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Corpus Christi, Texas

JB: It is April 11, 2017. This is Jen Brown. I'm here with Dr. David McKee and we're in Corpus Christi, Texas, to talk about his work as a biologist, his history fishing and growing up in the area. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

DM: Absolutely.

JB: Okay. Perhaps a good starting point—can you tell me about your early life and growing up in Sinton?

DM: Growing up in South Texas, I was pretty much raised by my grandparents and my mother—her parents. My grandfather was an old time South Texas sheriff. He was in law enforcement forty-four years. We had bloodhounds. It was really cool because my mother and her siblings lived in the jail. My grandmother cooked for the prisoners. I got to grow up, be raised by grandparents who were both born in the 1800s. So, it was all about fishing and hunting and dogs and just a very, very, very cool upbringing that I had here in South Texas.

JB: Did your grandfather teach you how to fish and hunt?

DM: Taught me how to fish and hunt and shoot and braid leather and sharpen knives and sharpen an axe and how to train dogs. We had regular training sessions where we would take prisoners out of the jail, take them out in the country, let them run a couple of miles to a destination that was decided before and climb a tree. We would come in like thirty minutes later with the dogs and let the dogs train by tracking these people to the tree. We did that about once every two or three months. So very cool. Very cool.

JB: [Both laughing] And the prisoners just agreed to this?

DM: They would agree to it because it was a day out in nature, and they weren't about to run away because they knew dogs would find them eventually. So, there wasn't any real danger of escapes. Usually all they wanted was a pack of cigarettes or something like that. But a day of exercise out in the field. I got to enjoy all of this stuff as a little kid with my grandfather. So yeah, a very, very deep-seated history in fishing and hunting, and anything outdoors.

JB: Where did you go to hunt and fish? Just around Sinton?

DM: Just around Sinton. I had uncles—all of his sons—my uncles were big hunters and fishermen. We would go down into Laredo and hunt down there. Mostly we just hunted around Sinton on some of the ranches around there.

JB: Did you fish freshwater or saltwater?

DM: Fished both. Started out as a kid fishing in the Aransas River over near north of Sinton. Had a lot of fishing in the local bays, fishing on the gulf piers, fishing down the beach, surf fishing down there. One of my uncles came back from World War II and bought a jeep like so many GIs did, and he loved to fish. So, we were some of the really, really early people that started surf fishing down Padre Island. We even had a little shack down there. We fished the bays, we fished the rivers, we fished anything that had water in it, basically. Freshwater and salt.

JB: What was the fishing like when you were growing up?

DM: Fishing was very good, very good. Don't know if it was really any better than it is now. It would be almost impossible to say. But we always caught fish. I think the big difference was that there were very few people that fished in those days. I say that in relation to how many people fish today. There may have been a greater abundance of fish at that time, but we always caught fish. We always ate fish probably two or three times a week. It was just a part of life, fishing. Both for food and for just enjoyment, recreation.

JB: Could you talk about Padre Island? So, you were some of the first surf fishermen there? This was before it became a national seashore.

DM: Yes. This was before, well, my uncle came back from World War II in probably '46 or so and bought an old flat-top Willys jeep. He started fishing there in the late forties, and then by the mid-fifties, I was old enough to be taken along. And that was before the national seashore, so to get down to Padre Island, you had to go in at Bob Hall Pier out here, that's where you'd hit the beach, and then you just ran down, as opposed now where you come in at Malaquite. It was quite a drive just to get to Yarborough Pass which would have been thirty, thirty-five miles, I guess, from Bob Hall Pier. That was a long, grinding, four-wheel drive trip in those days. We'd go to the cabin which was one room with no screens on the windows, no door but a cut-out for the door, and stayed there three or four days fishing. I was little, so I don't remember all that much, but I don't ever remember seeing another car go by. I'm sure there were cars, but we felt like we could have been on the moon, we were so far away. We would have sort of little family reunions down there, where we would have the big beach seines, and those would be anywhere from four to—I don't know if we ever had the eight-hundred-foot nets. You'd take one end out with a boat and go way out around, and then people would grab that end of the net. You'd have both ends and you would just pull the net in up onto the beach. We would have little family reunions where there would be a couple of families—my mother's family that would go down and do that. Women, kids, men, the whole bit—to pull the net in. It was just a lot of fun. A lot of fun.

JB: And then just fry up the fish and—

DM: Fry up the fish and bring a lot of fish home. Don't remember ever getting stuck down there, but I'm sure we did. But, great fun. Great memories.

JB: Um, so what about the gear you used fishing?

DM: The gear—?

JB: What sort of gear and lures, and that sort of thing did you use?

DM: Well, in those days there was very little lure fishing. It was all pretty much bait—live bait, dead bait, cut bait, shrimp, mullet, croaker, whiting—whatever we could get and put a knife to is what we used for bait. But I guess the real desired bait, regardless, was always live shrimp. Seemed like you could always catch something on live shrimp. The rods and reels were very basic. Before you leave, I'd like to show you some of this. I collect old fishing tackle and lures, so I'll show you a little bit of that. But I really didn't start lure fishing until probably the seventies. I've written a lot about the lure companies that started here in Corpus Christi, been published on those companies. The five companies that started here in Corpus Christi are largely responsible for saltwater fishing in the other gulf states, Pacific and Atlantic, because of the companies that started here in Corpus Christi and very aggressively marketing their fishing lures. A couple of the companies had traveling salesmen selling the lures made here in Corpus Christi and all five gulf states, as far up the Atlantic coast as the Carolinas. So, lure fishing in saltwater didn't really start on any grand scale probably until the 1960s and I didn't start using lures really until the 1970s. Pretty much since that time I've used nothing but artificials. No bait. All artificial lures for fishing. It's really a good feeling to know that you can, rather than use bait, you can fool a fish into thinking it's fixing to eat something that's manmade. It's kind of fun.

JB: Do you fly fish as well?

DM: I don't fly fish. I've always had so much of a love for the revolving spool reel that I just—I've got fly equipment. I've caught fish on fly rods, both fresh and saltwater, but I just don't—It doesn't turn me on like fishing, like wade fishing with a lure, with a regular revolving spool reel. That's really my weapon of choice.

JB: What do you enjoy about it so much?

DM: About the fishing?

JB: Yeah.

DM: I think it's just such great therapy. When I'm doing almost anything else, I'm probably halfway thinking while I'm—like in the yard yesterday I was working, and I was working in the yard but at the same time probably eighty percent of my thoughts were about, "Oh, I need to pay this bill, I need to take the dog over there, I need to do this." When I'm fishing, it's one hundred percent. There's none of that, "Where am I supposed to be, what am I supposed to be doing." It's all about right now. It's kind of exhausting because it tends to just pull all of the stress right out through the hands and the reel and the line, out to the lure. I just feel cleansed when I've come in from a day of fishing.

JB: How did your love of fishing translate to becoming a fisheries biologist?

DM: Good question. Good question, Jen. Well, growing up in a family that was all about hunting and fishing, I knew from a very young age I was going to make, one way or another, a living out of hunting or fishing. I really knew it wasn't going to be hunting because hunting was very much regulated by seasons. You could only hunt turkeys and dove and quail and deer during a time of the year. At that time, like it still is, there's no season in the water. If they're there, you can go catch them. So, I knew I would have a career, one way or another, in fishing or a water-related career. But I was so young I didn't know what that meant, I just knew that that's what I was going to do. The day I got out of high school, the next day after graduation ceremony, I went over to Conn Brown Harbor at Aransas Pass and hired on a gulf shrimp boat. And that was an experience. The first trip we went on [coughs] we were supposed to be gone three to five days. Thirty days later, we pull into a Houma, Louisiana, outrunning a storm. I couldn't wait to get off that boat, but I couldn't do it because there was only one bus a week and it had just left the day before for a Lake Charles. So, I had to go back out on that boat. I think we were gone about another week and then we got back into Aransas Pass. I got off the boat and I thought, "I'll never get on one of these again." The guys were mean to me, they were all kinds of things. A week later, I was back on the boat. I loved it, I just didn't realize it at the time. I became such good buddies with the shrimper, the captain, and the rigger—he's the one who works the nets. As much fun as I had and what an experience that was for me, I knew that I was not going to be a gulf shrimper. The rigger on our boat had been shrimping forty-four years, and he absolutely was seasick the whole time he was out. But that's all he knew and that's what he had to do. He lived in a burnt-out car body that just sat on the ground at Conn Brown Harbor up on the ridge there, and he slept up under that—what you'd call today a homeless guy. But he was a professional shrimper. So, I knew I wasn't going to do that.

I was already accepted at Southwest Texas in San Marcos as a freshman, so I went there and was a biology major. I ended up not doing very well there, so they asked me to leave. I was very naïve. Ended up graduating at Kingsville with a degree in biology. Got my master's degree out here in 1980. CCSU and then I got my doctorate up at College Station, in mariculture, shrimp farming is what my specialty was. But, I always, along the way. I had been a biologist for Texas Parks and Wildlife over at the Rockport marine lab, loved that work. I got to work offshore, did shrimp tagging off shore, we tagged red snapper, we tagged mackerel, we did all kinds of really cool stuff. But, I had, before that, I had received a teaching degree and I actually taught public school, high school and middle school out at Flour Bluff. And, even though I didn't want to be a school teacher in the public schools, I knew I wanted to be a teacher. So, having left Parks and Wildlife, I left Parks and Wildlife because I had applied to College Station. Keep in mind, I was married, I owned a house, we had two children, and we kind of had that family grouping and said look I kind of like to go back to school again for my doctorate because I really want to teach, but I can't teach without that in college. So, the family said, "Okay, dad goes back to school again." You know one of those deals. So, I applied to College Station and they accepted me. So, I moved the whole family up to College Station. And to make a long story short, I got my job first job teaching at A&M Corpus and I got my masters there. So, I really never left out there, but I got my… I started in 1977 taking classes, and in 1985 with my doctorate, I started teaching as a full-time faculty member as a marine biologist. So, from all the way as hunting and fishing as a kid and running around the bays and river, and gulf beach and all of that, working on a shrimp boat, I finally found my niche and that was to be a teacher in college, teaching marine biology and fisheries. So, it just worked out so well, Jen. Back when I got my first job with CCSU, I mean it was basically very simple by today's standards of how you go about doing a faculty search and all those kinds of things. Back in those days, if you found somebody that appeared to be right for the job, and seemed to interact okay with the faculty, and our faculty at that time was ten people, in science, chemistry, biology, so forth. They just kind of had a faculty meeting of faculty, you came there, gave your little spiel, on why you would like to work there and what you would do, all those kind of things, they ask you to leave the room and they show of hands to hire this bloke, and you know I was hired. And thirty years later, it went so fast, so fast. I'm sitting after thirty years I've been retired four years, so now I'm sitting here talking about, in a nutshell, my life, but you know absolutely wonderful though, my experiences with the university. I never fail to tell parents of young people that came in to look at with their child, to look at A&M as a prospective place for their child to go, I said look I was not on as master student I would've gone anywhere in the United States to get a degree in marine biology. I said, "I found one, I found the best possible university and it was right here in my hometown." I said the same thing for my career, I would've gone anywhere to have a job teaching marine biology, but I didn't have to go anywhere because the best university was right here in my hometown, and I really mean that. So that was a lot of fun. Not checking out yet. But really had a great career and all of it really stims back to my grandfather, my uncles, and my mother was quite a fisherman. Oh, she loved fish. Everything I've done really was because of the great experiences I had as a young person. It took me a while to get my head on straight, because I had grown up with my grandparents who were in the Church of Christ and there was no nonsense, no dancing, no nothing, and when I got out of high school, I kind of went crazy because I [Laughter] been kind of deprived of a lot of things. So, when I got into college, I discovered beer, I discovered women. And all of these things had not really been in place, so it took me a couple of years really of stumbling around to get my bearings. But, once I found out all you got to do is go to class all the time, you got to take notes and keep up, and you cannot study for exams the night before. Once I figured all that out I went straight As all the way through to my doctorate. I grew up with a few stumbling blocks, but guess I can say I was kind of a late bloomer, but I'm glad it worked out the way it did.

JB: Can you talk, maybe go back and talk about your experiences here as a student? And this was when it was Corpus Christi State University.

DM: Corpus Christi State. Yeah, and just a note my wife was one of the, it was before CCSU. I think it was for two years, two years only, it was after UCC, which is University of Corpus Christi, then it was Texas A&I University at Corpus Christi. And my wife got one of the few degrees that was granted out here with that at A&I-Corpus. It was very small, there was just marine biology, there was one professor and that was Wes Tunnell, and before him, there had been one professor, and that was Henry Hildebrand and not only was Hildebrand a big influence on Wes, but also on me. I only had one class with Dr. Hildebrand but far as the experience that you're asking about out here, it was very small, had one chemistry teacher.[At this point, his wife comes into the room.]
JB: Hi.

HM: Hi.

DM: This is Jennifer Brown. This is Jane.

HM: Nice to see you. I want to know. Did David offer you anything to drink?

DM: I haven't yet.

JB: I'm good though. Thank you.

HM: Are you sure? We have a little variety.

JB: He was just saying that you have a degree from Texas A&I Corpus Christi.

HM: I do. And one of the few, what was it like three or four years, if that.

DM: If that long.

HM: If that long yeah.

JB: Neat. [Laughter]

HM: Yes. [Laughter] Scrap for a scavenger hunt. [Laughter]

JB: Right, because of the name change.

HM: I'm going to leave y'all. I'm going to run some errands.

DM: So, it was a very small faculty. We had one person who taught chemistry, we had one person that taught various other biology courses, and then Wes Tunnell. But the thing that I think is still going on out there Hildebrand did it, Tunnell did it, I did it. I did it much longer than Hildebrand did, I did it much longer than Wes did, because he went on and did other things at the university. But, what everybody kind of focused on, was you know, you're going to learn a lot out of books but you're really going to learn most in biology out in nature, but so do both. Don't blow the books off, study the books, learn the books, but get out and really apply it in nature, so that was the neat thing I like and I think it has been the reason that so many of our graduates, even at the undergraduate level, have done so well because they know how to run a boat, they know how to work a four-wheel drive, they know how to do this, they know how to do that, they know all their fish, they know their plants. They know the terrestrial plants, they know their aquatic plants, so they're the jack of all trades. I like the aspect of lot of field work, a lot of lab work, and a lot of course work. But the three combined was just wonderful. And what was so good about it for me was that, when I went to apply for a job with Texas Parks and Wildlife, I kind of had all the tools that they wanted a new employee to have. We learned how to write, too, technical writing, that is something I continued to for over twenty-five years and I was able to produce this monster paper every semester, and it is edited like it was being submitted for publication, even though what they produced was not suitable for publication, they at least learned the rigors of the assembling data analyzing data and putting it all in the text, all of that was a very good experience for me. And I think, I think some of the younger faculty out there are still carrying that on, Jennifer Pollack, I don't know if you met her.

JB: I don't think we've met.

DM: She took over my marine ecology class and she's doing the exact things same things the experiences that I did. So, it's a lot of get out in the field and do it and then get back in the lab and work it out then get on the computer and write it up. So, that was a very good experience for me.

JB: Do you have any memorable experiences from any of your field trips as a student or as a teacher?

DM: Yeah, one time, and I think about this quite often, we used to use straight formalin, which is from formaldehyde that's diluted down, and we had just ran by the seat of our pants back in the days as far as we didn't carry safety equipment, first aid kits, none of that, we just winged it back in the old days. One day we were seining in what is now Packery Channel, that was before Packery was open, probably back in the early eighties, and we were catching fish and putting the fish in this formalin, and now you can't even have formalin out the lab. It's pretty bad. Anyway, we carried gallons of it out in the field, and we were taking these live fish and throwing them in formaldehyde to preserve them and this one girl threw a real lively perch into some of that and she was very close to it and the fish hit the formaldehyde, it came up and just got all in her eyes and mouth and nose and everything. She started screaming. And I thought, my goodness, we, this girl is going to be blind just from the that formalin got in her eyes. We put her on the sand and we had drinking water with us, so we just liberally washed her eyes out, just flooded, irrigated her eyes, and everything was fine. But I think to this day, I think, oh my goodness, we came out of that one so lucky that the girl wasn't impaired, so after that, I never allowed any formalin on the trips, and as we learned more from the lab people that shouldn't even be out in the labs. But you know that's the way we did it in the old days.

JB: Sounds scary.

DM: [Laughter] Yeah it was, it was very scary.

JB: What did students like about those trips when you went out?

DM: Well many of them had never been out on the bay, so many of them had never been fishing, so many of them have never been on a boat, and yet so many of them live in Corpus Christi. So, it was like you know, "What?" And that was kind of hard for me to understand because we were just raised on the water and around the water. So, it was always just a, for probably for twenty-five percent of the class that had never done any of that, it was so rewarding to introduce them to a lot of these experiences, and show them how to throw a cast net, or how to pull a seine, and what's out there. And bring it up on the beach and identify it and put it back in the water or whatever. I think those, those memories of those students getting to experience that, whether it was the first time or they already done a lot of that growing up in a family, where similar to mine, which was all about hunting and fishing. I think, regardless, something that probably stuck with them, and I know now with Facebook and being able to keep up with a lot of students, you can see now that they have children or are married, they are doing that with their children. Probably because they got to experience that themselves, and got to see how much fun it was for the learning experience it was. So that was very rewarding I think for them and me.

JB: Can you maybe describe the research side of things? How would you describe your scientific work as a whole?

DM: Well most of my scientific work—what I did was teach, right off the bat. I was not a researcher, per say. When I hired [unclear] that was what I was supposed to do with no research requirements. But of course, we all knew you know, that the old publisher perish was going to be there regardless, and if we were going to move up into the ranks, through the ranks, we would have to do it. So, I was able to capture a lot of grants very easily through the Coastal Conservation Association. I was one of the founding members of that organization. And they were just like the field station, Laguna Madre field station. I was able to get, oh I don't know, twenty thousand, thirty thousand, forty thousand, I don't know, to help build that into what it is now. I was able to get a lot of paid internships for students throughout the years. So much of my research was focused on mariculture, shrimp farming, fish farming. I think my biggest contributions in the research side were pretty much students. No doubt about it. I would use, at one time- I don't think this record will ever be broken- at one time, I was on fifty-five graduate student committees. [Laughter] Fifty-five. Now, as you would imagine, being on that many I was mostly a member or a co-chair, to be able to be on that many. But, so you know when the publications would come about I would be an author, kind of an ex-officio or whatever. But, I think my biggest accomplishments have been in the books that I've done. I've got, of course, the *Texas Fishers in the Laguna Madre*. Have you seen the *Fire in the Sea*? Then I've got a lab book on the fishes of the Gulf of Mexico, it's an identification key that I did with two of my ex-students. And I've got a third book. I guess we can almost say in press. It's up at A&M Press up in College Station, it's called *Fishes of the Rainbow*, and it's about using the arts from Hank Compton rather than being deep sea or being the beige audit's very colorful, coral reef fish. I think my real contributions have been through several of my writings. I've done lots of writings; magazines, CCA magazines, the *TIDE* magazine, I've had a number of articles in there, and my stuff has always been not what you call research, but more popular writing. I think that's where I've always had my greatest interest, end. I think it would be very difficult for somebody like me to come in as a new professor and have to go out and immediately identify something that you can put your name on, that you're going to be able to write through a career by continuing to have to search for grant money. And I never wanted to do that, and I was fortunate enough to where, back in the day, we were paid to teach and that's what we did. So that's a pressure I guess on everybody that comes in still, even more so every year probably. And I never would have done very well under that kind of pressure. [Laughter]

JB: Can you talk about the process of writing *Fishes of the Texas Laguna Madre* and *Fire in the Sea*? How did those start?

DM: Yeah, well, of course Fishes of the Texas Laguna Madre was when Dr. Hildebrand died, Wes Tunnell ended up with several boxes, cardboard boxes, of something that looked like it might eventually become a book. So, he said, "David why don't you take these cardboard boxes and see what this is all about." And of course, so much of Hildebrand's stuff is now up in the archives in the Bell Library. There's like forty cardboard boxes up there full of his stuff. Anyway, so I took the boxes and immediately noticed that there were all of these pen and ink drawings of fishes in saltwater, primarily what occur in the upper Laguna Madre, the Mexican Laguna Madre. And Henry had a little text written about each one of these fish, but it was stuff that would never make for a book. It would say, okay, here's a red drum, we caught this and the salinity was 38.33, water temperature was twenty degrees centrigrade. So, I took the art and nothing else, and just started putting together the life history of these fish and I tried to tell a story of personal experience that I had with those fish in the book. So, what started out as something that we didn't know was going to be in the box, or boxes, were all of these hand drawings by Henry Compton, who had been a graduate student of Doctor Hildebrand's back in the fifties, who had drawn all this stuff. Hildebrand had it, put it in a box and thought he would someday publish something, I don't know, it was all scientific data, silent data and stuff like that - so I said "nobody is going to read a book that tells what the salinity was and what the temperature was when he caught the thing". So, I had so much experience in the Laguna Madre already, I had taught at Flour Bluff, number one, so many of my kids that I have taught were the children of commercial fisherman. I had three students that came to school barefooted. They had a skiff tied up down at the boat dock, they would walk to school, they were in a kind of special ed class that I started out teaching, a vocational class I should say, not special ed. And when they would get done with school, they would get out they would go back and get in their boats and they would run their trotlines. So, I had an early experience with these kids that lived out there on the water and went to school, so I had that experience. I started fishing the Laguna Madre in the seventies with lures. In the late 1970s, I bought into a cabin down at Baffin Bay. I just had all of these great experiences already with the upper Laguna Madre so when I got this lot of books boxes with this stuff in it I thought man, I'm going to highlight Compton's art and I'm not going to use any of Hildebrand's stuff because there was nothing there and I'm just going to start writing about these fishes, and how they live and what they eat and when they breed and then try to add a story about my personal experiences with that species of fish, and I wrote about the worm rocks at Baffin, the history of freezes and salinity kills in the Laguna Madre. I'm very, very proud of that book because it just allowed me to take years of—Oh! And then I was a biologist with Texas Parks and Wildlife in the upper Laguna Madre. So, I had so many connections with the upper Laguna and to be able to take those paintings by Compton and put all that together, focusing only art and I was just very, very proud of that work. And I continue with Compton's art because I've got over, well over, a hundred pieces of his art that I got from his sister, so I own the art, and we are doing basically the third book on Hank Compton, who was a real character.

JB: Some of those descriptions that he writes about the paintings in *Fire in the Sea-*

DM: Oh, good for you!

JB: I was just very, very curious. How did you feel when you came across all those paintings and stories originally?

DM: Oh! It's like pinch yourself. Am I really reading this? Let me back up and say- everybody knew who Hank Compton was, but he was very standoffish. And I remember him quite well because he worked on the same boat that I worked on at Rockport. But we were about ten years apart- so I well knew who he was, and I knew he ran the pier out here at Oso Pier by the university. And, uh where am I going with this? The Compton was just… it was a lovely opportunity to tell about the man, to tell about the Laguna Madre and to know that I was in the driver's seat to kind of push it along in the direction. I felt it needed it to go with full support from Texas A&M Press. They really liked that. But when I opened the box and saw - I mean it was unbelievable, the box, there were two boxes probably both of them together would be about the size of this chest. When we opened them up, I sat down on the floor- and I could stretch this out if you want a little bit about how it worked. I had already done the book on the Texas Laguna Madre, and got to know his sister in-law. That's the only surviving family member he has. He has since died. Got to know her pretty well and she called me up after the book had come out and everything else and said "David I just remembered I've got some boxes out there in the garage" that when Henry, we called him Henry they called him Hank, that Henry died pretty much alone, by himself- drank himself to death. Nobody knew he did painting. Totally untrained, but he could paint what the eye could see. She said "why don't you come over and we'll open these boxes." So, I went over to Helen's house, we sat down on the floor and she had already gotten them out of the garage- open these up and here are probably 175 paintings, like this, all organized, paper clipped, polaroid pictures of each one, everything organized, almost to a fault. It was crazy. But to answer your question, I looked, turned, just to see what was on the top one, there was the painting and below that was a polaroid picture of that painting that he had taken over the kitchen table, and then he had all of that text written on each fish. And when I started reading that text that he had written about that fish, I just thought oh my goodness I'm going to have to read this three or four times I think, to get the true meaning of what Henry is trying to say and when I did It was just like I've opened something here that is just absolutely splendid. And it gave me an insight at what I was getting into, which was the world of Hank Compton. One of the co-authors with me on this *Fire in the Sea* and *Fishes of the Rainbow*, her specialty and contributions in this book is to interpret those writings that you're talking about, that he's writing about, that fish or whatever. Because she has gotten to know Compton so well that we did an excerpt, we didn't print everything the he wrote about that fish, but she had a wonderful way of doing exactly what Henry was saying- Hank- and said ok we have eight pages of this writing on Hank, but we just need to pull two paragraphs out of that to put it in the book. So, we are all still just- when we get together and talk the co-authors, we just marvel at how good Compton was at describing something, the way he would describe it, the words he would use. He was so well spoken. He knew a lot of history. I hope some of the people reading that book are as enamored with Hanks writing as those of us who were able to put that work together. Some of it I still don't quite know what he's saying there. But I keep going back to reading it and eventually I will figure out what he is trying to say. What's your impression of that?

JB: What I found interesting was when he was talking about people he will refer to them as the biologist or he's talking about fish as people in certain instances.

DM: Which we think that was Dr. Hildebrand.

JB: So, have you been able to identify any of these people in his life?

DM: Obviously, there were some family members in there, and Helen, his brother, he had a brother Bill Compton who, interestingly, was a commercial fisherman out in the Laguna Madre. So, Hank was a biologist and his brother was a commercial fisherman. Those are opposing forces, but Helen is mentioned a couple of times by name and also called "sister in law." Other than the captain and biologist mentioned. I believe it's all people close to him. I found he would talk to the fish and the fish would talk to him or the fish would talk to each other. We put the art first, then hanks well thought out remarks about the arts. To appreciate that image that you have looking at you, which is a fish at a half mile down. You will have a better understanding of what you're looking at if you read the text. That's why we've always allowed Jen free rein. If you take the Compton art and cut the text down that best describes that art, you will understand it. I was in awe about his way with words. Also reading that text helped them understand what they were looking at. We got his entire text transcribed if anyone ever wanted everything. We had to edit a lot out of there because it was not professional or politically correct. He was quite a character. He worked very much like Hildebrand, who didn't want to work for anyone which turned out to be his downfall. He did not want to be burdened with having to write reports or go to faculty meetings or anything like that. He wanted to do it on his own time. In the academic world it's not that way. He only taught out here for less than ten years. Then, he went to Kingsville to teach over there for a few years. He felt like if he didn't like it he would need to move on. In turn Compton was the same way, he was a trained biologist, worked offshore, and did neat stuff around the Gulf of Mexico and beyond. But he did not want to do what was required of a state job. Sometimes he would drink too much and be scheduled to work at ten in the morning but not show up until two in the afternoon. That doesn't settle well with the bosses, so Hank just decided to finally retire after feeling like he couldn't keep doing this type of job. They were both very eccentric in an academic way and both wanted to live life to the beat of their own drum. Henry and Compton were both very quiet although Compton was seen as a womanizer.

He was never married but if he was it was only for a short period of time. Also, he was a very heavy drinker. One good story is when they built the western gulf, which was the ship that allowed them to go out of the Gulf of Mexico, and sample for fish they had to get a lot of federal dollars to do that. For example, if you're working in shallow waters you don’t need very many winches to pull the cable in. But, if you're working in water a half mile deep you use a bigger cable than the other one. It required huge winches, so they had to buy logging winches from up north and bring them down to mount them on the boat. It ended up costing a lot of money. The story goes, and I believe it’s true because several people I’ve asked about it have said it was, if you wanted money you had to file a report on what you spent last year, and we didn’t want to do that. Even though we didn’t do anything wrong you have to write the report. Some of those reports for the federal grants can take many months. They were about a few weeks out and I called in the [unclear] and said "you have to keep this project going and write that report because it’s due in two weeks. Henry ran down to the liquor store and bought a bunch of quarts of whiskey, went home, and cranked that thing out in one weekend whilst drinking all the whiskey. Then, he brought it in to the regional director's desk on Monday morning and proceeded to throw it on the desk, walk out, and save the day. He was one of those old rough-cut men, he was trained as a biologist but wanted to do his own thing. He wasn’t trained to work for somebody, those people don't exist anymore, and Compton was one of them. So, I was one that was very fortunate to bring Henry into the limelight. Very much a loner, lived under the cut which is around the port and in the areas, they’re going to tear down for the new bridge. He lived in squalor. His sister would take food to him and pay his rent even though he never wanted food just beer and whiskey. But at the end of the day he would accept whatever it was she brought whether it was groceries or anything. The first book in under way and I want to meet the guy. I know where he lives, and I told Helen "I really want to meet Hank." We might've knew each other but not really. She said he won’t meet with me or anyone, but I was very persistent and kept asking. Finally, she said "okay I'll call him one more time." She called me back the next day and said "guess what? Henry said he will meet with you, but only for fifteen minutes." [laughter] So I thought Whoopie! I finally get to meet the man writing about. She said he would call me in the next couple of weeks. Then, she called me back a week later and said "David, Henry is dead." Hank had died in his apartment, but they didn't know. That didn't work out but what did work out was they sent someone in and When they went in all that was in there were paintings and stuff he had been working on, whiskey bottles and easels. He seemed like a mad man painting and drinking. He ended up drinking himself to death. They sent in a cleaning service to clean out the apartment and for some reason they didn’t throw away those two boxes Helen had in the garage they just said for her to get rid of everything. Evidently even though these boxes were still taped up with masking tape. They must've figured something important was in there being that they were so heavy. They set them out on the landing of this upstairs apartment and Helen happened to go over there to see what kind of a job the service had done and get the deposit back. Well there were those two boxes out on the landing and she took them with her, even though she didn’t know what was in them, and put them into her garage. That’s when she called me a year and a half later and said, "oh yeah I got these boxes out there." That's kind of a little bit deeper into how this book came out. I have one of the books based on the boxes Hildebrand had, but the other was based on this random chance that what was in these boxes would end up being another book and it was. Hank knew good and well that those two boxes were destined to be a book, the way he organized everything. But, there was nobody who knew about him ever publishing a book. It was just his organized, academic mind that you have something it's going to be very organized. I was able to get the book out of the Hildebrand boxes and then get two books out of the Compton boxes. Like I said, "I'm a historian too and my greatest accomplishment are those books. It's like being able to put into print something about these guys that are no longer here. Some of the things they did in terms of getting to go out there and pull nets up from down below deep water, pull them up on the deck, say "I don't know what these are" and take them to the lab in Rockport and photograph them. Then over the course of his life he would paint these ships. I'm so honored to be the one to introduce Hank Compton and Hildebrand to the world. So that's my history and I love it.

JB: Wow that's neat. One of the things I wanted to ask you about the fishes of Texas Laguna Madre is you talk about the Ananias fishing club.

DM: Ananias means liars club. [Both laughing] Fisherman are always lying about their catches. Can I tell you what that is?

JB: Yeah you can tell me what it is.

DM: It was after World War II, kind of like my uncles, a lot of GIs came back and started fishing and raising families. There were guys in Corpus that were using artificial lures only, because of the availability of them from those five companies in Corpus Christi. So, they formed a club called the Ananias and it was established in 1946. You had to fish with somebody, use artificials, fish with somebody in the club, which was thirty-three members, because they had to verify the catch. It's been active since 1946. I became aware of it back in the seventies and thought, "Oh gee, what a cool deal, wouldn't I like to be in something like that." But the deal was, I think I was the last member. There were no members brought in until one member died. And that's how new ones were brought in. So when McCracken, Dick McCracken, died at ninety-seven years of age, I was the one that was put up for membership at the club. So in fact, Thursday night, we're having our annual Ananias dinner here at the surf museum. And it is just, you know, there's now I guess our membership is probably forty five or so, and you know, somebody doesn't have to die to get in, things have changed. But it's young and mostly older guys that are, everybody doesn't fish anymore, a lot of the guys, some of the old timers are kind of in wheelchairs now and all that. But it's just something steeped in history. The Fishing club started in 1946 with artificial lures only. I mean that's pretty, about as cool as it gets. Probably the oldest club like that in the state of Texas. So, I'm so proud to be a member of that.

JB: The other thing I wanted to ask you about is your work with conservation and conservation organizations. How did you get involve in starting the CCA here?

DM: Well, you mentioned Redfish Wars. That was what a lot of us were dealing with back in the seventies, and the Laguna Madre was trying to get down south to Baffin Bay and dodging all of the trout lines that were strung up, especially on the west shore. The thing about that was, as soon as Parks and Wildlife started assembling some of the data in the late seventies, they started seeing very clearly that about 500 commercial fishermen were catching more Redfish and trout than 1.25 million anglers were, fishermen. So 500 versus one million, something's out of balance here. So CCA got involved in that. About the same time the Houston chapter formed, we formed here in Corpus, and we had lobbyists and we went armed with heavy artillery and basically were able in the eighties to get the redfish and trout declared a game fish and not allowed for sale, and basically did away with that. So that was what CCA cut its teeth on was the Redfish Wars, and then once that was settled, then went after all other types of things. You know, restoring wetlands, and we're working on some sites that we're involved with up in the Houston area. You name it, we're involved in it: artificial reefs offshore, very much involved in the hatchery program here and in Palacios, and at Sea Center, Texas. So that little thing that caused a bunch of, basically anglers, to get up in arms about has developed into one of the biggest non-profit conservation organizations in the United States; right up there with Ducks unlimited and Quail Unlimited. Probably Ducks Unlimited and CCA are probably the two largest conservation organizations in the country. Started out in Texas, now it's all gulf states, it's all the Atlantic States. I think all of the Pacific states now have the local, state, and then national representation. So it's a big deal, a very big deal. So that's how I really got involved in conservation, was through that.

JB: And was there a moment where you saw redfish decline, or was it just trying to get across trout lines?

DM: Well it was both. We knew what the problem was. It was just like we didn't have the data. You know, show me the data. Well, I don't have the data, but I can go show you what the problem is. So about that same time our catches, when we would go fishing, and for a while it was a very rare catch if you could catch a redfish. I mean, it was because they were being just, hand over fist, just being pulled out by trout liners and netters. So that all came about the same time. You know, our angling success was going down, and commercial catches were going up. For the people who were well connected with people in Austin and with Texas Parks and Wildlife and the way that all began, we needed some baseline data. So we started, there was a tagging program in place with Texas Parks and Wildlife, but there was no real incentive to send your tag in, because all you'd get was a letter. So CCA came in in the seventies and said "Not only will you get a letter, but you're gonna get one dollar for every tag returned." So one dollar was not much but it just kinda showed the angler there was, that was a valuable piece of information that somebody was willing to pay for it, even though it was only one dollar. It really allowed so much information to be accumulated at a much greater rate because of that offering of just a one dollar reward, and developed a long and lasting relationship with Texas Parks and Wildlife. And I say all the time there's no way Texas Parks and Wildlife: Coastal Fisheries could do what it does without CCA, and there's really no way CCA could ever meet its mission without Texas Parks and Wildlife: Coastal Fisheries. So a long, long relationship. One of the things I'm very proud of that I did at the university was start an internship with Texas Parks and Wildlife paid for by CCA. I think we're now in the seventeenth or eighteenth year, and there's two hired for the Upper Laguna Madre, I think there's one in the Lower Laguna Madre, one in the Corpus Bay system, one in the Aransas Bay system, and I think even on up. For down here, the Laguna and Corpus Christi and Aransas bays…each I would select students from my classes that I had been following and knowing. Having worked for Parks and Wildlife, I knew what they wanted in a summer intern, so I would pull these students out and ask them if that was something they would be interested in. Parks and Wildlife would interview them, and ultimately, they would receive like, 6,500 dollars for the summer to work with Texas Parks and Wildlife. What has been so great about that, and it's still going on, Texas Parks and Wildlife utilizes that not as "Okay, we're good guys, we're gonna bring these kids in a let them shadow us around" and so forth, but they use that, now, seeing the quality of students they're getting, they use that as a training opportunity for new employees. We've had like, probably better that 30% of those summer interns are now working full time with Texas Parks and Wildlife. I'm really proud of that and that continues. So, you know, my life has really been kind of a mixture of angler, professor, shrimper, scientist, teacher, just so many things, but they all go back to that hunting and fishing, and how I was brought up, how I was raised.

JB: You also mention the data that fish and parks used. How would you describe the relationship between science and conservation here locally?

DM: Very good. Now I'll back up. I'm glad you asked that question. When I was working as a biologist with Texas Parks and Wildlife, CCA was kinda considered to be kind of some rabble-rousers. And I say that because Texas Parks and Wildlife realized that there was a problem with the redfish, but they took the attitude "We can handle this. We don't need any outside help." And all of a sudden here, CCA has somehow won the right to include a dollar for every tag. Well, they didn't like that very much, because it's like "These are our bays. We are paid to manage Texas Fisheries. We don't need some group of anglers coming in here and telling us how [unclear]. So I was working for Texas Parks and Wildlife, at the same time I was one of the founding members of CCA. I had to go in and tell my regional director, who was very much opposed to CCA and their involvement, their pushing into their business of Parks and Wildlife, that I was one of the bad guys. He didn't like that very much but he agreed that, "Well, okay, as long as you keep everything above board, it's okay." So, in the early days, the science and conservation were really kind of at odds with one another. Conservation was not even a word that was in the vocabulary at the time, until CCA really brought it into play. My early experiences were kinda being caught between a rock and a hard spot with that. Now, with conservation, you cannot have conservation without the science behind it, because-okay, there's two ways you can approach something: one of them is to be a preservationist. To be a preservationist, you just set something aside and it's not used. It's just used to look at, it's a feel good thing, because knowing it's out there and untouched by man. Well, conservation is wise use of a resource. And how you get to a wise use? The only way you get to determine what is a wise use is by having scientific studies establishing baseline on this issue, whatever it is, or subject. So anything now that has anything to do with conservation is all science based. Has to be. I've seen it from the very early days where the big term used to be. Conservation never was quite as bad, but you've heard the term "Damn Environmentalist"?

JB: Mhmm.

DM: Okay, well, Conservationist was never used in those terms, but it was almost the same thing. "Oh, here they come. They're wanting to put some regulations on this." Well, I say good. We wouldn't have national forests today if Roosevelt hadn't come in and created national parks that set a lot of this stuff aside. Now people understand that but in the early days, you were just a troublemaker, almost. So we've come a long ways-

JB: So, locally, how have those perceptions of the environment and conservation changed over time that you've noticed?

DM: Well, Did Emily Payne get asked that question? I just think of somebody like Emily that's probably had as much experience in that area as anybody. But, I think, restate that question again real quick.

JB: Do you think people's perceptions of the environment, and you mentioned the changing ideas of conservation, has that changed over time locally?

DM: Yeah, and I think that goes a lot back to what I was saying about our early days in the CCA and offering tags, and how that was not at all well received by the Texas Parks and Wildlife managing agency. You know, I think if we look at local politics and what's going on in Washington and all now, I think you're gonna get an answer for how people are viewing conservation and the environment and everything. I think, in so many ways, we're going in an opposite direction we were going in a year ago, but I think locally, Pat Suter is another one you need to talk to.

JB: Oh, I have.

DM: Oh, you talked to her? Okay. Is she still pretty coherent and clear and all?

JB: A little bit.

DM: Yeah, yeah. Pat's not doing as well as we were hoping. I think its come a long ways, it really has. Yeah, no doubt, no doubt, no doubt. I think everybody realizes there's probably too many people, and wherever people go, things change. And, I don't think there's any denying that. So, I think that—pretty compatible, the science and conservation and all that. I'm not sure I answered that right, but—

JB: No, that's fine. I think that was most of my questions. Is there anything that I missed or that you wanted to share?

DM: No, I think the one thing that I think puts things in perspective of where we are today, is when I was growing up, everybody could have a secret little spot on the bay or on the river, that they knew was theirs. That nobody except maybe an Indian, a Native American Indian, had ever put foot on that spot. And, you could go there and you would know that nobody knew about that secret fishing spot or whatever it was. Fast-forward to today, and how silly a concept like that would be, "you mean there's a place you can go that nobody's set a foot before?" The numbers of people enjoying, recreating, whatever we call the outdoors now is just unprecedented in terms of the way it was in the past. I don't think planners are quite ready for what the onslaught of how many people are going to be fishing, how many boats are going to be in the water, how much room you need at boat ramps. I mean boat ramps have become as complicated to operate as a golf course has—so many people in the way of aquatics that are doing these underwater. So, in my short lifetime, I had all kinds of secret little spots I could go that nobody knew about. That's almost unbelievable now, to tell a young person that, because they'd go, "Gosh I can't imagine what that must of been like, when you could be there all day and never see anybody else, never see any footprints, that anybody had ever been there, and that was your own little spot." Now, where you go, there's people camped out. Even on Padre Island, which was one of our most underutilized national park in the United States. All the funding for the national seashore comes from visitorships, so they don't have much visitorships because of four-wheel drive requirements. Yet, how much that has changed. I guess you can still go down there in the middle of the week, and maybe in a cold blowing blizzard, and not see another car. But, it's going to take something like that to do it in one of our most isolated parks in the states. So, the point I'm trying to make is the numbers of people out there, sheer numbers of people out there. Whether they're fishing or whether they're just bird watching, or whatever. Wherever people go, things change. And, we're just seeing so much of that type of activity. People try to get a handle on it. So, if nobody's fishing how do you estimate what kind of change or whatever you want to call it—harm, affect boat traffic has on fish populations? Nobody's catching them. It's just the fact that boats are going here and there, and running over the top of them. How do you quantify something like that? That's what we are kind of getting up against. The sheer numbers of people doing things, and we want everybody to be out using the natural resources, but everybody leaves a little something behind. Whether it's a cigarette butt, or the wrapper off a piece of a chewing gum, or whatever, you can see the evidence there. How you're able to quantify that and how the overall big picture is affecting the living resources. Don't know, but that's the way I'd kind of like to finish up, would just be to put that in perspective of where I've come from and where we are today. But, I want to show you some lures.

JB: Okay, well I’ll turn this recorder off, but thank you.