

**HUGH MERCER**  
**Holmer Farms**  
**St. Augustine, FL**

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Interviewer: Anna Hamilton

Date: 9/15/16

Location: Mercer residence

Length: 48:27

**[Begin interview]**

**Anna Hamilton:** [00:00:00] I'm going to start to ID the tape so that everybody knows where we are.

**Hugh Mercer:** [00:00:04] You go ahead with your take.

**AH:** [00:00:05] OK. Today is Thursday, September 15th, 2016. It's a little after 9:30 in the morning and I am with Hugh Mercer for Matanzas Voices. It's a really beautiful day on the Matanzas River and we're going to talk about his life and coming down here to Florida and his pompano business and the shellfish business and everything in between. So with that I'm going to ask you to tell me who you are and what you do or what you did.

**HM:** [00:00:33] Well my name is Hugh Mercer. Who I am? We have yet to find out. Actually that will be something for the boss upstairs. All right. Originally from Sayville, a smaller town on the south shore of Long Island, New York on Great South Bay. I mention Great South Bay because, from my earliest childhood, Great South Bay and its industries were important to me. My father was involved with Bluepoints Company, which was a great shellfish operation and therefore I was exposed to it early. Now I left—I've been a gypsy after leaving Sayville and have been in many, many places. But I eventually found my way back to Long Island and worked my last working years with Bluepoints Company, the original firm there.

**AH:** [00:01:34] I see. And will you tell me a little but about the background of Bluepoints?

**HM:** [00:01:35] Well the background of Bluepoints is that it came out of an era where oystering, shellfish in general, were a major industry in this country. I don't think most people realize that oysters were, by 1926, 1930, and of course this is long before the interlocutor's birthday [laughs], was a major industry in the country. You're talking millions of dollars, hundreds of workers—maybe thousands of workers. It was well-known everybody ate oysters. Maybe that contributed to a lot of things we just don't know. Anyhow. But of course that industry was affected and by the late forties and into the fifties, between storms and pollution, oysters as a factor had declined markedly.

**AH:** [00:02:33] Did you—so I'm assuming your family ate oysters regularly.

**HM:** [00:02:33] No we did not. [Laughs] We did not eat oysters regularly. Though I must remind you the oysters we dealt hand were quite different from the oyster you have here in Florida. The oyster in Florida is an intercoastal, an intertidal oyster. A so-called coon oyster. I'm going to use that expression probably because raccoons eat them regularly. Anyway our oyster,

the *virginica*, was a deep water oyster. Brackish now, and not salt, but a deep water brackish oyster. It did not expose itself and could not live exposed to tidal changes.

**AH:** [00:03:14] I see.

**HM:** [00:03:14] Now that meant, of course, it had to be handled rather differently. It was handled by larger boats with dredges. It was dredged, it was culled, and packaged. Of course Bluepoints Company, as a major firm, sent many a barrel of oysters across to Europe packed in what we call half barrels, double headed, with—packed in seaweed actually. It helped to make the two almost two week trip to England and France.

**AH:** [00:03:42] Wow. So the market was overseas rather than—

**HM:** [00:03:45] No no. The market was—market in United States was not only east coast, but because the oysters were open many times—there was an open stock too. Many gallons were opened and shipped in iced containers. The original Bluepoints Company was based upon Sealshipt Corporation which was an outfit which had patented a shipping containers for open oysters. They were clay and they were packed in barrels with ice and you went as far as St. Louis, Kansas City, and even as far as Cheyenne out in Wyoming. So that the industry and the product had a quite a widespread market.

**AH:** [00:04:31] What's very interesting. What attracted your dad to work with the company?

**HM:** [00:04:34] Necessity. He came out of WWI and like many veterans needed a job. He'd had some training in bookkeeping. So an opening with the then Sealshipt Corporation, was hired as an accountant or a bookkeeper probably. And from then on he was a faithful servant for Bluepoints Company—well which became part of General Foods. By 1924 General Foods had bought that company. Which General Foods bought a lot of companies at that time. You don't remember General Foods but it was a major consolidation of food companies. Food production.

**AH:** [00:05:18] I see. What would his day to day job look like?

**HM:** [00:05:18] Well his job was trying to keep peace. [Laughs] I say that literally. I remember he was assigned, originally, after one or two years in Connecticut where he met my mother, courted her, and married, then came to Long Island and was sent as you might say the hatchet man to take over Bluepoints Company. Bluepoints Company was acquired literally by General Foods and General Foods needed a representative there. Unfortunately the company in West Sayville had enjoyed many many years of Dutch control. I want to say Dutch control—I mean, of course, Dutchmen who had come to this country. They had built a community called West

Sayville and they had enjoyed the lease of Great South Bay. Great South Bay—unusual. There is about 15,000 acres under Great South Bay which was owned in fee simple by the Smith family that came from a King Charles II grant, or colonial grant. It is one of only two areas where underwater land is owned in fee simple in the United States. We paid—the Bluepoints Company paid light taxes, police taxes, fire taxes, and so on because it was fee simple. All right. Well now what happened was that when Bluepoints took over, it took over the bay, if you will, and no longer could West Sayville Dutchmen get on that bay and just arbitrarily work a lease. And it created a lot of friction. I can remember that through my day. A lot of friction between the locals and this Mercer guy who came in to enforce the new company. That's sort of the background there. So I've had a lot of funny dealings in my time.

**AH:** [00:07:29] [Laughs] Can you tell me about a few of them?

**HM:** [00:07:29] Oh I don't think I'd better. I don't think I'd better tell you about funny dealings in my time. I will merely say that the seafood industry, as many locals can attest, has its characters.

**AH:** [00:07:44] That's safe to say.

**HM:** [00:07:44] I will remember one episode. My father became involved in sort of an altercation with a gentleman also with the oyster business. And they met one time and had an argument in Fulton Market. Fulton Fish Market in New York City. And the gentleman pulled out a knife and my father retreated throwing bits of ice and other things he could gather up until he could finally get into a truck and get out of there. That was the kind of thing that was not unusual [laughs].

**AH:** [00:08:15] [Laughs] Fighting for your life.

**HM:** [00:08:16] [Laughs] Yes. Fighting for your life.

**AH:** [00:08:24] Did your family ever mesh with the locals at any point?

**HM:** [00:08:24] Oh well some of that rancor wore off. My father became really a part—a silent part of the community, always a quiet man, involved with banking and other things of that nature in the community. So he became part of that.

**AH:** [00:08:39] I've heard a story about somebody working the oyster leases in Big Bay and selling that land only to find that there were lots of clams there.

**HM:** [00:08:48] That is correct.

**AH:** [00:08:55] Can you tell me that story?

**HM:** [00:08:56] Yes. Very interesting. One of the holdings of Bluepoints Company was in Northport Harbor on the north shore of Long Island on Long Island Sound in New York State. It had been used as an oystering outfit too. What happened there was seed oysters be brought over, planted at Northport, and then harvested from there. The whole operation was an oyster operation. When my father acquired Bluepoints Company from General Foods he acquired that land as well. And he sent over a representative. Well the representative, unfortunate, thought only in oysters. He never tried the bottom. The result is when we sold the thing for a pittance really, whoever got it was smart enough to try the bottom and discovered quite a treasure trove of clams. Clams, interesting enough, always had been a byproduct. Even during the days when Bluepoints took over in South Bay and Long Island, there was an arrangement usually with the locals to clam on the ground and the clams were purchased by the company. They would clam manually. That is by tong, never rake. The rake was a late thing but tongs—I don't know if you know tongs or not. It's not an easy job to use tongs. But fortunately the bay is no deeper—the bay is no deeper than about ten feet, ten or twelve feet. Now we're talking an awful lot about great South Bay. I think you want to talk about Matanzas River.

**AH:** [00:10:37] Well it's interesting to hear where you came from and your history and all of this.

**HM:** [00:10:39] Well it prejudices my view, doesn't it.

**AH:** [00:10:42] Well it does a little bit, maybe.

[00:10:42] I mean when they talk about going into some kind of oyster operation here at Marineland and so forth, I rather smile because I remember oyster operations and they did not consist of hanging a dozen bags overboard. I have a tin boat which I acquired from Mr. [note: Patrick] Hamilton, the father of our interlocutor, and that tin boat sat in the water for about two years. We just pulled it out and the bottom is covered with oysters set.

**AH:** [00:11:18] Really?

**HM:** [00:11:18] So it doesn't take much to get oysters to set down here. The problem is, first of all, keeping them, and two, working with them. The intertidal oyster is not an easy oyster to work with. Hard to open. That's why you usually have roast oysters here. You can cook them open. But using a knife, a side knife or hammering them open as they do up in Maryland? Impossible.

**AH:** [00:11:46] I see. Do you enjoy eating oysters?

**HM:** [00:11:47] Do I do what?

**AH:** [00:11:49] Enjoy eating oysters?

**HM:** [00:11:49] I used to enjoy eating raw oysters. But then I learned what has been happening to the waters everywhere.

**AH:** [00:11:59] And can you tell me a little bit about what that is?

**HM:** [00:11:59] Well we know perfectly well that the oyster is a filter feeder as are all shellfish. They're filter feeders and they accumulate what's in the water and hold it. When you eat a shellfish you're eating a whole animal. So you're eating everything and therefore if the water is not good—that is to say if there are coliforms or other such things in the water, you may be eating them too unless they come from so-called certified waters. 'Certified water' is meant, and they still do in Florida, waters that are open to the taking of shellfish because the water is good enough that the poor little animal doesn't filter some strange things into itself.

**AH:** [00:12:57] I see. We've definitely been feeling impacts of growth and pollution. But before we get to that point I would like to ask you how you came to this area.

**HM:** [00:13:02] Ah. Well a stroke of fate. As I had mentioned to you, in the early sixties we got involved with intensive aquaculture. That is to say we wanted to see if you could artificially propagate oysters and what you could do. We built a facility. I spent quite a bit of money putting in tanks and all that sort of thing and realized you could very well propagate oysters. We built rafts and suspended our culture on them, had the oysters, planted the oysters, and so forth. It was a successful operation but the patient died. What happened there was—you want to know all this?

**AH:** [00:13:49] I do, yes.

**HM:** [00:13:50] In the 1920s, there there'd been some dearth of oysters and someone had the bright idea of bringing in Virginia shell stock from James and other rivers in Virginia. That shell stock was planted in Great South Bay. Nobody connected two things that occurred after that: the planting of that shell stock and the fact that if oysters were kept in Great South Bay beyond two years, they died. That's why the Great South Bay was really a marketing bay because you could not get set, that is young oysters, to live, grow, and be marketable in Great South Bay.

Something was wrong there. This was quite well known. It was forgotten, however, when we began to plant out our oysters. Our oysters were beautiful. We put out several thousands of bushels of these choices from the greenhouse, if you will. But the second year we went out and they were all dead. I sent off [note: inaudible] from these oysters to a laboratory in Maryland who confirmed that MSX [note: Multinucleated Sphere Unknown), an oyster disease, had killed them. In other words, we were paying the price for the longed-harm life of what had been planted in 1924. The bay had MSX living in it. Which is a warning. You always pay—with particularly—when you're trying to domesticate a wild animal, you never know what diseases you're going to find. And that's—an oyster or a clam is a wild animal and you never know what's going to affect it. And you never know what might have been done to the waters in which it's living.

**AH:** [00:15:55] And so what happened after that? Did you—

**HM:** [00:16:07] We stopped the oyster operation and went entirely to clams. We had been shipping thousands of bushels of clams anyway.

**AH:** [00:16:07] And what was the fallout from that?

**HM:** [00:16:11] The fallout? We lost our money and the lab. That was the fallout. Not unusual for innovators to lose all their money and their innovation.

**AH:** [00:16:19] Was anybody else doing similar work?

**HM:** [00:16:22] Oh yes. There were a number of operations of so-called oyster hatching up in Connecticut, down in Maryland, and overseas. For example right now there's a lot of artificial oystering—I say artificial, meaning intensive oystering in the UK and Norway. How they'll come out? I have no idea. Our experience left a great deal to be desired.

**AH:** [00:16:53] So did you follow up on any of the research you were doing?

**HM:** [00:16:56] No. Well we followed up only in a sense of we did some clam—intensive clam production, which was all right. But when you're dealing with thousands of bushels of clams a few hundred makes very little sense.

**AH:** [00:17:10] That makes sense. Did you—you went to college and school when you were a young man.

**HM:** [00:17:17] Are you asking me my educational background?

**AH:** [00:17:21] I am.

**HM:** [00:17:21] Well I graduated from college, yes. Taught for a while, that sort of thing.

**AH:** [00:17:26] And when did you go into business with Bluepoints?

**HM:** [00:17:29] I was in business in Bluepoints from the time I was hatched because my father was—well I was always there. So I never really left Bluepoints Company.

**AH:** [00:17:41] And what kinds of things did you do with the company?

**HM:** [00:17:45] Oh well. [Laughs] I was a clean up man. If there was a problem, I had to clean it up. That was what I did. OK?

**AH:** [00:17:56] OK. [Laughs] And where did you go to college?

**HM:** [00:17:57] Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire.

**AH:** [00:18:05] And what brought you to Dartmouth?

**HM:** [00:18:05] I was not interested in studying anything at Dartmouth. I think I was sent to Dartmouth primarily because most of the officials in General Foods had gone through Dartmouth and therefore I should go through Dartmouth, too. It was probably not a good choice for me. I am not a Dartmouth type.

**AH:** [00:18:31] [Laughs] What is the Dartmouth type?

**HM:** [00:18:31] A Dartmouth type ends up as a chartered accountant or a lawyer. Maybe a medical man. A real professional. That's a Dartmouth's type.

**AH:** [00:18:46] You don't think what you did was a real profession?

**HM:** [00:18:46] No no. No. I'm a gypsy.

**AH:** [00:18:52] [Laughs] OK. And you mentioned you taught. What did you teach?

**HM:** [00:18:56] Economics, strangely enough.



**AH:** [00:18:58] So you had a profession. What brought you here?

**HM:** [00:19:00] Ah, now we're getting down to the subject matter after all the preamble.

**AH:** [00:19:05] [Laughs]

**HM:** [00:19:05] If you recall I said that we had gotten involved in intensive oyster culture which meant we were sort of aquaculturally bent. I'd been reading of the fish farming in Arkansas. As you probably know many of the soybean farms in Arkansas all turn to growing catfish. You know of that industry. Large industry in Arkansas. So when I saw an ad in a fish journal that it was—someone was looking to be financed for growing oysters or fish in Florida. Like the usual faultless young man, I responded to the ad from Bluepoints because we had a little surplus money and we thought there might be something here. I was told very quickly that any monies going to Florida would be happy personal. The company was not interested. So I personally contacted a Mr. A. E. Holton who had run the ad. He had found, what I'm living on now, the acreage right here by Matanzas at the park and wanted to put in a pompano fish farm. Now this is not too unusual. A number of pompano efforts are being made in and around St. Augustine. A local character, 'Starvin Marvin' Groves, who had put up the first—a man who had done many things in St. Augustine. He started the first drive in theater there. Anyway. Long gone now. Had started such an operation in what is now Belle Terria—or not Belle—

**AH:** [00:20:57] Berre Terria?

**HM:** [00:20:57] The development on the south bank, if you will, of Matanzas at the inlet. He had started—and there had been other operations. So when A. E. Holton brought this to my attention and I came down here to look, it looked feasible. It looked feasible at that time. And we started Holmer Farms which was a fish farming proposition. And we dug what the then superintendent of the park, a man named [George F.] Schesventer, called 'unsightly ditches in the marsh.

**AH:** [00:21:39] [Laughs] Oh my gosh.

**HM:** [00:21:40] Well our hope was to net pompano fry off the beaches and then grow them out in the pond in a cage situation. That was 1967. We finished the building about the end of sixty-seven and waited for the spring of sixty-eight. And for the first time in the memory of man pompano fry failed. There were no pompano. So there was no netting of pompano. And the [laughs] basic fish that we were going to depend upon was no longer immediately available in any numbers. So that is the story of many things. I've already told you about some things that come to naught but it's a warning. Dealing directly with nature is a very chancy proposition. She's a sort of a jealous thing [laughs].

**AH:** [00:22:44] So what—the first year you tried it it failed, and pompano just never came back?

**HM:** [00:22:44] Well pompano came back but not in any quantity. You see originally you could net thousands off here and transport—you could get a license to net pompano. Well that all died when the pompano failed.

**AH:** [00:23:04] Why do you think the pompano failed?

**HM:** [00:23:04] I cannot speculate. I would merely say that I do not question Mother Nature. It's not nice.

**AH:** [00:23:13] What did you do afterwards?

**HM:** [00:23:13] Well we thought we might try shrimp farming for a while but I realized that shrimp farming was out of the question here because what was beginning to happen, which I hadn't seen, was the water's beginning to turn bad. Why? When we first came down here and I remember the house—we built a house here. I had the house built for Mr. Holton in 1968. I came down and the only thing you saw when you went on the beach—you saw no cars or people. You saw the water tank at Crescent Beach and that was it. There was only two or three houses between our place and actual Crescent Beach village. It was deserted but they were getting to come. And it was under—it was just a fact of life that once you get a lot of humans, shellfish are under threat. All kinds of shellfish, including crayfish. So I told Mr. Holton to pack it up and he did. And that was the end of our Holmer Farm fish venture.

**AH:** [00:24:26] And how do you spell 'Holmer Farm?' H-O-M-E-R?

**HM:** [00:24:27] H-O-L-M-E-R. Holton-Mercer.

**AH:** [00:24:33] Ah I see. And can you tell me about Mr. Holton?

**HM:** [00:24:34] Well Mr. Holton was an innovator. He had been in the Navy for many years. A Georgia boy. You got to watch them Georgia boys. A Georgia boy, and he had held many jobs. The only job—everything. I think he—when I met him he had just come out of the Post Office, working the postal system. And I remember one story about him [laughs], among his many jobs he'd worked as a deputy sheriff and been a prison guard. And he said one day he was out with about thirty guys, some chained, some not, all with machetes clearing ditches. He said I stood there with my single shot shotgun and thought of thirty guys armed with machetes none of whom liked me. And he said, 'I quit the next week.' [Laughs] OK? Well that was Mr. Holton. He was an

innovator. And he did a very good job. We planned a very good operation but nature had other plans.

**AH:** [00:25:34] So what did you do to make money after that?

**HM:** [00:25:38] After that, Mr. Holton left. He went elsewhere. I only saw him once or twice again. The gentleman is dead, I believe. He and his family are dead. He was a much older man. [Laughs] A real enterpriser. After that, I rented the place, rented the house primarily. And I was going to sell in the seventies when everybody was selling down here. In seventy-one or two there was a break in property down here in Florida. One of the many down cycles in Florida property. Your father can tell you about the history of up and down in Florida property. And I thought of selling. It didn't come to anything and I took the place back and then from that time on rented it until I moved here.

**AH:** [00:26:28] So you went back up north.

**HM:** [00:26:30] Went back up north and worked with a company up there.

**AH:** [00:26:34] And what company was that?

**HM:** [00:26:34] Well [laughs] it was my own. I was raising sheep in Maryland.

**AH:** [00:26:40] You've done all kinds of—

**HM:** [00:26:40] I told you I was a gypsy.

**AH:** [00:26:44] [Laughs] You weren't kidding.

**HM:** [00:26:44] I have not sold tar to put on roofs yet as gypsies do, but that's the only thing I haven't done.

**AH:** [00:26:52] So how long were you down here the first time before you moved here permanently?

**HM:** [00:26:58] Well I only visited here while Holton was here. I came back several times just to see how the property was doing. I did own some property in St. Augustine too. I made a bad mistake of buying and then selling too early. Matter of fact I think there's an adage [phone rings] in the market: when Mercer buys, it's the top of the market. [Laughs] [Phone rings].

**AH:** [00:27:25] If you need to answer it we can pause. Yes.

**HM:** [00:27:35] OK.

**AH:** [00:27:35] That's funny. OK. Let me think where we should love on from there.

**HM:** [00:27:35] What I want to just mention—some things about the river now. We've been talking about a lot of things. But let's get back to the river. My next door neighbor was a man named Hutchinson. He was one of the very few residents when I came down. He lived by smoking—oh what is the usual fish here?

**AH:** [00:28:00] Mullet?

**HM:** [00:28:01] Mullet. He smoked mullet. Sold mullet. He owned a small piece next door to where we had purchased the farm land. Older family, but he was typical, making a living off the marine products. And again, dependent upon the river staying the way it had been. One of the early threats to that not only was the great growth in condos and living human beings which started in around 1974. It began to really peak in the late seventies. Things began to be built. I can remember the piece on which Summer House stands now. The acreage on which Summer House stands was offered for sale for \$70,000. That's exactly what—that's less than—much less than what a condo over there would cost now. But of course that's a comment on the fact that the dollar has gone to pieces. So that's—anyway. But the late seventies you're going to get development. Human beings, which meant invariably, inevitably, meant pollution of the water. There was another threat which occurred in 1987. Palm Coast had developed along the Intracoastal. And the Intracoastal is an interesting thing because I remember I was acquainted with William Cothron, C-O-T-H-R-O-N, whose father ran a bucket dredge and maintained the twelve mile canal between the end of Matanzas River and the next river down in order to complete the Intracoastal exchange. And he ran that. Bill used to play on that dredge. You remember the one time he fell off the pilot house, out of the pilot house and down the deck and he claimed that the fall on his head affected him all his life. Probably so. He worked for Eastern Airlines. He's the one that reminded me that all planes are held together with duct tape. But don't look. [Laughs] Anyhow. So getting back to it. The threat was that having had the Intracoastal completed like that and available water, when ITT developed Palm Coast there were a number of people had boats along the Intracoastal. Now they'd like to get out. They'd like to get in the ocean. So there was a move afoot to do something about it. Well about that time, 1987, the DOT [note: Department of Transportation] realized something would have to be done with the then present Matanzas bridge, the bridge over the Matanzas inlet. Now you'll want to remember the inlet is the last undeveloped inlet on the east coast of Florida, and one of the very few undeveloped—when I say undeveloped I mean untamed, if you will, inlets. It has a little life of

its own. It's a wonderful little inlet and very active in its life. Well the DOT brought forth a plan to build a high bridge. That would be a bridge like the one now we have at [note: State Road] 312. In other words, large boats could pass under it. Part of the line of thinking was, of course, they would then dredge that inlet and larger boats down there or wherever could pass out to the Atlantic Ocean. Well a number of us realized that was the sequence of events. That was what was going to happen. So a Mrs. Dottie Miles, who had been very active in this type of thing, and myself, began a propaganda campaign. We wrote to the paper. We started to get people. We put in all kinds of things. Had meetings against the high bridge, realizing what that meant. Well the fishermen didn't want it because they couldn't fish from it obviously. And we managed to prevail upon the watermen or baymen, as I would call them, that this is going to change the whole saline or salinity of Matanzas River. And who knows what that means. We know that such changes can be catastrophic. This resulted finally after about a year of propagandising before the DOT had a final meeting down in the meeting hall at Marineland. And the the chairman got up and said, 'Well now that we're in another county maybe we can have a more reasoned discussion of this.' And he—one of the party got up and said, 'I'm sorry sir, but you are still in St. Johns. The boundary is fifty feet to the south of this.' And everybody said, 'That's the DOT for you!' [Laughs] Maybe that was not kind but that was the way it was. But the thing about the meeting was there were 400 people there. Now you don't get meetings with 400 people usually. It took everybody. It took those commissioners that were there and the representative DOT and others by surprise and shock. I think the mere fact of such numbers of people frightened them. I think it did. Which is the only way you could handle a politician anyway, is you've got to frighten him one way or the other. Take away his bribe or else hang him. Anyhow. You can edit that if you care to but that's my feeling. Anyhow, there were baymen there in their boots. There were men there and and women who were yelling and so on and the representatives of DOT and their cohorts were overwhelmed. And a matter of fact I didn't get it out but they admitted to the paper they'd never been to such a meeting before. It frightened them. And the result was that the high bridge plan was out. They were not going to put it in that way. And therefore we had a new bridge, which is a very good little bridge. And I might say that whoever put that bridge in did it in remarkable—did it in winter weather. Terrible storms. Did the bridge without holding up traffic and got it done within budget. It was quite a performance. You've got to compliment that group that put it in. That's one of the major things that I remember about—we had to be so careful. What we're really saying here: we've got a little treasure on our hands with this Matanzas. And we've got to be awful careful with it or we're going to lose it.

**AH:** [00:35:11] That's a good point. Now when you were fighting the high rise bridge, there were a few institutions down there right on the inlet that have a lot of stake in the inlet. The Whitney Lab, Marineland. Where did they fall on this?

**HM:** [00:35:21] Well Marine—certain representatives of Marineland—of Whitney Lab were of course aware of the situation and did help support us. But they were a state outfit. We have to be careful there. DOT is a state outfit. So. But the park, the National Park, which would have had to give up land to a high bridge, was certainly opposed to it and did make that clear. And I think most people who lived along Matanzas were opposed to it. I think that we had a lot of people come out from—even then from condos to oppose it, realizing what we we're up against. No I think it was general public as well as some public entity opposition to it.

**AH:** [00:36:13] Do you think in general the people who live down here understand the value of the inlet and protecting it and the Matanzas?

**HM:** [00:36:13] I'm not sure about that. Things have changed markedly. We want to remember, that was almost before you were born wasn't it? 1987.

**AH:** [00:36:29] That's the year I was born.

**HM:** [00:36:30] There you are. So you have a lot of new people. They don't remember some of these problems that are occur—they don't remember how the—what the river was like, quite frankly. I mean we're much more shellfish—shellfish—the river now is looked upon more of a recreational site. Which it should not be. It should be looked upon as a living organism and we ought to treat it like that.

**AH:** [00:37:01] What do you think that we can do to let people know that?

**HM:** [00:37:05] Well I suppose all you can do is from time to time bring out the hard facts. But I don't think it's going to change anything. Maybe it'll take catastrophe to do something. I don't know. I really don't.

**AH:** [00:37:20] Have you been involved in other community—

**HM:** [00:37:24] No. I'm not a community-minded guy. I'm the little old man that lives down the end of the lane. [Laughs]

**AH:** [00:37:33] You're a member of SACA [note: South Anastasia Communities Association] though, yes?

**HM:** [00:37:34] Pardon me?

**AH:** [00:37:41] South Anastasia Communities Association? Do you belong to any—

**HM:** [00:37:41] Oh I send money to pay. I never go.

**AH:** [00:37:46] I see. Do you remember the first time you saw this area? Do you remember when you first came down?

**HM:** [00:37:52] No I don't really remember it. Not actually. It's much the same as when I first came down. We've tried to keep it that way.

**AH:** [00:38:02] It helps that you're sandwiched between the Park Service.

**HM:** [00:38:06] That's correct.

**AH:** [00:38:07] What kind of relationship do you have with the Park Service?

**HM:** [00:38:09] Not very good. Never has been. I'm afraid they still think of us as the 'unsightly ditches in the marsh.' [Laughs]

**AH:** [00:38:20] And how—can I ask how many acres you have here?

**HM:** [00:38:24] Oh I don't know. More than enough.

**AH:** [00:38:30] I'm wondering, because this is still such a wild, ecologically, spot, what kind of wildlife you see.

**HM:** [00:38:36] Well I think we ought to make it clear. I have already surrendered the possibilities, at least while I'm alive, of development. We have a conservation easement here.

**AH:** [00:38:51] Oh really?

**HM:** [00:38:52] So in essence we have the local park, state—town park—whatever it is—what is that park down there?

**AH:** [00:39:03] There's Fort Matanzas.

**HM:** [00:39:03] No, no not the national park. The park other park that's down there.

**AH:** [00:39:08] The River to Sea Preserve?

**HM:** [00:39:08] Yeah. What is it? Is it local or state?

**AH:** [00:39:11] I'm not sure.

**HM:** [00:39:11] Isn't that awful. Neither one of us know. But it's not federal, it's either or local or state. I'm sandwiched between. So we now have a connection. We are one large park, if you will. I realize that like everything, a conservation easement could be overcome by money and corruption in the future. But I won't be here to see that.

**AH:** [00:39:41] You've done all you can do for now.

**HM:** [00:39:41] I've done all I can do for now.

**AH:** [00:39:46] So it makes a nice corridor for wildlife.

**HM:** [00:39:46] It's a corridor. Unfortunately the wildlife has diminished markedly since I've been here. When I first came down, this—if you know the island on which the fort is located is called Rattlesnake Island. And that was a good name because Mr. Holton killed twenty-five rattlesnakes here. It was rattlesnake country. So they're gone. I can't remember indigos. Fifteen years ago we had three or four indigos here. They are a wonderful snake. I haven't seen any.

**AH:** [00:40:25] In the last fifteen—

**HM:** [00:40:26] In the last few years. The snake population is gone. The frog population has been sadly decimated. When we used to drive down A1A the frogs be singing in the ditches. No longer true. Spraying and such things have taken care of them. So wildlife, while it may be a corridor for wildlife, I don't think the wildlife is here. We have seen some bobcats from time to time. Of course raccoons. They can live anywhere. They live in cities. Rats. The rat population is down somewhat too. Rabbits. Remember rabbits used to be all over? Now we have one or two. So there's been—the effect of human beings living here has made a tremendous difference. I mean I think it's true: where human beings move, other animals leave. They really have to. Remember, it's been proved over and over again: when a city is decimated and you have only three things left, the rats, the cockroaches, and the humans.

**AH:** [00:41:39] What about the bird population?

**HM:** [00:41:39] Bird population. Never had much shorebirds. I will get in the winter time—Oh god. What are they? Never can remember. So simple. The big fellas. Wood storks. Wood storks will come here. I will have maybe 100 wood storks perched on the isthmus out here by the



ponds. They like it. It's a nice sheltered place for them. I will get of course the egrets. I have a visitor kingfisher who announces his arrival every fall by coming through the yard once and twittering and going out there. But yard birds, very few. We have a lot of blue jays, a few cardinals, warblers. Both winter and summer warblers. But that's about it. I will see the occasional catbird in the woods and once in a while a rufous-sided [note: rufous-sided towhee] what do you call them? Yeah rufous-sided—they scratch like this. Well it's not important. Anyhow. They're usually in the woods, but very seldom. No no. Yard bird life has been badly affected here. I think it's probably a food problem. Also I think a lot of the birds are not happy with salt air. We've got to remember, salt plays a big part. We have some slash pine here on the property. Well there are three or four slash pines that I transplanted from a ditch ashore. When I say 'ashore,' I mean across the other side of the river. You don't see slash pines on the island. And I notice when the wind goes east they will die off on the east side so the slash pine is a typical of plants that do not like salt. Salt air. And we have to remember that ocean is right over there. And here comes the salt.

**AH:** [00:43:58] That's true. Do you spend time in the river?

**HM:** [00:44:00] No no. I've only gone across the river on the ferry at Matanzas park.

**AH:** [00:44:08] Really?

**HM:** [00:44:08] That's the only time I've ever been on the river.

**AH:** [00:44:12] Really?

**HM:** [00:44:12] Yes.

**AH:** [00:44:12] Why—do you not care to go on the river?

**HM:** [00:44:16] I think after my stint with a shellfish operation on Long Island I'd had enough of boats. To me a boat is one big nuisance. Makes me think of what Morgan, JP Morgan of whom you have not heard but he was a big financier around the turn of the century of 1900. Someone asked him what his yacht cost, and he replied, 'If you need to know the cost of a yacht you can afford it.' And I think that's the way I look upon boats. They are nothing but a good way to lose money and be a damn nuisance.

**AH:** [00:44:58] Do you enjoy spending time outside or going to the beach?

**HM:** [00:45:00] I never go to the beach. I think I've walked on the beach as a therapeutic situation after operation. That's about it.

**AH:** [00:45:14] So you have a range of about a quarter of a mile since the river is here and the ocean is—

**HM:** [00:45:15] I am a hermit.

**AH:** [00:45:21] [Laughs] When did you move here permanently?

**HM:** [00:45:21] 1984. Mrs. Mercer and I came down. She was not too happy about the move but I think she adjusted to the circumstances.

**AH:** [00:45:33] Why wasn't she happy?

**HM:** [00:45:33] I think she felt it was, as you would notice, too removed from activities. However we did join clubs and move around and so forth.

**AH:** [00:45:47] Where were you living prior to moving here?

**HM:** [00:45:51] Prior. Maryland.

**AH:** [00:45:56] Can you tell me about your marriage to Mrs. Mercer. Where you all met and—

**HM:** [00:46:01] Is it really of any interest to anybody?

**AH:** [00:46:04] Well it's part of your life story.

**HM:** [00:46:05] Well we're not doing my life story. We're doing Matanzas River life story and I think that's fine.

**AH:** [00:46:13] That's fair. That's fair. Let me check to see—I think we've covered a lot of what I wanted to talk about. I would like to ask you very broadly, what do you think makes this area unique?

**AH:** [00:46:34] [Laughs] Every area tends to be unique. Detroit is unique, if you will. So obviously northeastern Florida is really part of Georgia in a way. We get Georgia whether. It's unusual. I mean the thing about it is that—I suppose the—one would have to answer—first of all, the history of the place is unique. Until a little while ago St. Augustine was unique. It's now not

unique. When you see a picture of St. George Street with thousands of people swarming up and down it, that's not unique. We've got a real problem there. No. Well I can't answer your question.

**AH:** [00:47:36] OK maybe I should rephrase it into saying, what attracted you to moving here permanently? You could have gone anywhere. Why here?

**HM:** [00:47:41] What attracted me? I continued to own the place and therefore was the refuge.

**AH:** [00:47:47] [Laughs] There was no romantic—

**HM:** [00:47:47] No. No. Romance, you know, is like wine. After a little while it turns to vinegar.

**AH:** [00:48:01] That's harsh.

**HM:** [00:48:04] I think you have to be careful about that yourself.

**AH:** [00:48:08] I think that's probably true. That's probably true. Is there anything else that you want to add that we haven't talked about?

**HM:** [00:48:10] No. I think that's enough and I think you are to be congratulated on exercising your grant in this matter. And I would like to think that it will be useful.

**AH:** [00:48:24] Well thank you. I think it's very useful. I appreciate your time today. Thank you.

**HM:** [00:48:27] [Laughs] You're welcome.

**[End interview]**