

HOOKED



WHITNEY JOSEPH

Fort Pierce commercial fisherman, Capt. Terry Howard, fishes solo most days. He makes an exception for his friend and part-time first mate, Fort Pierce native John Rohm. On a good day the pair may return with upwards of 700 pounds of King or Spanish mackerel.

Fort Pierce anglers are keeping it reel

BY WHITNEY JOSEPH

It takes a special kind of discipline to wake up on time to watch the sun come up over that lucky spot on the water. Lucky for the fisherman, that is, not for the fish. But that's exactly what countless men and women in Fort Pierce have been doing for generations.

Indiana native, retired public school teacher and author Terry Howard is among them. He's a commercial fishing captain who has been living in Fort Pierce since 1972. At 74, he still spends most days on the water, fishing his 24-foot diesel-powered Stapleton boat named *Miss Fannie*, in honor of his daughter.

Howard fishes mostly alone, though his neighbor and friend, John Rohm, who grew up fishing local waters, sometimes works as his first mate. "I'm proud to have John as my first mate," says Howard, who catches primarily king mackerel and Spanish mackerel.

"There are many methods and types of commercial fishing in Florida," explains Howard, who favors troll boat fishing,

which "trolls for fish and pulls them in on hand lines, one at a time." The fish are gutted and immediately packed in ice. Troll fishing is considered among "the most ecologically sound form of commercial fishing," says Howard.

On a day in early January, Howard says he hauled in about 700 pounds of Spanish mackerel. Some days, though, he says he returns with nothing.

Howard, who fished the lakes, rivers and ponds of Indiana as a boy, fishes the waters off Fort Pierce today, in large measure, thanks to an early role model.

"My grandfather was a schoolteacher and farmer in northern Indiana. I always admired that combination. So, when I got a teaching position in Fort Pierce I was determined to learn how to fish commercially. Trolling for mackerel seemed a perfect fit. It's environmentally friendly, you can fish alone and not be dependent on others, and it's fun — especially when you harvest a large catch of fish."

After moving here in the early '70s, a fisherman friend and >>

popular Fort Pierce native, “Uncle” Bill Summerlin, gave Howard some sage advice: To be a commercial fisherman, “you had best have a working wife to support you when there are no fish or when foul weather keeps you off the water.” Howard says he was thankful he had “a teaching job to supplement my fishing ... I have great admiration for commercial fishermen that rely only on their fishing prowess to make a living.”

When asked how commercial fishing served him throughout his 40-year career, Howard says, “That’s a wide-open question. There have been good times and bad times. There were times I had engine problems and was ready to sell out. I worked through the bad times.

“I don’t know how young fellows make mortgage payments today because it’s so erratic. You make money some months and none, others. Fishing is not as good as it was and there are a lot of reasons for that: the environment, pollution, overfishing. Early on, when I first started fishing, you didn’t need any licenses; it was like the Wild West — that was it, you were a commercial fisherman. Today you need lots of permits and licenses to stay in business in Fort Pierce. It’s a hard career. But the guys that get in it, that’s all they want to do — fishermen work through the bad times. They’ll tell you, ‘It’s the best job in the world. There is nothing like it!’ People who commercial fish love it and don’t want to do anything else. Avid recreational fishermen love fishing, too.”

RECREATIONAL FISHERMEN

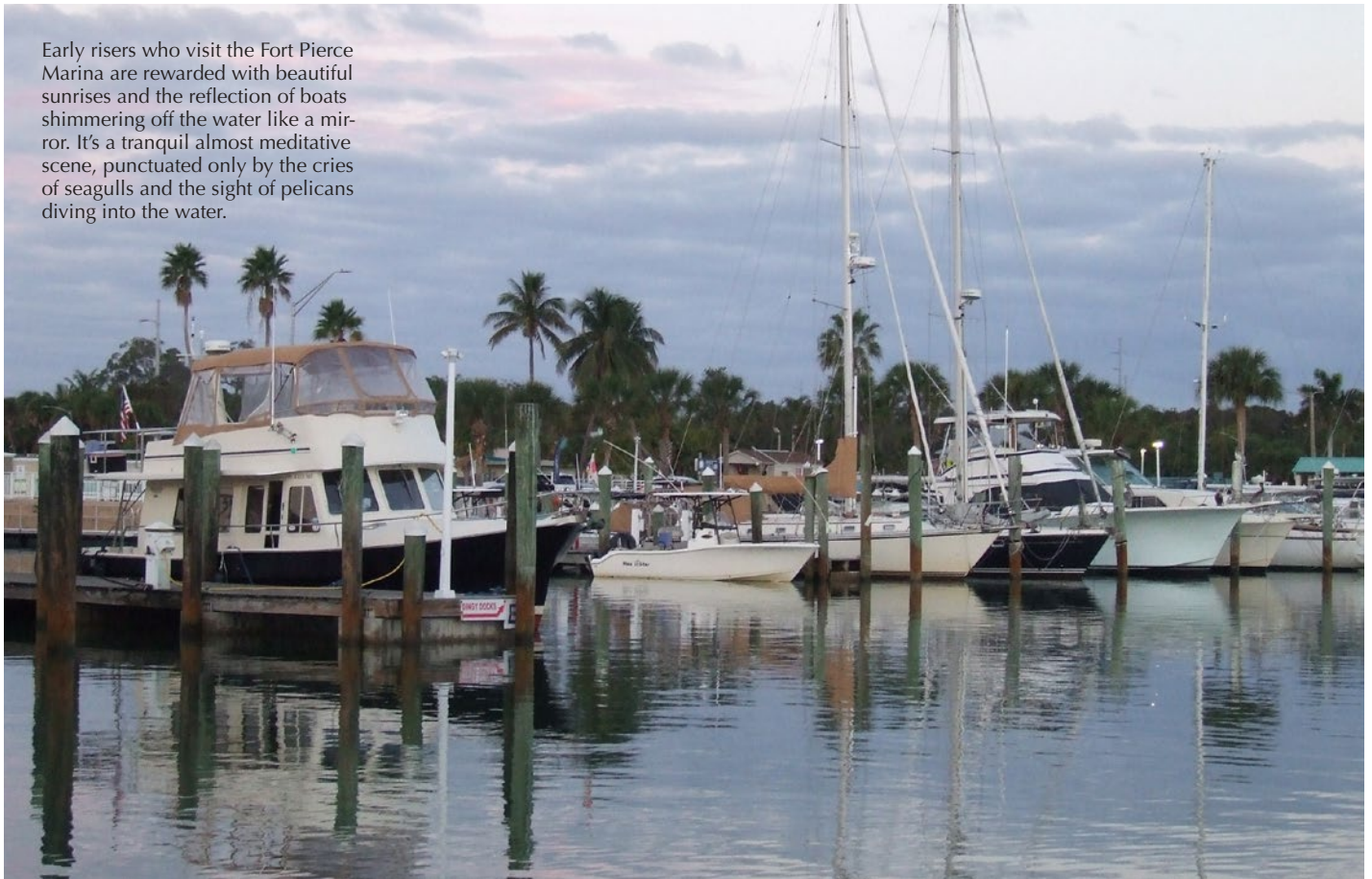
Longtime angler William Moore and self-described “newbie” Lu Gene, whose obvious expertise with a fishing >>



WHITNEY JOSEPH

Fort Pierce angler William Moore has been fishing the Indian River Lagoon and other nearby waterways for the past five decades; he fishes every day but Sunday.

Early risers who visit the Fort Pierce Marina are rewarded with beautiful sunrises and the reflection of boats shimmering off the water like a mirror. It's a tranquil almost meditative scene, punctuated only by the cries of seagulls and the sight of pelicans diving into the water.



WHITNEY JOSEPH PHOTOS

rod belies his claim of inexperience, are recreational fishermen who also fish the Fort Pierce waters. They, too, appreciate the quiet joys of the early morning, pre-fishing rituals.

"Actually, I've been fishing for as far back as I can remember," admitted the decades-younger Gene, with a chuckle. While he and Moore aren't related, the two are often mistaken for kinfolk. They've known each other for years and are extremely close so, "We could be related, 'cause we just love each other," Gene says.

Their favorite spot is across the street from the Fort Pierce Public Library on Melody Lane. The Mediterranean-style building overlooks the Indian River Lagoon, just steps from



Veteran fisherman William Moore looks on as his friend and fishing buddy, Lu Gene, removes a hook from his catch after casting his line from the seawall off Melody Lane in Fort Pierce, a popular spot for local anglers.



Once a fish is caught and the hook removed, the process must begin anew. Fresh shrimp is the bait of choice in this instance, as Gene sticks a new bait on the hook.

downtown's waterfront park. The lengthy seawall there is a popular spot with anglers who've come to fill plastic pails with their haul.

Moore, a native of North Florida, has been fishing these waterways for more than 50 years. His family moved to Fort Pierce when he was 12. "Oh, Lord," he says, "I can't tell you just how long I've been coming out here, but it's been a long time. I come every day but Sunday. I catch anything that bites, from sand perch to snapper to yellow jacks to croakers to drums. Occasionally we'll even catch one of those bonnethead sharks, they look like a hammerhead shark, but they're not. >>



WHITNEY JOSEPH

Holding up one's catch to memorialize the moment for a photo is a true point of pride for any angler, just ask Gene, who did so while fishing with Moore on a December morning.

"It can be hit or miss. Some days are good, and some are not so good, and some days you get nothing at all." Moore pauses, before adding a bit of angler's philosophy: "That's why they call it fishing."

BEAUTIFUL DAYS

Regardless of what they reel in, Gene and Moore clearly appreciate just getting to spend their days along the waterfront together. The seawall holds the men's hot coffee and fishing gear, with snacks also at the ready. They agree the key to catching fish is knowing that they like to bite early. But only sometimes, warns Moore. On those days, be ready. Get to your spot before dawn breaks. Not only can you generate a great catch; you'll get a glimpse at an incredible sunrise to boot.

They describe those mornings as times of peace and tranquility, beyond compare. Sometimes the beauty is inexplicable — even, transcendent. "I was out here early one morning, and it was like there was a helicopter or something flying overhead, pushing the water out in ripples — it was like fish were swimming, moving the water around — but there were no fish," recalls Gene. "The sun was just shining on the water."

"The morning can be so spiritual. For me it's very relaxing and peaceful," Moore says of the inner calm it brings. "I just enjoy being outside. I love watching the sun rise, hearing the birds sing and watching the people come and go. It's very peaceful."

Nevertheless, there are times that Moore says it seems he spends his whole day engaging with passersby who are curious about his success. Many have become regular visitors. "Some people will just come and talk. We meet a lot of people out here. They like to socialize," he says. "If I don't come >>

one day, the people will return and say, 'I came and I didn't see you.'" Gene agrees that fishing can be both a wonderful solitary experience and a great social activity, adding, "It can be very peaceful, but it can also be very irritating," which garnered a chuckle from his friend.

LOAFING & FISHING

Even with all their socializing, these two are focused masters of their task. Gene said that a successful day's catch would be 60 to 80 fish. His very best days are upwards of 100. "You can catch them all day," says Gene. "But it's not like that all year long — only when it gets cold. When the temperature drops the fishing gets better because we're in shallow water." "These fish are on a schedule," Moore adds. "Sometimes they bite in the morning, and sometimes they don't bite till late afternoon. Sometimes they don't bite at all. I'm serious."

When those good days come along, Moore will donate his extra catch to his church congregation. "It puts food on the table," he says. "Not only our table but on others' tables, too. You can't eat all you catch, so others get to enjoy some of it also."

Fishing six days a week for 50 years in Fort Pierce waters, whether by the waterfront park, along the pier or at one of his more secluded — secret — spots, Moore says he's just happy to be doing what he loves and sharing his catch with those who appreciate it.

"I have a lot of elderly people in my church that I give it to," he says. "Many of them don't fish, and even if they do fish, they don't clean fish. So, I will. And then I'll call them up and share it."

Throughout, Moore keeps one famous adage in mind: "A bad day of fishing is still better than a good day at work."

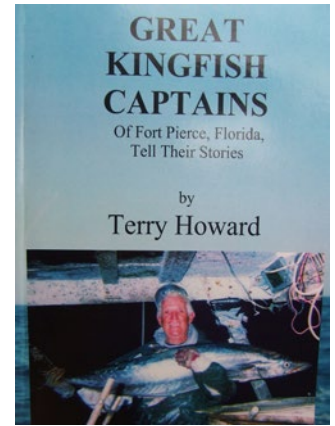
FISH STORIES

Howard, meanwhile, found that most who fish have tales to tell. He has mined that rich vein of storytelling in order to pen numerous books about life at sea. For anyone who has an interest in learning about what it's like to pilot a commercial fishing boat or to work on the high seas, Howard's books are worth reading. They include: *High Seas Wranglers: The Lives of Atlantic Fishing Captains*; *Fire in the Water*; *Great Kingfish Captains of Fort Pierce, Florida, Tell Their Stories*; and *Simone: Memoir of a French Child of World War II*. This last book is the only one not about life at sea.

Even though this local fishing legend says he's ready to reel it in, that doesn't mean he's lost his love for a good yarn. After boarding boats for more than half a century, he says, "I think I would rather sit down and read a book."

"If my grandson comes, I'll give him a pole if he wants one. But I'd rather sit down and watch the river and read a book. I love fishing and love the whole thing about commercial fishing, but I'm just as happy sitting on my porch."

Visit www.terrylhowardauthor.com to learn more about Howard and where to get his books. *PH*



WHITNEY JOSEPH

Great Kingfish Captains is among a handful of books penned by commercial fishing Capt. Terry Howard. It profiles the lives of fishing captains from Fort Pierce, once known as a mecca for deep-sea commercial fishing.

