

Gene Turner

31 July 2007

Interviewer: Edward Woodward

Gene Turner was born June 1918 in Fort Valley, Georgia. Later he would live in Plant City, Florida where his family had a farm (Track 3, and Disc 2 Track 3). In the early 1940s Turner joined the Navy where he learned woodworking (Track 1). Machinery was limited; most everything was built by hand. He didn't build boats, but worked on destroyers that had wood stairs, tables and benches (Track 2). "You just can't imagine all the stuff that's made of wood on there," said Turner. "And someone's got to make it all."

Stationed on the U.S.S. Alcor, he spent eight hour days in the work shop. Bunks were hard to come by; many men slept on a thin mattress wherever space allowed. So when a bunk opened in the shoe shop, Turner moved in and watched his two bunkmates repair shoes. When the workers transferred, Turner was asked if he could run the shop himself. "I needed them private quarters, and I said you're damn right I can take it over," he laughed. Initially, Turner ran the shoe shop after his workshop duties. He applied heels and half soles to shoes, honing his skill to seven minutes a pair. He would end up running the shoe shop as his main job.

Drawing on his wood working skills, Turner built a boat for himself back in Plant City (Track 1 and 3). Others admired his boat and wanted one as well (Track 1). He began building bass boats with lumber provided by his customers (Tracks 2-3). Realizing he could make money boat-building, Turner continued, constructing some 3,000 boats during his career, the largest a 45-foot house boat (Track 1). His business also grew from one employee, a cabinet maker he trained to build boats, to 27 workers building one plus boats a day for customers from as far away as California, Maine and northern Michigan (Tracks 3-5). By trial and error and "a little common sense," as Turner put it, he learned the trade (Track 13).

Turner described his earliest days boat building: "I'd start a little boat on a Monday morning. I'd build it and paint it and go fishing with the man that was buying it on Saturday morning and check it out, make sure there was no leaks or anything in it (Track 3)." He built the boats by hand with dark red Philippine mahogany and teak trim.

In the mid-1950s Turner moved his business to St. Petersburg (Track 4). Logan Lumber Company of Tampa supplied his wood. When fiberglass emerged, he said he was one of the first boat-builders to try the material (Track 3). But the material required frequent maintenance. Losing money and realizing wood was a better product, he abandoned fiberglass.

In the 1960s, Turner began building boats from a scale model; an inch represented a foot (Track 15). He would whittle a model representing half the boat (Track 14). Turner was also an innovator. He created through-hull live bait wells, skid rails that protected a boat

during transport while increasing fuel efficiency, and ways to protect and enhance other equipment (Tracks 5-6 and 12-13).

Turner also became a go-to source about kingfish: what bait to use; chumming for them; how to catch them (Track 6-7). He shared his knowledge speaking at civic and fishing clubs (Track 8). “I never tried to keep any of my secrets from anybody,” Turner said (Track 7). “I figured the more they knew the more they’d let me alone. Because they used to just follow me and just worry me to death ... come and anchor right up next to you. I used to cuss them out. Finally got tired of that and I’d wait until they got anchored up good and then just pull up my anchor and leave. Leave him sitting there ... not say a word to him, just pull up and leave him ... they’d still follow you, a lot of them.” Turner favored kingfish because “you can catch ‘em big and you’ve got all the fight you want on him.”

Turner recalled one day catching 30 kingfish, the smallest one 22 pounds, about 10 fish 35 to 46 pounds a piece, and the rest above 30 pounds; a total haul of about 1000 pounds (Tracks 6-7). “That’s a pile of kingfish,” he said (Track 7). “You bring ‘em in on one trip you open a lot of eyes.”

Gene Turner’s son Chris credited his father’s talks as a catalyst for not only his own boat business, but other fishing related businesses as well: marinas; fuel docks; motels and charter guides (Track 8). However, Turner gradually noticed fewer kingfish were being caught recreationally. He blamed commercial netting. Turner tracked the swing through a friend processing commercial catch at his fish house (Track 9).

Not only did businesses tied to recreational fishing suffer, but the state was taking a sales tax hit, claimed Chris Turner: “That fish swimming was worth a lot more money than it was sitting on the dock and that fish was being sold for pennies a pound, and the state just lost an incredible amount of money (Track 9).” Gene Turner pushed for a net ban, sharing his concerns with politicians and people in the fishing industry (Tracks 8-9). He traveled to Tallahassee for hearings – sometimes flown by a friend on short notice when hearings changed - and dogged politicians (Tracks 9-10). Turner was instrumental in the eventual net ban (Tracks 8-9).

Turner built his last boat of solid mahogany for his grandson (Track 14). “I made the damn thing in the back of the garage,” he laughed. “I was a little while on it.” Though no longer boat building, Turner still crafts fishing accessories made of wood such as gaffs and bait dehookers (Track 15 and Disc 2 Track 1).