depths? Can you show me here on this map? This is the outline of Oculina Bank, there. This is Oculina.

BB: Mm-hm. It would be, like, 240 to 350. Down on some of those steeples, you know, they get as far as 350 feet.

RC: Okay. So, that’s in this encompassed area outlined as the Oculina Bank, is where you’re referring to fishing?

BB: Yeah, mm-hm.

RC: Okay. That's where you were using the lead weight bandits with two to several hooks?

BB: Yeah. That was later on, like in the early years. We didn’t—we only used just one hook, actually.

RC: In the beginning?

BB: Yeah, in the beginning.

RC: During what months were you and Ronnie going out there to the Oculina Bank, bottom fishing?

BB: Mainly summer months.

RC: May, June, July, August?
BB: Yeah, mm-hm.

RC: Okay. How long did your fishing trips last?

BB: They’d average two days. We’d go out there, you know, maybe early one day and maybe be back in the next day that evening, or up to three days.

RC: Up to three days.

BB: Mm-hm.

RC: Billy, what do think you guys were catching on the bottom fish back then?

BB: Well, we caught a lot of genuine reds.

RC: I mean weight, like, what would a trip’s weight be?

BB: Yeah, we’d get 1,500, 2,000, [something] like that.

RC: I was writing down 1,500 while you were saying that, because I remember what you all used to bring in. (both laugh)

BB: Yeah.

RC: But 1,500 would be a fair average for you guys?

BB: Yeah. We’d consider that a good trip.

RC: Where did you sell your catch at that point?

BB: Charlie’s Sea Foods.
RC: How many years did you fish for these groupers with your brother Ronnie?

BB: I’d say two to three.

RC: Couple years, then. Why did you stop?

BB: Well, like I [said] earlier, I had other opportunities to run boats and basically get my own boat.

RC: Okay. So, we’re gonna say: What did you do next? Even though you’ve talked about the kingfish, I guess we’ll talk about when you got your own boat. You got your own boat and you were kingfishing. What else did you do? Did you fish groupers then, also?

BB: Yeah. I did some night fishing, like on the northeast grounds. We’d go out there and night fish. A lot of squid would come up at night. So, we’d have a dip net. We could dip our own bait up, catch kingfish and a few grouper and a couple of snapper along the way too, sometimes; we caught the whole way down.

RC: And what? Through the day, you got to the Oculina Bank?

BB: Okay, this is with the little boat. That’s when I was doing most—this is in the late seventies [1970s].

RC: It’s up to seventy-nine [1979]?

BB: Yeah. So, that’s when we did quite a bit of night fishing.

RC: Okay. Then, Billy, when you got the Vicki Ann, did you continue to grouper fish with the Vicki Ann?

BB: Yes. I got my reels on there. I kingfished for a few years, and then I got back into snapper and grouper.
RC: Would that be on the Oculina Bank?

BB: Yeah. Fished the twenty-seven fathom area—there’s a nice ridge out there in spots—then go on out to the forty-five fathom area.

RC: Okay. So, now we’re up in the eighties [1980s], and how were you fishing for the bottom fish at that point? On your bandits?

BB: Mainly we just used the weights, the heavy weights with the two hook rig, because we didn’t really know anything about the fishery with the porgy rigs until probably the mid-eighties [1980s], or somewhere in there. It was something that just came along. Ronnie found out that it was a good way to catch the fish. At the time, he lived up at Cape Canaveral, fishing out of there. I made a trip up there and he showed me the tricks and how to make ’em up and everything.

RC: So, basically the whole time, both you and your brothers, even when you owned your own boats, went out there fishing, huh?

BB: Yeah, mm-hm.

RC: All right.

BB: Yeah, we made some trips together. But anyway, he—

RC: You mean like boat following boat?

BB: Let me think back just a little bit.

RC: I remember there was lots of times I could look up and I could see you and Ronnie: might be a mile apart, but it was like you all stair stepped through there.

BB: Yeah, we made several trips together like that, which made it nice in case one of us broke down: we had a way to get back in.
RC: Right. So, in the *Vicki Ann*, were you still doing a couple of day trips?

BB: Yeah, mm-hm, two to three day trips.

RC: And you were still there working out to 400 feet for the porgies and 250 with the groupers and (inaudible)?

BB: Mainly, yeah. Mainly 250 to 350 there, that’s where the porgy range was.

RC: Right. Were you still doing the two-, three-day trips?

BB: Mm-hm.

RC: How ’bout in the *Vicki Anne*? What was an average catch?

BB: When the times are right, we’d each get 1200, 1500 pounds.

RC: Okay. How many years did you fish for the groupers and snappers with the *Vicki Ann*? Was there a point you quit?

BB: I quit right after I got caught. (laughs) When I got caught on the bank, that ended it. I just basically turned around and came back home.

RC: What do you mean? You quit grouper fishing all together—

BB: Yeah.

RC: —or you quit fishing the Oculina Bank? When did you quit fishing the Oculina Bank?

BB: I quit when I got caught by the marine patrol. Yeah, that was it.
RC: Okay. So, I guess why that’s kinda covered it. I’d like to talk about a few things about how things changed in the Oculina regulations and if any of them affected you. The Oculina Bank initially closed to trawling and dredging and bottom long lining in eighty-four [1984]. Did that affect you?

BB: Not in eighty-four [1984]. Let’s see, the closure was in ninety-four [1994], you said?

RC: In ninety-four [1994] was the closure to retention of snapper/grouper species, and it stopped you from anchoring. So, did that affect you, the ninety-four [1994] closure?

BB: Yeah, I made some trips out, but you had to go off past where the closure was.

RC: So, in ninety-four [1994], you had to start going way up to the north during that period?

BB: Yeah, I’d fish up there above Sebastian, even as far as the Cape, you know, up in the 900s.

RC: Go back here. You know, we refer to this Oculina coral, Oculina Bank. You know it runs way up. And earlier, I asked you, “When did you quit fishing the Oculina Bank?” and I was referring to this closed area. When did you quit fishing that closed area? In ninety-four [1994]?

BB: Yeah, yeah, that was it, mm-hm.

RC: And then, later on, you couldn’t even fish in the area. You were allowed to fish north of it, after you had the trouble with law enforcement. (phone rings)

BB: Mm-hm.

RC: All right. Okay, then in ninety-six [1996], anchoring was prohibited within the Oculina Bank. Did this affect you? (phone continues to ring)

BB: Yeah, that just basically closed you. Yeah.

RC: In ninety-six [1996], trawling for rock shrimp was prohibited. Did that affect you?
BB: That’s one of my neighbors. (laughs)

RC: The designation of Marine Protected Areas [MPAs] closed to fishing is being used more and more frequently as a fishery management tool. What do you think about the use of closed areas to fishing, compared to other types of management regulations like quotas, closed seasons, et cetera? Well, what do you think of things like closing these areas?

BB: Well, it just put the person that lives in a neighborhood out of business. I mean, it’s in your back door, so—

RC: It is kind of discriminating, isn’t it?

BB: Yes. I mean, there was just such a few of us doing it that we had no power to say, “Well, we don’t like what’s going on.”

RC: Right, right. Well, what would be better management, like the quotas or closed seasons?

BB: Well, you could live with some of ’em; it’ll depend on how long the season’s closed. I mean, if it’s closed for six months, then you could concentrate on another fishery, and then go from there.

RC: So, a temporary closure, to you, is a lot better than a permanent closure.

BB: Yeah, mm-hm.

RC: You hit on the fact of your neighborhood; that’s a very relevant point. It really discriminates, whether it’s in your back yard or not.

BB: Yeah, mm-hm. Very true, because—you know, had it either it go southeast or straight out or a little northeast. It was basically the whole back yard. (laughs)
RC: Yeah, it was. You know, fifty miles doesn’t seem like much, but it is a fifty mile closed area, and it’s a lot further than fifty miles from the inlet, especially if you’re trying to steam home into a tide or something.

BB: Yeah.

RC: I know I had to come around that north end sometimes, from offshore tilefishing. Man! (laughs). It could be a mess trying to come around—

BB: Yeah, because there’s certain gear you’re not allowed to go through.

RC: Oh, yeah, we can’t go through it, gotta drive around it.

BB: Yeah.

RC: But you usually gotta try to pluck the tide and the sea to come back this way—

BB: Right, get on the south edge.

RC: —or use the falling conditions and try to come inside. Lots of times, it’s easier coming the north side. But it’s not fun lots of times.

BB: Correct.

RC: Well, Billy, here I’m talking and we’re interviewing you, so let’s get you back to talking. (laughs)

BB: All right.

RC: What do you think is the best way to manage a fishery?

BB: Well, we know that in the past years, there’s a—because of the nets and stuff with the kingfish—that there had to be some regulations or they’d just decimate the kingfish. So, there
was good laws that came in, like, for instance, the drift nets. You know, they outlawed them because they were decimating the population of all the species—bonitos, whatever—

RC: Right.

BB: But there has to be some regulations, I realize that.

RC: So, it’s not really a one shoe fits all type approach, it’s different approaches.

BB: Yeah.

RC: And you say that the nets were too efficient?

BB: Yeah. Back in the late seventies [1970s], they decimated the kingfish, and it took a long time for them to come back.

RC: Would you be saying, then, that you agree with the management measures that’s been put in place with the kingfishery, that it has rebuilt the fishery? Is that what you’re saying?

BB: Yes, mm-hm.

RC: Okay. Well, I’m sure someone’ll like to know that they did good. (both laugh) We yell at ’em all the time.

BB: Right.

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

BB: Well, if I had a son or grandson that was in it, I’d be very concerned, family-wise, because with the price, the economy the way it is right now, it’s—we’ve got the prices that we got back in the eighties [1980s], you know, as low as a dollar a pound. Who ever heard of that? We were guaranteed ninety cents even back in the eighties [1980s] and early nineties [1990s]. That was the lowest price.
RC: Well, what were you getting for groupers in seventy-one [1971], the first time you went out there to Oculina Bank and caught ’em?

BB: They were twenty, twenty-five cents. But what we did, we liked the snapper. You know, the snapper, they were triple the price at that place in time.

RC: For the red snappers, yeah.

BB: Yeah. I mean, we obviously liked to target the red snappers. So, that’s what we did: we’d run it, hit the hot spots where the big snappers were.

RC: So, from your past experience, the Oculina Bank is a place that will hold a lot of red snappers?

BB: Yeah. Then, we had this rock. It became known as Indiana Rock.

RC: Right.

BB: I don’t know if you’re familiar with it, but it got that name because I grew up in Indiana; and there was Jerry Harrison, he grew up in Indiana as a kid; and there was about four different boat owners that wound up knowing where that place was, and it got that nickname of Indiana Rock.

RC: Of Indianans knowing there’s that rock.

BB: A lot of people wouldn’t know how it got that nickname, but that’s what happened.

RC: I’ve heard it called that for years.

BB: (laughs) Yeah, yeah. It was—that’s how it derived.
RC: Well, all these issues—we keep hearing about the red snappers. Now, here we are sixteen years into protecting red snappers through that, with the Oculina Bank. You’ve been paying—we’re helping rebuild right now.

BB: Yeah.

RC: (laughs) ’Cause we can’t fish. All right, Billy. Well, is there anything else you’d like to share with us?

BB: No, I can’t think of anything right now.

RC: Well, Billy, like I say, it’s been a pleasure. Thank you, and we’ll conclude this interview at this time. Thank you.

*End of interview*