

A CULTURE
WORTH
SAVING

Never too late

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outskirtspress
DENVER, COLORADO

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Outskirts Press, Inc.
<http://www.outskirtspress.com>

ISBN: 978-1-4327-8308-2

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

This book is dedicated to my wife Malinda Usina Jones
who has stood beside me and encouraged me
every moment of life's journey since 1950,
and to Florida's commercial fishing families
whose culture is worth saving.

Thanks to Margo Hall for dedicated editing assistance.

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A Culture Worth Saving

“If families live their lives in a culture, but disappear without leaving a written record, did they truly exist?”

rp jones -09/30/11

FLORIDA AND FISHING HAVE BEEN SYNONYMOUS SINCE ADMIRAL PEDRO MENÉNDEZ DE AVILÉS FOUNDED ST. Augustine in 1565. He brought myriad tradesmen, including net makers and fishermen who harvested seafood for sustenance and trade.

From 1880 through 1925, four million Italian immigrants arrived in the United States. Immigrants from Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Scotland and Scandinavian countries fled to America. Thousands of families migrated to Florida, searching for economic and political freedom. Thankfully, many chose commercial fishing.

The culture shock was huge when families that were speaking diverse languages and observing different customs met life long Florida natives living in coastal communities from Pensacola to Fernandina. The locals did not welcome foreign fishermen with open arms. Animosity toward Europeans in 1880 was no different than animosity toward Vietnamese fishermen fleeing communism in the 1970's or the enmity toward Cuban fishermen fleeing Fidel

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Castro's communist dictatorship in the 1980's. America will always be a melting pot where world-wide cultures combine and sometimes collide.

These few recollections are about people who created the Florida commercial fishing culture, a culture worth saving.

CHAPTER 1

The beginning of conservation in Florida

GUY BRADLEY STALKED WALTER SMITH AND HIS TWO SONS THROUGH THICK MOSQUITO-LADEN THICKETS DEEP IN THE FLORIDA EVERGLADES. The Smiths were plume hunters whom Bradley had been trying to apprehend for killing birds in the Everglades rookeries. He found and confronted them at their hunting camp. An argument ensued when Bradley attempted to arrest one of the sons. Gun shots rang out from both sides. When the shooting stopped Bradley was mortally wounded. He bled to death before his body was found the next day, drifting in a boat miles from where he was killed.

Guy Bradley is recognized as Florida's first wildlife officer although he was not always on the right side of the law. In his younger days he killed birds for their plumes but quit when he saw the error of his ways.

After much soul-searching, he joined efforts to stop the slaughter of millions of pink Flamingos, herons and egrets. Killing birds for plumes so feather merchants in New York could decorate ladies hats became unacceptable to Bradley.

After Bradley was killed Walter Smith, the accused

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killer, was tried in a Monroe County court. The jury acquitted Smith after testifying he shot Bradley in self defense. Bradley's death and the acquittal of his killer caused citizens to demand something be done to protect Florida's endangered birds.

Intense public outrage forced Florida legislators to address acts of plume hunting, shellfish poaching and other illegal wildlife activity. As a result of Bradley's death and the lack of any statewide conservation laws, the 1913 legislature created the Office of Shellfish Commissioner to which Governor Park Trammell appointed T.R. Hodges.



Florida was a wild state in the early 1900's. Occasionally, Native Americans attacked rural residents. Protecting Florida's coastline and thousands of miles of bays, rivers and creeks was a dangerous challenge which T.R. Hodges willingly accepted.

Most Florida waterways had no navigation aids. Local poachers evaded arrest because they knew every hiding place along creeks and rivers. Nevertheless, Commissioner Hodges relentlessly brought poachers to justice. He did such a good job for conservation that, the 1915, Florida Legislature expanded his duties and authority.

Hodges greatest challenge was crafting law enforcement regulations which the fishermen and hunters would obey. The independent commercial fishermen were not ready to accept change. They didn't believe Hodges would fairly enforce the law. Fishermen knew people

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with the right political connections were seldom arrested and punished. Hodges never convinced them his law enforcement agents would be any different. In the long run, his harsh enforcement policies cost him his job. When Governor Catts was elected, with strong support from commercial fishermen and dealers all over the state, one of his first actions was to fire Hodges, as he had promised the fishermen during his campaign.

In the early 20th century, hunting, fishing and logging in Florida was unregulated. The commercial fishermen and others who lived off the land and sea didn't want anything from government. It is a trait still important to commercial fishermen who pray to be left alone to catch mullet, redfish, trout, blue crabs, shrimp, oysters and clams in the same manner and same places they have harvested them for over a hundred and fifty years.

Hodges didn't understand commercial fishermen or their culture. Fishing-lore indicates his bias against commercial fishermen was reflected by his harsh manner of law enforcement. These raw-bone, independent fishermen, whose ancestors settled Florida, had self-regulating hunting and fishing laws in their community. The fishermen had their own way of dealing with outlaws. Vigilante law enforcement was sometimes used on out-of-county fishermen. It was simple and harsh.

If, for example, an out-of-county crab fisherman set his gear in local waters, his buoy lines might be cut and his traps destroyed. The out-of-town crabber could either fight the entire community or return home. The smart ones left in their boat. The dumb ones left on their back.

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If local fishermen had a problem forcing an outsider to leave, they went squirrel hunting along the shore where the outsider's traps were set. Bullets whizzed close to where the unwanted fisherman was pulling his traps. This type of hunting got the intruder's attention.

In Hodges' time, law enforcement was sporadic, due to the lack of conservation officers. Local constables, sheriffs and judges protected the voting citizens of their community because they kept them in office and on the county payroll. Outsiders were not always judged under the rule of law.

The stubbornness of commercial fishermen to change guaranteed a confrontation with Hodges. The fishermen would not accept law enforcement by a politician in a white uniform who looked down his nose at them and told them how, when and where they could fish. Hodges convinced them by harsh words—and brute force if he had to—that the Florida Legislature commissioned him to enforce the conservation and management laws of the state and he damn well intended to do so.

According to an unpublished manuscript by Robert M. "Bob" Ingle, the first State of Florida marine biologist, *"T.R. Hodges was a fastidious dresser who wore a sparkling white uniform with insignias and badges designating his high rank and the name of his organization. He changed uniforms often when he was in the field enforcing fishing laws. This was possible through delivery of cleaned and pressed uniforms sent by train or horseback from a specific Chinese laundry in Tallahassee."*

The son of the captain who operated one of Hodges's

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gunboats told Ingle that the two one-pound cannons were mounted on the bow of the steamship *Roamer*. Hodges used cannons to enforce the law after one of his officers was killed by a fisherman during a confrontation. The cannons protected his agents while they investigated fishing activity in coastal villages and cities up and down the west coast of Florida.

Under protection of the canons, his agents left the safety of the gunboat. On shore they checked the size of oysters, monitored the shellfish harvesting areas and measured fishing nets for proper mesh size and total length. If the nets were illegal they were confiscated, then stacked in a pile on the violators' property and burned. Under his legislative authority, Hodges did not need a warrant. If he suspected an illegal activity had occurred or an illegal net was in a person's possession, he took immediate action without a warrant. Due process was hardly ever considered in this era.

Commercial fishermen are protective of their nets, traps and all fishing gear. I can only imagine the scene in Apalachicola, Carrabelle, Fort Myers or St. Augustine when fishermen and their families gathered around piles of confiscated nets and watched Hodge's agents burn them to ashes. The animosity between the crowd and law enforcement officers was probably brutal. The scowling faces, clenched teeth and crying babies, mixed with raucous shouts from big, strong men in the crowd, was a powder keg. Hodges needed cannons and armed agents to destroy the fishermen's nets. It is amazing Hodges wasn't tarred and feathered.

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Hodges received significant publicity from Florida newspapers during his tenure. The following example is from the *New Smyrna News*, published on Sept. 29, 1916.

Hodges Declares Fish Jumped Into His Boat

"The fish are so thick in the East Coast Canal (Intercoastal Waterway) that they jumped into a small skiff towed behind the Seafoam steam craft in which State Fish Commissioner T. R. Hodges came to Miami yesterday, so that official said upon his arrival in Miami. Mr. Hodges arrived in port yesterday, coming from Fort Lauderdale, after making a trip along the entire East Coast. He stated that the Seafoam, drawing three and a half feet of water, easily made the trip down the East Coast Canal.

They are working on the canal at the present time and dredges are taking out the shallow places," said Mr. Hodges. "I am sure that the waterway will be able to accommodate all yachts this winter."

Mr. Hodges was accompanied on the trip by the patrol boat Alice D and two patrolmen. On the way down he saw a man using a big seine. The fisherman dived from his boat and took to the woods while the officials took charge of the seine which is now on board the Seafoam.

Mr. Hodges left Miami early this morning for Boca Raton and Palm Beach, where the Seafoam will be laid up while he goes across the state to Sarasota where he will begin another trip along the west coast. He stated that fish are plentiful along the inland waterways and that

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never before has he seen such large schools of mullet. On the way down, near Boca Raton, he stated that 18 large mullet jumped into a little skiff being towed behind the yacht and that there are "billions of fish" in the waters of the inside passage. "This will be especially good news for northerners who dislike to go outside but who want to catch fish on the way down," said Mr. Hodges.

The Seafoam is used exclusively on the east coast by the shellfish commissioner while the Roamer, the armed steamer, is used exclusively on the Gulf coast."

Hodges will be remembered for establishing a framework to protect Florida's marine resources. After his career as Shellfish Commissioner, he remained active in Florida politics. He ran for governor in 1924 and 1928 but lost both times. He ran for Secretary of State in 1930 but lost to R.A. Gray.

The Shellfish Commission was replaced in 1933 by the Florida Board of Conservation, an organization given oversight of the fishing industry by the governor and six members of the Florida Cabinet. The Cabinet system worked properly for decades until the management of Florida marine resources was given to the Marine Fisheries Commission by the legislature, driving a nail in the coffin of seafood industry's harvesting ability. Under a recent Constitutional Revision there is no longer any oversight or appeal process by either the Cabinet or the legislature.