

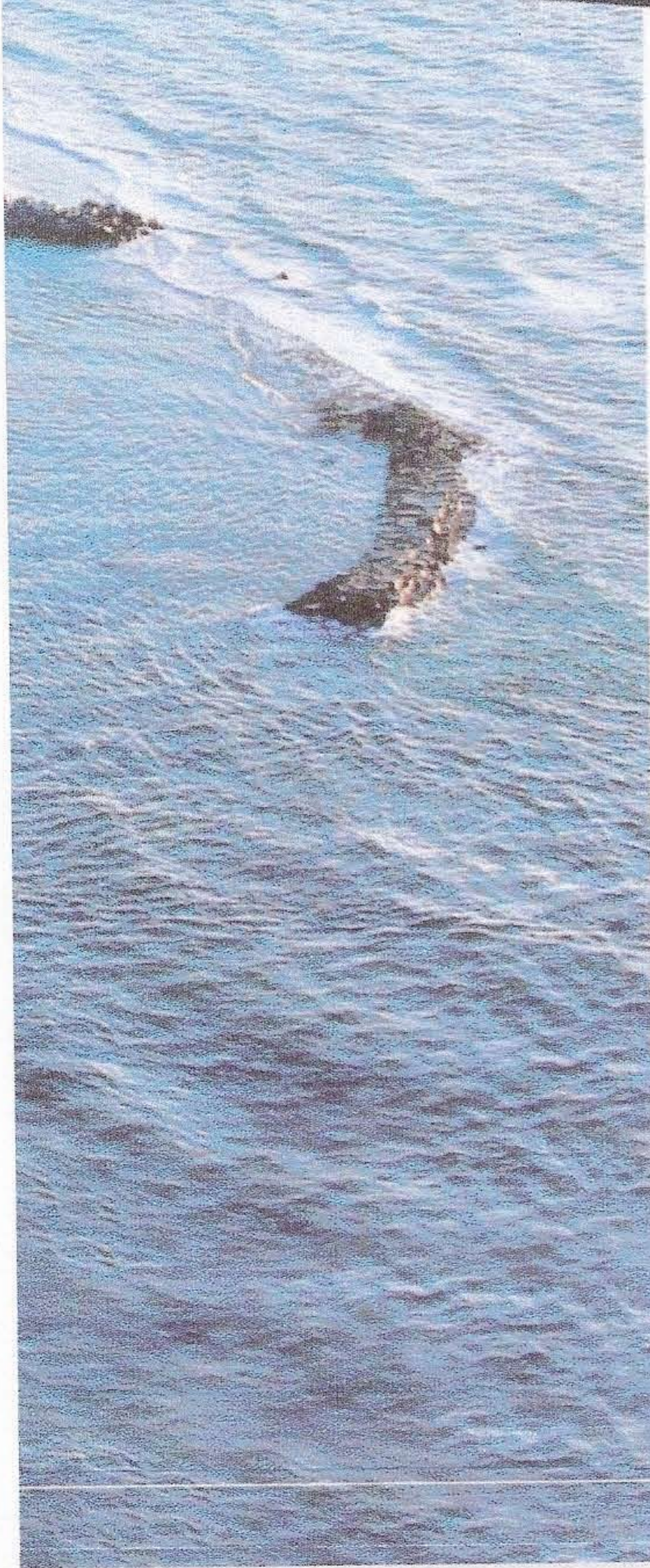
THE HILLSBORO BOYS

Some of the Sport's Best Trace
Their Routes to Hillsboro Inlet

By Jan Fogt



COURTESY CAROL MOTT



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Today, Hillsboro Inlet may be one of south Florida's busiest, but in the early days, just a handful of captains worked out of the area. Although small in number, these captains made a lasting mark on the sport.

SITUATED HALFWAY between Miami's famous Pier 5 and Palm Beach's sailfish docks, Hillsboro Inlet in Pompano Beach, Florida, produced some of the best-known crews in the business. Unlike the spit-and-polish Palm Beach captains of yesterday in their starched white shirts and navy pants, or the khaki-clad Miami fishers, Hillsboro boys dressed for dirty work. Known for "filling the boat," they wore sleeveless T-shirts and navy pants during the years Pompano was better known for its green beans than beaches. When sport fishing began to take off, Pompano was more of a farm town, and the local high-school sports team went by the name Bean Pickers.

Charlie "Split-Tail" Hayden

experienced the climate firsthand, working for pioneering captains like Red Stuart and Bill Fagen in Miami and Bill and George Staros in Fort Lauderdale in the 1950s. "When I went to work at Hillsboro Inlet in the '60s, I saw the difference right away," he says. "Any one of them would have given anything they had to help the other if he was in trouble. That was the difference. They acted like family."

And many were family. The Stones, Knights and Voss families were related by blood or marriage as were the Griffins, Keens, Motts and Merritts. As for the rest, if they weren't related by blood, they became brothers on the water, according to Marvin "Sonny" Griffin Jr., whose father, the late Marvin "Griff" Griffin Sr., served as a founding member of the Hillsboro fraternity.

"Once you got in, it was like going to a fishing academy," says Capt. Peter B. Wright, who spent his first 10 years in the business working for Hillsboro captains like Griffin, John Whitmer and Freddie Voss.

"Even if you weren't working for them, they took a fatherly interest in you if you happened to be somewhere like the Bahamas and they saw you screw up," says Capt. Bark Garnsey, who grew up fishing on his father's driftboats out of Hillsboro.

"At Hillsboro, there were no one-day wonders," says Garnsey. "Anyone you called captain earned it. Whatever any of us have achieved in this profession is because of what we learned from the generation of captains and mates that came before us."

Taking a Visual

Today, Hillsboro looks much different than it did in the halcyon years of the 1950s and '60s. For one thing only one of the two docks remains, since the Yardarm restaurant and south docks were torn down. In 1972, Jim Stefanis decided to build a convention hotel on his property at Hillsboro Inlet and gained permission from the City of Pompano, which later rescinded the permit. Stefanis sued. The case dragged on for 27 years, and Stefanis went bankrupt. As for the land, the city bought it for pennies on the dollar and made it a passive park. *Helen S* and the remaining eight charter boats now tie up at the Intracoastal docks, still owned by the Beatty family.



COURTESY FRED STONE

Capt. Benjamin Stone stands with a hammerhead caught on a charter circa 1939. Stone, the local light keeper, and his sons pioneered fishing in the area.

Fred "Punch" Stone

The oldest of his surviving brothers (George and Patrick), Fred "Punch" Stone was born at Hillsboro Light 83 years ago. His father, Benjamin Franklin Stone, served as the last civilian light keeper in the United States and refused to retire even after the U.S. Coast Guard took over aids to navigation.

The Stones were related to the pioneering Knight family, whose members intermittently operated the lighthouse and commercial fish docks, smuggled rum, charter fished and ran the still-popular Cap's Place Restaurant in Lighthouse Point, where Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt planned the D-Day invasion.

The Stones moved from lighthouse to lighthouse, but in 1936, they came home to Hillsboro from Cape Canaveral, Florida, and replaced the retiring Tom Knight. By this time Cap's Place was one of the liveliest nightclubs around — a popular speak-easy, restaurant and gambling hall. Located on an island near the inlet, the lighthouse held the only telephone, so the Stones took dinner reservations for the restaurant, which Fred would deliver in his 15-foot rowboat for 25 cents. The Stone brothers became the first of many Hillsboro captains to ferry guests to the restaurant for tips. In those days people were told to pull up on the beach and flash their lights as a signal. "Then we'd row over and pick them up," says Stone.

By the time he was 12, he started taking paying customers out fishing from the Hillsboro Club, a private enclave operating under the lighthouse. "My teachers then were guides Becton Isler and my uncle Burnham Knight, who were the first to charter there," he says.

When World War II broke out, Stone, then a member of the Sea Scouts, enlisted in the Navy. At the age of 15, he shipped out for active duty in the Pacific. Four years later he returned home from Guadalcanal intent on getting his captain's license and running his own charter boat — a dream that took 10 years to become reality.

Hillsboro changed during the war. Instead of three charter boats, there were now half a dozen operating. Johnny Whitmer, Marvin Griffin Sr., Burnham and Billy Knight, Buddy and Allen Merritt, and a handful of Ocean City captains were now charter fishing out of Hillsboro Inlet. Fearing there wouldn't be enough business for him, Stone went to work for captains Harold and Ken Lyman in Boynton, Florida, who also gave Ron Hamlin his start. Ten years later, Stone bought *Toss Up* and came home. "It felt so good to be fishing under the light again," he says.

Stone remembers the heyday of tuna fishing in the Bahamas as "the height of his career," taking the helm to compete against tuna maestros like captains Buddy and Allen Merritt, Tommy Gifford, the Staros brothers, and Walter and Fred Voss III. Although Stone did well fishing *Toss Up*, he's best known for running Arthur Appleton's 37-foot *Merritt Tina Teaser* in tournaments at Cat Cay and

Bimini. "Punch Stone never got the glory he deserved even though he caught as many giant tuna as any of the hot shots," says longtime mate Charlie Hayden.

The Voss Brothers

Although not as well known as his uncle Walter, Fred Voss III excelled at tuna fishing. "Walter had a good reputation back then because he had a lot of high-profile clients like E.K. Harry



COURTESY CHARLIE HAYDEN

Capt. Fred "Punch" Stone (far left) had strong roots in Hillsboro, and excelled at chasing tuna in the Bahamas. Charlie "Split-Tail" Hayden (kneeling) worked as a mate for Stone.



COURTESY IGFA

Walter Voss (far left) often fished tuna tournaments with former IGFA president E.K. Harry (far right).

and Ed Gould, whom he fished with a lot in tournaments. But Freddie was just as good a tuna fisherman. He taught me a lot," Stone says.

In those days Walter Voss owned *Dream Girl*, which he chartered out of Fort Lauderdale. He also would run Edwin J. Gould's *Sea Quest* in the summers, the Andy Mortensen boat that he took to Bermuda in the '60s.

The youngest in a well-known fishing family, Fred Voss III no doubt felt he had something to prove. Many considered Fred Sr. more of a marlin fisherman than a tuna fisherman, while most of the local captains regarded Walter as a bit of a techie back then.

"It must have been around 1961 that Walter made up these high-speed lures. He was using them to catch blue marlin before anyone on the East Coast ever tried them," says Stone. Lure making aside, perhaps his most lasting contribution was the boat Voss designed and built for himself. And *Dream Girl* was just that: a boat that fishermen like E.K. Harry and Capt. George Bransford admired so much, they used his plans to build their own boats. And when Mike Matlack started building Gamefishermen boats in the '90s, he too turned to Voss' plans. Bransford, who made a name for himself in 1966 as the first captain to catch a 1,000-pound black marlin off Cairns, Australia, used the plans from *Dream Girl* when he went to work building *Sea Baby II*. This vessel became one of Australia's most famous

game boats under Bransford and its successive captains.

Dr. Gilbert Voss, a lesser-known Voss brother in big-game circles, became a prominent marine scientist and expert on billfish and squid. Sadly, Fred and Walter died young. Fred Voss II apparently died of a heart attack in his 40s while fishing off Walker's Cay. As for Walter, he was in his 50s when he drowned in Bermuda. Freddie Voss III lived hard and died accordingly. He was in his 40s when his body was found dumped along I-95 — a murder that's never been solved.

By all accounts, Freddie Voss was crude, rude and rough, but for many of those who knew the Voss family, they consider Freddie the best natural fisherman in the family. "He was crazy," says Charlie Hayden. "One day he'd be fine; the next day he'd be a madman. He'd plain scare you to death."

While fishing with Voss at Ocean City, Maryland, one summer, the crew encountered a slight run-in with the locals. "They didn't believe anyone who had not white marlin fished there could catch 15 in a day. The next day Freddie comes in and dumps 13 white marlin on the dock and just walks off and leaves the boat there. That's one of the milder stories you'll hear about him," Hayden says.

"Freddie Voss was the strongest man I ever knew," says Wright. "He taught me to twist wire. Freddie could take #35 piano wire and break it. He would put a hook on one end and with a single glove take a double wrap and yank on the wire to try to get my twist to slip. When I got to where I could make a good wrap, he'd break the wire."

According to Wright, Freddie exhibited the best instincts of any of the Voss boys. "No one at Pompano ever noticed the cobia following migrating rays until Freddie started running the beach in his tower and saw them," says Wright.

The discovery of this lucrative fishery set off a round of competition among Hillsboro captains, especially between Johnny Whitmer and a talented newcomer named Joe Mott, who would load the boat with cobia. Part of the reason Mott excelled at sight-fishing cobia was because his father-in-law was a pilot and he'd fly the beach spotting rays for him. Ever the competitor, Whitmer decided he needed an eye in the sky as well and talked his daughter Lynne "Sarge" Whitmer into taking flying lessons. "He wanted me to spot rays

and radio their location so he could beat Joe Mott. I did fine with the lessons, but I couldn't pass the vision test," she says. "That was a huge disappointment for Daddy."

Mott started running his own boat *Lucky Lady* at 19 and became one of the best all-around captains ever to hail out of Hillsboro. On *Backlash* in the 1960s, Mott followed pioneering captain Tiny Brown of Islamorada, Florida, to Cozumel, Mexico, and also made a name for himself at Cat Cay on a variety of boats, including *Xiphias*, whose mates included up-and-coming captains Danny Beare and Garnsey.

The Merritt Boys

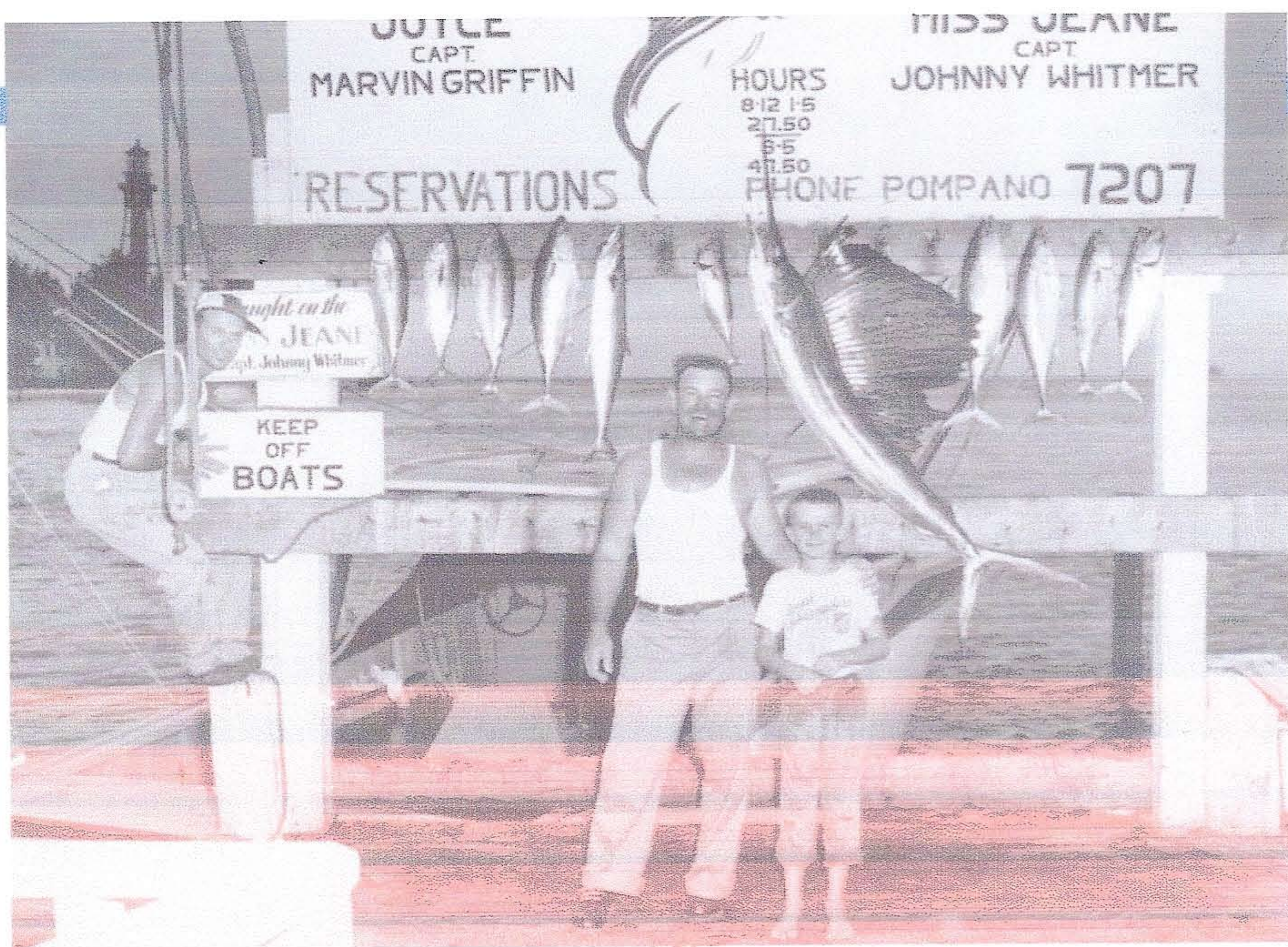
When it comes to hot shots, few could match the now 86-year-old Allen Merritt at Cat Cay or Bimini, where he ruled the tuna grounds fishing with anglers such as Bill Carpenter, Dorothea Dean and Jo Jo Del Guercio. Charter fishermen first and boat-builders second, the Merritts always understood what it took to make a living by chartering, and they treated their fellow Hillsboro captains accordingly, often extending credit to them or staying overtime to make repairs so their bretheren could fish the next day.

Along with his older brother,



COURTESY ROBBIE THORNE

Mates Robbie Thorne (far left) and Peter Wright (far right) with a blue marlin taken on Johnny Whitmer's *Miss Jeane* circa 1963.



COURTESY SONNY GRIFFIN

Marvin Griffin jumps up to change the “caught on Miss Jeane” sign as Johnny Whitmer has a laugh with a young Sonny Griffin.

Buddy, Allen spent his first years chartering in Florida in Fort Lauderdale docked alongside his father, Frank. After their parents opened Merritt Boat and Engine Works on the west side of the Intracoastal in Pompano in 1948, the brothers relocated to the north dock at Hillsboro Inlet, berthing next to Johnny Whitmer’s *Miss Jeane* and Marvin Griffin Sr.’s *Joyce I* and *Joyce II*, which John Marshall ran. Also docked on the north dock were Serge Keen’s *Keen Time* and Burnham and Billy Knight. Joe Mott, whose father, Crawford, served as the dockmaster, showed up in the ’60s, and that’s when the competition really heated up, recalls Merritt. “The only one not into producing meat back then was John Marshall,” Merritt says. “In those days you’d go out that inlet and turn north to no man’s land [Delray], and the fishing would be so good you had to fill the boat.”

By this time the Merritts were well-established big-game fishing innovators. Allen had won more tuna tournaments at Cat Cay than anyone — including

Buddy, who he credits with changing the fishery. Buddy took a sailboat mast and added a seat and rope controls, which allowed him to spot and bait tuna on the shallows and maneuver the boat on those fish at Cat Cay. “He was so successful that it changed the way we all fished for them,” Allen says. The Merritts also invented the center outrigger used today by fishermen the world over.

“Buddy and I usually didn’t share information, but late one afternoon I went over to ask how he was catching all these wahoo. We hardly ever caught wahoo in those days, and he was getting them regularly,” says Allen. “Buddy first looks around and says, ‘I’m fishing a line from the flying bridge — way, way back. In fact, if you can see the bait, it’s too close.’ Well, I tried it out and thought, *man that works*. The only problem was, with a sharp turn, the line would tangle in the rigger baits. So the next day I clamped a Calcutta bamboo rod to the tower, and the center rigger was born.”

The Mayors of Hillsboro

Becton Isler and Burnham Knight may have been the first captains at Hillsboro, but the most memorable were John J. Whitmer and Marvin Griffin Sr.

Whitmer resembled a heavyweight fighter with the height of a bantamweight, while Griffin towered above like a basketball player. Whitmer had a taste for booze, gambling and the ladies, whereas Griffin was a conservative family man. Docked alongside one another for the better part of 40 years, they were fierce competitors and best friends.

A notoriously shallow inlet, Hillsboro used to sand over after four or five days of heavy incoming swells, preventing anyone from getting out, says Wright, who began working on Whitmer’s *Miss Jeane* at just 11 years old. “Before the full-time dredge and before the boats got big, they would get out of the boat and push it over the bar to get out,” he says. Over time Whitmer and Griffin developed better strategies.

“My dad and Johnny used to get the sheriff to bring jail trustees down to help them dig out the inlet,” says Griffin’s son Sonny. “By the 1950s, they’d resorted to using dynamite to break up the sandbar so the tide would scour the ditch clean. They were always working together like that.”

Unlike Griffin, who was born and raised in nearby Oakland Park, Whitmer came to Pompano from the Kansas wheat fields. By 1930, he started taking paying customers out from the

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COURTESY CHARLIE HAYDEN

Joe Mott (left), pictured here with Hayden, began running his own boat out of Hillsboro at just 19 and became one of the best all-around captains in the area.

Hillsboro Club to supplement what he earned jigging up king mackerel. Griffin's journey was more happenstance. In the 1920s and '30s, live-in bridge tender Fred Alexander manually operated the swing bridge over the Intra-coastal, and he just happened to be the father of Griffin's girlfriend, Kathleen. When her father died in an accident in the Florida Keys, Kathleen's mother, Ruby, was left to manage the bridge, two daughters and a fishing boat. She could handle the bridge, but the boat was another story. "She asked my dad to take it over," Sonny says. Eventually, Kathleen and Griffin married and had children, including Sonny and his sister Joyce, for whom all future Griffin boats were named.

Until the '40s, Whitmer and Griffin tied up at the old charter docks by the lighthouse. Since it was located on federal land, they paid no dockage, which raised the ire of the Stefanis family because they planned to build a restaurant and marina complex on 16 acres across the inlet. Before long the charter fleet was ordered out. "Neither Johnny nor my dad would tie up at the Stefanis' docks, so Johnny contacted a successful local businessman, Bill Beatty, and told him if he purchased the property on the inland side of the

bridge, they would build the docks and get Crawford Mott to manage them. That's how what we call the north and south docks on either side of the bridge got built," Sonny says.

One of the most dedicated ever to come out of Hillsboro, Johnny Whitmer once caught 36,000 pounds of kingfish in 30 days. During the 40-plus years he ran the *Miss Jeane* boats, he took pretty much every up-and-coming mate under his wing. "I'm best known for fighting fish with the boat. That's something I learned from Johnny, running his slow, single-engine boat," Wright says.

Making your way through Hillsboro's wild opening with a single-engine boat was the best training a captain could experience. "There was no margin for error no matter what side of the inlet you tied up on," says Garnsey, whose father, Dan, owned the *Helen S* fleet of driftboats. "The mere thought of losing an engine in that inlet would make me physically ill, because no matter what your experience, Hillsboro was daunting in a 10-knot boat. As soon as you got inside, you had a dogleg and then a sharp turn to make the dock. I still get chills thinking about those days I did it with a southeast wind and an incoming tide pushing the boat toward the bridge."

When Dan Garnsey came to the south docks with the *Helen S* boats, he made a deal to lease the marina from the Stefanis brothers, who developed the property for their Yardarm restaurant. "Dad thought captains and mates should be professionals and dress and act the part, which rubbed off on me and O.B. O'Bryan, whose father, Vernon, was our operations manager and a senior captain for 33 years."

The Winter Boys

For decades, Oregon Inlet fishing legend Bill Baum and Ocean City captains John and Billy Mumford spent their winters fishing Hillsboro. Capt. Marty Snow, who started out working for Mumford, as did Allen Fields, believes they chose Pompano instead of Palm Beach or Miami because they wanted to fish alongside captains like Allen and Buddy Merritt and Whitmer. Many considered Mumford, who ran the *Whiticar Bolo*, the dean of the winter guys. At one time Mumford owned both the *Bolo* and *Bolo Jr*, which Fields ran until he went to work for Buster Day on *Seven Days*. But it was that old

Whiticar with Mumford at the helm that everyone kept on their radar screen, according to O'Bryan, who spent five years mating for Mumford.

"Working for John was a little like working for Chip Shafer, who most think of as one of the greats to come out of Oregon Inlet," O'Bryan says. "He had this subtle way of gathering information from everyone on the radio about what they were seeing, and that helped him put it all together."

One of the few outsiders to come out of Hillsboro, Robin "Robbie" Thorne relocated to Pompano in 1958. Dressed in his New York finery, he met with dockmaster Dwight Miller, who introduced him to Capt. Art "Cappy" Robinson. "Cappy took one look at me in those clothes and said, 'You're just what I'm looking for.' An old Pompano captain, he wanted a mate he could mold," says Thorne, who for the better part of 40 years worked as a professional mate for the best who came out of Hillsboro.

Thorne stayed several years with Robinson on *Vera II* until Robinson suffered a heart attack. His next assignment was with Palm Beach captain Fred Hastings and angler James French Baldwin. "I spent two summers with them in 1961 and 1962 and was lucky enough to be there when Mr. French won the International Swordfish Tournament at Cuttyhunk off Massachusetts, catching swordfish of 518 and 200 pounds."

The rest of the year Thorne worked for Mott, who introduced him to giant tuna fishing in the Bahamas, which changed his life. "The reason I stayed mating most of my career was so I could go tuna fishing," he says. "I got to go pound fish with Buddy Merritt on *Timid Tuna* the year he caught 16 giants in one day in Newfoundland, and I fished with Allen Merritt in 1964, the first year they fished there." Fishing with the Merritts and later with captains Bill and George Staros, he spent a lot of time in the pit with anglers such as Jo Jo Del Guercio, one of the best big-game anglers who ever lived. "Fishing with Jo Jo was like having a third mate on the boat. He could rig baits, wire fish, you name it."

Mating on boats out of Hillsboro Inlet put you in a prime spot to learn from the best, and that is exactly what shaped these men into the best captains and crews of the day. "Being a Hillsboro mate was the greatest thing that ever could happen to a fisherman," says Thorne.