

**WALTER COKER
Photojournalist
St. Augustine, FL**

Interviewer: Anna Hamilton
Date: 5/28/18
Location: Genung's Fish Camp
Length: 1:30:13

[Begin Interview]

Anna Hamilton: [00:00:29] But I'm going to ID the tape and say that this is Anna Hamilton for Matanzas Voices and it is Thursday, May 10th, I think, 2018, and I am sitting with Walter Coker in his home outside of Genung's Fish Camp with a front row view of the Matanzas River, which is awesome. And it's a little after 3:30. So to start I'm going to ask you who you are. If you'll just tell me your name and what you do. [00:00:29]/[0.0]

Walter Coker: [00:00:34] My name is Walter Coker. I am a surfer, a Floridian. I've been in the state of Florida since 1963. And I went to the University of Florida, got trained as a photojournalist. I had a 30 year career in photojournalism, which sort of went by the wayside. And now I run an Indonesian import store in St. Augustine. [00:01:02]/[28.4]

AH: [00:01:04] Yeah. That's quite a span. [00:01:05]/[1.0]

WC: [00:01:06] Yeah. Yeah, I was—'63 to now. I guess that's fifty-eight years. Is that right? My math isn't that good. [laughs]. [00:01:17]/[11.2]

AH: [00:01:17] Can I ask you to turn off that fan? Is that OK? And if you get really hot— [00:01:22]/[4.5]

WC: [00:01:22] Sure. I turned it on for you. [00:01:22]/[0.0]

AH: [00:01:26] I don't care. [00:01:26]/[0.0]

WC: [00:01:28] Your preference. I don't run the AC very often. [00:01:33]/[4.8]

AH: [00:01:34] Yeah. [00:01:34]/[0.0]

WC: [00:01:34] I'm anti—AC. [Laughs]. [00:01:35]/[0.3]

AH: [00:01:35] Well this is pretty shaded and nice. [00:01:35]/[0.0]

WC: [00:01:38] Yeah, yeah. [00:01:38]/[0.0]

AH: [00:01:38] Will you also tell me your birthday, please? [00:01:38]/[0.0]

WC: [00:01:39] We this on June 17th, 1956. [00:01:42]/[3.1]

AH: [00:01:46] You have a birthday coming up. [00:01:46]/[0.1]

WC: [00:01:46] Yet another. [00:01:46]/[-0.0]

AH: [00:01:53] And so tell me—you mentioned that you weren't born here. [00:01:53]/[0.0]

WC: [00:01:54] Yeah I was born in Birmingham but my parents only lived there for a few months and my dad was in the Navy at the time. And—I'm sorry, the Air Force, and he got stationed at Eglin in Panama City. So when I was between the ages of 1 and 3 I did live in Florida but it was in Panama City. Then he got stationed in Patrick Air—in Germany at Hahn Air Force Base for three years from the time I was 4 til I was 7 and then in 1963 he got transferred to Patrick Air Force Base in Satellite Beach, which is where I basically went to all my schooling and junior college and where I grew up. [00:02:35]/[41.5]

AH: [00:02:37] That's interesting. So do you remember your time in Germany? [00:02:40]/[2.6]

WC: [00:02:40] I do. I do remember a fair amount of it. I actually had a hip issues when I was growing up and I was on crutches for most of the time I was in Germany in the snow and ice—and crutches. I remember it pretty well. [00:02:56]/[17.0]

AH: [00:03:00] Maybe a few bruises— [00:03:00]/[0.0]

WC: [00:03:02] Not some great memories, no. [Laughs]. [00:03:05]/[3.6]

AH: [00:03:06] Tell me about your parents. [00:03:06]/[0.0]

WC: [00:03:08] My mom was originally from Alabama, a very small town called Wetumpka. But she—they were pretty not wealthy. I would call them poor. They lived in a one room house. And she would pick cotton after school. But she made her way to the University of Alabama. She was an R.N., a nurse for a while. And then she became an English teacher later on, which I guess is where I got some of my spelling and journalism skills. [Laughs] And my dad was—he was—he spent 30 years in the Air Force—between—he was in the Navy for a little while and then he went into the air force. So he was originally from Georgia, north Georgia, but he met my mom in Birmingham when he was stationed there. [00:04:01]/[53.6]

AH: [00:04:04] Wow. You have some southern roots. [00:04:04]/[0.1]

WC: [00:04:04] Yeah we do. I actually just sent off some stuff to Ancestry.com to see see a little bit more, because there aren't a lot of records. So I'm going to try to find out some more about the roots. [00:04:17]/[13.2]

AH: [00:04:18] Yeah. Do you have any siblings? [00:04:18]/[0.0]

WC: [00:04:20] I have two older sisters and they live in Kentucky. And one of them actually just bought my parents' lake place where they moved from, as they're getting older they couldn't take care of it any longer. [00:04:30]/[10.3]

AH: [00:04:33] That's cool. [00:04:33]/[0.2]

WC: [00:04:33] And my one sister also lives in south Florida part of the year, sort of a snowbird, too. [00:04:39]/[5.6]

AH: [00:04:43] Are you close to them? Do you see them often? [00:04:43]/[0.1]

WC: [00:04:43] Don't see them a ton. I go to see my parents still a fair amount. I mean they're—my dad's almost 92 now and my mom's 90. So I try to see them as much as I can. [00:04:54]/[10.1]

AH: [00:04:56] Tell me their names. [00:04:56]/[0.0]

WC: [00:04:56] My Mom's name is Acenith and my dad's name is Dubb. [00:04:58]/[2.2]

AH: [00:05:04] Those are the best possible names. [00:05:04]/[0.2]

WC: [00:05:04] Yeah they're—I'm not sure where they arrived at Acenith. I think it's some Greek, a Greek name of some sort. But how my rural grandparents came up with it, I'm not sure. [00:05:17]/[13.3]

AH: [00:05:18] That's the thing about southern names, is there are a lot of unusual names the southern families have that— [00:05:19]/[1.8]

WC: [00:05:26] Yeah. Yeah. Her sister—her siblings are Geraldine, Rebecca, Winifred and Byron. So there's a couple odd ones in there too. [00:05:37]/[10.9]

AH: [00:05:40] So you spent your kind of formative years in Satellite Beach. [00:05:41]/[1.1]

WC: [00:05:43] Yep. [00:05:43]/[0.0]

AH: [00:05:46] So from the ages of— [00:05:46]/[0.0]

WC: [00:05:46] I was there—I moved there in '63. So I was seven. And I left there in about '77. So I went almost all my elementary school, of course junior high and high school and two years of college. I went to Brevard Community College. [00:06:03]/[16.5]

AH: [00:06:04] And what was that area like when you were growing up? [00:06:04]/[0.1]

WC: [00:06:08] When we moved there it was you know—the reason he was stationed there, the reason they put Patrick Air Force Base there was because of the space race at Cape Canaveral where they were launching and trying to beat the Russians into the space race and to the moon and everything. So the air force was—their job was to track the missiles when they were shot, you know, because back in those days it was all formative. So when they put rockets and satellites into outer space they didn't know what was going to happen. So when they try to put them in orbit they wanted to have people, you know, squadrons all around the world to see, to track them as they passed by. So my dad had this dream job of being able to fly places like South Africa, Australia, Guam, Ascension Island, all these different places and they would sit there and wait for the launch and sit around the pool and go fishing and [laughs] all kinds of stuff like that. I always said I'd sign up for the Air Force tomorrow if I could have gotten his job because he had a plum job there. He was stationed in Satellite and got to go to all those places as well on the government's dime. So anyway he got stationed there and we moved there, like I said, when I was seven and there was nothing there. I mean there was palmettos and up in Cocoa Beach there were some hotels and restaurants because that was kind of the center of the action. Satellite Beach was really nothing. I mean there was a few subdivisions coming in. A1A was still sort of a potholed, you know, sort of semi-dirt road down towards Sebastian Inlet, which, you know, seemed like eons away from where we were. But it was amazing. It was like everywhere else in Florida, though, now: you go back and you can't even recognize the place. [00:08:04]/[115.9]

AH: [00:08:10] Yeah. Change is hard to see in your home places. [00:08:10]/[0.0]

WC: [00:08:10] Yeah, it is. Yeah. It's pretty astounding every once in a while when you revisit places and not a shell of their former selves. [00:08:22]/[12.1]

AH: [00:08:25] So is that where you learned how to surf? [00:08:25]/[0.0]

WC: [00:08:27] Yeah I started surfing—we lived, you know—I just lived a few blocks from the ocean and we didn't have any idea how good we had it. You know we just—"This is how

everybody lives." But of course it wasn't. And yeah we just started surfing. My older sister had a couple boyfriends that had surfboards and we started learning about it and I got my own surfboard in I guess it was 1970, my first surfboard. [00:08:54]/[27.5]

AH: [00:08:56] Did you have to save up to buy it or was that a gift? [00:08:56]/[0.0]

WC: [00:08:57] It was a gift. I think it was a birthday present when I turned 14 maybe, or 13. [00:09:04]/[6.4]

AH: [00:09:07] And what were the waves like? [00:09:07]/[0.1]

WC: [00:09:09] Satellite Beach turns out to be one of the best places in the state to surf. I mean, again, we didn't know. We just thought it was like that everywhere. When I went to Gainesville later to go to college and I started meeting surfers from all around the state they were like, 'oh wow you're from Satellite Beach? Man you're lucky.' And I was like, 'oh really? I didn't know that.' [Laughs] No, the waves are good. For Florida it's a good spot. I mean you know there was actually in Satellite Beach there, there was this warm rock reef which they unfortunately are doing renourishment down there as well and they're covering up a lot of the reef there but the reef was an incredible ecosystem and we used to fish for sheepshead and drum off the rocks and there was crabs and all kinds of stuff in those reefs. And there are still—the reefs are still there but they're also nothing like they used to be in the '60s. And I'm not really sure why.

[00:10:09]/[60.0]

AH: [00:10:09] And what was the surfing community like? [00:10:16]/[6.9]

WC: [00:10:16] You know there was a lot more surfers up towards Cocoa Beach. We were—you know I started surfing long before I could drive. It wasn't any of this go look around for the best waves. You just walk to the beach and go surfing. You didn't check, you know, a spot a mile down the road or two miles up the road. You would just go surfing. So it was growing, you know. It was catching on quite—pretty rapidly down there in the early '70s. So it was cool. And then when we got to be able to drive we started going down to Melbourne Beach and Sebastian Inlet and places that are, you know, real stand out spots and it was like going on an exotic surf trip for us because the water color was totally different down there. It was blue and the waves broke different and everything was just new and exciting and there was like total wilderness down there. Yeah. [00:11:13]/[56.8]

AH: [00:11:13] Did you learn from somebody in particular? Or did you just trial and error? [00:11:13]/[0.0]

WC: [00:11:22] We just learned—taught ourselves basically. Yeah. A friend of mine got a got a board before I did and we just started going together. And they were longer boards back then so I would carry the nose and he would carry the tail because we were too small to carry a longboard and our arms wouldn't reach around the whole board. So we'd take one board to the beach and, you know, trade off. [00:11:45][23.0]

AH: [00:11:46] That's a good image. [Laughs]. [00:11:46][0.0]

WC: [00:11:46] [Laughs]. [00:11:46][0.0]

AH: [00:11:46] Do you remember a particularly good surfing day from being that age? [00:11:46][0.0]

WC: [00:11:56] I remember my first wave the first time I stood up and went, you know, a pretty good distance and then I was like I knew—I kind of—I didn't think consciously about it but I didn't—I kind of felt like this was it. This is what I wanted to do. Yeah. [00:12:12][15.9]

AH: [00:12:13] And like what—So that's interesting because I think people who surf, that's always how they feel, is that yeah, you obviously surf. Surfing grabs you. [00:12:16][3.5]

WC: [00:12:22] Yeah. [00:12:22][0.0]

AH: [00:12:22] What about it for you— [00:12:22][0.0]

WC: [00:12:24] I don't know. It's hard to describe. That's one of the things about it is because it is so hard to kind of put your finger on and I never really thought about this but I read a—there's surf writer named Allan Weisbecker and I was reading one of his novels. And he—and I—and it's kind of hard to believe that I never thought about it, but it's like when you're standing on a surfboard riding a wave you can't really have another conscious thought about anything else. Like you can sit out in the water waiting for a wave, then you can have all kinds of thoughts and think about the future or your problems or anything like that. But once you're up on a wave there's nothing really else that you can, you know, you can focus on. Everything kind of goes away. So that kind of—when I read that I was like, 'oh yeah I've been doing this for years but—' you know, that really kind of nailed it for me and that's the best description that I've ever kind of like come across. [00:13:25][60.9]

AH: [00:13:25] That makes sense. [00:13:25][0.0]

WC: [00:13:28] Yeah. [00:13:28][0.0]

AH: [00:13:30] Are you goofy foot? [00:13:30]/[0.2]

WC: [00:13:30] I'm goofy foot, yeah. [00:13:32]/[2.4]

AH: [00:13:38] Just for the record. [Laughs]. [00:13:38]/[0.0]

WC: [00:13:38] [Laughs]. [00:13:38]/[0.0]

AH: [00:13:38] So you started surfing in the '70s and at that time—I mean we think about media now and everybody's taking pictures of each other and you have internet and the world is a lot smaller, kind of, because of that. But at that time the surfing community was smaller and maybe more isolated. And before we started recording you were talking about Surfer's Journal and Surfer Magazine. How were you learning about the broader— [00:14:06]/[27.8]

WC: [00:14:07] It was almost nonexistent. I mean Surfer—Surfer was—the magazine was in existence then and I think when I really got into it like in the early '70s it was coming out six times a year. So you wouldn't see not a single photograph of anybody surfing except for when the magazine came to your mailbox or in the surf shop six times a year. And there was no—obviously no video. There was a show called Wide World of Sports on TV that every year they would show the Duke Kahanamoku contest that takes place at Sunset Beach in Hawaii in the winter and you'd see that about three or four months after it happened. And that was like it. And then in the mid '70s some surf films started coming around and they would basically, you know—somebody would make a surf film. Usually a California guy, you know—California-based because that's where everything was. That was where all the magazines were based and all the media about surfing was based. So there would be a—outside of Endless Summer, which made the big theaters, which, you know, that was in the late '60s. But other than that when I was starting to surf the only motion pictures you'd see, again, where the Wide World of Sports or if a surf film came to town. And down there we would go to Cocoa Beach Playhouse, is what—it was a theater. You know, a playhouse. And they would run the films there. And that's where we would go to see films and it was like a big, big deal to go see a surf film. [00:15:55]/[108.3]

AH: [00:15:57] Really? [00:15:57]/[0.0]

WC: [00:15:57] Yeah. You know, all the surfers would come for miles around and they'd have like two nights, two shows each night. Sometimes we'd go to every one of them, you know, because it was just so unique and incredible to see surfing from somewhere else. You know

some of them were travelogue, some of them were Hawaii. You know, almost all of them had Hawaii in them. But it was just, you know, something you just didn't get to do. [00:16:20]/[23.4]

AH: [00:16:21] It seems like it would be really validating, too, where like you're kind of a fringe part of a broader town or city or whatever, and then to see yourself on the big screen, or people that you admire. [00:16:28]/[7.2]

WC: [00:16:32] Yeah, yeah. You know we developed our surf heroes through all that stuff, through the magazines and through, you know—we all had our favorites and mine were all goofy foots. [Laughs] So. But yeah when they would come to sections on that, you know, showing the guys you like, their style or whatever, yeah, it was pretty exhilarating to see on the big screen. [00:17:00]/[27.8]

AH: [00:17:00] And who were some of the people you emulated when you were younger? [00:17:00]/[0.0]

WC: [00:17:06] Well I don't know—I would have liked to have emulated some of them [laughs]. But the ones I liked, Jerry Lopez and David Nuuhiwa and Rolf Aurness who's kind of a—David Nuuhiwa and Jerry Lopez are still pretty well-known names. Ralph Arness was—he's not so much known anymore but he was pretty big at the time. His father was like a Hollywood actor. I forgot his name. But anyway those three guys were who I liked the most. You know, who I kind of like—they were goofy foots and I just liked their style. And that's who I kind of like wanted to surf like. [Laughs]. [00:17:45]/[39.2]

AH: [00:17:47] If you had to describe their styles, what about them— [00:17:47]/[0.0]

WC: [00:17:56] Jerry Lopez was like a zen master. He was just super casual and he would surf huge. Like Pipeline in Hawaii and just get super tubed but just look like he was standing, you know, in the parking lot. He was just unflappable and just a really good surfer and he just had this zen-like approach to surfing. And David Nuuhiwa was—he was a little bit more radical. He surfed small boards like twin fins and things like that. And he was kind of—I remember him being, you know, riding a lot of alternative equipment early on. When boards were still longer he was going real short. And he was also a really good longboarder too, though. So. And Ralph Aurness, he was just—I can't say what his style was. I just remember seeing a lot of his surfing and just thinking it was really radical and I don't know, something about it struck a nerve with me. [00:19:02]/[65.7]

AH: [00:19:09] How would you describe your surf style? [00:19:09]/[0.4]

WC: [00:19:09] Well these days my skills have eroded quite a bit. [Laughs]. [00:19:12]/[3.0]

AH: [00:19:12] They've evolved. [00:19:12]/[0.0]

WC: [00:19:14] But in the old days I always tried to be casual. I guess if I was trying to follow any of them it would have been Gerry Lopez. I've always tried to, you know, not get too frantic or anything like that. I don't try to do stuff outside of my ability. I like to just kind of cruise. And that's kind of what I've always wanted to do. I was handicapped by being 6'3". So when you're riding Florida waves [laughs] it pays to be shorter and not taller. [00:19:48]/[33.6]

AH: [00:19:48] I didn't think about that but of course you're right. [Laughs] So moving a little bit to your schooling. You know, in high school you start to develop a sense of self, and your interests in terms of professionally. What was your experience like? What were you thinking about and interested in? [00:20:12]/[23.7]

WC: [00:20:12] Really, in high school, all I was interested in was surfing. But along those lines surfing is what made me get interested in photography. And my dad, like I told you earlier, was traveling around quite a bit with the Air Force and he would go to Guam often because that was either a stopover or a place they would base out of. And they had—he was course in the Air Force, so he would have what they called the BX back then which was, you know, you get stuff at a really cheap price. And there was a bunch of Japanese cameras there, which all the good cameras were Japanese. I mean aside from Leicas and things which were German, but nobody was going to buy those to start off with. So like my dad bought me a cheap camera, you know, less than a hundred bucks for a camera and a lens, sort of a small telephoto lens. Like a 200 millimeter lens. And I just wanted to start taking pictures of my friends surfing. So then a little later on we got a Nikonos camera, which was an amphibious camera that Jacques Cousteau helped design. And he and Nikon got together and developed this waterproof camera, which it was made for diving. But I started using it to swim out to shoot surfing with. But so that was really surfing and photography kind of came to me pretty close to the same time. And then when it came time to go—I didn't do much with photography in high school, like as far as year book and all that stuff. I didn't really do that. I was too busy surfing. So by the time I got into school I decided, you know, I was always pretty good at journalism. I mean English class, spelling, all that kind of stuff and language. And then—so I decided to look at melding photography with, you know, writing and photojournalism is what I decided to go with. [00:22:20]/[128.1]

AH: [00:22:25] What was the first picture you took? Do you remember? [00:22:25]/[0.0]

WC: [00:22:25] I don't remember the first picture I took. I've got some pictures from the early '70s but I don't remember the actual first picture. [00:22:33]/[7.4]

AH: [00:22:37] Do you still have your first camera? [00:22:37]/[0.1]

WC: [00:22:37] I don't. I've been thinking about buying one like it if I find it on eBay. I did buy a Nikonos 2, which was the amphibious camera that I was talking about earlier. I bought one of those a few years ago. The original one got stolen in Puerto Rico a few years later. But yeah, I've started looking around at collecting a few old cameras. [00:22:59]/[22.7]

AH: [00:23:01] Would you use them or just have them to collect them? [00:23:01]/[0.0]

WC: [00:23:03] Well I had this grand plan of starting to use a Nikonos but I shot one roll of film through it and about a year later I got it developed. [Laughs] And so, you know, the grand plan hasn't really come to fruition. It's just like shooting film now is—it's such a chore. I mean I love the idea of it but you know going to get the film, loading it up, shooting it, sending it off for developing and—you know it's just—I don't know. I entertain the idea of it but I don't really follow through. [00:23:39]/[35.5]

AH: [00:23:40] Yeah. Were you a hold over when— [00:23:46]/[6.2]

WC: [00:23:46] Digital? [00:23:46]/[0.0]

AH: [00:23:46] Yeah. [00:23:46]/[0.0]

WC: [00:23:48] I was—at the time I was working for Folio Weekly. So I was, you know—the the early stuff that came along with digital was pretty marginal, quality-wise. And just the transfer of imagery just to the computer and working with it, everything was so cumbersome that I wasn't like an immediate follower. But as it developed and stuff and I saw—you know when I was working for Folio I was spending—I was shooting black and white film and processing it myself in the darkroom there. So I was I was not only shooting all the articles but I had to spend 15 to 20 hours a week in a dark room. So—you know, and I was in a crappy little dark room with not great ventilation and stuff so I'm just inhaling chemicals and having my hands in chemicals. And so when digital got to where it was—you know, the workflow was good and the quality was good, I came along pretty quickly with it. I mean it was just—I didn't think it was great at the time but it was a good tool for what I had to do to produce. All the photos that I was shooting for Folio weren't like stuff I was proud of. [Laughs] You have to do a lot of bullshit as well as the good stuff. So for just getting that stuff out of the way and making it happen fast—you know, to spend you know 30 or 40 minutes on a photo in the darkroom of a restaurant that you didn't care about for an advertisement, that was just a colossal waste of time. So when digital came along it

made that part a lot quicker. But you know, I'm fully digital. I don't shoot as much as I used to but I haven't shot any film other than that Nikons in quite a long time. [00:25:41]/[113.5]

AH: [00:25:42] Gotcha. [00:25:42]/[0.0]

WC: [00:25:43] But I hate what digital has done to a lot of the photography in general. I mean you know, there's just so much imagery now that people don't look at pictures anymore but for a second or two and hit the 'like' button and move on. You know, nobody analyzes anything and nobody—also I feel like the impact of—when you used to see a photo you used to immediately—you know it could take your breath away and you wouldn't doubt whether or not it was real or if it had been photoshopped. And that whole feeling of just looking at a photograph and being really moved by it, it seems to have gone away and that's one of the kind of obviously dark side of digital to me. [00:26:40]/[56.1]

AH: [00:26:43] So that's been your experience? [00:26:43]/[0.3]

WC: [00:26:43] Yeah I just think that it changed the way you perceive, you know, a photograph, an image when you see it. I mean there are just so many ways to manipulate and digitize and change content. And I mean we could always dodge and burn and crop a photo a certain way in a dark room. But there was pretty strong limitations on what you could do to a photograph. And now it's pretty much wide open. You know, you can do anything to photograph. [00:27:13]/[30.3]

AH: [00:27:17] Do you think that's detracted from the value of what photographers have to offer? [00:27:17]/[0.1]

WC: [00:27:24] I think if you are able to trust—if you know the photographer, if you know the—like if there's a certain magazine you're looking at you know that they have integrity and you know that you don't have to worry about that kind of thing, I don't think it takes away what a photographer has to offer, but it—I think it—you have to turn your filter off and on depending on what you're looking at. You know, what medium you're looking at. But even Time magazine and even National Geographic got caught manipulating images. And this was years ago, when Photoshop was just starting, just kind of catching on. That they both got caught and like small manipulations of images, but if you're a purist that was kind of a no-no. I mean it still is, but. So you have to be careful now and that's kind of what I'm saying. When you look at an image now, you know, if you're in doubt about it you have to go—you know. I mean I had somebody tell me one of my photos was Photoshopped because it was one of those Watusi cattle out there in Hastings and he had horns that were like 5 feet long and the guy—I saw the guy learned I was a photographer. It was a couple weeks after it came out. And he was like, 'oh you Photoshopped

that picture.' And I was like, 'no, I didn't photoshop pictures. I don't photoshop pictures.' And he just—he totally refused to believe me. So I mean, you know, there would have been no question about it before but now he's able to doubt the image. And if you want to doubt the image, you can doubt the image. [00:29:15]/[110.6]

AH: [00:29:20] But that would have never happened 40 years ago. [00:29:20]/[0.1]

WC: [00:29:20] Yeah. Right. So before that wasn't an argument that anybody could make it. It wouldn't enter into the conversation. But the guy didn't want to believe it was true. So he, without looking at my negatives or whatever—I don't even remember if it was a negative or a digital photograph. But Photoshop existed at the time so he was certain that I had Photoshopped these giant horns on a cow. Like if I was going to photoshop something and make it spectacular I probably wouldn't have done it on a cow. [Laughs] I probably would've chose some other subject matter. But I just didn't do that. And but you know, it changes the perspective and the point of view of people. [00:30:04]/[44.4]

AH: [00:30:04] Does it make photography less powerful? [00:30:04]/[0.0]

WC: [00:30:11] I think it does if you—again, if you don't have the assurance that the sources is credible, you know? But again, you know, if some magazine is tempted to change something just so that the header fit in or something like that and the layout will look better. You know, again, those are small things and they don't necessarily change the content of the photograph but it becomes that slippery slope where, if this is OK, maybe this is ok, too. And then we start going down that road that nobody should be going down. You know it's—I think photography is still obviously incredibly important and powerful but I think the other part of the world we live in today is just over the barrage of images that you see every day. I mean I'm on Instagram now and have been for a couple of years and I didn't get on that right away. And I like being able to put my old photographs on there and stuff like—and things like that. But I just think, you know, you look at them for a second and move on and they're the size of your phone screen. And nobody spends time with them and analyzes them and if they're—if it's a photo with a lot of detail, a lot of content in the details, you won't see it on your phone. So there's only certain things that work that way. But yeah I just think the sheer number of images that we see every day because of digital is just—you can't—you just can't analyze them or look at them the same way as you could when you're—even in a newspaper, or in a daily newspaper, you know, if there was a big photograph, an incredible gripping photograph on the front page, even on a newsprint for a day it would impact you a lot more than something that's going to run across your your phone screen. [00:32:26]/[135.6]

AH: [00:32:27] Yeah. That's true. Can I ask you to close that window? [00:32:27]/[0.0]

WC: [00:32:27] Sure. [00:32:27]/[0.0]

AH: [00:32:27] As interesting as those people sound. Sorry If your house turns into a sauna. [00:32:27]/[0.0]

WC: [00:32:41] That's OK. I like it. [00:32:43]/[1.4]

AH: [00:32:43] So tell me about arriving at the University of Florida. [00:32:43]/[0.0]

WC: [00:32:55] Well I was—there was a brief interim between my junior college, my two year degree. I did go back to Alabama and worked for about six or eight months to save money to go to college and buy a car and stuff like that. So I lived in Alabama for, I guess it was about eight months. And I worked about 60 hours a week because I wanted to get out of there really quickly. I mean I love Alabama and my relatives but it was no place I want to ever live. [Laughs] So I basically used that time there to save up as much money as possible. So when I got to the University of Florida I was leaving Alabama, which I was really anxious to do. And even though I was moving to Gainesville I was still 80 miles away from the ocean. But I was within driving distance to go back to the beach again. So that was eight months being away from the ocean were pretty tough. But once I got to Gainesville and started school, you know, I was able to come over. That's when I kind of started my love affair with St. Augustine because it was the closest beach. And it also had a lot of other things to offer. But I started going to school there. I started journalism and to be honest it was an odd time. I wasn't super super—I wasn't a diligent student. I'll be honest with you. I could have done a lot more studious things but we were enjoying life and going surfing when we could. And yeah. So made it through in a couple of years though. Lot of my friends took 5, 6. [Laughs]. [00:34:51]/[116.2]

AH: [00:34:55] You were a lucky one. [00:34:55]/[0.2]

WC: [00:34:55] Yeah. I took a full load all the time and I got through it. It was pretty tough being a—I was—I wanted to be a photojournalist obviously, so—but at the time, it was '77 when I started there. And there wasn't really a curriculum in photojournalism. There was—I had to basically—I had to be a journalist. I was in journalism school so I had to take classes like journalism law, which was excruciating. And you know I had to I had to take courses as though I was going to be a hard news reporter for a daily newspaper. And I had to—I was supposed to be able to type 35 or 40 words a minute on an old—you know, they were electric typewriters but they were pretty cumbersome. I barely squeaked by that. So I kind of winged it getting through journalism school. But when I got to the end I did have two or three classes in photojournalism

and I aced all those. [Laughs] So when I got to actually what I wanted to do I was OK at it.
[00:36:04]/[68.4]

AH: [00:36:04] And so were most of the jobs funneled to hard news rooms? Or were there more—were there investigative, kind of long form— [00:36:05]/[1.8]

WC: [00:36:17] You mean as far as graduates go? When you got out of that system?
[00:36:19]/[2.7]

AH: [00:36:19] Yeah, just in terms of what you were thinking about afterwards.
[00:36:19]/[0.0]

WC: [00:36:21] Yeah they were—I mean for the people that wanted to go into journalism there was, you know—you could do it a few different things. There wasn't a whole lot of, the way I remember it, there weren't a whole lot of specialized courses. Like there was a couple at the end. Like I took Applied Journalism where we produced a page in the Gainesville Sun. Our class produced a page in the Gainesville Sun. So I would choose to photograph most of the stories and other people would write them. But if you wanted to go into investigative or, you know, whatever direction you wanted to go with in journalism—there was broadcast, of course, and advertising was in our college, as well, and PR. But as far as the journalism goes, there was just, the way I remember it, a couple of courses that were more specialized that if you want to go in a certain direction with journalism that's, you know, the ones you would take. [00:37:16]/[54.9]

AH: [00:37:16] Gotcha. Did you have an after school plan? [00:37:16]/[0.0]

WC: [00:37:22] No, none at all. I started working for a friend of mine who was involved in horticulture. He had a nursery and I did, you know, I started doing some freelance work and just started traveling a little bit and surfing. [00:37:39]/[17.3]

AH: [00:37:40] What was your first photojournalist job after school? [00:37:45]/[4.8]

WC: [00:37:45] Well when I was a senior in my Applied Photojournalism, or my Applied Journalism class, when we were producing that page for the Sun, my graduate assistant I met, he started a paper called Gator Bait. And he started that in 1980, '80 or '81. I graduated in '79 from UF. So I'd known him through the class and he decided to start this newsprint weekly publication about University of Florida sports. Mostly football, because that was where the interest was. I said weekly, but it came out monthly until the football season. Then it came out weekly because every game would be in there. So he reached out and asked me if I wanted to be his photographer so I was the first photographer for Gator Bait Magazine and now he's—he made—he did quite

well with it. They've got a website and all kinds of stuff but I shot all the sports for the University of Florida when I was working for him. [00:38:56]/[70.7]

AH: [00:38:56] That's a pretty big deal. [00:38:56]/[0.0]

WC: [00:38:58] Yeah, yeah. I was on the sideline for a lot of those seasons. The 0-10-1 season in '79 [laughs] and I did—you know we shot gymnastics, baseball, all that stuff, basketball. And during football season when we'd come out once a week I'd shoot the game on Saturday. I would travel sometimes to like the Jacksonville game, the Georgia-Florida game, sometimes down to Tampa for a game down there, went to Auburn one time. But I would shoot the game on Saturday and spend Sunday in a laundry room in the back of my house about size of a telephone booth, if anybody knows what that is [laughs] and develop all the film and make proof sheets and take them to them on Sunday in the afternoon and then he'd choose the photos he wanted and I go back and print them until about midnight on Sunday night. And sometimes it was about 95 degrees in there. It was some pretty interesting times. So yeah, that was my first real journalism job after I got out and then I was, at the same time, I was working for a camera store over in Gainesville. [00:40:12]/[74.5]

AH: [00:40:12] Did you—I mean today that job is the ultimate for a lot of people. Sports photography. [00:40:16]/[4.0]

WC: [00:40:21] Yeah. [00:40:21]/[0.0]

AH: [00:40:21] Did you—was that something that you were like, 'yeah, this resonates with my professional ambitions?' [00:40:21]/[0.0]

WC: [00:40:26] Well I liked shooting sports because that's what I'd done to start. You know, surfing, obviously was an action sport. So it takes a certain amount—in those days it took a lot more skill because you had to follow focus when you have action moving away or towards you. There was no autofocus then. It was all manual so you had to have not only your camera set properly, you also had to be able to focus on fast moving stuff and also avoid getting taken out by 300 pound lineman [laughs] when they come off the sideline. So it was interesting times but yeah I had—I always had kind of a, back in those days, a real interest in mostly action, you know, sports and action photography because I'd started at surfing and then I'd start shooting sports with him. But then later on I met a guy that worked for the University of Florida itself and in 1985 he hired me to work under the president's office at the University of Florida. And I became a photographer for the actual university. I was a state employee. [00:41:35]/[69.0]

AH: [00:41:35] That's cool. [00:41:35]/[0.0]

WC: [00:41:37] So I worked through the Gator Bait thing and got to know them because I was on the sidelines at the games and stuff and then made some connections that way and I got the job. And then I had to really start developing my skills into a whole different—like I was doing a lot of PR stuff for the president's office and portraits and all kinds of stuff. Studio work, which all stuff I had never ever done before. [00:42:03]/[25.8]

AH: [00:42:03] Was that a hard learning curve or did you take to that? [00:42:03]/[0.0]

WC: [00:42:07] No it was pretty hard. It was—it was again, still back in the—it was in the mid '80s. It was film. You know, you had to have light meters and film and processing and, you know, studio lighting. I didn't know any of that stuff but I somehow managed. [00:42:26]/[19.1]

AH: [00:42:27] So how did you migrate from kind of the PR university world to the more nuanced documentary—if that's fair for me to say about your work. [00:42:27]/[0.0]

WC: [00:42:37] Well I—what happened was I—at the University of Florida we did everything. I was still shooting all the football games for them. I was shooting a lot of sports for them because, you know, I was doing stuff for the Associated Press wire because the university itself—a lot of people might not know this, but they'll have—they basically have a PR division of the university, but they are doing legitimate wire stories and stories on their research and things like that. So I went to some fascinating sites like archaeological sites, anthropological sites, labs where guys are doing some crazy chemistry and things like that. So but we'd had a team of writers that would write about research that was going on at the university and they would—the Associated Press thought it was legitimate enough to give us a wire service. You know, we were connected to the wire service. So when we had put out a story on like maybe an archaeological find in Palatka or, you know, Ocala or something—like Barbara Purdy found Indian canoes preserved in Lake Newnan, Newnans Lake over there, that was a big deal. So it was a legitimate news story and we would write it and I would photograph it and it would go out on the wire so some of the photos and stories we did would wind up out, you know, published in L.A. or different parts of the country. Occasionally they even got published around the world, you know, depending on what the subject matter was. So anyway I started learning more—that was more like working for a paper, a newspaper, which I had never really done other than the Alligator, which was the student newspaper. But I moved over to St. Augustine in 1990 and I started working for Folio Weekly in 1992 and that was when I started really kind of I guess developing my eye for whatever it became. It was like—I developed a way of looking at things and seeing things that I think became pretty distinctive. [00:44:59]/[141.8]

AH: [00:45:01] Yeah. And it seems too the shift was from assignments and university news to you have to find the story. Is that— [00:45:01]/[0.0]

WC: [00:45:11] Well after a while, after I'd worked at Folio for a while—you know, I was driving up to Jacksonville and that was—we were doing—it wasn't super in-depth stuff. It was—Folio was only five years old when I started working for them. They started in 1987. And I started working for them in '92 and we were still—it was still a pretty minor player in the overall scheme of things. You know, it was—we were just kind of finding our way and then like in the mid '90s we got a guy, an editor was hired named Bob Snell and he came and he came in with a real kick ass attitude and he hired Anne Schindler who is pretty much of a legend as far as journalism goes around here. And once we had this team—and Tricia Booker also, which was Bob Snell's wife. John Citroni, can't leave him out. But anyway once we got this team in place we started doing stories that really made a difference. And so it was—we were generating ideas for stories and we were all working together and then something had happened like—a little later on in 1998 I started doing the 'Through the Lens' column, which was something that I had to totally—it was what we called standalone photograph, standalone art. It was just a photograph that wasn't tied to any other editorial in the magazine. So that was when I really had to, you know—it was kind of scary. It was exciting but also scary because every week I had to have an image that I wanted to put out there that was something that would just be by itself and with no content other than maybe a caption or where—when and where it was taken. So that was when I really had to start finding stuff and I started carrying my camera full time always looking for photos, 20—you know pretty much every waking moment. [00:47:16]/[124.5]

AH: [00:47:16] And how did that idea for 'Through the Lens' come about? [00:47:16]/[0.0]

WC: [00:47:20] There was a couple other—we subscribed to a whole bunch of alternative weeklies, which was—Folio was an alternative weekly. It's kind of modeled after the Village Voice, you know, back in the '60s up in New York City. But I had seen similar kind of photos in other papers because we would get papers from all over the country to see what they were doing just to keep up with everything. And there was a couple of them that had, you know, basically the same thing. You know, call it something different, but it was a stand alone photo. And I just—I was interested in doing it. I'd been—I'd started seeing these photos and I wouldn't take them. But I would say, 'that'd be a cool photo, but there's no place for it.' And I pitched it to Bob and he—after a little while he was cool with it and we started doing it. And that was that. [00:48:16]/[56.0]

AH: [00:48:17] And tell me about some of them—some of the photos—I mean I know you did it for a long time, but some that stood out to you or that maybe resonated with the community. [00:48:17]/[0.0]

WC: [00:48:27] So many. One of the first ones was—one of the ones that got me thinking about this was there was an industrial area up in Jacksonville called Beaver Street and it's like real gnarly. Like, you know, truck yards and salvage yards and different things like that and chemical tanks and all kinds of crazy stuff [laughs] that you don't want to know about. But it was off the beaten track. But I'd drive down there because it was an interesting place visually and there was a salvage yard that had all these toilets, empty toilets, just in rows and rows of empty toilets and I always said, 'you know, that's a cool looking image to me, an interesting image to me.' There was weeds growing out of them and different stuff like that so I always thought that was a cool image and that was one of the first ones. And there are so many. I can't even think of them all. It was interesting because you could just drive around and you had this free form, this opportunity—and so I developed my eye to look for these things, the odd things that people would drive by every day, even I would drive by every day until I started looking. And then you'd see a picture form there. And that—you know, I was told many times over the years that a lot of times that was first thing that people would turn to when they opened up Folio was that was one of the things they want to look at. [00:49:57]/[90.1]

AH: [00:50:02] Yeah, that's how I felt. I remember when you had that column. [00:50:02]/[0.0]

WC: [00:50:02] Yeah. It was a pretty, you know—for the time, the period of time that it was in, there was no Instagram then. It was almost like an Instagram, a precursor to Instagram. Somebody actually said that to me. I was like, 'I hadn't thought of it that way.' But it was. Because you know if you're walking around with your phone and you see something's kind of cool you take a picture of it and you can show it to people. But it was it was a whole different level, of course, shooting it on film and it came out once a week and people could look at. And it was kind of cool too because I would end up going places and see one of them cut out and stuck on the wall or whatever. [Laughs] And I'd go, 'well at least that resonated with someone.' [00:50:42]/[39.3]

AH: [00:50:43] Yeah. Well I think it's kind of—we're used to reading news and seeing reports about something but photos, especially in a disembodied way like that makes you look at the world around you in a new way, and look for meaning in new ways. [00:51:01]/[17.4]

WC: [00:51:01] Yeah, yeah. Oftentimes I would use it just, you know—I would show some development or something or some land being cleared. I was definitely an editorial stance that would start coming across in some of the photos. Like a big pile of trees that was just being incinerated on a property to make room for a development. So I would definitely—I definitely got political with it a little bit you know and tried to do what you just said, like make people stop and take a look at something that they would drive by and not think about. And sometimes it was

funny, sometimes it was ironic, sometimes it was tragic. I often drove around and when I started driving around to—when I was driving to Jacksonville every day I was driving about 500 miles a week sometimes because I was driving 25 miles to the office and then once I got there I'd be on assignment and our coverage area was from Nassau County all the way, you know—it was Nassau, Baker, Clay County, Duval County, and St. Johns County. So we were—geographically it was a huge area. So I was driving all over the place and something about—I started seeing a lot of roadkill. I mean I just started thinking about it. And I started thinking of a way to show that in a photograph without being, you know, gruesome. We had something at Folio where they said, 'is this something that somebody wants to see while they're having lunch?' Because a lot of people would pick up Folio because they didn't have phones back then. You'd pick up Folio to have lunch and you'd read Folio. So I wanted to find a tasteful way to show something—make awareness about road kill because there was just a tremendous amount of it. And there still is. And one day I was coming home on Phillips Highway from Jacksonville and I saw a deer that had been hit and it was dead. But he wasn't, you know, he wasn't mutilated. And he was laying on the side of the road. And I just got there and I framed the picture up and I was waiting for cars to come by because I wanted to kind of juxtapose the dead animal with the car and there wasn't anything gross about it, but it was clearly dead. And when I was doing that two people walked into either side of the frame to go look at the road kill because it was a deer and people—I don't know what their curiosity was. But I was using a wide angle lens and they both framed up the animal. And then a car went by so I was able—it was kind of a symmetry to it that, you know, it's just—all these things came together and I got the picture and I ran it and people were sort of like—we got some reaction to that one. But I was like, 'hey I just want to bring some attention to this thing that I, for some reason, I have a sensitivity to.' So. [00:53:56]/[175.3]

AH: [00:53:56] Were there any photos that you were strong in favor of publishing that your editor said, 'no, maybe this crosses the line, or no, that's not suitable.' [00:54:09]/[12.9]

WC: [00:54:09] Yeah we had—I can't think of any great examples right off the top of my head. That was one I probably should have had some warning on. [Laughs] We definitely got in some newsroom fights. One that comes to mind was when there was the Maddy Clifton—I don't know if you remember. She was a little girl that was murdered by her neighbor. And we did—we had the first interview with them because they were getting so castigated by all of the media. And, you know, it's a really gruesome story but this teenager had killed this girl, you know, supposedly accidentally but he hid her body in his room. And anyway he was—his parents were sort of raked over the coals saying they were covering up for him and this and that. But we kind of took a, you know, a cautious approach to the thing. We didn't—anyway the guy liked the way we handled that so he gave us an interview. And I photographed his parents and instead of putting that on the cover they put some photo of the kid on the cover. It was a couple things like that, that you know, you're always going to have those kind of battles in the newsroom and

you've got to stand up for certain things and some you win, some you lose some.
[00:55:51]/[102.2]

AH: [00:55:52] That's true. What was it like to work at Folio? Folio has, or had, a reputation of being an aggressive, opinionated, truth-telling underground publication. [00:55:52]/[0.0]

WC: [00:56:04] Yeah. I loved it. It was—during our heyday it was an exciting place to work. It was—I mean everything's changed now of course which is why I don't have a job there anymore too. But that was partly the digital revolution and the economic collapse and the internet and everything coming along. But from like the late '90s into, you know, really for about 10 years there was it was an incredible place to work. There was a lot of energy. We were—there was a lot of bad stuff going on around here that nobody was—you know, the job of an alternative weekly is to cover things that the other—that the other media won't cover. So that's what we did. And we had, like I said earlier, Anne Schindler and Bob Snell and Tricia Booker and John Citrone and Susan Eastman. I mean we we loved doing those stories. I mean we found things that we felt needed to be covered and weren't being covered and we covered them and we pissed a lot of people off and we had an impact too. I mean it wasn't just writing something. I mean occasionally—obviously things like the Fleeman Tract would still happen and they got developed and stuff. But you know there was some some pretty big stories that we that we broke and it was an exciting place to work. I mean I won't say I loved every minute of it because every place has its moments but it was—I wouldn't trade it for the world. It was a great experience. And I feel lucky to have lived in that era, really, as a photojournalist because you know—I actually taught photojournalism at UNF as an adjunct a few times in the late '90s. And even as I stopped doing that I'd have occasional students at UNF that wanted to be photojournalists look me up and ask me what they should be doing and this and that. And at the end it was heartbreaking to have to tell them, the ones that really wanted to go out and shoot and shoot for a living, and to be honest with them I had to say, 'I don't really see it as—you know, unless you're in the top 1 percentile and you're ready to work for very little money. And this is a labor of love and your passion—' I couldn't really encourage them at the end. And it was kind of heartbreaking to have to tell people that because I had been able to live this career and do this work and I loved doing it but then to have to tell somebody that that's sort of over with—I mean I don't want to over state that it's gone forever. But it's completely a different landscape now. [00:58:55]/[170.9]

AH: [00:59:07] Has anybody picked up the mantle from the opportunity that Folio Weekly afforded? Who's doing the work with the same kind of integrity? [00:59:07]/[0.0]

WC: [00:59:10] Around here? [00:59:10]/[0.0]

AH: [00:59:10] Here or just in general. [00:59:10]/[0.0]

WC: [00:59:15] I think there's still great journalism. You know, obviously nationally we have great outlets. I think journalism in general though is—unfortunately there's, just like imagery, there's so much. There's so much information. Like even looking at the New York Times online every day, I try to do that but it's—there's so much to read. And it's just—there's just so much information. It's just like so many pictures come across, pass in front of you every day now that I just—I mean obviously there's clearly great work still being done but I just feel like the way the era that we are in now with the amount of information that for a story or an image to have the impact it did, I just can't see that it does anymore. It's hard. It's hard. It's hard to like put into words exactly. But when we came out once a week in Folio everybody, you know, was paying attention. And most people were. Everybody knew what was on the cover. Everybody knew the issues we covered inside and people talked about it. I mean you didn't—instead of staring at their phones. You know you talked about it. You read it at lunch and you talked about it. And I'm sure there's dailies all over the place and alternative weeklies everywhere that feel the same, that the impact is just—you know Folio's still there. They still write some good stories. But there is no talk—what we used to 'talk quotient.' You know there was—there's no conversation. Nobody knows what's in there every week. I mean it just—I don't know. It just seems like that era is kind of gone. [01:00:58]/[103.0]

AH: [01:00:58] Do you have any hope that it will come back or maybe be reborn in a different form? [01:00:58]/[0.0]

WC: [01:01:07] It seems hard to go back to that because I don't think—you know clearly we're never going back to a Surfer magazine that come out every six months and you don't see anything in between. I mean every—six times a year and you don't see anything in between. And Folio Weekly, it comes out once a week and you're looking forward to every, you know, everything they write about. It just—I just think that time is gone. I don't see how it could ever come back. I mean, again, it's not to diminish what's being written now or any journalists out there now that are doing great work. But it's just hard for me, after having lived through that, to see that that kind of environment could ever be, you know, be there again. [01:01:51]/[44.4]

AH: [01:01:51] Yeah. Maybe that's also kind of the charge for the new generation of journalists, is to find out how you make that stand out. [01:01:54]/[3.2]

WC: [01:02:00] Yeah it would be. It would be an interesting—[drilling sounds outside]. [01:02:03]/[3.0]

AH: [01:02:03] What is that? [01:02:03]/[0.0]

WC: [01:02:06] [Laughs] I think they're doing some deck building or deconstruction or something. [01:02:12]/[6.0]

AH: [01:02:12] [Laughs] Gotcha. We'll see if it gets too bad. [01:02:12]/[0.0]

WC: [01:02:17] Yeah. [01:02:17]/[0.0]

AH: [01:02:21] So a lot of your work, especially in recent years, is more environmentally focused and social justice focused. How did that—[drilling sounds] That might make me insane. Let's just see really quick. Sorry. [01:02:29]/[8.2]

WC: [01:02:36] That's alright. [01:02:36]/[0.1]

AH: [01:02:36] Also we've been talking for about an hour. Is that OK with you? OK. [01:02:39]/[3.0]

WC: [01:02:40] Yeah I'm fine. You mean how much time we're spending? [01:02:41]/[0.9]

AH: [01:02:42] Yeah. I usually try to keep it at an hour or under an hour but I got carried away, apparently. [01:02:42]/[0.0]

WC: [01:02:48] No I'm flexible. I can go more if you want. [01:02:51]/[3.3]

AH: [01:02:52] OK. Well there's nothing really to do about it. [01:03:07]/[14.6]

WC: [01:03:07] I mean we could sit in that bedroom if it would be any better. [01:03:07]/[1.0]

AH: [01:03:07] Could we try that? Just to—I've asked people to unplug their refrigerators before and all that stuff. [01:03:08]/[0.2]

WC: [01:03:13] [Moves to a different location] I don't know if that bed will squeak. [01:03:32]/[19.1]

AH: [01:03:32] I don't care. Are you going to be comfortable? I can also pull a chair in here. [01:03:32]/[0.0]

WC: [01:03:32] I can pull a chair right there and close the door. Right There. I don't know if that's—. [01:03:34]/[1.9]

AH: [01:03:40] Yeah. So tell me about how your—the focus of your work evolved and how you got to care about what you care about. [01:03:44]/[3.6]

WC: [01:03:48] Well the stuff that I shoot now—I don't shoot near as much but of course I have a phone in my pocket all the time. So like everybody else in the world I always have a camera with me. And frankly the quality of the photos is about as good as my—is better than my first digital camera. So is that going to be OK? [01:04:07]/[19.2]

AH: [01:04:08] Yeah. It's fine. [01:04:08]/[0.1]

WC: [01:04:10] But anyway I've always cared—like even since I was a kid in Satellite Beach when the first condo was built on the beach there, and I was 14 or something, I wrote a letter to the city commission, and said this shouldn't happen and now I go down there and there's a wall of condos on the beach. And that was the first domino. So anyway, I've always been a surfer all my life. I have been in the ocean all my life in Florida and I've cared deeply about it and that's never gone away and I've been, you know, I've been—I've watched oceanfront development happen for really my whole life. And it drives me insane. So I see crazy stuff going on I just photograph it and I don't really have a outlet for it anymore other than maybe Instagram [laughs] and—but I still do it. I still drive down to Summer Haven and see what madness they're doing down there every other day for no other reason—just so I know what's happening. So I still do that. I don't do so much as far as social stuff goes. Most of the stuff that I post on Instagram, a lot of it is old stuff that I, you know, that I remember fondly, frankly. You know, the times that we were talking about earlier. But I'm—environmentally, that's probably really more what I try to shoot now, other than when I travel I like to shoot photos still. But I've always just tried to document the evolving face of Florida especially along the coastlines and I'm still doing it. [01:05:48]/[98.5]

AH: [01:05:50] And why? Why does it matter? [01:05:50]/[0.1]

WC: [01:05:53] Well—I mean—like the Fleeman Tract when that happened I—when I realized that was going to be kind of mowed over I just immediately decided I should start going in there every day and photographing the beauty that was there that's going to be lost forever, frankly. I mean partly I do it to preserve, you know, the beauty of Florida and places that are disappearing. Now some of the stuff with the buildings, some of the crazy houses they're putting on primary dune, you know, next to the water line while there's others falling into the ocean just up the road, I just do that because I feel like it needs to be documented as well. There's no beauty there to document, but it's insanity is what I'm documenting there. You know, when you're building a place in basically the same place that right down the road has just tipped over into the ocean, there's something wrong. Something's gone wrong there somewhere. So there's a process there

somewhere that's failing [laughs]. And somebody—maybe someday I'll have an outlet to put all these photos together and show somebody but I don't know. Sometimes I wonder why I do it myself. [Laughs] But I do it. [01:07:11]/[78.7]

AH: [01:07:11] Have other people—has anybody come up to you and said to you, 'oh my gosh, your photographs. I hadn't thought about this, that or the next thing in this way but now I see something new. [01:07:20]/[8.7]

WC: [01:07:27] Yeah yeah. I mean just the other day, that one picture, that aerial that I put up the other day of that subdivision, it's 20 years old now. But a guy commented on my Instagram, he said, 'you need to show these photographs more because people, you know—' I'm basically paraphrasing, but he said basically, 'people on the ground don't know what they're living in until—' And that was the point of the aerial photo essay, was kind of, 'look down on this.' Because it looks like madness from above, you know? And it is. But when you're down in it you're like, 'eh.' It's just—you know. But that different perspective. And he said, 'you really need to show these more.' I don't know how you do that. But I liked hearing it [laughs]. I mean you know—I definitely—and again, I'm terrible with coming up with examples but definitely over the years I've heard that a lot. [01:08:20]/[52.7]

AH: [01:08:20] Will you tell me the story of that particular photo, just to contextualize it? [01:08:20]/[0.0]

WC: [01:08:25] The aerial photo? Yeah, so I had—the development was—it was in the late '90s and I had actually seen this guy's work. I forget where I'd seen it because there was no internet, really, then. I think I must have seen it in a magazine. And to be frank I've forgotten his name. But he did that kind of work up in the midwest. He was shooting, like, you know, human footprints development from the air. And I was just like, 'that's a really cool approach.' It wasn't an original idea on my part but I knew that it would be impactful here because, you know, development was a big deal then. And obviously it still is. That doesn't go away in Florida, apparently. But I had done a little bit of aerial work and I kind of liked doing it. I knew kind of how to do it and I had connections with a plane. So I just decided—I pitched it the editor and Bob and they seemed to think it was—you know, they had to spend some money to do it, a little bit more than we usually do for a story because I had to rent a plane. But we just drove around—flew around and I knew some places to go. I knew where things were going on, where it was going to be pretty impactful to look at from that perspective. And it turned out to be certainly that way. It was just an aerial photo essay. We had St. Johns County. We had Duval County. We had Clay County in there. I don't think we got up to Nassau County. But I mean it's the same thing everywhere. You've seen one you've seen them all. But it was cool to look at in different ways. And you'd have them in perspective to different water bodies or the ocean or the

river, the St. Johns River even . So it was interesting to be up there and do that. And that was one of the things that was cool about doing that work, was doing different things like that, having an idea and being able to pursue it. [01:10:30]/[125.0]

AH: [01:10:30] And when you were in the plane doing that work, what was going through your mind? [01:10:30]/[0.0]

WC: [01:10:38] You know, I knew kind of what I would see because I had been—I'd done aerial work for other things before. And it's just like photojournalists, journalists in combat and stuff—although I've never been in combat. I've been a couple times in places where I felt like I was. But obviously that's an exaggeration to guys that were in war. But you're just trying to get the image and worry—not worry but process it later, like what you're seeing. You just—you've got a certain amount of time in the plane. You're paying money for every minute. So you've got to make the most of it. And if you'd see a certain angle on something or you knew—you know, I would direct them to go around at a different angle or different altitude. But it was almost like everywhere you look in certain places it was just ghastly. You just see this what looks like a Monopoly board of houses and buildings and retention ponds and cul de sacs and dead end streets and it's just, who wants to live here? Our cover was something like, 'You Are Here' and it just pointed to one little house and all of this like, a hundred other houses all around it that all looked the same. Yeah. [01:12:00]/[81.8]

AH: [01:12:05] Why did you and Folio Weekly think it was an important story?
[01:12:05]/[0.4]

WC: [01:12:06] We were just, again, trying to raise awareness and just say, 'hey this is madness' and put pressure on developers, too, but you know, they were sort of bulletproof [laughs] to pressure unless they got caught doing something illegal. But no, it was just trying—again, a different way of looking at something that you're in the middle of every day but you don't see it. You know? Just like me driving by something every day until I finally go, 'hey there's a picture there' and stop the car and go look for it and find it. So we just really—and you know I actually got some calls on that story too that were like, 'hey my house—' they totally—some people, it went right over their head. I mean literally and figuratively I guess. But this one guy came to me and he was like, 'can I get an enlargement of that? I think my house is in there.' I was like, 'nah, I don't think so. We're not going to do that.' [Laughs] Because you kind of missed the whole point. [01:13:11]/[65.1]

AH: [01:13:11] [Laughs] It's like funny, and sad. [01:13:11]/[0.0]

WC: [01:13:16] Yeah. It was all of those. It was tragic. [01:13:18]/[2.1]

AH: [01:13:20] And will you also tell me about the Fleeman Tract? Because that's something you've mentioned a few times. Just for somebody who might not be familiar with that.
[01:13:21]/[1.0]

WC: [01:13:25] Yeah. The Fleeman Tract was a really big deal to me and a lot of environmentalists here. It was 111 acres of pristine—I mean it was pretty much untouched. It was 111 acres of what's called maritime hammock. And it was dunes and swales and oak trees and deer and cottonmouth snakes and rabbits and Anastasia beach mice. It was like a thriving ecosystem right in the middle of St. Augustine Beach across from Publix where Sea Colony is now, a gated community. And there was a pretty big battle to save it because it was a jewel. I mean it was—there's really nothing like it and it's gone. But it was—I got involved. And we did—something I should mention is alternative weeklies, we did journalism with a point of view. I mean we did not—we were fair, I believe, but we came at things with an opinion. And we—that's what alternative journalism was. So when I developed an opinion about that and it was clearly, 'this place needs to be saved.' And it got—you know, I embedded pretty much with the environmentalists there and I photographed Karen Lewis out there and she was the leader of a group called TREES, which was an acronym but I don't remember what it all stood for. But I photographed her on the property. I mean the place was just incredibly beautiful and I couldn't imagine that it would be lost. And when it was lost it was devastating. I mean it—to this day it's hard for me to think about. Because it was, like I said, right in the middle of St. Augustine Beach and it was—you know, it went for like 11 million dollars to a developer. And and if fact serves—if my memory serves me, there was like ten million dollars to preserve it. So the guy—you know, the family that owned it—and granted they bought it in the '60s and wanted to make some money off it but basically they got a million dollars more by selling it to a developer. But in the end it had gotten so heated and everybody hated each—you know, the sides hated each other so so severely that there was just—it was really sad. You know, the whole thing was sad because we couldn't come—we couldn't come to some sort of agreement where this—the realization of the property, I guess, it's hard to fathom that the developer and the family that owned it could have fostered so much goodwill by—and their name would have been respected forever. Because you'd have this park, this passive park or a place even—not even a place to—maybe a boardwalk or two on the edges of it, but just leave it alone. And it was just one of those things that it was a tragic loss to me. And it was like, to me, it was a signal that if we couldn't save this place, well what what can we save, you know? So now it's a gated community with some really poorly constructed McMansions in there. And it's just always been, you know, something that has stuck with me. It always will. [01:17:05]/[220.0]

AH: [01:17:05] When you drive by that area, do you think about that every time? Does it ever become part of the landscape now, or do you still have this association with places?
[01:17:13]/[7.8]

WC: [01:17:15] Oh I totally do. They don't go away. I mean they still have the deer crossing sign there on A1A, but I don't think there's any left. Because how could there be? There was a herd of deer living in the middle of St. Augustine Beach and happily living there reproducing and everything and now there's houses in their home. And yeah, I can't drive by there. And I've had to go in there for different things to deliver furniture or whatever and it's heartbreaking for me. And you know, like I was saying earlier too, I don't—the people that live there and bought homes in there, they don't have a clue what it was one time. You know, it's been 20 years since they started bulldozing the place. And they left trees in there. They said they could have cut everything down and that's the favorite approach of developers is, 'we could do this, but we're going to do this and you should be happy with it because we're saving trees instead of mowing everything down. So choose the lesser of two evils.' Or whatever. I don't know but that's—and they did leave trees. They didn't do a clear cut there. But you know, the damage is done. So I don't blame the people that live there because they don't have a clue. It's just such a sad statement to me on where we were then. Because every—most people thought it was worth preserving. But it just didn't happen and it turned out in the end to be such a hateful exchange. City commission meetings were heated and it was just a tragic kind of thing to live through and see that we couldn't work it all out, that the money couldn't be come up with by the state and the county. Shoot. I don't know. It was—to me it was such a remarkable place that it should have been preserved by—even the feds could have gotten involved. I don't know. I don't know what the criteria is for that but it was a remarkable place. [01:19:25]/[130.0]

AH: [01:19:25] Were there any, on the flipside, wins that you've seen through your work that you covered that you've been—? [01:19:25]/[0.0]

WC: [01:19:35] Yeah. You know the Bridge of Lions was one. I took that picture right there in 1992 or three, I think it was. We did a lot of stories on the bridge when the preservationists were fighting and then there was this big movement to tear it down and build something that would move more cars into the downtown 15th century city [laughs], which didn't make any sense to me. But that was a pretty big—you know, that in the end the preservationists won and we had given them a pretty strong voice I feel like. So I photographed a lot of the bridge often. One of my photos got on the cover of the Historic Register calendar and it was a picture of the Bridge of Lions when it was designated as one of the most threatened places, one of the 11 threatened places. [01:20:32]/[56.3]

AH: [01:20:35] '11 Places to Save.' [01:20:35]/[0.3]

WC: [01:20:35] Yeah. Yeah. And they put it on the cover of their calendar that year. And you know, I feel like Folio, we did some investigative reporting. Theresa Segal, who was involved, she she did a lot of work. But we gave voice to them and that was one I feel like we had a lot to do with the win. There's not a lot of them, though, sadly. Especially development-wise. There's very, very few of those that stand out in my mind. I mean there was—there's got to be some [laughs] but I'm having a hard time remembering them. It was a lot, you know—a lot of the times you would just, you'd put out the information and hope something was done. But you know, it didn't always turn out that way. [01:21:27]/[52.4]

AH: [01:21:27] And one of the things I wanted to ask you about is you obviously still take pictures of the coast and surfing, and I wonder if you would talk a little about that and how you've seen coastal Florida—and specifically here—change. [01:21:27]/[0.0]

WC: [01:21:32] So you mean like maybe environmental? [01:21:45]/[13.0]

AH: [01:21:46] In any way you want to talk about it, yeah. [01:21:46]/[0.1]

WC: [01:21:49] I don't shoot surfing as much as I used to because everybody else is doing it [laughs]. Now—I used to love to shoot surfing and when they would have a good day I would make a point to go shoot but now I go down to the beach and there's five people out standing on the beach shooting and they're putting it up online an hour later. And it just kind of like lost the point to me. So I'm not shooting much surfing anymore. Every once in a while if it gets really good and I find a spot that's kind of away from the crowd I'll—I like to shoot empty waves more like to shoot surfing. And when I travel and surf I still like to shoot and document the things I find. But the coast here it's under siege. You know, it's under siege by development from the land side and by sea level rise and climate change on the other side. And so the two is a really bad mix. You know you've got people building closer to the water and more stuff on the water and you've got water coming in. Obviously we've had a couple hurricane experiences in the last couple years. And I just see that as further madness that we're not getting the signal. You think—I mean I don't wish the hurricanes would come here. As surfers we always wish they were 400 miles offshore and they send in swell and it's clean swell and we'll get waves like California or Hawaii instead. But when they come right over us it doesn't do surfers any good. So don't blame surfers for wanting hurricanes [laughs]. But after Matthew I was like, 'well this is going to really deal a blow to the development community,' because you can't—this is a shot across the bow or a shot into the bow because—but it didn't happen and then Irma, and we're like, 'oh well this is going to slow things down.' And it's like up in Villano on North Beach you're like, 'this should really cut back on the building and maybe some people will kind of give up on these houses,' which is a horrible thing to have to do. But if your house is sitting on the ocean

and it's getting undermined yearly or if not—it's not just hurricanes. We're getting these king tides, what they're called and north easters that are, you know—so there's all these things going on but there doesn't seem to be any talk of retreat or—it's madness. I mean they're like, 'let's build a wall. let's build a wall. We're going—we can—' They're okaying armoring the coast pretty much rubber stamping all this stuff now and it's just—I don't know. I know it's property and they are taking property if they tell somebody they can't develop on it. But at some point it has to end. I don't know the intricacies of insurance and how much money you and I are paying to help these people and if we start renourishing in front of their homes, do we get to go to the beach there? There's all these issues. I mean where are turtles and birds going to nest? Because when you start armoring like they're doing up in Vilano, you only have a beach at low tide. At high tide the water is banging up against their sheet piles and there's no place for a turtle to go. And I don't know. It just seems like all the rational thought about all these things and the concern for our wildlife and our sea life, it seems to be gone. The current administration in Florida is there's a whole nother topic but he wants to be our senator soon. So I don't know. It just he—Rick Scott I'm talking about, of course, is just—he's trying to be an environmentalist now that he's going to be running for senate. But he's just going to let the place go, in my opinion. And he bought the election eight years ago and I don't know. We're paying for it now.

[01:26:10]/[261.0]

AH: [01:26:11] So we've talked about a lot of setbacks but what do you—I mean you're still here and you still shoot these things and obviously find importance in doing that work. What are the things that you do that give you hope, or the things you see that give you hope?

[01:26:18]/[7.0]

WC: [01:26:34] Well there are still a lot of people around that are not giving up. And really, young people is really all we've got. They're being left a mess, frankly, in a lot of ways. And I still have hope that things will turn around. I mean you know, as journalists we're kind of trained skeptics. I mean if you're not a skeptic you're not a good journalist. So we—you don't see a lot of super sunny journalists. And I think that's good. I mean, you know, that's what we're—so I've lived a life of those kind of things. And it is hard to sometimes have hope but you've got to. You got to. So I'm hopeful that sanity will return someday to our policies and our politics. And you know, there's things happening. Solar. And there's lots of alternative thinking going on with regards to energy and technology is creating plenty of problems but it's also got opportunities to change the way we do business, the way we do things. And hopefully that works out that way.

[01:28:05]/[90.6]

AH: [01:28:10] So we've been talking an hour and a half and I want to be respectful of your time. Is there anything else that we didn't get a chance to talk about that you want to talk about or something that you want to add that maybe I didn't think to ask about? [01:28:17]/[7.0]

WC: [01:28:26] The environment around here, one thing that you know we didn't talk a whole lot about that I've seen happening is—and they actually mentioned it at SACA yesterday, was the mangroves and stuff, the—having lived on the river here for a couple of years now and seeing the river change and you see the mangroves and things coming up here that didn't used to be here. It's just I've always wanted to live in a tropical place and I never really have. And I'm sort of living—starting to live in one now but it's not really probably the right way to do that. [Laughs] But I love tropical plants and stuff and I love mangroves but—and they're starting to grow out here in the waterway and I love them. But it's really odd to see them out here. And they seem like they don't belong here. But it's just something that's interesting too. I like plants. I've always liked to grow plants and things like that so I've been watching them and I photograph them sometimes. But it's just something that's curious to me. It's kind of cool in one way and then it's kind of a pretty bad signal in another way that they're up here where it used to be—you know, when I lived in Gainesville in the '70s it would be frigid for, you know, from October to March or April. You wouldn't think about putting on a T-shirt. And now you put on warm clothes you know four or five times a year and it's just radical how much change has happened in the last 30 years. I don't know. [01:30:03]/[97.6]

AH: [01:30:03] It's very real. [01:30:03]/[0.0]

WC: [01:30:04] Yeah, yeah. Anybody that doubts it. I don't know. Take a look around. [01:30:08]/[4.1]

AH: [01:30:10] Yeah. [01:30:10]/[0.0]

WC: [01:30:11] Yeah. [01:30:11]/[0.0]

AH: [01:30:12] Well thank you. [01:30:13]/[0.2]

WC: [01:30:13] OK. [01:30:13]/[0.0]

[END INTERVIEW]