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

Jonnie Walker, a professional fishing guide, moved to Sarasota as a kid in 1956 and has been fishing ever since. Over the years, he has seen many changes in Sarasota Bay as it has been dredged and the coastline has been developed. An active conservationist, he is involved with the Coastal Conservation Association, the Sarasota Bay National Estuary Program, the Sarasota County Reef Committee, and served 8 years on the Natural Resources and Parks and Recreation Advisory Board of Sarasota County. He co-chairs an annual fishing event for the physically challenged. Jonnie likes to say, "Take a kid fishing, because someday he may take you."

Interview with: **Jonnie Walker**
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Anastasia Sallen: So I guess the first thing would be to introduce yourself.

Jonnie Walker: I'm Captain Jonnie Walker, it's J-O-N-N-I-E, W-A-L-K-E-R, and I live here in Sarasota, I'm a fishing guide, I've been fishing for 30-something… 37 years now as a guide. I've been here fishing since I first moved here when I was ten, um… You want me to start right at the beginning when we first moved here?

Sallen: Yeah, that sounds good. How did you come to Sarasota?

Walker: Well, my grandparents had vacationed here for years, and my parents had vacationed for a couple years here, and then in 1956, they sold the business in Long Island and decided to move to Sarasota, and the first place we moved to when we moved to Sarasota was Philippi Shores trailer park, which was a little trailer park right on Philippi Creek. So we moved right on the water, and I think the first or second day I was here I was fishing, and I was fishing off the dock at the trailer park and catching snook and trout and ladyfish, and just all different kinds of fish, I mean as soon as we moved here, so I was—the bug had bit me and I've been doing it ever since.

After we'd lived in the trailer park for several years, we moved out to the community of Bee Ridge, which is out around the area of Proctor and MacIntosh. And in those days it was just a little community, it had its own post office, it had a railroad station, I mean you could pick up the

railroad train out there and ride it all the way into Sarasota, you know, that was the big thing on Saturdays, we would flag the train down and take the train into Sarasota. That was a lot of fun. And in those days my dad was very much into fishing, so as a ten-, eleven-, twelve-year-old, I was with him every weekend fishing somewhere. In those days you could camp out on the water, and we would go down to El Jobean or to Englewood, or to Boca Grande and camp on the beach, you know with our tent, you know, it was allowed to do it in those days. We used to do it on the south end of Longboat Key. On the north end of Longboat Key there's a place called Beer Can Island and we used to go there all the time and camp out. It was just really nice to be able to camp out, fish for the weekend, and we had an old station wagon that was full of sand and nets and rods and reels and buckets and just all the stuff you need when you're camping. It was a great time in those days. There wasn't a lot of private property, there was no private beaches. If you could get to a beach you could go anywhere on it. It was very wide open and a lot of good fishing, a lot of good fishing.

And, the early '60s.—I think it was like '64—my parents bought a bait shop fishing camp on the Venice Jetties, on the south side of Venice Jetty. It was called Tarpon Center Bait and Tackle, so in my high school years I was there almost every weekend working, and then in my young married days I was there almost every weekend working, fishing, working, I mean you know, I'd work for a while and then I'd go fish for a while. I never had a boat when I was growing up. Never had a boat, couldn't afford one! I mean we were pretty poor, we didn't have a lot of money and we were too busy working to go out and get a boat. I went to work for the telephone company, it was GTE in those days and... worked on Longboat Key and St. Armands Key and met some people that were well-to-do, had some money that liked to fish and had boats, and I would take them fishing on the weekends and my days off, you know I'd take them fishing. I met this one couple on Longboat and they had several boats, they had like three boats, a big cabin cruiser, a sportfishing boat and a little bay skiff, and this was in like nineteen sixty three-or-four, somewhere in there. Uh no, it had to be later than that, sixty-six, I'm sorry, sixty-six when I met them, and he did not like to fish, but his wife loved to fish, so he said, "Would you take my wife, for godsakes, please take her and take her fishing." So we—this was a lady by the name of Dorothy Goldsmith and she has since passed away, but I love her dearly. She was a wonderful woman, started me out as a guide, because she would tell her friends about our exploits of fishing and all the fish that we caught and everything, and they'd say, "Well, we want to go fishing," so I would borrow her boat to take some of her friends fishing. Umm, so after about a year of this I realized that I better go get my own boat. You know, I just couldn't borrow her boat all the time, so I got my own boat and started taking people fishing. I had a little 16-foot bay skiff with a 25-horsepower motor on it. I charged people $20 for a half a day to go fishing. Now this is in '73-4, somewhere in there. And it was wonderful, I kept busy. I worked out of the old Chart House Pub, which was on the south end of Longboat Key which is now the Dry Dock restaurant and took people up from there, you know, go out fishing, have lunch and just met a lot of nice and interesting people. And I decided, well, I've gotta get a little bit bigger boat, and I bought a 22-foot boat. And since then I've been through a dozen boats since then. The boat I have now is a Chris-Craft 23-foot. It's a beautiful boat and I really love it. But I've gone through a lot of different boats and a lot of people. I've been very lucky, that I've met a lot of really interesting people in my years guiding. And a lot of people that have passed away that are very memorable to me, that really meant a lot to me in my fishing, and treated me well and took care of me, and made sure I could make a living doing this. You know, it's really changed since the days I was charging $20

for a half a day, now I charge $350 for a half a day. So, it's really changed over the years, what we've done, to what we're doing.

Do you want me to go into talking about the bay now?

Sallen: Well, no, why don't you tell me a little more about living in the trailer park.

Walker: Ahh! You want to know more about the trailer park!

The trailer park was a great place. It was—in those days there wasn't just—you know, trailer parks have a bad name for themselves now, if you live in a trailer park it's either a bunch of old 90 year-old people or it's a bunch of worthless bums, you know. In those days everybody lived in trailer parks. It was the cheap thing to do in Florida. It was the only thing you could find, there was no housing down here in those days, there wasn't all the big developments that are here now. And, when we moved in, there were people from the circus that lived there, and in Sarasota, there was probably 13 or 14 circuses that wintered here besides Ringling Brothers. So, there was Small Little's circuses, there was clowns that lived there, there was trapeze artists that lived there, there was tight-walkers, I mean everything you can think of—And as a kid, we learned how to tight-walk and how to work on a trapeze and hang by my ankles, and do all kinds of things like that. It was really great, and in those days you know, you could let your kids loose and you didn't have to worry about them, they could be gone and if they got home before dark that was fine, you know, after dark you worried about your kids. My parents let me have pretty much free rein, you know, I just did everything. We hunted in the woods, we fished in the bays, we fished in the creeks, and just had a really great time.

I was talking about the other day, my grandson is into competitive shooting, and we're very careful about how he carries the gun. He's not allowed to carry the gun when we're—and he's 14-years-old—and carry the gun unless we're with him and he has to carry it from his house over to our house, or wherever he's going with it we have to be with him. He can't just carry it by himself because of the danger that could present itself, either somebody sees him and thinks he's doing something wrong or whatever. But in those days, we walked around—I walked around with my buddies—we had a shotgun or a .22 rifle, and we walked up and down streets and we walked through neighborhoods and went from one woods to another woods, you know, to hunt for squirrels or rabbits or whatever we were doing, or dove hunting or whatever, and didn't have to worry about it. You know, and the same with fishing, we would just pack up our gear and go camping, and just as kids, and go camping for the night, or for the weekend and go to the woods by a lake and just fish in the lake all day, you know. It was a lot of fun.

Sallen: Tell me a story about camping out.

Walker: Ha! Camping out, well we—Ha ha! There are some stories I probably can't tell you, but there are stories that I guess I can. We had a lot of fun. There was a woods right near my house and a bunch of us kids in the neighborhood would just go over there and camp, and we had a regular camp site over there that we used all the time and on the weekends we'd go camping. And our parents never worried about us, you know, which was the nice thing, you knew we weren't gonna get into trouble. We didn't do anything stupid, we weren't doing anything crazy. But we took our guns with us, we took our rods and reels with us and we did everything, cooked.

And my dad had taught me years ago, that you have a philosophy, you don't catch anything or shoot anything unless you're gonna eat it. I mean, if you're going out to fish for fun that's fine, release them and let them go. But, you don't go out and shoot and kill stuff unless you're going to use it. And we would shoot rabbits, or squirrels, or doves, or whatever and we'd eat 'em, you know, put 'em on a stick and cook 'em over a campfire. It was great! It was a lot of fun.

Sallen: So, how did you decide to be a guide?

Walker: Well, it wasn't any deciding about it. I had gotten laid off from the phone company, and this lady that I talked to you about earlier—

Sallen: Keep going.

Walker: Oh, is the wind bothering you?

Sallen: I'm just blocking the wind.

Walker: Okay. This lady I had talked to—let me start over again.

Sallen: Okay.

Walker: You know, it was by circumstance, because I had gotten laid off by the phone company. Uh, in those days, the phone company would lay you off when they didn't have work. And we got laid off in the summer a lot, because there was just not a lot of work to do in the summertime here in the phone company. In the wintertime when there was a lot of people here we had a lot of phone work to do. Anyway, I was out of work, and I'd just bought this boat and started taking people fishing, and I said, "Well I guess I can make a living at this if I work hard enough at it," and I actually never made a lot of money, but it was a good living. You know, I've never saved anything, I don't have anything in the bank now. I'm 63-years-old and I don't have a nickel. But you know, I know that as long as I'm able to go fishing I can make a dollar, so I'll keep on doing it. Somebody asked me the other day, when are you gonna retire, and I said, "I'm not gonna retire, you're gonna find my boat spinning around out there in the middle of the bay somewhere and I'm either not gonna be on it or I'm in it dead, you know, one or the other." Because, there's just nothing I like better to do than to go fishing.

I mean, and I actually enjoy people. I get a big kick out of talking to people—"Where are you from? What do you do?" and everything else and you know—and I've had really interesting people that I've taken, that I mean have come from all walks of life, poor or rich, in-between, sports celebrities, you know, just everything you can think of, people that didn't want to be out on the boat, but at the end of the day loved it. A lot of times the husbands always want to drag their wives, and they say, "Well I'm just gonna read a book, and I'm gonna sit on a towel in front of the boat and I'm just gonna get a suntan." Well, after they hear us having a lot of fun catching fish, it's all of a sudden, "Well can I use the rod and reel?" "Yeah," you start catching a few fish and people get excited.

I mean today I had two kids and four parents out, I mean it was a lot of people on the boat. Too many, but those two kids screamed and hollered all day, they just had a wonderful time. And it's neat to hear kids laughing and getting excited and giving you a high-five, you know, and just get-

ting all up about the fish. I wore ‘em out. They were done. By eleven o’clock they were done, they were ready to go in, so it was a good day. When you can wear ‘em out and keep ‘em busy and keep ‘em occupied—and it was really funny ‘cause the mom said, he brought his Nintendo with him because he’s one of these kids that just has to be doing something all the time, he can’t keep his interest, he never even asked about the Nintendo. He said he loved it, he loved it, he wants to know when he can go back again, you know, so it was great.

And if I can turn a kid onto fishing—my dad always had a theory, he had kids that used to hang around the bait shop and he’d put ‘em to work catching kingfish for bait, and different things, sweeping up, doing whatever, and he said, “You know, if you can keep a kid fishing, it gives them something to do.” When they’re bored they won’t—when kids get bored and they don’t have anything to do is when they get in trouble, you know, and if you can keep a kid busy, show ‘em how to fish and show ‘em the enjoyment of it. It’s nice to catch and release, but it’s also nice to have one or two to take home and eat, and they enjoy that. I mean, kids nowadays are eating fish more than they did when I first started guiding, because, you know, they’ve learned to like the things that are good for ‘em, you know. Hmm, don’t know where I was going with that, but that’s okay, ha ha. Hit a dead end there, didn’t I? Whoops! There’s a wall! Ha.

Sallen: Ha ha. Tell me about the bait shop that your parents owned.

Walker: Oh, the bait shop was a lot of fun. My parents had this bait shop from 1964 to 1972 and it was an interesting place. They served beer and sandwiches, and bait and everything, and it was right out on the Venice Jetties. And, besides the people that fished all the time—and it was great fishing down there, I fished all the time—they had their trailer that they lived in right on the water, right there, it was just like waterfront living on the cheap. It was really good. And uh, we had a great time because the people that hung around the bait shop were just an interesting group of people, everything from circus roustabouts who—the circus used to winter in Venice in those days, the Ringling circus, and they would come in for the season, and the circus in those days, they would—in the winter time they didn’t show, they came in and practiced their new acts and they got together and fixed their equipment and did all that kind of stuff. And, they would come down there and buy fish and tackle and sit around and drink beer all day, and my dad had smoked mullet and stone crab claws and stuff like that and people would come from miles around to have his smoked mullet and smoked fish and smoked shrimp. He smoked shrimp which is—if nobody’s ever had it, smoked shrimp, they are excellent. Nobody does that anymore, nobody does smoked shrimp anymore. But, we had this really eclectic group of people that hung around. There was a guy that used to come around with all these circus roustabouts and everything else, owned four Holiday Inns in Southwest Florida, and he used to hang out there all the time with these guys and drink beer with us on the weekends and stuff and just have a great time. I mean, we drank a lot of beer when we had this bait shop, had a bunch of picnic tables set up out there and we just by 3 or 4 o’clock we were popping that first beer, you know, had too, ha ha, you know. Or maybe lunchtime too, you know, and just sat around all night. And it was—even after all the fishermen had left we would still be sitting there drinking beer all night. And sometimes, on the weekends especially, we had 20 or 30 people there. Had a bunch of tables, like I say, lined up and we’d be just talking. It was a real neat place to hang out.

I’m really disappointed that, you know, my parents couldn’t hang onto it longer. The developers came in, the property was owned by the—actually by the federal government, but it was leased,

but the city had leased it from the federal government. And they decided what they wanted to do so they could build condos across from it, is they wanted to move the bait shop out so they could move the road over, ‘cause the road was in the wrong place. So, we had to leave so they could put a road through, and it just destroyed another piece of Old Florida. You know, there was a lot of old Florida around here in those days, a lot of Old Florida.

I worked out—for years I worked out of the New Pass bait shop, and it was actually the place where my dad had his first job when we moved here. He was a shrimper at night, and shrimpers go out at night to catch the bait shrimp. The shrimp come up out of the grass at night to feed and they had to go with these nets that they dragged behind the boat and catch these shrimp and keep them alive to sell as baitfish. And he had his first job there, so I knew these people from way back when, but when I was working for the phone company on Longboat and Lido Key I used to always come in there for lunch. There was a hamburger place up on the bridge, and Dan and Daisy Bird owned it, and I knew their kids from school too, and it was a really neat place. It was a building that looked like it was ready to fall off the side of the bridge, the floors went in a couple of different directions, but they had the best hamburgers in town, and people would come from in town and everywhere else just to have hamburgers all the time there at lunch time. So I spent a lot of time up there, you know, on days that you’re not fishing you just sit around and talk to people and drink a couple of beers and have a hamburger—and hoping to pick up a charter that way. But it was a lot of fun growing up around there. And they tore that down in the ‘80s to build the new bridge at New Pass and they opened up another bait shop down below it, which was owned by Carl and Beverly Sadler, and he shrimped at night also. He had one shrimp boat left and he had worked with my dad back in the '50s and he had that place until, uh gosh, I can’t think of it, it had to be in the middle '90s, and they sold it to another fella who fancied it up and made it better and everything else and it really has evolved over the years, but it’s still a piece of Old Florida. It’s a neat place to go into. If you’ve never been there, they got a unique collection of stuff around there in the bait shop and everything. It’s a lot of fun, a lot of fun to be there.

Sallen: Did you ever go shrimping with your dad?

Walker: Oh yeah! Yeah…

Sallen: What was that like?

Walker: I fell asleep most of the time. But it was a lot of work, it was late at night, I mean he started at dark and didn’t get done until almost daylight. So I mean, I went with him a few times when I was a little kid, but—the thing that was neat about that, when we lived in the trailer park, he was the supplier of all the bait in the trailer park. I mean he brought buckets full of dead shrimp that us kids used. We froze ‘em up in packages and put ‘em in the freezer. So we always had a good supply of bait *(laughs).*

Sallen: That’s great! Umm, so what do you do in a typical day as a guide?

Walker: Ah, a typical day as a guide... You get up at five o’clock in the morning, you come out to the bait shop, you get the bait you’re gonna need for the day—or you catch it yourself. At certain times of the year I catch sardines, but most of the time we have to buy shrimp, especially during the wintertime—Umm, get out to the boat, get the boat cleaned up, get the rods and reels

ready, and wait for my customers. I usually take them out around 7:30. Umm, a typical day on the water is four hours, a half a day is four hours. We catch any number of fish all according to what time of the year it is. We catch mackerel, and bluefish, and trout, and flounder, and pompano, and sea bass in the bay. In the gulf we catch kingfish, and cobia, grouper, mangrove snapper, umm, triggerfish, it's just a lot of different fish. The neat thing about fishing in Florida is you can catch ten species of fish in a day. There's just all different kids of fish here. And at any different time of the year there's different fish biting. Most fish are pelagic, which means they kind of migrate back and forth, especially your kingfish, and cobia, and mackerel, and bluefish, they're in and out. They come real thick in the spring and in the fall. We have trout in the bay almost year-round—redfish, snook, just everything you could think of, you know. So, usually anytime of the year you can catch something.

I like to get people out that are novices, because novices will listen to you. They will—I'll show them how to hold the rod, how to cast it, how to put the bait on (If there not afraid to put the bait on), and maybe about after an hour or so of practicing they're doing really good. I mean, a lot of people I have to cast every cast for 'cause they're just not good at it. A lot of people are real good, I mean they catch on real quick. The people I had on the boat this morning, I mean they caught on real quick, how to bait it, what to do, and everything else, so they were doing really good. I mean you do better if you listen to me and learn. It's tough getting someone on the boat who has been fishing a few times, watched a lot of TV shows and thinks he knows how to fish, because they won't listen to ya. You know, "I know how to do this," and they won't cast good, you know, they won't hold the line right, they won't reel it right, you know. They just won't listen to you. That's why—you know, I always kid people, women and kids on the boat will always catch more fish, because they'll listen to me. They wife will listen. She goes, "Oh, hold it like this, do this," you know and pitch it out and catch a fish. Well the husband, he's trying and he's not doing anything you know *(laughs).* So I always kid guys like that, you know. And you know what's really funny is you'll get the wife that after a while will say, "Well Honey, why don't you use my rod, it's a lucky rod," you know, and that really burns 'em up, that gets 'em going.

Sallen: Umm, so tell me a story about one of your times on the boat.

Walker: Well you'll get some people—most people, if they're real fishermen, understand about fishing. Sure, there's gonna be days where it's difficult and you don't catch much, and it's hard, but a couple of things that I really hate is the person that asks me, "When are you going to take me to the good spot?" That really burns me up, because then I'm not going to go to the good spot, you know, or the one that says, you know, "Well we've caught a bunch of these, let's catch something else," you know. Man, if you're catching fish, and your catching a bunch, you stay with them, you have fun with 'em. You don't have to keep 'em, you release 'em, you know.

I've perfected a releasing tool that I use, it's called a de-hooker, and so you don't handle the fish, you don't touch 'em, you just grab a hold of the hook with this little wire de-hooker and you release the fish over the water and he drops back in the water. So it doesn't hurt 'em. You know, if you handle a fish is the worst thing you could do. You're gonna rub the slime off of 'em, you're gonna rub the scales off of 'em—especially with a towel or something that really hurts 'em. So, unless I'm gonna keep something, I don't touch a fish. I try to release them alive. Umm, also we try to use circle hooks most of the time, which are a type of hook that doesn't catch them down in the throat, it comes out and catches them in the side of the jaw. So, that helps a lot with fishe-

ries, because I mean, I've learned—you know, when I first started fishing, I used to keep fish that people didn't want and I'd sell 'em. You know in those days you could do that. Nowadays you can't, you have to have a commercial license, a special license to be able to sell fish to restaurants and stuff. So, I don't like to do that. I mean, I realized real quickly that I'm making my livelihood out of this. I mean, you know a realtor doesn't go around burning down houses, you know. I mean it just doesn't make sense. I'm not going to go out and ruin the fishery, by catching too many or killing a bunch of 'em just to make a customer happy, you know. So I try not to handle 'em and hurt 'em that way. Umm, I wanna keep the fisheries going, even after me, you know, I want 'em for my grandkids too, you know.

Sallen: How'd you develop that de-hooker?

Walker: You know, I saw an old guy had one of these on the boat one day. He showed me what it was and it was made out of a coat hanger, and I said well jeez, I can do better than that, so I had a guy make some out of stainless steel. And I started really producing them and selling them to all of the bait shops around here and last year, they made it the law that you have to have a de-hooking device on your boat at all times, umm, so you don't handle the fish and hurt 'em. So I've let another guy take over the business, and he's making 'em and selling 'em now, and he distributes them all over the state.

Sallen: Wow!

Walker: And I didn't make a nickel on it. I just let him do it, you know. I figured if he's the one that's got the gumption to go out and try to sell this thing—you know, I perfected it, but he can go sell it, you know.

Sallen: What was it called?

Walker: I just call it a de-hooker, I don't know what he's calling it now. It's something else, something de-hooker, I forget what it is. It's a pretty simple little thing. It's just a wire hook that grabs the hook and holds it upside down, so the fish will fall off naturally.

Sallen: That's awesome.

Walker: Mm hmm. Do you want to talk about the state of the bay now? The dredging and all that, or is that next?

Sallen: Well, I wanted to ask you again what you're favorite fish to eat is.

Walker: Oh, pompano. Pompano is my favorite—you know people always ask me, there's a list: pompano, flounder, snook, triggerfish, and then maybe mangrove snapper, and then on down from there *(laughs).*

Sallen: And then how do you prepare the pompano?

Walker: Oh, pompano… I do it kind of uniquely. Pompano is an oily fish, and it's like a mackerel or a bluefish in that it's oily, so you don't want to cook them down in their own juices. You want to put 'em on a rack. So I put 'em on a cookie sheet with a rack, I put lemon, garlic, salt,

and pepper, and I sprinkle a little bit of parmesan cheese on top, and cook 'em at about 400 degrees until they're almost done and then brown 'em right on top.

Sallen: Sounds good. Umm, so how is fishing a part of Sarasota's history?

Walker: Fishing was probably the first industry that was in Sarasota. I mean, there were Cuban fishing camps along the coast of Florida. All up and down the coast, and there were several of them in Florida. They think there was one at the mouth of Phillippi Creek, one down in Osprey, and of course in Cortez, right at the mouth of Tampa Bay and everything, there were some there too—and I'm talking about when Spain still owned Florida. They would send people out, or just leave them for a year or six months in this place, catching fish, salting them down in barrels, drying 'em or however they preserved them in those days, pickling them or whatever they were doing. And then the boat would come by every few months and pick up the supply of fish and take it back to Cuba. And I don't know if it was eventually shipped back to Spain, or where it was shipped to, but I mean it was—you know, that's what they did here.

And then the cattle industry came to Florida. Right after the Civil War in South Florida it got real big. There was a great book, it's a novel, and it's called *I Take This Land*. It's really a neat book, it tells you about this area of Florida and how the cattle industry was so big and how it started right after the Civil War and everything.

And then citrus became big. When I first moved here there was a lot of citrus groves right downtown. Where Southgate shopping center and everything [is, there] was a huge citrus grove in those days. And they developed it, you know, like everything else around here. There is hardly a citrus left around here, a few little groves and that's it anymore. Most of it's all gone, but in the heyday there was ten or twelve groves between Manatee and Venice probably, you know, it was a lot of stuff going on.

Umm, and then there was some light industry that came to Sarasota. My dad worked for an electronics plant back during the '60s—during when they were developing NASA and everything—and there was some electronics industries here and my dad worked for them for a few years, probably eight or nine years back in the early '60s, before they bought the bait shop and everything. Other than that, if you weren't a construction worker, there's not much to do in Sarasota, as you probably know with this day and age. And now, with the building boom kind of over, it's even tougher. I mean it's really hard, a lot of people out of work. So, tourism is the big industry, and that's always been, you know, even when my grandparents came down here in the '30s, and vacationed. And they said there was these tourist camps, and there was these little bungalows. And I can remember vaguely—and I've heard my parents talk about it—we stayed at a little place on the corner of [U.S. Highway] 41 and Bahia Vista and it was called Fred's Tourist Camp, or Tourist Cottages, or something like that. And there were these little, like, two-room shacks, you know, with a little kitchenette, you know, it wasn't even a kitchenette, it was a little gas stove on a counter, and a bedroom, and a place to sit down and eat, and that was it. And that was here in those days to stay at. And… But people started building down here.

And the keys weren't built up at all in those days, because condominiums couldn't be built on the beaches, because insurance companies would not insure anything on the water. You had to build it yourself. So you couldn't borrow money to build on the keys, you had to use your own

money to build on the keys. Umm, but back in the early '60s I guess it was, the insurance regulations changed and the federal government subsidized flood insurance and everything. So then the banks would loan money to people, because it would be guaranteed by the government, you could get insurance. So then people started building these condos and developing out on the keys. Until then, there was very little development out here, it was all privately done, I mean you had to have your own money, you had to have a lot of money to build out here, and people built little cottages. They didn't build big mega-mansions like you see now. They were just little beach cottages all up and down Siesta, and Longboat, and everywhere else. It was unique, pretty neat in those days.

Sallen: So tell me about the construction of the Intracoastal.

Walker: Well, back in the early '60s there was probably at one point ten or twelve dredges going in Sarasota Bay, from Manatee down to Englewood, doing all kind of developing. There was the Intracoastal Waterway that was being developed and dug, and there was Bird Key that was being developed. There was land on Siesta Key that was dredged up out of the bay and put on Siesta Key. There was land on Longboat Key that was dredged up out of the bay and put on the dry land, and when you have that many dredges going—and every time you dredge somewhere you're kicking up all kinds of sand and silt, layers of clay that's been buried for thousands of years down on the bottom, and it suspended all of this stuff in the water. Consequently, probably 80 percent of the grass flats in Sarasota Bay died. That is the nursery ground for all fisheries. I mean, that's where all of your little bait lives, that's where little fish grow up at—the same with the mangroves—but the grass flats were probably the worst thing that happened at that time. It killed all those, so it took years for those to come back once the sediment started to settle out. And even today, when you have, you know, a lot of wind and rough water the silt gets disturbed in the bay and you can see it on any day, any given day you can see the streams of silt in the bay. If you flew over it you would see lines of it, where it's being disturbed up off the bottom, and that really hurts the bays.

Later on in the '80s and '90s, what happened, because of all the development, was all the nutrients from the land were running directly into the bay. Instead of going into the lakes and the creeks, and slowly coming down to the bay, it was developed. You put up seawalls, you put up things that trap the groundwater into the ground. So everything flowed off the ground, off the seawalls, straight into the bay, which put all of these nutrients right into the bay without letting them be absorbed into the land. That really started to hurt the bay again. After we got rid of all the silt, then we had all of these nutrients, which makes algae grow in the bay. The algae grows, it keeps the sunlight from penetrating down to the bottom, where it—sea grass is just like any other kind of grass, if it doesn't have light it's gonna die. And that's what happened back during the '70s and '80s, and even the early '90s.

And then the City of Sarasota cleaned up their wastewater treatment. We started, umm—there was a great organization that came to Sarasota Bay called the National Estuary Program, which I was on the citizens' advisory group for that. And they started telling people, you know, "Look, this is what's happening and this is why it's happening." Until then, people didn't really have any idea. So the City of Sarasota cleaned up their wastewater and made it a tertiary treatment, where it's almost like drinking water, you can drink it. And most of it gets dumped out east of town on sod farms and ranches and stuff like that, it's used in golf courses, it's used in people's

yards now. If you live in the city of Sarasota you can hook into their wastewater treated water and use that for watering you yards. So it's not coming into the bay like it used to. We still have trouble with fertilizers, and just this last year we passed an ordinance in Sarasota County that you can't use nitrogen-based fertilizers, especially during the summer, there are only certain times when you can use them. Which, the summer is our normal rainy period, so it doesn't make sense to fertilize the heck out of your yard in the summertime and then have it rain like mad and it all washes into the bay; all that does is fertilize the bay, it doesn't fertilize your yard. And we've kind of cleaned that up now, so it's going to get better. I mean, the grass flats have come back in Sarasota Bay in the last 5 or 6 years, probably 50 percent more than there used to be 10 or 20 years ago.

Mangroves were another problem. Mangroves are your natural filtering system between the land and the bay. They also stabilize the shoreline to keep it from eroding, the oysters grow around it, clams grow around it, little crabs live in it, birds live in it. Everything lives in these mangrove forests, and they say that we only have maybe about 30 percent or so, or 40 percent of our mangroves left in Sarasota county that were here originally. I mean, you know, you can look at areas of Longboat Key that are just solid seawalls. Bird Key, it's just sea walls, there's no mangroves anymore. Umm, you can't just have sea walls, it doesn't let the sand near the seawalls get stabilized and have grass on it because every time a wave hits the seawall, it churns up the bottom and digs up the grass if it does start to grow. So, you know, we've destroyed the mangroves, we've destroyed the sea grass, and that's what has really hurt the bay over the years.

When I first started guiding in '74—full-time guiding in '74—fishing in Sarasota Bay was pretty much easy. I mean, you could go out anytime and catch trout. You could catch redfish. When I first started guiding—and I don't really like to talk about it that much 'cause it was pretty wasteful in those days—when I didn't have a charter I would go out and fish for myself and sell it to the fish market. And it was nothing to go out and catch 50 pounds of trout and several hundred pounds of redfish in the morning. My wife and I one day caught 400 pounds of redfish, I mean, that's a lot of redfish. And we sold it, you know, it was putting bread on the table for us. I mean, I could make a living and pay my bills that way. But that's how easy it was back when I started guiding. Nowadays if you got and caught a dozen trout you're very lucky. If you catch a dozen redfish it is amazing. Snook fishing has really come back from what it used to be, and I think a lot of that had to do with the commercial fishing.

You know, back in the—I'm trying to think of what year it was now—we banned gill nets in Florida. Until that point commercial fishermen could keep anything they caught basically and the nets that they used did not discriminate from one fish to the other, or size, or anything else. And commercial fisherman by law could keep a certain percentage of undersized fish. I mean, us sport fisherman, we were always under controls for different size limits and quantity limits, but a commercial fisherman wasn't; quantity limits were nonexistent and size limits they could keep—you know, like, if they caught 100 pounds of trout, 10 pounds could be undersize, ten percent of it could be undersized. So, I mean it was really hurting the bay, and it took a long fight, but we've got a law passed now that you can't use gill nets in the bay. And fishing has really come back from that, it has come back really well from that.

Am I rambling?

Sallen: No!

Walker: I am rambling, but it's okay *(laughs).*

Sallen: So, tell me more about the building up of the keys.

Walker: Well, let me see… Well, I've pretty much told you—because of the insurance laws they changed and then they started building on the keys. Umm, Arvida came to Sarasota in 1964 or '3, or something like that, and they bought all of John Ringling's holdings, which were basically Bird Key, a lot of St Armands Key, Lido Key, and the south end of Longboat Key, umm, thousands of acres, and bought it for pennies on the dollar. And they came in and started to develop Bird Key, which was an environmental disaster. They took a four-acre island and made it into a four-hundred acre island, by dredging up—there was something called riparian rights in those days, and riparian rights meant that you owned, if you were a landowner, you owned down to the low water mark, which at the lowest low tide could be a hundred yards off of your property. And that key, Bird Key was completely surrounded by this huge grass flat that at a low, low, low tide, maybe once or twice a year was out of the water. So, they took their right, which was perfectly legal in those days. They built sea walls around the perimeter edge of it, and they pumped up sand out of the bay, which wasn't their land, but in those days you could do that. They pumped it out, up out if the bay and put it in behind that sea wall. They built canals through it and everything, and it just was horrible what it did. They did the same thing to Sarasota Bayfront. They did the same thing on south Longboat Key, on the first projects that they did. Well after that there was so much fighting against it—you know that people really were against it. Environmental organizations started because of that, there's several, Save Our Bays was one of them, Manasota 88 was another that started because of this. People were in an uproar. They went and got legislation changed that stopped them from doing that dredging, which was great.

And actually at that point Arvida, I think, realized what they had done, and made bad press with it, so they became really a good steward of the rest of the land they had on Longboat Key. Instead of dredging out on the edge of the grass flat, they dredged behind the mangroves, dredged the canal up through behind the mangroves on the mainland part and created a canal all the way along their property which runs about ten miles probably. They made a big marina, used the fill from that to fill in some of the land and started developing that way. And actually, in some of the areas, instead of sea walls they put in a rock—riprap it's called—which is porous and lets the water go through, and also the mangroves can get root in it and start growing. So, now they've got a big beautiful hedge of mangroves along their property, which they can trim—but still see over them to see their waterfront views and stuff. But it's much better for the environment.

I mean, actually, those canals are great fishing areas now.

Now if we could stop the runoff from the golf courses and stuff it would really be good, 'cause the golf courses pump tons of fertilizer onto those golf courses, and they water continuously, so there's always water flowing off of the golf courses into the bay and everything, with the fertilizer and the pesticides and everything else that goes on a golf course is pretty bad.

Sallen: So, do you consider yourself to be an environmentalist?

Walker: Yeah, I am a practical environmentalist. I don't consider myself as a right-wing environmentalist, I mean I'm not going out and laying down in front of logging trucks, and I realize that people have to make a living, and people want to develop their property, and to make a viable country we have to have people making a living off of things. So I don't want people to stop from developing their property or anything like that, but I want it to be done in a proper and prudent and environmental way, and there's ways to do it, and we've proven it thanks to—like the Estuary Program and different organizations. There's a program called Florida Yards that's very interesting and teaches you how to plant Florida native plants instead of putting in tropical plants that won't grow good down here anyway, stuff that you don't have to fertilize and stuff you don't have to water continuously, umm really improves the bay and the environment. So, I mean there are ways to be an environmentalist and not be against building or anything else.

Pleww!

Bug. These little bugs come out this time of year, when it starts getting warm like this. When the temperature gets to like 80 degrees is when the love bugs start showing up. They'll be showing up now with this weather getting warm.

How're we doing?

Sallen: We're doing good. This is great!

Walker: You got a lot of editing to do, though. Boy, you're gonna have to go through this.

Sallen: It's part of the project.

Walker: Good.

Sallen: But umm, so tell me more about the early days of fishing in Sarasota.

Walker: Uhh, the early days… Well, you know, equipment has changed so much. When I first started guiding I never went in the Gulf. Well, I'll get into some other things, too. Remind me to tell you about the reef system that we've built here in Sarasota. But, you know fishing has changed, techniques have changed, equipment has changed. When I first started guiding I had a boat that had a 24-horsepower motor on the back, it had a live well that didn't even have a pump, it just had holes drilled through the bottom of the boat and let water flow into the live well, kept bait alive. We didn't have lights on it, there were no batteries on this boat. I had to hand crank it. I mean it was a basic boat. But I caught more fish out of that boat I think per time I was using it than any other boat I've ever had. I mean it was a great little boat to fish out of and it caught a lot of fish. But it was easy in those days, like I said before. And then as you get older and you want to make your clients more comfortable and you want to be more comfortable and make it easier and everything; you get bigger and better boats all the time and work your way up. And I've had every kind of boat. I've had flats boats, I've had sport fishermen, I've had... I've had every kind of boat there is, you know, just about.

Umm, and never fished out in the Gulf much until I started in like the '70s and '80s—well, late-'80s probably—I started going out in the Gulf more and catching kingfish and cobia and stuff that don't come into the Bay. Tarpon fishing is a big, big thing down here during the summer.

May and June are the prime months for them. But, I've worked my way up through boats, you know, and what we use. The tackle we use is so much better, everything is a lot easier nowadays, you know, 'cause tackle, and boats, and bait situations. Lures have changed, you know when I first started guiding there was two or three basic lures we used. There was a red and white buck-tail jig we used, it was actually made out of buck tail, out of a buck's tail. Umm, and MirrOLures we used a lot. And now there are thousands and thousands of different kinds of lures, and soft baits and hard baits, and crank baits, and just spoons, and all kinds of stuff that—and we never had that, the tackle stores never had it when I was a kid. They had the basic stuff and that was it, just hooks and sinkers and a few lures. So it has really changed over the years, and some for the good and some for the not so good.

It made it easier for a lot of people—especially for the offshore fishing, with LORAL and GPS, and depth finders, to be able to find fish that they couldn't before. In the old days when the off-shore boats went out to bottom fish, they used what they called a "lead line," and it was a big hunk of lead on the end of a rope and you threw it and let it go down to the bottom and it bounced on the bottom and you brought it back up, and if it had little pieces of shell or rock in it you knew you were on hard bottom, if it had sand in it you knew you were on sandy bottom, and you wanna fish on hard bottom. So they would throw it out where they thought there was some hard bottom, until they found some hard bottom, they would anchor up and they would catch grouper. So it was really easy in those days. You didn't need a depthfinder. They didn't have depthfinders in those days! They didn't have all that kind of stuff! You went by a compass and you lined up things on shore. When I first started guiding in the bay, I had a different pine tree that I would line up with this house, or this telephone pole, to find certain grass flats when I couldn't see them on the bottom.

Umm, but one of the major things that really changed fisheries in Sarasota Bay—back during the late '70s, early '80s, we started making artificial reefs. Well, before then people made sort-of like their own private artificial reefs. If you had an old boat, or some concrete culvert pipe that you didn't want you went out and found a place in the bay and you dumped it there, and you had a little private fishing spot, you know, until somebody else found it.

Umm, but back during the '80s I guess it was the federal government said that we could use part of the monies from the boaters' fees for boating improvement, which meant boat ramps and fish-ing-related things. So, this one guy, his name was Allen Fisher, and Don Rohr, who was the local guy, thought we could start making some artificial reefs legally, and go to the state and the fed-eral government, get permits to do it because you have to go through the Coast Guard, the Army Corps of Engineers and a bunch of different people to get these permits to do it. And finally they relented and said okay. Well, we got the County involved in it, and we got somebody with the County—he's still there, Mike Solum—to write up these proposals for us, and we get the money together and some of that tax money and some other private money and we started building these reefs.

And we experimented with a lot of different materials, I mean we used telephone—or power in-sulators—we used old boat molds, we've used old boats with concrete culvert pipes in 'em and stuff like that. And finally figured out that the best thing to use is concrete, you don't want to mess with any of that other stuff. We even tried tires, we put 20,000 tires out on a reef, out off of Sarasota, and a big storm came in a couple of years later and washed about 5,000 up on the

beach, so they said no more tires. So, we don't use tires anymore, we use stuff that's gonna stay there and that the corals and the sea fans and the grasses will grow on, and they attract fish, and they do. They serve as a habitat for little fish. Little fish are protected around it. Big fish come to it because they have an ambush point, they can sit there and wait for stuff to come by. It really attracts fish and all kinds of fish, I mean from grouper and bottom feeders all the way up to barracudas and sailfish and everything.

So, back during the '80s we built a lot of these, you know, all over Sarasota, some in the Bay, out in the Gulf. I mean, we've got 'em all the way from just a few miles offshore to 28 miles offshore. And they really have created bottom where there wasn't any bottom before. See, the Gulf of Mexico really doesn't have much topography to it. It is basically a desert out there, it is just a sandy bottom. Once in a while you'll find a little rocky bottom that's just a natural limestone ledge or something, but very little of it, especially off of Sarasota here. So, this has really improved our fishing off here. The artificial reefs have probably done more for fishing around here than any one single thing except the environmental issues that we've had for the fishing in Sarasota. The ones in the Bay produce fish, the ones out in the Gulf produce fish, they are also homes to stone crabs and all different kinds of things.

Right now there is no money anymore for it, so they haven't really been doing it. I think we've got a little bit of money coming this year, maybe we'll be able to do a little bit on one of the old existing reefs.

But there's a company here in Sarasota that got into making these Reef Balls that look like concrete igloos with multiple holes in 'em. They're a concrete dome that they come out and place on the bottom, and they make a perfect habitat for these fish. And they use waste concrete which is left over from when the cement trucks go out and everything, so they are very cheap to make—pretty expensive to put out, 'cause you have to have a barge and a tug and everything to put a crane on it to put 'em on the bottom, you can't just drop 'em on the bottom, you have to put 'em right on the right spot. And they've really done good, they've really done good.

Sallen: Awesome!

Walker: Yeah.

Sallen: So I imagine that has changed your business.

Walker: Oh, yeah! Oh, a lot. I mean… You know before then I didn't fish in the Gulf that much, 'cause you only have certain times of the year when like the kingfish and the mackerel are runnin' and the cobia are coming up the beach, to really fish and any other fishing that's done out in the Gulf is done way offshore. I mean I'm talking 30–40 miles off, and I don't do that type of fishing, I stay fairly close. Well, we've got four reefs that are in four miles of both passes, so I mean it's a short little hop out there. One of them has all the old John Ringling Bridge on it, the other one has all the old New Pass Bridge on it, uh, one other one has a bunch of old rubble from some other stuff we did years ago, concrete telephone poles and stuff like that. But they all attract fish and they're all really good.

One of them we put a bunch of railroad boxcars on, which were really good at first but they collapsed down real quickly, and they didn't make as much profile as you want on a reef. And then

the Army, the federal government gave us a bunch of Army tanks. So, we have some reefs out there that have some M-50 Abrams tanks on 'em that are really interesting, that aren't going to rust away and they aren't going to move. These things weighed 50 tons each, and they're as much as six inches thick in some places, so I mean they aren't gonna go away. But they really attract the big goliath groupers and they're great for these dive charters that go out. They dive them and they see these tanks down there with the big fish around them and everything. And they're good for fishing, so they're really good.

Sallen: What are goliath groupers like?

Walker: Goliath groupers are a giant grouper that goes—they can go up to seven or eight hundred pounds, and some of the reefs have 'em on there and they're like the bull in the china shop, they just hang out on these reefs and if you're trying to catch a mangrove snapper or a little grouper off of them or something they eat it halfway to the boat, and then you can't do anything, they just go right back down to the bottom with it you know.

Sallen: Can you catch them?

Walker: You can, but it's really work to do it. It's against the law to keep 'em. You can catch one, you can't bring 'em in your boat, you have to release 'em at the side of the boat with a dehooker.

Sallen: Are they endangered?

Walker: Yes, they are endangered. At one point there was hardly any left. Now they're everywhere and they're really becoming a nuisance. And there's talk of maybe opening up a limited season where they will let you keep one if you have a permit or something, but I don't know why anybody would want to keep one, they're a big old ugly thing and they aren't that good to eat. So, it'd make a good trophy I guess, or something.

Sallen: What else do you think is important about the Bay or about fishing?

Walker: Well, you know, some of the things that have happened over the years. You know, we've had some bad red tides, which really decimate the bay. We had a bad freeze this year that really, really hurt the Bay, things like that. But, they're natural things, they're naturally occurring things, and the bay recovers really quick. When we had that red tide about six years ago, it was devastating. It really hurt my business a lot, but the next year was tough, I mean we caught fish, but it was tough. But, two years after that red tide we had phenomenal fishing, phenomenal fishing, just all kinds of stuff going on. It was really good. So, I mean nature has a way of correcting itself if it's left to its own, you know. If you don't hurt it by the developing of sewers or the fertilizer or all these other things, nature can correct itself. You know, and I've always felt that way. We've experimented—Mote has experimented with raising certain fish in captivity and releasing them out in the Bay, like they do salmon up north on the rivers. But, if your bay is healthy you don't need to do that. If you have a healthy bay where there's good nursery habitat for the little baby fish—if you have one fish that lays 10,000 eggs, it'll resupply that bay in a year or two. So, I mean if you have a healthy place for these little babies to be raised up in.

Sallen: I remember you saying that the grass flats are starting to come back?

Walker: Yup, and they've done some surveys. The National Estuary Program has paid scientists to check the grass flats every year, for the last 10 or 15 years, and in the last five years they are really starting to come back from what they used to be, and I think it's because of all these laws that we've passed about the nutrients, about the dredging, about replacing the mangroves, and even replacing grass flats in some places.

Oyster bars is another thing. Oysters are a natural filter feeder, and they can feed—or filter a tremendous amount of water.

(Boat starts up) Let's wait until he goes. A lot of these guys that have boats, they don't run 'em much, and they're dangerous on the water.

Sallen: Yeah.

Walker: But, most people are very good on the water. You know, fishermen are a different breed of people, I mean they realize—you know, it's like an ethical hunter. You realize that the way you hunt and the way you do things are gonna help the environment, you know, rather than hinder it. You know, and you learn about that kind of stuff in—they teach that in a practical hunting course that the state puts on for kids. One of my grandkids has taken it. And it teaches you, you know, you don't shoot anything just for the fun of it, you are careful where you shoot. You only shoot by the laws, you know, and if you control your deer populations, or your animal populations—just like raising cattle—it'll make 'em better. It's just like what has happened with the deer populations in the United States. There's more deer in the United States now than before Columbus got here. I mean, just because of the breeding that they've done, and the way that we farm and we've cleared out all of the woods in the United States, so there's nowhere—because deer don't live naturally in woods, they live in the perimeter of woods, where there's fields and there's grass, and there's stuff like that. In the deep woods there is nothing to eat, it's the hardest place to find something to eat. You know, the animals that can get to the treetops are doing alright, there's a few nuts that hit the ground, but other than that there's nothing for deer or anything to eat. They're browsers, they eat bushes and grass and stuff like that. They can't reach the top of an oak tree or pine tree.

(Boat starts to leave the dock) Alright guys, see ya! Have a good day!

You know, it's the same way with fishing, if you ethically treat… I mean, fishing laws have changed a great lot since I've been fishing. I mean, when I first started guiding trout were 12 inches, snook were 18 inches, grouper were 12 inches, there was no slot on redfish—no amounts, you could keep as many as you wanted. You know, and back—way back in the '50s—the first bay fish that they ever put any real strict limits on was snook, and it was either 17 or 18 inches, I forget now. And you could only keep four. Now we're down to two, and they have to have a slot limit. Now slot limits were created because we've realized over the years that your bigger fish are females. A lot of fish are hermaphroditic they change sex as they get older. They start out, most of them, as males and as they get older and bigger they become females because they can hold more eggs, they're the bigger breeders. So the bigger fish are—and all fish, except grouper, tend to be the females.

And so they put some slot limits, which means you can only keep fish in-between two certain sizes. Like redfish, it's 18 to 27, you can only keep them between 18 inches and 27 inches. Anything over 27 inches has to go back and anything under 18 has to go back. Snook is even more restricted, there is only a little gap, it's 28 inches by 34, I think. So, there's not much you can keep in there, only 6 inches or so. It's really restrictive, and you're only allowed to keep one per person, which is good, it's helping the fisheries.

Sallen: What do you think of when you think of "Old Florida"?

Walker: Uh, orange groves, cow pastures, Crackers. You know, Crackers is not a derogatory remark like some people call people Crackers. Crackers in Florida were named because the way they drove the cattle in those days was with a bullwhip, and you crack that whip, and they would call them Florida Crackers because they were cracking that bullwhip all the time. And everybody carried one. You know, back in the old days—you know, back in the 1800s, when people were first coming down here—you carried a bullwhip all the time, either to whip off a snake or keep the hogs out of your garden or 'cause people let all of their animals loose in those days, there was no fences, and the only fences you had were right around your house, and that was to keep the cows and the hogs from coming into your house, you know, or come into your yard. So, you had to have that bullwhip around. So, everybody was always cracking a whip somewhere, whether it was driving their team of horses or herding their cattle. That's what a Florida Cracker was.

I mean, there was an old guy that lived on the next street over from us—which were all dirt roads in those days—and he lived in a little house that was basically a one-room house. It was just a little—like what you would call a shotgun house, which had a backdoor and a front door and the reason they called it a shotgun house was because you could shoot a gun from one door to the other one and not hit anything inside, you know.

And he lived there. He had no facilities. There was no running water, he had a pitcher pump outside that he got water to wash with, and he had an outhouse, and that was it. And this guy was really an old-time Cracker, and I learned a lot from him. He made me my first bullwhip, he taught me how to make things from palmettos, and how to carve stuff out of palmettos, and we used to make these darts that you could shoot out of an old inner-tube rubber band, and just all kinds of things. How to eat a palmetto. Have you ever heard of swamp cabbage?

Sallen: No.

Walker: And how to eat 'em, you cook 'em and everything and its really good. But, he worked all his life in orange groves. His whole life he worked in orange groves. In those days they didn't have tractors to plow up orange groves. He went through there with a hoe and hoeing around orange trees to keep the grass and the weeds down, and that was his job. And he worked for Albritton's fruit company out there, and he worked for years for them.

And before that, he said they used to call it "grubbin'," and they would go out in a field—in those days all the land out here was palmettos and pine trees, there was no oak trees and stuff out here in the country, very few, it was just palmettos and pines. And the way you had to farm it, you had to dig up all those palmettos, and they didn't have all those tractors and bulldozers and stuff like that. You went out here and grubbed 'em up by hand. You chopped at 'em, and

whacked at ‘em, and shoveled at ‘em until you got ‘em out of the ground and made enough land where you could plant a garden. And that’s what he had done all his life. I mean he was a hard old guy, you know, and that’s what a Florida Cracker was in those days. Pretty amazing, but short-changed *(laughs).* I don’t know if it’s for the good or not. It has made it a lot easier, I don’t know if I would want to live like that. The bugs were pretty bad in those days *(laughs),* we had a lot of mosquitoes back in those days.

Sallen: Well, I think I’ve about run out of questions.

Walker: I think I’ve about run out of stuff to talk about. *(laughs)* I think we did good.

Sallen: Yeah!

Interview with: **Jonnie Walker**
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Interviewer: **Anastasa Sallen**
Subject of Interview: **Sarasota Bay**
Transcriber: **Anastasa Sallen**
Date of Transcription: **May 8, 2010**

Sallen: Let me just give you an idea of what the project is going to be like.

Walker: Okay.

Sallen: So the project is going to be a seven minute-long slideshow.

Walker: Okay.

Sallen: It’ll be seven minutes of audio with pictures to go along. So, um…

Walker: Seven minutes doesn’t give me time to talk about anything.

Sallen: That’s the thing. So, I’m thinking maybe if you just kind of tell me some more stories about the bait shop, or maybe describe what is was like growing up in the area.

Walker: Things that really mattered in Sarasota Bay and what happened to it—I mean when I first moved here in 1956, in Phillippi Shores Trailer Park, it was still pretty pristine. There hadn’t been that much dredging and developing going on. It just had started. By the '60s it was going full bore. There was dredging in the Intracoastal Waterway, there was dredging on Longboat Key to create Country Club Shores, there was dredging on Bird Key to create Bird Key, there was dredging everywhere, and on the Bay-front where they built City Island and everything, or Island Park. So, there was all this dredging going on which really devastated the Bay, because all this silt, and sand, and mud that they dredged up—There was no controls in those days, and they just pumped dirt wherever they wanted to. Created islands wherever they wanted to. All these fine sediments just drifted all around the Bay and they wiped out the grass flats. Where there had been acres and acres of grass flats there was none. The developments started building sea walls, you know people didn’t want mangroves in front of their houses, they wanted a nice sea wall so

they could get a view. So, they cut down mangroves, which are a part of the filtration system also. So, all of this really, really hurt the Bay.

When I started guiding in 1974, when I came back from that vacation that I was on—I had lost my job at the phone company and had to do something, so I had been taking some people fishing. I met some people on Longboat Key that had befriended me when I worked for the phone company that had a boat and loved to go fishing. She loved to go fishing, but he didn't. So, I would take her fishing, and she would tell her friends about it, and she let me use her boat and I would take people fishing and make a few bucks. And I mean, back when I first started guiding I charged 25 bucks to take somebody fishing for the day. It's gone up quite a bit since then, but you know it was all I needed, you know. We had a few bucks in our pocket, and we had a lot of fish to eat so it was all right. But, it was great fishing, but as those grass flats died off, and the mangroves situation got worse, there was less and less fish. I mean it was harder to catch fish. In the '80s and '90s it was very difficult. Sarasota—the City of Sarasota had a sewer system that was not working properly, and they would pump sewage into Sarasota Bay every day—millions of gallons of partially treated sewage that was not treated good enough, and it was full of phosphates and phosphorus, which triggered algae blooms, which clouded up the Bay even more, which still wouldn't let the grass grow. Not until the late '90s did things start to clear up and into the thousands it has really gotten better. We have more grass now than we probably had during the '70s—grass flats and mangroves. They've come back.

And, we're lucky that we live in a town where people enjoy the environment, and are educated enough to realize that what they do hurts the environment. And, we've been lucky in the last few years that we have county commissioners and city commissioners that realize that we need to protect this environment. If we don't, nobody's gonna want to move here. I mean realtors finally realized this, builders finally realized this. Hey, if we don't start protecting the environment nobody else is gonna want to build a house down here. So, I think we're lucky in the fact that people finally got smart enough about this, and realized that they need to protect this Bay. And hopefully I'll be fishing for many more years to come, and be able to use this Bay—And like I say all the time, you teach a kid how to fish and they'll take you some day, but it's more than that. It's teaching a kid to enjoy the environment, and realize that what we do affects in the future, and that my grandkids and my great-grandkids will be able to fish in this bay and have as much fun as I have had living here.

It was great. When we first moved here in 1956, we lived in Phillippi Shores Trailer Park, which was a wonderful mix of people. There was old people, there was young people, there were circus people that lived there. There was all kinds of different people that lived in these trailer parks back in those days. It wasn't just old people. There was young people—new people just moving to Florida, people that had lived here for years. So I learned a lot of how to fish from people that lived in the trailer park—how to clean fish, what to do. My dad was too busy trying to make a living. But he loved to fish too, and every weekend we would take off and go someplace.

We had the greatest time. In the '50s and '60s, you could pull up to a bridge and throw up your tent and camp out by the bridge and fish all night and nobody said a word. You'd go up to Longboat Key, you'd go up to Manasota Key, or Boca Grande and pitch your tent and camp for the weekend. It didn't matter, they didn't care. It was just a fantastic time. We used to go up to the north end of Longboat Key to Tommy Mayer's dad, and he would take us over to Beer Can Isl-

and, and we'd stay over there for the weekend, and then on Sunday afternoon he'd come pick us up in his boat and bring us back to shore and we'd go home. And we ate fish, and we camped out—you know, grilled fish on the beach, and fished and camped, and just had a fantastic time. I mean it was really a lot of fun in those days.

I mean, it's gotten to where you can't do that now. You gotta pay to fish nowadays. I mean, you've gotta either pay for the property that you're sitting on to be able to enjoy it, or you've gotta go out with somebody to do it. It's not as easy as it used to be. But, it was so much fun as a kid. And, all through junior high and high school I hung out with a lot of guys that fished and hunted, and… that's what we did. You know, we fished in the creeks, we frogged in the ditches. We would—after the summer rains we would walk up and down the ditches with little frog gigs and gig frogs. We would spear turtles and eat 'em. I was raised that if you kill something you eat it. You know, and it was all right to kill something as long as you were going to put it to use and eat it, and we did.

As kids we camped out in our own neighborhood. There was places where you could just go down by Skeeter Drain, which is Redbug Slough now, which is a beautiful area. We'd go camping down there and gig frogs. We'd catch bluegills in the ditch. And we'd take our guns with us—we used to walk around the neighborhood with a shotgun over your shoulder, and we'd go down the railroad tracks and shoot rabbits, you know. Or, camp out along the railroad tracks, and shoot a couple of rabbits, and shoot a couple of doves, and then go back to camp and eat 'em. You know, that was our dinner for the night. We had—we had a great time, and it's sad that you can't do that anymore, because of our society. And my God, if I saw a kid walking down the street with a shotgun on his shoulder now, I'd call the cops too. But, you know, it's sad that we have to do that. I mean, it was a much freer and easier time in those days.

Sallen: What are frog gigs?

Walker: *(Laughs)* It's a little three-pronged spear. It's just very small and it's on a stick, and you just jab a frog with it. And then you take it back, you bring the frogs back, a bag full of frogs, and you skin 'em and you fry up the legs and they are good. You've had frog legs before, I'm sure. But, they are good eating.

When I first started guiding, the first place I ever worked out of was what is now the Dry Dock Marina on Longboat Key. At that time it was called Joe Zwick's Fish Camp—or I think they called it New Pass Fish Camp, but Joe Zwick owned it. Some people from Chicago came down, the Lewises, and bought it. And, they helped me, you know, get started there and take people out there. They still own the place. Their granddaughter owns it. Hal Lewis and his wife, and then Barry Lewis and Carol, started the marina and developed it, and now their daughter, Cynthia and her husband Eric own it. And, I'm still working out of there. But in between, I worked a couple of other places.

I worked out of New Pass Bait Shop for many years, probably 25 years or more. Uh, worked out of there… and it was really a neat place. It was Old Florida—the old shack on the bridge. Everybody called it the bridge shack. It had the best hamburgers in town. And, down below there was a little Bait shop that was owned by Carl Sadler, and my dad and he, when my dad first moved to Sarasota, worked together shrimping. They had a shrimp boat—they had three or four shrimp

boats. My dad ran one, and Carl ran one, and they caught shrimp and sold them at the bait shop, for people to go fishing.

And in those days, I think he could get three dozen shrimp for a dollar, is what it was. Now, it's about three dollars for a dozen shrimp. So, it has changed quite a bit. But, that was neat. I used to go out with my dad, at ten or eleven years old, and go out on the shrimp boat. And, you shrimp at night. It's nasty, mosquitoes, fish all over the place, and getting jabbed, and stuck, and prodded by every kind of fish there is in the water. 'Cause you have to keep these shrimp alive, and you have to separate them from everything else. So, you have this board that you dump them up on and sort the shrimp out and dump them down a hole and into the water, and the rest of the stuff you dump overboard. But, I can remember my dad just—his hands would be all infected and full of scars and stuff all the time.

But, I used to go with him all the time and do that. But, working out of New Pass was really fun. For years they had it, Dan and Daisy Bird, owned the bridge shack, which was the hamburger place up above. And, days that I didn't have a charter I sat up in that bridge shack and drank beer, played the pinball machine, and ate hamburgers, and talked to all the old-timers around there. There was a group of old guys that fished every day off New Pass Bridge, or in the area. I got to know them, talked to them, and I learned a lot from just watching and talking to people, and going fishing with them, and taking them fishing. I mean, I used to take old guys fishing with me that—you know they weren't charters, but they were just old guys that hung around there. I'd say well let's go fishing, and we'd go fishing. And they'd take me to spots or teach me how to rig a different way or you know, just learning from other people. It was always so much fun.

Then I was lucky enough to meet Gene Whipp, who owned Gulf Wind Marine at the time. And, I had known him for quite a few years, but I was needing a new boat and Gene says, "Well shoot, I'll sponsor you, I'll give you a boat." And this is about the same time that I started the TV show with channel 7. I had taken the weatherman—that used to be the weatherman there—fishing a few times and we did some shows on fishing and stuff. And when he left, they asked me if I wanted to keep on doing the fishing show and I said sure. So consequently, doing a TV show I got Gene Whipp to sponsor me and he gave me a boat for a couple of years and, unfortunately he passed away, really sad, at a young age. Then I had another boat company that wanted to sponsor me, so I had—I was really lucky that I had the opportunities to do the TV show, get these different sponsors, and now I'm running a Chris-Craft, which I was sponsored with. But, they have sold it to me since then because right now all of the boat companies are in trouble. They're having a hard time so I had to buy it, but—You know, and basically that's where I am now.

I'm out there fishing everyday still. I'm 63 years old, I hope I can do it for at least another 10 years. I'd love to be able to just keep on fishing. I just—I enjoy it, I love getting up in the morning. I get up at 5 o'clock in the morning, I go out to the bay, I watch the sun come up, watch the moon go down. I catch my bait in the morning. I can still throw a cast net. I can still fish two charters a day. I ran two charters today and I am beat, but I love being tired *(laughs).* It's good to be out on the water all day, enjoying the sunshine and having a good time.

I meet so many interesting people. Over the years I've met some great clients. I mean, I call them clients, some of them are friends. I mean, I've met so many people. I've got people that I've been taking fishing for over 25 years that are still going out with me, and they're regular clients, they go out—I have some people that go out once a week during the season. And it's just really nice that I've met so many interesting people over the years. I mean, I've lost a lot of customers of course. When people move down here they're usually at retirement age, so you know, I'll take people fishing for 10 or 15 years and they go on. But, I can remember almost every one of them. I can't remember people's names that well, but if they talk about certain fish that we've caught, I can remember *(laughs).* I can say "Oh! That was the day that we caught 20 redfish underneath that one dock," you know. I can remember people by the catches more than I can by their names. I'm really bad—I meet so many people that it's tough to remember everybody's names. I envy people that can remember people's names.

Walker: Am I talking enough?

Sallen: No, yes.

Walker: *(Laughs)* She's just going "Uh-uh, uh-uh, uh-uh."

Sallen: No, this is really good, 'cause I think you had a really good progression there.

Walker: I hope so.

Sallen: Yeah.

Walker: I hope you can use that. How many minutes are you going to use? Only eight minutes?

Sallen: Seven minutes.

Walker: Yeah, we just did about 30 minutes. What the hell *(laughs)*! I don't know how you're going to cut that down.

Sallen: We'll figure it out. But, so you had that picture of the bait shop, I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about it.

Walker: Which one? The Venice one? That my parents had?

Sallen: Umm, yeah, the one that you're parents had.

Walker: Yeah, my parents had a bait shop that they bought on the Venice Jetties, on the south side of Venice Jetties in 1964 or '5—I think it was '64 the year they bought it. And, they moved the trailer down there, and they lived right on the jetties. I was in high school at the time and I actually stayed up here in Sarasota. But, I spent almost every weekend down there working, helping them. After Joanne and I got married, we worked down there for about a year or so off and on helping them on the weekends. And it was just a great place to be. People would hangout and drink beer there every afternoon, and you know it was just a big party all the time. It was really a great thing. I miss that, it was a lot of fun. We could have kept on doing that, couldn't we? *(laughs)* Yup, there was a regular clientele that came in there every evening and would sit there

and drink beer, watch the sunset. You know. We had the best sunsets, looking for a flash of green, and just really having a great time down there.