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Robert Benton oral history interview by Terry Howard, August 5, 2010

Robert Benton (Interviewee)

Terry Lee Howard (Interviewer)

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Terry Howard: Good afternoon, this is Terry Howard. Today is August 5, 2010, and I’m at the

Robert Benton: Fort Pierce City Hall.

TH: —Fort Pierce City Hall, conducting an oral interview with Mayor Bob Benton for the Gulf and South Atlantic Fisheries Foundation’s project with Fort Pierce fishermen on the Oculina Bank HAPC [Habitat Area of Particular Concern]. Welcome, Mayor Benton. Please state your name, spell your name, your place of birth and your date of birth.
RB: Bob Benton, B-o-b B-e-n-t-o-n. I was born in Yonkers, New York—don’t tell anybody (TH laughs)—October 30, 1956.

TH: Okay, when did you move to Fort Pierce?

RB: I moved to Fort Pierce permanently in 1968. I took my first steps here. We had a place in Connecticut and a place in Fort Pierce, but we moved here permanently in 1968.

TH: You were born, again, in 19—

RB: Nineteen fifty-six.

TH: Fifty-six [1956]. Okay, and what brought you to Fort Pierce?

RB: My grandparents lived here, and my dad had to change his profession. He had had a heart attack and we lived in Connecticut, and the cold weather and everything; they told him he needed to move to a different climate, so with our relatives down here in Fort Pierce we moved to Fort Pierce.

TH: And your grandfather, what did he do down here?

RB: He was a retired fireman. He did some work around here, worked for the county. Mainly he was a snook fisherman on the Bridge all the time, almost every night of the week and—

TH: That would be the old South Bridge?

RB: The old South Bridge.

TH: It was a wooden bridge?

RB: Wooden bridge.

TH: It had a turnstile—
RB: Right

TH: —in the center. Okay, and did you come down to vacation often?

RB: Oh, yes. At least three or four times a year.

TH: Okay, so you were a teenager when you first moved here?

RB: When we first moved here, I was in sixth grade.

TH: Sixth grade, okay. Are you married?

RB: Yes.

TH: How old were you when you got married?

RB: I believe twenty-five.

TH: Do you have children?

RB: I have two boys.

TH: Okay, and how old are they?

RB: Twenty-five and twenty-one.

TH: How much schooling do you have?

RB: Some college; no college degree, but I’ve been to some college.
TH: What do you do for a living?

RB: I have a landscape maintenance business, and I’m mayor half the day, landscaping the other half.

TH: Okay, Mayor of Fort Pierce, Florida.

RB: Right.

TH: What other jobs do you have?

RB: That’s about it. Well, father, and you know—

TH: Have you worked in the fishing industry?

RB: Um—

TH: Commercial, charter—

RB: When I was younger, I did some work, way back when I was a kid, I guess you could say, unloading the Spanish mackerel boats, the big net boats, way back when; and also have done some—just a little bit of swordfishing and also tilefishing. Back when I got into the construction business, I guess you can say, in my maybe late teens and early twenties, I worked for Gus Lennard. Do you remember Gus?

TH: He built boats.

RB: He built the boats, but he was one of the first that really got involved in the swordfish when they were really big. He was building all the boats up there next to where Herman is now.

TH: Herman Summerlin. That would be—describe where that would be.

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1 Herman Summerlin was also interviewed for the Oculina Bank Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is O6-00031.
RB: Up on Indian, what’s it— St. Lucie Village, I guess you would call it.

TH: Okay. Now, Gus Lennard, can you spell his name?

RB: G-u-s L-e-n-n-a-r-d.

TH: All right, and he was a fisherman at the time?

RB: Mm-hm.

TH: Okay, so you did work—explain a little bit about the mackerel fishing. You picked mackerel?

RB: After about, I should say less than a year of that, I had enough of that. I’d seen more mackerel than I ever wanted to see in my life. It was good money, it just—I’d rather go catch fish than—you know, it’s sort of—I would lose my taste for fish if I’d have done that much longer. I’d rather catch fish—

TH: Well, describe exactly what you’re doing, though.

RB: Oh, we literally stood in the back of a—maybe it could be anywhere from a twenty-foot boat to a fifty-foot boat. And in some cases, literally thousands of pounds of mackerel and just throwin’ them up on the, you know, up on the conveyer belt—

TH: Taking them out of the—

RB: Right. If they didn’t have a head on them, they went in my cooler to go home, but as long as they were a whole fish they went into the fish house.

TH: I mean, you picked them out of nets?

RB: Right.
TH: Okay, and do you currently own a boat?

RB: Yes, I have, really, two of them. I’ve got a seventeen-foot Dusky, which I’ve had two of, since I was a teenager; and I’ve got a twenty-one foot Blue Water.

TH: What kind of engines do you have on them?

RB: Yamaha on the Blue Water and Evinrude Johnson on the Dusky.

TH: What horsepower?

RB: One fifteen, and a 275.

TH: Two seventy-five on the Blue Water and 115 on the Dusky, okay. Now, I’d like to ask you some questions about the Oculina Bank. How familiar are you with the Oculina Bank?

RB: Somewhat. I haven’t fished there a whole lot. Years ago, before it was outlawed, we did some bottom fishing there, but I just— most of my fishin’ wasn’t bottom fishin’. I just didn’t have the patience for it a lot of times, unless fishin’ was good.

TH: Why was the Oculina Bank designated as an area to protect?

RB: My understanding: because number one, because there was issues with anchors on the bottom; and also being the spawning ground for grouper and snapper. I’m learning more and more as we go with Harbor Branch being located here in town. I guess I’ve read a lot over the years. I guess Oculina Bank is like a—sort of like the [Florida] Keys: it’s a sort of like a very special place, I guess, for the spawning ground for these fish.

TH: It’s the Oculina coral. And besides anchoring, did you know anything about drag, dragging?

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2 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.
RB: I know they used to supposedly drag nets up there.

TH: For?

RB: Well, my understanding when they drag nets, that’s whatever they can get in them. (laughs) Unfortunately, I’ve seen—I’ve seen some of those ghost nets, so—

TH: I think these were shrimp and scallop boats for dragging. I’m not sure. So, that’s why you believe—why do you believe it was designated as an area to protect? Was it because of the bottom and the reefs?

RB: Right, because of the coral and, I guess, being very unique and being the spawning ground.

TH: Okay, anything else you can tell me about the bank that you know of?

RB: Just that it’s a good fishing area that was—you know, that we—I guess we lost, as far as fishermen.

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

RB: If it’s gonna make the fishery better, you know? Like I said, because I’m not a big bottom fisherman, I can live with it. I think my concerns are more with the regulations that are being put on grouper and snapper now.

TH: Has the closure of the Oculina Bank affected your fishing?

RB: It’s just a little bit of bottom fishing I would do. It’s probably cut it out now. About the only bottom fishin’ I do is if I get lucky to go with people like David King, who has some good numbers. There’s not many other areas around, I guess, like the Oculina Bank.

TH: Okay, so if anchoring and bottom fishing in the Oculina Bank was not prohibited—in other words, if you could fish there, would you fish there?

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3 David King was also interviewed for the Oculina Bank Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is O6-00009.
RB: Yes, I would.

TH: How and for what?

RB: Mainly grouper [and] snapper, and my understanding [is] we’ve caught some cobia up there before.

TH: Now, cobia, you’ve probably caught them trolling?

RB: Trolling, and mainly—we have a bridge on the boat, so we sight fish for them.

TH: Overall, how has fishing changed since you began fishing in Fort Pierce?

RB: Well, fishing when I was a kid and when I went with my grandfather at a young age, snook fishing on the bridges with a cane pole and some wire line. You could snook fish and it couldn’t have been better. It was most interesting. I got to throw this one in: Right now we’re in the fishing—I guess we do fishing tournaments, the kingfish tournaments, and it’s amazing. Years ago we couldn’t get through the ribbon fish to get to the snook, and today we’re selling those ribbon fish for five, six dollars apiece, or more, for these fishing tournaments.

I think fishing in the sixties [1960s] and seventies [1970s] was excellent, and then I guess the late seventies [1970s] through the nineties [1990s], until the net ban—and this is specifically inshore; not, you know, the beach fishing. I’d say the late eighties [1980s], things were really slow. In fact, I was—there was a lot of times I would go fishing and come home empty-handed. Since the net ban, it’s amazing. The fish—the comeback of the industry, I guess you can say, and even the bait on the beach, it’s just amazing. I’ve seen sailfishin’ in thirty feet of water off Vero Beach, just recently, which is, you know, unheard of—as a kid, anyway.

TH: Have you had any experiences with law enforcement within or regarding the Oculina Bank?

RB: A couple of times. Usually we’d see them fly over. I guess they do a flyover pretty often. On the way in one day, we were stopped by the FWC [Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission] and just checked, because they—I guess they must have a satellite that they—somehow they knew we were up there close to the Oculina Bank. We were trolling—it was one of the fishing tournaments—and because we were up that way, they were checking us out.
TH: Okay. You can still, I guess, troll over that area. Now, I want to talk about your fishing history, specifically. What is your earliest memory of fishing and how old were you?

RB: I was probably six, seven years old, fishin’ on the old South Bridge, like I said, with my grandfather with a cane pole. And with serious business fishing, you didn’t get a lot of sleep. We were out there from—I remember he’d wake me up maybe ten o’clock at night and we’d get home maybe about two or three in the morning sometimes. It was an hour difference each night. But you know, I guess you could say at a young age it was fun, to a point; but for him, it was a way of life.

TH: So you had a cane pole? Describe the cane pole and wire leader.

RB: Well, wire—it was just a basically about a ten foot long cane pole, just a piece of real heavy cane with a—it had some eyes on it, but basically just had a piece of wire line on it, about maybe twenty feet long. He would just have a mullet and he’d just walk along, walked the length of the bridge and just up and down, you know, around the—climb down on the pilings. And the fish would always be in the, you know, from the lights: they’d be right on the edge of the lights and he would just throw the fish in. Once he hooked the fish, he’d just throw it up on the bridge.

TH: Now, you’re showing me, just like pulling them straight up, and then the fish would flop up on the bridge?

RB: Definitely not like we’re doing it today.

TH: And how—what size mullet and how did you hook the mullet?

RB: They had a pretty good size mullet. It was probably, I’d say, four to six inches and we’d hook it up through the top of the lip.

TH: From the bottom lip up?

RB: Well, no. Just put it in the mouth and just like this. (demonstrates)

TH: Okay. All right. Cool. Like this? (demonstrates) You have to explain— (laughs)
RB: (laughs) Through the top lip, put it in the mouth, and put it in, like, the corner. And make sure you had a healthy one, because if it had a mark on it, the tarpon would get it before the snook sometimes.

TH: Really? Why was that?

RB: I don’t know what it was, but for some reason, in my years of snookfishin’, it appears they always like a clean, healthy bait. If we wanted to catch tarpon, we would pop an eye out on one of the mullet, and the mullet would swim around in a circle—and the tarpon (makes sound effect). Snook wouldn’t touch it, but the tarpon couldn’t stand it.

TH: Huh!

RB: It was amazing how many tarpon we would catch in the middle of the inlet out there over the years.

TH: How did you learn to fish and who taught you?

RB: Well, it was my grandfather, and things have changed now. Now, I have a son and (inaudible) one of my awards that I’m very proud of, and very involved with, the Fort Pierce Sport Fishing Club. One year I was their inshore—let’s just say “champion,” I guess you can say—and I would probably say thanks to tripletail fishing inside the river. We had several that were within the world record by—I guess to break a world record you have to go so many ounces over the last one, and we had—my wife had one that was almost there.

TH: What was that weight?

RB: It was about twenty-three pounds.

TH: Triple—a twenty-three pound tripletail.

RB: Yeah, in the middle of the Indian River, halfway between the inlets near the nuclear power plant.
TH: Between St. Lucie—

RB: Half way between Fort Pierce and Stuart Inlet.

TH: In the river.

RB: The Indian River.

TH: Were you fishing for tripletail?

RB: Oh, yeah.

TH: How do you fish for tripletail?

RB: With a troll rite shrimp and—

TH: A troll rite, what’s that?

RB: A little—it’s a hook with about an eighth of an inch piece of lead at the end of the hook with a shrimp and, you know, fifteen-pound test, and just fishing the channel markers. Or we would put crab traps out just to attract the seaweed and the bait, and that would attract the tripletail.

TH: It would be an obstacle in the water that would—

RB: Right, just—and it would get the seaweed and then it became a nursery for the bait, little shrimp and stuff, and the crabs. And specifically, in the summertime, we caught some big tripletail for many years.

TH: Now, tripletail, would that be—that you would find tripletail where you would also find sheephead?

RB: Yes, and flounder.
RB: Until today, most of my fishin’ today is snookfishin’, and still tripletail fishing. I gave up fishin’ for tarpon, because I got tired of watchin’ them get eaten at the boat by a shark. I just, you know, I’ve had some—I’ve caught some tarpon in the inlet here, the Fort Pierce Inlet, that were anywhere from—you know, the bigger ones were well over a hundred, maybe 120 pounds or better. And a couple times, some of the smaller ones I’d caught off the end of North Jetty there, off the worm reef when it was still there. Remember the worm reef that was in the middle of the inlet?

TH: Oh, yeah.

RB: Fishin’ was really good there. I used to fish there every night, but I just got tired of watchin’ big sharks come up and take this fifty pound, seventy pound tarpon and just cut it in half. So, being there’s no meat value, and I do like to fish because I like eating fish, I just decided that, you know, I’m not going to target tarpon anymore.

TH: Okay. When did you first start fishing in the Fort Pierce area? I guess age and year.

RB: Probably really—you know, when I started fishing a lot and really got involved in fishing was probably about 1970.

TH: You were about how old?

RB: I would say I was probably about twelve.

TH: Fifty-six [1956] to sixty-six [1966] and yeah, okay. So what did you fish for?

RB: Back then, anything that would bite. Did a lot of trout fishin’. A guy named Jay Sample—I don’t know whether you knew Jay Sample or not, but I used to work for him when I worked for
I was talking about Gus Lennard. I worked for Jay and before—

TH: He built docks.

RB: Well, that was his son.

TH: Okay.

RB: The father was a housing contractor, you know, a general contractor, and before work every morning—he lived on Indian River Drive—he’d go out trout fishin’. And we caught trout every morning. I mean, it was nothin’ to catch gator trout; a six, eight pound trout was almost a sure thing. We didn’t keep them all, we just kept one or two for dinner, but that was his life.

TH: Did you—what did you use to fish for trout?

RB: We used to use—well, they changed the names from cottee jigs to—

TH: Trout touts.

RB: Trout touts. Used the Boone trout touts years ago—the slick tails on, you know—so it’s a little bit of everything. I never used much live bait, because I know it—to me, it’s sort of cheatin’ for trout and put a lot of effort. I know I’ve caught my share of trout with pigfish, and a lot of big ones. I try not to target the big ones. They keep the little ones out there, so I like the three to four pounds. Good eatin’ and—

TH: They’re better eating than the larger ones?

RB: Yeah, it’s—I don’t know. I just—even snook fishin’, I’ve caught some snook that have been—you know, when I say up there probably in the forty pounds, lower forty pounds, in the turn basin. And they didn’t up much of a fight, usually, on a real cold day. But I’d rather catch a twenty-pound snook any day. They put up a better fight, and most of the time—well, up till a few years ago, you could take that twenty-pounder home. (laughs)

TH: They’re better eating—
RB: Yes.

TH: —than the forty pounders. And the trout—go back to the trout. Did you look for sandy places in the grass?

RB: Yup, that’s—

TH: Can you explain—can you elaborate on that a little bit?

RB: Well, the trout would sit in the nice grass—you know, turtle grass, whatever you want to call it—and they would wait for a shrimp or some bait to go across that sand trap and the sand spot, and boom! You never know what you might catch there, but a lot of times [it was] amazing. And sometimes it was so neat with the trout, we’d get back in that grass and the grass would be—wading in it could be knee high. We had to climb out of the boat with some big trout, just with mask and snorkel, and just sorta pull them out of that grass. It’s amazing. Many, many years ago—

TH: You mean, they were so big?

RB: They were wrapped up, because I never use a leader when I fish for trout. I usually use six to eight pound test with no leader. And I only had two big teeth, really, and if—

TH: If you try to horse them in, you would lose them.

RB: Right. And a lot of times I would fish with Zara Spooks or jumping minnows (inaudible), because I love to. You know, you didn’t get as many fish, but early in the morning—

TH: The zeros?

RB: Zara Spook.

TH: Spell it.
RB: Z-a-r-a, Zara.

TH: Z-e-r-a [sic].

RB: Zara Spook.

TH: S-p-o-o-k.

RB: Right. Or a jumping minnow.

TH: Jumping minnow, describe that.

RB: They both resemble a mullet about four or five inches long, and they would dance on top of the water, and make some noise; they had little rattles in them. They just—in July, fishing up near the village off that island near the marina, I’ve caught a twelve pounder up there one time on one, and that was—

TH: Twelve pound?

RB: That was my biggest trout. Right up there; that island that goes into the marina.

TH: Riverside Marina. I know right where you’re talkin’ about. I keep my boat at Riverside Marina.

RB: Oh, you guys probably went by me on the way out in July when I was—when I caught him.

TH: Twelve pounder, cool.

RB: I’ve seen bigger than that, but that was the biggest one that I’ve caught is twelve pounds. I didn’t measure him or weigh him, but I know it was a quick around there, and away he went. I didn’t keep him.

TH: You let him go?
RB: We got a picture, real quick picture, because I’m one of those people you don’t bring your sailfish, you don’t bring any fish in my boat; if you hold it in the water, we’ll take a picture. But none of this—I can say that—

TH: None of this is—you’re holding a fish up?

RB: Right, and we don’t bring it in the boat. We unhook it in the water.

TH: To protect the fish.

RB: That’s right.

TH: Unless you’re gonna eat it.

RB: Unless we’re gonna eat it, and we don’t lose too many fish.

TH: Cool. What did you fish for? You said everything. And we’ve talked about trout, tripletail, anything that would bite.

RB: Well, we caught—you know, over the years, everybody caught jacks. We’ve been catching a lot, in fact, a few years on and off in the mouth of the inlet permit. Some good permit fishin’. And Sam Crutchfield—I think, watchin’ him one day, because I live on South Beach catchin’ one off North Beach, “What is he catchin’?” I get the binoculars, because usually you didn’t catch a lot of permit here, other than fishing down St. Lucie power plant, nuclear power plant; we’ve caught some. There were a couple of years recently with the crabs that the permit fishing in the mouth of the inlet, the Fort Pierce Inlet, was exceptional; some big permit.

TH: So where did you fish when you began fishing?

RB: In Fort Pierce.

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4 Samuel Crutchfield was also interviewed for the Oculina Bank Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is O6-00032.
TH: But I mean, specifically, where in Fort Pierce?

RB: Fort Pierce Inlet, the bridges, Indian River.

TH: North and South Bridge?

RB: North and South Bridge. And most of my fishin’ is within a few miles of shore. If I go out, I do a lot of cobia fishing; a couple years ago we did very well, but we have a little bridge on our — got a picture of it here. It’s got a top on it now, the Blue Water. But we chased down the cobia following the rays right off the beach.

TH: Explain that, following the—

RB: Well, we’d see the manta rays, and a couple years ago, we had a banner year that anywhere from ten feet of water from the Fort Pierce Inlet to the St. Lucie Inlet. On any given day, if you just followed the schools, you’d find these big manta rays, and then you’d find the cobia around them, usually. It’s just amazing. No live bait. We would just be looking for them and throwing the jigs that I would fish for snook with, two ounce feathers.

TH: Two ounce—

RB: Yeah, two ounce—well, I call them “feathers.” Jigs, I don’t know what they—

TH: Snook jigs.

RB: Snook jigs, with real bright—

TH: They’re usually white.

RB: Well, these are real bright colors: pink, green. I mean, something you’d think a fish would run from. (laughs)

*Pause in recording*
TH: Okay, we’re talking about—okay. For cobia fishing, you look for the manta rays, the big manta rays. And the cobia apparently like the shade of the manta rays.

RB: The shade, or maybe they stir up bait. It’s just amazing. They stick with them, and once you see—usually on a calm day, you see the little fins from the rays comin’ up, and chase ’em down, and it seems like at least 75 percent of the time there’s cobia around them.

TH: Okay. What’s your biggest cobia?

RB: Well, there’s a question there. It could be with David King. I had one that was in the mid-sixty, sixty-five pounds with him. Now, my son went out one day by himself and had one almost seventy pounds—and I’m sure that was a job, getting him in the boat and gaffing him yourself. He called me and told me all about it, so—

TH: I imagine he was excited.

RB: He put up a heck of a fight, and they’re good eatin’.

TH: Oh, yeah. Do you mostly go fishing in your own boat or boats of others?

RB: Lately, I’ve been going in some friends’ boats offshore, because mine are small and slow. I’ve been fishing in some nice big forty-five foot open fishermen with nine hundred horsepower. I’m gettin’ spoiled.

TH: When you go offshore, what do you fish for?

RB: A lot of—we do the kingfish tournaments with the Southern Kingfish Associations [SKA]. So, sometime nailing kingfish or a cobia lately.

TH: Okay, and you go with David King?

RB: Well, I haven’t fished with David in a while. I’ve fished with my son, and his boss, Scotty Crippen, has White’s Tackle shop, and there’s a group of us that do these fishing tournaments.
TH: How do you spell Scotty Crippen?

RB: Scott, S-c-o-t-t.

TH: I got Scotty.

RB: It’s C-r-i-p-p-e-n.

TH: Okay, Scotty Crippen. And did you mention another name?

RB: Well, my son, Kadri, and—

TH: How do you spell your son’s name?

RB: K-a-d-r-i.

TH: An original name, Kadri.

RB: Kadri.

TH: Interesting. Is it a family name?

RB: No, we had a friend—my wife wanted something different, and we had a friend we met in the Bahamas. We used to go to the Bahamas and spend a month, and he was over there surfin’, and he was just one of those people. He could surf well, dive. My wife said, “I don’t want a name like everybody else,” so it was the name we came up with and—

TH: And your other son’s name?

RB: Kori, K-o-r-i.

TH: Kadri is the—
RB: He’s the twenty-five year old.

TH: Twenty-five and twenty-one. K-o-r-i?

RB: K-o-r-i.

TH: So you got them both with Ks. Okay.

RB: Kadri is a very avid fisherman. He lives for fishing. He fishes probably four, five days a week. (laughs)

TH: Good for him. Okay, so do you mostly go—you used to fish mostly with your own boat?

RB: Right.

TH: Okay. Now, who do you fish with now?

RB: My son’s friends.

TH: Who did you fish with, and then who do you fish with now?

RB: Well, for years I would fish with Greg Simmons, did a lot of snook fishin’ at the beach. I’d say the north jetty on the beach. I had a handful of friends I fish with there that I grew up with. Clark Cole, I don’t know whether you knew Clark or not?

TH: Spell that. I gotta get the spellings on these.

RB: C-l-a—

TH: I got Clark.
RB: C-o—Cole. Let me get that right. C-o-l-e. Cole, I believe it was.

TH: C-o-l-e. Okay and go ahead.

RB: Greg Simmons.

TH: I got Greg

RB: S-i-m-m-i-o-n-s.

TH: Is it —i-o-n-s, or just —o-n-s?

RB: —o-n-s, maybe. (laughs)

TH: From then, you fished with?

RB: When my son was born—

TH: I’m sure you’ve fished with a lot of people.

RB: Yeah, I fished with a lot of people, but I got to where I would fish more with my son. Now, we did the fishing tournaments. It was a handful of us, but usually my son’s friends. I started off with him. We had a business and when I could get a break I had to take him with me, so I had his car seat strapped to the console on the center console of the boat, and he’s been in the boat since he’s been probably two years old.

TH: That’s Kadri?

RB: Kadri.

TH: During what months of the year do you fish for what fish?
RB: Well, I fish for snook only during snook season. I won’t take a fish out of season and I don’t want to fish for them out of season. I’ll make a comment: Guides should be outlawed from fishing for snook out of season, because, you know, when they take the picture they break the law, most of them; and in my opinion, that’s the bigger problem than almost the cold weather in the mortality of snook.

TH: When they take the picture, they break the law?

RB: Yeah, you’re not supposed to bring that fish over the gunwale of your boat.

TH: Ah, I see what you mean.

RB: The FWC should enforce the law more. But snook fishin’, you know, during the season; tripletail fishin’, usually year-round. The summer’s better sometimes than the winter. With the cold weather, they’ll kinda get offshore near the buoys. Flounder fishing in the wintertime. During the mullet run, which is late September, October, if I can get away I’ll be fishin’ the whole—September, October are really my favorite months of the year, really, with the mullet run, because you never know what you’re going to hook up with—

TH: Okay.

RB: March, there used to be a mullet run. There’s not much of a one anymore. But usually spring and fall are my favorite; in the summer it gets pretty hot and kinda slow. Unless in May June, maybe some dolphin fishin’.

TH: A fishing trip: how long does an average—you know, if you go fishing, how long do you?

RB: Nowadays for me, I’ll head out at five, four or five in the mornin’—

*Pause in recording*

TH: Today is August 11. I’m Terry Howard with Bob Benton, Mayor of Fort Pierce, Florida, and we’re concluding our interview. Where else do you go fishing in the Fort Pierce area that we haven’t discussed?
RB: Well, mainly, I should say in the last ten years or so, those are the main areas. The Indian River Lagoon and usually within three miles of shore is most of my fishing.

TH: Okay. You used to go offshore further?

RB: Right. And there’s a few times a year that I—when I have an opportunity to go out in a bigger boat—I guess getting older, you get wiser, and that seventeen-foot boat or that twenty-one foot boat isn’t so big when you’re ten, fifteen miles out in the ocean. So, when I have the opportunity to go out in a thirty-foot boat, I jump on it.

TH: Okay, so oftentimes you go with friends and—

RB: Yes.

TH: I guess it says here, who do you usually fish with? Do you have a specific friend or friends that you usually fish with?

RB: Mostly my son Kadri now, and more his friends than mine, because his friends are the ones with the big boats.

TH: (laughs) All right. How often do you go offshore fishing now?

RB: I would say I average maybe three or four times a month.

TH: Three or four times a month. Are there some months you go fishing more frequently?

RB: When? Well, being my son works at a tackle shop, when the fishing’s good. When the cobia are out there, we can go fishin’ three or four days in a row, you know, once you know where the fish are; you’re only allowed one per person and they’re close to home. So if the fishing’s good, I might go several days in a row if I can get out of bein’ mayor for a few days. If things are slow like they have been this—especially this summer, with the cold water and everything, it just haven’t been out. The little bit of fishin’ we’ve done has been for kingfish off the Vero Cove, or you know, up North Beach.

TH: It was good year for mackerel off Vero Cove, the big mackerel. Did you get into any of
RB: Oh, yeah. We got some. I was next to a couple of boats that had some over-fifty pounders, but we—

TH: Fifty pounders? Oh, kingfish.

RB: Yeah, kingfish. Most of mine have been in the thirty pound range.

TH: I was talkin’ about mackerel, Spanish mackerel.

RB: Oh, Spanish mackerel.

TH: There was a good run of jumbo mackerel.

RB: I haven’t seen—we don’t target them. We’d see them, and every now and then catch one fishing for bait or something, but—

TH: Okay, how did you fish for the kingfish?

RB: Either ribbon fish—

TH: Do you catch your own ribbon fish?

RB: Yeah, we catch our own ribbon fish in the winter.

TH: How?

RB: Well, either a piece of shrimp. Luckily, this year they were in my backyard. I had over nine hundred ribbon fish in my cooler, in my freezer, because with the SKA tournaments we, you know, sell them to our—what we do is we work together in the SKA, a lot of us. We have fishermen from North Carolina that we fish with for years. So when we go up there, they provide us with bait, and vice-versa. And so there was some in the cold weather in our backyard
this winter. A couple times I was throwing, they were that thick. I caught seven at a time in my cast net.

TH: Right off your dock?

RB: Off my dock, and we’d catch them and put them, you know, we had salt water, bakin’ soda, and had the cooler ready. We would sit in the backyard, my son and I and a couple of his friends, and a lot of times with one hook, and just—I was using whenever I would catch other fish. In fact, when we had the real cold weather I pulled some snook out of the water that were dead, and what I didn’t eat, I just [used] little pieces of it, I caught ribbon fish on it. Took a little piece of meat on a hook and—

TH: So the ribbon fish were that thick, right?

RB: Oh, dropped it under the light, and boom, boom! I mean, one after the other. It was so much fun, and my grandfather would roll over in his grave if he knew we were sellin’ them upwards to six dollars or more a piece.

TH: Wow.

RB: Unbelievable.

TH: Cool. Tell me how you bait the ribbon fish, how you use them as bait.

RB: What we do is we have something—a big lead head, a colorful lead head. Maybe a one ounce—well, maybe a half-ounce lead head that you normally maybe use with a grub or a cottee jig, the big ones. And then we would tie some wire and have—it depends on the size of the ribbon fish, and two or three treble hooks into the ribbon fish.

TH: All the way to the tail?

RB: Tail. All the way to the tail.

TH: With a line going—
RB: No. (demonstrates) We’d have the head, then we had the treble hook here, then one here. Then, if need be—you know, depends on—

TH: About equal distance.

RB: Right.

TH: And with one at the end.

RB: A lot of times the ribbon—you know, like everything else, the kingfish would cut you, or cut it in half.

TH: Aim right for the middle of it. Huh.

RB: Yeah. So that or blue runners, prime bait, too. And the same with that, using the same type of rig with one treble hook trollin’ it.

TH: Where did you get the blue runners?

RB: We would get them either in the backyard. We used to catch—it was so funny. When the guys would come with the big tournaments they’d go the power plant, or go offshore just to the buoys, and we were catchin’ them right there at the city marina. (laughs) One after the other they’re comin’ in saying, “What’re you guys catchin’?” “Something you guys were probably looking for!” And we open up the pan and show them three or four dozen blue runners, and it’s like, “So what—” you know? We like it when they spend money, so—

TH: (laughs) In Fort Pierce.

RB: And mullet, too. You know, mullet, to me, especially if you have a calm morning, if it’s a sheet of glass, trollin’ mullet on top, splashin’ around, it’s just—

TH: You bone the mullet?
RB: No.

TH: How? Do you break their backs?

RB: All I do is just throw, you know, a hook in them and troll it with a treble hook and swim freely and—

TH: Oh, live mullet; you’re talking live mullet.

RB: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

TH: Interesting.

RB: Try to splash them around as much as we can and sometimes throw a kite up in the air, you know? If it’s that slow, you want to save on gas; just throw a kite up there, and—

TH: Watch your line feed out.

RB: Just that splaschin’ on top of the water. If there’s a fish around, it draws them.

TH: Yeah. Okay, cool. All right. On average, how far away—we talked about that. On the average, how far away from shore do you fish, and that’s a tough one, that you’re targeting?

RB: Yeah, most of the time within five miles. If I’m going to go bottom fishin’ or in—one thing I’ve never caught is a sailfish, believe it or not. You talk to Ed Killer, that’s been the joke for years. I went out as a spotter—or not a spotter, but a—you know, when they go out in the sailfish tournaments, make sure they touch the leader. I’ve done that for five years. But it’s just one of those—I’ve always targeted fish I could eat, and sailfish. I’ve caught a marlin, but I’ve never caught a sailfish. And all these guys want to be the one that gets me a sailfish, but it just hasn’t happened.

TH: Good year last year on sailfish, here.

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5 Edward Killer was also interviewed for the Oculina Bank Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is O6-00016.
RB: That’s what I hear. And they even got them at the Vero Cove this year, in the Cove fishin’ for kingfish. I guess I didn’t grab the pole quick enough.

TH: Saw one north of 12 [Buoy] recently, you know how they do? Okay. What you fish for? We already talked about. How do you decide where you’ll fish? I guess you ask your son what’s going on, or you—

RB: Yeah. Most of the time, just to give me an idea of the area where the fish, the depth—and most of my fishin’, as I said before, is sight fishing. You know, we’ve got a little bit of a bridge on the boat, and for all my years, that’s—you know, that’s why if it’s rough, I don’t—a lot of times I won’t go anymore, unless there’s a tournament or something where I have to go. I’m becoming a fair weather fisherman, because fishin’ to me is almost so much easier when you can see the fish before you catch them.

TH: Yeah, it seems like if you see the action on the top of the water, there’s usually fish around, flying fish, or whatever, otherwise—

RB: You see kingfish skyrocketing. It’s like, “Okay, let’s stop here.”

TH: Yeah, a good sign. Okay. I guess how much do you catch on an average trip? That’s a tough question, too. That’s kind of—

RB: Well, I’m one of those people in my older years who—I’ve become very conservative. I don’t catch more than I can eat, usually. I don’t like to freeze fish. I might bring home some for friends if we’re catching kingfish. If the fish looks like he’s going to make it, we’ll let him go. If not, we’ll bring him home and we feed the neighbors. I’ve got a guy, a neighbor that makes a smoked—you know, smoked fish like Dennis Macy does up there. (laughs) So, it’s a—we don’t waste anything. It’s so much—I guess when you get older, it’s kinda neat to watch them swim away.

TH: Good. 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, and if so, how? The Oculina Bank was initially closed to trawling, dredging, and bottom longlining in 1984. Did this affect your fishing, and if so, how?

RB: I think I would have been doing a lot more bottom fishing if the Oculina Bank had remained
opened, so you could go out and anchor.

TH: But as of 1984, it was only trawling, dredging, and bottom longlining that was prohibited. So, did that affect your fishing?

RB: That didn’t affect me. No, that wasn’t.

TH: Okay.

RB: It might have affected what I’d eat at a restaurant. (laughs)

TH: Okay. In 1994, the Oculina Bank was designated as an experimental closed area where fishing for and retention of snapper/grouper species was prohibited. Snapper/grouper fishing boats were also prohibited from anchoring. Was your fishing impacted by this regulation?

RB: That’s what impacted my fishing there, because that’s probably where most of the grouper and snapper that we would’ve caught in this area came from, the Oculina Bank, and if you can’t anchor or drift fish comfortably, I guess you can say why bother?

TH: Essentially, when you did target grouper and snapper, that was one of your prime—

RB: That was one of the top places to fish. If the weather was good, especially this time of year, full moon, snapper fishin’. I can remember some nice size muttons that came from out there. (telephone rings)

TH: Okay, let me pause this.

*Pause in recording*

TH: Back in business. Thank you. Then in 1996, all anchoring was prohibited within the Oculina Bank. Did this impact your fishing, and if so, how?

RB: Well, we just, like I said—
TH: In 1994.

RB: It’s off limits, so—

TH: Okay. In 1996, they expanded the area of the Oculina Bank north and—well, here, I’ll read this to you. In 1996 trolling for rock shrimp was prohibited in the area east and north of the designated Oculina Bank, and in 1998 this area was incorporated into the Oculina Bank HAPC. Fishing with a bottom longline, trawl, or dredge was prohibited in this expanded area, as was anchoring by any vessels. Was your fishing impacted by this regulation? And that’s an area, again, east and north.

RB: That didn’t affect me at all.

TH: Okay. (shuffling papers) Excuse me. The designation—this is the nitty-gritty. 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, trip limits, closed seasons, et cetera?

RB: I don’t agree with the way it’s being done today. I think they need to enlist more fishermen instead of—my personal opinion is there’s too many guides, and maybe they have the ability; maybe they have lobbyists? (telephone rings) But they’re—unfortunately, I don’t think they’re listening to the—I want to say common fisherman: the guy that wants to put food in the—you know, like myself, been fishin’ all my life.

TH: Food fishermen.

RB: Food fishermen, the recreational fisherman that isn’t a guide. But the guide business has become so big that it appears they’re listening to them to increase the stocks. But as we find, when we have a freeze like this year, the number of fish that died, I think, have showed us that the net ban has worked. There’s tons of fish out there. We have snook out in the ocean now. But my concern is this: Right now they’re considering closing snook season for three years, snook fishing. They’re still selling permits. They’ve raised the price to ten dollars. But, in my conversations with Tallahassee with the Marine Fisheries Chairman, they’re looking September 2—they’ve already said they’re closing it in September, but they’re looking at closing it the rest of this year, and possibly for three years. Well, the guides are still catching fish. When you’re catching fish with live bait, one of five fish will probably not make it. You’re going to gut hook some fish and they’re probably not going to make it. So how can this be allowed?
I think they need to rethink the way they want to manage the fishery. I think, as up north, and especially fresh water fishing, I don’t believe in Florida that we do enough with hatcheries. Why aren’t we releasing more redfish, more trout, more snook? If there’s so much money in it, which we do know there is, why not put back instead of just taking? That’s what I see. And if we don’t use it, the foreign countries are coming in, especially offshore. You know, the closing of grouper and snapper to us, where they spawn, is hurting us, because they can catch them in North Carolina all summer. As they move down, the grouper, to spawn in December, they can catch them until they get here. And we’re outlawed, because they come here to spawn, but everyone else can catch them. So, I think they just need to rethink the way they’re doing business and have some real fishermen on some of these panels, and quit being so political. This is coming from the Mayor.

TH: Okay, I’m going to ask more. Could you elaborate more specifically? Well, let me put this question to you: If you could manage the fisheries, if you were managing the fisheries, would you close areas to fishing, or what do you think the most equitable, fairest way to manage the various fisheries? Again, quotas, closed seasons, or combinations of the above, how would you do it?

RB: Well, I like the idea of closing during spawning season, for certain species. You know, there could be areas that would be off limits. I mean, you can look at so many counties, but you can’t target one area and say you can’t fish, say, one county or two counties. There’s places in that county that could be off limits, especially in the winter time. The fish like to congregate if it gets very cold where the warm water or deep holes, and they should be off limits because it’s almost—it’s a sin when people can go drop a bait down where you’ve got literally hundreds of fish huddled in, because it’s four foot deep everywhere else.

I think the way the rules are going now, it’s—for instance, snook fishing, that’s one of them. The biggest ones we do is in the slot limit. When I started fishing for snook, you could keep all you wanted. Then, it was four fish. Then, it was two fish. They increased, you know, from eighteen inches to twenty-two to twenty-four. In my opinion, they should open the slot maybe from a twenty-two to a thirty-six, because that way, people will catch their one fish quicker. And I’m all for one fish statewide, but one fish and you can go home, instead of catching ten fish to get in that six-inch slot limit. People are, you know, catching and killing too many fish; they’re throwing them back. I would just open it up a little bit with some of these slot limits on a lot of the fish.

TH: Would that also apply to grouper and snapper?

RB: I would think so. My biggest thing with grouper and snapper today is they haven’t regulated the spearfishing industry. I have a neighbor that spearfishes and I see them unloading their boat for an hour with these fish. Last week we had—a couple weeks ago, we had some fifty-degree
water. You go down to fifty-degree water, and those fish are just sittin’ there. I mean, they’re not gonna—you’re not going to catch one hook and line.

TH: They’re dormant.

RB: They’re dormant. They’re just sitting there waiting to be—you can shoot two or three with one gun. And they still use the—what’s it called with the, you know, the shell?

TH: Bang sticks?

RB: The bang sticks. And I think that’s where we need to regulate things different. In the Bahamas, when you want to spearfish, you can’t use tanks diving. You have to free dive or with mask and snorkel. If that was done here, because the bigger fish, you know, that produce more offspring in deeper water, live. Here, unfortunately, it’s like you could go rape a reef in three days with cold water, and I’m sure it’s done. Luckily, a lot of these guys, because they’ve been doing it for a living for years, don’t go back to the same spot. You know, they might work that spot once and go back several weeks or a month later.

TH: Okay, now that’s spearfishing. I was concerned about that they—for example, if it’s a closed season on snapper or grouper, and you’re fishing, so you’re fishing for, say, amberjacks, you still might catch some snapper or grouper and—

RB: Well, and if you’re pulling a fish up from deep water, chances are they’re dead, you know? There should be exceptions to every rule for that reason. I won’t throw a fish back if he’s dead. I won’t waste it. I’ll take my chances with the law enforcement officer. I’ve done it a couple of times, and that’s why I don’t fish with light line anymore.

TH: So if you could manage—one more time, do you have any more thoughts on this, ’cause this is the time. If you were managing the fisheries—okay, we’ve talked about snook; we’ve talked about grouper and snapper. What do you think is the fairest, most equitable tool: again, quotas, closed seasons, combinations thereof?

RB: I’d say a combination of quotas. Cut the numbers down, and the closed seasons when they’re spawning, or if you’re dealing with fish that, you know, cold weather—that’s snook in the wintertime. But, I think the closure of spawning season and quotas are the best way to go. It’s better than outlawing completely.
TH: I’m going to go back to the talk of—you mentioned there’s talk of closing snook season for —

RB: For three years, they’re talkin’.

TH: What would that do to Fort Pierce, to local economy? How would that—would there be an effect?

RB: There would be a notice, especially, with the tackle shops. You can’t sell snook like your grouper and snapper to the restaurants. But for the guy like me—I’m a diabetic. I usually eat fish three or four days a week. It’s the best thing for my diet and always has been. But for once, my freezer doesn’t have too many fish in—you know, snook season’s been closed for quite some time now.

I think that they should open it to the one, and I just think common sense needs to be used. They need to speak with fishermen, because fishermen that I know are going to break the law. And the law isn’t enforced across the board evenly. Some people are allowed to break the law and some people aren’t. If you can afford a lawyer and you have a nice boat, chances are it’s going to cost you dearly. You’ve got a little jon boat and you’re a minority, chances are they’re going to let you go. So, I think they just need to put common sense in the rules.

TH: That goes back to enforcement. Where should the enforcement be? On the water, at the boat ramps?

RB: Well, it has to be on the water, because people have learned how to break the rules, but they also have to get out there. One thing that the state doesn’t do well enough, the FWC, is educate. Rules change so fast, most fishermen, unless, you know, you get a publication or go to the tackle shop on a daily basis. The rules—I mean when you buy one of those little measuring, you know —

TH: Tapes?

RB: Yeah, and you put it on the side of your boat, if it’s there six months, chances are it’s not accurate.

TH: (laughs) It’s true. Okay, finally, thinking ahead to the future, what do think fishing in Fort Pierce will be like in ten years?
RB: Right now it’s blurry. When I look at the crystal ball I’m scared, because if they continue to put regulations in effect like they have in the last, say, ten years, I probably will move from this area. If I can’t go out and fish, you know, enjoy myself fishing and also bring something home, because of the price of gasoline—I mean, it’s called—if you’re not bringing home groceries, you can’t afford to go. There’s other places in this country. I could go up to the state of Washington and catch halibut.

TH: Or salmon.

RB: Salmon. Well, I love halibut, the big ones. I mean, to me that’s the best eating in the world. But I would look to leave Florida if they continue with these regulations, because like I said, it’s great for the guides, it’s a great business; or else maybe what I’d have to do is go into the guide business so I could enjoy myself. But I just—I do like—my diet consists of a lot of fish, and I can’t eat mullet anymore.

TH: Okay. In ten years what do you foresee fishing being like in Fort Pierce? You find the regulations, the big—how about any other factors, like runoff?

RB: Well, the runoff, you know, I think we’ve been doin’ a lot better, at least being involved with the city for fifteen years. Our regulations, our land codes, our development codes have changed a lot, so you just don’t dump anything in the river. It has to sit, be filtered. There’s talk now about eliminating the phosphates in fertilizers. Hopefully, the state will eliminate that.

I’m in the landscape business, and I don’t landscape—er, I don’t fertilize on the island, period. I’m going to do my part. But I think we’re learning, and as long as we continue, as long as something’s done about the problem with Lake Okeechobee, the Army Corps of Engineers, once again—and I do understand that human life comes first with them, and they’re afraid of the dike breaking, and until that’s restored; but it has created a lot of damage on the estuary, Caloosahatchee and the St. Lucie River, which—when I was a kid the St. Lucie River was teeming with fish and I caught a lot of fish there, but certain times of the year you’ll catch nothing. So, I think we’re doing better, but we still have a ways to go.

TH: Did you know that in order to keep from releasing so much water into the St. Lucie River, they’ve diverted quite a bit into Taylor Creek?

RB: Mm-hm, and they want to do more of that. And there’s a good plan right now. A fisherman that sits on both—well, he’s involved with both boards; he was involved with the citrus here.
Doug Burniche has been pursuing us putting the St. Johns back to the way it used to be. Years ago, you could get in a canoe—Indians did, and they could go from Martin County, western Martin County, to Jacksonville. But my understanding is—I’ve been educated that, when they built the Turnpike and I-95, that they closed that off. In other words, they cut the ability to do that off.

TH: The connection to the—?

RB: To the north.

TH: To the St. Johns River?

RB: To get water to the north. While South Florida’s having maybe a flood, and we’re having problems with dumping water, Indian River or Brevard County are having droughts. How do we get water sent to them? I see them. There’s talk about changing that now, which will help us all out; but unfortunately it’s going to take lots of money, and it could be many, many years away. So hopefully, it’s something. It sounds good. I think they’ve got a good plan, but I just—a lot of money.

TH: Anything else you’d like to share with us?

RB: Well, I think the big thing is please don’t over-regulate us that you put fishing to where it’s something that most of us will walk away from. Because from my son working in a tackle shop, one of the few businesses in this economy that is doing very well, it’s amazing what people spend on line, rods and reels still. They’ve done very well. I want that to continue, because that—you know, one thing about Fort Pierce and St. Lucie County, that’s probably our biggest draw, is our natural resources. We’ve been—what put us on the map was our fishing.

The best sailfishing in the world, on the Treasure Coast, depends on where the temperature [was], you know? It could be Stuart, it could be Sebastian, it depends on the day. But please don’t put us out of business, because we’ve lost the citrus business almost. Fishing is the other one, and if you cut that out and regulate it—which they’ve already done to the commercial guys. I think that’s shown, at least inshore, that the netting, had they regulated themselves, or tried to over the years—and I think some of them would have; but a majority of them, it was so easy to get a boat and a net and go out and catch fish. But you know—

End of interview