

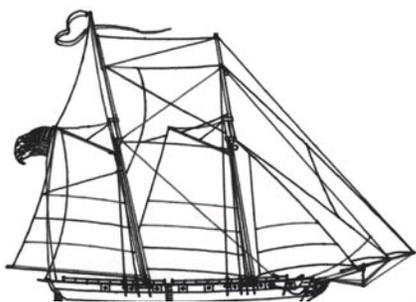
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Turtle Industry in Key West

By Corey Malcom

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In April of 2000, the Florida Department of Historical Resources called upon the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society (MFMHS) to organize a rescue-archaeology effort to save materials being dredged from the pens surrounding the site of the Thompson turtle cannery. This site, known more commonly as the “turtle kraals,” is at the foot of Margaret Street at Key West Bight. Over a dozen MFMHS staff and volunteers slogged through muck and mud for a week, gathering anything that was turtle-related or man-made. By the end of the project, thousands of turtle bones had been recovered, along with knife handles, slabs of marble table-tops, whetstones, bottles, glass marbles, and many other materials relating to the working waterfront of the mid-to late 20th century. It all added up to a remarkable glimpse into a somewhat mysterious industry.

Mr. Donald Wells visited the MFMHS recovery project after reading about it in the local newspaper. He introduced himself, and talked to the crew about what the kraals was like when it was functioning. He had so many pertinent things to say, that he was



Turtle being removed from the kraal. Photo credit: Monroe County Public Library.

asked if he would agree to a more formal interview, which he did. The interview was conducted on April 19, 2000, on the dock at his home on the Stock Island waterfront and was videotaped. The following transcript is made from the audio portion of that tape.

Wells had plenty to say about his ten years at the turtle kraals. Importantly, he was frank about the business – as he saw it, turtles were no different than any other livestock. It was an especially enlightening talk, and put a significant, first-hand perspective on the turtling operations and

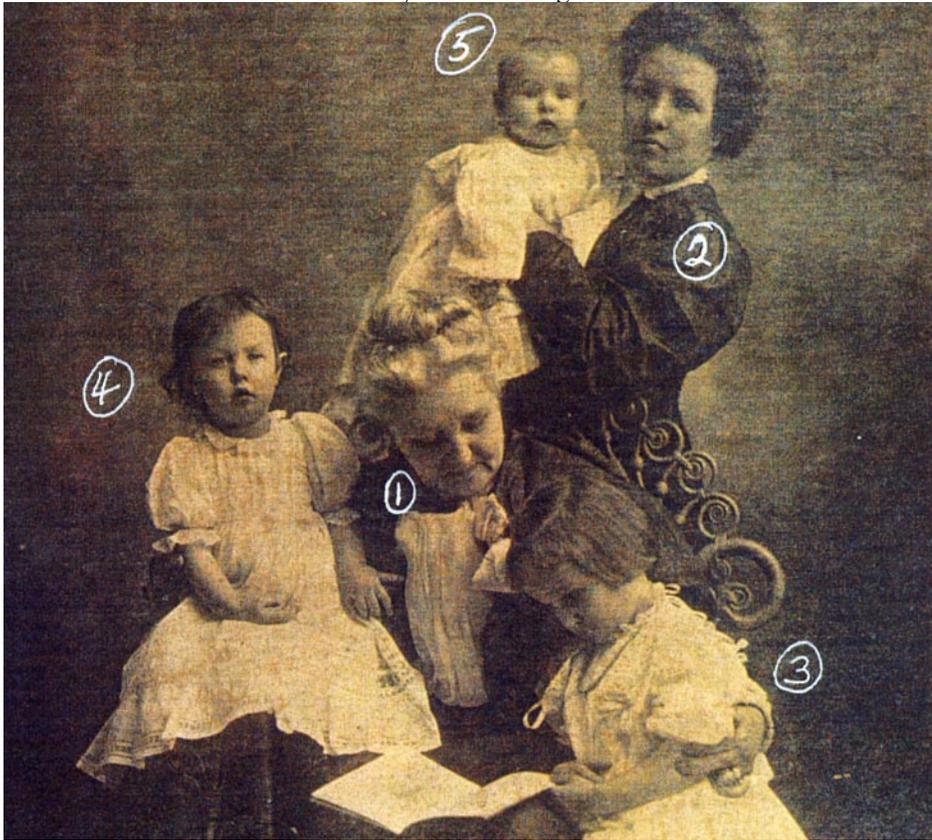
on the materials recovered in the excavations. A heartfelt thanks goes out to Donald Wells for his cooperation and honesty.

The Wells interview was to be the first of two with former kraals employees. Another was scheduled with a woman who had worked in the cannery preparing the soup. Unfortunately, she became reluctant about participating and backed out. No amount of pleading could convince her otherwise. Mr. Wells probably could have answered many of the questions that were planned to be posed to her, but he was not

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SOCIETY NEWS AND NOTES

By Tom Hambright



Descendants of William R. Hackley 1. Charlotte Hackley Spencer 2. Lilly Charlotte Spencer Sweet #. 3. Judith Page Randolph Sweet 4. Charlotte Hackley Sweet 5. Dorothy Fairfax Sweet. Photo credit: Hackley family.

I hope the readers find the diary of William Randolph Hackley as interesting as I have. His diary covers part of the time between 1829 and 1857 when he lived in Key West and is the only look we have of family life during the years before the Civil War. As a lawyer and U.S. Attorney he was in the middle of the wrecking industry at its peak. During the time I have worked with his diary I have found other information about him and his family and met some of his descendants. He came to Key West in 1829 from his native Virginia and married Matilda Floker on August 12, 1841. They had four girls all born in Key West and baptized at St. Paul's Episcopal

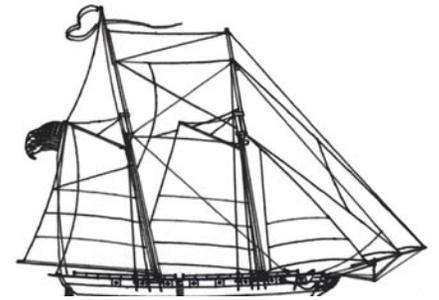
Church. The girls and baptism dates were: Harriett Marie (June 1844), Charlotte Heinemann (January 1844), Sarah Ann Folker (November 1849) and Lucia Beverley (February 1856). They also had a son that died shortly after birth. In 1857 the family moved to Illinois. The family members I met did not have a photo of the family in Key West or Illinois. One of the family members did have a photograph of Charlotte late in her life with her daughter and granddaughters. Following is more of the diary for September and October 1856.

Tuesday, September 30. Rose at 4:30 to which hour I have set the

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New Members

Kathy Buckard, Cape Coral; Brenda Hargave, Elmore, AL; Alison Sipes, Marbelhaed, MA; John Strothenke, Key West.



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asked them. As a result, many of the details of cooking the turtles remain a mystery.

This transcript is verbatim and includes all of the pauses, stammers and poor grammar uttered by both interviewer and interviewee.

CM: Donald, ah, you're a long-time turtle fisherman, and worked in the turtle business. Do you mind telling us how old you are and just some background about you? Where you were born, ah, how long you worked there, all that sort of stuff.

DW: I'm a Key West Conch. I'm a fourth - fourth generation Key West Conch, and I went to work at the Key West turtle kraals when I was fifteen years of age, and I was there for ten years. First started out in the cannery when I went there as a fifteen year old boy just working out the calipee¹, the chines² and stuff like that for the ladies to get ready to put into the cans. Then, my boss who was there at that time, he quit the job after I was there five years. Then I took over his place as the boss of the turtle kraals.

CM: Who did you work for?

DW: Karl Thompson. Karl was the boss of the turtle house at that time, but the company was owned by Thompson's Enterprises³. So, after he left I stayed there another five years. Kept wanting to quit, and my boss, Mr. Maitland Adams⁴, said, "Do one more... one more order for me for Moore and Company⁵. They need 150 turtles done in three days." I said, "Well I'll go ahead and do that order for you, but when I get this done, I'm leaving." He said, "Fine." Five more years passed. So I was, you know, a commercial fisherman on the side at night, while I was working for them in the daytime, and me and my wife would get in an argument about it everyday, because

I didn't want to be there. I wanted to be a commercial fisherman. So finally she said, "Quit." So, Christmas Eve, lunchtime, I came home for lunch and I said I'm going to quit today. She said, well, if you can't make it you're going to have to go back. I said, "Never. I don't want to do this anymore."

CM: What year was that?

DW: Oh, I've been gone forty years or so. Thirty-nine, something like that.

CM: 1960 or 61.

DW: So I did that hundred, a hundred and ten in one day. So we completed that order I was just speaking about, in three days. And then, like I said, five more years went away before I left there. But, every morning you know, we'd get in the pens, and put a rope around their fins. The crew I had in there would drag them up that chute into the slaughterhouse. In three minutes I would disassemble one turtle - every three minutes, from start to finish.

CM: Ah, let me ask, uh, before we get into too much detail there, how many people worked at the kraals?

DW: We had about... When the cannery was in operation we had around ten people working, and, uh, some cleaning the calipee...

CM: What were the different positions? How was it organized there?

DW: Well I would, I would go in early, about 5 o'clock in the morning. I would chop up the turtle backs the day before, and would cut off the underneath part, what they called the calipee. I would chop the outer chine of the turtle shell off. We had about a thousand-gallon pot - cooking pot - so we'd place all of that in there, then we would cook it. Then after it was cooked, I would take them out to another big thing with water in it, and break the

shell off the calipee and the chine off the turtle. And then the ladies would clean it. You know, they'd take the meat and stuff off of it. And they would use the gelatin, cut it up into little chunks, about one-inch squares, they would weigh it and put it in individual cans. And then as that went through the rack to the cannery where they put the tops on, we had one person pouring the, ah, what do you call it, the stuff in the cans, the liquid in the cans...

CM: Stock?

DW: Yeah, the stock, right. And then it would go to this little can, can thing we had to put the top on, and then we'd put it in the vat after all this was done. We had a big steam vat to put vacuum in the cans so they don't explode. That would stay in about an hour and a half, and then we would take it out, and the next day we would label it. Different labels, you know, same soup - Key West Soup, Modern Soup, you know, and on and on (laughs). So...

CM: So you had the canning operation, and you had the kraals. So were there people that worked only in the kraals, or were there people that worked only in the cannery?

DW: Yeah. We had people... Like I said when I first started I worked in the cannery with the ladies, and then after five years I started butchering. Then I butchered. Somebody else did the job that I was doing. So I stayed butchering, it was like three of us butchering. Then after, we needed a person to take the, the quar..., after the quarters was taken out of the turtle, we needed someone to take the meat off of the bone. So, I left myself do that. So the other three boys would butcher, and I'd take the meat off the bone... [unintelligible] ...and stuff like

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(Turtles from page 3)

that.

CM: How was turtling organized in Key West? I mean you worked for Thompson. Were there any other turtling operations in Key West?

DW: Well, I want to tell you a story I read in the paper the other day, that, it's just not true. They said the Key West commercial fishermen that fished for turtles in Key West, the turtles got scarce and they had to go further and further to catch turtles. That's not true. The only turtles that was caught came from the Cayman Islands on the *A.M. Adams*⁶ that belonged to Thompson Enterprises. There was only one other man that caught turtle in Key West that was Gene Dominguez, better known as "Shorty" to us, and he had a small operation. You know he'd catch ten or fifteen turtles maybe once a month, but he didn't bring in turtles to our, to our company, he sold them on his own.

CM: So he was sort of an independent operator?

DW: He was an independent operator, and you know all of us Key West people caught a few turtles. Like me, I had turtle nets, and I would catch maybe five or six turtles nightly and sell them for twenty, twenty-five dollars to the local people. See in the turtle business over there, if a turtle was under a hundred and twenty pounds, we did not take it. They had to weigh at least a hundred and twenty pounds, or the company would not take it. And, you know, these, these things, the turtle boat themselves, you know they, like I said, they lived primitively. They, it was their live... it was their way of life, and they had nets, nothing was harpooned. It was caught in nets; they had about 50 or 60 nets. Only 15 to 20 people on it because there was herds of turtle down in the

Cayman Islands, which there still is. They had dories, double-end dory boats that they would go out and pick up their nets in every morning. See turtle is like a chicken; they'll come back and roost at the same place every night. And they would find out where these turtles' sets were, and they would place their nets out before dark, and when the turtles' would come back to sleep that night, they would get entangled in the nets. These guys, sometimes they'd check their net two or three times a night, and take out the turtles that was in the net.

CM: Yeah, you'd have to watch them before they drowned, right?

DW: Right. They would entangle as they try to move their fins, they would wrap up and they would drown.

CM: What kind of net was it?

DW: It was line – fishing line. Just a heavy fishing line⁷.

CM: OK

DW: They had floats on it. No leads. It was a swing net.

CM: Its not like the green shrimp net, then?

DW: No. It was sort of like line, like line itself – a heavy line.

CM: OK

DW: They made their own buoys. They would carve them out of boards and stuff into the shape of their boat. That's what they used for floats on their nets.

CM: So that's how you knew who's net was what, huh?

DW: Right.

CM: Well that's a neat trick. I've never heard of that. Talking about the turtle business here, what products came out of the cannery and the kraals? You mentioned soup, but were there other things made, were there... One thing I noticed when we were doing our excavation over there recently, we didn't find many skulls, and we thought well maybe they sold the

skulls as curiosities to tourists. We didn't know. But were there other things that, that were shipped out? And were live turtles shipped to other places?

DW: There was turtles that we shipped occasionally, maybe once a month to Sid and Roxie's that's on Islamorada, and he would come down here to buy 8 or 10 turtles.

CM: Live turtles?

DW: Right, right, live turtles. And he had a cannery up there, which I think still exists up there. And that was about it, you know. We would use the shells, the chine of the shell, the calipee, the fins and all the skin that was on the turtle. That would, that would go into the can. That was in the can.

CM: So, so it was primarily soup was the product.

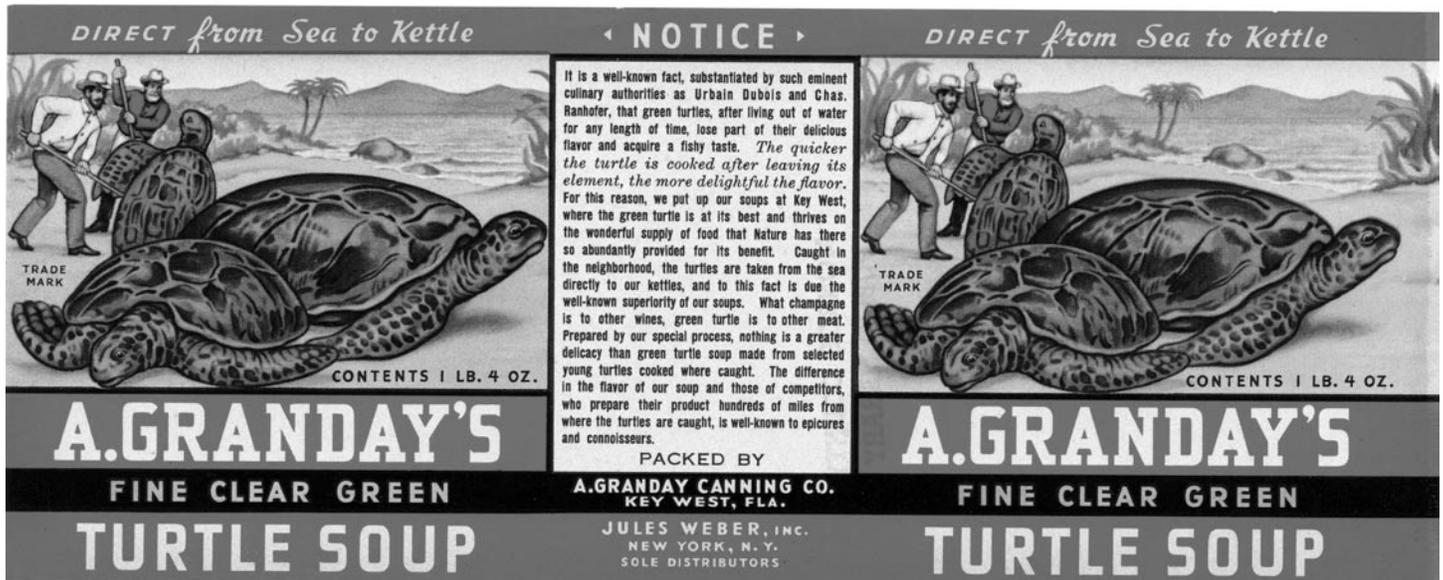
DW: Right, right. And the steaks and stuff went to our market. See we had a market as well, the company - Thompson's - they had a market. All the steak would go there. And we shipped some turtle to Miami – to Jackson Seafood out of Miami. Weekley⁸, he, he would buy a couple hundred pounds twice a week. We would pack it in ice in a barrel – put it in a barrel and shipped it up to Jackson Seafood in Miami. But other than that, all of it was used locally here.

CM: Ah, what, what kinds of turtles were fished? I mean I know that there are primarily five species around here. What, what type did you guys prefer? And out of those, did each one have different qualities, and did you use them for different things?

DW: The only turtle we used was the Green turtle.

CM: Green turtle.

DW: There's a Hawksbill, a Loggerhead, and a Ridley's, but ah, they're not good eating, OK, they're, they're fishy. Because the Green turtles, they eat vegetation.



Label from A. Granday's Turtle Soup can. Photo credit: Monroe County Public Library

They don't eat meat. They're vegetarians. And, you know, we used loggerheads locally for us people to eat. And, most, it wasn't, it wasn't that sellable, no.

CM: So it was the Green that you were after...

DW: Green turtles was all we used.

CM: Did you, did you take Hawksbill for tortoise shell, or...

DW: Ah, we ate Hawksbill, and I would chore[?] the shell.

CM: There was, ah, was there a side market for tortoise shell?

DW: Yes there was. There was people that would come down here and buy the shell after, after you took it off the main shell, and they would use it for eyeglass... eyeglasses and combs and what have you, but, commercially, no there wasn't. It wasn't commercially.

CM: Ah, we talked a little about how the turtles were captured, primarily in nets, right?

DW: Right.

CM: And harpooning was...

DW: Well I told you the other day, we had a, we had some people down in Costa Rica that were harpooning turtles, and the company I worked for they did not know this, OK? We had

a shipment of turtle come from Costa Rica, and a hundred and ten died in one day. From harpoons. In the lights in the center of their backs, which is their lights, most people would say lungs, OK? Well they plugged the hole with a piece of sponge, and the turtle would bleed internally and die. So my boss said, "Don, you gotta go and find out what's happening with these turtles." And I did. I went out and butchered a couple of them. and I came to his office and I threwed the thing on his desk, and I said "Look at this." I said, "These turtles has been harpooned." So that was the end of Costa Rica. There was no more turtles coming from Costa Rica. Everything we had, primarily, was from netted - 'cause we would really check out the turtles and make sure there was no harpoons.

CM: Yeah. When the *Adams* got a load of turtles, how were they put on board, and, and, uh, how were they transported? Were you ever able to see that?

DW: Yes. These turtles when they were put aboard the *Adams*, when, when they caught 'em

down in the Cayman Islands, they had pens down there. They would store the turtles in those pens until they got five or six hundred a time. And then they would take them out of the pen and take a hot poker, and put a hole in their front fin, on both sides, both fins, and back fin, and spencil⁹ it with a palm leaf - which was very strong, they couldn't break it - and lay 'em on their back. You see, once a turtle's laid on its back, he can't turn over. He's finished. And they tie 'em anyway to keep the turtle from beating itself with its flipper, cause he would break all his insides, and he would bleed internally and die. So therefore they had a spencil, with, with a hook. But that's about it. Then they would come in here you know, and we had day labor...

CM: They had the schooner *Adams* filled with, uh, five, six hundred turtles at a time?

DW: They would put 'em down below deck some of 'em. You know they would fill down below decks first, then they would place plank boards on top, then they'd put a layer of turtle, plank boards, then

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another layer of turtle. And then they had wind chutes that they would put down in the holds, so the turtle wouldn't die, you know, from heat exhaustion. They would keep wind down in there.

CM: Wow.

DW: It was quite an operation.

CM: Okay. Um. Next question, ah, when a load came into the kraals here in Key West, what was, what was it like? What was, that had to be a pretty big, hard effort to get 600 turtles out of the hold of that boat.

DW: Yes. We would get day laborers. They knew the boat was coming – we knew the boat was coming. We would send out word around the docks, and when the boat did get into the dock we had probably twenty people waiting to drag the turtles, on their backs, off the, off the schooner. We'd take them down to the pens, and we had two men that would cut the spencil, put a rope around their flipper, and lower them down into the pen so they didn't hit other turtles and damage them, and it was, it really was just falling down the chutes. And we'd keep the plank boards wet as we drug the turtles to keep from skinning their backs up so badly; you know, instead of a dry board. And that was about it.

CM: And that took how long to unload?

DW: It would take practically a whole day, you know, 8 hour day to do this.

CM: How many pens were there at the kraals? I mean, we see two now, one on either side of the cannery. Were there more than that at one time?

DW: We had, we had four kraals there. We had three on the inside, where the cannery is at, and one on the outside of the dock that's there now. And we built the one, later, on

the outside of the dock, so we could kraal more turtles. You know, we was limited in space with the three pens. Occasionally we would have four or five thousand turtles there, at one time. The pens were full.

CM: Four or five thousand turtles in those kraals at one time?

DW: Right, right.

CM: That's remarkable. So there were... what we see now is only half of the capacity that you had at that time?

DW: Right.

CM: Okay. Did you ever... well, you just answered that, but you did help build some of those kraals? So, so...

DW: Right. We built the outer kraal. And, you know, when I was there we had sometimes to have to replace some of the pilings in the other kraals that was there from wear. You know, from years of wear there.

CM: So that was in the '50's. Um, was there ever any dredging of the kraals that you know of, when you were there?

DW: No. The turtles kept it dredged.

CM: Okay.

DW: You know, as they lived – as they swam they would clean out. There was no muck or nothing in there. It was like rock on the bottom - pea rock. They would keep it clean theirselves. The algae and everything was gone. Because they was vegetarians they would eat any vegetation that grew there.

CM: Well, that's, uh, was my next question. If you have four or five thousand turtles in there – and you... its only so quickly you can process them. Did you have to feed them while they were in there?

DW: No. In the wintertime we did not have to feed them, because of the north wind would bring the grass in, through the fence, before the jetty was put out there. And

there were times, you know, when we had calm weather. There was no grass. We would come out to the beach out here, Rest Beach, and get truckloads of grass, and throw it in the pens to feed them. Other than that, no.

CM: So, you would just collect the grass off the beach...

DW: Right.

CM: ...when you needed to, and they would live off that?

DW: Right. We would go down there, and just shovel it right into the pens to 'em.

CM: How long could a turtle expect to stay in those pens?

DW: Well, we did twenty or thirty every day. Five days a week, sometimes six days a week, you know. Plus big orders from Heinz – the one that makes the tomato ketchup – and Moore and company. Ah, they would take quite a bit. They would buy a year's supply at a time.

CM: Well, okay. So, so a turtle could expect to spend a week in there, or...?

DW: No, we had turtles that might have been there, in there a year.

CM: Oh, no kidding!

DW: You know, we'd try to, we'd try to keep up with that.

CM: Yeah.

DW: You know, we'd work the pens that we had just put fresh turtles – fresh turtles would stay. We'd work the pens of turtles that had been there for sometime. You know, we'd try to watch it closely.

CM: Rotating the stock...

DW: Rotate the stock – to keep them from losing weight.

CM: Sure, sure.

DW: Ah, how, uh, you said there was a, uh, bottom of 150 pounds? Is that correct? Bottom weight?

DW: Hundred and twenty.

CM: A hundred and twenty that you would take. Um, those turtles

get pretty big. How big were some of the bigger ones that you saw?

DW: We had some go as much as 500. That's about the size, the biggest size of a Green turtle already, so... Normally, two – three hundred, was the normal size. You know, anywhere from a hundred and twenty to three hundred was normal. When you see one that was five hundred, he was an exceptionally big turtle.

CM: Okay. Now, the, um, say a turtle's been in the kraals for awhile, and, uh, its time is up, what was the next step? What, how did you go about processing a turtle - removing it from the kraals and processing it?

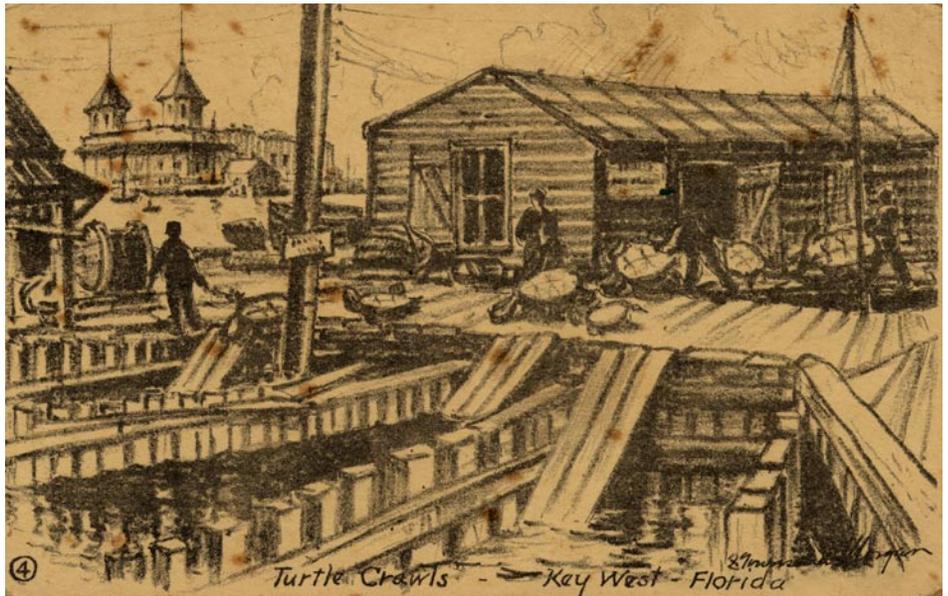
DW: Well, I would go out in the morning, walk those concrete pillars with a lasso. I would put a lasso down around its flipper, and pull it tight. Bring him down to the chute – we had three men on, on the dock, near the chute, and we'd flip him over, and drag him up the chute. And then, after we'd get 25 or 30 head in there that we were gonna do that day, this, this here would come into play (lifts axe). I would take the butt end of this axe, and I would butt 'em right on the nose with it.

CM: Right.

DW: It stuns 'em, and they would stick their head all the way out. See, a Green turtle cannot hold their head in the shell. But they would go in enough where you couldn't chop it. So we'd butt 'em on the end of the nose with this axe. And it would stun them, and their head would come out all it would come, and then I would take my knife and just cut, cut it right off. Cause the axe was only used to cut the neck bone. Once that was done, it was simple.

CM: So the head came off and then, uh...

DW: Then, then we'd have 'em on their back as I was saying...



A sketch of the turtle cannery and kraals by F. Townsend Morgan. Photo credit: Monroe County Public Library.

CM: This was all right on the dock?

DW: In the building.

CM: Oh, that's in the building, okay.

DW: Yessir. That wasn't allowed on the dock, alright? (laughter) So, after this was done – the head was off – I would take my knife and cut around the stomach, which, its got a line the whole way around the stomach, which is the calipee. I would take my knife and cut that the whole way around. Call up the calipee. Cut the, the quarters away from the calipee, which is the underneath of a turtle, and then after that is removed, I would cut down through the two front quarters right in here, and then, through the shell, and just take it from the shell. The front quarters and the hindquarters; the axe comes out again. The hindquarters you gotta chop right in the center of it to take the two quarters out, you know, to get it loose from the shell.

CM: Ah, well you've described there you... you used the axe there, and the knife. We found a number of knife handles in there, ah, what type of knife did you use?

DW: I used what they call – it was a real thin bladed knife, which was a “Queen 200.” Cause it had flexible... it would bend to go under the joints to cut out the quarters, and we would use a new knife probably every two days. They would either snap off, or they would get real dull – we'd throw 'em away.

CM: “Queen 200” you'd call it, huh?

DW: Right. That was the name of the, the brand name of the knife.

CM: Well, I like that, because, ah, the knife handles that we found had a “Q” on them with a crown over that, and uh...

DW: That's it – the “Queen 200.”

CM: You confirmed my theory that that's what those were.

DW: (laughter) That's what they were. Cause it was good and flexible, we couldn't use a dexterous knife, because it was too stiff. You need to go under the quarter to remove some of the shell.

CM: Um, uh, you talk about lassoing a turtle before pulling it out. Did you ever have to hop in those pens to get 'em out?

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DW: I used, I used to get in the pens quite often, and do the same thing. I would get in the pen, and then I'd have another man on the, on the top of the kraal who would hand the lasso to me. I would put it around his fin. Walk him to the chute; they would walk with the rope and pull him somewhat, and I would flip him over onto his back, and up the chute they would pull him.

CM: Was, was that dangerous getting in there?

DW: No. Green – I been bit a lot of times, but Green turtles will only bite you and put a bruise.

CM: Uh-huh.

DW: You know, they're not like a Loggerhead that'll take your arm off.

CM: Right.

DW: And, no, occasionally they would bite you.

CM: Yeah.

DW: I mean, you grab hold of a turtle in a pen like that, they would, you know a turtle would go up to 50, 60 miles an hour, but you know the only good thing we had in our favor there was the pen was not far enough for him to go like that. He would drag me underwater, for some time. That's, you know, basically what we done. During the storms, you know, we had to go and take every one of them out of the pen. Tie the fins again, spencil the fins back up, take 'em up to the old ice plant that used to be there. Store 'em in one of the rooms up there.

CM: Now if you had a hurricane coming, you pulled 'em all out of there?

DW: Every one of 'em.

CM: Wow.

DW: Because in 1948 a storm came – nobody knew it was coming – that's before I was there working, of course – and some of the kraals

went down, and there were turtles up on Caroline St.

CM: Wow (laughter).

DW: That was, you know, from those pens. And then, some of the locals of Key West would catch 'em up the street. They'd butcher 'em right in the back of the Mascot Bar that was there on Caroline St. I was just a kid when this was taking place, but I knew of it.

CM: That's a funny story (laughter). Um...

DW: Didn't really want the surge and stuff anyway in the pens - it would bruise 'em up so badly within the storms, that it was so packed in the pen.

CM: So, so when you're butchering a turtle, it didn't really fight back, or...

DW: Never make a sound.

CM: ...or scream, or anything like that.

DW: Well, you know, I read a story in the paper here like I was telling you the other day, a couple of months ago. And one lady out here on the beach says she heard a turtle crying, at night. That is not so. Turtles do not cry. They do not make any sound but a blowing sound – that's it. I mean turtles, you know, daytime they would, uh, have to blow quite often. You know, every fifteen minutes anyway. At night, they'd come up only three times a night and blow, because they're not using any energy up, you know, just laying still on the bottom. So when they're moving, they gotta come up and blow.

CM: Ah, going through all this, and processing turtles and all, you, you... About how many per week, again did you, did you say you did?

DW: We did 25 and 30 every day.

CM: Every day?

DW: Sometimes six days a week.

CM: So, a couple hundred a

week?

DW: Right.

CM: Um, one thing now, and I mean obviously the Turtle Kraals is popular with tourists, and I'm sure it was a curiosity when you were working there...

DW: Right.

CM: ...How did you guys deal with tourists? Did you have a shop there for tourists, and people on the dock, or people wanting to know what was going on in the cannery. What did you do about tourists?

DW: People would come to the kraals to look at the turtles in the pens. You know it was a big tourist attraction at that time. And we had a building away from the cannery, it was all in the same building, but one room was for slaughtering only, and we kept the doors locked because people didn't want to see that. When they did, they – I'd be reported. And then I'd, they'd come there and I'd say, "You've gotta talk to my boss. You know, I'm only doing my job here." And it happened quite often. As you was sayin' the other day that you'd only seen one picture of that turtle house, that's probably the only one you're ever going to see, cause we didn't allow any pictures taken in there for that reason. People thought we was, you know, cruel to these animals, but they were put here for food, you know. And that's what I was doing, supporting my family, doing what I was doing – just like butchering cows or anything else. And then somebody comes along and says, "Hey, they're an endangered species." Not so. There's plenty of turtle. We're overrun with them as a matter of fact – Loggerhead, especially. Which is a menace to me as a commercial fisherman, 'cause they eat my traps. So, I mean, this, a lot of these stories that people tell, its not true. You know I've dealt with turtles, I've probably butchered

more turtles than McDonald's made hamburgers down there. And I probably know more about turtles than most people living. Like I told those guys from *Keys TV*, I said, "I've probably seen more turtles in one pen than you're gonna see the rest of your life." And its true.

CM: That's absolutely true, you know, when you talk about a couple thousand down there. Um, well, you sort of brought it up there, you were obviously in Key West when turtling ended, but you weren't working at the kraals.

DW: No, I, I quit there, and my boss came back and tried to get me to come back again, and I told him, "No." I said I was a full-time commercial fisherman then, and I didn't chance to do that anymore. And I had, you know, my son was a baby, and he wanted my wife to come back and work for him as well, but she said, "No." He said, "Well talk to him when he comes home." She said, "I will, but he's not coming back." And I never did.

CM: I don't really... Explain this to me, what was the, you seemed to sort of have had a resistance to the, to working down there, was it, something kept you going too, but, was it, it didn't pay well, or was the work just too hard and nasty, or...?

DW: I made, I made good money down there.

CM: Do you mind telling us what they paid you?

DW: I made eighty dollars and sixty cents a week. For six days. Which then, you could go to the movie for ten cents.

CM: Yeah, that's pretty good, yeah.

DW: It was a good living. I mean the, the people at the company - Thompson's Enterprises - really treated me good. They treated me like I was one of their own. I mean I had no problem with that. I just wanted to commercial fish full-



People with a turtle on the dock by the kraal. Photo credit: Monroe County Public Library.

time. You know, that was my goal in my life. That's what I wanted to do. But my wife said, "Hey, you've gotta make a living one way or the other. If you can't make it butchering tur...if you can't make it fishing, you're gonna go back to butcher turtles again." And I said, "This ain't ever gonna happen." It wasn't that I resented butchering the turtles, cause I didn't mind doing it at all.

CM: You just wanted to fish.

DW: I just wanted to fish. And better my life. And I did.

CM: You've got a nice place here.

DW: Well, I've built two new boats you know - built a 42 and a 48. Now I'm semi-retired, you know we're getting ready to leave Key West. I hate to even say this.

CM: You are?

DW: Yes sir. January.

CM: What's causing this?

DW: Well, I can't retire and live in Key West. The cost of living down here is too high. So I'm moving up to Alachua, Florida right outside of Gainesville. So I'm going from a turtle butcher to a commercial fisherman to a farmer (laughter).

That's gonna be something new for me.

CM: Yeah, that will be, that will be. Well, as you know, you came down, we recently did a sort of an excavation down there, and probably dug a lot things that you had handled, but I had some questions about some of the things we have found, and I was just, maybe you can answer that for our purposes. You had a beautiful answer on the knife, 'cause we did find a number of knives with a "Q" mark on 'em.

DW: Right.

CM: That was the "Queen 200." I like that. Ah, what about whetstones for those things, did you...

DW: We used a whetstone, plus one of those, uh, sharpening steels.

CM: Yeah, yeah. We found a number of, uh, they look almost like a rod from inside big batteries, but they were worn down, and they were pretty hard.

DW: That was probably the st... the ones that we sharpened the knife with.

CM: Yeah, I was wondering

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(Turtles from page 9)

about them. They looked like they'd been...

DW: The steel. Yeah, we wore out plenty of stuff there – hatchets, knives, people, everything (laughs).

CM: Yeah.

DW: We had a variety of wore out stuff (laughs).

CM: Uh, we also found, uh, chunks of what looked like marble-slab tabletops. Were there marble tabletops in that cannery?

DW: There was slabs of marble tables where the, the shells, pieces of shell and stuff was, you know, taken apart to get the gelatin, or the calipee and stuff for the soup. We couldn't use wood stuff because you'd end up with wood splinters and stuff in the cans.

CM: Sure, sure. So you did use those on the cannery tops?

DW: Right, right. We had some marble slabs that laid on top of the tables. And we would skin all the fins, all the skins from the...the only thing we'd throw away from the turtle was its breath (laughter). If my boss could have saved that, he would have done that too (more laughter).

CM: Um, well, uh, we found a, a large number of bones, um could you tell me what the uh, obviously you wouldn't use the bones for much of anything, but what, what did you guys do with the excess stuff? I mean why were we finding so many bones, and what did you guys do with them?

DW: The reason you guys are finding some bones there, there, what they are is fin bones that had been cooked. They're bones out of the flippers. Bones out of, out of the calipee – the underneath of the turtle – the center part of it, and pieces of shell that come out of the chine of the turtle, when you chopped it out to get that gelatin

off of it, and that was all cooked. In times, you know, when the weather blew hard, and I couldn't get out in the boat, the ... the "dump boat" we called it, to dump the remains of stuff that we took from the factory. We would dump some under the kraals. So that's why you find some bones there. You're not gonna find many skulls, if, if any. Have you found many skulls?

CM: Ah, we found two skulls. Uh, I'd say we found ten thousand bones and two skulls.

DW: Right, right. All of that was dumped was dumped between Christmas Tree Island¹⁰ and the Tank Farm¹¹, because, you know, the heads would float, and we'd have a stench in the harbor, and next thing we'd know we'd be in big trouble. We had enough trouble as it was just taking some dead turtle out there that had died on us in the pens and dumpin' him. Where the sharks didn't eat him.

CM: So you would take those remains and just haul them out there between Christmas Tree and, and...

DW: Tank Farm

CM:...and the Tank Farm, and that was it?

DW: Right.

CM: There's probably a pile of bones out there then.

DW: I dumped them there for ten years, like I was saying, that, that was the dumping ground.

CM: Okay. Alright. So what we have is just sort of incidental. Boy, there were some bones...

DW: The people, the people after me would dump in the same place.

CM: Going through there, we also found a number of conch shells. Um, was that just, was that a little side business going on there, or what?

DW: The locals here in Key West, even myself, many years ago, would get the conch – the shell was not sellable at that time – so we would discard the shell, just throw it under

the dock after we took the, the muscle out of the shell.

CM: Now these were all cracked, they were...

DW: Yeah. Some of us chopped it with a hatchet, took the back end off. Later years we learned to punch a hole in it, and turn it loose from the shell. But later years, the shell was worth money then, but at that time there was probably a million conch shells down there. Matter of fact, that road that goes out past the Turtle Kraals; that's conch shells underneath of there. Cause I lost a bunch of turtles in that number one pen to the road. My boss said, "Don, you better find out where these turtles are going. Either you're not writing them down in the book, or somebody's taking them." So I get in the pen, and I swam down along that concrete wall, which is the road there, and they had undermined that road, you know, with their flippers over years, they kept wearing and wearing it until they went through that concrete, and after that it was just conch shells. And as they kept doing this, they were going out on the other side of the road. And surprisingly, that road never caved in with all them big trucks going over it. There's a million conch shells under there.

CM: So they tunneled their way out of there, huh (laughter)?

DW: Right on out to the other side. And went through the concrete on the other side. So I put sand bags in there, put some concrete in the sand bags – stacked it in the hole.

CM: Unbelievable (laughter). Uh, we found also in there some sections of net and stuff. Would that have been related to the turtle fishing, or is that just some shrimp boat?

DW: No. That was just some old shrimp net that was discarded.

No, the turtle nets have an eight-inch or ten-inch bar – square – you know, because like a shrimp net, they wouldn't entangle as they did their flippers as they swam. They wouldn't tie it off around their flippers and then get caught. With a... that particular net, they would brush on, and just keep on going. See we had a swing net, we didn't use no leads on the net. We would take a concrete block, and tie it on one end of the net, and then you'd run this net out with the floats on it, and this net would swing with the tide. So, therefore, if a turtle did entangle in it, he couldn't stay, he could bring... he could come up and blow, and breathe, without drowning. If you had leads on it, if he got in the bottom of the net, he would drown, cause he couldn't come up to the top. So therefore we didn't use any leads on it, that's, which, I used, and the turtle boat didn't have any either.

CM: They had it all thought out. Now we have one mystery that we have found in there. We pulled about forty glass marbles out of there. Was that anything?

DW: Nope. The only marbles that was there... were they colored blue ones, white ones, red ones?

CM: Yes sir.

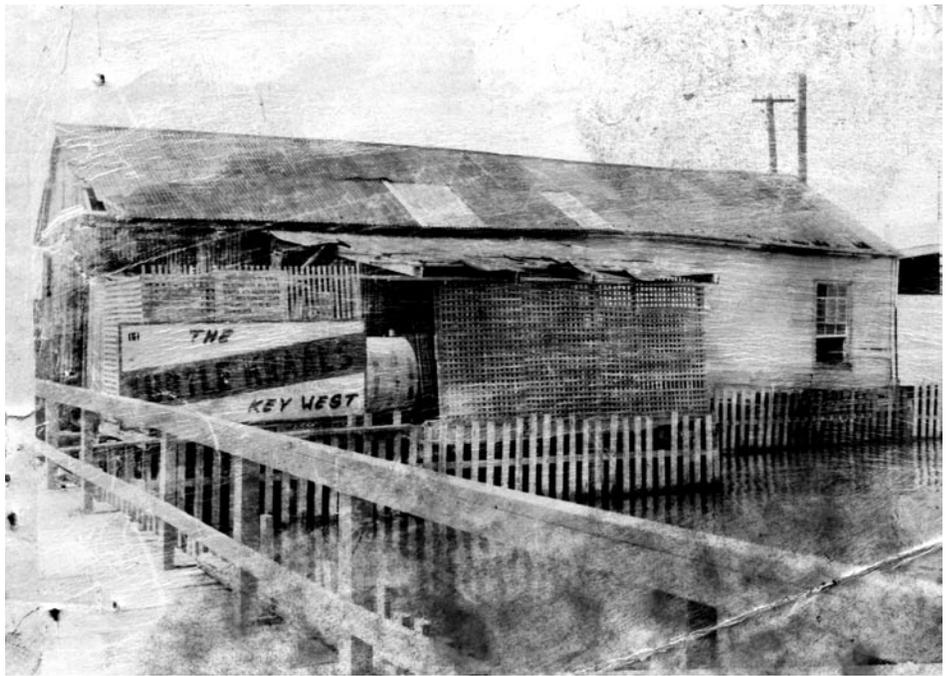
DW: I used 'em. I, I did some skulls. Alright. I cured some skulls for the curio store, which is turtle kraals bar now. Just for exhibition, and I would remove the turtle eye, and put that marble in there for an eye. That's what, that's what they are.

CM: Is that what we're finding then?

DW: That's what you're finding.

CM: Yeah, because we found blues and reds, and...now, a few were those tiger-stripe ones, and...

DW: Right. I would use them for eyes. Me and my wife would put them in for eyes...



The cannery building. Photo credit: Monroe County Public Library.

CM: So a number of 'em you just happened to drop down in there...

DW: Well, we would put different eyes in 'em to make them look...

CM: We knew there had to be an answer for that mystery.

DW: The eye itself, when we put it in formaldehyde, would shrink up anyway, and wouldn't be any good, so I'd just take it out and leave the eyelids in, stuff it with cotton in there, and then put a marble in for an eye.

CM: But, but you kept the skin on the head then?

DW: Right. The only thing I'd remove was, was the meat on the inside, and where it was chopped off – that bone. Whatever I could take out with a knife after the [unintelligible]. Okay. I took the eyeball out [unintelligible]. Because [unintelligible]... for the curio store there, but they wasn't... nobody ever wanted to buy them.

CM: (laughter) They didn't sell very well then?

DW: No, no. You know, there were so many turtles in Key West you know they didn't care less about

artifacts or shells, or whatever. Now I did take one foot of that Galapagos they had in there. Is that Galapagos shell still in that place in there?

CM: No.

DW: We had a big Galapagos. It was around six hundred pounds when it died. So, they asked me would I dismember it. I had to take a hacksaw to get that remains out of that shell, because I didn't want to take the bottom – the calipee – off of it. And they've got feet like an elephant, which you know, and I saved a couple of the feet and cured 'em, and made ashtrays out of 'em. But it got away from me, and somebody ended up with it. I don't know who got it. But, I mean, it was a nice, nice thing that we done with it. So the curio store had that tort – that uh, that biggest turtle shell in there for years.

CM: Somebody's made off with it, I believe.

DW: No, probably when they closed down the tourist attraction thing they might have got rid of it then. We had turtles back there, you know, in those pens for exhibition

(Continued on page 12)



The interior of the turtle cannery. Photo credit: Monroe County Public Library.

(Turtles from page 11)

that's behind the turtle kraals bar today. We had the boat bring them over – the eggs in the sand. Six weeks we hatched, we hatched the turtles out right there in the turtle house, the turtle kraals.

CM: You, you were actually hatching turtles there?

DW: Just for, just for a tourist attraction.

CM: Oh, okay, okay. I see.

DW: No, because they would take ten years...

CM: Yeah, I was gonna say that's a lot of patience.

DW: We just had 'em for exhibition for the tourists, you know, come in and these little baby turtles in these pens, and they would look at 'em. Stuff like that. But I read an article again last week in the paper, you know, this Loggerhead turtle was injured up the Keys and they took it to the hospital up there, get it back well,

release it, guy says the turtle is a hundred years old. Not so. Not in the wild. If they was a hundred years old, they wouldn't be an endangered species! Believe me, that's not so. A turtle is probably ten, twelve years at tops, at full grown, in the wild. Here in captivity you prob-, you keep it twenty years, it's not going to get big. You know anything you put in captivity takes longer to grow – because they don't get the right nutrients they do in the ocean, that they gotta have to grow.

CM: Um, you, you talk about eggs being brought up here. Was there a secondary market for turtle eggs?

DW: Yessir. When we butchered the turtles during the laying season, the turtles that we had, which didn't lay in the pen – once they laid in the pen, you know, the eggs wasn't any good once they were in the water. When we would butcher the turtles we would take out the white eggs – looked like a ping-pong ball – and

the yellow that's not a full mature egg. Both eggs were sellable. We sold them in our market.

CM: So that was controlled locally then?

DW: Right. The local people, see, you could take a turtle egg, a white turtle egg, and boil it twenty-four hours, and it won't get hard.

CM: Really?

DW: Stays soft. They would just put a little hole in it. Put a little salt on it, and suck the stuff right out of the shell. Now the yellow turtle egg – the uh, the not matured egg yet – what we would do, I would get 'em, put a pot of boiling water on. Let the water come to a boil, then turn it off. Then take the yellow eggs and put 'em right in that pot of hot water, with half a block of butter, let 'em set, and eat 'em just so. Real good. A real delicacy. They'd put you under if you did that today (laughs).

CM: That's why we're asking these questions, because we're never gonna be doing this again.

DW: No. Its never gonna happen again.

CM: Yeah, um, you had an interesting story the other day when you came out about turtles that were mating in the pens. I thought that was, ah, interesting.

DW: Alright. During the laying season, you know, the turtle...the *Adams* would bring the turtles to us, they would, we would, krall, put 'em in the pens, and every morning, they would start, you know, it was during the mating season and they would start to mate. So every morning I would have to go out, check the pens, lasso the male, haul him off the female, bring him up the chute and slaughter him. Because they stay that way for nine days. They mate for nine straight days. You know the female totes him around on her back for nine days. And if we leave him for nine days, he's gonna be worthless to the company. You know, he's gonna get so poor. So we would yank him off in the morning and butcher him. Save his life there (laughter). Or save our lives.

CM: Save yourself some money.

DW: Save the company some money. Hey, I'd have to do that even when the boat come in. I'd check the pens every morning before we'd start butchering. If we had one that looked like something was wrong with it, I would take him out and butcher him, for the simple reason that he - when I chopped that turtle's head off, if he didn't bleed, he was no good. Okay. The meat was no good. They gotta bleed just like cuttin' a pig or whatever. If they don't bleed you can't eat 'em. That poison, or whatever, would go right through the meat immediately. So we would make sure that that turtle was still living, you know, before we would slaughter it. If not, we would take him out to the ocean and discard it. We didn't want to poison anybody.

CM: Yeah, right. Did you have a, a very high mortality rate?

DW: Not, not turtles that came off the *Adams*, but like I was saying earlier, you know, the high mortality was from Costa Rica. Anytime you harpoon a turtle, you're taking a big chance. If you're not gonna eat him today, he's gonna die. 'Cause he's gonna bleed internally and die.

CM: Okay. Um, we can sort of wrap this up I guess. We've got all my questions here, but, uh, what was the end like? I mean, I know you weren't working down there but surely you remember it.

DW: It was coming to the end pretty much when I left. We started to slow down you know. They was tellin' the boat, "Don't bring many turtle." We would have probably then five or six hundred.

CM: Is that because the market was diminishing?

DW: No. I think the thing was coming up where they was wantin' to stop 'em. Cause we had, they had turtle after I left, but they had to release - when this thing came, "Hey this is an endangered species" - so the company agreed to let them go¹². Even though they didn't come from this country. But, like I said, Thompson's Enterprise - Mr. Adams, Mr. Jack Thompson, the owners - they were pretty reasonable people. You know, they went along with the law. They did this. They released a lot of turtle. I wouldn't say a lot, maybe a hundred or so, but they were reasonable people. But it was startin' to do this at the last when I left, you know, we was slowin' down maybe two, three times a week, and I would go work in the shrimp house then two or three days, or whatever, and they would say "Hey. You're butcherin' turtles tomorrow," but it was slowin' real down real good.

CM: It wasn't every day like it had been.

DW: No.

CM: You could feel the end coming.

DW: Right.

(Endnotes)

¹ The fatty meat from inside the lower shell.

² Meat from along the backbone.

³ Thompson Enterprises, headed by Norberg Thompson, was the company that dominated seafood processing, among many other Key West industries, during the early to mid-1900's.

⁴ Aurelius Maitland Adams, vice-president of the Thompson Enterprises.

⁵ A company in New York City that specialized in turtle soup and meat.

⁶ The 86-foot schooner *A.M. Adams* fished at the Miskito Keys near Nicaragua, where extensive grass beds provided an attraction for a large population of Green Turtles. Small, double-ended dories would be used to set nets, haul in the catch, and carry the turtles to the *Adams*. When it had a full load, the schooner would sail the turtles to Key West.

⁷ Polypropylene line.

⁸ Carl Weekley of Fausto's Food Palace.

⁹ A method of immobilizing the turtle's flippers by tying them together.

¹⁰ Today's Wisteria Island

¹¹ Today's Sunset Key, which used to be home to fuel tanks maintained by the US Navy.

¹² The last shipment of turtles came into Key West aboard the *A.M. Adams* on March 23, 1971. It was the same day that Florida governor Ruben Askew signed an emergency order making it illegal to use Green Turtles with a carapace of less than 41 inches within Florida's jurisdiction. Of the 135 turtles brought in by the *Adams* in its last trip, only five were of legal size.

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(Hackley from page 2)

alarm and it raining did not walk out but walked the piazza until it was light enough to see when I bathed. At 8 A.M. barometer 29.40, thermometer 83, wind southwest 2, clouds 10. The damaged part of the cotton of the bark **Emigrant** and sails and etc. were sold by the Marshall this morning. Slight rain squalls all morning with thick cloudy weather and a low barometer about 2 A.M. the wind came out from the northwest with quite a nice rain.

Wednesday, October 1. Rose at 4:30 and went to the ponds and found Peter Crusoe at Meade's Pond and went on to Linn's Pond where I shot one godwit, returning found Crusoe had killed a teal having seen two. At 9 A.M. barometer 29.45, thermometer 79.5, wind north northeast 3, clouds 7. There was no auction, the weather being too bad for some days for the men to dive. My eyes have been sore for some weeks past and I have not read a paper for the last month. The sewing machine is working very well, the driving wheel has a crack in it quite across but does no harm.

Thursday, October 2. Rose at 4:20 and went out to Mead's Pond and sat till near sunrise but saw nothing. At 8:20 A.M. barometer 29.53, thermometer 80, wind east northeast 2, clouds 6. Got a barrel of flour and a bag of corn from Tift. The sewing machine got out of order and we worry a great deal about it but cannot find the cause unless it be that the cotton is too rough. The mail smack got in from Havana about 3 P.M.

Friday, October 3. Rose at 4:30 and went out to the pond and sat till sunrise. Killed one teal and two lesser yellowlegs. Saw six in all and wounded one of the others. Returned home and bathed. At 8

A.M. barometer 29.61, thermometer 82, wind east 2, clouds 1 with a slight haze. Made an index for U.S. Attorney's letters file volume 1. Went down on the wharf where a few goods were sold and spent the morning cleaning up a galvanic battery which H. Albury bought for me yesterday. He bought three for \$3.75, I took two. They are much injured but I suppose that I can get one fixed up for the other by sending them north. After dinner time took the broken wheel of the sewing machine to William Williams and got him to unite a piece of iron under the crack. When I first started the machine it worked very well but I made a slight alteration in the band and it stopped sewing, fouling the hooks I have never in my life been so worried by anything as by this machine. Was the matter or that it was any different at one time than another it would be some satisfaction, but no reason can be seen why it should not sew at one time and as well as another. At home all evening.

Saturday, October 4. Rose at 4:30 and went out to Mead's Pond and sat till sunrise. Shot one teal then saw two large ducks in the pond but they would not come to my call and soon flew off. Returned home and bathed. At 8 A.M. barometer 29.66.5, thermometer 83, wind about east, clouds 3 with haze. Went to the wharf where there is a sale of wrecked goods. The sewing machine works pretty well but I shall send for a new wheel. The bark **Joseph Hale**, Merrill master, from New York to New Orleans with a general cargo has been ashore on the Fowey Rocks and is considerably injured. She was relived by the schooner **Joshua Skinner** and sloop **Dolphin**. The steamer **Calhoun** from New York six days to New Orleans came in about 9 A.M. and taking on board

some coal left at 4 P.M.

Sunday, October 5. Rose at 5:30 and bathed. At 9 A.M. barometer 29.58, thermometer 83.5, wind east by south 3, clouds 4. Charles Tift to whom the bark **Joseph Hale** is consigned introduced me to the Captain and employed me to defend the case. In the afternoon had a quite a nice shower.

Monday, October 6. Rose at 4 and went out to Mead's Pond and found that someone had pulled down blind, rebuilt it and sat till near sunrise. Someone at the head of the pond fired but I saw no birds. At 8 A.M. barometer 29.52, thermometer 83, wind east southeast, clouds 7. Wrote most of the answer of Captain Brown in the case of Coste vs. the bark **Emigrant**. Drew up a libel in the name of Don Jose Maria de Salas y Quiroga against a certain trunk of valuables picked up near Cape Florida

Tuesday, October 7. The fiftieth anniversary of birth finds me in good health and spirits and grateful to the giver of all good for the blessing daily received and pray for a continuance of health and happiness so long as to him it may seem good. The steamer **Isabel** got in late a number of our folks came home in her. I went to the

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Post Office and got papers and a letter from Mother saying that she is better as is Martha, and a letter from P. Williams saying that he has Smith's warrant, and a letter from Potter and Company, also my quarterly salary of \$50.00. At 8 A.M. barometer 29.48, thermometer 82, wind northeast 1, clouds 4 with hazy. Wrote to Potter and Company and answered the Treasurer's letter. Filed the libel by Salas drawn up yesterday to be served by William Randolph who is sent by Baldwin for the purpose. At 4 P.M. James Bethel and the Captain of schooner **E. Fisk** came into my office and submitted the matter of the salvage in the schooner to myself and Winer Bethel, examined the wreckers under oath. William Randolph came to tea.

Wednesday, October 8. Rained during the night. Bathed. At 8:00 A.M. barometer 29.48, thermometer 82.5, wind east southeast 2, clouds 9. Winer Bethel and myself different in the amount to be paid to Joseph Bethel. We agree that the men should receive \$40.00 per share for five days of labor and the boats \$120.00 making \$600.00 but I insisted that the schooner should pay expenses which he was not willing to allow. The two captains got together in my room and agreed to pay \$620.00 and his own cost. Christian Boye sent me a note retaining me for the brig **Bingham** and asked about advances to the schooner **Carrie Sandford**. Wrote to Wheeler and Wilson Manufacturing company about the sewing machine. Rain all day.

Thursday, October 9. Rose at 4:15 but before I could get ready to go out it commenced raining and rained for more than an hour. Bathed. At 8:20 A.M. barometer 29.45, thermometer 80, wind west northeast 1, clouds 9. Wrote W.

Kidder, Lovell, Mass., respecting galvanic batteries. Finished the libel in the case of the **Don Juan**. Drew up petition for the appointment of appraisers of the cotton of the **Emigrant** as the Captain wished to ship it by the ship **Stephen R. Mallory** and the ship is now ready to take in cargo. Aletta Patterson and Adelia Ximenez spent to day.

Friday, October 10. Rose at 4:20 and went out to Mead's Pond and sat till light then went to Linn's Pond saw no birds and no hunters. Returned home and bathed. At 9 A.M. barometer 29.42, thermometer 81, wind east northeast 1, clouds 3. Wrote to Mother. The steamer **Isabel** came in about 4 P.M. Dr. L. Engle and wife left in her, he has been appointed Assistant Surgeon in the Army and is ordered to California. The **Texas** came in about 10 P.M. from Aspenwall. Attended a rehearsal of boys from Newcombs' School and was much pleased with them. Felt unwell and ate no supper.

Saturday, October 11. Rose at 4:15 and went to Mead's Pond and sat till light, saw no birds but several gunners so I returned home and bathed. At 8 A.M. barometer 29.41, thermometer 81, wind northeast 1, clouds 3. Read the *Interlligencer* the first one since the gale, my eyes feeling better today than they have for some weeks. Fearing that a felon is coming on the end of the left forefinger burnt it with caustic which soon removed all the pain. The **Texas** got off about 2 P.M. Went with Matilda to William Walls and she, Lizzy Myers, the two Pattersons and Adelia Ximenez went to ride on a cart. I went with them and a harder ride I never took. Bowne and I the only gentlemen. Moonlight.

Sunday, October 12. Rose at half past 5 and bathed. At 8:30 A.M. barometer 29.43, thermometer 81, wind north northeast 3, clouds 6, weather pleasant. Read papers.

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The turtle schooner A.M. Adams. Photo credit: Monroe County Public Library.

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