

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



George Luzier was born in Sarasota in 1924. Growing up during the Depression years instilled in George a build-it-yourself mentality. At age 11 he had already built his first wooden sailboat, and throughout his teenage years he would build many more. When WWII came along George enlisted as a Merchant Marine, where he would earn his Captain's license. After the war was over, George returned to Sarasota, met his future wife Carolyn, and built his own house out of pecky cypress. After a few years captaining

large freighters, George decided to start a company with his brother Homer building wooden boats in Sarasota. George, throughout the course of his career, has built hundreds of beautifully crafted wooden sailboats and motorboats, earning a reputation as one of the best wooden boat builders around. At 86 years old, George is still at it, building boats five days a week and sailing with his wife Carolyn whenever he gets the chance.

Interviewee: George Luzier
Interviewer: Casey Schelhorn
Date of Interview: August 18, 2010
Location: George's boat shop

Schelhorn: If you could just start off by introducing yourself, and just saying who you are and where we are at.

George: Well, I'm George Luzier, and I'm a native from Sarasota. I was born 6-12-24, and my mother was native, and I've got two brothers who are both natives, and I've lived here the biggest part of my life. I've had a boat building business, a custom boat building business, for the last 60 odd years. I'm still at it.

Schelhorn: So, going as far back as we can in terms of Sarasota, how did your family first come to Sarasota?

George: My mother's side of the family came from Prince Edward's Island, Nova Scotia. And I believe they came right after the Civil War and they settled at Auburndale. And they had an orange grove and there was a big freeze in either 1895 or 96, I'm not sure of that. And it froze

them out and they came to Sarasota. And one of the things they had, they had a rooming house next to the Methodist church on Pineapple. And it's still there, the church is.

My mother was born in Auburndale in 1902, and her mother died when she was a baby and her grandmother, my great grandmother raised her. And she was raised in Sarasota. And her father was Homer Welsh, and he was associated with Seaboard Railroad. And in later years he was a postmaster, and I don't know what the year was, back in thirty-something when the Republicans or the Democrats wanted to get in, he lost out. It was a political job, and he lost out. I don't know, I guess he retired after that. And we lived on Pomelo Avenue. That's where we spent our boyhood. I've got two younger brothers, Charlie is two years younger than I am, and Homer is nine years younger. And that's where we were raised back in the Depression. We didn't have a lot of money, but we had a nice place to live and the family had a lot of fun.

And my father ran off, I say ran off I guess, anyway he left when I was nine years old and brother Homer was a baby. One of the things we wanted was a boat. And my mother I guess, I don't know how, but she gave us a boat that was about a fourteen foot built for an outboard, a big outboard. And he came with a pair of oars and a two horse power champion outboard that would run for about 15 minutes and would get hot. And it didn't roll well at all, and I saw the sailboats going around and I thought, I can see that's the way to go, because that rowing didn't do anything for me. So I had an uncle, Bob Luzier, and he was my father's youngest brother, and he was a yacht captain, and he helped me build my first 11-foot sailboat down on the Hudson Bayou, right where the Tom Bell house was at. And we went on from there and built bigger boats and sailed them. My mother took up sailing and we took up sailing and went at it. The bay was beautiful and it wasn't all pumped in. Scallops were everywhere and it's not that way anymore.

Schelhorn: What was your first sailboat like?

George: The first sailboat was an 11-foot; it was a moth—class of sailboat. It had a different rig originally. It had a bamboo mast—un-stayed bamboo mast. And over the time I had the boat, I knew where every bamboo patch in town was that I could get to on my bicycle because it had a tendency to break—the bamboo mast. So I would get the bamboo and cut it down. It was 18-foot long, put it on my bicycle, rig it, and put it on my boat. Then I changed the rig later on and got rid of it. I'm not real big on un-stayed masts.

Then I needed a bigger boat. And there was a local yacht broker new in town. It was down on the corner of Palm and Main, right next to the Cypress Bar. And he had a boat in there that I admired. It was a 13-foot called *Black Cat*—it was a “cat boat.” I think it was designed by Bruce Crandall. They wanted one hundred dollars for it. Well, you didn't have one hundred dollars so you built it. And I built it in mother's garage. And we sailed it, well, we actually about sailed it to death. We sailed it night and day and we made the sails ourselves on the old Singer sewing machine. And you can see from the pictures that it was a nice boat, had nice sails. So when I

turned 16, I was in high school. I was taking a course; they had a thing called *Diversified Cooperative Training*, and you went in the morning to school till noon and then I went home and had lunch, rode our bicycles. There was a millwork there—West Coast Lumber Company, nice big millwork, nice people. And I worked there. Well, when I got to be 16, I bought a Model A Ford, a 1931 Model A Ford convertible. I paid one hundred dollars for it, which was big money for one. But it was real nice, it had a new top and the engine had been rebuilt by the best builder in town, and it was a great car. So then I decided I had to have a bigger boat, so I built the 18-foot Dixie sloop underneath the pine tree because it was too big for the garage. And I had that for a number of years, and I sailed it and we all sailed it. And then I built a ten-foot pram for a brother, and I built some for the neighborhood kids, and it was just the thing to do. And, of course when I was in this period, WWII came through. In 1940, I was 16 and the Brits had a training facility over at Arcadia, at Dar field. And this was true in WWII, of course I don't remember that. But they trained the British over there and the nearest big town was Sarasota, so we got to know a few of them. They had a USO at the end of the old city pier, if you look at the pictures of the old pier down there you'll see it. And my mother used to play the piano and she used to play the piano at nights for them. We had an extra room or two in the house, and they used to come up and stay with us and they were my age or maybe a year older. I've got pictures of them, they became real good friends—that was interesting. Two of them survived the war. One of them was a prisoner of war, he washed out of here, they sent him to Canada and made a navigator-bomber out of him. I think he got shot down in Wellington. My mother used to write to him when he was in prison. And the other one, Teddy Weatherstone, he survived. He flew Lancasters, he survived the war but he got killed later on. What was the first ones name....?

I can't remember, but he came back to visit some years ago. Ken Dicks, he was from the East Coast of London, I had a nice visit with him. So this period was real nice and the Bay was real pretty. And we sailed all the time and we scalloped. And the War came along, so I got in the Merchant Marine cadet system for the Merchant Marine Academy. So I left in the later part of October, 1942. And I went to Pass Christian, Mississippi, and the basic school was there and we were there for six weeks... thereabouts. Then we got a little leave and went back, and then they assigned us to a ship. They sent me to Galveston, and I went aboard a tanker called the *S.R. Aruba*, she had just come out of the ship yard. She had been torpedoed down south of Gitmo Bay, and they hadn't broken her back and she hadn't burnt. I was a cadet on that ship for approximately six months, and we shuttled from New York to Aruba—she was built for that run. And then I went back to the Academy and was there nine months and graduated May of '44—Third Mate's license, any ocean, any tonnage. Then they sent me to Port Arthur, and I went aboard a ship called the [—] built in 1919, and she ran. I guess she made a lot of money. I went aboard and the captain, he knew about cadets and he liked them, and he said "I need a second mate, I've got a third mate and he can't be second mate, can you handle the second mate's job?" And I said "sure." So I sailed on her for six months and two days, and piled off. You had to sail six months to raise your license. I went home, went to Tampa, raised my license. I said "well, I've never been on a freighter." So I got on National Airlines, Lockheed Lone Star

at the old airport. Doesn't look like it does now, it was a twenty by thirty building, that's about it. I flew to New York, and was second mate on Liberty ship for two trips back and forth across England and France and back. Came home and relaxed a little bit, didn't quite have six month's time in, so I went back to Mobile on another Liberty with a load of coal and took it to Italy, and when I got back I got my Chief Mate's license. When I got home I sailed basically out of Mobile on T2 tankers, and I like tankers, they have better quarters and are faster, they didn't hang around quite as much.

I guess it was 1948, I met my wife in a hurricane... I've always been lucky with hurricanes. She was a school teacher. I was home, and my 18-foot boat was at the foot of Palm Avenue, and there was a hurricane. I don't know if it was named or not. We always, in the middle of hurricanes, would go out and check out our boats. And we walked down instead of taking the Ford, walked down to Palm Avenue and saw the boat, and it was fine. And she said, let's go to Charbis, she had a room at Charbis, it's a bed and breakfast now still between all those big buildings on Palm Avenue. And we went down there and Caroline was there and that was the first time I saw her. Later on I had been back to sea and come home and mother and I was out sailing one afternoon in Dixie. Caroline was a member of the yacht club. I wasn't because I wasn't around that much and didn't care. But they were having a fish fry at the boat yard here and they had an old fish boat they got on bad debt, and they were having a fish fry anchored out on the yacht club channel. My mother says we got to go out on the fish fry, and I said sure. And we tied up, everybody tied up. There was two girls, there was Caroline and the other one. And when we got time to leave everyone wanted to know which one I was going to go for. And I said let's go sailing. I told my mother, I said you go on home with Charby. And we went sailing. And we got married on Christmas Eve 1948, been together ever since.

Schelhorn: So then is it official that "let's go sailing" is the best pickup line?

George: (laughter) She took to it. Yeah, we cruised the boat. We took it to Key West one time, we took it two and a half weeks. And she was teaching school, and I worked here and there. I worked in a boat yard here and there. And we figured we would go back and seek our fortune. I would work on a tanker and go coast wide and she would teach school. She graduated from Agnes Scott and was a teacher and had all the credentials. And of course we wrote to Texas and they sent her all this fancy stuff, she could even teach French. Of course, they weren't about to give her a job. Well she knows about as much French as I do: *Parlez vous France* and *Chevrolet coupe* and stuff like that (laughter).

She had a '48 Plymouth four-door. And I got the moth boat on top, I had another moth that I built in '47, and I got it on top. And everything we owned was in the backseat and in the trunk and off we go. We went to New Orleans because we got friends there, and that was pretty much a bust because what little money we had we took care of it. And then off to Port Arthur, and of course when I was around Port Arthur it was a boom town. When we got to Galveston, it was a ghost town, completely dead, there were no jobs. And so there we were, out there and we didn't

have enough money to get home. She couldn't get a job, I couldn't find anything. One of the agents when I was on that first ship as a second mate and we ran in between Port Arthur and Tampa was there. So I called him up, his name was Maxie, so I said "Maxie, do you remember me?" and yep, and I explained my plight. And he says they were looking for a relief chief mate for about a week because they are going to Baton Rouge, and I said I'm your man. So I rode it there and back and earned 100 dollars. Well 100 dollars was pretty good money, and we got in that little old Plymouth and boy we headed back East. My favorite song was, well your probably not familiar with Buddy Holly, well, he had a song "Texas in My Rearview Mirror." We went back to Mobile and she got a job teaching school at 8-mile and that's 8-mile out of Mobile. And the only kid of the school that wore shoes was a junkyard dealer's son, but it was a nice school, red brick. And then I shipped out, I was gone over in the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean, back and forth for almost a year and came home. I made enough money to build my house.

Schelhorn: In Sarasota?

George: Yep, I had a lot over on Sapphire Shores my grandmother had bought in 1927. So I built a house myself and never had a mortgage, which was a good way to start.

Schelhorn: What was the house like?

George: I still live in it. It's a pecky cypress little cottage. Do you know where Woodland Drive is? It's off Bayshore. I'm four lots up from the basin.

Schelhorn: I'm not sure where Woodland drive is...

George: It's on Bayshore, you got the museum and you got North Shore and you got Sapphire and you got Woodland. You go down Woodland about 3/4, 2/3 the way down on the right you got a little picky cypress house with a tin roof and a humongous oak tree out front.

Schelhorn: I don't think I've been down there.

George: Drive down there, It's a beautiful neighborhood for raising kids. They've got the megamansions and that kind of crap now, and Spanish style. See, during the boom-time development we had pink sidewalks and that kind of stuff. It's pretty much all gone. And I've lived there ever since. Sarasota was a little town and in the summertime, the northern visitors—what we had—was gone. So it was really nice.

Schelhorn: So once you came back and built your house, what kind of work were you doing in Sarasota?

George: Well I worked on boats, I worked in boat yards. I worked with Stan Lowe, an old friend of mine, had a little boat business.

[Someone walks in, to sell paint.]

Oh... I was working, I worked with him part-time, just jobs like that. Of course the old airport was a WW II airbase. And they had started off with B-17s and they lost two of them, one along 301 and one at the foot of the Bay somewhere. And they took those out and they had P-40s and 49s and they ended up with 51s, but they never had any more of the heavy's down there. But there was none of these buildings, like this place down here, there was none of the subdivisions places to rent. So you could rent a 20 by 100 foot barracks building for 35 dollars. And you could get a bigger building, so I rented one of those, and I accumulated some tools and went to building boats. I started out with small ones and got orders for this. And I needed a bigger space and I got what had been the rec. hall. It had fairly high ceilings and 20 foot between the posts, so you could fit a pretty big boat in there- a big building. And a friend of mine had a cabinet shop in it before, and he had to move out, and I was there for some years and we built a lot of nice boats. I built a boat out there for Arthur's father, and built a lot of nice boats for him, he's an old native. And it was nice out there, it was like a village, you knew everybody and if you wanted to burn the trash you burnt it. It was really, really a great neighborhood, nice restaurants: Jack's Spanish restaurant. You never know it now, but it was. And I could come home for dinner, it was less than a mile.

Schelhorn: So it was alongside the airport?

George: No, it was in the airport.

Schelhorn: And so you are saying the airport was built to house planes during WW II?

George: It was an active airbase, oh yeah. It was a training base. This whole Florida was nothing but that. You had MacDill that was B-26s. And you had, Drew was heavies, Paige field, heavies. And that's what it was, and after the war was over the city got it back and they just rented them. And the good airport manager went and died on us. And they got some yo-yo out of Timbuktu I guess, and he jacked the rent up. They had been pretty good about maintenance, but it was time to get out and it was '66. And I got this place. This was the first building on this industrial park. It had all been cleared off and this was paved and everything. See a lot of my tools are three-phase and they had three-phase at the airport, but I've been here ever since-building boats. The first boat that was built in this building was a 39-foot ketch. I've got some pictures of it [points at a picture on the wall]. And you can see that it was new because it's all shiny.

Schelhorn: Do you design the boats or were you working on commission?

George: All the power boats I ever built I designed. I didn't design that [pointing at a photograph], that was an Alden design. And I didn't design that [pointing at another photograph], Tim Seabur's daddy designed that. And this was the second boat we built for this owner [pointing], he designed that. But just about everything else I designed. All the power boats I designed.

Schelhorn: I know you said that the first boat you built when you were 11.

George: Yeah, he helped me build the first one on the bayou. The one I built myself, that one right there, that was over on Pomelo Avenue in the garage.

Schelhorn: How did you learn this craft?

George: I was always interested in boats, and always good with my hands, and I just did it.

Schelhorn: You were saying that at this time if people wanted a boat it was a very common thing to build your own boat.

George: Well, if you didn't have any money, you built it plank by plank and that's how you did it. And I built some with the neighborhood kids. They would have a little money, and I would build a boat for them. That's how you did it. It made it easier when I got the Ford. I didn't have to put it on my bicycle. During the Depression, we were a happy family and we had plenty to eat, but as far as any cash money we didn't have any. All your money went, well mother had a couple of rent properties. We lived in the ones that we didn't rent. And you rent them for just about enough to keep from losing them to the taxes.

Schelhorn: And so that was your main source of income.

George: Well, my mother's was.

Schelhorn: So Sarasota is described as a land of abundance.

George: There is plenty of fish, and plenty of clams, and when the scallops was in, you could go out and sink the boat over there in Bird Key—that was a big flat. We would sit till ten o'clock at night opening the damn things you would get so many. Yeah, it was good about that. It was a pretty little town.

Schelhorn: How else would you describe Sarasota at that time?

George: Well it was nice, it was pretty, it was a great place to live. Sarasota if you look back at some of the old things you see it was known as the "air-conditioned city." It was cool here, there was breezes. You would never know it now, because of all the asphalt and all the big buildings. We didn't have air conditioning in my house until my youngest daughter was born or after. Didn't have heat, had a fireplace. It was a simple nice easy place to live. And we all made a living.

Schelhorn: It's changed so much...

George: Well, it's gotten so big and spread out so much. I don't know. You take for instance out east of town, all those people living out there. Well, we knew when we were little that no one would live out there. We had a rainy season and it rained for days at a time and I mean rain, really rain. And when it wasn't doing that, every day you would get squalls that cooled everything off. And we knew at the time that all these houses, that was all swamp. When the

swamp would dry out some, you could take your Ford out there because it was slicker than slick. But nobody would ever go live out there if we had the rains we used to have. You go out on these roads and you look at the top of these houses. You go out on University and you look off to the right and you see just the roof of the house and you know its low down there. Where is it going to go if it rains? But we don't get the rains anymore. And that was one of the things that used to cool it in the summertime.

And when we were sailing, you would be out there sailing along in the afternoon and you would see the squall, and you would sail up wind and wait a little bit. And here the squall would come, and you would take all your clothes off and put them underneath the deck of the boat and you would go downwind, and you could get the boat to go on a plane. And the squall would last ten minutes at the most. And by this time you would turn purple or blue and be cold and shivering and you would just jump overboard and come up. And the breeze would come up again and sometimes you would see another one building up and do it again. It was just a great place. I've shown you the pictures of the coons. The coons would come to the bayou.

Schelhorn: You had a pet raccoon?

George: Yeah, we had a pet raccoon, we always had cats, never was big on dogs. We always had pets. I still got them.

Schelhorn: What was it like having a raccoon?

George: He was just one of the family, did whatever he wanted to do. He lived out doors mostly but he could come in at night if he wanted to. He watered the house. But outdoors we kept him on a chain and kept him on a clothesline, he could run up and down. And there was a well at the house, but by this time we had city water, but it would flow a little bit. Have you ever been around a coon and watched them. They're interesting animals. And we would take him fishing with us or wherever we went, the beach, we would take him with us- something to have.

Schelhorn: This thing with the weather is really interesting, do you have any theories?

George: It's all this building and all this asphalt. It used to be the rainy season would be through June and July. When you watch now, in May if you are lucky the clouds will build up in the east and get as far as the interstate and they won't come through and something stops them, I guess the heat coming off all that.

Schelhorn: When was the Interstate done?

George: Twenty years ago. All this stuff east of town. University Parkway used to be County-Line Road, it was a shell road that went down basically past Lockwood Ridge. My kids used to keep their horses out there and ride down there and camp down there. None of that stuff was there.

Schelhorn: How about life in the Bay, how has that changed?

George: Bay is dirty, ain't no fish, scallops don't come back. You can't eat the clams. Aside from that, it's great. The Bay is dead, maybe not now, maybe it's coming back. The Bay bottom used to be covered with grass. I haven't kept my boat up here in years, so I'm not up on that. Certain times in the winter the water gets real clear, something to do with the oxygen because there is no rain. And you can go in 10 feet of water, and sail for miles and see nothing on the bottom- nothing, no grass, nothing. In other words, it's barren. Well, you don't have the grass, you not going to get the little fish. Charlotte Harbor is the same way, they ruined it. The goddamn phosphate mines up there. Everything that comes out of the Charlotte Harbor, the Myakka River, the Peace River, you got all these goddamn golf courses and they all fertilize. You got all these houses and everybody fertilizes and everything goes in the Bay.

See, I've kept a boat down there for thirty years off and on, and there's been some rain. And with the rain you expect it to muck up, but it just doesn't clear up- it's too much. There was a dead zone out there for a while. I got a friend down there who is a shrimper, and he had to go way off because he said it was completely dead. But everything goes in the water, and that is what suffers. And now they are trying to clean it up. Tampa is trying to clean theirs up. And they keep talking about it here. Every year they have the scallop search and they go out there and they get a few scallops. Jesus Christ, we used to go out there... you could fill a tub that big and that big around with scallops.

I'll tell you another place that's the same way, Anclote Key. That water down there used to be as clear as it was in the Keys—crystal clear—and we used to go down there to scallop. And we had a little sports fisherman and we used to go down there, scallop, spend the night. And we went down and spent the night, scallop and come home. And there was scallops everywhere, and then some years ago my wife and I took this boat (points to a picture) at the time the scallops should be in and went to looking for them at the same place I caught them before. And I'm not talking about just standing on the boat looking, I'm talking about wearing a face mask and she pulled me around shark baiting, and I didn't see any. I talked to a guy anchored up, and we was anchored up for about a week or so, and we talked to a guy and I kind of knew him in a way. And I said by the way, where the scallops? And he lived up there, and said "They're gone." And I had already figured that out, and I said "Yeah, I figured that out." I don't know if they ever came back or not. But it was like a Mecca for them. But there is all that building and all that subdivisions and everything and they won't go in dirty water. Scallops travel and they move. Some of these experts will say they won't, well that's bullshit. Fishermen will tell you different.

Schelhorn: So you used to pull up basins of scallops.

George: I've got a picture, I don't know where it's at, I see it once in a while. You would find out where they was at and you would go aboard and get them. But it's just not there anymore.

Schelhorn: What was fishing like at that time?

George: Fishing was good. There is still some fish out there, but it ain't like it was.

Schelhorn: What was a typical day of fishing like?

George: It just depends what you want. The kingfish runs used to come in here. I had a twenty-foot inboard [points to a picture]. And I went out one morning and we were going to have a party, and a friend of mine, Bill Hebb, a native of here, he lived off Bayshore on the water. And we had a bunch of friends coming on Friday night and neither one of us wanted to fish. He said he would go in the morning with the cast net and get some mullet. And I took that boat up to Bully's Creek and I ran it down out Big Pass and I finally found a school of kingfish out there, and I put them in a circle, and I caught two little black-finned sharks and I think about thirty King Fish in one circle. I mean I had kingfish all over the boat. I came around back to Bowlees Creek and load them in the truck and took them to Bill's place on Bayshore and he had a cleaning place so we could clean. We had enough nice kingfish, but it used to be like that everywhere. You would get so many you would quit. It's not that way anymore. It's the same way with the mackerel. You would go out and catch 50, 60 mackerel without trying. Well they are limited now, which they should be. But back in those days there wasn't any limit, there was so many of them.

Of course you can't take but two I think. Most of my fishing has been with, I've never been much on bottom fishing, most of my fishing has been with trolling. I trolled all the time with a sailboat, I've caught as many fish off a sailboat as with a powerboat and it don't cost anything, no pollution.

Schelhorn: Are you still sailing?

George: I sailed last Sunday.

Schelhorn: On one of your boats?

George: Yes, it's down on Boca Grande.

Schelhorn: What kind of boat are you sailing on?

George: This boat [points to a photograph]. When I first built it, it was black. I've had it thirty years, real nice boat. No, I always fished.

Schelhorn: Well I don't know if there is anything else you want to talk about now, but maybe we could call it an interview and meet back up in a couple of days.

George: Well sure, if you think you got enough there.