

GROWING UP IN KEY WEST

by

Virgil "Freckles" Higgs
(with his son Ervin Higgs...)

1926

Mr. Higgs told of his early boyhood days, hanging around a coffee shop down at the beach; there was an old ice plant down there too. Said he was about 14 years old at that time. His age is now 66, but feels like he's 40.

He worked on the railroad in Sugarloaf. Had to lie about his age to get hired, though. He told them he was 21 but was only 17. He helped set the tracks and hauled railroad ties, etc; also worked around the light house.

"I used to go fishing with my grandpa when I was 12 or 13. Used to do some cooking. He taught me lots of things about fishing for crawfish and lobster. Almost every boy growing up in Key West hung around the boats a lot--either working or just for fun. Bound to learn something that way. Then, after working on the railroad, I went back fishing with my grandad again. Was probably 18 or 19 then. I'd cook some fish that we caught and then walk up and down the street and sell them for 5 and 10¢ apiece. Now they charge \$1.25 a pound uncooked. craw

"We'd go out to waters about 30 to 40 ft. deep from sunrise to sundown sometimes. We liked to catch Jewfish and catch turtles. We liked to catch the turtles bare handed. Remember we'd have to put up a good fight sometimes to catch those Jewfish.

"During WPA days, I worked with the airways when they started down here. Sometimes they used carrier pigeons when the radios were too heavy. Also worked on wrecking boats. These were used to rescue people who were on boats that were marooned or having troubles.

"Remember when we go fishing for sponges. We'd go out where Key Haven is now and bring in 18 to 20 bunches. There were probably 10 or 12 sponges on each bunch. You'd have to let them dry good and then clean them. That was a job. The sponging industry used to be good around here but some kind of a fungus start eating them so it kind of died out."

Ervin Higgs, "Freckles" son, added a note that he remembered his father crawfished with a preservation point of view. He remembered his father picking up females and if she had eggs, he threw it back into the water.

"Catching small crawfish is against the law, although some think the smaller ones should be caught and let the older ones do the breeding. But, it doesn't take long for the smaller ones to grow and breed.

"Turtles don't seem to be caught as big anymore. Remember when we'd catch three; that was a whole load. We used to sell a lot of turtles.

"I worked at the fish market with Adams and Thompson about 40 years ago--worked there when you were born, Ervin--and then I started my own fish market. Two of them, I had. Then, when I had my stroke, I had to quit. Thought after I got out of the hospital that I could go back but couldn't step on my leg with any pressure, so just had to give it up.

"It took time to learn to clean the fish with some speed, but finally got so I could clean a 300 to 400 lb. fish in 55 minutes.

"My father came from Bahamia but my mother was from Key West. Guess many years ago there were no colored people in the Spanish Wells. When they'd come over there on the boats and try to get off on land, they were run back on the boats. They were'nt wanted over there.

"My father came to Key West as a young man. I grew up in Johnnycake Alley. I was brought up on Johnnycake and can still make it pretty good.

"Getting back to WPA days, I worked in a ditch helping to put in a sewer line. Used a shovel and pick ax; made about \$7.50 a week. On the railroad, I made around \$35 a month. Doesn't sound like much but in those days it was pretty good. Didn't make any difference what you did--there just wasn't much money around.

"When we had a bad hurricane, I went up to Matrecumbe to help--that was in 1935--we went up on boat barges. Had to stay about 4 weeks. Was working for the Key West Engineers. I did cooking and things up there--we did anything to help and get the job done. A lot of people died in that one. They cremated the bodies. We had to get all kinds of shots to stay in the area.

"Before we had good roads, I used to drive up as far as Marathon and Key Vaca--stopped at fisheries along the way called the Key Vaca fisheries. The Thompson Plant in Key West, thought, was the biggest and best. They also had the ice house. Remember, I used to sell tickets to get ice. They'd have to take their ticket over to a little window; the ticket would tell how much ice they had paid for and then somebody would cut it to size.

"I remember way back when we used to hang around the Coffee Mill; there was a place there called Bow Wow's; we used to play cards over there and a little poker too. Another place we'd go was a place on Margaret Street called Johnny Blacks.

"Old Rupert, a big, big man, used to run a store where I'd go to get staples items. He was a giant man and he also ran a concession at the dock. He used to be a boxer. Guess he weighed 500 lbs. or so, and his wife was tiny and skinny.

"Then Jeff Knight used to have a coffee shop right across from the ice plant where I had my fish market. Used to go there a lot. My wife always said that I wasn't going to make my boys into fishermen but in spite of that, have one who is a real fisherman; he knows a good deal about it, how to cut it up and all. It's kind of an art that not everybody can do well.

Tony Wells used to be great at cleaning turtles. He was called "Cigar" or "Cigarette Willie". You'd see him after work sitting around with a blanket around him.

"There just isn't a good place to fish around anymore. I had the best fish in Key West back when I had my fish house. Any fish I sold was strictly fresh. Anything that I felt wasn't real fresh, I wouldn't sell it. Would throw it away. People who'd come down from the North would always come to me for their fish because it was the best and the cheapest. I had a big business there but didn't really make a lot of money because there was so much waste.

"I have four sons; have a lot of relatives here. There are a lot of Higgs in Key West. I've had a good life in Key West, lots of friends, and a wonderful family."

(Mrs. Mary Malone and Mr. Higgs son, Ervin, assisted with this interview. Portions of the tape could not be understood).
