SARASOTA COUNTY WATER ATLAS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
NEW COLLEGE OF FLORIDA — SPRING 2010

Thomas Fulford, more commonly known as Blue, is 78 years old and has lived in the fishing village of Cortez, Florida, his whole life. Blue learned to fish at an early age, a trade which supported him much the same as it had supported many generations of Fulfords before him. During Blue's career as a fisherman, he witnessed the enactment of legislation which banned the type of commercial fishing that had sustained his family and community for over a century. Blue portrays life as a fisherman on Florida's Suncoast, and how that has changed over the course of his life.

Interview with:	**Thomas "Blue" Fulford**
Date of Interview:	**March 3, 2010**
Interviewer:	**Casey Schelhorn**
Subject of Interview:	**The Fishing Village of Cortez**
Transcription Date:	**March 20, 2010**

Casey Schelhorn: Could we just start out with a little biographical information? Like what is your name and where you were born?

Blue Fulford: Good morning everybody, I sure am glad to see you today. My name is Thomas R. Fulford. I live in Cortez Florida. I am 78 years old and I've fished all but 13 of those years. My parents are from… you want that? Local people, my mother came down from North Carolina, Carteret County, North Carolina and married my daddy who had preceded her from Carteret County, North Carolina in 1890. And they produced this wonderful pile of fishing masculinity that you see sitting in this chair.

Casey Schelhorn: So you say you've been fishing for all but 16 years. Were those the first 16 years?

Blue Fulford: First 13 years of my life I was going to school, the rest of them I've been getting educated.

Casey Schelhorn: Do you remember the first time you went fishing?

Blue Fulford: I remember the first time very well.

Casey Schelhorn: Would you describe it?

Blue Fulford: I don't know why my mother let me go. She was very strict on me, hardly let me away from the house. But this friend of hers, practically everybody that lives in Cortez were friends in those days, probably blood related, and he wanted to know, he asked me if I wanted to go fishing. And I ran home as fast as I could, got home and asked momma "can I go fishing with Albert Few?" "Well… No, can't go." And I says, "Please momma, please?" And after about a half hour of that she says "Well, okay you can go." So we went. We were going on the beach. That's the type of fishing Albert did. He had a crew of five men, a little old 26-foot boat and a big cotton seine on it. And we rode out to Longboat Pass. Started out the pass, down the beach and it was just too rough, those big ol' breakers rolling in there. We couldn't work the net in that kind of surf. So we came back inside and went up into Bishop's Bayou. That was a very calm, secluded place in the bay. And we hauled the net out on board and pulled that seine in. I think we caught about 50 pounds of sheepshead, two or three mullet, something like that. But that was my first experience on a boat. Of course, I had been on boats lots of times—picnics, parties, things like that. But that was my first experience with a net, in Bishop's Bayou. Coincidentally, that was where Tom Mayers lived. So I can kind of clue Casey in to where it was.

Casey Schelhorn: When you talk about Bishop's Bayou, is that the little spot on the northern part of Longboat Key?

Blue Fulford: Yeah. Bishop's Bayou.

Casey Schelhorn: Was that a common fishing spot?

Blue Fulford: It was then, there wasn't any houses around it then. I've caught a lot of fish out of there in my fishing career. And that's the way it was. And we had a man born handicapped, and he has a leg he couldn't control, it was all emaciated and wasted away. He had to hold a hand on his knee to make it work and to keep it from folding when he tried to stand up and he had a horrible limp. But he was able to do it, get in and out of that boat, and I was impressed and I fished with him quite a bit in the crew and later years. Of course, everybody did everything they could to help Jon… His name was Jon Harris and he was related to Albert Few somehow; I'm not sure just how it was. Anyway, I was impressed. I ask him how in the world he did it. And he said, "You do what you got to do, son." And that has pretty well been my philosophy throughout life, you do what you got to do.

Casey Schelhorn: Would you consider him a role model for you?

Blue Fulford: He wasn't a role model as a fisherman, he never was able to fish. He was a role model of determination, desire, demand to go on when you think things are down. And I've faced that in my life. In 1987 I lost this leg in a boat, and people ask me if I thought that was the end of my career, and in 14 days I was back in a boat catching fish. *(Laughs).* So no, it's not over. I'm just getting started.

Casey Schelhorn: Why do you think your mother was hesitant to let you go fishing that first time?

Blue Fulford: Aren't all mothers that way? I thought that was the way they were supposed to be.

Casey Schelhorn: But growing up in Cortez, wasn't everyone expected to be a fishermen?

Blue Fulford: I don't know what she expected of me but she sure whipped my butt enough to make me do what she wanted me to do. So I never really gave it any thought. I just thought that's the way it was. When I was big enough to go to the shore… we called that the dock, the water-front… it was the shore. When I was big enough to slip into a pair of shorts I was there. And I had an uncle who was one of the most outstanding fishermen in the state of Florida: Walton Tink Fulford. And he sort of took me under his arm to make a fisherman of me. And every time I went down there he would give me something to do, teach me something to do, how to fish, how to mend net, how to spread net, how to hang net, how to do everything there was to do to a net. So I started learning at a very early age. When I got big enough to where I could go out on a crew and make some money, I went out with him. He was a good teacher but he wouldn't talk, he expected you to watch him and learn from what he did. But he wouldn't talk. He didn't tell me one single thing, but I had to watch and I had to learn. He gave me one pocket knife and a mending needle and he said, "When you learn how to use these, you can go fishing." *(Laughs).* That's the kind of fella he was. And he caught an awful lot of fish. I learned a lot of fishing from him, but like I said it was from observation and not from reading it out of a book or oral discourse from him.

Casey Schelhorn: Is that kind of a common way to teach in the world of fishing, that kind of quiet…?

Blue Fulford: Well it was with him, but other people told me things, told me what to do with that needle, how to use that knife, how to mend that net. I didn't know a crowfoot from a one-bar when I first picked up that net and needle, didn't know how to tie a knot onto a net, didn't know where to tie that next knot, didn't know where to go, didn't know anything about it. But somebody would come by and see me struggling and see the mess I made that looked like a distorted spider web in that net, you know, where I'd try to fill it up. And they said, "No, you don't go there, you go here, see how that net is made, it's made in rows. Just complete those rows and go down, just complete that row and go down, pick a sider, pick up your bottom and go down to a point." And suddenly it just dawned on me like that, and I said there ain't nothing to that. You can mend any size hole you want. Just because it's a big hole don't let that worry you. Just find your starting place and start filling, fill in those rows. And that's just the way it works, but I sure hope people listening to this video don't think it's that easy. *(Laughs).* They probably won't.

Casey Schelhorn: Technological change has been such a big part of fishing. Would you describe what fishing was like back then?

Blue Fulford: Technology goes a long way. It started out with oars, and then it went to sails, and then it went to power engines. I didn't see any of the oars or any of the sails, I got there when it was time for power engines. Of course I've poled many a mile, that's why we use these skiffs—powerless boats, non-power boats. We had to propel them with what we called polin' oars. And that was done with your shoulders, and I guess that's why you saw me wince when I do that. I just moved my shoulder. And I've done this ten million times, and that's not exaggerating. Poling, some people used oars and rowed the boat like a rowboat, but they were never used in Cortez. We always set our net when we were gill-netting—single-net boats or multiple boats, we always used pole. Other places they rowed and they did very well with those oars. But we just never did it in Cortez. Why? I don't know.

Casey Schelhorn: What kind of fish were you going for with the gill nets?

Blue Fulford: Well, usually whatever was in season, the cyclical runs of the fish. We would target that fish like the pompano here, we would target pompano, bluefish, kingfish, anything like that was here we would target that particular species, but primarily it was mullet. Mullet was the bread and butter fish of Cortez. We used to say we had mullet and grits for breakfast, we had grits and mullet for lunch, and we had leftovers for supper. We were pretty well versed in that little creature you call mullet: Segel Mugillis [*Mugil cephalus*].

Casey Schelhorn: Do you catch that close to shore?

Blue Fulford: Most of them are. They're an estuarine fish mostly, and they just go into the gulf in roe season. They spawn in deep water offshore three or four miles and then the fingerlings come back into the bays to grow and develop and get that cycle going again.

Casey Schelhorn: You said you started fishing at 13. After that first time fishing, was that it? Did you stop going to school?

Blue Fulford: I didn't drop out of school, I dropped out of college *(laughs).* I went to college primarily because of a girl. She went to college in Tampa and came down to visit, and I wanted to be next to her all I could. So I went up there and enrolled in college. it was Florida Christian College then. I tried it, and I walked outside and it was situated on a river, Hillsborough River. And I'd walk out there at night and see all that water and all those stars twinkling up there and man, did I get lonesome for Cortez. It didn't take me long to get my college degree *(laughs).* I think I was up there six weeks, and I was back down here. But I didn't get the girl *(laughs).* That's the breaks.

Casey Schelhorn: What is it about fishing as a career that has drawn you towards it? You talk about the stars…

Blue Fulford: Fishing as a career used to be a good thing. But now you can't fish. You got so many regulations, you can't go here, you can't go there, can't use this, can't use that. So many can'ts, you have to give up. But it used to be good. It was an independent lifestyle. You went when you want to, and the rewards were directly proportional to the effort you put into it. If you wanted to work hard, and I did, I went day and night. My wife used to quarrel at me about that, about not staying home and resting, I guess that's why she wanted me to stay home, to rest, I don't know. But I was gone.

Casey Schelhorn: So when you wanted to go fishing, how long would you take a boat out for?

Blue Fulford: Well, fishing around here, you're not out very long. Sometimes you are out for over a day and a night. But most of the time you're back in. You leave one night, you're back by next night—that's inshore fishing. But sometimes we would do what they call "ice fishing." That's where you got big iceboxes in the launch and you would stay out until you'd fill that ice-box, and then you'd have to come back and reload. Get some more grub and some more ice and go out and get some more fish, hopefully. It was a good life, a real good life. I remember one old fella he used to tell us, "Boys, you think you're going to get rich but you won't. And sometimes

you think you're going to starve to death, but you won't." Really, what more can you ask? When you have food and clothing and are there with content, that's real contentment.

Casey Schelhorn: What was the camaraderie like between the fishermen?

Blue Fulford: The camaraderie was great; people really and truly loved one another. Somebody got sick, he was there to help them. That was one of the things I admired about my uncle, as soon as somebody got sick you'd see him coming around with pencil and paper taking up a collection donation so that person could get back out. That was my uncle Tink, they always called him Uncle Tink. One of the most well-attended funerals I've ever been to, and I don't think anybody there knew his name—his name was Walton. Everybody called him Tink. Want to know how Walton was, nobody would give you an answer, want to know how Tink was, they would tell you all about that feller. That's kind of like me, my name is Thomas, my mother called me Sonny. My nickname is Blue. I had a friend grow up fishing with me, he was two or three grades behind me. He says "Sonny's name is Tommy but they call him Blue." *(Laughs)*

Casey Schelhorn: Why do they call you Blue?

Blue Fulford: Well that's a story that came to me. My older cousin told me it was because I had a little pair of blue pants—short pants. My mother put me in that outfit all the time. I've got a picture of it somewhere if I can find it. You had a shirt-blouse type thing that you buttoned to the pants to hold those pants up. And she put those on me and everywhere I went. But I always heard that she showed me how to sing the nursery rhyme, "little boy blue, go blow your horn." And I could say that almost before I could walk and everywhere I went she take me she would have me recite it. And the people would say, oh my land, Litha with little boy blue. And it all wore off except the Blue part. And I don't mind that at all. I always wanted Blue to be synonymous with mullet and Cortez. You said one of those others and you thought about Blue. Like I said, this was a wonderful place to grow up, everybody was related, the camaraderie was so great, we didn't have all these electronic what do you say, advances that we have today, that keep people from developing those ties that bind people's emotions and spirit and hearts together. Like I said, 8 hours in front of a television or a computer or whatever that doesn't turn me on at all. I don't even watch television except when I want to get a weather report. I don't have a computer, and like I told you yesterday I don't even think I know how to turn one off unless you get a big hammer I guess that might work.

Casey Schelhorn: Some people might say that the camaraderie you develop with some develops in difficult situations. I know that being on the ocean, camaraderie is a necessity because it can get dangerous real quick and you have to be able to trust that people will help you out. What's your experience with that?

Blue Fulford: That's the way it is supposed to be. That's what we were developed to be, we were created in the image and likeness of God, that's the kind of guy he is or spirit he is. He's not a guy, he's a spirit, one who looks after another one and cares for all his children. We supposed to have those kind of feelings within us. And we do unless its washed out of us by all this other stuff we're flooded with—so much anti-this and anti-that and anti-this that we don't focus on the things that we should. Cortez was good—we had two churches here. My aunts were real prominent figures in the Churches of God. The building is still down there—original building—

and my mother was a member of the Church of Christ, and naturally that's where I come up in. And I accepted that teaching like it was good straight from the Bible. So there were two churches in Cortez and they had a spiritual influence on everybody's life. There was only one school, and it had a really strong PTA and we were always doing Christmas plays and Halloween parties and square dances and things that would develop a community spirit and bind people together. And we all participated and all looked forward because there wasn't anything else to do. And so we just naturally enjoyed it. Have you heard anything about the Cortez Grand Ole Opry? I thought that was world famous… I hate to see you shake your head. But music was one thing that brought people together. There was one family here, the Culverts. There are some of them still here. Richard Culvert was especially one of them who inherited the musical talent from that family. He still lives here in Cortez. It seems like every afternoon, especially on the weekend when the fishermen were home, you would hear guitars and fiddles floating from, I don't know it seems like you could hear them from a mile away. And there was one guy who had an accordion and that thing really made a lot of noise. And everybody would just start gravitating to that sound of music and before you know it, you would have twenty or thirty people in that front yard up on the porch listening to all that music singing. And every once in a while we would have mullet and grits. That made it that much better.

Casey Schelhorn: Do you play any instruments?

Blue Fulford: I have a guitar and I learned about four chords on it.

(Wanda, Blue's wife, comes outside)

Casey Schelhorn: *(To Wanda)* Blue was just telling me about the good ol' days.

Wanda Fulford: Well he can tell you all about it.

Blue Fulford: I was just gettin' ready to tell him about you.

Wanda Fulford: Well you are? That's okay too. Tell him I'm a good lady.

Blue Fulford: Okay, let's get back on the tape before I run down.

Casey Schelhorn: We are still on the tape.

Blue Fulford: Oh, we're still on the tape. Well I wish I had said something I wanted her to hear *(chuckles).* I don't know how to get back into it.

Casey Schelhorn: We were talking about everyone gathering around a porch and listening.

Blue Fulford: You get me wanting to start running around and doing all them crazy things again.

Casey Schelhorn: You still fishing?

Blue Fulford: No, I don't fish. I can't get around in the boat. I tried to fish with my son when I lost this leg in '87. And I kept on fishing for a long time on the big boat, I had a pursing boat,

that's what I had when I lost my leg, I had a pursing boat. Got the Tom weight rope around it and sawed it off. Larry finished cutting it off—however, [the rope] didn't quite finish cutting it off—and he finished cutting it off. But after I got well, I continued to fish that boat. I could get around very well the first ten, twelve years on a big boat, but then I got rid of that big boat '98. I couldn't fish anymore. I tried to fish with Larry a little bit, tried to get out on that, because he had a kicker boat.

Casey Schelhorn: Who's Larry?

Blue Fulford: Larry is my son. He told me one day—he got aggravated—he said you as useless as a knot on a log in a boat. I said I know that. Nobody know that better than I do. Another interesting side to our family: Our grandfather lost his leg, I think to diabetes. My mother lost her leg to a shotgun, and I lost my leg to a piece of rope on a pursing boat. About two or three months later, Larry was out fishing and catching some sharks for experimental purposes and one grabbed him by the leg and took a chunk out of his calf. But he survived with the rest of the leg, and he says "oh my land, I got to thinking about Daddy when that shark grabbed me by the leg." We can still laugh about it and enjoy it.

Casey Schelhorn: You got a bit of legacy there, no pun intended.

Blue Fulford: Yeah… yeah.

Casey Schelhorn: How many children do you have?

Blue Fulford: We had three. Yeah that's what I was going to say about Wanda. She said, "When I first saw you, I fell in love with you." She said, "I knew how much you loved fishing. I watched you work along the shore and work on those nets. And I knew how much you loved fishing and I knew that is what you was going to do, and I knew you was going to need a fisherman's wife and I knew I could be a fisherman's wife." You know, that makes me proud of her, it brings tears to my eyes just thinking about that. She didn't tell me that 'til, I don't know, it's probably been ten or twelve years ago. This coming May 28th we will be married 60 years. So I guess she let me choose pretty good. We've had our ups and downs some, rough ships. We've both had rides on troubled shores. But we're together and I pray to the Lord it will be that way the rest of our lives.

Casey Schelhorn: When did you meet her?

Blue Fulford: I don't know, we lived about four houses apart. I don't know when I did meet her. I had seen her a long time, and even before I even knew her, before I even met her. Okay, but I don't know, that's a part of the good old days.

Casey Schelhorn: How old were you when you married her?

Blue Fulford: *(Thinking)* Let's see if I can figure that out… I think I was 18… I know I had a child before I was 19. In between 19 and 20 somewhere in there is when Larry was born. Larry was born in '51 so, we got married in '50. In '48 I graduated and I can remember her there at my graduation. And she was in the eleventh grade, and she quit school. That's the way it was.

Casey Schelhorn: So Larry catches sharks and manta rays and stuff like that. Is this the net for that *(pointing to a net nearby)*?

Blue Fulford: Yeah, he was catching sharks for somebody, some aquarium down there in the Florida Keys. And he works with different outfits for a long-term study of dolphins and he is a chief catcher. He can catch a dolphin better than anybody else who has ever caught one. Other people wear the dolphin out trying to catch them and they will come right to Larry. He works for Randy Wells. Randy Wells has been doing that dolphin study for over 20 years. Randy works in Manatee County and he goes all over. Last summer he went to Texas and caught a stranded dolphin. He went to Louisiana and caught a stranded dolphin. He went to Louisiana after Katrina and caught some that had escaped from an aquarium due to the high water. And right now today his is over at New Smyrna Beach catching a dolphin that has been entangled in some kind of webbing and net. Last week he caught one here that had fishing line wrapped around him that was about to cut his dorsal fin off. He just does thing like that. He stays enough to keep him on the water. His wife has a good job and he's happy with what he is doing. And if he can manage this manta ray thing, it will be well worth doing. So you make enough money to keep the wolf away from the door. It is kind of like that commercial fisherman I told you about, sometime you think you going to get rich but you won't, sometime you think you're going to starve to death but you won't. Okay.

Casey Schelhorn: How do you find a manta ray?

Blue Fulford: They are easy to find, he's going to have a plane working with him. They are easy to see. Well, they are all around. But the area they are going to work in is St. Augustine. And there is an inlet up there, Matanzas Pass [Inlet]. And he has a real shallow-draft boat that can navigate that inlet because it is real shallow. And for some reason the manta rays come real close to the beach at that spot. I guess it is because it's part of their natural habit that they do that. But they want to catch one in that area and just run it to the land where they have equipment to handle it with. And it will be real exciting to see if they can do that.

Casey Schelhorn: You were obviously a big factor in Larry being the ocean man that he is. Did you take Larry fishing a lot?

Blue Fulford: Larry fished with me a lot, both boys. Paul didn't stick with the fishing, he does a little fishing on the side, but yeah they both fished with me a lot.

Casey Schelhorn: You make cast nets, but you were also a fisherman. Were those two separate kind of professions?

Blue Fulford: I never knew how to make a cast net. I still can't throw one. I still have never caught a fish in one that I know of. But in 1995 we had the net ban that took the nets away from the commercial fishermen. It's like taking the scalpel away from the doctor and saying, use this old rusty pocket knife and take that fella's appendix out. It's like giving someone a cast net and saying feed the world with that cast net. It won't work and that got me emotionally started. In 1995, that's when it went into effect. And I said, Sonny—it's strange that I don't call myself Blue—but I said, Sonny, you can't throw one of them cast nets, but you're going to need a cash-flow somehow. You are going to need to make some money somehow. I said there are a lot of

people now who are going to want some cast nets, and you better learn how to make them cast nets. So I had a brother-in-law who had been doing it for a long time. He had retired from shrimping and he went into making cast nets and I called him and asked if he would show me how. And he said, "Yeah," and he showed me how to make cast nets. That was in '95 and I've been making them ever since. I've never had anyone bring one back to me and say it wasn't any good. In fact, I pat my own back: I've heard nothing but praise for my cast nets. They say if you want a cast net, get Blue Fulford's cast nets. I tried to build a good one, I just followed the principles. I build them as best as I could as though I were building one for myself, I don't cut any corners. Just build something that I thought would last and something that I thought would catch fish. And that's what I did and I guess it worked. A fella asked me one time—and incidentally he is dead, he fell over a few years ago and he drowned—he was a fisherman and he went to crabbing because of the fish ban. I say that is the third man that the fish ban killed. He said, what makes you an expert? I go, I don't know, I like to make them, I know how to make them, I make them right and people buy them and say they like 'em. They come back for more. I don't know if that makes me an expert but it gives me the desire to go on. Call it whatever you want to.

Casey Schelhorn: How long does it take to make a cast net?

Blue Fulford: It is according to your desire, your talent, and your dedication, how long you are willing to work. If you knit one by hand like our granddaddies used to do, and I made several of them just to see what it was like, it takes forty hours to knit by hand an eight-foot cast net. But I can take a machine-made webbing and I can make a cast net—two of 'em—in a day, eight-foot nets. And it's just how hard you are willing to work. This thing I'm working on now, this experimental project for this manta ray, it's going to take… *(chuckles)* I've already put three or four days into it. I'm just getting ready to put the lead-line on it. It's a time consuming project, you've got to have a lot of patience.

Casey Schelhorn: So you've sewn all of this by hand?

Blue Fulford: No, this is machine-made. See all of this? But I've never made anything out of webbing that big, that's two-foot stretch mesh. Most cast nets are two-and-a-half-inch.

Casey Schelhorn: I would think most cast nets would be made in a factory.

Blue Fulford: They make 'em in factories but like I say, they just no good. A sewing machine will miss a spot there and it doesn't care, and ain't no one to look at it and see that it's no good. They just put it in a box and send it off. And sometimes they turn out alright and sometimes they don't. But a handmade net by someone who knows what he is doing is a much more desirable piece of equipment. And I say someone who knows what they are doing because I seen 'em come through shop at my little place where people want me to repair them and I say I won't even put my name on that thing. I wouldn't want anybody to know I made that, it is so shoddily done. I guess I'm like my son Paul, I'm always trying to be a perfectionist. I guess what an old man on the shore told me "that anything worth doing is worth doing right." And I adhere to that philosophy. If you are going to do it, take your time and do it like it ought to be done. I have heard "do it right the first time."

Casey Schelhorn: So you say you are supposed to knit them. What material were they using?

Blue Fulford: In those days they were using tarred cotton. They would put a preservative on it. They couldn't use tar, it would make it too stiff. But they used tar on the other nets for stop netting and heavy seines. But cast nets, you gotta have a flexible, pliable twine. They would use cotton and a little after, I think I read this last night, I think it said 1920 they started using flax or linen. And that is a fiber that has been around since ancient Egypt. But it was still a natural fiber and bacteria would eat it up. If you didn't care for it you would bend down to pick up your net and you would stand up with a handful of net. That was a problem with all the natural fiber nets—that is what I grew up with: cotton and linen. Had to keep lime on those nets to keep the bacteria down.

Casey Schelhorn: When was the switchover to nylon?

Blue Fulford: The 1950s. Nylon was invented around 1947.

Casey Schelhorn: How long did it take for the switchover to nylon occur after they invented it?

Blue Fulford: I think it was two years *(laughs).* It wasn't very long. My first experience with it was, I think, 1950. I can remember my uncle buying the first net there was, nylon net. It was a, I don't know really the word to describe that piece of net, but there has been lots of improvements since they made that first net. But it is almost indestructible if you keep it out of the sun. Now the sun, the ultraviolet rays, tear it up, just make it fall apart. The sun will do to nylon what the bacteria will do to the natural fibers, make it no good, take all the strength out of it.

Casey Schelhorn: With every technological innovation there will be some sort of associated change. What was the associated change you saw with the invention of the nylon cast net?

Blue Fulford: Nylon and especially monofilament will catch a lot more fish in a gill net than cotton or linen. Most people that went to it was for the labor factor. That other stuff is so labor intensive. Every time you came in and wasn't going to use that net for ten or twelve hours you pulled it out on the spread and dried it and poured lime on it. That's a lot of work—liming and spreading that net and pulling it on that boat and getting it ready to go fishing again. That's why people changed so quick. In my opinion that took the work out of fishing. That's one of my observations.

We were born in the best generation in the best time frame in my generation as far as fishing is concerned. When I was growing up I used to set on my mother's front porch and watch those fishermen walk up and down that road with that tin bucket in his hand—a lard bucket. In that bucket he had a cold biscuit and a cold piece of mullet and every day that's what he ate till he came back in. If he wanted to sleep, he slept in the rain or slept under a piece of canvas, sometimes he didn't get to sleep. Sometimes you could run your net and wait for the tide to come in—things like that. You had time out, and to get some sleep he had an old hard board to sleep on, a pile of wet net. He had to start out earlier, get his sail up to catch the wind right. Or get his oars going if he was going to get where he was going to fish.

When I came along, that was gone. We had comfortable clothes to wear, weather protection gear to keep us dry and warm. We had dependable boats and motors to take us where we wanted to go. We had bunks on our boat. We had stoves under the canopy. We always had hot coffee and bacon and eggs, grits if you didn't want to eat a mullet. But that was all gone. It was still hard.

But then nylon nets—polyethylene most especially—came along. It is almost impervious to the sun, too, if it's black, yellow, or blue. But black is almost impervious. Or real dark green. But then you got that, what else is there to do? All you got to do is run your nets and that is just fun *(laughs).* Spreading those nets and liming them and putting them back on the boat—that was really rough work.

Casey Schelhorn: So that was all before your time.

Blue Fulford: I got in during the greatest generation. I think about that once in a while, I read it in the newspaper—"the greatest generation." I missed the wars, all the wars. I missed them. I've never been in the service. But I had cousins by the dozens that were in there. And there were a couple from Cortez that didn't come back. Then I get to thinking: what was I doing fourteen years old working my butt off at the boathouse trying to feed these people, filling the place for the men that were in Germany and Japan fighting? Never had to go to Japan, thank the good Lord. Collecting scrap metal—I can remember that, doing all we could for the war effort. I had a ball of tin foil. Cigarettes used to come wrapped in the package, aluminum foil I guess it was. But we called it tin foil. And I had a ball of that stuff two feet thick that I saved for the war effort. I picked up aluminum, scrap iron, old tires, anything we could come up with. I learned all the songs to the branches of the military *(chuckles).* "Coming in on a wing and a prayer." Winged cigarettes used to have pictures of war planes on every package. I had 212 of them and I could identify every one of them. Okey-dokey.

Interview with: **Thomas "Blue" Fulford**
Date of Interview: **May 1, 2010**
Interviewer: **Casey Schelhorn**
Subject of Interview: **Fishing In Cortez**
Transcription Date: **May 5, 2010**

Casey Schelhorn: Last time I was here, you were saying you would like to speak more about the fishing net ban that went into place in '95 that affected Cortez. Would you like to give a little background about how that came into place?

Blue Fulford: There has always been a bone of contention between the recreational and the commercial aspect of this fishing—always been a fight, as long as I can remember. I was 19 years old my first attempt to speak up for the fishing. It was at a planning and zoning meeting at a courthouse in Bradenton, Florida. They were going to develop a piece of property behind the old school where the FISH preserve is. And that was my first attempt. I was against that, I thought it was kind of ironic or coincidental. About fifty years later I was president of the organization that bought that property, and under the leadership of F.I.S.H: Florida Institute for Saltwater Heritage. And from then I've been working right on, but the contention didn't die. I kept on fighting, various attempts were made throughout the years and throughout my fishing life to eliminate the nets in Manatee county.

And finally under the leadership of the *Bradenton Herald,* a sportswriter named Jerry Hill, they came up with the idea, after California had experienced it, to do referendums. They couldn't get the legislatures to outlaw fishing, so they decided to go with the referendum. Through their prop-

aganda and their outright lies and the stories they concocted and told—ghost stories and scare stories—got the people to sign the petition. He got it on the ballot and voted it; 72% of people in the state of Florida voted for the net ban. That was really a bad thing to do. They just didn't realize what they were doing, I'm sure. It has been fifteen years now since that net ban.

But I remember the previous election before '94 when we came out of the voting precinct down here at the firehouse in Cortez, they called themselves "Save our Seafood Group." And they had their people set up all over the county at every one of the precincts to come out and sign that petition. To me that seemed…. shall we say unfair, if not illegal… unfair at the least. But they were so deceptive about it. When I read some of the propaganda, if I hadn't known better I would have signed the thing myself. It was that vague. And right after the net ban went into effect, the Organized Fishermen of Florida made some kind of attempt in the courts to get it overthrown, but it didn't work. And we did a survey that showed that the people who voted for it thought they were helping the fishermen. That's how they were deceived. They were really deceived. But like I said, most of those things have passed from my memory. It's almost too late, in fact it *is* too late to do anything about it.

Nobody knows how to fish now like they did fifteen years ago. I'm one of the few that is left that could get the network going again like it was. Of course, there is always change and somebody could find some way to do it somehow, but not the old time way, not the way that we used to do it, not the way that worked so well for a century in Cortez, Manatee County. Kept plenty of fish in the bays, kept plenty of fish for everybody to catch.

There was just no need for it. It was, what shall we say, a resource grab by the recreational people. They wanted all the fish for themselves and they saw a way to get it, and they did. It happened about the same time of the first Gulf War over there in Iraq with Saddam Hussein. Saddam setting up in Iraq saw little ol' Kuwait sitting down there and said hey, I want that, they can't nobody keep me from getting it. He made an attempt at it and found somebody could keep him from getting it, but he took it anyway, he tried to, made a grab. That's what I compare that net ban to. Here was this great big, can't get away from the David and Goliath thing, here was this great big ol' giant who wanted this little commercial fishing industry. He said, we know how to get it and we going to do it and they did. To me it was a demonstration of man's inhumanity to man, that was an immoral act; it shouldn't have been done, it was wrong from the word get go.

There was nothing morally, socially, ethically, economically or spiritually wrong with commercial fishing, and yet they took it away from us. And I forgive 'em, but I want everybody to know that we didn't like it, it hurt a lot of people, still the hurt exists. All you got to do is go through Cortez fifteen years later. And if you had any idea what it was like before the net ban and you go to Cortez now, you can see the difference. It's just not the camaraderie there, the working together there, the cohesiveness that there was amongst the fishermen working together in that fishing operation which is something that created a community that you very seldom see anyplace else. That's just one thing I wanted to get in there. It was unnecessary, hasn't done what the champions of the net ban said it would do. Matter of fact, first two or three years after the net ban passed there was more mullet around here than they'd ever seen. The first year, went in affect around '95, in '96 there was so many mullet you could hardly plow through 'em. It was just people getting antsy, the fishermen wanting to catch them, and trying to catch them and getting arrested, and all that kind of things. But if the fish had been in jeopardy, it doesn't seem like

there would have been so many around the next year after the net ban. It couldn't have grown up that quick, it's against all logic and reason. How else may I help you?

Casey Schelhorn: Was the campaign for the net ban mostly based on protecting the fisheries?

Blue Fulford: Well, that's what they said. They claimed we were destroying all the fish. Everything would be extinct if we didn't get rid of these nets. They were depicted as walls of death. And while there were abuses of fishing on the high seas where these big drift nets, Japanese run out 40 or 50 miles of nets, catch all kinds of fish and lose their nets. There were pictures of rotting sharks, fish and dolphin drifting around in these abandoned nets. Nothing like that ever happened in Cortez or Florida. We just did not fish on that kind of a scale. But people said we did.

Casey Schelhorn: Before the big net ban in '95, were there regulations?

Blue Fulford: Oh yeah, there were regulations. We had mesh size, and depth size, and length size, and twine size, and closed areas, closed seasons, opened seasons. Fish were regulated, they were protected. It was not necessary. They completely turned their back on all of that. There were no scientific and biological bodies, bureaus or organizations in the state that spoke up for the net ban. They all said it wasn't needed, but that didn't make much difference, not to the people who were pushing for the net ban. But like I say, the people were deceived, and they thought they were helping the fishermen when they were putting them out of business. I had a number of people tell me that very same thing, we didn't know we were hurting the fishermen in Cortez, we love the fishermen in Cortez. But there was some that didn't. There was one group of people in Bradenton who took out an ad in the *Bradenton Herald*, "We were for the net ban," and they all signed it. And most of them were good friends of people in Cortez. Funny, but just about a year ago now one of them came up to me and apologized for doing that. He said I'm sorry for doing that. But you're just a little bit too late. But be that as it may, it's too late now. You can't cry over spilt milk I guess.

Casey Schelhorn: You say Cortez has changed a lot in the last fifteen years. How have you seen the various changes, could you be specific?

Blue Fulford: Well, it doesn't look as bad now as it did the first five or ten years. I used to go to the shore a lot to the seafood galley to eat. And every time you go down there, you would see another piling had rotten off. The worms had eaten a piling out from under the dock. Another corner of the dock had fallen down. You would go down another day and there would be another sunk boat somewhere, nobody got their old boat up. But you just watched it die like that. Used to set down there and you would see boats continually going in and out plying their trade, loaded with fish, nets, people just going out for a day's work having a good time while they were doing it, getting paid for playing, I guess you call that. I enjoyed that for about fifty years, really a good life. I hate to see anybody else losing it, taking it away for any reason.

I noticed an attempt was made in the extreme Northwest, I don't know if it was Oregon or Washington, this past spring to get a referendum to outlaw sustenance Salmon fishing on some of those rivers out there. It didn't pass, they didn't get their signatures or something. I read about it in National Fishermen. But I know it's still going on. I know it's very intense in North Carolina and that's where Cortez came from: North Carolina. And there's a difference though, in North

Carolina all of the scientists are firmly on the side of the industry, they don't want the fishermen be put out of business. They see the need and the place for them in the economy in the scheme of things. But in Florida nobody did.

I wrote letters to all of our representatives, all our senators, all the state cabinet, governor, lieutenant governor all of them. One of them answered me, that was Jim Smith, he was Secretary of State at that time. And he said, "Mr. Fulford, though I share your concern, I suggest that you get out and get to work if you don't want the net ban to pass." I asked them for their help and that was the only reply that I got. Now Governor Lawton Chiles at that time was I say a close personal friend of mine. In fact, he called me Blue and I called him Lawton. That's the way it was. And I said "Governor, I know you are sympathetic with our cause, and I know what the sports people would do to you if you come out publically on our side," so I said, "I'm not going to ask you to do it." I says, "But if you will help us somehow I would appreciate it." He shook my hand and he says "Blue I sure appreciate that." But I was in a place at that particular time to have some political influence, I was executive director of Organized Fishermen of Florida and we had about 2,000 members in our fold at that time. We had a pretty positive political influence impact on the thinking of the state, but we couldn't do anything to that net ban. It was just too many people against it—well, because they didn't know what they were against.

I used to ride up and down this state and there was an intense, very intense building boom going on at that particular time. Every cow pasture you would look into you would see a condo complex going up, and I just shake my head and say, "Oh my land, they are just filling those apartments just as fast as they can build them. They don't know a thing about fishing and every one of them is going to be asked whether to put me out of business or not." And to me that wasn't fair. It seemed if we were going to be put out of business, we should be put out by people we know, our peers anyway, people who knew something about fishing. It didn't happen. I'm not cynical, don't want to get even, I don't even think that all this oil well stuff going on out in the Gulf of Mexico is an act of God or punishment against people who did this dastardly act, if I could use such a bad word.

Casey Schelhorn: One of the things Soupy was saying is that even though they took the nets away from some of the smaller scale commercial fishermen, they have given permits to some of the huge fishermen. So they are concentrating fishing to these huge corporate entities. What do you know about that?

Blue Fulford: Well, there are no huge operations going on inside the state of Florida, not inside state or federal waters. Now our state waters in Florida, they're not but they are too big. I'm thinking about all the impact I see, pictures in *National Fisherman*. They catchin', I don't know, millions of pounds of fish in one operation and that doesn't look sustainable to me. I'm not the one to say because I'm not doing it. But I know people—I have read articles by people—who do do it. And they speak out against it, but they don't listen. I don't know Casey, like I say, my time at the wheel is already passed. My watch is over, all I can do now is make cast nets for these people who are allowed this limited activity, cast netting.

Casey Schelhorn: Are there people that make enough money cast netting to survive, or is that just a hobby?

Blue Fulford: You can't do it, it's not just a hobby but it's a—what shall we say—a stop gap or something. It fills a niche certain times of the year, you can take a cast net and get certain kinds of fish. They use cast nets for catching mackerel over on the east coast. They use cast nets for catching sand bream. People make good money doing that, some do. But it's not a type of activity that can support a whole community or state. Fish are so spotty and come in such sporadic spurts that you can't get anything established. We had networks here, you know. When the fishing was at its prime, before you caught your fish you almost knew where they were going to be sold, who was going to eat them. And now you can't depend on that. The markets don't know whether they can depend on mullet one week to the next, sand bream from one week to the next. So they go to different places, and most of them are going to these block fish, frozen fish, portion packed, these big factory ships you had referenced to a while ago catching everything and calling it whatever they want and freezing it four or five times and putting it in Long John Silvers and Steak and Shake *(laughs).*

Casey Schelhorn: None of it is eaten fresh?

Blue Fulford: No, none of it is eaten fresh, but attempts are being made. And I can't bad-mouth it. Some of it is good. Some of the fish is good, it tastes good. I don't know how they make it do it. But I order fish just about everywhere I go, just to see what it would be like. And most of the time—I'll say, *most* of the time—fish is good. Can't deny that.

Casey Schelhorn: Well, Blue, it's been fifteen years since the net ban. What would you hope that the coming generation would know about Cortez of the past? Or what do you hope it will be like in coming generations as a place?

Blue Fulford: I really don't know. There's not anything here for them to do. There are two restaurants down there now in Cortez, and that's probably taking care of all that restaurant trade that is going to come in here, and there is a couple of more on the other side across the bridge. There is nothing for the people to do, for the kids to do, they just growing up, I hate to say but seems several just turn to drugs and destroy their life. And it doesn't seem to be any way to stop that. That was almost rampant before the net ban but there was a certain amount of cohesiveness and camaraderie that existed. People were proud of their boats and proud of what they did. The real legitimate commercial fishermen, the ones who bought property and built houses, paid their taxes, raised families, were interested in the industry and taking care of it. Commercial fishing in Florida had always been pictured as winos, tarpaper shack-dwellers. They just would fish long enough to make enough money to buy a fifth of wine, drink that wine and while they were still drunk they would go fishing and have a fight with somebody out there on the shore or on another boat. But the legitimate commercial fishermen have just been given a bad rap from that type of people that drifted in here. And there was a lot of that that went on in Cortez. Thank Lord I wasn't one.

Casey Schelhorn: But you did see characters like that?

Blue Fulford: Yeah. I saw characters. There were people who drifted in here and lived in the net camps. Now we call them colorful characters, used to live on the waterfront. There was always a town drunk, winos. We didn't escape our share of them.

Casey Schelhorn: So you were talking about the drug abuses. I know Cortez has had issues with smuggling in the ‘70s and ‘80s. What are your memories from that?

Blue Fulford: I think it was pretty accurate what I read about it. I just finished reading a book about it. One of the prime drug dealers in St. Petersburg wrote a book. I wasn’t a personal friend of him, but I knew of him. And the way he told it in that book is pretty much the way I remember it.

Casey Schelhorn: Well, what was that like? When you started fishing there wasn’t drug smuggling in Cortez. How did that change things?

Blue Fulford: Well, it gave the ones that were doing it and had access to the money opportunities to get better equipment, bigger boats and overpower the little fishermen who were trying to struggle on. And finally, some of the rest of us had to borrow money to keep up and to compete with this thing that was going on. I know we had a bait fishing industry going here, and there were four or five little pursing boats operated by hand. And that’s one of the things I worked for in the legislature, to get this area opened so you could use a little pursing to catch bait in for the bait market. And we had it going pretty good developing a market, and then there was some fellas got hold of some drug money and built some bigger boats, and they were catching more fish and taking the markets away from little guys. And it just impacted us in that way. I had to borrow money to get a bigger boat to keep up. I kept my pursing boat right under that shed right there and pulled my net right on that little dock. It was just a little operation. In fact, that dock was built to lift ‘em out on. I had a hoist up there to set ‘em out of the boat and haul ‘em off to the markets. We were doing good, and then other people built the bigger boats and in order to compete we had to do the same thing someway.

Casey Schelhorn: So it sounds like that fractured the community.

Blue Fulford: I don’t know, there was an element—two or three ladies, in fact they were my cousins—that opposed it real violently. But I don’t know that it caused any bloodshed. What was that McCoys and Hatfields, Hatfields and McCoys? There were no family feuds like that, you know. People just took their stands either for it or against it.

Casey Schelhorn: In terms of Cortez for the future, it seems like one of the things that needs to happen is to keep the condos out. How do you see that happening in the future?

Blue Fulford: I don’t know if keeping the condos out now is going to help anything. This current economic slump has done more to stop that than anything else. Right across there this fella who bought this property, had it set up to build thirty-seven condos right across the canal from me. Bottom fell out of the housing market and I don’t think it hurt his money, he seems to have more than anybody has ever seen. But I don’t know, I’m glad to see. Still looks good to me to drive around Cortez and see a boat in the yard and an old pile of rusty engines sitting around somewhere. Sometimes that gets out of place, there are two or three people who overdo it and there are two or three people who completely or constantly are complaining about it and report them to whoever the authorities are. Authorities are just about forgot the complaints—they say well that’s Cortez, don’t mess with Cortez. Oh, land. We’ve had a time and we’ll probably keep

on having a time. I guess we'll be here till we die, unless something don't come along and take us before then.

Casey Schelhorn: Well, thanks.

Blue Fulford: I guess I've had my say, Casey. I just would like to say for anyone who is living in a fishing community like Cortez, that you gonna be under pressure. Don't give up because they gonna eventually get ya. Oh, me.

Casey Schelhorn: They made a politician out of you.

Blue Fulford: Yeah. There are several people throughout the state did. I remember I campaigned so hard in the election in '94, I would give people my card. I said vote for me, I'm running in this election. What are you running for? I'm running for my life *(laughs).* But they took my life. Oh well, I'm still here. Way of life is going, that's what I hate to see go. One of the few clean honorable operations that we had left on the face of this earth and took it away and give it to people to play with. Lot of dollars are made on the recreational side of it, though. But they didn't have to do away with the commercial to do with that.

Casey Schelhorn: Were the recreational fishers just worried they wouldn't have enough fish to catch themselves?

Blue Fulford: That's what they thought, there would be shore-to-shore fish, just walk across the bay on the backs of the fish, if they got the nets out of the bay. They found out that wasn't so.

Casey Schelhorn: Well, thanks for talking.

Blue Fulford: Okay Casey, I hope I can do somebody some good out there. I hate to see the commercial man lose out. He has a place in the scheme of things. Somebody has got to catch these fish and put them on the table for those who can't catch them. Maybe somebody will develop a way to do that. I'm waiting for technology to advance to the Star Trek level. I want to be able to ride through the bay on a transporter and press a little button and all the fish will just come in my boat. Now what will that do to the net ban. They will have to have another referendum to outlaw transporters. Oh goodness. I can still laugh about it though. I guess that's a good thing.

Casey Schelhorn: We'll wait and see. I sure hope Cortez is still around in the next fifty years, hundred years.

Blue Fulford: Yeah. Most places that I read about, if there are any like Cortez, it's just people that are fishing, whose wives have a good job, and they have a part-time job. Fishing is not a full-time job anymore. It's just part-time, it helps supplement the income. If they would let us do that, that would help a lot. Alright, Casey.

Casey Schelhorn: Thanks, Blue.