

Donna Ransom  
7 August 2007  
Interviewer: Edward Woodward

Donna Ransom was born October 1915. She and her mother came to Indian Rocks Beach in 1933 (Track 1). Their accommodations varied: one night with family friends; a few days in rooms rented from the Hendrick sisters; a month in a home-made bright blue trailer made from a truck body and canvas; then the Indian Rocks Inn, where both could stay and have three meals a day for \$20.

Soon Ransom met her husband-to-be, Wyllys Ransom, who she also called Bill: “The first time I ever saw him he was sitting on the dock at the bridge at the fish market and he had on oilers, and he was sitting cross-legged and had a cat in his lap and I couldn’t see what he was doing, so I went down to look and he had the cat upside down and a kitten trying to get it to nurse because the cat had had kittens in the bottom of his boat and he didn’t know it and he went fishing, and then when he came back the cat wouldn’t let the kittens near her, so, that was our introduction (Tracks 1-3).” Eventually they married, foregoing a planned big wedding for a courthouse ceremony in Tampa (Track 2). Mrs. Ransom said her husband spent two years selling mullet for a penny a pound to raise \$350 to buy her diamond ring; he wanted something that would last (Track 2 and 5).

Wyllys Ransom’s family came to Indian Rocks Beach about 1912, Donna said (Track 3). Wyllys’s father Captain Kenneth Ransom relocated the family when his doctor recommended the area to better his case of Brights disease. Captain Ransom, who went by Cap or Cappy, was the subject of a book called “A Year in a Yawl,” based on his log from an extended boating adventure (Tracks 3 and 10). Cap was a bridge tender for many years, living in a small house there while his family stayed at their home south of Indian Rocks Beach on property he had purchased for \$5 and acre (Track 3). Ransom recalled the bridge being in bad shape (Track 10). When she headed to town, Cap would give her money to buy \$1 spikes at a Clearwater hardware store so he could repair the bridge (Track 11).

Wyllys Ransom would become a full-time fisherman (Track 3). “When he graduated he handed his mother his diploma and said, ‘Now I’m still gonna be a fisherman,’” said Ransom. “And he was. He never did anything else, couldn’t imagine working for somebody, and loved (fishing) till the day he died. He was enthusiastic about fishing.”

Wyllys sold fish wholesale to markets in Tampa and Clearwater (Tracks 4-5). Donna Ransom recalled one delivery to Clearwater during the late 1930s (Tracks 7-8). She drove a Model T converted to a truck that cost \$25. The truck died in Belleair, and when the axle broke, fish spilled on the road. A worker was able to help Ransom salvage the fish by loading them onto another truck.

Wyllys also had his own fish house and carried the catch of local fisherman (Tracks 4 and 5). Wyllys mainly caught mullet in cotton nets, eventually switching to monofilament (Tracks 4 and 6). He carried other items, including pompano, scallops and bait shrimp

(Tracks 4 and 9). And he shipped live stone crabs by barrel to Joe's Stone Crab in Miami (Track 5). Wyllys also earned money guiding yachts through the narrows of the bay, usually making \$50, once \$100 (Track 13). But one trip ended that practice, recalled Donna Ransom. Wyllys guided a boat all the way to Clearwater. Later that night they saw a photograph in the Clearwater Sun revealing the boat's contents: marijuana.

Donna Ransom recalled one of her husband's largest hauls: seven tons of mullet, semi-trailers with ice backing down to the beach and three teams of fisherman called in to help handle the load (Track 4). However, there were lean times (Track 7). Red tide shut down fishing for weeks or a month, recalled Ransom and her daughter Patricia "Posey" Harwood (Track 6-7). While waiting for red tide to clear, Wyllys would work on his cypress boats, which his father Cap had built (Tracks 7 and 9-10). There were also tragic moments: Wyllys and his nets were recruited to retrieve a boy who had fallen off his raft and drowned (Track 5). As Wyllys pulled the boy in, one woman grabbed a trout from the net, a moment Donna Ransom recalled her husband characterizing as "ghoulish."

When Wyllys fished, October to late December was the best season before it closed for spawning, Ransom recalled (Track 7). Harwood recalled workmen at the smoke house in the 1950s vying for the largest mullet, since all cost a quarter (Track 11). The fish were smoked with oak and buttonwood, the later bought from a man in the Keys (Track 11-12). Harwood shared other memories about the fish house: a large white crane named "Whitey," that met her father on the bay, perched on the back of his boat, and road to the fish house for hand outs; a sea turtle her father raised in a large shrimp tank, then kept under the fish house and fed fish guts; a pile of shucked scallop shells; and renting to tourists a row boat that her father had given the kids one Christmas (Tracks 4 and 14-16).

Harwood sometimes fished with her father, and she recalled him tying a rope around her sister tied to the boat in case she fell overboard (Track 14). For fun their father hauled them behind the boat in a washtub lined with cork. Harwood recalled her father being a patient and generous man (Track 6 and 14). Added Donna Ransom: "His bad word was dadburn, and the girls would come in and say, 'daddy's mad (Track 6).'"

Wyllys Ransom also hosted fish fries for local churches and schools (Tracks 8-9). Sometimes the fish fries returned favors in unexpected ways. Donna Ransom recalled one customer complaining about driving from Dunedin to Indian Rocks Beach to buy fish. When Ransom mentioned a good fish house in Dunedin, the woman explained that the leader of her church urged his congregants to patronize Wyllys's fish house.

For working in the fish house Donna Ransom earned all checks under \$5, two dollar bills and silver dollars (Track 6). She saved the money in a New York account so she couldn't spend it, she said. The savings paid off when a freeze knocked out the fish house ice maker. The cost to repair it? The balance of her savings: \$2,007. In the 1950s, Donna Ransom took an LPN class at Morton Plant hospital and became a nurse in the maternity ward for twenty years; some off days she still worked in the fish house (Track 8).