

KEY WEST WATERFRONT ACTIVITIES
by
Elija Cates

Interviewed by: CDR. Bill Ford

Elija Cates was born in 1887 in Rock Sound on August 23. "I came to Key West in 1900 when I was 13 years old. I came by myself on an old schooner and landed here on October 20 in 1900. Had a \$20 gold piece--an English piece. That's all I had so had to be very careful.

"My first job was with Luther Thompson. He was young too. We took off together and went sponging. After two weeks, we came back and sold what we had for about \$17. Living was cheap, though. You could buy a can of corned beef for 10¢; that with hard tacks made a good meal. I've done sponging all my life until about 3 years ago when my eyesight started going bad. Then Johnny took over.

"My family all finally came down here from the Bahamas; there were eight of us; 3 boys and five girls. They eventually all got married but only four of us are still living. My sister Maggie used to run a little store on Elgin Lane--used to be Low Tide Alley. Many a night when we'd come home, we'd stop up a Charlie Thompson corner--guess it was Thomas Thompsons house (where Paul Sawyer lives now); sometimes there was 8 or 10 ft. of water where Porter Place now is. We used to barge in sand to fill in where some of those houses are now.

"When my family came over, they settled in Plantation Key and we did what they called "charcoaling". They used buttonwood; we'd build this coal kiln in the day. Sometimes we'd be up all night with it so it wouldn't burn too much. We'd have to throw dirt on top of it once in awhile.

When questioned as to where they found the dirt in the Keys, he explained: "On Plantation Key, there were a lot of holes--solution holes where the rains washed in the rock--but when you'd dig in there, you could get a lot of dirt out of them. We'd put our kilns close to the holes. As I've said earlier, we used buttonwood--we had what was called a low-land buttonwood and a high-land buttonwood. Or, it was called the black and the white was sap buttonwood. The white wasn't too much. If you cut it down, there were shocks from it but the black wouldn't do that. We'd chop it up and burn it and sit by the fire at night. We'd cut it about 10 ft. long, let it dry well first, and then burn it. After it was burned down enough and cooled, we'd sack it up and sell it. In the Bahamas, my family did the same thing but often they'd spread conch shells around in the kilns with the wood to make a white lime.

"After I was 18, 19, or 20, I worked as a Captain on a schooner out of Ft. Pierce for a man by the name of Holmes--in San Juan; then we eventually moved to Miami as Holmes had a fish house in Miami. We worked for mackerel then; guess I caught about 2000 before Christmas. Right after Christmas then, I joined a group from Georgia on a schooner--but this was a sail schooner. There was no power on this one--all sail and you could really move when the wind was right. There were two masts, two triangular sails; the next Christmas we didn't have enough to come in with so we stayed out until the train came in--this was about 1916.

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"On Christmas morning, it was very calm; I suggested that we go to Angelfish Bightas there was a school there; we did that and Dick Adams who still lives on Big Pine Key, said to me—Captain^o there's fish over there. So, we went and caught about 100,000. Usually, a small ~~row~~ boat would follow us to bring the fish back in but he wasn't there that day so we had to take our catch into Miami. Our schooner was old; it had chain plates. These chain plates were big holes on the side that we didn't know anything about so it started to go down and we lost about 50,000 lbs. of fish. That boat was called "Gertrude". This was Christmas night. So we drifted into Miami about 10 or 11 the next morning and Captain Holmes met us and told us to dump the fish we had left. I told him "No" that I was leaving and going to Key West. He begged me not to do this; he apologized that the man didn't meet us and bring the fish back in as usual but said it was Christmas and he drank too much. Anyway, he took me and all my men (about 10 of us) out on the town. The next morning when I woke up, the wind had come up and whipped the sails on my ship to pieces.

"Well, another boat out of Miami called the Lamana—18 h.p.—took me in tow and got me fixed up so I could back to where I'd been the day before and caught 50,000 lbs. of fish. The Lamana towed me back in to Miami; got there that night.

"Then I did leave for Key West on the train; this was the first train into Key West. There was a big celebration down here, of course, with the first train coming in. So, from here then, I went on with a crew of fishermen to Cuba but then went back to Miami again a little later. A short time later, caught 700,000 lbs. of mullet.

"When I came back to Key West to live, I built Thompson's fish house and worked there for 17 years."

"Now we're going to talk about Captain Luther who was a wonderful man. He passed away only a few months ago. He was about my age, I'd guess about 87. Luther Thompson was in charge of the Turtle Factory here. In 1919, I was Captain of the Heron at that time. I had two baby girls, Ruth and Thelma, born on the 11th of March, 1919; on the 12th, when I went down to the dock to go out, and my engine man was drunk—he was laying there on the dock. Captain Luther was standing pretty close to me. He said to me: "Captain, you've got a problem here. If you can't get him to go with you today, I'll go." So, Captain Luther's offer was readily accepted by me and he went aboard to get the engines started. I remember that this was on a Sunday morning. Well, we went down to the Marqueses and got there about 11 o'clock that night. There were a lot of mackerel down there so by midnight, we had 48,000 pounds of Spanish mackerel. We came back in and unloaded the fish; we shared \$131.00 that day. Captain Luther seemed to enjoy the day with me and told me if I ever got into a bind like that again, to let him know and he'd help me out.

Luther ran the cannery plant; he also ran the boat for Mr. Thompson. No one else could please Mr. Thompson as Captain Luther could, of course. I must admit that I was a work horse but have never regretted it. It didn't seem that hard working with fine people like Luther—and Charles and Karl too; they were all good hard working boys. And, they had a good mother. She kept me from starving many days—she was always fixing good things for me to eat. They lived on the corner of Eaton and Francis. They were the T. A. Thompsons. Mr. Thompson was a man who didn't talk a lot but he used to buy a lot of sponges.

*Norberg, Karl and Charles Thompson were sons of T.A. Thompson.
Luther was not related.

The so-called "Hardheads" came down to Key West to fish in about 1917. They came from New York or Wildwood, New Jersey. Many of them were good men too. I took over the fish house that year so I'd have these boys come down and run the boats. They'd use our boats from here. The reason I took over the fish house, Mr. Thompson came to me one day and said he was going to buy Hanson out (Hanson had the ice house) and asked me if I'd run the fish house because he couldn't do both. We started building a new fish house then too. I'd sometimes take the boat out and get the old pilings from the railroad. I poured the cement too for the fish house. And you know, after all that work, the next fellow that came up couldn't see the point of all that work. He didn't really think I'd done anything.

Later on, things got pretty bad financially; he cut my wages way down to \$15 a week from \$30. This was in the early 30's now. Well, I went back on a boat to Key Vaca that year and shipped him one million, one hundred thousand pounds of mackerel. So in March, when the season was over, I got a call to come back to Key West. I got in on Monday and reported to Mr. Thompson but he told me to take off until the following Saturday which I did. He then told me that he had to lay me off. I accepted that but asked if he had a cause to do this. He said: "Elijah, your work has been nothing but satisfaction to me." I'll never forget those words. I had a lot of opportunities to work elsewhere but would never leave the Thompson family as they had always been good to me. Anyway, he paid me off and I left.

About a week later, he saw me down town and asked me if I'd like to come back to the fish house. I said "No, I don't think so," but he told me to come down to the office anyway. So, later I went down; his manager was sitting around there with his head bowed but Mr. Thompson asked me if I'd come back and take over the fish house. Told him that if he was running it, I'd come back but not otherwise. I just couldn't work with ~~him~~, his new man.

We used to take the fish off the boats, pack it in ice in barrels, and ship it on the railroad. We used to have 80 30 ft. power boats bringing in fish while the railroad was in operation. Before that, we had no need for the ice plant because we couldn't ship it out.

Bill White used to run a machine shop where Sea Farms hardware is located now. He'd keep the boat engines repaired.

Back in those days, there wasn't any call for crawfish like there is today. We'd have a few orders from Tampa once in awhile but that was all. They'd want them alive so we'd have to put sea grass on top of them when we'd pack them. We'd ship them in half barrels.

That fish company was a money-making thing. Howard was the salesman for the company; he was a good one too. He ^sknew when the market was flooded, he knew just when to ship, where to ship, and how much. He made a lot of money for the company—and for himself.

Now, we're going to talk about my good friend, Charles Thompson. After he came back from the Army, I was asked to help him find a job so I suggested to his father that he set Charles up in the hardware business because it was needed in Key West and Mr. Thompson had mentioned this several times. So, he asked me if I'd help Charles get started with the ordering of the merchandise which I did. Sometimes we'd sit in the office until two in the morning ordering things that we thought we'd need. So, he finally started up in a building on the corner of Caroline and Grinnell Street.

While he was waiting to get started, thought, he asked me if I'd take him along on my boat which I did; he enjoyed that, and seemed to have a good time doing that--catching king fish mostly. Haven't seen him in a long time now--don't even hear from him anymore. I considered him my best friend for a long, long time.

Let's get back to the hardware store. That building was located next door to where Karl Thompson started his bottling company.

Mr. Ford mentions that in ~~swimming~~ digging around in back of the old Thompson warehouse, there were a lot of old bottles and questions Elija about this. Elija admits he had a little "runner" business on the side--mostly rum. He'd go to Cuba to get it, bring it back here, bottle it up and ship it out to New York and send special orders to special friends. "We had a fellow hired there to take care of this stuff for us; we'd ship it in big trunks. When I'd get it loaded on the ship, I'd send this fellow a wire and tell him, ~~your~~ friend is on the way." He'd know then it was coming."

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Questioned whether he ever worked on the railroad--Elija said he did for a while. "I remember when they were drilling over near Boca Chica where the arches are now, they were using dynamite down from us a ways and there was a bad explosion. This was after I'd been with them a couple of months. This explosion killed six or seven men at that time. So that cured me. I quit there then.

Tunneling was quite a thing down here in the early 1900's. Joe Lowe was around then and he did a lot of this but I didn't get involved there much.

(This tape ended rather abruptly with no particular ending).