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Samuel Crutchfield oral history interview by Terry Lee Howard, April 26, 2010

Samuel Crutchfield (Interviewee)

Terry Lee Howard (Interviewer)

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Terry Howard: I’m with Sam Crutchfield. Now, Samuel Crutchfield, do you have a middle name?

Samuel Crutchfield: Yeah, Douglas.

TH: Samuel Douglas Crutchfield. Today is April 26, 2010. I’m at …, that’s my home, conducting an oral interview with—oh, excuse me, I’m Terry Howard. (laughs) I’m conducting an oral history with Samuel Douglas Crutchfield for the Gulf and South Atlantic Fisheries Foundation’s project with Fort Pierce fishermen on the Oculina Bank HAPC [Habitat Area of
SC: Pretty much. I was born in Polk County and started coming to Fort Pierce because of family ties over here when I was just a baby.

TH: Okay. I’m getting ahead of myself. Please state your name and spell your name for the recording, and your place of birth, date of birth, and when you moved to Fort Pierce. Okay?

SC: Okay. My name is Sam Crutchfield, C-r-u-t-c-h-f-i-e-l-d. My place of birth was Fort Meade, Florida, in 1939, and I started coming to Fort Pierce as a baby with my parents, who had friends here in Fort Pierce. And I can remember coming to Fort Pierce about the end of World War II as a real small child, and being unable to go across the South Bridge back then, because it was a military base on the other side.

TH: Now, what was the date of your birth? Nineteen thirty-nine?

SC: June 15—Gemini—1939.

TH: Okay. All right. And you came during the war?

SC: Came here first during the war. I can remember I made a friend very early, because I loved to fish off the bridges here as a kid: a bridge tender on the old South Bridge, and his name was Jim. I can’t tell you his last name, but everybody knew Big Jim, and he would tell stories of coming to work and seeing ships burning offshore; they were torpedoed by the German U-boats. That was a very unique time in history when that was going on right off our coast. And the story that was circling here about the Germans that they found—they were captured here, they had Sunrise Theatre ticket stubs in their pocket.

TH: So they were slipping ashore and going to the movies?

SC: Absolutely.

TH: Okay. I had read that they—that the Bethel Shoals buoy was lit up, had a light on it even during the war, and that the submariners, the German subs, would use that as their (laughs) navigational thing. They would come into the shallow water, lay on the bottom all day long,
come up at night, and attack the shipping.

SC: Yep. There’s some incredible stories about that that happened up and down our coast. And almost all the wrecks that I’ve fished as a charter boat captain, starting in the early sixties [1960s], were wrecks that were results of German U-boat torpedoes. I can remember when I first started going there as a mate on one of the old charter boats in Fort Pierce, the *Victory Too*, with George Archer.

TH: Okay.

SC: George was chatting me up about the ship we were fishing, called the Southeast Wreck in seventy-two feet of water, and that was a torpedoed ship.

TH: Okay.

SC: As was the 12A [Buoy] wreck.

TH: All right. Okay. You first began as a mate with George Archer?

SC: Yeah. I didn’t really grow up in Fort Pierce. I grew up in Bartow. But every time I had an opportunity to come to Fort Pierce, which we did frequently several times a year. We always spent our summer vacations over here, staying in some of the old South Beach apartments, like the Marine Terrace and the old Kiwi Motel on the Inlet. And I officially moved here in 1964 when I finished my tour in the Coast Guard. I spent four years in the Coast Guard. Joined the Coast Guard so I could be stationed in Fort Pierce, and couldn’t wait to finish boot camp and figure out to get here, and took my first opportunity to go to petty officer school, which was radio school in Groton, Connecticut, and became a radioman and found out they didn’t have a radioman billet in Fort Pierce, so (laughs) I was stationed in Jacksonville Beach. Then I got out in January of 1964 and moved here and enrolled in IRJC, the Indian River Junior College, which is now the Community College.

TH: Now, it’s State College.

SC: State College, now. It just keeps getting bigger and bigger. I finished the program here and then went to the University of South Florida and finished my degree and graduated in 1970, fishing part-time and going to school part-time.
TH: Cool. Let me go back. You’re getting ahead of me, but—you said, what brought you to Fort Pierce? I guess the fishing, and your family would come here?

SC: Family ties. My mother and father had friends here in Fort Pierce, and they actually bought a home from some people who lived in Fort Pierce, and the home was in Bartow. So, it all kinda comes together as a big puzzle, but that’s the home I grew up in, in Bartow. And then came over here for summer vacation and on weekend trips, and then moved here in sixty-four [1964].

TH: Do you have—are you married?

SC: Not married.

TH: Have children?

SC: Have no children.

TH: Okay. And schooling? You already went through that. You got your A.A. degree from—

SC: IRJC. And my B.A. degree is from University of South Florida with a degree in television broadcasting.

TH: Oh, yeah?

SC: Absolutely. And there’s a little story that goes with that that’s real quick.

TH: Go ahead.

SC: I met with some of the local—the major stockholders of WTVX once I graduated, ’cause I’d been in the military, I had been to school, I was like ten years older than the kids coming out of college. I had a degree in television and they were looking for a station manager, and I interviewed for the job. I’ll never forget that as long as I live. Whenever they got through explaining what my duties would be, what my salary would be, and what they expect of me, and they asked me what did I think? I looked at my watch and I said, “Well, it’s a quarter to three. The bank’s still open. I’m gonna go to the bank see if I borrow some money and buy me a
charter boat.”

TH: (laughs)

SC: “’Cause I’m not gonna work in television.” (laughs) But I sorta did later on. I got involved—I did a TV show here for about five or six years. Live, every afternoon, Monday through Friday. I did five minutes live on what was going on—the fishing report.

TH: Okay.

SC: And it was sponsored by White’s Tackle Shop back in the old days. Gosh, it seems like the old days were a long time ago, but we’ve always been looking for the good old days and I was living in them and didn’t know it. (laughs)

TH: Okay. The chronology, here: did you go to—were you in the Coast Guard before you went to college?

SC: Coast Guard before I went to college. Got out of the Coast Guard and went back to college. I went to junior college, you know, before I went in the Coast Guard.

TH: So, you got your A.A. degree from the junior college—

SC: No, incorrect. I messed ya up, there. I went to junior college after I got after the Coast Guard.

TH: Okay.

SC: I went to Florida State University right out of high school for one year. They asked me not to come back, my grades were so poor. I’d been to school. I was tired of school. I needed a break. I had an opportunity to go to Florida State and be a member of the Marching Chiefs Band, the symphonic band. I was a trumpet player and they needed one, and so I had a ticket to go to college. But it was just more than what I wanted to deal with right then, and I had a lot of fishing and hunting to do, and I figured I better do a little bit of that. So, eventually, I got back to college and I was ready then. What a difference in my grades. (laughs)
TH: After four years in the Coast Guard?

SC: Oh, yeah. I was ready, then, to go to college.

TH: Okay, and then you’re very successful in the junior college, and then at University of South Florida?

SC: Correct.

TH: Okay. Did you have another job besides charter fishing, charter boat captain, because I know you just talked about an interview. The interview was right after college?

SC: Yeah, it was right after—I mean, really, as soon as I came to town. I mean, really, they knew I had my degree in broadcasting, and some of my friends were the principals and they had ownership of the WTVX. It was just more than I wanted to do. The first thing I could remember knowing I could not get involved in was the three-piece suit and a tie. And that just didn’t fit in my program.

TH: Okay.

SC: And I have a lot of ties, most of which were given to me by my father, and Christmas presents and birthday presents and any reason to give someone a cheap present. I have ’em, but I don’t wear ’em. (laughs)

TH: (laughs) So, you went out—obviously, you didn’t become a captain immediately?

SC: Nope. I went to work—the first job I ever had was on a boat, a fellow from South Carolina named John Yount. He had a boat called the Banshee.

TH: John Young.

SC: Y-o-u-n-t. Yount.

TH: Oh, okay.
SC: And he was an offshore captain.

TH: Yancey?

SC: Yount. Y-o-u-n-t.

TH: But the boat?

SC: Banshee. B-a-n-c-h-e-e [sic]. Like a “screaming banshee.”

TH: The reason I ask—I’m gonna stop you every time you name a name, because—

SC: The spelling and all that, yeah.

TH: Well, they always—they call me. Incidentally, these are gonna be archived at the University of South Florida's Department of Oral History.

SC: I gotcha.

TH: And they’re gonna also transcribe them, so you and myself, we can get transcriptions of the interviews. I should’ve mentioned that at the beginning. Okay, so go ahead: you started off your first job.

SC: That was my first job. And I worked for John off and on for about a year, and I was going to school part-time and working as a mate part-time. I did that all—the entire time I was charter fishing I worked and went to school, and I took night courses and courses, you know, during the week so I could fish on the weekends, and bits and pieces; put together my A.A. degree over three or four years. I couldn’t just go straight through.

TH: That was after the Coast Guard and while you lived here in Fort Pierce.

SC: When I first came to Fort Pierce and started in the junior college, I went to work for John
Yount on the *Banshee*, okay. It wasn’t long, I had—I fit in really well with fishing, because I’ve done that all my life. I knew how to do most everything that a man needed to do to be a mate, because I had been fishing. I was in my early twenties by then. I had been fishing since I was five years old. I had been taught how to wrap wire. I was taught how to put bait on hooks. We didn’t use much live bait in those days, it was all—in those days, nobody here that fished offshore, on a charter boat, fished ballyhoo. It was all mullet. I worked for John, like I said, off and on for about a year, and then I quit John and went to work for George Archer, who had probably the most successful charter business here in Fort Pierce. A-r-c-h-e-r.

TH: Okay.

SC: I’m sure you’re familiar with that one. He and Buck White, who had White’s Tackle Store, lived together on Second Street right down the street from the tackle store. There was always—anything you wanted to know about, all you had to do was ask Buck or George, when it came to fishing. And they knew. They really knew. There wasn’t a joke. If you had a question to answer, they could answer it. George was from New York. He had come from New York as a charter boat captain, and a real interesting story about him, when he came to Fort Pierce, decided he was gonna open a charter business. He got a boat, got all his equipment together, got everything ready, and he hung his sign out over at the old Fort Pierce shop, which is basically now the city marina. And I have a picture of that somewhere. It shows his sign: “For charter.” *Victory* was the boat then, before he got the *Victory Too*.

TH: Okay.

SC: And the afternoon that he hung his sign out was December 6, forty-one [1941]. His boat was commandeered by the Coast Guard and they used it for submarine patrol all during the war, so he didn’t get to charter fish a damned bit! You know? That was beginning and the end until after the war for George’s charter fishing. And his day was patrollin’ the beach, looking for submarines, or picking up survivors or whatever. But that was quite a way to start.

But, anyway, when I got the job working for George on the *Victory Too*, that was my first real job, because he was a real charter boat captain.

TH: Did he ever tell you any stories about picking up survivors?

SC: No, he did not. No. I didn’t hear any stories from George about picking up survivors, but there was all kinds of stories about things that happened during the war that he heard about or witnessed: ships burning at night, seeing the fires offshore, smoking early in the morning. It was a real battleground off of here, you know, with the torpedoing of the ships. The Germans were a
lot closer to us than we thought.

TH: Okay. Fascinating. All right, I need to get back on track, as much as I can, but I love this. Now, do you currently own a boat?

SC: Yes.

TH: A charter boat?

SC: No. I retired from charter fishing, and they say the happiest two days in your life is the day you get a boat and the day you get rid of it. It wasn’t really that case with me. I had done it a long time and I was ready to do something else. But, whenever I sold my boat and got out of it, the boat I owned—I owned a custom built flats boat, now, that’s built by one of the premier boat builders in the world, a sport fishing boat. It’s Mark Willis from Stuart. He built me a twenty-footer.

TH: Mark Willis. W-i—

SC: Right. And we jointly owned this boat. I mean, it stays at my house, I use it, it’s like mine. That was the deal when he built it; he didn’t have time to use it. (laughs)

TH: Willis. W-i-l-l-i-s?

SC: Yes. Correct. Willis Marine. My boat is twenty feet, a flats boat. The last boat he built was a seventy-six foot custom sportfisher with a price tag of just right at $9 million. Forty-three knots, seventy-six feet long.

TH: It’s obscene now, the size of these boats.

SC: It’s obscene. Only the very, very, very exclusively, very rich can afford to own a boat. This boat has forty-three knots; it’s burning 250 gallons an hour, diesel.

TH: Good Lord.
SC: Very impressive boat. That was his dream. He was my mate for many years, and that was his dream, to build boats. And he has built some awesome boats.

TH: Cool. Okay, I’d like to ask some questions about the Oculina Bank.

SC: Okay.

TH: And I will tell you that we’re gonna—there’s gonna be some repetitive questions, so bear with me here.

SC: Maybe I can come up with repetitive answers.

TH: (laughs) How familiar are you with the Oculina Bank?

SC: I would say just generally familiar, not specifically familiar. It was all—came about by just someone discovering many, many years ago that there were places off in forty fathoms where we could catch big grouper and big red snapper, and amberjacks—and the biggest sea bass I’ve ever seen in my life, big old six-pound, green-headed sea bass, which are relatively unheard of in our area.

TH: Green head? I’ve never heard that.

SC: Well, that’s the name for the old—the big ones. You know, a six-pound sea bass is that big. (demonstrates)

TH: Yeah.

SC: I’m lucky now if I can go—and I still think they’re one of the best eating fish there are, anywhere—and can go catch ’em that weigh two pounds. That’s a pretty nice one, but five and six pounders were common when we first started to fish it.

And the first time I ever fished the Oculina Bank, there was a boat from Jacksonville had found this spot, and he called me on the old AM radio and said, “Look, I’m on this. You need to come here and drop something down. We’ve gone down three times and caught three thirty-pound red snappers.” I said, “Definitely, I’m on my way.” And when we got there, we caught a couple of
big red snappers. And in those days we had an old LORAN-A. Yeah, I got the number, the A-number, and we were able to go back there. We discovered it was easy to find because you’d get on your east-west line and then make sure you were south. We call these places “the peaks.” That name still applies today. You hear of people fishing the peaks all the way from—really from just off St. Lucie Inlet right on up to—off of Jacksonville.

TH: Forty fathoms.

SC: Forty fathoms, primarily. Now, it goes from—pieces of it, thirty-one fathoms, forty fathoms, forty-four fathoms, there’s one particular place. But it was primarily if you just wanted a center line about forty fathoms, you know, and it would—the highest, if I could remember, would be 180 foot relief, places where when—there was 180 feet from the bottom from the top if you got on it, if you marked it on a—I think the southwest to northeast would give you the sharpest, highest part. And I had probably a dozen different peaks.

TH: So, it’d be 180 feet from the top of the peak?

SC: From the top of the peak.

TH: So how about from the bottom of the peak?

SC: It’d be 180, 180 on top, and 240 on the bottom.

TH: So, it’s like a hundred-foot—well, I can’t do math.

SC: Eighty foot.

TH: Yeah.

SC: Yeah. Eighty foot was high. Sixty to eighty foot was the—

TH: The peaks.

SC: But, you know, you’d be a 180 foot on top, 240 feet on the bottom. And that was pretty
common on a lot of those different peaks. The first time I ever saw—

TH: Now, that is on the Oculina Bank?

SC: Mm-hm.

TH: ’Cause I was trying to think—it’s a living reef and they have peaks like that on ’em.

SC: Yeah, yeah. They’re peaks; it’s all a reef. You can hang bottom in 240 feet right when you start up that thing—okay, we’re home—and pull up a piece of coral. I have some at home that I pulled, small pieces that you’d break off as you were fishing.

TH: Mm-hm.

SC: And you could hook it right on top and bring up a piece of coral, and it may be—it’s usually all different kinds, but there’s a lot of really pretty coral formations that we hooked pieces of. Now, I didn’t anchor there very much because there was too much tide. You could anchor, but it would be so much tide that you were unable to fish, like you had to power fish it. The first time that people were really aware of what we were doing with—Harbor Branch put their submarine on some of these peaks, and I saw some of that footage.¹

TH: Mm-hm.

SC: I’ll tell you the man’s name; I’ll think of it—Grant Gilmore was there forever.²

TH: Mm-hm.

SC: They made that available for some of the people, the local people that were looking, and they were showing all the Warsaws and the big gags and red snappers and amberjacks on the Oculina Bank. At that time, nobody referred to it as Oculina Bank. They referred to it as the

¹ Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution at Florida Atlantic University conducted scientific research referenced in the Oculina Bank closure. It is a non-profit oceanographic institution dedicated to marine and ocean research and education operated by Florida Atlantic University.
² Richard Grant Gilmore, Jr., PhD is a fish ecologist and ichthyologist. He worked at Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution as research scientist for 27 yrs. (1971-1998). Gilmore has worked on regional aquatic conservation and fishery management programs including Everglades restoration, Oculina Coral Bank studies, and Indian River Lagoon habitat management and reclamation.
TH: Aha! Okay. Why was the Oculina Bank designated as an area to protect in your opinion?

SC: I don’t know. I really don’t.

TH: I think it came as a result of some of these Harbor Branch—

SC: Yeah, I’m sure they have a lot to do with it, if they found that there was something—like, they said that this is the only living coral reefs that we have. Our inshore bar and the offshore bar are supposedly not living coral reef, but I know that is incorrect because I’ve caught living coral there, too. (laughs) You know? Maybe the percentage is what they’re talking about?

Scientific research and scientific knowledge sometimes—and the layman meshing those things gets somewhere lost in the shuffle. I think anytime that we have something that we’re in chance of losing, there’s a chance of our losing it simply because of our inability to care for and protect, then we’re making a mistake not looking into it. And sometimes the only way to do something is to start somewhere and then—you know, like if your house is on fire, the first thing is let’s get the fire put out, and then we’ll worry about straightening things up and making it look nice again. But anytime you close something and say, “You’re not allowed to do this,” or, “You’re not allowed to do that,” it needs a lot more research and looking into scientific study than this state usually puts in before it happens.

There was a huge war here over net fishing. I can remember one of my really, really, best friends ever that was a kingfisherman was Ish Taylor. And Ish Taylor said something about that that I’ll never forget, because it was the only thing out of the whole thing that made real sense. When you wrap a fish up with a net, you take away his ability to survive. If you put fishhooks in the water and give them the option of biting or not biting, you’re never gonna destroy the species. And I firmly believe that. It’s gonna be hard to put something extinct with a hook and line, especially when you deal with what we deal with on the Oculina Bank: water that’s 240 feet to 280 feet deep, current that runs three to four knots. It’s a science to be able to be a good enough fisherman to position your boat so the angler can catch a fish in that dip without being swept north of it and miss the bite altogether. Anyway, it’s a—

TH: Even with modern—

SC: Well, the technology’s gotten much, much better since I quit fishing. I mean, the things—there were things that were sacred. Nothing’s sacred anymore, because they publish charts with
numbers that has every piece of bottom on it that any man has ever found. I had a book, a LORAN book, before there was a GPS. When I retired in 1985 from charter fishing, I had a LORAN book that had several thousand numbers in it: places all the way from the LORAN tower off of Jupiter to up off the Cape. Someone conveniently stole that, you know—which I wouldn’t have taken anything for it, but it was stolen from off my boat.

The GPS, of course, is so much better. It is so far superior; but any old-time fisherman, like myself, still thinks in terms of LORAN numbers. You can put a LORAN number, write it down, I’ll tell you where it is. (laughs) I mean, that’s just the way. We were very, very familiar. You knew, when you hit the zeros going offshore, you were on the inshore bar, east of the Inlet. And when you got down south into seventies, you were on the offshore bar, fifties in the north, and you could just play those numbers. You knew what was east of the Inlet. When I had my first LORAN-C, I could—I learned the number of the Inlet, because I wanted the number of the Inlet of Fort Pierce that I could come in in the dark when it was breaking up, you know, as bad as it gets, I could get into the Inlet safely. And that was a number that was fifty yards north of the tip of the south jetty. And leave—stay the hell away from the north jetty if it’s breaking bad, because you can die right there, big, breaking sea.

You know, that’s why the Oculina Bank, when it was in its infancy of being what it was as a fishery to the charter boat guys—the weekenders that went to the Oculina Bank, for the most part, they wanted to troll over a peak to catch a wahoo or a dolphin or a tuna or something. And they did very little bottom fishing, because most of the run-of-the-mill—weekend warriors, we would call them, people who would fish weekends that were doctors and lawyers. And working people who fished on weekends didn’t have the technology to able to fish that deep in all that current and be able to produce fish. They’d catch amberjack. But anyway, it was—so, anyway, the Oculina Bank was really discovered, it seemed to me, in the seventies [1970s].

TH: What do you think—okay, you’re answering more questions than the ones I’m asking, but I love it.

SC: Yeah.

TH: What do you think about the closure of the Oculina to anchoring and bottom fishing?

SC: I don’t agree with that at all. I think every man that buys a license should have access to that. The anchoring is probably the most—the thing that may hurt it more than anything else, simply because with any kind of anchor that’s gonna hold in the current and the depth, it’s gonna have to be a pretty strong anchor that can, you know, disrupt the bottom pretty good: rip loose, tear up coral. If it’s all we got out there, it’s the only place we’ve got living coral, let’s try not to tear it up. But the average person’s not gonna anchor out there anyway. It’s a rare day that you
get the current slack enough you can anchor.

TH: So you’re of mixed feelings on anchoring?

SC: You know, if they want to eliminate anchoring, I’d go along with that. I don’t have a problem with that. I’m not gonna anchor there anyway. I think I’ve anchored out there three times all the years I’ve fished. Power fishing’s all you need. You’re not going to hurt coral a lot with a fishhook on an eighty-pound line, or sixty-pound line.

TH: So, bottom fishing, you think, should still be allowed?

SC: I think it should be allowed. We’ve got our limitation now. Who’s going to go fish the Oculina Bank right now? You can’t keep a grouper or snapper anyway, so that’s taken care of that. That’s soon to change here, the first of May. But now, I understand that you’re only gonna be allowed one grouper per person, and the only groupers I ever caught on the Oculina Bank were either Warsaws or gags. I don’t ever remember ever catching a red grouper or a scamp. It’s a place where gag grouper and Warsaw groupers would hang out. It’s not deep enough water for a yellowedge grouper, or a black grouper. I’ve never heard of a black grouper coming off there. There’s instances, anything’s possible, but I know I saw an awful lot of grouper caught on the Oculina Bank. I’ve personally caught more grouper than I need to put down on paper off the Oculina Bank charter fishing.

TH: If anch—go ahead.

SC: Anchoring, I think, isn’t something you can just say, “No, you can’t anchor there. You can have the ability to drop a hook and line down there with a live bait or a cut bait, or a jig or whatever, and if you’re tough enough and good enough to be able to catch a grouper down there, then so be it.”

TH: Now, if it were legal and if—I guess this is two if’s: If you were still charter fishing, and if it were legal to fish there, would you fish on the Oculina Bank?

SC: Yes, I would.

TH: Okay.
SC: It’s not only a good place to catch bottom fish; it’s a great place to catch, you know, billfish over those peaks. I’ve caught blue marlin over the top of ’em. I’ve caught yellowfin tuna, blackfin tuna, dolphin, wahoo; it’s such a wonderful place. Any place that you have, be it off Florida, South Carolina, New York, or the Pacific, that has bottom structure and high relief that’s gonna hold bait, it’s gonna be a great place to fish.

TH: Okay. Excellent. So, you would fish how and for what if it were allowed? You just told me that. You’d not only bottom fish, but you’d fish for—

SC: Do a lot of trolling. There’s a lot of days I’ve fished Oculina Bank all day long. From the morning I put my lines out, I stayed on top of those peaks, working north and south, inshore, offshore, all day and never dropped a line to the bottom. It was a great place to troll, like I said, for all your pelagic fish; they’re gonna hang out there because there’s stuff for them to eat.

TH: Overall, how has—this is overall. How has fishing changed since you began fishing in the Fort Pierce area?

SC: I think technology has made the fishing pretty much better in a lot of respects. It may not be as quite as good as it was in others. If this is an encompassing question, meaning inshore or offshore, the king mackerel fishing when I first came to Fort Pierce was nothing short of phenomenal. It wasn’t good; it was phenomenal. I can remember going on a commercial kingfish boat in the early fifties [1950s]. I just rode along with a man—

TH: Who?

SC: I’m trying to remember this fella’s name, because I’m coming up with a blank.

TH: It wasn’t Sherman Merritt?

SC: No, no, no. I knew all those guys, but this wasn’t it. This guy fished for Charlie Lowe. I’m not sure I’d remember his name. He just asked me if I wanted to go with him. He knew I loved to fish, and I was a kid, you know? I was fourteen, fifteen years old. He introduced me to the bugline real quick. (laughs) I was amazed. And I don’t remember what we caught, 300 or 400 pounds of kingfish that day, and they did what they still do. They were about a ten pound average, you know? Now you see them catch them catching five pound average fish, which I hate to see. But that was phenomenal fishing.
But the most incredible change would have to be in the big kingfish that we had in the sixties [1960s] and seventies [1970s] and eighties [1980s], until the nets showed up.

TH: Seventies [1970s]?

SC: People—well, I remember back in the sixties [1960s], whenever George Archer was getting his second boat built, the *Victory Too*, which was being built in North Carolina. He and Buck White and I would fish de-boned mullet for big kings up off what is now Pepper Park. And we’d catch those thirty to fifty pound kingfish. And I can remember Buck, every he’d get one on, he looked at George, and he said, “Man, that’s just another new plank for that new boat,” ’cause it was something—you know, we didn’t have charter. And the people that never saw that firsthand—the guys that fished offshore, all the kingfishermen that fished offshore here, they continued to do that. They would not come in there on the beach and try to catch those fish because they weren’t rigged for it. They couldn’t catch ’em on a handline. They would eat your electric reels alive. And I can remember the first man that started doing that was Tommy McHale. He was the first one. Ish never did try. Steve Lowe never tried it.³ They knew what they were set up to do. And those fish in there were monsters, and there were so many of ’em. It was unbelievable.

TH: What was the biggest one you ever caught in there?

SC: Sixty-seven pounds. And I’ve caught a number of fish over fifty.

TH: And this was with?

SC: I caught six: all rod and reel, no drag, light of drag; this was before kingfish tournaments were even ever conceived. One thing you learn really, really quick when you’re fishing for those big kings on the beach, which are in there: there’s two things that put ’em in there, and that’s water temperature and bait. That’s the only reason they come. And those big bait schools would get in there. I’ve seen kingfishing as good as it could get right after Christmas, right on up until this time of year. But a winter we had like this year, the water temperature—you know, you have the Atlantic and the Gulf stock. The Atlantic stock can handle the cold. The Gulf stock can’t. So the big fish we were catching, you know, were primarily Gulf stock fish that were coming around—

TH: The Gulf of Mexico?

³ Steve Lowe was also interviewed for the Oculina Bank Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is O6-00014.
SC: Yeah. I caught six kingfish. I’ll never forget this. I had my wife, my ex-wife, and a lady friend of hers, two women. And I went out one afternoon at five o’clock just for something to do—flat calm. It was in, like, January or February and we went into the inlet. We were fishing that red nun buoy entrance back before they changed the whole buoy system there now. And we would fish the tide line. We were fishing whole bunkers, as big as they get. I would de-bone ’em and fish two hooks with a wire in between, you know, standard rig. And take the whole backbone out and the guts out, hook him through the nose, and let one hook drag back by its tail. Didn’t hook it in him, just let it hang, a 7/0, 3407 (inaudible), just as slow as that boat could go, and that old bunker would swim on his back, he’d swim upside down, and when they bit it (claps) in they would usually go twenty feet in the air.

We caught six kingfish, put them in the boat; one of them drug my wife, who was sitting on the back of the engine box, a single-engine boat—drug her all the way to the transom and tore her cartilage up in her knee on the (inaudible); she just all caught off balance. We brought those six kingfish in and they went to Astor Summerlin. It was 309 pounds—six kings; that’s over a fifty-pound average. I mean, there was a lot of that went on.

The best day I ever saw on the beach, I fished a party in the morning, and it was the man that owned Clint Davis [Clint Davis Co.], made the plastic bags, and a friend of his, and they were both elderly. They each caught two forty, forty-five pound kings, had four fish in the boat; they’re done, bring us home. I took them in and I called my dad, had him pick up my wife, and come back to the boat. The three of us went back to Pepper Park, where we caught these big schools of threadfins, muds; fish skyrocketing everywhere. No commercial boats here. They couldn’t deal with them. They just didn’t have the knowledge to fish those big fish that you couldn’t push a button and have that reel never slip and throw ’em in the fish box. You had to fight ’em for fifteen minutes with a loose drag.

But I got to Pepper Park and slowed down and my radio went off, and it was a friend of mine, who was at Sand Point in a cove. He says, “I don’t care what you see, don’t stop. Come up here. You will not believe it.” When we got to the cove, he came over to the shallow and he dropped off in the cove itself—

TH: He got into the cove, inside the reef?

SC: Into the cove, a hundred yards off the beach. They had—the bait was just top to bottom—I think there was a time there, thirty minutes, [when] there was never less than fifty kingfish in the air at a time. It was the most unbelievable thing I’ve ever seen, all those fishes jumping. We started catching king at twelve o’clock, exactly; twelve o’clock noon we had our first bait in the water. They called me from the co-op and said, “You need to have your fish here by five o’clock to go on this truck, or the price is gonna be a lot lower.” And so I started running and trying to make it at—
TH: For Craig Jones?

SC: Yeah. I think that’s who was there, then. Old—

TH: Martin?

SC: Yeah, well, Martin was there forever. But the old boy from North Carolina, you’ll think of his name. Ran a Stapleton—not a Stapleton, he had a Stamas, one of those twenty-seven [foot] Stamas boats. Oh, I’ll think of it in a minute. He lived right up here off of U.S. 1, right here.

TH: Oh, I know. Cleve Lewis.

SC: Cleve Lewis! You know, he was a (inaudible) up there. Cleve Lewis, him and his wife.

TH: I know Cleve.

SC: But anyway, we started at 12:00. I was up there throwing fish on the damn conveyor at about ten minutes to 5:00. We had 1,005 pounds of kingfish and 175 pounds of horse mackerel. Rod and reel fishing, and I don’t believe we had a fish under thirty pounds. I mean, that was the way that fishing was. I saw it in its heyday. People that never saw it can’t believe it. And the guys that were seven, eight miles offshore out there catching kingfish, they would see those fish in the fish house that I was catching, Albert Ashley was catching, Billy Patterson was catching. Finally, Tommy McHale starting doing it a little bit, but he realized that, you know, the break can be motored on both sides. And it was a hell of a difference.

There were things that—the offshore fisherman hated anybody fishing with live bait. They just absolutely would go crazy over that. And Ish Taylor, he was the best friend I had offshore because he told it like it was. He got pissed off one day listening to them—and Gene Hayes was another good friend that, you know, never worried about what I did. Ish got on to ’em one day and he said, “Fellas, you think there’s somebody comes out here and cuts these damn threadfins up for these kingfish to eat? Hell, no! They cut ’em up themselves! If a man can catch ’em better on live bait, that’s what the man needs to do!” He was always on my side. (slamming sound) Whoops! Popped the rungs out, lock popped out. But anyway, you had to see that to believe it.

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4 Albert Ashley was also interviewed for the Oculina Bank Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is O6-00022.
TH: Okay, quick story: I was with Moby [Paul], he showed me how—I never had much luck at live baiting, but one morning I went right to where you were talking about, right out here off of Pepper Park, and had been catching some big ones in there, and I just got off from school; I was teaching school when I got off that Saturday morning. And I got fresh pogies up the river; we used to run pogie nets out.

SC: Oh, yeah.

TH: Fresh, big ol’ pogies, iced down, perfect. Got out there and I was using 200 pound mono; straight mono, no wire. Trolling as slow as I could possibly go, really—sweet sea witches, brand new, made up, everything was just all new: new hooks, shiny, everything. I got six fish that weighted 250 or 240.

SC: Mm-hm. Yeah.

TH: I had a fifty-four pounder, two forty-five pounders, a couple of thirty-nine pounders, and I’d never done anything this—I mean, this doesn’t quite hold a candle to what you’re talking about, but that was my—I did experience it. And I never used a gaff that day, because Moby taught me if you keep them comin’ and you don’t let them turn their heads—

SC: Can’t do that with them great big ol’ fish.

TH: Well, like, I did it, and of course—I have a twenty-four Stapleton and it’s low sides, and I got it going. It was like it would spring out and they’d spring right over the stern. (laughs) I was younger and stronger, then, too. But I never used a gaff, got them all on the boat, and I never had a day like that since. But anyway—

SC: That’s the only kingfishing I’ve ever enjoyed was catching fish on the beach. Live bait would work probably as good as anything, but I’ve caught my share of them on big ol’ pogies like you were talking about, and mullet: de-boned, two-hooks, (inaudible), and the bite was on top. It was a spectacular bite.

TH: I’ll bet.

SC: And the day that my dad and my wife and I caught the thousand pounds of kings and 175
pounds of horse mackerel, I don’t think we ever had a bait. We never fished with two baits. I couldn’t fish—I was gaffing fish, baiting hooks, re-riggin’, putting new wires on as hard as I could go, and I don’t think we ever got a bait twenty feet behind a boat. It was just unbelievable. You put that damned thing over, we were using wires that long—that was another thing, using short wire, because that way you had less chance of the wire kinking. And as soon as you put it in the water, you had a standard way. You’d got the bait hanging in the air; he’s not in the water. You’ve got the reel and free spool, 4/0 pins, and you dropped it in the water and your thumb was on the lever. When he nailed it, you had to let go of the lever or you were gonna backlash and burn your thumb because those bastards run a hundred miles an hour when they bit. I was fixing a boat that didn’t have a (inaudible) brace then, and I used to look at them damn kingfish jump so high! I don’t really know—if I had to bet on how high a kingfish can jump, (TH laughs) I know I’ve seen them in the air thirty feet. I know I’ve seen them thirty feet. I’ve been sitting on my damned brace looking up at ’em. The bigger (snaps) the higher he can jump.

TH: That’s why they call it “skyrocketing.”

SC: Yeah, and the biggest kingfish I ever saw in my life was in the Fort Pierce Inlet. We were snook fishing. And Sonny Koblegaurd, who passed away now, was fishing with me with a girl he went to high school with. He had taken her fishing, you know, old high school buddies. She hooked a fish, thought it was a snook; he just kept (inaudible) and drag. Incoming tide, spring of the year, water was gem clear. And we were fishing at the old wormery, and this fish was damn near—he damn near spooled us going in, and then she was working it back. Well, we both decided it was friggin’ shark, because you’d have a shark eat a snook damned every day in the Inlet back in those days. So, Sonny got his “brain sack,” as he called it, he carried it everywhere, and got a damned .22 pistol out and was gonna shoot the shark. Well, when it came out up on top of the water behind a boat, about thirty feet back of the boat, it was the biggest kingfish that I guess ever been. This kingfish weighted a hundred pounds or more.

TH: Good Lord.

SC: He was just a monster. He was that big around. I couldn’t believe it. And mono—had a sixty pound monoleader.

TH: He’s folding his arms. (laughs)

SC: Oh, yeah. You know, he was really just way bigger than kingfish are supposed to get. And monofilament leader, and he was hooked in the corner of the mouth—I could see the hook. I can still see it; my eyes can visualize that. And it came up on there, and he was going off to his starboard on, you know, and he changed directions and cut one across the other way and that line went across, and cut off on his cheek. It was just like—that was the biggest kingfish you’ll ever
see, right there. I know that there’ve been instances of kingfish weighing a hundred pounds. They catch a kingfish in the Orient over off Japan that’s, they say, a first cousin. He’s a little different than this kingfish we’ve got, but they’re in excess of a hundred pounds.

TH: The record is—

SC: Ninety-three?

TH: Ninety-three in Puerto Rico, or ninety-six. Maybe it’s ninety-three or ninety-six.

SC: Something like that, yeah. But this thing, he had to weigh a hundred pounds. That was really big.

But this whole dissertation started over what have I seen change. The kingfishing was phenomenal at one time. The nets really hurt the kingfish. There’s no question. The guys down in Stuart at Florida Sportsman magazine, they got the public up in arms about it. I give Karl Wickstrom complete 100 percent credit for getting that movement started. He did a hell of a job. It needed to be done. I had a lot of friends who were net fishermen. I was a hook and line charter boat fisherman. I never took sides. I could see both sides; but yet, in my heart I knew that the nets had to go. That was the greatest thing we’ve ever achieved in this state for getting the most for our dollar out of our fishery, because the greatest thing ever written about net fishing was in Florida Sportsman back when they were just getting started on trying to get these nets stopped. They took all the money that derived from commercial fishing redfish in a year. All the dollars, however many, you know, million dollars from netting redfish in the whole state of Florida, did not equal but one-third of the sales in gold spoons for catching redfish. That tells you what you’ve got to do. I mean, that doesn’t leave you still in doubt, when it’s worth so many more times the money. That was just one species of fish.

And the reason the kingfish got hurt so bad, it was the equipment was too effective. You combine the nets that they have, the glass nets they call them from monofilament, the airplane spotters, the rowers, the boats. But I’ll never forget, I docked my boat fifty—one hundred and fifty steps from Hudgins fish house, and that’s where they landing all those fish in the early days, and the boat that started the whole thing, the Battle Axe. Buddy Daniels from Everglades City—

TH: This is right at the end of Fisherman’s Wharf in Fort Pierce, next to the old South Bridge?

SC: Yep, absolutely. Right there. Originally, it was Charlie Lowe’s fish house.
TH: Yeah.

SC: But they had—when they started bringing those fish in, both mackerel and kingfish, it was absolutely take your breath away to see those boats almost sunk. Net piled in the cockpit, net and fish combined, if they had a 40,000 pound set, they were lucky if they got 10,000 pounds that were salvageable because the other thirty pounds were mush and rotten before they could get ’em out of the net, and they got thrown overboard. It was a horrible waste, and they couldn’t utilize what they were catching because their techniques that they had to do it—they could catch the fish, the airplane would put them on the school.

When it finally—I never took sides, simply because I had friends both ways. I didn’t want to step on anybody’s toes. Like I said, my heart knew which way I had to go. But when I finally lost my ability to deal with the guys with the nets was when I was five miles north of the Inlet in thirty feet of water catching kingfish with a charter, and had a net boat take me in his circle and tell me when I got ready to move, he would come and get me out of the net. Well, that was it for me. I had enough. I knew which side I had to go with then.

TH: You remember which boat that was?

SC: Yeah, I sure do. I’ll tell you the name of it. It was Francis Stiller, and the name of the boat was the Razor—and he had several instances of that, I wasn’t the only one. All they had in their eye was dollar signs. They had a lot of money invested in equipment, but boy, they could make a living if they could sell. But, when you catch 40,000 or 50,000 and can sell 10,000 for absolutely bottom-dollar prices, and you got another 30,000 or 40,000 getting thrown away, it don’t make sense.

So, anyway, we’ve done a major turnaround. We’re starting to see those fish come back. The numbers are nowhere near where they were, but they’re cutting ’em back. These kingfish tournaments are producing, you know—and look at the revenue they generate, a kingfish tournament. The Jacksonville kingfish tournaments—I played—you know, I have a band up there and played for that one time, and I think they had 1100 boats in that tournament. Eleven hundred times the fuel—which may be a good thing, may not—times the motels, the hotels, the bait, the tackle, and then what these guys are catching in the net that just don’t pencil out. Anyways, it’s coming back, getting better.

TH: Now, you left out the drift nets.

SC: I didn’t get to see a lot of that, but any of the net fishing was horrible.
TH: The drift nets were what—

SC: Indiscriminate killing of everything.

TH: —Tommy McHale maintains, what finished off the big smoker kings along the beach.

SC: Yeah, oh, yeah. The drift nets were absolutely indiscriminate. When the drift nets were being used, I don’t know what they were getting for those big permits they were catching in those, but it was nothing. And, my God, there’s no telling—there’s probably more money spent trying to catch permit, per capita, because you don’t catch many and people spend a lot trying to catch ’em.

TH: Overall, how has fishing changed? You think the pelagic fish are coming back as a result of the net ban?

SC: The kingfish, the mackerel, there’s definitely more mackerel. There’s definitely more pompano available to the guy that goes out there and tries to catch. I do a lot of that now, and in the last few years, pompano fishing has been phenomenal. Not just on the beach, but in the river or inlet. Got a lot of the old net guys are now pompano fishing in the winter, and they can make a living doing that, you know? They may not get rich, but it’s something to do. But because the nets are better, the fishing is better. Overall, I don’t know; sometimes I wonder. I don’t know that I can say for sure that speckled trout fishing is better. It seemed to me like when they used to trout fish with nets and fish those big nets, they help police a lot of the slime grass and crap out of the river that we don’t—there’s not been—we’ve got a horrible slime grass problem in that river now, and I’ve never seen good fishing in slime grass, except pompano. They seem to like it for some reason.

Overall, the fishing—this is another little angle that really needs to be included. I spend a lot of time in Louisiana. Two months a year, I’m out there, duck hunting in the morning and fishing in the afternoon. Their fishery is phenomenal. It is so far better than ours for redfish and speckled trout. There’s no comparison. The greatest day that I’ve ever seen redfishing in Florida won’t hold a candle to what they do every day in Louisiana for redfish and speckled trout. They were too excessive on their limits. I think they’re still high. When I went there in 1995, their speckled trout limit was twenty-five per man, per day, plus five redfish, one of which could be over the slot. They hammered those fish hard and they still had big numbers, but they’ve reduced their limit now to fifteen with still five reds, but they ain’t gonna hurt the redfish. Most of the redfish were being thrown back, anyway.
TH: Why do you think their fishing is so much better?

SC: Two major reasons: their marsh. If you’re gonna have redfish and trout, you need marsh. They need place for shrimp, crabs, and all that to come. And that’s where these fish are raised; they’re raised in the marsh. And their entire southern third is marsh, of the state of Louisiana; one-third of that is marsh. And the hurricanes that they’ve had of late have really—they were as destructive as they could be from a man’s standpoint. They washed away a lot of marsh and coastal beach erosions with the hurricane, but my God, they’ve really propagated redfishing. I mean, since the hurricanes, the redfishing is even better. It puts some more of the Gulf of the Mexico over the dunes and into the marsh. It’s full of plankton and stuff. Anyway, you’d have to see it to believe it, it’s phenomenal.

TH: You said there were two reasons. What’s the second one?

SC: The second one is whenever they stopped the nets in Louisiana.

TH: Was that before or after Florida?

SC: It was—they stopped the nets before the hurricanes.

TH: No, before we stopped nets in Florida.

SC: No. They were one of the first ones. They were on the cuttin’ edge. Louisiana, I think, and Texas were before us.

TH: Okay. Now, I want to talk about your fishing history, specifically. You’ve already talked a lot about it. So, we’re just gonna go over this probably a little bit quicker. Your earliest memory of fishing, and how old were you?

SC: My earliest memory of fishing, I was probably three years old, with my dad. He was looking at a fish on a bed, and of course I’m looking for the four-poster, you know, I didn’t understand. I was looking for a nest. I didn’t see any twigs and sticks. And then, finally, as a very small child, he showed me about a five pound largemouth bass in real clear water. It was on a white, sandy spot in the grass, and that was a bed. That’s what a fish bed is. And I can remember that.
And I can remember the first fish that I ever caught like it was, you know, within the last couple of months. I can see this. It was at a place on the Kissimmee River called Camp Mike, and we’d gotten there before daylight, and my dad and his friend were putting the boat in the water—this is freshwater, ’cause I started off, grew up on freshwater, but loved to fish saltwater. And he gave me a dead shiner to put on my hook, to get me out of his hair so they could get the boat ready to go. And I threw it out, had a cork on the line, the cork went under. I was screamin’ and hollerin’ that I had a bite, and it was like, “Leave me alone, boy! I’m tryin’ to get this boat in the water.” And he finally looked around and the cork had just come up. “You haven’t got a fish! Leave me alone.” And by that time, it went under again and I was gonna show him.

So, I started to—I had an old Bronson reel and about a three foot steel rod, had one line guiding the tip on it. And when I went to wind, I looked and the line guide was gone, and the line was wrapped around the rod about ten times. (TH laughs) I couldn’t turn the handle, (laughs) so I just threw it over my shoulder and ran up the boat ramp and drug about a five pound bass flopping right up the boat ramp. That was the first fish I can ever remember catching.

TH: And you remember that?

SC: Yep. That was probably in 1945, somewhere along that.

TH: That’s cool. Now, what kind of reel—did you mention a kind of reel?

SC: It was a Bronson.

TH: A Bronson.

SC: That was an old bait castin’, old type of bait catcher. Inexpensive.

TH: Okay. So, I guess, who taught you? Your father taught you to fish?

SC: My father taught me everything that any kid could ever need to learn about freshwater fishing. He was not too strong on saltwater fishing. I mostly taught my father how to saltwater fish. That was kind of unique, because I came over here as a child and had friends that knew how to saltwater fish and taught me, and I would teach my dad what I had learned. There were some things he could do; he could tie a knot, he could do things like that, but he couldn’t—to the day he died, he didn’t know how to rig a ballyhoo or a mullet. That wasn’t his—he had me for
TH: How did you decide to become a charter boat captain? I guess, was that your job interview with the TV station?

SC: No, it was way before then. When I was in school, when I was in high school and growing up, I always was a fisherman. I mean, I have a 1957 Summerlin Institute—which was named after the Summerlin family here who gave them the land to build a high school in Bartow. It was called Summerlin Institute, and not Summerlin High School. I can remember it in the 1957 yearbook, there’s always some girl that writes little projections into the future of how you’re gonna be, and they had me designated as a charter boat captain before I ever graduated high school.

TH: (laughs)

SC: (laughs) It’s there. It’s what I wanted to be. I wanted to be—and I didn’t just want to be a charter boat captain, I wanted to be a good one. I wanted to be able to produce fish for my customers. I always said, “When I start doing this for the money, I’m gonna quit.” I did it because I loved it.

TH: Okay. Cool. We’ve already talked about when you started fishing in the Fort Pierce area. Were you fishing commercially, recreationally, or working in—

SC: Recreational, when I first started. Yeah.

TH: Okay, when you first started. What did you fish for, how did you fish—we already talked a lot about that. What was the first fish you targeted in the saltwater here, that you remember?

SC: Mangrove snapper, speckled trout, and snook.

TH: In the river, mostly?

SC: Yeah. Off the bridges.

TH: Oh, really? Okay. South Bridge?
SC: As a kid. Yeah. The old South Bridge—there was a bridge that I went across when I was little, right where the 7-11 is on South Beach. There a bridge that went over there before you got to the Pelican. The water used through right there. There was a little store there called the U-Towed-'Em back there on the other side of the road, probably before you came here.

TH: I came in seventy-one [1971], seventy-two [1972].

SC: Yeah, it would’ve been before that. Of course, that went away, the U-Towed-'Em. But we used to fish there and fish off the old North Bridge. The old North Bridge was a two-lane, rickety wooden bridge, and I can remember fishing off that. And when they built the new South Bridge—not the new one that’s there now, not the high bridge, but when they still had their swing-draw. Both of those bridges had swing-draws; they didn’t have lift then.

TH: I remember.

SC: I would have to say that when I first had the opportunity to fish from a boat, I had probably the best fisherman that ever put a bait in the water in St. Lucie County at the Inlet, and in the river. It was a gentleman by the name of Rollin Mathison. (telephone rings)

TH: How do you spell Matherson?

SC: M-a-t-h-i-s-o-n.

TH: Mathison. No R?

SC: No.

TH: I’m gonna ignore that [the telephone].

SC: It was R-o-l-l-i-n.

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Referring to the Pelican Yacht Club, which is a marina that also has a store and a restaurant; it is located on the east side of the South Bridge.
TH: R-o-l-l-i-n. Okay.

SC: Rollin Mathison was a—

TH: (referring to telephone) Okay, they’ll call me.

SC: —was a whiz-bang fisherman. He specialized in snook fishing. He would catch snook and what everybody at that time called channel bass. “Redfish,” that was a term from the west coast of Florida. You never heard them called redfish; they were channel bass.

TH: I heard of channel bass when I first came here.

SC: And that’s what the IGFA [International Game Fish Association] still calls them, is channel bass. And one of the most impressive fish I ever saw in my life was when I went to North Carolina to go hunting one time. And the boy that was gonna take us over to the lodge—this was in Pamlico Sound on a place called Gull Island. He met us when we got there and he said, “Y’all come on over to my house. I want to show you my world record channel bass.” So we walked in an old cracker-style house on the outer banks of North Carolina, and I’m looking on the wall and I see no channel bass. And you went through the door, and you walked under it when you went in; it was on the wall behind you. And he turned around and said, “Take a look,” and it was a ninety pound channel bass. This was in the seventies [1970s]. It was caught off of the Rodanthe Pier. It’s been beat now, but it was a ninety pound channel bass.

TH: Good Lord.

SC: But Rollin Mathison, a book could be written about him because he did things his way, you know? Tred Barta is—you know, I’ve known Tred for a long time. He’s a good friend. He is what he is.

TH: Tred who?

SC: T-r-e-d B-a-r-t-a. Tred Barta is a guy that has a show.

TH: B-r-e-t-a?
SC: B-a-r-t-a.

TH: Okay.

SC: B-a-r-t-a. Tred Barta is from New York. He was a man that walks to the beat of a different drummer. He’s a guy that does things his way. He has a TV show now called The Best and Worst of Tred Barta. He’s been on for six or seven years. He just had a spinal stroke last year, and he’s paralyzed from the chest down. He’s still doing the show, from a wheelchair. He is a know-it-all pain in the ass. Most people hate him, but you just have to know him. He can back a lot of the shit up, if you know what I mean. But he’s still—

But Rollin was way before Tred’s time, but that’s the way he was. He didn’t have any friends, because he didn’t want friends. He didn’t want anybody messing with him, and if he was in his boat he didn’t want you close to him. He fished Dacron line, he fished a pin 67, revolving spool reel, and he fished sixty-pound test Dacron. He fished number seven wire and a 7/0, thirty 407 hook. He fished live mullet, he fished live—what they call “shiners” here, which is a mojarra; live pilchards, threadfins, whatever you get. He fished the inlet more than anyplace else. He sold all his snook to the old Simonson’s Restaurant. It was legal then. And he filleted them and sold them, and Otis Simonson bought many of ’em from me and him, because I’ve sold the man one myself when it was legal and when it wasn’t legal. I didn’t do it long when they made it illegal, but I was just going to the junior college in sixty-four [1964], and I had to make what I could make to go to college, because that’s the only job I had was fishing. But then one day, when I started charter fishing, I said, “No more. We’re gonna be legal-eagle from here on.”

I can remember at one particular spring, here, when a buddy of mine took his vacation. Came over the last year I sold snook, and we would sell snook. We’d get a dollar a pound for the fillets back then: fifty cents for the whole fish or a dollar a pound for the fillets. We did nothing but snook fish for a week and we were catching them at night off the bridge, in the daytime on the Inlet, and in the afternoons at the Taylor Creek spillway, and we caught lots of snook. But Rollin, everything he ever told me was right on. I mean, he was not a bullshitter.

TH: He didn’t have friends, but he took you under his wing?

SC: He didn’t want friends. I was his friend. I was one of the few friends Rollin had.

TH: Okay.

SC: He knew that I loved it as much as he did. And he could see that I was gonna be good at it.
I know no other way to put it. I convinced him that my monofilament leader was better than a wire leader, finally. He had an old boat. I mean, this is a man that’s thinking way ahead of his time. He had an old fourteen-foot sailboat; that was his fishing boat. It had a little inboard engine in it, with all the sail stuff was on the mast. And it was real wide. The damned thing must’ve had a ten-foot beam. You know how that is?

TH: Mm-hm.

SC: Real low, had a keel under it, kept it at the Pelican. He would talky-talky it up, you know, just to crank that old thing up, and it wouldn’t go five knots. He knew how to go on the incoming tide, and how to run an outgoing tide, run along the shores of the inlet. You couldn’t get out at the channel, ’cause you couldn’t hardly go, but he was gonna be where he was going. And he had two livewells on that boat, and it’s a huge displacement hull under the water. He had livewells that were that deep in a fourteen foot boat.

TH: Showing three feet?

SC: That’s right. He had three-foot-deep livewells. He could 500 shiners in each well, or you know, and no pumps—holes in the bottom. He had bait cars that were the width of this and eight feet long.

TH: Showing another four feet?

SC: Yep. Four by two feet deep that would slope, and he kept that tied up under Olie McCarty’s dock over on the inlet next to Carter Daughton. All these people were gone before you got here. Olie McCarty, you should probably remember her. She was the ex-wife of what used to be the governor of Florida, Dan McCarty, who died in forty-nine [1949], I believe, in office. But, anyway, he caught most all of his bait with a seine, and he would keep the seine hung up on the dock there at Carter Daughton’s. You know where the Sea Turn is? Right there. The house—immediately west of the Sea Turn condos was Carter Daughton’s. The house next to that was Olie McCarty’s. He was friends with both of them.

TH: And you say a seine. How did that work?

SC: Okay. You had a net that was—his was a hundred feet long. I think it was illegal, probably. And it was a seven feet tall, and it had pockets sewn in the middle. So what you would do—give me a piece of paper. This is interesting.
(demonstrating by illustration) This is the shoreline. This is the Fort Pierce Inlet, this is the seawall, and it turns right here, and right here, now, is the Sea Turn. Carter Daughton’s house was here, and Ollie McCarty’s was here. There was a dock that went out like this, that was McCarty’s dock, and this dock went out like this. All right? Under this dock, he kept a bait car.

TH: Bait, what?

SC: A car, a baitwell. And it was tied, knotted off here and knotted off there. So, it didn’t matter which way the tide went, it would still hang there, and it was heavy enough that it would just set down. It would hold a thousand live baits. All right? The way this thing worked, the seawall went down to right about here, and then the seawall turned to rock here where you couldn’t do much. He kept this seine hung up on the dock, so when it was time to go catch bait this end was attached to the dock. He would jump in the water and pull this seine out like this and put a stake in it, in the bottom. You had to get into the water about this deep, depending on the tide, to get the seine in position. The tide is coming in—

TH: Now, tell me, this point right here: where’s the Coast Guard station?

SC: Way back here. The old barracks were way back down here. Okay, this is west, east, this is the inlet, this is Dynamite Point right over there.

TH: Okay. Right across from Dynamite Point.

SC: Yeah, okay. When the tide is coming in, this—he had it all set up before I ever met him.

TH: Right here is where the Turn condos are?

SC: Yes. Sea Turn is right here.

TH: Okay. Now I’ve got you.

SC: Okay? The tide is coming in.

TH: Mm-hm.
SC: On the last forty-five minutes of the incoming tide—er, the first forty-five minutes of the incoming tide is the point when you want to catch the shiners, which is a fish that looks kinda like—they call them sand perch, but they’re not. They’re a mojarra. They don’t have the hard fins like a—they’re wonderful bait [for] everything. I’ve caught smoker kings on them—I mean sailfish on them. They’re great bait.

TH: Sand perch is what I do understand.

SC: Yeah. They’re like a sand perch, but they’re not really a sand perch. They’re a mojarra.

TH: Mojarra?

SC: Yeah, mojarra. When this tide is coming in, it makes a backwash that goes this way because of that point where the Sea Turn, because the inlet is really kinda coming like this and then it makes a turn right there. So, the current is going this way in here closed, and this way out here. All right? The shiners start to drift down with this. It’s a natural—it’s just a place that God made for a good fisherman.

TH: (laughs)

SC: He would run this seine out and put this thing in. And then he would get up here up on this point right where he still had the thing. We’d put a chair there and you’d sit and watch for the shiners. When the shiners came drifting down, and it’d always be in schools, there may be—a nice-sized school was a hundred, a big school maybe five hundred. And they would just drift down, just kind of ease down. And when they got here, he dove off here, and went out and grabbed that stake and came in. Then you got down on your knees, on the bottom, water about this deep, and you’re real comfortable.

TH: About waist deep.

SC: And you worked that net, lead line and court line, and you worked in it until you got to the bag and then you shut the seine, open up the bait car, put the seine up on the bait car, and now you’ve got all the net being supported by the bait car and laying in the water around you, and you’ve got a bag twice as big as this table with all your fish in it. And you lift it up there, and ideally, you never handle them. Rollin didn’t want you to touch his bait. He wanted them perfect. You would take water and a fish in your hand, and flip it out of there and count ’em, and
he wanted to know how many were in there.

Classic story, to tell you how meticulous the old fart was; he could catch a fish when nobody could even think about it. I’ve never seen anybody as good as it as he was. He would really had it figured out.

*Part 1 ends; part 2 begins*

SC: I got there by myself one day. I couldn’t work this by myself. I mean, he and I were buddies. I’d catch bait, help him, and we never—I never fished on the same boat with him. If we were fishing, he’d—the only man I knew that—I knew two men that fished on his boat. Bill Yates was one of ’em, and a buddy of mine from home, Jack Blocker, used to come up here on vacation.

TH: Jack?

SC: Bill Yates, fished with Ron. He’s the guy that sold the (inaudible). And Jack Blocker from Bartow, who grew up with me.

TH: Last name?

SC: B-l-o-c-k-e-r. And Rollin would take either of those. I never fished on his boat, and there was a reason: we wanted our individual fish. You know? And if I fished with him, they were his fish. (laughs)

So, anyway, I got here by myself one day. I got out of class and went over and looked, and it was really before the tide was right, and it had been one of the longest times I ever remember we couldn’t get bait. We had no bait for, like, a month. It was shitty. No bait. And I got there, and there was a big-assed school. I bailed off, got everything out by myself, was in my good clothes; they said to pull off everything but my pants. I made it set, and I had a thousand shiners (cell phone rings), and I just got through counting them, and finished it up.

*Pause in recording*

TH: Okay.

SC: I had just taken all of these shiners out of this thing. I was thrilled to death. I got a thousand
bait, and they’re hideous as far as I’m concerned, ’cause I ran the net right back out.

TH: Yeah.

SC: And I had my bait car tied and another next to his.

(electronic device sounds)

TH: Okay, go ahead.

SC: First ones that I caught were his; it was his net. If I catch more, I’m puttin’ ’em in my well, ’cause a thousand was all he wanted. I had no more than run it out when he came up. I opened the well, and he was so excited, it was just like—my God, I had just done him the biggest favor anybody had ever done. He had a thousand baits in his well and he hadn’t got wet. He was just ecstatic.

Here comes another school, and each one of ’em might have been that much bigger (demonstrates) than the ones that were in his well.

TH: Oh, yeah? He’s showing about, like, about a quarter inch?

SC: Yeah, he’s pissed off ’cause I got the best bait. (laughs) That’s the way he was! You know? He was mad now, because—and I finally decided, I said, “Rollin, you just take my bait car and fish out of it, and I’ll fish out of yours!” Okay! (laughs) Hell, yeah. He was all over it. Yeah, because that’s the way he was.

TH: Now, where did you keep your bait car?

SC: Right beside his, under that same dock.

TH: Under the same dock?

SC: Yeah. I mean, I was locked in with Rollin from the get-go. He knew that I—
TH: Now, he was a commercial fisherman, then?

SC: Yeah. Hook and line. He sold snapper, he sold snook, he sold redfish, and it was all legal when he was first doing it. Everything but the snooks were still legal.

TH: And he didn’t need to have a bunch of licenses?

SC: He didn’t trout fish hardly ever. He pompano fished a lot back when there were—the technique we fished for pompano back then, I’ve not seen anybody fish that way in years. You use a four-ounce cigar lead about that long with a swivel on both ends and a thirty inch piece, or twenty-four to thirty inch piece of thirty pound mono and a little yellow bucktail with a crab knuckle on it. And you drifted the edge of the channel and dropped it till it hit bottom, and went up three or four turns, and you sat there and jerked it, let it fall back, jerk it, fall back and whenever you jerked it, it didn’t fall back; you set the hook, ’cause the pompano, I mean—

TH: How long did you say? You said three inch long—

SC: A three-ounce cigar lead.

TH: Okay. Cigar lead.

SC: Yeah, a trolling lead.

TH: Okay, I know what you—okay.

SC: ’Cause you were fishing the channel, you were fishing, you know, twenty-five, thirty feet deep and you had to be close to the bottom. And the pompano fishing back—hell, Steve Lowe and Ray Lowe both used to do that quite a bit. The most pompano I’ve ever caught in a day was back in that day. I remember with Chip Shafer, the old captain of the Temptress, I took him with me pompano fishing one day, and we were catching them on bait casting rods when the old wormery was there.6 And, of course, there was no limit. I had caught seventy-something the day before and whenever Chip went with me, we caught seventy-eight.

TH: Pompano?

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6 Irving “Chip” Shafer was also interviewed for the Oculina Bank Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is O6-00002.
SC: Pompano. And Chip couldn’t bait his hook because he’s allergic to shellfish. If he touched a shrimp, he’d break out in hives. I was having to bait his hook and mine, and we were catching pompano faster than we could catch ’em.

TH: Cool. All right. We have a lot to cover.

SC: Okay. I get sidetracked.

TH: Oh, I love it. I love it. During what months of the year did you fish for what fish, you know?

SC: Well, when I first—

TH: Break it down a little bit, start in January?

SC: Yeah. When I first started charted fishing, all my fishing was inside, you know, with my own boat. But as a mate fishing offshore, of course, you know your December, January, February were sailfishing.

TH: Sailfish.

SC: Everybody wanted to catch sailfish. That was when you concentrated, really targeted sailfish. In the spring was whenever you start—as soon as the March winds would permit you to fish offshore. We started—you know, originally, early on we went dolphin fishing, king mackerel fishing. We caught very few tuna off here when I was charter fishing. When you caught a tuna, you were not fishing for tuna; you caught a blackfin, or occasionally a yellowfin, if you were off deep.

Ironically, the biggest yellowfin tuna I ever caught was off of Fort Pierce on an afternoon, half day, in ninety feet of water. And we had a rigger go down on thirty pound, and I saw it out of the corner of my eye, and I saw a lot of dark color and I thought I had a blue marlin on it. I had my boat in reverse for one hour backing straight offshore, fighting what I thought was blue marlin. It was a 177 pound yellowfin. (laughs) And that’s a big ol’ yellowfin.
TH: Big anything. God!

SC: Well, you never know. When I was a little kid I could remember people saying when you’re fishing saltwater, you never know when you put your line in water what you might catch. And that’s true. And I’ve been fortunate enough to catch some world records and stuff. I caught a number of fish that would’ve been world record had they been caught according to the rules. But when you fish with a mate who primarily—you’re fishing with inexperienced people, they want you to—if you can get the fish on line and hand them rod, they’re thrilled to death. The people that want to do it all theirselves [sic] tell you that up front.

A number of fish that we caught—were caught—African pompano, fifty-seven pound African, which would’ve been still a world record, but, you know, it was hooked by a mate and handed off. We caught a seventy-seven foot dolphin that was a world record for eleven years, on thirty pound. But, you know, different fish over the years that would’ve been world record had to have been—you know, a spearfish that was caught, hooked by my mate, after he ate everything behind the boat. (laughs) Couldn’t get—finally got a hook in him, and handed the rod to a lady, and she with her two—her four children and her husband. Between the five of them and her, they finally got this fish that we thought was a little blue marlin in the boat. She wanted to mount it. We put it in the boat, and I flew a blue marlin flag; thought that’s what it was. When, we got to the dock I start lookin’ and I said, “That’s not a blue marlin. That’s a damned spearfish!”

TH: Spearfish?

SC: Only one I’ve ever caught. Weighed seventy—what did that son of a bitch weigh? Seventy? Sixty-four pound! And the world’s record was forty-four pounds, women’s world record. But, you know, everybody on the boat had handled the rod and I said, “Ma’am, it would’ve been a world’s record, but we can’t count it.” And she just lost her patience with me. I was the world’s biggest asshole, my mate was a jerk. And a week later, I get a letter from her attorney threatening me with a lawsuit if I don’t file for her world record. Well, that was a joke. We got a big laugh.

Pause in recording

SC: —two half days filled that box on the beach, morning and afternoon. I had a charter one morning and we caught—you know, a bunch of fish came in. And Bud Adams and his three sons, Mike, Robby, and Lee, came, cowboy boots and all, got on the boat. We went to Pepper Park. Bud did not like to go fishing long. And go out there—and about two hours is about as long as Bud Adams is going fishing—come in three or four hundred pounds of kingfish. Every damned fish he was catching was thirty or fifty pounds. I caught two sixty-four pounders, and a sixty-seven pounder. A beginner caught a sixty-seven pounder. I mean, they were just—you had to see one of those things to believe it.
And that one that we lost in the inlet, like I say, was that big around. (demonstrates) Snook fishing with mono leader, I guarantee it weighed a hundred pounds. We had him on for forty minutes. We thought it was a shark the whole time. Sonny Koblegaurd got his pistol out and was gonna shoot the shark, and all the sudden (laughs) (inaudible) “Holy shit!” It was like the biggest snook I ever put on the scales. Caught him right off the old Coast Guard station after fishing the inlet hard for a snook, for a guy my wife worked for that ran the Indian River Citrus League in Vero [Beach]. We never had a bite and we were coming from off of my third trip that day, and I was in that little boat I bought from Ray Lowe.

And we were coming in and went by the old Coast Guard station and the lights came out in the water, and I saw a bunch of mullet shower out of the water, and I said, “You know, I’m gonna grab a bait and try here for ten minutes,” and put a bait out. And I can see this like it was last week. Put one bait out, he’s sitting there holding the rod, and I’m sitting on the chair, and I’m sitting on the back of the motor box on that nineteen-foot boat. And I went and dozed off, and what woke me up was the drag going out. And I mean, it pinned sixty-five, and it went (makes sound effect), you know? I said, “Goddamn! Got something on that!” And I’m listening to that dragging, shark that’s bigger than shit, we kept some old blacktips.

We got that fish up, and when it came up on top of the water behind the boat, I shined my light on him. I saw them red eyes and I knew it wasn’t a shark. I put him in the boat and he mounted that fish. It was forty-six pounds, and the state record’s still forty-four, I think.

TH: A forty-six pound snook?

SC: Yeah, and I caught two over-fifty pounds that I had to let go: one of them because it was out of season, and then one time—it was oversized one time, and the other time it was oversized and out of season. That damned (inaudible) caught followed me around when I was fighting that one. Mike Everett and I were fishing them out to Taylor Creek with live mullet. Ten pound test, twenty-five pound leader, out of season, they’re all huge females. Catch ’em on a mullet that long. (demonstrates) Catch ’em on a ten pound; we’re gonna let ’em go anyway.

TH: Big mullet.

SC: And I got this fish, I was standing on that Challenger flats boat on the back deck. I’m standing on the edge. I’m probably this far above the water. I caught that fish in the gills like this, and his tail threw in the water. Ha! I’m sure that fish was fifty.
TH: Fifty-pound fish? That’s humongous!

SC: Well, old Fanny Gill, that one’s that’s in the forty-two pounder, she caught on a cane pole off of South Bridge. That happened in the early fifties [1950s].

**Mike Hogan:** That was man-fishing. I did that only one time.

SC: I only did it a couple of times and I hated it. It hurts! (laughs)

TH: With a cane pole!

MH: (laughs) Yeah. Big shot with a cane pole!

SC: That fish hurt her so bad, and she wasn’t gonna let go ’cause they knew damn well that they were gonna be able to sell it. You know? It was still legal to sell them then.

MH: Mm-hm.

TH: She’s got a stuffed one there? Forty-two pounds?

MH: Yeah.

SC: Sam White’s got a picture of it. It’s on a post there by the (inaudible).

TH: Oh, a picture.

SC: That gal in the white dress. That was the lady that my parents knew, and her boyfriend—they weren’t married—named Henry Hall, worked for the water treatment plant. He worked and got off at 11:00 every night. And when he got off of work, they went to the South Bridge or North Bridge, we cane pole snookfished, and sold our fish to Charlie Lowe for twenty-five cents a pound. I can remember that like it was last week.

MH: Yeah.
TH: Well, thank you.

MH: Enjoy the visit.

TH: Now, we were discussing what you fished, what months of the year. You mentioned January sailfish.

SC: December, January, and February, we consider that sailfish season.

TH: Okay.

SC: You fish for sailfish because that’s when they came here. The bait showed up offshore, you know, average depth’s around 120 feet of water. I mean, day-in, day-out if you fished nothing but 120 feet, you were gonna catch some sailfish. It would vary from day to day, but that’s the common normal depth outside the offshore bar.

In the spring and summer, you fish for dolphin. You fish for cobia in the spring. You fish for king mackerel, you fish for bottom fish, you know, spring and summer. In the fall, your kingfishing was usually pretty good. Plus, you had what we called the “mullet run,” and you had fish on the beach and, around the inlet, snook and tarpon. And then it was hunting season, (laughs) and you didn’t fish as much until the sailfish showed up again.

TH: You caught big tarpon. You were talking about big fish, and you talked about some of the big fish you caught. What was the biggest tarpon you ever—?

SC: The biggest one we ever weighed was 179 pounds, was caught in the Fort Pierce Inlet. I had a group of ten doctors that would charter me. They would bring a couple of boats, and I would kind of be the leader of the group, and we would fish for snook, primarily. But this one particular year, right before hunting—it was in November, and it was a northeaster blowing from hell. It was horrible. We couldn’t go outside the inlet and the waves were breaking solid, and those waves—you could look into those seas and it was solid golden-yellow with spots and tarpon. And so we started tarpon fishing and we caught, I think, eight or nine that afternoon, and that was the last one we hooked.

We finally landed him in the dark right there off of the North Jetty Park, right there where the
Australian pines used to be, and the bathhouse is now the restroom. Got up there, it was right behind the old wormery, and I (inaudible) out of the current and I got him up there and I got a gaff in his lip, which we put a rope through it and towed him back into the Pelican—I was fishing out of the Pelican back then—and weighed him, 179. And Sonny Kobleguard came over and took pictures of it for the Tribune.

But that’s not the—that’s the biggest tarpon I’ve ever weighed. The biggest one I’ve ever caught, I caught with Bill Yates twenty years ago right off of North Beach on a live mullet coming in from offshore. We saw this one big tarpon roll. We had one mullet, put it on, threw it out, and hooked this tarpon and fought it till we got him up and got a hold of it, took the hook out, and let him go. And we estimated this tarpon to be 200 pounds plus. He was really a big fish.

TH: What year was the one that you caught that you weighed?

SC: That would’ve been probably sixty-nine [1969] or seventy [1970], somewhere right about that time. We used to catch a lot of tarpon in the summer and early fall at night, fishing the end of the North Jetty and South Jetty with live mullet. I chartered for that a lot, and we caught a lot of fish. I caught nine tarpons on nine bites one night. Mustad had just come out with a hook they call a z-nickel; it wouldn’t rust. And my friend, Sonny Kobleguard, who was one of my best friends ever, was really instrumental in a lot of fishing, brought some of those z-nickel hooks and we went nine for nine. Went back the next night with a charter, with Dave Putnam from Fort Pierce and his wife, and who’s dead and gone, (inaudible); they used to love to tarpon fish. And we went 0 for 27 the next night with the same hook. (laughs) Couldn’t keep one on. They jump off bad. The first night, it was a miracle to get nine bites and land all nine.

TH: And you never landed one the next night?

SC: Never landed a one the following night. We just loaded for bear, plenty of live mullet, and you had to see this to believe it. Right on the end of the North Jetty, that night that we went 0 for 27, the mullet were so thick; this was in, like, October or November. The tarpon got in them and they came in the air and I ended up with a hundred mullet in my boat. They jumped in the damned boat getting away from the tarpon. (laughs) We were throwing mullet overboard, putting some in the well.

TH: What kind of boat did you have?

SC: That boat was a boat that I bought from Ray Lowe. Yeah, Ray Lowe, Steve’s brother, and it was a boat that he and Charlie built from cypress wood. They bought the old coach park station
at Taylor Creek, tore it down, and took that cypress lumber and milled it, re-milled it and made a— it was a nineteen-foot, real fishing boat with two big livewells in it. It had two little bucket fishing seats in the back, a seventy horsepower Universal inboard, low sides. It was an inlet and river boat; it wasn’t for the ocean, although I caught many a big kingfish on the beach with it.

TH: You have any pictures of the boat?

SC: Yeah.

TH: I’d like to have—

SC: I got to pick out the name of that boat: it was Lucky. L-u-c-y. And all my boats after that were Lucky T-o-o.

TH: Cool. Okay, on the average, how far did you go offshore to fish?

SC: In those days when I was mating—when we went marlin fishing, it was maybe twice a year. That was when we would go deeper than the old Bendix machine would go—it was over 127, as deep as it would go, 120 feet.

TH: Fathoms or feet?

SC: Feet. Those machines are all marked in feet. The old circle jerk machine, you know, the stylus and paper. But when we went marlin fishing, we would go completely out of sight of land. And probably, looking back on how that bottom does, I doubt that we ever got to three hundred feet of water. Most all of our fishing was inside a hundred feet.

TH: How did you decide where to fish when you leave the inlet?

SC: If you were fishing for kingfish, grouper, or snapper, obviously, you fished over bottom structure. If you were fishing for dolphins, you look for an edge, you look for weed lines, you look for birds: some kind of surface sign to think to make you think you’re in an area. Jumping dolphin chasing flying fish—there’s a lot of flying fish in an area. Anything that would give away that there was some reason for fish to be there. And this was back before anybody had

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7 This was an old railroad station.
water temperature gauges.

The most important piece of equipment in any fishing boat is a water temperature gauge, to me, because if it’s too cold, king mackerel ain’t gonna be there. If it’s too cold, sailfish ain’t gonna be there. If it’s too cold, snook ain’t gonna be there. And I learned that many, many years ago. And you can be sailfishing—I’m talking about two-tenths of a degree. On one side of a color change, you’re getting bite after bite. You get on that other side and you can’t see one. That’s how critical that temperature is on fish. Sailfish are unbelievably particular on water temperature, 72.4 degree water, and if you’re in 72.6, you won’t get a bite. It’s just amazing. And all temperature gauges are different, unless you have a good temperature gauge, and the only one I ever could depend on was a Dytek. They were usually right on the money.

TH: Die?

SC: D-y-t-e-k, Dytek. And you get these machines—you buy a fathometer and a GPS and a plotter, and it’ll give you temperature in a corner. That thing may be ten degrees off. But you know, as long as you know you can relate to what it’s telling you. The last time you caught sailfish it was in 64 degree water, and you’re catching them today and it says 64. The water temperature’s not 64, but that machine tells you you’ve caught ’em at that temperature before.

TH: Learning your machine.

SC: All interperlation [sic].

TH: Okay. How do you decide where you will fish? Depends on what you’re targeting?

SC: A lot of factors go into the old upstairs computer. When you leave the dock, you pretty much know what the people would like to do. If what they want to do, you think, is out of the question, you convinced them that that’s not what you really want to do today, because it won’t work. Then, you want to go to the area that will probably produce your best chance of catching whatever they want to catch. If that would be a sailfish, you’re gonna go until you find the right water condition to set out: right water temperature, bait, a color change, as long as the water’s pretty. I’ve caught sailfish in forty feet. I’ve caught sailfish in twenty-five feet. I’ve caught them on a beach fishing for king mackerel. I know one Easter Sunday morning, Bill Yates went three for six on sailfish off nigger beach in twenty-seven feet of water. They were there.

TH: Frederick Douglas [Beach].
SC: Yeah. We call it the (inaudible) bath and surf club.

TH: Okay. Finally, I’d like to talk about how your fishing has changed over time in regards to the Oculina Bank. Since 1984, several changes have been made in the regulations of the Oculina Bank. I’d like to know if any of these regulations affected your fishing. If so, how? And, to begin with—if you fished prior to 1984, the Oculina was initially closed to trawling, dredging, bottom longlining in 1984. Did this affect your fishing?

SC: I retired from charter fishing in 1985. I don’t remember it having any effect on me, because by the time when I retired, you know, it really hadn’t gone into effect yet. All those regulations, they have changed. When they would affect me was whenever I couldn’t legally go there and drop a bait to the bottom and catch a fish, because I was not gonna violate that. I’ve always had a rule. Like, I know so many people that run across and fish the Bahamas without clearing customs and come back. I didn’t do that. I’m gonna abide by the rules. I made my living as a charter boat fisherman. People were paying me to take them out and do the best job that I could to produce fish for them. I didn’t want to do anything that would infringe on the ability to make me take away from the fishery, but I surely didn’t want to do anything that may cost me my license. So, I played by the rules.

TH: So, actually, once the Oculina—the closure of the Oculina Bank did not affect you that much because you retired before the more stringent—

SC: Right. About the time that that started.

TH: But I guess the question I asked you earlier, had you still been fishing—you did fish the Oculina Bank?

SC: Sure. A lot. (laughs)

TH: So, it would have affected, had you still been charter fishing?

SC: Yeah, it would have.

TH: It would have affected your fishing.
SC: You know, like I say, they made it unlawful to anchor. I think they even made it unlawful to even go out there and drop a line to the bottom.

TH: Yeah, you can’t bottom fish.

SC: You can’t bottom fish there. That, to me, makes no sense whatsoever. It’s one of those things that if you have a commercial boat that has electric reels and all of the equipment, the pneumatic reels or whatever, that can go there to anchor twenty-four hours a day, and pound that —maybe that’s gonna make an effect on it, because they’re in the business of being good at what they do. But a guy going out there sport fishing in a charter boat hands a man or a woman or a child a rod and reel—and most of the times we did that. If I could catch six fish, I had six people on the boat. If I could put two grouper and four red snapper in a boat, I didn’t want any more than that. I never went out there commercial fishing. That’s too deep to commercial fish; it’s too much aggravation.

TH: Okay. Let me—I’m gonna skip down a little bit. But you probably—you’re in favor of banning longlining and trawling and dredging.

SC: And anchoring.

TH: And anchoring, okay. But as far as power fishing over the area?

SC: Power fishing, rod and reel fishing with a rod and reel, not an electric reel. Not a hydraulic reel, but just sport fishing for all.

TH: Right, for all practical purposes.

SC: But the one thing that does enter into this in any argument about what’s right: it’s hard to say, it’s not fair for commercial fishermen to do it, and the sport fisherman can do it. That really is, in some ways, not fair. And whenever you get down to the brass tacks of it—I don’t remember who I heard say this the first time, but the difference between a sport fisherman and a commercial fisherman is that the sport fisherman takes a picture of his fish before he sells it.

TH: (laughs)

SC: I mean, there’s a lot of truth in that. So many people who work five days a week, and on
weekends go catch fish and sell them, may or may not have a license. That’s not my argument; it’s just the fact that there are a lot of ways that the resource gets hit. But as long you’re leaving that up to the fish to either bite or not bite, you got to deal with the weather, the tide, the water depth, and all that stuff, the price of fuel. I mean, it’s not gonna get beat to death by hook and line fishermen.

TH: Okay, Captain Crutchfield, Sam. I would like to come back later and talk to you about some of these personal experiences, but for right now, this is the final question. This one is very important. The designation of marine areas that are closed to fishing is being used 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 such as quotas or closed seasons, et cetera? And I follow this up with—well, answer that question first.

SC: Yeah. I find it hard to believe that a closed area, a sanctuary, is going to make a huge difference. It may make a slight difference. I can’t see it being the difference between success and failure of the gag grouper, for example, because we know that the most gag grouper that exist are in the Gulf of Mexico, and they start from six feet of water and go all the way off to 200 fathoms. Where they spawn off Fort Pierce, I was lucky enough to find one time, and they were spawning in ninety-eight feet of water. They were stacked up in mounds, that when you went over it with a fathometer, you thought you were looking at structure; you were looking at gag grouper. And that was where I caught the most gags. I caught seventy-nine head of gags one day, rod and reel fishing, three of us, 2,000 pounds of fish, on live mullet.

And I don’t think those fish are spawning out there on the Oculina Bank. I think they’re spawning inshore, just like where mutton snapper spawn in Bahamas. They’re usually in, like, seventy, eighty feet of water. The female’s roe is being fertilized by the milk from the male, from the sperm, when the water gets cloudy and there’s huge columns of fish, and I’m seeing the muttons in the water when you couldn’t see through ’em. I’ve seen the gags on the fathometer when you didn’t catch another fish but a gag. Never caught a red grouper on that spot, ever, never caught a scamp. Always gags, always on the Oculina Bank. Every grouper I’ve ever caught there was a gag.

I don’t think that you’re protecting the spawning part of it. Maybe you’re preserving the reef with the fish on it as a picturesque place that a submarine can go and take pictures. But if you’re going to preserve, can they tag those gag groupers in 240 feet of water and find those fish spawning in nine feet? ’Cause those fish moving inshore, are they’re moving to a place where they can legally be caught? If the answer to that question is yes, then they need to do what they can to utilize that as a way to maybe save part. But when you’re just going on a whim that this is a nice place that needs to be preserved—preserved for what reason, I think that’s where your real truth lies in it.
I don’t know that much about it from the standpoint of how good it does. I know people this year that I’ve heard talking about it. “We went out there forty fathoms, dropped in, caught some gags, man.” Had to let ’em go; you got to vent them or they’re not gonna make it, you know? I know some guys that were catching an awful lot of grouper and snapper when they shouldn’t have been, and some of them were probably bringing them in. I don’t know that they did. I wouldn’t do it. No way. But anyway, answering your question, I’m not sure what value that has. You can put money in a cup—

*Pause in recording*

TH: Go ahead. Your—

SC: Yeah, all I’m saying is I’m not sure of the value of closing. I don’t know if the result warrants the action necessary.

TH: Okay. Let me follow it up with the other question. There’s quotas, closed seasons, there’s trip limits, there’s catch limits. Of all the different ways of managing a fishery, which one—what do you think is the fairest way, and the best way, to manage the fisheries?

SC: Limits, without any doubt. I think that limits are necessary. We’ve got—when I came to Fort Pierce fishing, for every hook in the water, we now probably have a hundred hooks in the water.

TH: Mm-hm.

SC: So, limits seem to be effective. I think that if you have limits that justify, you know, you got just X number of fish—if you know the numbers, then you can put a fair limit. If you don’t know, if you’re shooting in the dark—the limits they’ve put on snook, I think, have been ridiculous. ’Cause we’ve had—

TH: Let me open the door. Go ahead, I’m listening.

SC: We’ve had many more snook, up until this super freeze we had, than we’ve ever had. When they—we have—I think we’ve had some really—we’ve overdone it on the limits, I think, where we’ve had—you should be allowed more than one snook. The slot limit, to me, has been ridiculous. I know they’re trying to target the male fish before they turn into females by doing that. When you’ve got to catch a fish that’s within a four-inch slot, that’s pretty—if you’re gonna have to be able to keep one fish, keep one. You know? Whatever one you want to keep, keep
But when you put size limits on grouper, I think that’s an effective way to do it, and the size limit on grouper being—one on a gag twenty-four inches. That’s more than fair. And sure, a little ol’ four-pound grouper, that won’t quite be it. He’s good eating, but you know that fish is legal; it weighs six or seven pounds, it sure as hell—you know, you’re doing a better thing.

They’ve done some good things. But if you can only keep one fish, the man that catches that fish should be able to decide it. They should have it so when you violate a law on a limit, whether it be size limit, slot limit, over the limit, they need to throw away the damn key. I mean, just don’t tolerate people—the worst thing we have to deal within limit—I can’t say the word I want to say. But there are people that I’ve never seen throw a snook back. If they catch—that’s going up the hill at Taylor Creek, home with them. They don’t throw ’em back. They don’t know the law. They don’t care about the law. That’s dinner. If you’re gonna have a law, I think they should go ahead and put maximum fines. You get caught with a short snook, you get caught with three or four snook in your—you know, just really burn them up. Maybe it’ll get around that you’re not gonna tolerate that.

TH: How about closed seasons of fish?

SC: Closed season during the spawn, yeah. For snook, I’m all in favor of it. I can remember when there was no closed season on a snook. We still had limits. The limit was four, and I remember—good Lord, when you’re catching snook in the Fort Pierce Inlet and the bite is on, it’s, like, amazing. I’ve caught as many as seventy-nine snook on a tide. When you’re catching and you put four fish in the boat per person—that was the limit, and we never caught over the limit. And the deck of your boat—most of the fish you were catching were the males that were as big they get, and the deck was slick with milk sperm everywhere. And when you’d bring up a decent size fish to the boat—a female, a fifteen, eighteen, twenty pound snook—there’d be ten males with it. I mean, you had to see it to believe it: snook that you could not see through the schools. We still have the snook like that. The freeze of 2010 will go down in history as the worst lick the snook have ever taken, ’cause I mean, they were hammered here. It’s showing, too.

TH: Well, how about the closure of the—for the snapper and grouper this year, the six month closure?

SC: We’ve got more red snapper right now than I can remember at any time since I’ve been here. I don’t understand the closure on red snapper. I don’t understand the closure on grouper. I think this was kind of an experimental thing more than anything else, but it was for real. You had to do it. But I know that within the last year I’ve fished offshore only two or three times bottom
fishing; but I used to do it two or three days a week, sometimes seven days a week.

I can remember when we had lots of red snapper that were what we called “spots.” There were the little bitty guys, a pound apiece. They were legal. We brought them in; we sold them. I remember having ninety-nine red snappers one day on a bite, and I didn’t have but 105 pounds of fish. Decent red snapper—most the time you catch a red snapper, now, he’s going to be four or five pounds, or bigger. And most of the places, the numbers that I used to fish, you could go there with good bait and just as soon as you hit bottom, you’re gonna get a bite; it’s gonna be a red snapper. Somebody must know more than I know, and I feel like that the biologists, they were all just studying the red snapper. I know that they seem like—I spent a lot of time in Louisiana, and I swear, if you fall overboard by one of those rigs, a red snapper will eat you.

TH: (laughs)

SC: I mean, the red snappers in the Gulf—they’ve really got a lot of red snapper.

TH: So, you think the closed season would be better served if they had quotas or trip limits?

SC: I don’t know. I think court’s still out on that. I don’t feel comfortable with a closed season on a offshore bottom fish, knowing full well that on any given day I can go out and catch red snapper and grouper right off Fort Pierce. I can go in the Gulf of Mexico off of the state of Louisiana and not catch grouper, like we do here, but the red snapper are prolific.

Somebody came up with that suggestion. It all comes back to something I said way early on in this conversation: you don’t always have the best, qualified people making the recommendations that are followed. And getting someone as a project manager or a lake manager or a refuge manager from outside the area—someone from Minnesota trying to manage an ecosystem on the Kissimmee River does not pencil out. I think you need local knowledge on anything. If you got somebody—if Grant Gilmore is telling me what he’s seeing in red snapper and grouper, I’m gonna believe it.

TH: ’Cause he’s studied them all his life.

SC: Because he’s been there, done that, and bought the t-shirt. But for so many people that come from out of state, they come here because Florida is a great place to live and work, and get a job in some kind of either wildlife or fisheries management, and they’re not qualified to deal with the local flora and fauna. I got a real issue with that, because I can tell you the six best bass lakes in this state are now managed by GFC [Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission], and they suck
This going in and scraping the bottom is the biggest bunch of crap that was put on the public as has ever been. I know the man that was the contractor that did the Lake Kissimmee deal, and he said there wasn’t enough muck taken off that lake to start a damn muck business. It was white, sand bottom. I grew up on that lake. I’ve waded every inch of it. There wasn’t any muck. You may get way back in an old slough somewhere like Osceola Slough. You go far enough back in the lily pads, you’d find some muck; but that was also being utilized, just like the hydrilla. Everybody says, “Hydrilla. Noxious vegetation. You gotta poison that.” Every lake they’ve removed the hydrilla from, you go and try to catch a fish.

The worst example I can quote you, and this is only if you can remember: Four years ago I was bitten by a twelve foot alligator. I was in Lake Istokpoga. They did that bottom deal in there. That was the best lake a man could go to if just want to go get a bite. Fly rod, plug rod, bass, shell cracker, speckled perch, bluegills; it was just like a heaven. I’ve been there twice in the last four years. The day I got alligator bit, we fished four hours without a bite. I went there last spring, a year ago right now, with Hans Kraaz and his two boys; jumped out of the airboat again, wading, knowing damned well that place is full of gators. We fished for three hours without a bite, on a fly rod with a little brim bug. Now, that’s bad fishing. And I know enough about that sport, fly fishing, that if ever something is there to catch, I could’ve gotten a bite.

Lake Kissimmee is slowly getting better. Lake Okeechobee they almost destroyed. Poor management is a hell of lot worse than no management. I mean, that’s just—there are things that have happened in the last year, trying to control the resources and make things better. The Game and Fish Commission went into the St. Johns for the first time, whether or not they were the culprit. The St. Johns Water Management District has always done a great job with their fisheries management, but when the State gets involved, it goes the other way. They had a place up there we called Sitories, which was north of the management area that they’ve had up there, the Goodwood area, and the other one they put in it there, the duck place. I can never think of the name of that thing.

We had an area that we had been hunting for years, and it was choked out with vegetation. The old palm willow and crap had gotten so thick that you couldn’t get in there, even in an airboat. It was good for nothing. It was just like a canopied-over forest that the sun can’t get to, won’t hold up for the deer population because it can’t grow what they gotta eat. Hurricane Frances opened this place up, and it was loaded with hydrilla. It was so thick you couldn’t hardly run a kicker boat in there. That became the most incredible water fowl hunting that I’ve seen in my lifetime here in freshwater. It was the home of a wintering flock of 50,000, 60,000 ring-necked ducks. They went in there this past summer and killed all the hydrilla. Why? They say, “Well, the tourists come down. They want to go bass fishing, they can’t run their boat.” You can’t get a kicker boat in there. It was a high dock; you had to have an airboat. So, that argument’s out the window. There weren’t enough ducks killed to put on a barbecue in that place the whole season.
last year. It was horrible.

But, anyway, leave the information out of management of freshwater relation in Florida. No management’s got to be better. They now realize the worst thing, that the biggest blunder they’ve ever done in the state of Florida was the channelization of the Kissimmee River. I watched that happen. Very few people fought it. It provided a lot more pastureland for a few ranchers. It made runoff better and eliminated some of the flooding by having a hundred foot wide, thirty-foot deep channel. But they just really destroyed a lot of what it took God a long time to come up with that, and it didn’t take Man but about ten years to completely destroy it. Now, they’re looking back, saying, “Well, we goofed.” They’re trying—and I’ve looked around some of the work they’re doing, trying to bring that back. They will eventually make it better than it is now. They have no choice there, because what they had was a disaster.

When you get something that is not producing, then you got to maybe do something to make it better. But when you’ve got the best producing areas—maybe it’s the Oculina Bank, the inshore and offshore bar of this area, or the Fort Drum swamp. If it’s doing a great job, leave it the hell alone. Regulate who comes and goes when and what they can take, but don’t go in and say, “We want to eliminate the hydrilla.” I can take you in any body of water to have a lot of hydrilla, and take a little net and go around. I’m gonna show you tons of juvenile fish, shrimp, crawfish, food—and the fishing’s gonna be good there.

TH: Hydrilla cleans the lakes.

SC: Yes, sir.

TH: Makes the clear water.

SC: It makes—it’s a buffer. Now, if hydrilla is bad, why don’t they have their all STAs full of it, you know? And that’s where the ducks are now.

TH: STAs?

SC: The Stormwater Treatment Area. But, anyway, vegetation is good, the right kind of vegetation. Cattails are not good. They’re so proliferate whenever they’re exposed to (inaudible). That’s why a lot of these places get choked out.

TH: Quickly, thinking ahead: what do you think fishing in Fort Pierce will be like in ten years?
Last question.

SC: Well, the fishing that generates the most revenue for the state, ’cause the people buying licenses want to go catch sailfish, redfish, largemouth bass, and all that, I think it’s going to be able to be maintained pretty well. More hooks in the water means more of a draw in the fish population. But along with that, we’re introducing redfish here now, which we’ve never done before. This is the first year I remember, locally, where they were releasing—they were releasing supposedly 10,000 redfish that were almost slot limit here. I guess Harbor Branch did the work on them. And those are good things. You don’t hurt things by doing stuff like that.

Jumping in and taking over and managing something that you don’t understand yet is what gets us in deep shit. And when we see the most detrimental effect—just like we’re make gonna Florida a better place, we’re gonna channelize the Kissimmee River, and the U.S. [Army] Corps of Engineers and all their might didn’t take them long to do that. I can remember the old Kissimmee River before it ever had a shovel stuck in it. It was a gorgeous place. Phenomenal fishing, phenomenal duck hunting, wildlife. But anyway, that was a mistake. At least it was one of the few times they’ve admitted making a mistake. George W. Bush never made a mistake. I mean, everything he did, he did for a reason. He was always right, everybody was wrong. We went into Iraq because they had all of those weapons of mass destruction, and they were in bed with the damned Al Qaida, and now that’s coming back to haunt.

Anyway, I think if I could somehow turn a switch and make the best possible scenario for what Florida’s got coming down the road—’cause I’m getting old, I ain’t gonna be here much longer. They need to get some better educated people in the field of trying to propagate the species and make things as good as they can managing saltwater, freshwater, whatever, in a way that it’s gonna be a positive outcome and not a negative. We’re getting too much negative outcome from their little efforts.

TH: Thank you. (laughs)

SC: Yes, sir.

TH: I’m gonna shut this off.

End of interview