

**Captain Billy Sandifer**  
**Narrator**

**Jen Brown**  
**Interviewer**

**March 16, 2017**  
**at the Sandifer Residence**  
**Flour Bluff, Corpus Christi, Texas**

**Madeline McDonel, Eric Hernandez**  
**Theresa Valli, Malcolm Konicek**  
**Zeke Rodriguez, Josh Featherstone**  
**Transcribers**

**JB:** It is March 16, 2017, this is Jen Brown. I'm here with Captain Billy Sandifer in Flour Bluff, and we're here to talk about his work in conservation and the environmental history of the coastal bend. Do I have your permission to record this?

**BS:** Of course you do.

**JB:** Okay, thank you. Perhaps a good starting point would be—can you tell me a little bit about your background and early life?

**BS:** I was adopted by my grandparents. They raised me from the time I was fifteen months old on a farm, southwest of Agua Dulce, Texas, between Agua Dulce and Alice. It was a 368-acre farm, about thirty head of cows, grain and cotton. We worked in the fields from when I was old enough to walk. We picked cotton in the fields with braceros, which are migrant workers. I'll never forget my grandad, they put me in a cotton patch picking cotton when I was five years old. My grandad said he wanted me to understand the value of a dollar. Well I did, and I understood right off it wasn't worth it. [Laughter] So I don't think I've ever given a darned about a dollar since, it's just never been a priority with me.

**JB:** What was the work like picking cotton?

**BS:** Well, you were on your knees dragging, started with an eight-foot cotton sack and I think I ended up with a sixteen-foot cotton sack. You'd pick two rows of cotton barehanded, and when they used to pick cotton they pulled the cotton out of the burr, but in the later years we pulled cotton which included the burrs. Then it went to the gin and they took the cotton out of the burr, and the burrs were very sharp pointed, so your hands were bleeding and swole up all the time, and it was tough work, very tough work. Like I

say the first cotton sack I ever had was a flour sack that my grandmother sewed a sling on so I could drag it. Finally, I went to—I always tell everybody I went to Vietnam to get out of a cotton patch because I thought it was going to kill me. [Laughter]

**JB:** When did you serve in Vietnam?

**BS:** In 1966, '67, '69, and '70. I served a total of twenty-one months, got a heavy dose of Agent Orange which in later years has led to diabetes two, and several health issues and now I'm a ninety percent disabled veteran due to that.

**JB:** Did you grow up hunting and fishing?

**BS:** If we weren't working, when I got off school, there were fifteen acres of brush across the road from my house, and I spent that time between getting off the school bus and dart in that brush; hunting. I caught perch in the local ponds and put it in our water trough and used to go catch the same perch every day. When I was about ten, I guess, my grandad leased out the farm and bought a little boat and we would—it was fifty-six miles to Bob Hall Pier from our farm, and I'd get off the school bus and he'd be there tapping his foot and telling me to change clothes and go grab a sandwich because we were going. We would fish off Bob Hall Pier or some other pier until about four in the morning, then I had to help him drive home. At daylight I went to school and he got on a tractor and, finally, he figured out I was never going to graduate from high school because I had no interest in it whatsoever—never did, it was indoors. He felt like I was capable of more than my grades showed so he made a deal that if I didn't come home with at least half B and no failing grades we didn't go fishing that week, and so that's the only reason I ever graduated from high school.

**JB:** Then you went straight into the service?

**BS:** Well, I went to Montana.

**JB:** Oh yeah, that's right.

**BS:** I was up there—I counted it out since I talked to you and actually I was only up there seven months. Got up there in July, south of Melstone on Musselshell River, and then I went in the military in January. I had a Russian-American rancher's daughter who was going to inherit a zillion acres of farmland in North Dakota when she turned twenty-one, and she was determined that I was going to be her life partner. I kept seeing these five-mile long rows of wheat and me on a tractor for the rest of my life, and so I bailed on that deal. You know, whenever I think of conservation, our farm was split into two different parcels of about one hundred and sixty acres apiece, actually it would have been a little more than that, and when my grandad bought the southern place it was brush, and it was only a mile north of the King Ranch north fence, so it was pretty wild. I'll never forget we—he took us over there, again we were about seven or eight years old back then, or I

was, and he took my grandmother and the kids over there to show them his new land. And farmers are very fond and proud of new ground they call it, and the bulldozers were breaking out that brush, and I asked him, I said, “Papa, where are all the mountain lions, and the bobcats, and the javelinas, and the deer going to live, and the coyotes going to live?” and he says, “I don’t care, I’m going to, I’m worried about making y’all a living, not to where the coyotes live.” I just immediately popped up with, “Well, I’d a whole lot rather live with those coyotes in the brush than I would look at this old flat bare farmland.” He snatched me out of that truck and whipped my butt, and I think he whipped my butt for about six weeks every time he saw me because that hurt him so bad. I guess when the truth is told, there were my conservation roots, even that far back. I remember my grandmother was a big time Baptist, and I’m a heathen, I’ve always been a heathen. I’m a mother-earth mother-ocean kind of guy, and she says, “Billy you don’t like going to church, don’t you ever want to talk with God?” I said, “I do Momma. Every time I walk out this door I talk to God all the time, and I don’t have to go into a building that’s built by man, really to glorify man, to talk to God when this is what He built right here, this natural world.” So that’s what my whole life’s been for.

**JB:** So, you early on got involved in conservation issues?

**BS:** No, I did not. I spent seven and a half years in the military, and I don’t have any transmission. I’m either running full wide open or I’m in neutral shut down, one of the two. I don’t have any gears. That’s one of the problems I’m having in retirement is I don’t know how to stop, and I’m trying to teach myself to not do anything, that’s very, very hard for me. I was, like all other farm boys, I was very patriotic, and I was real serious about the military, and that’s what I did, probably did a pretty good job of it. But no, it was in my later years that I got interested in conservation, and my way of getting interested in conservation differs from most people I think because my whole perspective of society is much different from most people. If I was going to make a difference, well, then I should make a difference. I don’t have to go join some group to make a difference. If the groups are trying to make a difference, and there’s a bunch of us out here on our own trying to make a difference—that’s just that much better isn’t it? CCA [Coastal Conservation Association] approached me years and years ago about joining the CCA. I’ve always been a big supporter of them, but I have no interest in being a member of CCA. Dr. McKee tried to get me on. He told me they’d put me on the board, and I told him, “I’m the last thing you need on the board because I’m not a ‘yes’ man, and I’m not going to go along and not make waves, that’s not Billy, that’s not how I am, and I’m going to say what I truly feel and I’m going to be burning people all the time and y’all don’t want me I assure you.” Many of CCA’s issues have always been mine, but especially since—I’ve written probably around three hundred outdoor articles and I’ve always made a point with the editors and publicists that I pretty much get to determine what I write, and they can edit my articles for grammar, but not for content. They start editing me for content, I’m gone, because I’m not out here ego tripping. I don’t care. I mean I really don’t. So, I’ve had a lot of great opportunity to work with conservation through those efforts, through my articles, reach a lot of people.

**JB:** What did you write about?

**BS:** Oh, what they all want me to write about is the how-to type articles on saltwater fishing, but there's also a love for history from the young anglers, historical perspective like you're doing, and so I tried to mix in a little natural history with oceanography with interesting stories of things that happened on charters and stuff like that. I worked on different shrimp boats, in the Gulf [of Mexico] for two and a half years, between here and New Orleans, and I bought the first edition of *The Fishes of the Gulf of Mexico* and took it offshore with me, and any fish in the bycatch in forty-six fathoms of water that I didn't know what he was, I would toss him to the side and after we had cleaned up everything I would get my book out and go ID that fish. It wasn't too many months, and I could tell you what any critter inside of forty-six, forty-eight fathoms was, that was as deep as we had the cable to drag. So, I've shrimped in the Gulf, in the bays, in the Laguna Madre, shrimped top nets, bottom nets, but I've always lived a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. An old buddy of mine said, "Well, hell, just tell the captain you're straight out of Illinois and all your life you've dreamed of working on a shrimp boat, and he's your dream come true. And then the first time you get paid and the wind blows out of the south east quit, and when he tells you 'what happened to forever?' And you say 'gee, it sure felt like forever to me captain.'" [Laughter] So, I was bad about that. I'd work a few charters or a few trips, and I'd drag up and go fishing, and that's just the way...

**JB:** In what years were you a shrimper?

**BS:** I was in the military twice. I did four and a half years in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and I ran the Harbor Police Division and police boat in Cuba where I was a game warden for the base, which was funny because the provost marshal called me in, I thought they were going to arrest me because I was black-market commercial fishing with a rod and reel, which was against base regulations. This lieutenant commander called me in, the provost marshal, and I said, "Are you here to charge me?" and he said, "No we don't have enough evidence to charge you, I'm here to hire you." I said, "Why?" He said, "because you're the biggest outlaw commercial fisherman on this base and them Ohio and Kansas farm boys I've got in the police division aren't smart enough to catch you at it, and so I need you working for us". So that's how I got the job, but I ended up rewriting the rules and regulations for harbor patrol division in Cuba and got involved in a lot of controversies in Cuba which led me to quit the military. Then I went shrimping after that. I quit in 1976, I shrimped '76, '77 off and on now. Up to until '91, I do a little shrimping now and then.

**JB:** Can you talk a little about what it's like to be a shrimper?

**BS:** I have a book in there that McKee gave me on Texas shrimpers, and they asked the headers which is the low man on the totem pole that does most of the grunt work to describe shrimping. Most of them were illegal aliens, and they said, "*Es muy peligroso.*"

It's very dangerous. We used to talk among ourselves out there. They all talk about the days of wooden ships and iron men, but shrimpers today are still iron men. They're just on iron boats, that's all. It was very dangerous, if you wanted to be lonely it could sure be that way. We'd go out and spend sixteen to twenty-six days. You put the net out at 7:00 p.m. and pick up at twelve-thirty at night, clean the catch, sort through the bycatch, try to get a nap. At daylight, the net comes up again, and you get through about ten in the morning, and you have to do any repairs that are to be done and get whatever sleep you're going to get before it all begins again. You have to crawl up on the outriggers, they're the two arms that hang off the side of a shrimp boat that stabilize the boat, and the pullies for the wenches run through the cable, and you have to climb up out on the end of those greasy, oily suckers a hundred miles offshore, and pull a rather heavy tickler chain they called it that runs in front of the net. Make sure it's clear and free of any obstructions that you might've picked up during the night, and you do pick up things. Just hard work. I do all kinds of fishing in the daytime. I rarely slept. Don't sleep much now. And a shrimper's whole life is at night, because that's when he stays up all night. Telemarketers were shrimpers' worst enemy if he was working on a day boat or a night boat like in a lagoon, because every time you lay down to sleep in the daytime that's when all the telemarketers call you. Shrimping is admirable from the perspective of what it requires of the men, and their being up to the challenge of it. But, a real interesting thing to me was that most of them hated the sea. They called the land 'the hill' and the jetties was 'the bar' and everything else was 'the sea.' If you got to question them, most of them couldn't get along 'on the hill.' I used to be an electrician, but I never could get along 'on the hill.' I got in too many fights—this and that—and most shrimpers would fight with a fence post. They were self-chosen to be outcasts to society. What I've always wished—I can't say I don't love them, I love them with all my heart, they'll always be my brothers—but I've always believed as hard as a man can in farming. Our shrimp and stuff should come from mariculture, not from the sea. I've always thought those men deserved the right to finish up their careers, because very honestly, they don't know anything else to do. And they're not going to do well in society. Let them finish their careers, don't let the next generation in, grandfather clause them in, and shut the damn thing down.

**JB:** You're talking about the shrimping license buyback program?

**BS:** Yeah.

**JB:** Okay.

**BS:** Anyway, they go at it, I just feel like shrimping is archaic. It needs to go away. I worked for an oriental seafood specialist on the first experimental shark fishing long line boat in Texas, which was very unsuccessful. Probably because he was a raving idiot and had no idea what he was doing. He told me, he's from San Francisco, that the ground fisheries which are the croakers, the spots, the many species of whiting, the many species of fish that dwell on the bottom in the gulf. He said that the ground fisheries available in

the Gulf of Mexico forty years ago was far more economically productive than shrimping ever was.

**JB:** What did they use them for? Just eating?

**BS:** They used them for fish meal, for eating, for fertilize, for all different—Louisiana has such a market, fish oil, all kinds of stuff. He said those fishes' populations had been so destroyed by shrimping in the gulf, that they could never recover to the point of becoming a source of income financially.

**JB:** Did you notice any changes over the years you were shrimping in terms of bycatch or just shrimp themselves?

**BS:** No. The game was always the same, but it's the same as with sport fishing or anything else. The amount of people doing it just grows exponentially. It never stops. No one has any idea how many shrimp boats are in the Gulf of Mexico. When I had my twenty-six-foot panga, I might run across a couple hundred miles of ocean in a day back and forth. Nobody would believe how many shrimp boats I see in July and August after the shrimping season reopens here. They're not just Texas boats. In the winter, the Texas boats go up towards the Mississippi and work. Main reason being they bring a better market value up there. That's where the better shrimping was, and it was closer to a port if you got caught out in a bad storm, which you did. I've been in twenty-two-foot Coast Guard seas in a seventy-six-foot boat. I don't recommend it. [Laughter] I wouldn't recommend at the time, but we were there, and—I lost my track...

**JB:** We were just talking about different places where you fish. So, when you shrimp towards the Mississippi did you just pull into port over there to sell the shrimp? Is that how it works?

**BS:** Usually you stay out about sixteen days on the trip, and you come in to sell because you're not freezing those shrimp—they have freezer boats, but it's a small percentage. Whenever you see a whole bunch of the net mesh bags on the beach—potatoes or orange bags—they look like a potato sack—that's what the freezer boats put their shrimp in to freeze them, the tails. But the average shrimper—he uses ice which he can only hold for sixteen days, and then he has to do a real good job of it. He also uses sodium bisulfite which he calls 'dip,' and if you have cuts on your hands—and you do—it burns the heck out of you when you stick that basket of shrimp into that vat. It keeps the shrimp from turning dark. It helps to preserve the shrimp. It's the strongest, closest thing to formaldehyde that the FDA will let you put on shrimp.

**JB:** And the Mexican shrimpers use something different?

**BS:** They use Clorox. Those little wonderful aqua green bottles that litter the beach everywhere full of turtle bites are Mexican Clorox bottles that the shrimpers use to

preserve their catch. Now the FDA would never allow an American shrimper to use that. However, he will allow the Mexicans to use it, and sell the shrimp to us. So, what's up with that? But anyway, what you do is you go spend sixteen days, we called it a "double header", and that means you go out and you shrimp for however long sixteen, eighteen days, fifteen days, thirteen days, and then you go into Louisiana, and sell your catch at a higher price, and maybe stay a couple days. Then, you turn around and go back out and spend another sixteen days before you get home. Then the second time you would offload in Aransas Pass. So, that was the story of the double header.

**JB:** Were you around when they started to incorporate the TEDs on the shrimping boats?

**BS:** No, I'm pre-TEDs. However, McKee asked me during our interview for CCA, and in two and a half years, I only saw one turtle in the net. It was alive. I don't know how long David shrimped, not a long time, but quite a while, maybe a year or so. He never saw a turtle in the net. Yet both of us are so very, very acutely aware of how many turtle pop up dead the day after shrimping season starts here on our coast in July.

**JB:** So, how did you go from being a shrimper to being a fishing guide and captain?

**BS:** Well, I shrimped fourteen days in February one year, and my take home nights in February one year, when we first moved here, I made fourteen dollars in fourteen nights. Well I had a good-looking woman, at the trailer, so I didn't see any reason for me to be doing that. About that time, my grandmother passed on, and she left me a little inheritance. I'd been thinking about guiding. I had a real good reputation for catching fish, and caught some real big fish. I lived down in the Big Shell by myself for a year and a half one time. Everyone knew me whether I knew them or not. So that was my footing for starting a business. It was basically the sharks, because that's what I was really known for was shark fishing. I used that money to buy four-wheel drive equipment and keep food on the table and the bills paid while I got the business started. I never made any money. I just made enough to keep doing it, that's all. But that's all I ever wanted was just to keep doing it. I guided down there for twenty-two years. It was after I started guiding that I really, really got active into conservation. I was doing more writing then. I used to tell people that I was a soldier for environmentalism, and I had twelve hours in rich people's lives to take them down into God's country and change their minds about they looked on things. That's all just pretty well the truth.

**JB:** What sort of things would you tell them on these trips?

**BS:** Well, I'm supposed to be a textbook on history and geology, da dee da, of that environment down there. We'd talk about things like the sand being all gone. It was deposited at the mouth of Pleistocene river beds during the Cretaceous. It was forty miles offshore. That's what created the barrier islands. That sand's all gone, there's no new sand. We've damned up all the rivers. Rivers are the only avenue of approach for new sand on the gulf beaches. There is no approach now. The Rio Grande's dry. I knew men

that'd seen the Rio Grande a mile and a half across, and I could cast, heck, it wasn't any wider from here to my gate. Now it doesn't flow at all, and the Rio Grande had the only certain breeding population of snook in Texas, and that went right out the window, you know, because they lost the Rio Grande. We lost the sawfish. We lost the tarpon. There were other entities, as well, involved with the tarpon but one of the main problems, especially with the sawfish, was freshwater inflow. They must have that brackish water, and when little old ladies are raising cane, every time they do a water release—you can't have the necessary amount of freshwater coming in to assist them to support these populations of fish. So, the tarpon are super down. The sawfish are gone, and the snook are rare as hen's teeth and that's all relative a whole lot to freshwater inflow, and society's impeding of freshwater inflow. I read a report, I think it was in *Texas Monthly*, by the land commissioner in Laredo in charge of the water conservation district for the Rio Grande, and he said if he did his job correctly not one drop of water would reach the Rio Grande River. And, a long time ago, I said then they ought to hang him on the spot. If he thinks that's his job is to allocate every single drop of water out of the Rio Grande agriculture, then they need to run him off. They need someone in there who understands the overall picture of what's going on. What's going to end this world as I know it is nothing but greed. It's all about greed. It's all about the green dollar. Well, I'm all about the green, I just ain't much on the dollar.

**JB:** When you grew up you caught a lot of tarpon, and sawfish, and snook in that area?

**BS:** There were a lot caught. There's never been a lot of sawfish. Maybe eight or nine were caught after I started fishing, but I know that in the 1920s and stuff there were a lot of them. I know several old beach seiners that have caught them in their nets. They caught, in the '60s, maybe three off of South Padre, and five up here. Caught a couple of big ones off Bob Hall Pier. Of course, that kind of stuff is totally historic now. I tell them about one of my favorite peeves(?), is I begged everybody who worked for Texas Parks and Wildlife, as long as I can remember, to declare the lemon shark endangered and catch-and-release only in Texas. The reason is when I was a kid you could catch four or five of them on the weekend, eight or nine-foot long. Now there's one or two caught on the Texas coast every year, total. The reason isn't long liners. It isn't the freshwater. It's sport fishermen. In my day we used sharks for bait. The lemon shark for some reason is a delicacy to tiger and bull sharks. Their babies are. So, if we caught a baby, we used it for bait, a small one. Then if we caught a big one we killed everything for its jaws, and the lemon's got a sorry set of jaws. But, the lemon shark is littoral, it's normally caught in less than thirty feet of water. Strong populations exist in Florida and other places, but not Texas, and the reason is we have taken them out. Every time a nine and a half to ten-and-a-half-foot lemon strolls up on the Texas coast, some kid catches him and cuts his jaws off. I was looking just the other day on the new shark regs, the lemon shark isn't even mentioned, like he's a non-entity. It lists the ones that are okay to keep, the ones that you can't kill, and it doesn't mention the lemon anywhere. That's nothing but rod-and-reel fishermen that have taken out the lemon shark. Certainly, a little bit of ego isn't as important as taking out a species in our ecosystem. God put all them critters there for a



reason, and it's not our place to choose which ones we want or don't want by their aesthetic value to us, you know? I never would let customers kill any shark except a lesser blacktip, less than six feet long, and then they had to eat him. All the others were tag and release, and it got to where I wouldn't hardly let them catch a blacktip, but I will say in the later years, not as many of them wanted to keep a blacktip. They just wanted the experience, and probably Sharkathon had a lot to do with that.

**JB:** On the Discovery Channel?

**BS:** No, Sharkathon, the tournament. I'm tickled that I've had a lot of influence on the boys that started Sharkathon, long before there was a Sharkathon. They're all adamant about catch-and-release and actually, some of them were marine biologists, and one still is, Todd Neahr. He's in Florida working for their game and fish department. When I was a kid, there were probably thirty shark fishermen on the Texas coast. Then, in 1977 or so, I was president of the local shark fishing club, and I think at one time we had a hundred members. There were probably fifty people in San Antonio shark fishing. So, there were a hundred and fifty. Now, everybody's got a four-wheel-drive and they're all shark fishermen. Used to shark fishing was something you grew in to. You didn't start out shark fishing, you grew in to it, as you became an accomplished angler on a lower level, you worked your way up. Now they start out shark fishing. Gosh, I think Sharkathon had twelve hundred contestants last year. Imagine if all of those guys were killing for jaws. Thank God you're not. They probably had the best shark season, big shark season of my life last year, but it was unusually early and abruptly ended. As climatic change influences things the old-time schedule isn't what it used to be for fish species. The fish are earlier in the spring and tend to evaporate a lot earlier. Our peak shark fishing was in June, and the first part of July before it just got screaming hot, and now actually if you can get a bait out in all this wind. But we didn't have kayaks and stuff, we had to swim the bait or take it out in our eight-dollar vinyl life raft or set of swim fins or an inner tube or something. The equipment has progressed so dramatically, as it has in all saltwater fishing, and it's much more successful. We never had the capabilities that they have now.

**JB:** Can you be more specific on, like, what gear you used, and then how that's changed?

**BS:** Well, we used Penn Senator reels and heavy rods, and I think a Penn Senator sixteen ought rod, reel, and line weighs twenty-one pounds. So, we used to say if you couldn't take a sixteen ought and hold it straight out in front of you, stiff-armed, you weren't man enough to fish with it, you weren't strong enough. I caught a 746-pound tiger that drug me a mile and a half up the beach with one of those things. We used shoulder harnesses with a standard belly plate. We were harnessed into the reels, and the rods were stiff as a tree trunk, and everybody that used to shark fish has got a bad back because of it. Now they have the new Dacron, or the new braid lines, which are thinner diameter, so they can use lighter equipment. The reels have several gears to them, where the old gears, like the Penn sixteen ought, had a two and a half to one ratio. You'd crank forever to get a little line back. The rods are more user friendly. These kayaks—heck, those kids have got

depth finders in those kayaks and everything else. They can look for structure more than we ever dreamed, like a seven and a half fathom rock that lies out in front of the turtle shack at the thirty-nine. We never even knew it was there. We knew vaguely that there were rocks offshore, but we didn't know where, or how far out. Now, the kids go out there with a kayak anytime they want to and catch a massive red snapper. They've got so much more going for them, but it was always a loner sport. Now, it's another day at the mall. Honestly, the new shark fishing, I don't care anything about it. It was *mano y mano* to us. We wrapped our own rods with our colors, the diamonds that were in them, were our personal colors. Everybody knew your rod. If you went to the sand dunes to take care of business, nature's calling, and you got a shark on, we called it a "run," then nobody'd touch it till you come back. You'd get back and you almost didn't have any line left because that fish was just hauling butt. And God help you if you picked up that rod and hit that fish, because you're fixing to get your nose broken, because that guy worked real hard to get that shark on. And for you to intrude, that was not acceptable. If you fought a shark for thirty minutes and he whipped your backside, somebody took a knife and cut the line at the end of the rod, because he won. Nobody would dare to take a rod with somebody else's fish on it. No tag teaming. It was one on one. It was macho to the max, which always suited me. Now, I've heard of three to four guys fighting one fish. Why bother? Of course, now in hindsight, I know that cutting that line off at the end of the rod didn't do those fish any favor at all. To leave them with a thirty-foot cable leader—God knows how many hooks, big hooks, and all that line to drag around, that wasn't a favor to them whatsoever, it was probably a slow death. But so is throwing up on the beach and cutting his jaws out.

**JB:** What sort of baits or lures did you use?

**BS:** The bait of choice was a tarpon. I used to—if I didn't manage to catch one in the late seventies and early eighties, I'd paid a hundred dollars for a tarpon over six-foot long. Old Carl Borgman used to say that you hunted big tigers all your life until you put on a forty-pound piece of tarpon bait. Then you just sit back and wait for them to hunt you. Jack crevalle, small sharks, stingrays, cownose rays—actually, just any—we used all natural baits. The old deal about the shark fishermen using cats—I wish because I don't like cats—but I don't know if anybody ever used a cat. I do know of one fool using seagulls one time, but actually he caught a shark. It was natural baits and the guys who didn't have a chance to catch them would drive over to Port Aransas and beg, borrow, and steal at Deep Sea Headquarters, or something like that. Back in the days of the tarpon—I've seen thirty tarpon caught in one day off Bob Hall Pier, all big ones, and they'd be laying there stacked up like firewood. The local shark fishing club rented a walk-in freezer, and they would take those tarpons and freeze them and then the club members could come and get them for bait as they needed them. So, there were a lot of ways to get bait. Sometimes you had to buy it. Now, the causeway over here and Roy's, both sell shark bait all the time. You just stop and buy bait.

**JB:** You mentioned you lived out on the island by Big Shell. What years did you live there?

**BS:** You know, I'm at the point now—I'm fixing to be seventy years old—and I'm at the point it's all kind of a blur. Time wise, I do real good till I try to, I'll say I did this in '77 and twenty minutes later, I'll say well, I did this in '77, and then I get to thinking, wait a minute, if you were doing this in '77, how were you doing this? But as near as I can figure I lived in the Big Shell the second half of '77 and '78. That's when I lived there.

**JB:** What was it like back then?

**BS:** I've been down here sixteen days without seeing a vehicle. There were in the interim- the kids got to calling the Big Shell, the High Banks, because when you reached the seventeen-mile marker, all at once on the beach was elevated two and half feet to as much as eight feet. There was just a sheer ledge, and just at the water's edge on low tide, you could drive in and out. If not, you had to drive in that really, really soft stuff up north, up on the high ground. It was very soft. It took as much as an hour and a half to drive from the seventeen to the thirty, would take you as much as an hour and a half, gears jamming, got to stop three or four times to let the engine cool off, kind of stuff. Because of that, not many people went south of the Big Shell. There were people who gone down there a lifetime and never been south of the twenty-five-mile marker because they thought that bad driving continued all the way to the Mansfield jetties. The reality is we never told them any different. We didn't want them down there, and it was the domain of the shark fishermen. We kept it to ourselves. Well, now these kids get on and post it on the website, post it on the message board, post it on Facebook, the exact opposite of us. It's very peaceful. The trash was as bad then as it is now. It's been bad all my life. We're losing the beach as far as I'm concerned. I don't apologize. I'm the number one believer in global warming, because I've been outdoors lately, and it just cracks me up when some redneck tells me he doesn't believe in global warming. How do you not believe in global warming? When each year is hotter than the record year before? Huh? When they say that the sea level has risen fifteen inches in the last twenty years, how is it not? I sit here on TV and I watch these poor E`1234qw5e6skimos that are losing their villages. You get on National Geographic channel and it's everywhere! The ice is melting. The sea level is rising. To think that, us as a species isn't at least partially to blame for that is ludicrous. Of course, we are. Fossil fuels, certainly we are. You want to tell me the sea levels risen before? Certainly, it has. You know I'm well aware. Old man asked me, "Billy, I'm going to see if you know anything." I said, "Well I don't. I'll just go ahead and tell you right now." He said, "Do you understand when I say guts on the beach?"

**JB:** Oh yeah, I know.

**BS:** There's three guts, okay? They're deep channels of water separated by sandbars, and then you have what we call "The Highway," which is the open sea. He said, "Where's the

first? The wade gut?” That’s the one before the first one, which is temporary in location and you can wade across it. Thusly, it’s the wade gut. It’s irregular though. It’s not at one end of Texas to the other. So, I said, “Oso Bay.” He said, “Where’s the first bar?” I said, “I live on it, Flour Bluff.” He said, “Where’s the first gut?” I said, “The Laguna Madre.” He says, “What’s Padre Island?” I said, “Flour Bluff’s the second bar.” He said, “My god, there is somebody that does understand.” So certainly, I understand the rise and lowering of sea level, historically, on our planet. While interesting, my concern is what we’re faced with now. What we’re faced with now is the guy that started guiding on PINS [Padre Island National Seashore], after I quit, is the board member on our Friends of Padre. We just had lunch at a meeting of the Friends of Padre, and he’s not getting any of his charters at all, because there’s no beach. If you don’t have access, you don’t have anything. I have breakfast on Tuesday mornings with five old geezers that I’ve known for over fifty years. They were all shark fishermen, and all of them believe the same thing: Padre Island is going away. Padre Island is disappearing. When I was guiding, it was very conspicuous. I was down here one hundred and twenty-eight days a year, certain locations of the beach just kept getting narrower and narrower. In this one place, I had a real steady landmark. So, I started measuring and as near as I can figure, in ten years, we lost sixty-eight feet of beach. Now, if that’s not significant, I don’t know what is. I got cracked last Tuesday, because one of the guys we were talking to about this said, “Yeah, we just need a hurricane. It’ll sluff off that forward dune and build us back a beach.” I said, “Sure, it will, you idiot, but that’s not going to replace the sand dune.” The sand dunes sluff out south, we lose, we don’t win. Yeah, we temporarily have a beach back, which will then go away. Now, we’re losing the sand off of Padre Island. I’ve had several people in my life tell me I was a visionary. I don’t know about all that, but I believe the day will come to that, if they settle down travel on the beaches, especially the National Seashore, there be a car wash up there somewhere, so they can retrieve the sand off your vehicle. Because if you figure you got two thousand trucks down that beach and it’s soft, if you look there’s a little mound, right there, and if that little mound is Padre Island, from where I used to wash my truck. And you know, it’s unbelievable the sand you get on a trip, and multiply that by two thousand, and the day will come if they can find some sand to replenish it. They are going to have to replenish our beaches. There’s places in the United States, now, that regularly—Galveston tried it and the first tropical storm washed it all away. We live in a time of accelerated change, climatically, and the rise in sea level is one of those things. People need to understand it, you know?

**JB:** What would you say to people who don’t believe in climate change, or don’t agree with you that the beach is going away?

**BS:** I would say, “I don’t care.” [Laughter] Go out there and spend fifty years or one hundred and twenty-eight days a year for twenty-two years and see how you feel about it then. Don’t sit there in an air-conditioned office in Dallas and explain it to me. That’s one of the problems I’ve always thought we had, and I know several other people feel the same way. Our legislators make all these rules about the coastal environment when they live their whole life is inland. What, they go to South Padre Island once a year maybe, for

two or three days, and they're supposed to be the people making decisions for Texas Parks and Wildlife and all this other stuff. I don't think owning a football team is a good prerequisite for being on the Board of Directors for Parks and Wildlife. Do you?

**JB:** No.

**BS:** I really don't see the connection there. You know, it's like—we were fishing with live finger mullet one day, and I had this, actually he was a neurologist, actually, he was a brain surgeon—and he asked me, “How do I make this finger mullet do his job? What can I do to, you know, in a way of presentation, to make it more effective?” I told him, “You know, he's been a finger mullet all his life. I think he knows how to be one, and I can't imagine you giving him any tips that he's not aware of about being a finger mullet. So, why don't you throw him out there and let him be a finger mullet?” I'm a breed Native American, and I believe with all my heart, that's what's wrong. The tragedy is most Native American populations have had two hundred years of the white man teaching them how to be Indians. If they want to legislate and regulate coastal issues, I think they need to deal with the people who deal with those issues every day. Not as a good-doer but as a way of life, because the keyword we're faced with is sustainable. You can't issue a hundred thousand commercial fishing licenses. You can't do it. But, apparently you could issue a hundred thousand Texas fishing guide licenses, and I've always told—provided a fishing guide ain't nothing but a commercial fisherman with a rod and reel. He's fishing for a living ain't he? So how in the hell is he not a commercial fisherman? Boy, if you don't think that I don't burn some of those prima donna fishing guides, with their Spiderman sunglasses on, you're wrong. It'll burn them buddy. I keep a pair of white shrimper's boots, right inside the door, I wear them a lot, and here on the T-shirt I think I...

**JB:** Yeah.

**BS:** There they are. I want to remember where I came from. You know what just really burns my butt? I lived most of life as a hunter gatherer. I get to the end, I get it, we're using live finger mullet, I get to a couple hundred yards from the end of the pavement. I pull over on the beach, I unhook my aerator system, and my bait box. I walk out on the surf and I turn loose all the finger mullet I got leftover, and they're happy little suckers. Then, I drive up to the deep-sea dumpsters to dump my trash for the day, and there's a hundred and fifty flopping dead finger mullet laying there with the fire ants eating them. Why? One day it angered me so bad. There were so many of them. I grab my cast net, dumped it out of the bucket, grabbed up all the finger mullet, put them back in, and ran out to the surf and turned them loose. A customer emailed me about a week later and said, “You know what, I've told everybody that I can get to stand still about you taking those mullets out there and turning them loose.” He said, “That's what a fishing guide ought to be.” He's right. That is what a fishing guide ought to be. That ought to be standard procedure. Not anything you get recognition for. It ought to be something, because you're supposed to have some respect for things. People don't have any respect.

We live in a time of me. There's a commercial. One of these genealogy commercials that just burns my back side. This guy is telling them "yeah!" Him and his wife standing up there, and he says, "yeah." I'm supposed to be all Italian, and I'm Eastern European. Here's my ancestor who is Eastern European and we didn't even know he was. And yeah, he looks a lot like me. He looks a lot like me. How does his great grandfather look a lot like him? He looks a lot like his great grandfather. Ain't that right?

**JB:** Yeah.

**BS:** How? But that's the mindset. That is the mindset. He looks a lot like me. Every time I see that I want to knock his block off. I go, "my God."

**JB:** So, these views on conservation, that's what led you to start the Big Shell cleanup?

**BS:** Just tired of the trash. These old shark fishermen used to—we'd stayed in the same place three or four days or at least a weekend, and as soon as you got there, soon as you got your baits out, you started stacking wood for a fire, get a fire going. Then as long as you were there, everybody walked around and picked up all the trash and put it in that camp fire and burned it off. And hell, it'd be half a mile of beach would be cleaned from one shark camp. You can tell where the shark fishermen had been. Then, in the nineties, you can tell where the shark fishermen had been by the mound of trash he left. The new breed shark fishermen, and that's the direction it was going in. And so, I had a couple, from Arkansas, that were looking at the Coastal Bend as a very high potential for where they wanted to move to, to retire. And as soon as we hit the beach, that woman started sniveling about that trash. I kept explaining it's a conversion occurrence in the western Gulf of Mexico, da dee da. And finally, she told me, "Billy, we're not going to move here. The reason we're not is people don't care anything about this place. And I said, now wait a minute, most of this trash doesn't come from here. It comes from somewhere else. She said doesn't make any difference, it is here ain't it? The local community does not care enough, does not have enough pride or self-respect to clean it up. I never could crawl out of that hole she put me in. I felt the burden of that. So, when I was a kid I asked him, "Why is all that trash down there?" He said, "It's too big of a job to get it out." They went to the moon! Going to the moon wasn't too big of a job, but the trash was still in the Big Shell. I think it speaks for itself. Nobody cares. Do you know that we have no participation in the Big Shell cleanup from the business community on Padre Island whatsoever? None. Very few volunteers that live on Padre Island, but they're the ones ringing in cash registers up. Not us. I mean, we got farmers from Orange Grove picking up their trash. My papa told me—he asked me something and I said, "Aw, you can't do it." He said, "Boy, let me explain something to you. Don't let nobody tell you is there is anything you can't do, because you can do anything. But you have to be willing to suffer the consequences that come from that action. If you want to jump off the Empire State Building, by God, you can, but you have to accept the fact that you're going to land." So, the Feds said it couldn't be done. They told me, "You're nuts!"

**JB:** The Padre Island National Seashore?

**BS:** Superintendent of national seashore Butch Farabee. He said, “Billy I love you to death and you’ve absolutely finally lost it. Ain’t nobody can go down there and get all that trash.” I said, “Do I have your permission to try?” He said, “Absolutely. But it will never work.” So, the day of the first cleanup I took the southernmost section of volunteers, we did the southernmost section, my section did. About two o’clock in the afternoon, Butch Farabee, the Superintendent drove up on us handing out hot dogs and he said, “Well kiss my back side you pulled it off.” So, it’s never been possible, it’s always been impossible. We don’t worry about it we just do it. One year on the t-shirt, they had me and, it said “shut up, suit up, show up and pick up the trash.” That’s it. I mean that’s the whole story right there. I don’t want to hear all that whining stuff. No reason for it. So, we can’t do anything unless we make an effort. We’re not going to make an effort unless it’s a priority. We have this booming tourist industry which we supplement with this horrendous industrial complex over here. It’s not like that can’t go away. You know, when it becomes too unpleasant come, people quit coming...

**JB:** What do you think the success of the cleanup can be attributed to? I mean, it’s grown quite a bit, hasn’t it?

**BS:** First year, we had three hundred people. Then we had as many as maybe one year we had five hundred? I’m not sure—four hundred anyway. Then last year we had seven hundred, and this year we had seven hundred and fifty. Eight years ago, I started this Friends of Padre non-profit C3 group whose primary function is to carry out the Big Shell cleanup. I knew I could only individually take it so far, and I knew I was way behind. I’ve never been on Facebook in my life. I have no intention of going on Facebook, and I don’t text. I laugh in that Machete movie, when that Chicano tells him, “Machete, no text.” Well Billy, no text. I won’t even answer one. I knew I could only carry this so far. Like I said, I’m fixing to be seventy, my health is shot, and I wanted this event to survive me. I found a group, I handpicked these boys one at a time, heavy in the marine biology aspects of it, and they’ve taken on several other jobs too. We do the highway from Whitecap to Commodore. We do the Burners Without Boundaries [Borders] cleanup down there in Kleberg County. We gave Tony Amos ten thousand dollars one year for the ARK [Animal Rehabilitation Keep]. We gave the turtle people fifteen thousand something one year. These were contributions that we received, and we participate in things like this Earth Day, Bay Day that’s coming up, we will be there. Now I may try to scrounge out of that one. That many kids makes me nervous. It appeals to people because it’s an adventure. Because it is something out of the ordinary. It’s something that makes them feel good about themselves. The feeling when you come off that beach, and you drive all those miles without a piece of trash freaks people out. They nail themselves when they see all that wonderful beach the way it’s supposed to be. Buddy Gulf was our outdoor editor the first year I did the cleanup, and he was my hunting and fishing buddy and...

**JB:** At the *Caller* [Corpus Christi *Caller-Times*]?

**BS:** Yes. He helped me a lot because he thought he could get a good story. Buddy did a lot of articles with me. He said, “I was good ink, colorful.” And he told me—I said Buddy quit using my name so much and promote the damned event for itself. And he says, “Let me explain something to you. Any event that exists long term is tied directly to some person. The public has to have a name and a face to put on it and it will come. I know how you are, but if you’re not willing to accept that let the cards fall where they may. If you want that event to succeed long term, then you have to put up with the foolishness.” And that’s the only reason I ever did. It’s always irritated me that my name’s up here. I don’t want my name up there, never did. I’m not trying to impress anybody. I have told kids for thirty years I do not want to be your hero. I want you to be your hero. That’s my goal. Isn’t that I become your hero, but I want you to be your hero.

**JB:** What sort of people show up to help you with the cleanup?

**BS:** Everybody from Bandito bikers, to soccer moms, to PhDs and doctors, to Canadian snowbirds that are waddling. We were just talking about the demographics. Had to chew my way through that one of the cleanup, and we put a little questionnaire in their grab bag, to try to learn what we can about our volunteers. What we found out in the last two years, is eighty percent of them are first timers. We’re very heavy in the forty to fifty age group. Families are big. People trying to lead by example.

**JB:** Do you have any memorable experiences with this cleanup?

[Tape interruption]

**JB:** Okay, we are back with Captain Billy. He’s just showing me a bottle he found at one of the Big Shell cleanups from two Dutchmen on a freighter off of the coast of Venezuela.

**BS:** They wanted my reaction to it. I thought about it, but my reaction was that they needed to quit throwing Bacardi bottles in the ocean, you know, so I decided I forgo sending them a reply. But we find it all—beaver-chewed logs out of the Mississippi River. This time we found a little cocaine. Last year we found a little cocaine. We found a baby green sea turtle wrapped up in a piece of shrimp boat net bag one time. All kinds of stuff. You name it, we find it. Oh, I think the best one: bowling ball with barnacles on it.

**JB:** How does a bowling ball get in there?

**BS:** Currents brought it in and rode across the bottom. I guess some roughneck was sick and tired of his poor game at bowling, and so he took his ball out there and drowned it. Threw it off a platform and it rolled all the way to the beach. I’ll never forget that. It was kind of a maroon color.



**JB:** Hm. I suppose you find interesting stuff all the time out there?

**BS:** Oh yeah, there's no telling. I found countless bails of marijuana out there. I found as much as eighty-one pounds of cocaine. One time I drove up on two-masted schooner—very high end with a very stately, elderly, white-headed couple sitting on a poop deck, drinking martinis and playing gin, sitting on the sandbar. They had set the automatic pilot on, and went to bed, and of course the shoreline curves, and they didn't take that into consideration, so they ran the ground at the forty-mile marker and they were waiting on the Coast Guard to pull them off. I think they said they were from Massachusetts. I see it all- lot of the illegal activities.

**JB:** I heard in Shane Bonnot's CCA podcast that you were a DEA [Drug Enforcement Administration] informant out there?

**BS:** Mm-hm.

**JB:** How did that happen?

**BS:** Well, I used to be a Deputy Marshal. I was one of the original sky marshals that flew on airplanes. We also did pre-departure inspections that required us to work for the Bureau of Customs. To make arrests in international airspace, we had to be US Marshals. So, we had dual authority. I worked as a Customs Air Security Officer. During the later time of that program, I was working out in Tucson, and they shut down us going on flights because some Congressman's wife got insulted at a cocktail party about armed assassins on U.S. flagship aircraft. We were working desert detail anti-drug in the Arizona desert on an Indian reservation, Navajo Indian Reservation. I had quite a bit of experience. Then one day on the charter I had a customer who ended up being an ex-sky marshal that I used to work with in New York City. But he was currently the head DEA agent in Corpus. So, I began to point out some of the things to him including two dopers and he put me on a payroll as an undercover informant. I also over a period of time worked with the Coast Guard and with Customs. I knew that place was my living room, you know, and I know who should be there and who was out of place. I knew who was dirty. I'd just get a license number and tell them, and they'd run a check and the guy would be hotter than hell. It would go down there and set up an ambush this side of where he was. When he'd come off, they'd pop him, and he'd have a load.

**JB:** So, the smuggling work is just people driving down the beach? Or on boats?

**BS:** They would run pangas full of dope right up on the beach, and offload it into vehicles, and used to- back in the day they would just bury it on the backside of the fore dune, cover it with a tarp, plastic tarp, shovel sand over it, and get a GPS coordinate on it, and then take a coke can and turn it upside down; stick it on a stick then stick it right there. The guy would come down the next day in his vehicle. He had the same GPS coordinate that they did. It was all predetermined. He had to dig up his dope and take it in. But we got to busting too many of them, so they got to offloading directly onto vehicles. It was a little more dicey, and a little more interesting, and I'm an old adrenaline freak anyway so I ended up. It was hilarious because PINS didn't know I was working as

an informant for defense. Which suited me because park rangers are not trained in drug enforcement. They're supposed to be Smokey the Bear. A lot of times they did a rather poor job of it. Then he resigned, or he retired, and when he retired, the new agent in charge did not have as much interest as he had. The amount of federal activity down there declined steeply. Now I think Homeland Security and Border Patrol's doing it, from my understanding, and they don't coordinate with the seashore either. We would do operations down there. There'd be ten DEA agents down there spread over fifty miles.

**JB:** With the amount of traffic, you'd think it'd be hard to do now with all the people going down there.

**BS:** You transfer the dope at night and drive out in the crowd. Those guys are extraordinary seamen. They have no fear. They can't make a living in Mexico. They have hunter-gathered Mexico to death. I've been to places in the Sierra Madre, down south of Veracruz where the acres would be this deep. There's no deer to eat them because they've eaten every deer there a hundred years ago, and Texas Parks and Wildlife, and I think other states, have given them deer—taken deer down there to reestablish populations. Mexicans just shoot them and eat them. They can't get a foothold, so you'll see the most beautiful streams and small rivers and creeks and there's not a sign of life in them. Never seen a sign of a fish. They ate them all. I got tickled, we were in a little place called Gómez Farías in the Sierra Madre, and my buddy asked this Mexican, he spoke Spanish and I didn't, he asked him about rattlesnakes and he said, "there used to be a lot of rattlesnakes but this guy down in San Luis Potosí, this nopales cutter. A rattlesnake tried to bite him. He whacked his head off with a *machete*, and he was hungry, so he just cooked him and ate him. He was good and now you can't find a rattlesnake in San Luis Potosí."

**JB:** I think that most of my questions have been answered. Do you have anything to add? Anything that I might of missed?

**BS:** I don't know what it'd be, hun. The whole thing here is this: from my perspective this is our mother, the earth. We breed like fire ants. We have no respect. It's been headed that way. When the white man came here, he was amazed that all these Indians were living here, and you can still drink the water. Two hundred years later you can't drink the water. And you hadn't been able to drink the water in Europe for two hundred years before that. They got here and did the same damn thing as they did there. I think the important thing is if we lose it, it can't be recovered. We can't get it back. We have to do something to turn that around because we can never get it back. The Native American believed in the spiral of life. He believed that life was a series of lines, one within the other in a circle. They were all evenly spaced, and everything was running as it should. Every time someone did something against mother earth, it moved two of those lines out of position and squeezed them in some places and made them larger than others. Finally, when that balance was so distorted that you couldn't recognize it, the system would no longer function. He believed that every time someone did something good for mother earth, it helped to restore those lines. I just make sure I'm on the side of restoring those lines. True story.

**JB:** All right, thank you. I'm going to turn this off now.