

Title: Key West Oral History Interview with Bob Knowles, Gilmore Parks, Bill Tyler, and E.V. Anderson

INTERVIEWEE: Bob Knowles, Gilmore Parks, Bill Tyler, and E.V. Anderson

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Knowles: My first recollection of a hurricane in Key West was 1919. At that time, I lived at the foot of Catherine and Leon Street. At that time, there was nothing east of Leon and Catherine Street. Ours was the last house on Catherine Street. At that time, there was no boulevard. Garrison Bight was wide open with the exception of the railroad and there was a lot of fish in Garrison Bight, a lot of birds, and when you looked up-- when you looked up to the east where I lived you could see nothing but mangroves and when you looked across Garrison Bight you could see the drawbridge and the railroad. I remember the beginning of the 1919 hurricane. We were moved-- we were moved inland to stay with an aunt and it was quite a fierce hurricane. Trees were down, poles was down, a lot of property damaged and I can't recall at this time whether there was any loss of life or not but when we returned to our home, the house was flat on the ground. It had gone-- gone down off of the pillars, the floors were all warped and there were fish, boats, and a lot of debris all over the lot.

[audio cuts off]

K: Gilmore Parks and myself were neighbors and this has been many years ago and he and I-- he and I caddied on the golf course and at that time, they had streetcars and this goes back, I guess, probably '25, 1925, '26, or maybe a year or so before that. Gilmore, you remember when the streetcars ran on Flagler?

Parks: Yes, I do, (Roddy?). They ran-- the streetcars ran up as far as Third Street and then, of course after that, it was nothing but a little sort of path; just a one lane street up to the city dump at that time.

K: Well, Third Street--what is now Third Street was approximately where the high school is now, is that right?

P: That's right, and all out in there where the salt ponds-- salt ponds and to the left, there was a large cigar factory.

K: Do you remember afternoons, the hundreds and hundreds of cigar-makers that were coming from the factory? They were on bicycles, they were all over the streetcars and they were raising all kind of hell, I guess. Do you remember that?

P: Yes, I remember that quite well, the cigar-makers. Most of them was Spanish people and the cigar factories itself, they had what they called a 'reader'. He would-- while they were making cigars, he would sit up in front of all of them and read the news to them and tell them what was going on-- well, not the world at that time, because we didn't know, but it's probably Miami far as we went.

[audio cuts off]

K: Gilmore, you're pretty well-acquainted with spongers and sponging and things of that nature and I remember sponging pretty well, of course, but I'm not as familiar as you are with it. Can you tell us some of the stories and tell us just exactly what these people were like and how they went about the sponging and areas and so forth?

P: Alright, let's begin with the waterfront. Down at the foot of Greene Street was William Curry Son's Hardware and just short of that was Alan B. Cleare's Wholesale. Well, he brought in bananas and all kinds of things like that from the mainland. And then all were in front of Thompson's where the electric company is at now. They had a huge dock where the spongers would bring in their catches after they had spent about six to eight weeks sponging. And these buyers would come from Tarpon Springs, Tampa, Miami, wherever and they would bid on the lots. Now, they have what they called the 'sheep wool sponge', which is the best sponge. Then they have the yellow sponge and the grass sponge and the sheep wool was more expensive. So they would separate these in lots and these sponge buyers would go around and bid on each lot. When they would bid, they would write a price on a little piece of paper, pass it to the captain of the boat. Then, he in turn would consult with his crew. If they thought it was a good price, then they

would buy it-- or sell, rather. If not, they would take-- they would ask for some more bids and this went on until everybody was satisfied. Now these boats-- I had four sponge boats myself and believe me, these spongers were characters. I could remember many times of putting their (mattresses?) on the dock when we were ready to go out and they weren't there. In fact, I had one boat captain that I had to buy him six to eight fifths of wine before he would go out and actually, he was the best boat captain I had. And he would just go out four or five miles, anchor, the whole crew would get drunk, they'd stay there two or three days, and then after all the wine was gone, then they'd go on about the business sponging. Now, the boats, they were about twenty-five, twenty-six foot long and it had old Palmer engines in them, sounded like a steam engine-- steam engine going up the road and they would use hooks to get the sponge. They were on about a sixteen foot pole with three prongs and the sponge legally had to be five inches across the top. And they would go for six, seven weeks at a time and--
[audio cuts off]

Tyler: Gilmore, how many sponges to a bunch would they consider?

P: Well, that all depends on the size of the sponge. Your string of sponge was four foot six inches long- your string- and then you would put sponge on there to fill up that string. Now, some bunches would take ten, some bunches would take five. I've seen bunches that would only take two sponge.

T: Well, how about price? How did they operate in price? How did they sell?

P: Well, back then, of course, we all know was hard times. I would say-- I'd say back then, they would get on an average of five dollars a bunch.

K: How long was it that-- how long-- approximately how long would they stay out?

P: They would stay anywhere from six to nine weeks and incidentally, I owned these boats and what I would have to do, I would have to give these spongers what they called 'bounty' then. I would have to leave them enough money to support their family for the six to nine weeks that they were gone until they sold the sponges.

T: Up in Sugarloaf, they used to have a little disk that they used to experiment, I guess, with growing sponges. I was wondering how they ever made out with that, Gilmore.

P: Well, they tried that, Bill, but the sponge grew alright, but they didn't grow fast enough and it wasn't feasible for commercial use.
[audio cuts off]

Anderson: Gilmore, a lot of these people were as you say characters and like all characters, they had very picturesque nicknames. Can you tell us something about the nicknames of those people?

P: Yeah, Andy, some of them had nicknames that you wouldn't believe. Joe Chicken, Tidy, Sack of Ham, (Old Tilly?), (Mama Tilly?), (Kaiser?), and believe me, they are characters.

K: There was one you left out. How about (?).

P: Well, Roddy, (?), he was a fisherman. I didn't know too much about him. I knew his nickname but not-- he didn't-- wasn't a sponger. But I remember some of these who most of them were wine-heads and as soon as they would get in and get the money, share up, they would all go to the bars, sit around, drink, get drunk, and they'd be drunk as long as their money lasted. When the money was gone, they were out-- they were ready to go out for another trip.
[audio cuts off]

A: Well, Gilmore, I know that they sound like real eccentric people. Could you tell us some more about their actions when they were ashore and their general mode of life?

P: Well, actually, they spent most of the time in the bar. They-- I could remember many, many times that they'd go to a dry good store-- in fact, we had one on Division Street (?). They'd see a shirt they liked and if it only cost \$10, they didn't want to pay that little bit for it, they wanted something for about \$30. So, what the (?) would do was give them

the same shirt and charge them \$30 and then they were satisfied. They didn't want that one for \$10.
[audio cuts off]

A: One of the greatest catastrophes that had the greatest effect upon life and being of Key West was the 1935 hurricane. The eye of this hurricane passed over the Matecumbe Keys- which is to the east of Key West. And although the hurricane itself did not affect Key West, the results and the damage caused by that hurricane had a profound effect. It essentially cut the highway between Key West and the mainland and it cut the railroad. The feasibility of rebuilding the railroad was examined and the cost of rebuilding the railroad far outweighed the concern or the return that would be affected by its replacement. Bob, you were in on the first people to regain access to the Keys after the hurricane passed. Would you care to--? I would like to have you recall your experiences upon seeing the results of that hurricane.

K: Yeah, I would, Andy. I remember very well. I was on the buoy (?) at the time and when we first got hurricane notice, we went-- we proceeded to anchorage-- hurricane anchorage in (Manor?) Harbor here in Key West and we lay it out there at anchor and we had rough water but it wasn't rough enough to even wet the deck, so we didn't get too much effect from the thing but I remember early that morning they-- we received a radio message to proceed to the dock and load water and supplies for the keys at Matecumbe and the middle keys were pretty hard hit at the time so they said proceed with all dispatch and load and get on the way immediately. So, we went in and loaded supplies: drinking water and etcetera. And then we got on the way for the keys. That afternoon, we were up off Matecumbe and Alligator Light. There were two keepers on Alligator Reef Light lighthouse and they had-- they'd lost contact with the lighthouse and I guess they wanted to know immediately what effect was on the light because it's one of the most important lights on the coast. So, we anchored that afternoon and I was in the boat that went in and when we got to Alligator Reef Light and we got close enough to see the light-- incidentally, the light is about five miles-- four and a half, five miles off of Matecumbe- that's south of it. And so when we got close enough, everything that had a platform, oh, about fifteen, twenty feet from the water's edge, the platform was completely gone, all of the water (hangs?), everything was gone and the two keepers-- the two keepers were down at the bottom of the light. All of the windows in the dwelling was blown out and you could see that none of the storm panes from the light itself were in position- that had all blown out. So, we picked up the two keepers, took them off of the light and they had told us that the seas- the seas were so high that they had broken these storm shutters-- broken these storm shutters on the light and they had to go into the cylinder halfway up-- halfway up to the light now. These people were a good seventy-five feet above water and they said that the seas were breaking above where the position that they were in. They spent the whole night in that cylinder and the top of it was gone, of course, and water was pouring down and they said that this structure rocked like a tree. Now, this light is approximately 160, 165 feet high so the seas that was hitting this light must have been somewhere in the neighborhood of 100 feet high. So, we took these people off and then we proceeded into the anchorage and after we got in, we started loading supplies and ferrying supplies into the beach. The-- I was amazed that the first sights that I saw there, the trees were-- it seems as though everything was uprooted, there wasn't anything hardly standing. And there were bodies in the trees and the whole area was just a mess. Well, incidentally, I saw the railroad train that they had sent down. This train was supposed to evacuate the people but it arrived just about the same time as the hurricane. So, the cars had gone off of the track, they were lying on their sides, the rails were all twisted. And so, such a scene of desolation I've never seen. We did what we could, we landed supplies and everything. We proceeded up to Matecumbe Hotel which at that time was a building that no one would have thought that any hurricane would destroy because it was concrete block, everything, but that was also leveled. So, for mile after mile, there was nothing but this desolation. And so, we were there a couple of days and we saw the bodies. They were transporting these bodies out by truck, taking them-- (taking men?) to Miami and sometime these trucks must have had, I don't know, ten, twelve, fifteen (rock?) boxes on them. That-- you got a new question?

P: (Roddy?), let me ask you something. All these deaths, wasn't it a lot of veterans down there at that time?

K: Well, yes. That's primarily-- most of the deaths were of veterans because at that time, they had-- they were moved down on the keys. You remember during the Hoover Administration, well, they had a march on Washington and they wanted to so-to-speak, get these people out of their hair, I guess. So they sent them down to the keys to build highway bridges across the keys, across the water someplace there. And so, I don't know how many of these people they had down there but they certainly must have lost hundreds and hundreds of them.
[audio cuts off]

K: I was-- I was just thinking. At that time, we were all up-- we were on the highway-- we were walking down the highway and we found parts- parts of the lens from the light. This light- as we said before- is four and a half, five miles off-shore and these pieces of glass were cut prism glass and some pieces of it was, oh, I'd say maybe a foot, foot

and a half long and probably three or four inches thick. And we found numerous pieces of these lens laying on the highways that had come from this light, that had traveled a distance of four or five miles.

T: Roddy, let me interrupt you here. Weren't those lenses built to withstand 150 to 200 mile winds?

K: Yes, they were. The way these lights were structured, they had what they call 'storm panes'. These storm panes were glass an inch thick and they were set in metal frames and on the inside-- inside of the light-- on the inside of the light was these cut prism glass. All this-- these were terribly expensive things I imagine because they were all made in-- manufactured in France and transported to this country.
[audio cuts off]

K: All of this-- after all of this damage to the keys, (they?) found out that there were so many bridges-- so many bridges going out, everything, and there was no transportation. No transportation to Key West or over the keys in itself so they put in a ferry system to help out in the situation but things were pretty bad for a little while and then being Depression time and everything like that. Things were kind of-- was kind of slow and rough in Key West because it was a good while after this before we had any kind of transportation to Key West over the highway. But-- so, we weathered that-- we weathered that and we came on through the hard times and everything and then as they replaced the bridges, and one thing and another, things got a little better. Andy, can you give me your first impressions of Key West, when you first came to Key West, and the circumstances under which you came?

A: Well okay, Bob. I first came to Key West on the old *Houston*, what you'd call cruiser at the time. It was a hull designation of CA-30 and we came down here to Key West to pick up President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in February of 1939. And the main purpose of his visit was to open and to dedicate the new highway built from Long Key-- from Florida City down to Key West. This highway was-- consisted mostly of two-lane asphalt and marl roadway and when they stand in water, they had wooden bridges span water between the keys and these bridges were an experience to ride upon. The-- some of the bridges still exist and they-- fine fishing from them, but they were a hazard on the road. We-- at that time when we arrived in Key West, the naval station was not active. They had eleven people in the naval communication center and although the gates were wide open in the-- within the naval station, to my recollection there had been no vandalism. All the windows were still intact and all the windows and it looked as though everybody had just quit and go home. The area around the bight-- inside the bight where the submarine base- (so called?) was nice, pure, clean water. There were crawfish by the dozens in the seawalls and at the present time where building 124 is now, they had tennis courts that were open to the public and the courts themselves remain--
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END OF INTERVIEW