

## Introduction

This is the story of my Florida, the Florida I grew up in and learned to love. It is mostly about fishermen, the people of the east and west coasts whom I knew best, the ones who colored my life in my early years and who, along with my seafaring family, gave me my appreciation for the sea and its denizens. That I became a naturalist and an oceanographer was due to a quirk of fate. I might just as easily have stayed a sportsfishing guide and a charterboat captain. If I had, this book would never have been written.

Many changes have taken place since these events occurred. New fishing methods have been introduced, new types of boat have been developed, some whole fisheries have disappeared. Crystal River and Flamingo are no longer recognizable as they were just forty years ago. But the people remain. Fishermen are fishermen: unique, hardworking, hard drinking, colorful in speech, philosophical in disposition.

During my early years I was fortunate to see and participate in a number of different fisheries, more than most fishermen have seen. Others may have known the fisheries better, but those who did have failed to record their experiences. The events described here, as far-fetched as some may seem, are all true, and most were written down at the time they happened, for I was even then experimenting with writing. They portray a Florida little known today. I hope that in their reading you

can get a feeling for the Florida that has passed. If I have spent more time talking about fishermen and less about fishing in some cases, it is because I find people more interesting than fish and fishermen more interesting than most people. I hope that you agree.

proof

# 1

---

## Prohis and Fish Wardens

*Nowhere in the country was Prohibition flouted like it was in Florida. Rivers of illicit booze flowed through the speakeasies of Miami and the oceanfront estates of Palm Beach, but all of it had seeped into the state clandestinely by boat, run in at night onto lonely beaches or through mangrove-choked inlets to waiting trucks on shore. Boat captains ran the risk of running liquor past the Coast Guard, the well-to-do shelled out big bucks for drinks, and organized crime pocketed huge profits. For younger boys in small fishing communities along the southeast coast, rum-running was a nightly spectator sport; for older boys there was money to be made—if they didn't get caught.*

R.S.V.

I wouldn't say that native Floridians disregarded or flouted the law, they just felt that some laws were wrong and ignored them. This attitude generally was directed toward laws that prohibited them from doing what had always been done, like making and drinking 'shine during Prohibition, or rum-running, or digging turtle eggs, or net-fishing in Lake Worth. Prohis (Prohibition officers, pronounced "pro-highs") and Isaak Walton League fish wardens were scorned by nearly everyone and were circumvented whenever possible. The LAW in Palm Beach County was Sheriff Bob Baker, and he was respected and obeyed. Bob Baker

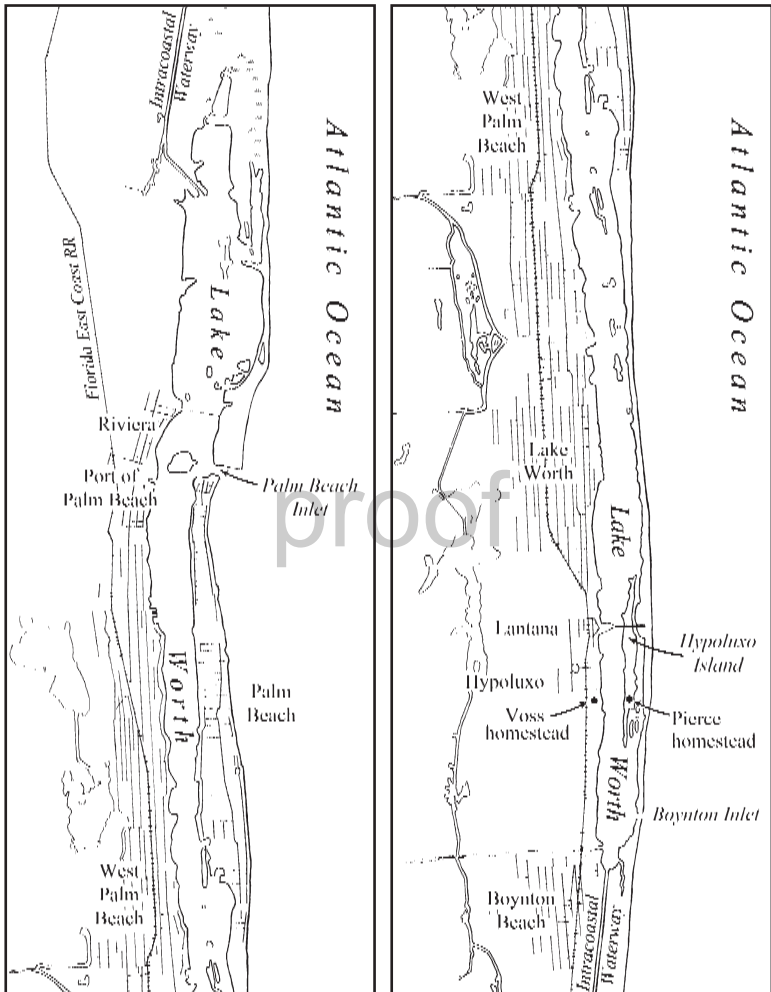
did not have much use for prohis or Isaak Walton League wardens either. After all, he was a cracker too.<sup>1</sup>

Fishing and rum-running were often synonymous. The fishermen knew the coast, its inlets and network of waterways, better than anyone else, including the prohis and their government confederates, the Coast Guard. I was too young for any action in those days, but my brothers were teenagers when a rum runner ran Boynton Inlet with a Coast Guard boat in hot pursuit. Both the rum runner and the Coast Guard ran aground on the shoals inside the inlet, but the rummy got free by heaving over the side most of its cargo of Scotch, which was done up in lots of three bottles each, neatly sewn in burlap. The rummy then ran off into the mangroves and the Coast Guard lost them.

The sacks of Scotch floated for a while and then sank, distributed by the incoming tide all over the south end of the lake. Word of the bonanza spread like wildfire, and next morning my brothers in their outboard were searching the lake with a dozen other boys, diving up the sacks in the clear water. The prohis were roaming the roads by car and helplessly watching the activity in the lake. They never caught on to the rum runners, who were buying back the sacks at \$10 each as fast as they were brought ashore.

Another day a Coast Guard 75-footer was chasing a big rum runner up the lake. The Lantana bridge was a swing-draw high enough for the rummy to go under but too low for the patrol boat. At the foot of the lake the patrol boat began blowing for the bridge and we heard her repeated blasts, becoming more strident as she neared the bridge. The draw was still swinging as the rummy roared underneath. The draw was barely open when there was a BOOM from the patrol boat firing her one-pounder through the draw. The bridge tender threw himself flat as another shell screamed by.

The patrol boat roared through the open space, creating a tremendous wake, but she suddenly lost headway and began to drift. Just as the rummy ran through the draw, her crew had



Lake Worth in the mid-1930s. The left-hand panel shows the north end of the lake, the right-hand panel the south end.

thrown over a section of mackerel net, which wrapped itself around the blades and shafts of the patrol boat's propellers, putting the pursuers temporarily out of commission. Frustrated, the men at the gun continued firing at the rummy until she was beyond range, unscathed.

In fact, Coast Guard boats were not fast enough to catch a rummy and never did until one broke down in a chase. It was immediately converted into the Coast Guard's first fast picket boat. Years later, I was in charge of her at Miami during our first year in World War II. She had a 350-horsepower Murray Tregurtha engine but with stops on the throttle. When I took them off she was the fastest picket boat in the fleet.<sup>2</sup>

But this book is about fishing, and Lake Worth was filled with fish that the Isaak Walton League seemed determined to preserve only for the sportsfishermen, or so everyone thought. In the fall, as the first northeasters came along, bluefish and Spanish mackerel invaded the lake around the two inlets. Commercial fishermen in small boats fished for both, using a strip of white cloth for the mackerel and a no. 6 Wilson spoon or a strip of white pork rind for the blues. The small boats were so thick in the steamship channel at the Port of Palm Beach that the Merchants and Miners Transportation Company and Bull Line freighters occasionally ran one down.

Besides these migratory fish there were sea trout, big snook, and redfish for the taking with trolling or casting gear. Mullet and sand perch abounded but could only be caught by cast net or seine. The big black mullet was a staple fish on the lake, and anyone with a cast net could easily catch enough for supper in a few minutes.

Sand perch (*Diapterus plumieri*) are large, flat, silvery fish that were highly prized locally as pan fish. The common name is confusing because this fish is known elsewhere as mojarra or broad shad, while on Biscayne Bay the fish they call sand perch is a long, round, ugly creature with an enormous mouth (*Diplectrum formosum*). Sand perch (or striped mojarra) were occasionally caught by cast-netters, but commercially they were taken in gill nets.

And then there were pompano. This highly overrated fish brought anywhere from twenty-five cents to a dollar a pound to the fisherman. A few people fished them commercially with

hook and line and made a few dollars a day, but pompano were mainly caught with pompano gill nets or trammel nets.

Most native Floridians, and especially fishermen, have little culinary regard for pompano. Absolutely fresh, practically still flapping, and pan-broiled in a little rendered-out white bacon fat, it is delicious. Iced, it loses its flavor, but it has thick, white meat with only a few easily removable bones and a delicate texture. With no fishy flavor, it makes an excellent, tasteless base upon which to pour or ladle various French sauces and condiments so that the poor pompano is no longer recognizable as fish. So-called gourmets now pay exorbitant prices to “ooh” and “ah” over the sauce and praise the chef for his beautifully prepared *fish*. But there are few fish so beautifully sleek, silvery and firm as a pompano, and at a dollar apiece their beauty is even more dramatic. Pompano live along the open coast or in estuaries, feeding on crabs and clams in shallow, sandy flats. When alarmed by a passing boat they have the odd habit of jumping at high speed, flat on their sides, out of the water and toward the wake or boat, often jumping into the boat itself.

All sorts of curious tales are told about this strange behavior; fishermen are full of them, and two are known to me personally. One pompano jumped through the port hole of our charter yacht and fell on the galley floor. Another time, my father was taking a friend to Palm Beach in his steam launch to have a boil lanced, when a pompano jumped into the boat, hit the boil on the man's shoulder, burst it open, and fell to the deck. This ended the trip to the doctor and afforded an evening meal for the patient.

This typical behavior also originated a new type of fishing. Several of the conchs at Riviera built long, slender flatties, set up poles bow and stern, and stretched old mackerel nets in between. In the quiet of the early morning or late afternoon they towed these flatties behind high-speed sea skiffs at 18 or 20 knots over the shallows around the inlet. If schools of pompano