

Title: Key West Oral History Interview with Virgil "Freckles" Higgs

INTERVIEWEE: Virgil "Freckles" Higgs
INTERVIEWER: Ervin Higgs and Mary Malone
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Ervin Higgs: Why was-- why was grandpa called 'Two-by-Four', dad?

Virgil Higgs: Just a nickname they gave him, that's all.

EH: How did it come about? I mean--

VH: I don't know.

EH: You don't remember?

VH: Uh-uh.

EH: How about-- how about 'Old Ropes'?

VH: Just a nickname they gave him, too, just the same way they gave me the nickname 'Freckles'.

EH: Gave you a nickname of 'Freckles'?

VH: Yeah. (?). That's the name that I go by- Freckles.

Malone: I know, I remember Freckle's Fish Market.

VH: Right.

EH: Well dad, as a boy-- could you tell us a little about as a boy growing up, you know?

VH: Well when I had fish cart and (smoke up and down the?) street (that we?) used to buy fresh. (Had wheelbarrows on mush streets?). There was an old fella around here used to sell clams- running around the street with clams in a bucket hollering out, "Fresh clams! Fresh clams!"
[all laugh]

VH: (?)

EH: Who was that? You remember his name?

VH: I don't remember his name, no.

M: They don't sell clams here anymore, do they?

VH: No, ma'am. You can get them down in (sea farms?), fresh clams, but this fella used to have them in buckets, see, running around the street. Used to be about fifty cents a (quarter?) of fresh clams.

EH: Well, dad, when did you start hanging-- I mean-- you know, hanging around the waterfront and-- [both speak at same time]

VH: Oh, since I was a little boy.

EH: Oh, yeah? Tell us a little bit about growing up around the waterfront and--

VH: (?) only coffee shop down there.

M: (?)

VH: Yeah, Mr. (Wellman?).

M: (?)'s daddy.

VH: Oh, yes ma'am. He owned a coffee shop there on the beach.

M: Oh?

VH: Right there by the ice plant. A step just right from the ice plant. Yeah, I remember that. I was (knocking around?) the beach then.

EH: How old were you then, dad?

VH: Oh, I was about fourteen, I guess.

EH: Fourteen?

M: You mind saying how old you are now?

VH: Now I'm sixty-six and I feel like I'm forty.
[all laugh]

M: Well, you're younger than some of my people. I had a man here who was ninety who worked on the railroad. He came down from Miami just to make a tape.

VH: I worked on the railroad, too, at Sugarloaf.

M: You did?

VH: Yes, ma'am.

M: Well, tell us about that.

VH: That's when I was a kid. I had to lie about my age- told them I was twenty-one and I was only about seventeen. And then I went to work at the Sugarloaf.

M: Well, what did you do?

VH: They took me-- hired me.

EH: What did you do up there, dad on working on the road?

VH: Oh, setting tracks and clamping railroad tracks and stuff. Handling railroad ties and stuff. And then the lighthouse service- I worked in that lighthouse service.

M: Did you-- were you a lighthouse keeper?

VH: No, ma'am. We used to build beacons and stuff and take up the buoys and bring them in and (check and paint them?).

M: Oh, uh-huh.

VH: From Lake Okeechobee (?) All that heading out (?) - them stakes out there. I had to put them in. (I left my buoy stakes up to dry?) (?).

EH: Who's some of the fishermen, dad? I mean, you know, I heard you-- I remember you telling me that you used to fish with people like (Picky?) and Will Demeritt and all of those boys down there and-- what age were you then when you were (kicking?) around the boats and--

VH: Oh, eighteen, nineteen.

EH: You started fishing earlier than that with grandpa, didn't you?

VH: Oh yeah, yeah. I was a little boy when he used to (?). I did the sculling for him- scull the dinghy for him- catching crawfish. He used to sell crawfish and my mother used to cook them and sell them five cents a piece- cooked. And the big ones, ten cents; five and ten cents a piece, already cooked. And I'd take them around the street and sell them.

M: Come around now.

VH: Oh yeah, you'd better buy them now. They get them a dollar-- a dollar and-- I think about a dollar and twenty-five cents a pound- uncooked.

EH: Sometimes you used to-- what you say 'scull a boat', dad. How far sometimes would you--?

VH: Well, rounds, you know what I mean? Keeping the boat there so the old man could catch crawfish--

EH: Yeah, but--

VH: --right around the shoals.

EH: --any distances?

VH: No. No. I could scull a distance, yes. My father used to scull from sunrise to sunset, any time he wanted to scull. I'd see he'd tie up to a pole out there. Tie up to a pole and still use the oar in the water- sculling. The boys used to say, "Two-by-Four, put that oar down and rest up." "I ain't tired," he says.

EH: Well, dad, what about some of your fishing trips with grandpa? I mean, you-- good Lord, you've done a great deal of fishing. Do you remember some things that you could remember happened when you--?

VH: Oh, about fishing, yeah. We went kingfishing, me and him down in 'No Man's Land'. I still go down there now and catch kingfish. Out here they--

EH: Out where? Where do you--?

VH: Out off of Key West. Every year them fish-- them kingfish is out there.

EH: But I remember you telling me about grandpa sometimes. You used to watch him go down to-- jump overboard and go down after some turtle. Tell us about-- [both speak at same time]

VH: --jewfish.

EH: Or jewfish or turtles that you--

VH: I see him go off a spar- spar of the boat right on top of a loggerhead turtle and bring him up to the top of the water.

EH: How deep was the water?

VH: Oh, about thirty, forty feet. Didn't make no difference to him, could be 500 feet, didn't make any difference to him. Once he gets that turtle, he knows just what to do with him. Grab him: one hand, one hand on this side, takes his knee and shove down the back of him, you see, and comes up (when he knows he's done?), you see what I mean? Brings him up to the top of the water. When he brings it to the top of the water, then he (?).

M: The turtle himself brings him up.

VH: Yes, ma'am. Yes, ma'am.

EH: He used to go overboard and that's how he used to catch turtles, barehanded, huh?

VH: Yeah. If you strike a jewfish and he goes in the shoals, you know what else he can do? Go to the shoal with a hook, hook him in the mouth, pull him out to shore and bring him up in his arm. That was Two-by-Four.

EH: That was your dad. That was my grandfather.

VH: Yes.

EH: Well you-- I remember you telling me one time that grandpa's-- the anchor line got hooked one time, pulled grandpa overboard. Remember you telling me he that went down bottom and went over with the anchor, something, one time? You said that--

VH: No, Sack of Ham, he did it and my father saved his life for him. (?)

EH: Sack of Ham? Who was that, daddy?

VH: Richy's daddy, Sack of Ham.

EH: What was his last name?

VH: (?).

EH: Adams?

VH: Adams, yeah.

EH: Yeah.

VH: His boat sunk, (my father was with him?) and he had to go- he went down (turn the other boat motor loose?) saw Sack sitting inside the boat.

EH: How old were you then?

VH: Oh, I was-- oh, I'd say forty.

EH: That--

VH: It's been maybe about seven, eight years ago.

EH: Wait a minute. Seven or eight years ago?

VH: Yeah.

EH: It has to be longer than that, dad. [chuckles] What about you-- also, you used to tell me about you working with the airways and things of that nature.

VH: Oh yeah, Miami-Key West airways, yeah, I worked on them.

EH: Yeah. That's when they was first started down here?

VH: Yeah.

EH: Which airways was that?

VH: That was during the WPA days.

M: Tell me something. Is it true that they used, um, pigeons in case the radio gave out? You know, there's a lady here who claims that they used carrier pigeons.

EH: When the radio wasn't operating, they used to send the pigeons with a message?

VH: I don't know.

EH: You don't remember that?

M: I never believed it. [laughs]

EH: How about laying cable, dad? Did you ever work on the boat on that or do you remember any of the--?

VH: Laying cable? No. I've been on a wrecking boat.

EH: Wrecking boats?

VH: Yeah. But they only pull (?) cable. That's Western Union. That's the only (?) that lays cable. Now, this cable boat down there, she's a wrecker. What I mean, she goes out to wrecks.

M: You mean wrecking like they used to do?

VH: Yeah, pulling boats off there, get them to shore, you know, pulling boats off.

EH: They-- what he means now, they probably go to just to save the person that wrecked--they're ship wrecked somewhere or they're up on a sand bank or something or a reef or something and they pull them off of it. I don't think that-- you don't mean that they go to take all the goods from them or anything like in the old days when the boats used to go up on the reefs and they'd--

VH: No. No. No. Go out there and take (sugar?) and stuff.

EH: Dad, do you remember anything about the Greek and the sponge fisherman and all of them down here?

VH: Yeah.

EH: Remember--

VH: Yeah, they won't let the Greeks come around here anymore. They came and killed the bottom walking on the bottom, see? They came and killed the bottom.

EH: When you were doing sponging?

VH: Right now.

EH: But back in the old days is when they tried to come down here from Tarpon Springs and that area.

VH: But when they found out what they was laying down there and a big bunch of boats went down there and brought them up to Key West, tied them up there, and told them to go back.

EH: Told them to go back?

VH: Yeah.

EH: Yeah? Why, they were killing the--?

VH: They was killing the bottom where the sponge grow, see? You keep walking over, it kills the bottom.

EH: You didn't sponge like that?

VH: No.

EH: What did you-- you used hooks?

VH: We'd throw-- we took a hook and--

M: I've seen a sponge hook, it's a big, heavy thing like a-- sort of like a pitchfork.

VH: Yes, ma'am.

M: But very heavy, huh?

VH: No, they're not too heavy. (They were on a boat?).

EH: In the water I guess they're lighter from the buoyancy end of it. How many sponge would you say that sometimes you caught in the run of a day, dad?

VH: Oh, I don't know. Me and the old man, we went up there to Key Haven in that shallow water up there (off pass?). We got seventeen bunches of them.

EH: Well, that's where Key Haven is now, right? That isn't-- Key Haven wasn't there then?

VH: No, not then.

M: Seventeen bunches?

EH: How much is on a-- how many is on a bunch?

VH: All according to what size. Sometimes ten, twelve, fourteen.

M: Then you have to clean them, don't you?

VH: Oh, yeah. You gotta let them die and then squeeze them out and put them overboard and then clean them.

M: They smell terrible.

VH: Oh, you bet your life.
[all laugh]

VH: You bet your life they smell terrible. Give you the sick stomach. That's why I never did like to sponge.

M: But there was quite a lot of money in it at one time, wasn't it?

VH: Oh, it's still good money. More money it in now than what it was years ago.

M: Is that so?

VH: Oh, yeah. Yes, ma'am.

M: I also heard the sponge was coming back here. They're growing back, is this true?

VH: Yeah. Yeah, 'cause years ago, the sponge started to die. (?) and started to eat them all up, holes in them.

EH: What ate holes in them, dad?

VH: I don't know. Some kind of a fungus around here was killing the sponge out. But now, they've stopped.

M: But you ran the Greeks out, huh?

VH: Yes, ma'am. Well, I want them out. I wouldn't let them stay here.

EH: Well, they was-- I understand they were stomping all over the grounds and whereas you people just--

VH: Put a hook.

EH: But dad, when you used to catch crawfish, from a conservation point of view, I used to remember when you used to bring crawfish up and I'd see the-- you'd tell me that was a female and had eggs and stuff--

VH: Oh, yeah.

EH: --you'd throw it back overboard and-- but nowadays, they probably don't do that.

VH: Nowadays, plenty of them take and cut the spawn off. Throw the spawn overboard.

EH: Keeps the crawfish, huh?

VH: Yeah.

EH: Well, that's why maybe we don't have so many crawfish.

VH: They catch them doing that, boy, they'll burn them. That's against the law.

M: Well, somebody-- a man up the Keys told me one time that the law was crazy in that they should catch the small crawfish- which are the tender ones- and let the big ones breed. Now, does that make any sense?

VH: Hmm. No.

M: You don't think so?

VH: No, ma'am. Catching the small crawfish is against the law.

M: I know it is, but they think the law is wrong.

EH: They think the law is wrong, dad. They think that maybe what we ought to do is eat the young crawfish and let the older ones keep having crawfish, see, and the young ones are tender.

VH: No, that's wrong because them small ones, it ain't long before they start having eggs under them.

EH: It isn't long?

VH: No.

M: Well, what do you think about turtles? Have you ever thought about turtles?

VH: Turtles? Yes, ma'am, I've had plenty of them.

M: Well, I watched turtles for a long time come up and lay their eggs and I never saw a medium sized one. They were always very big ones. And now you can't catch a turtle before the carapace if it doesn't measure forty-one-- measure forty-one inches. Well, that's a big turtle.

VH: That's very large. That's why them people quit bringing turtle up out of Key West. They brought up a load here about three years ago and you know how many turtle they had aboard that boat? Want to know how many made the measurement? Three. Three turtle, yes ma'am, out the whole load.

M: That's when--

VH: And they quit.

M: Seafarer men quit, huh?

VH: Yes, ma'am.

M: They did away with that boat called the Maitland (?), no?

VH: Yeah, that's right.

EH: Well, you used to-- used to buy turtle from Maitland and all them for years.

VH: Yeah, Maitland was the butcher-- the turtle-- right-- I'd have to call. And ask me how many pounds I want. I'd tell him four, 500, 600 pounds. I sold plenty of turtle when I was down there. Plenty of them. Maitland used to come in and say, "Freckles, how many turtle you want today? Six, eight, ten?" "How many you gonna butcher?"

M: Maitland himself?

VH: Hmm?

M: Maitland himself?

VH: Yes, ma'am.

EH: You used to work for Maitland, dad, didn't you?

VH: Well, he was with Thomas-- he used to work for Thompson.

M: He worked all the time for Thompson, did he?

VH: Ma'am?

M: Never worked any place else.

VH: That's all. Maitland Adams and I-- the way I heard it now, I don't know how true it is. He was working at the box factory when old man Thompson hired him and after he hired him from the box factory to work, and then he opened the this office up and he got right in over there, cleaning the office and getting things (in order?)-- Maitland.

EH: And that's how Mr. Maitland started?

VH: Yeah, that's how he started with Thompson.

EH: And today he's--

VH: Today, he's well fixed.

EH: He's been in the industry a long time. Yeah, I remember--

VH: And anything you want-- you go in that office and anything you want, you gotta go see Maitland. You ask Mr. Thompson, he sends you to Mr. Adams, "You go see Maitland." His mama live right across the street there.

M: Right, two doors-- yes. Uh-- Maria, yeah.

VH: (Chippy's?) wife lives there. (Nettie's?) brother- (Chippy?)- the one used to be at the ice plant?

M: Yes. He's a good friend of mine, a neighbor.

VH: Yeah, I know her.

M: And she makes the best cakes in Key West.

VH: I know her.

EH: That's where I go to get them now.

M: Well, tell us something funny about Key West in the old days.

VH: Funny?

M: Funny. Nothing funny?

EH: [chuckles] A lot of funny things happened dad back in--

VH: Yeah, but I (didn't get around in all that?).

EH: Yeah. How about-- how about your-- how about the time that you started into your fish market? How many years ago was that?

VH: Well, I've been in the fish business working for Maitland Adams and Archie (?) forty years. I was working down there when you was born- down there for Maitland and Archie.

M: You had a fish market of your own until just recently, didn't you?

VH: Yes, ma'am. Yes, ma'am- Freckles Fish Market. I've had two of them. I had this one down there and I took with a stroke and I went to the hospital. When I got out, I thought I could do it again but I got out and this leg here got stiff on me and I couldn't clean the jewfish and I had to give it up. But I'm coming along pretty good now, though, I think I could do it now.

M: A lot of people miss you.

VH: Oh, I know that.

M: A lot of people. But I know a very funny story. A lady named Ruby, um-- I've forgotten her last name. Anyhow, she called up, she wanted to ask you if you had some kind of fish and instead of asking about the kind of fish, she said, "Have you any freckles?" And she was so embarrassed, she hung up the phone.
[all laugh]

EH: Ah, I'll tell you.

VH: Oh, I'm well-known over this town, well-known. Even the strangers come here.

EH: Dad, I used to remember coming down there and watch you clean turtle and clean jewfish. Once upon a time, I think you had to help Mr. Maitland and them out cleaning turtle when they lost the-- when they lost their man out there doing the butchering or something?

VH: Yeah, I used to go out there and butcher.

EH: You used to butcher turtle and--?

VH: Yeah.

M: It's kind of a horrible job, isn't it?

VH: No, ma'am, that's easy. Way easier than cleaning the jewfish. It ain't nothing to that. Oh, it's as easy as kissing your hand. The joints is right there. All you got to-- your knife goes right in them.

M: How about-- how about jewfish, dad?

VH: Jewfish is hard. It's hard work. It's hard work.

EH: But you used to be able to clean them pretty fast.

VH: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

EH: I've watched you. You can skin and-- skin and clean them up, take the meat and everything in how long?

VH: Well, a 300-- three or 400 pound fish, I can clean it up in fifty-five minutes. That's not rushing. Just take-- you know what I mean, just go right ahead and do it. Fifty-five minutes and time over and over. I cleaned one out there in thirty minutes.

M: That's an awfully big jewfish. It's pretty tough, isn't it?

VH: Yes, ma'am. Years ago, you had trouble selling them big ones, but now you don't-- you ain't got no trouble, you sell them off. People years ago wanted small ones, but now some people want small ones, the rest of them don't-- you tell them jewfish and that's all.
[audio cuts off]

M: We'll start out now.

EH: Grandpa come from Spanish Wells, you say?

VH: Oh, he was Bahamian, yes.

EH: Yeah? How about grandmother? Grandma Mason? Where was she from?

VH: She was from Key West.

EH: She was from Key-- she was born here?

VH: Yeah, (?) born here.

M: Well, there are a lot of people here from the Spanish Wells--

VH: Oh, yes ma'am, plenty of them. Yes, ma'am.

M: Agnes Reardon's father, Sawyer, came from Spanish Wells.

VH: See, that's one place- Spanish Wells- that never did-- the way I understand, have a colored person come on that island. No colored people at all.

M: Oh?

EH: That's was back in the-- that was many, many years ago.

VH: They would allow it. You put your foot on that island, you get back in that boat and beat it. Go, we don't want you here. They run them-- run them off.

EH: How long ago-- how old was grandpa when he come to Key West?

VH: Oh, I don't know. I guess he was probably about sixty I guess, or more.

EH: Sixty? No, when grandpa come to Key West.

VH: Well--

EH: He was real young when he come to Key West. He had to be because you were born here in Key West.

VH: Yeah, because him and (mama so was?) just-- you know, the man just married. My father was eighty-four when he died. Eighty-four. My mother was sixty-five, but I'm a little older right now than my mother.

EH: Where did you live? Where were you raised? What's that little alley?

VH: Johnny Cake Alley.

EH: What they call it, pop?

VH: Johnny Cake Alley.

EH: Johnny cake? A lot of peoples never ate Johnny cake before, you know that?

M: I thought it was called--

VH: They don't know what they're missing.

M: It's good. It's Love Lane now, isn't it?

VH: Yes, ma'am. It's been Love Lane, but the way I've always called it Johnny Cake Alley. When I was a kid, that's all you could see: people, you know what I mean, making Johnny cake. I had one not long-- last night by myself. I like it.

M: I like Johnny cake, too. I make it sometimes.

VH: See, my wife, she just mixes hers in a pot but I don't. I knead mine, I make them better.

M: Oh, you make them too, huh?

VH: Oh yeah.

M: You a pretty good cook?

VH: Not like my wife.
[laughter]

VH: She's the best.

M: Tell us about how it was in the Depression. When the WPA was here?

EH: How was it during the WPA days? What did you do? What was the people doing there?

VH: I'll tell you what I was doing: I was down in a ditch, a pickaxe and shovel.

EH: Where?

VH: All over Key West. Within the city line. Well, out here, everywhere.

EH: What kind of money did you make then?

VH: Nothing. I think it was around seven or eight dollars a week, seven dollars.

M: What did you make when you worked on the railroad?

VH: Oh, you got paid by the month. You only made about thirty-five dollars a month. You never made no money years ago around here. I don't care what you did, you could've been a lawyer, you wouldn't have made much money 'cause the money wasn't around here. [clears throat]

EH: So when did-- when did you start going in the boat daddy? I mean--

VH: When I was about fourteen.

EH: Fourteen, but how old were you-- that was after the WPA, wasn't it?

VH: Oh, yeah. (Around that time?)

M: The WPA was in the 1930s.

EH: Nineteen thirties.

M: The 1930s, wasn't it?

EH: Yeah, you-- I remember you telling me about the hurricane of-- in the Matecumbes or someplace where you had to go up and help or do something. What was that?

VH: That was up in Matecumbe.

M: That was in 1935?

VH: Thirty-five, yes.

EH: You had to go up there and help them and--?

VH: Yeah, we up there on the big barges we had (?).

EH: How long were you up there?

VH: Oh, about four weeks.

EH: Four weeks?

VH: Yeah.

M: You took a barge up?

VH: Yes, ma'am. Big, big barge we used to have-- work around the (airplane?).

EH: This was when you were working for who?

VH: Miami-Key West Airways.

EH: Key West. And you guys went up there to help out?

VH: Mm-hmm.

EH: What, just to straighten things out a little bit and--?

VH: Yeah--

M: To bury the dead or--?

VH: No, ma'am. I done the cooking and stuff up there for the fellas. One of the other people-- two people-- one of them was (Roslyn?) Will-- (Brooms?)

EH: (Roslyn?)

VH: (Brooms?)

M: Oh, you mean the guy that ran streetcar? Here (Brooms?)

VH: Mr. (Brooms?), yes, ma'am.

EH: But you went up there just to look for him or did you go up there to help--?

VH: No, I went up there to help the people, see what we could do. And every time we turned around, why there'd be one light pop up right up in front of us. We went over there and right there where the ferry comes in, we looking (overboard?) there and pop right up in front of us.

EH: What were they doing with the bodies, dad?

VH: Cremating them. You could smell that place there twenty miles away I would say.

EH: And you were there-- [both speak at same time] Didn't you tell me that the men had to get all kinds of inoculations of shots and different things to stay in the area and--?

VH: When we first got there, we had to take shots. Coastguard was up there, and then the place was so much bigger up there. All the liquor you wanted. Could dig your feet in the sand, you know? There used to be I don't know how many places there. Could get beer and whisky and stuff. Bury in the sand, just bury it there.

M: It was just looser.

VH: Yeah the sand just buried it. (Lowered- buried it down?), you see?

M: (?) or something?

VH: Yes, ma'am.

EH: Four weeks up there, huh, dad?

VH: Yeah. Plenty people got-- my friend Billy, he went out of his mind.

EH: Billy who?

VH: (?).

EH: (Billy?) (?), he went out of his mind?

VH: Yeah. He seen people popping up in front of him all the time. Found him running all around hollering.

M: I wouldn't wonder.

VH: Got the horrors. Got scared and horrors. Then he started running around. One pop up and he'd start hollering.

M: I don't wonder. It was a terrible thing.

VH: Oh, my Lord, it was something, I'll tell you.

M: You know, they should have gotten them. The train was made up in Miami and ready to go and Washington wouldn't authorize it until it was too late.

VH: I'll tell you a st-- There were some bodies there anyway you see them sticking on trees, broken limbs and stuff. Little babies, men, women, all over the trees. And boy, talk about smell. Oh, my Lord. You could smell that way to Long Key. When you got to Long Key, you start smelling it. You look overboard, you see the flesh of people. Don't go in the water. The people, you know what I mean, that drowned, they decayed right in the water.

M: Well, let's talk about something a little more pleasant.

EH: Now, I used to remember you going up the Keys-- driving up the Keys a little bit to Marathon. Did you work in that area or what? You used to stop off at fish houses--

VH: I went to Key West-- Key Vaca's Cut. I go to Key Vaca and fishing out of there. Thompson had a fishery out there. Key Vaca.

EH: What was that called, East Coast Fisheries?

VH: No.

EH: No?

VH: Just Key Vaca.

EH: Key Vaca?

M: Key Vaca?

VH: (Just about a mile?)--

EH: What was that--?

M: That means cow.

EH: What was it, mackerel and kingfish, dad?

VH: Mackerel, kingfish, yeah.

M: Well, actually the Thompson money really came from fish, didn't it?

VH: Uh-huh.

EH: Fish and the ice plant. Used to provide all the ice.

VH: You see, Maitland wondered how this man here was sea farming. I don't know Maitland said something to him and the man got a little snotty, and Maitland told me, he says, "I don't want nothing to do with them people, Freckles. Not me," he says, "I wouldn't help you." You know what I mean, because I don't know, something turned up there and Maitland got mad.

EH: But Maitland's helped you a lot, dad, hasn't he?

VH: Oh, yeah. Maitland? Yes. Maitland's a nice fella. A lot of people don't like him, but he's a nice gentleman. Very good.

EH: He's treated you good.

VH: Yeah.

EH: He's always concerned. Every time he sees me, he's always asking about you.

VH: Oh, yeah, Maitland, he used to like me. And little (Chippy?), (?)'s wife (?).

M: He worked in the box factory always didn't he?

VH: Who's that?

M: You calling '(Chippy?)'- Mr. Adams.

VH: No. No, ma'am. He worked in the ice plant selling tickets. He used to sell tickets for the ice plant.

M: Tickets?

VH: Yes, ma'am.

EH: Used to buy ice--

VH: Years ago, you had to get a ticket to get ice.

M: Oh.

EH: You'd go to the little window and--

VH: Tell them how much want.

EH: --what you wanted.

VH: And they'll give you a ticket. Then they'd ask you to go right to the other side and get your ice.

M: I thought (Marie?) said that they-- that he works in the box factory and so did she.

VH: Well, might have.

M: Adams.

VH: Yeah, well, it might have been the first (?).

EH: What were some of the people that you used to fish with, dad? What were some of their names?

VH: (Picky Marshall?), (Addison Cruz?), Will Demeritt. I don't know, many more, plenty more.

M: How well did you know Elijah Cates?

VH: Very good. He put in many a day down there for Thompson. He lives right along side of him.

EH: Well, he used to where his house was.

VH: No, he lives right there now. He sold it, but he--

M: I thought it burned down.

VH: It didn't burn down, no.

EH: It burned inside but the shell is there.

VH: (His boy caused that?) fire, Johnny.

EH: Yeah.

VH: (?). They wouldn't do anything about it.

EH: But dad, I used to remember mom saying to you-- well, I remember even back in the days up in the-- where Grandma (Pent?) used to live up around the coffee mill. Remember who-- and then what was that place that was out in front there that you used to be able to play cards and--?

VH: Oh, (Bow-wows?).

EH: (Bow-wows?)?

M: (Bow-wows?)?

EH: Yeah.

VH: Nickname.

M: (I don't know about these?) these nicknames. A man named (Bow-wow)?

EH: (Bow-wows?). And that's where you used to play cards over there?

M: What was it, a coffeehouse, a restaurant?

VH: No, just a regular card-- card and money. There was money there, starting money.

M: Poker games?

VH: Poker games.

EH: That's where they-- that's where some of the boys in Key West used to go back in the old days, huh, dad?

VH: Plenty of them used to go.

EH: That and-- what was the other place on Margaret Street?

VH: Margaret?

EH: Yeah, that-- down by the Harris School, what was that called?

VH: Oh, Johnny Blacks. (?)

EH: Yeah, but you used to call it 'Johnny Blacks' back then when the old man-- that was another hang-out back in--

VH: That was a bar room.

EH: What was that guy-- I used to remember going over to the old place to get some coffee. Who was the man-- the big man that used to run that? What was his name? Rupert? Old-man Rupert?

VH: (Rupert Knowles?)

EH: He was a big guy, wasn't he dad?

VH: Yeah. He had a concession stand out on the pineapple factory, too.

EH: Out--

VH: Out on the dock.

EH: On the dock?

VH: Yeah, he used to sell ice cream, sell sandwiches, and all that stuff.

EH: He was a-- he must have been four or 500 pounds or something like that.

VH: Yes, he was.

EH: A big man.

VH: He was (?).

EH: Used to be a boxer.

VH: And his wife is skinnier than me.
[laughter]

VH: Yeah, he was a great big fellow. Oh, my Lord.

EH: What was the place--?

VH: And his wife was thin.

EH: What was that other place we used to go-- you used to send me as a kid, dad, to get some coffee for you? Was it Knight's or something down there--

VH: Oh Jeff. Jeff Knight's.

M: Jeff Knight's?

EH: A little coffee shop?

VH: Jeff Knight's used to be down there by the coffee shop, too.

M: Was that-- is that father of--?

EH: Of the Knights, right. Of Jeff and Harry and all of them.

M: Jeff and Harry?

VH: Yes, ma'am. (?).

EH: You used to send me in there for coffee. I remember getting you a cup of coffee and stuff when I was a kid and--

M: I thought only the Cubans ran coffee shops.

VH: No, he ran that for years.

EH: Right across from the ice plant.

VH: Right where I had the fish market.

EH: Right.

VH: Where I opened the second fish market.

EH: This was a few years ago.

VH: Yeah.

EH: I remember mom saying to you that you wasn't gonna make her boys into fishermen. Was that what mom said to you?

VH: I got one now. I want to-- I like building a place up and go down there and-- you know what I mean, and show him just what to do there. And build a business up and turn it over to him because he's young and then he'd have-- work for himself instead of working for somebody else.

EH: He's-- he's-- out of the three of us, I think that he- Robert- would be the best because he knows how to cut fish and everything.

VH: Robert knows how to-- yeah, Robert knows how to cut fish, he knows how to clean them. It ain't nothing to it, I mean you could show and do it-- show it a couple times and that's it.

EH: It's something to it, dad, because everybody just can't cut fish and filet it and do the things to it that people will buy.

VH: Somebody butcher the turtle (?). They better learn how to butcher turtle.

M: If anybody had a turtle to butcher. I love turtle but I can't spend \$2.49 a pound for it.

VH: Yeah, and that's frozen and that ain't no good.

M: I know it isn't. Well, what's that thing--? I had it once and I forgotten what they call it, it's like gelatin.

VH: That's fat. Turtle fat.

M: It's sticky.

VH: [clears throat] Turtle fat, yeah. That's good for a steam- steamed turtle.

EH: Was it part of the turtle?

M: Yes. It was sort of a jelly. It was really-- well, it wasn't exactly fat.

EH: Was it yellow or green?

M: Well, it was sort of yellowish, clear.

EH: That's fat.

M: Is it?

EH: The other times that you've cleaned-- you've cleaned turtles and cleaned fish. I used to go down there and--

VH: You take Donnie and all of them. Right now, they don't-- they can't-- they don't know how to--

EH: Donnie? Who's Donnie?

VH: He used to work out there.

EH: Wells?

VH: Yeah. They know how to butcher them, but they don't know how to clean them.

EH: What they used to call him, daddy?

VH: Donnie Wells.

EH: Yeah, no, but didn't they used to call him 'Cigar'?

VH: No.

EH: I remember him when they were young calling him Cigar.

VH: Cigarette Willy and them.

EH: Oh, Cigar-- oh, that was it: Cigarette Willy.

M: Oh, that fella that sat on Duval Street. He disappeared.

VH: No, ma'am, not him.

EH: No, that's not the same Cigarette Willy that he's talking about, the one that used to sit around with a blanket around him--

VH: No, ma'am, not this one.

EH: That's a different guy. That's a different person.

M: This was an older (firmer one?).

VH: Yeah, this a young fellow. He works-- he worked at a bookstore now--(Leoni's?) bookstore on Duval Street.
[clears throat]

M: Well, there doesn't seem to be any place to buy a fish now.

VH: No, ma'am and what you get, it ain't no good. I had the best fish and stuff- anybody will tell you- in Key West.

M: I know, I've heard.

VH: But you get-- my places used to be strictly fresh. If a fish looked bad to me, I wouldn't sell it, I'll throw it away. That's why plenty of people have been in my business. And I had a tremendous business there, big business.

EH: They used to come down on their vacations or when they come down on vacation just to come--

VH: All up north.

EH: --all up north and stuff.

VH: Take back shrimp and stuff. Buy them from me because I get the best. The best and the cheapest.

EH: Yeah, that's right. You sure undersold the other fish places.

VH: Yeah, because Maitland-- I told Maitland one day, I'm (starving?), "I ain't making no money on this turtle so I gotta raise this." He says, "Well," he says, "I'll tell you," he says, "you raise the profit on this turtle that I am giving you," he says, "I'm gonna raise you." Well I said-- I thought it all out, I said, "Well, (?) I'd rather leave it like it is instead of raising for poor people and getting the turtle at the same price." So I didn't raise it, I left it right there because a lot of poor people couldn't afford it, you know what I mean? So I left it right there. But I didn't make any-- much money of off it, so much waste. And I told Mr. Adams so that he know that--

M: How many sons do you have, Mr. Higgs?

VH: I gots four.

M: I know two daughters-in-law, your wife (?), and I know Joan.

VH: Who?

EH: Joan. You know Willy's--

VH: Oh, Joan, yeah.

EH: You don't know Robert's wife?

VH: No, she don't--

EH: I don't think she knows (Cassie?).

VH: (Cassie?), no.

M: No, I know--

EH: They're the ones that live up in Love Lane now-- house up in Love Lane right next to where dad and them lived.

M: There are an awful lot of Higgs that live here, aren't they? I mean, nowadays. You know, Henry Higgs lives across the street, I guess he's your nephew.

VH: Yeah, that's my uncle's boy. My daddy, you know, had (?) two brothers. His daddy was named Buddy-- Buddy Higgs. My father was named Albert but they called him 'Two-by-Four'.

EH: 'Two-by-Four'?

M: You never know--

VH: Two-by-Four, open that door.

M: On account of the lumber it's Two-by-Four or--?

VH: Huh?

M: On account of the lumber?

VH: Lumber? Yeah. I don't know where got that from, but I bet that's so. I don't know.

M: There's some very funny nicknames here and some very funny names of little streets and things. I just learned about Johnny Cake the other day from, um, Florence Rey (Rabin?). I think she lived there at one time.

VH: Who?

EH: Florence (Rabin?), daddy. She--

VH: Oh, yeah, Ms. Graham?

M: Yes, her name was Graham.

VH: Right in front of the alley. Yes, ma'am, I sold them many a crawfish. Many of them. Five cents, ten cents. Yes, ma'am, I know who you're talking about.

EH: She-- I think she wrote a story about one time about you, dad.

VH: Yes, she did. I answered some questions for her. She was down at the market.

M: You managed to get along, though, and raise your family.

VH: Oh, yeah. Yes, ma'am.

M: Everybody did. I guess they had just good a time. Now, we don't have much money anymore.

VH: Well, that was a good little business down there. I missed a few thousand dollars by being like this the year before last, the last year.

EH: Well, dad, the good Lord's been good to you. He's kept you around and--

VH: That's right. I'll tell you the truth, I was just about dead out there in the hospital. Everybody thought I was dead.

M: Well, you don't look dead.

VH: No, ma'am. Colored woman right next door to me, the one down my alley? She told my wife, she says, "I thought he died." She says, "No, my lord" she said, "he's home sitting now talking to me." She says, "Well, somebody told me he died."

M: Well, next thing we know, we'll be buying fish from you and thank you very, very much for the interview.

VH: Oh, that's alright and thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW