

Title: Key West Oral History Interview with Benny Felton

INTERVIEWEE: Benny Felton  
INTERVIEWER: Unknown  
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Unknown: Benny, after that hurricane in 1935 and-- when all the tracks got torn up and they didn't rebuild the railroad, was there already a highway there?

Felton: Part-way, yeah. Part-way there was the highway up on the upper Keys and up to Pine Key on this side.

U: Oh, to Pine Key?

F: No Name, (no record?)

U: No Name Key? When cars drove down to there and then they had to come on the ferry, huh?

F: Hmm?

U: They had ferries?

F: Two ferries-- three. Three ferries.

U: Oh and those three ferries would carry you all the way down to Key West?

F: --had to make two stops (?). Yeah. Around (where the?) Key (you live?), they had a road there, oh, maybe twenty miles meet the other ferry on the other side.

U: And they'd carry cars and everything on the ferry?

F: Oh, yeah, anything. horses, trucks. The only thing is the vibration, but you get used to it.

U: And every time you got on each ferry, you paid a trip fee?

F: It was so much for a car and a dollar a piece for each person.

U: Sounds reasonable, yeah?

F: Wasn't no other way to get there.

U: So then they decided to build the railroad all the way?

F: Actually, the railroad--  
[indistinct chatter]

F: -- they sold the right of way for six hundred--  
[indistinct chatter]

U: Sold the bond to build the highway?

F: And they built all that damn bridge for three million dollars.

U: Well that's pretty good.

F: (?) all that overhang (?) Seven-Mile Bridge, all that overhang. They didn't import nobody either. They used Key West people.

U: That's what they should do.

F: Key West people did that. (?)

U: Well, it lasted for quite awhile then, for about--

F: A couple of years.

U: No, I mean the road.

F: Oh, the road.

U: The road lasted quite awhile.

F: Yeah, (old Craig?), he bought a (piece of land from them?). My daddy worked for him in his (early trip?). Built a restaurant and he used to feed the crew on this side. Well, the man didn't know what he bargained for. (?). Thirty-four thousand built the man just one (foot?) little cabin. [pause] The worst of it was on this side. The people who were building there, they went bankrupt.

U: Yeah?

F: Yeah. Over there, they cut down plenty of timber- mostly mangroves. And that was-- that was the first (?). So after awhile, (it was inline?) with the rest. And the road used to seesaw like that up until you get to-- where you cross the railroad tracks to uh, Perky.

U: Perky Key?

F: Yeah, and from Perky on up it was alright. Then the road used to go in the middle of Pine Key that way. This way (Pine Road?) used to go towards where the old railroad used to be and that's where a lot of people live in there.

U: Yeah.

F: And if you go straight that way, you're heading on (?) road.

U: I remember one time they had a toll bridge in Big Pine.  
[children's voices in background]

F: Yes, it's still there.

U: The toll booth?

F: Yeah, the toll booth. (?) [laughs] And your tradeoff-- (?) before (?).

U: That's really good.

F: (?). (?) I don't care where you go, you can't find nothing like the Keys. When the people (do their work and be?) near water. That's the reason why they dug all them canals, you know, (??)?

U: Yeah, it's nice to have a canal; you put your boat there.

F: See, there's a big place up in Coral Gables that's the same way. Bring your yacht right up to your house. All these goddamn environmentalists. They're breaking all that stuff up. They don't want it, they don't have it, and they don't want nobody else to have it, see?  
[pause]

F: Seeing you quite often nowadays.

U: (??)?

F: Hmm?

U: (??)?

F: Yeah, (?). She's only been here three or four days.

U: Oh, yeah?

F: (She's got around?) more than I did.  
[loud background noise]

U: Sure is a noisy corner, lately. A lot of traffic.  
[pause]  
[loud background noise]

F: -- (?) after sixty, you don't know when (?).

U: Is that right?

F: Yeah. (?) before you came.

U: Yeah, he's still-- was he still there?

F: (He's getting on out?), yeah. The damn fool, he won't go before six.  
[pause]

U: Benny, do they still have the turtle boat and all that stuff down here? They don't?

F: No.

U: But they still have the Turtle Crawl.

F: No. No, the turtle has to be (imported?). We had a Nicaraguan in that place the-- they fixed us up with a concession, this company in Miami.

U: Mm-hmm.

F: It goes there and being processed there and then you go (?) from Miami. That's why (?) there.

U: Right. Yeah, it's high priced.

F: It's a big seafood company.

U: Uh-huh.

F: Bye-bye. (?). I never see her with a man. She went around there (?) bar in the middle of (?).

U: Oh, yeah.

F: Happy Hour.

U: They used to bring a lot of turtle in years ago, though.

F: Oh, yeah.

U: They had *Maitland Adams* was the name of the boat?

F: *Maitland Adams*, yes. In one trip, they took to Grand Cayman.

U: They catch them themselves?

F: Huh?

U: They catch them themselves in the boat?

F: Oh, no, people used to catch them; they put them in the big crawl.

U: Oh.

F: Buy them \$5 a piece.

U: No, I mean when the boat went down.

F: When it broke down-- went down, it was already in the crawl.

U: Oh, and they just picked them up in the crawl.

F: --catch them and put them in the crawl, see?

U: Uh-huh.

F: Next trip, they go to Nicaragua. The next trip, they go to Mexico, see?

U: Oh, that's a good idea.

F: Yeah, the Grand Cayman, they find they just as scarce as (?). Grand Cayman won't let nobody catch no more turtle there. There was this (document?) there and they started hatching the eggs and now they got enough turtle they could (?).

U: Oh, that's good.

F: (?).

U: Yeah?

F: Yeah.

U: Well, I understand that the way they used to catch the turtles was when they came up to lay the eggs, they'd catch them then.

F: Well, (?).

U: Yeah, see, because then they couldn't lay the eggs. And that's probably why they died out so much.

F: That's right.

U: If they wait 'til after they lay the eggs then get them when they're leaving the beach, it'd probably be better.

F: You know it's a funny thing. We had a hurricane-- let me see, what year was it? The tide got so high that the-- went so high over the crawl, all turtles were out.

U: Down here in Turtle Crawl.

F: Yeah. Yeah.

U: I heard about that, yeah.

F: And Thompson- Thompson's (?). The guys, they can catch more way down in Nicaragua and brought them right back here. That's how far they travel. They know where they come from, huh?

U: Yeah.

F: It's instinct, see?

U: The turtle's just lay there eggs right up on the beach, huh?

F: Right on the beach, yeah.

U: Dig a little hole--

F: --these people used to do down (?). They'd go down there and they'd cut as much meat as you want out of a turtle and leave the poor turtle right on the beach. 'Cause you see, turtles-- a turtle don't die until three or four days after you've [coughs] cut him up. You ever notice it quivers even after you bring it home?

U: Uh--

F: When they had turtle down here.

U: Oh, no.

F: (?) time it takes the thing to die for three or four days. (?)

U: Yeah, there he is.

F: Huh?

U: There he is now.

F: (?)?

U: No, no. How you doing?

Unknown2: Good.

U: I know they have a powerful mouth because one time they caught one on one of the charter boats and he opened his mouth and they put a one-by-two there and it snapped it right in half. Snapped in right in half.

F: (?) food 'cause they're funny. They can eat these uh-- what do you call these damn things, uh--

U: Jellyfish?

F: Yeah.

U: They eat jellyfish, yeah.

F: They eat them damn things. And grass. See, the grass is (glucose?), you know? People (?) they make soup out of that, but we don't. It's full of plenty of iodine.

U: Yeah?

F: Yeah.

U: I understand that what happens a lot of times to these turtles is that people throw plastic bags overboard and turtles think they're jellyfish and they go to eat them and they choke to death.

[pause]

[audio cuts off]

U: Oh, no.

[pause]

F: Did those (phillies?) leave yet?

U: I think they went around to the front.

F: Huh?

[audio cuts off]

F: (?) scratch each other. I mean, what the hell did they cut me with? Ah, it's one of them things. Second time in my life.

U: Benny, years ago did you ever go fishing or anything with your brother or you never did that?

F: I went sponging one time (?).

U: Oh, you didn't care for that, huh?

F: (?).

U: I imagine that's a rough life.

F: Yeah, that's what makes drunks out of them, you know, when you come in, the first thing they do is go to the bar. The captain had to take care of-- shrimping is the same way, though- tough life. I've seen mosquitoes up in Biscayne Bay (?). They didn't sting you. (?). Swarms, you know? Now, Charlie, he would go out sponging any day when it's warm. (?). He had me working, he'd be on the boat sponging.

U: He do pretty good?

F: Yeah, he got plenty of them.

U: They have a man comes down and buys the sponge every now and then.

F: Well, he came down last time; he didn't give me what he wanted to. But, I don't need the money, see? (?)

U: The next time he comes?

F: Then he gets four hundred and some pieces. Pretty sponge. (?) and he came down here and everything's (?), you know? He says, "(?)" (?). He charged (?). He says, "Now don't-- there's no price. Whatever you want, I'll pay you plenty." I don't know what he sold them for. Those was pretty, too (bleach white?). You hang them out on a line and let the sun (bleach them?).

U: What do they mostly used those sponge for nowadays?

F: It's the best thing in the world to stain wood.

U: I mean, when that guy comes down to buy them, I mean, that's what they use them for?

F: Painters, (?) they use. It's better than rubber, see? Rubber is-- rubber absorbs. Whatever you use, grease or whatever it is, you can't get it out. With a sponge, you could squeeze it out, see? That's the difference. They imitate the sponges but they never get it perfect. The rubbers got a-- I don't know, it's a-- it's not suction, I forget what it's called-- it absorbs, you know what I mean?

[pause]

F: It can't be a passenger plane going that fast.

U: That's a private plane, though.

F: Hello.

Unknown4: You want (?)?

F: I will.

[audio cuts off]

**END OF INTERVIEW**