

Interview of John Bass by Joe Guerzo 1-10-2019

Joe: this is Joe Guerzo and it is January 10th, 2019 and I am with...

John: John Bass.

Joe: And your birth date?

John: August 7th, 1952.

Joe: My birthday is August 8th.

John: (laughs)

Joe: All right, our first question. So where did you grow up?

John: I grew up in Englewood. Born and raised here. Larry was a good friend of mine. Larry Sparter, he grew up with me.

Joe: I was going to say, where?

John: Basically, the way he got involved, my dad and his dad were very close. And his dad ran a gas station in town and Larry was basically, in the garage one day, and being a, you know, kid. And my dad came into the gas station, because he buys his gas there and everything. And one thing led to the next and somehow or the other, Gordon, that's Larry's father and my dad were very close. They went hunting, build things together and so forth, and basically said, 'Larry's here if you want to take him over to the property.' So, Larry got into the car, with my dad. I was in the car with him. We got on the property, and um, the property that you've seen pictures of and we started being kids. Larry got pissed off, pissed off at me basically and was walking off the property. And my dad said, 'Why are you leaving?' And he said, 'Your son beat the shit out of me', or something along that line. And dad said, 'Well, why don't you go back and beat the shit out of him?' And Larry said, 'Okay'. So, he went back and beat the shit out of me and ever since we've been like 2 brothers. We were a pea in a pod.

Joe: How old were you guys when you met?

John: Probably 6 or 7, 8 years old. Ten years old.

Joe: Okay. That was one of my first questions. So, you grew up on the complex.

John: Yeah.

Joe: And I was going to ask you who were your friends growing up and that was one of them.

John: Well, we basically, we grew up... that was my first close, close friend, and still is to the day. Basically, as time went on, we had other friends and stuff as we all went to school. Englewood School, it's not there anymore.

Joe: Is that where you went? You went to Englewood?

John: Yeah, they finally tore that down. And I ended up going to Lemon Bay School. From Lemon Bay School, I ended up going to a boarding school

Joe: Was Lemon Bay a high school at the time?

John: No, it was not a high school, I don't think. I think it went all the way up to 4th or 5th, 6th, somewhere in there.

Joe: So, you mentioned boarding school.

John: Yeah.

Joe: How old were you?

John: I was in my teens, I think, when I went to boarding school.

Joe: Where was it?

John: Basically, I went to many different schools. I was cross-sighted when I was born, and they fixed that. I was a slower learner, I have alexia, when you see something that's not there or whatever. And basically, they thought I had a problem, so they sent me up. I went to Pennsylvania and a New York school, boarding school. My grandmother was still alive, and I told her, 'I need to get out of here. This is not where I need to be'. And so, they brought me back home. And Flint School, out of Sarasota, had a school there and their idea about school was that they wanted to put you on a boat, a sailing schooner, a 160-some foot sailing schooner. And what we would do, the first year, we went down to the Caribbean, and basically, down in the Caribbean and we would study different parts of that area. And then we go onto the island, like Papillon, Devil's Island.

Joe: Yeah, I remember the book.

John: Right. And, um, we went on the island itself and it was quite interesting, to say the least. But, we traveled all through there and then, that summer, they took the boat over to Europe. And then, so, we had to fly over to Europe and we went to Germany, we went to the concentration camps, went through all that. They wanted to take us to the Berlin Wall, but we were kind of afraid that some of the kids might...

Joe: So, this was the sixties?

John: Yeah. They were kind of afraid that someone might do something wrong and we'd all get shot or whatever. And so, we didn't do that. But they took us through all the different youth hostels and so forth. And then I graduated in Amsterdam, yeah Amsterdam and came back here and basically, started a, I was doing landscaping and then my mom helped me get started in a marine business. I ran that for about 4 or 5 years.

Joe: Oh.

John: And then she got sick and I started working for some marinas, and their attitude towards me was... I believe in taking care of people. Okay, that's just my philosophy. I don't know where I learned it. I think I learned it from all my friends and stuff, you take care of people. And marinas and stuff, they didn't want me to do that. They didn't want me to go out of my way or anything like that. And so, there was always conflict of interest. And, my dad was still alive. And so, the next thing I know... that's my phone.

Joe: I thought it was a dog.

John: No. And basically, my dad passed away and he was working with, he used to take a lot of family pictures and flower pictures and stuff. And basically, we went in the house to clean up all the stuff with my kids, my brothers and sisters, Mark and Amy, we didn't really know anything about cameras and stuff. I didn't really know much about it myself, so I picked it up and started looking at it. And got all the camera gear out and started working, trying to figure out how to work all this stuff. And it was my 50th birthday party, I think it was, and my wife, who wasn't my wife at that time, now is. She went down to the Frames by the Thousand. Dan was down there, who ran the shop and had this big picture made up. And basically, went down to pick up this picture and like glue, me and him just hit it off and we became good friends. He was in photography and we did a lot of film. We started off in film and then we ended up going into the digital world. I still have my digital camera, my Nikon. He would do weddings and stuff, and I would just tag along. It got the point where some of these brides wouldn't feed us. They wouldn't give us something to drink, so I would... my job was to go out and steal whatever I could find, a grocery store or whatever to make sure Dan had everything. Eventually, he ended up fighting, I think it was cancer. He actually died in my arms. I was up at his house and his wife was standing on one side of the bed and I was standing on the other side and he died. So, I was still doing my marine supplies and a friend of mine, basically, had a building. And he said, 'You can come in here and rent here and so forth and so on. And so, I did, and I was there for ten years or something like that and then another story, that I'm not going to get into, but basically, from there we ended up over here. So, my uncle, who passed away about 2 years ago, he made Rocky and Karate Kid, on my mother's side, and he always kept pushing me, telling me, you know, 'Go here, go there, do your thing'. Unfortunately, cancer got him, and he died. But he always pushed me, making sure I was always doing what I was supposed to be doing. So, it was, growing up in Englewood was a good thing, because we didn't have cell phones and we didn't have all that stuff. If you needed a bowl of sugar, you went next door and get it, you know.

Joe: Right.

John: You just leave a note on the table, that's just the way it was.

Joe: What was it like? Were there many stores to go to get sugar and things like that?

John: No, everything was, basically, a very small town, a very small community. My dad, he ran the fire department and I got involved in it after he got out of it. I was involved, I still am involved in the fire department and the search and rescue, among other things. It's just

something dad did, and I felt I enjoyed doing, like I said before, helping people. But no, basically the town was basically small, and we had certain stores we could go to, five or ten cent-store. Beach Liquors, Larry and I would get off the school bus right there, dad had an account there and we could go in there and get a milkshake and a hamburger.

Joe: How far was that from your house?

John: It was, you know where Beach Liquors is? Oh, you don't live over on the other side.

Joe: I live in Port Charlotte.

John: If you go on New Point Comfort where the laboratory was, just on 776, I think it is, right across from there is a store, it's now Beach Liquors and that's where... it was kind of a store and restaurant.

Joe: So, that's where it was?

John: Yeah.

Joe: In that plaza?

John: Yeah.

Joe: Was the town very similar? Were there a lot of tourists back then?

John: No, it was kind of a low time. There was a lot of commercial fishermen, you know, trying to make a living. Of course, we had the marine biology lab going. I think, where we got involved, where Larry and I got involved in it was towards the end of it because Genie came down hard.

Joe: Eugenie Clark?

John: Yeah, and basically, what they had told her up north was that this area down here was very full of fish and all kinds of things for her to study, and sharks and so forth. So, she came down, and we were kind of closing down the laboratory and we became very close friends with her. And she went down and helped the Vanderbilts and the Vanderbilts got her involved down there and started the Cape Haze Laboratory. And the family, the whole family, Larry's family and mine, we all became very close to her. She would call us up, in fact, Mary Kay, who was still alive, her dad was actually Burrell Chadwick.

Joe: The Chadwicks.

John: Basically, helped Genie with going out and catching fish.

Joe: Burrell Chadwick, what year was he born?

John: I don't know exactly when he was born. He was here when I got here.

Joe: He was older than you.

John: Oh yeah.

Joe: Okay.

John: He was a father. He had a daughter and kids. Mary Kay is still alive, and she lives over here on Drury Lane, in that area.

Joe: That's his daughter.

John: Yeah, not at the home. She has a house over there. She was married and lost her husband about 2 or 3 years ago and basically, so we all kind of grew up together and Burrell was good friends. Genie would call us, the kids, and we would all load up at the boat house with spear guns and shotguns and so forth and so on. And we'd go out and help her catch fish. Whatever critters she could.

Joe: Cool.

John: I'll never get this, but she'd sit out on the back of the boat. She'd yell at me and I'd go out and find her pin cushions, what we called pin cushions. I'd don't know if they're in the bay anymore or not. Like a sea urchin. She'd sit in the back, pop them open and eat them raw. And I went, 'God.' It was interesting. It was a good time. Her daughter is still alive. She has a dog.

Joe: Eugenie Clark's?

John: Daughter.

Joe: She's in town?

John: No, she passed. I went on adventures with her. Genie actually passed, 2 years ago, 3 years ago, but her daughter and I are like brothers and sisters.

Joe: So, her daughter is about your age.

John: We kind of grew up together. Her husband, Hera's, is an underwater ichthyologist, yeah, ships and stuff like that.

Joe: What's her last name now? It's not Clark, I imagine.

John: Ah, shit. I can't think of it.

Joe: That's okay.

John: I can't think of her last name.

Joe: That's alright.

John: Hera, was her daughter. I was actually in their book, Lady with a Spear. Genie would run the laboratory and then Burrell, he would go around and his calling card, Burrell's calling card

was a baby sea turtle. And whatever Genie told her, he would go to the next laboratory or whatever it was, and his calling card was a sea turtle, a baby sea turtle. He'd pass them out.

Joe: This is Burrell Chadwick.

John: Yeah.

Joe: Okay, so what was Eugenie Clark like?

John: Very, very enjoyable lady. Very knowledgeable. Basically, many years ago, while my uncle was still alive, I came back from a venture with her over in Papua New Guinea, and he picked me up at the airport. And so, I was telling him, I said, 'One of these days, you know, you make movies and stuff, we need to sit down and do something with Genie'. And he said, 'Yeah, that might be something that we could do'. He said, 'Let's go out and have dinner'. So, we went out and had dinner, came back, and he said, 'Let's take a peek at the computer and see what we can come up with'. I had never tried it since then, but I should. We come to find out, there was like 4 or 5 pages of stuff on Genie Clark. It was just, page after page after page. And he said, 'There's plenty here'. But we could never get the money to put together and everything. There is, a good friend of Genie's and mine, who was at Moat. I can't think of the guy's name. He was a scientist. He's done interviews with her and everything before she passed. And he keeps threatening, and I just talked to him not too long ago. And there's rumors that he's trying to put a book together. It should be interesting. It's like a biography of her.

Joe: Cool.

John: But, she loved kids. She did a lot of things at Moat. The kids would always come by and see her.

Joe: How old were you when you were working for her?

John: I was in my... well, I started out when I was little.

Joe: That's what I was going to say.

John: A little whipper snapper, and from there we grew up and we kept getting closer and closer together. Mom and dad were very close. As a matter of fact, Larry, that you've met. If you look at his hand, his finger is built like that and it's bent, basically almost like that. And you might ask, 'why is his hand bent?' Well, her husband, her first husband, was Konstantinu. You can actually go and look it up, because Larry's wife actually found it and one day, because she was a nurse. What happened was, many years ago while we were all growing up as kids, we didn't really have a lot of money. So, we used, his dad was a machinist and could build just about anything. But he took a pipe, put a tire rim on the floor, put a piece of pipe on it and an electric motor on top of it and a fan blade. That was their fan. So, unfortunately, one of Larry's relatives called and so Larry went in to pull the plug out of the wall. He was on the bed, and the fan fell on top of him. So instead of trying to put his hand this way, he went like this. And Larry's father called my father and said, 'The best thing I can tell you to do is see Dr. Konstantinu in

Sarasota'. I think he was in Sarasota or Venice Hospital, and he was a bone specialist. And Konstantinu told Larry's father, 'I can cut them off and throw them in the trash can, but I would like to try to save them'. And Larry's father said, 'Okay, fine. Go for it'. So, Larry now has use of his hand and Konstantinu made it bend like that, so when he closes his hand he'd have the use of that hand.

Joe: Okay, so that's why it's bent.

John: Yeah.

Joe: And that was Eugenie Clark's first husband?

John: Yes, her first husband.

Joe: Okay.

John: And then, she went on and had a couple of other ones after that. He was a super nice guy. He did a lot of work down here, saving peoples' lives.

Joe: Konstantinu was his name?

John: Yeah, and then he went into oil tankers and so forth. And then, Genie got a couple of other husbands. I think he died and then she went on to her other husbands.

Joe: It sounded like it was an interesting place to be growing up.

John: Oh, yeah. There was a lot of good things going on. We were basically, a self-sustained community. You know, we basically had the old Whiskey Corners over here, where Wells Fargo is parked now and Merchants Crossing. That intersection was originally Whiskey Corners. The idea of that place for a bar was it was the first place you could drive up to a window and say I need a quart of whiskey and whatever they give you, coke, and you can get everything right out the window.

Joe: Did you call it Whiskey Corner? Is that what you called it?

John: Yes, Whiskey Corners.

Joe: Okay.

John: And basically, it was a place where everybody could go and if you didn't have any money, it didn't make any difference. You could go there, and if you needed a roof put on your house or if you need a piece of putang or whatever you might need, that's where you would go because the community would all come in. People would get there, hey I need this, or I need a car... I need that. It was just a great place to go. When they tore that down, they tore down a lot of history.

Joe: So, it's gone?

John: Yeah, it's gone.

Joe: Okay.

John: It's like everything else, it's gone.

Joe: So, it's at the plaza where the Wells Fargo Bank is?

John: Yep, that intersection. That's where it was. It was a good place to go. Of course, it was a bar, but they used to have music and everything. There's a lot of good stories about that place. You can write a whole book on that place.

Joe: Really?

John: Because it was the only liquor store that you could go buy... you can't buy liquor outside a window.

Joe: I guess it would be popular.

John: Yeah.

Joe: So, how big was the town, then? A couple thousand?

John: I would say, back in the sixties, 30's, 40's, 50's, 60's and 70's. I think it probably, I might be wrong, back in the 80's, it probably died. That's when the roads started coming in. I just found this out recently. Somebody told me. I don't know if anybody knows this. That they were gonna actually bring 41 down through here.

Joe: Oh, wow.

John: There was some reason why they didn't do it and I can't remember why. It ended up going where it is now. I forget why. Someone was just recently telling me about it and I said, 'Really?' I said, 'I never heard that one'. But it was a very interesting town. We all worked like a community. We all did commercial fishing. We did other things to make a living. It was hard. Back in the Depression times and so forth and so on. Unfortunately, I didn't have to go through that because it was over with by the time I got up to a decent age. But, it was interesting. It was interesting.

Joe: I want to ask you about your family. Obviously, we do the Cookie House tours and you didn't get to meet your grandfather.

John: No.

Joe: Are there any stories you grew up knowing about him?

John: Basically, I've heard a lot of stories. He was the type of person... I still got piles and piles of pictures to go through. Basically, my grandmother, who I got to know, very close, and she would tell me stories and stuff. I wish I was alive, because he was the type of person who would

always, and I think a lot of my traits came from him, because, he was the type of person that you could see at the laboratory, he wanted to help people. The whole Bass family was that way. And we always believed in helping our fellow friends out, whatever they needed. If they needed some money. They needed a house or someplace to live.

Joe: Right.

John: And I think that's why he started the marine biology lab. Is to help the community, help the scientists and everything else. That's what he did. It's basically the same idea that Mote was trying to do, is doing up in Sarasota. Bring the scientists to Englewood. We'd go out and collect the critters and whatever they needed.

Joe: Right.

John: Or we'll ship them out. We were supposedly, according to earning, the Bass Biology Lab, actually was, my grandfather came up with the idea. When you open up a frog, all the veins and stuff are different colors. Well, he was the one who came up with the idea of injecting rubber and stuff, different colors in that frog's body, or whatever animal you were going to do. So, there was a purple, there was a red, or whatever. That's what they came up with. I don't know if there's a patent on it. Also, he also came up with the idea of how to put a salt water tank together. So, if somebody wanted a salt water tank in their house, he would say we'll send this whole kit to you. The fish, the critters, the whole 9 yards.

Joe: That must have been relatively new.

John: Oh yeah. It was. Of course, they'd send animals out to the scientists. There's constant people calling my mom's house. I'll never forget it, 'You've got my cat over there?' No, we don't take cats. 'You got my dog'. No, we don't take dogs. They're always wondering what we were doing. Basically, our collection was animals out in the woods, stuff like snakes, alligators and so forth and so on.

Joe: Was your father an only child?

John: I think so. I think he was. I can't remember. I wish Larry was here. He could answer that question better than I can. But, I think he was.

Joe: so, what were your parents like, growing up?

John: Very... my mom was basically, the community mother hen. She took care of whatever needed... Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, you know. Always helping out the community. Dad was the same way.

Joe: Was he in science as well?

John: he was, basically, more into building things and helping the community. He started the fire department in Englewood. I think mom actually helped the Girl Scouts get started. That's

just the way it was back then. We all pitched in and we all did what we had to do to make something happen. We just had to.

Joe: How about your grandmother? Was she here for a long time?

John: She was a very sweet lady. Larry and I would remember the fact that when she would come over to the property, we had people taking care of the property back then. We knew that she was coming because the property became spotless. I mean, everything was put away because we knew grandma was coming down and everything had to be in tip top shape. She had a place up in Sarasota and another in Longboat Key. She's the one I got pictures, boxes and boxes of pictures.

Joe: I'd love to see some of those.

John: Yeah, I haven't gone through them myself. Every time I open them I go, "Oh god, it's a whole different story'. There's a lot of history. There's a lot of history.

Joe: Your grandfather passed away so young. Did she end up ever re-marrying?

John: No, I don't think so. I think she actually brought him back when he passed away. Now, the story, one story I got...

Joe: Do you know the story of how he died?

John: Basically, I think he died over in Mexico.

Joe: He got on a plane.

John: He got on a plane or something like that. I can't remember the whole story. I read some of it. There's different versions of it. But, I know he came back here and actually he was buried here. Because I know that for a fact, I had an electrician come over to my house one day, and I was going through some of the paperwork from her and it actually showed where he was, who was the funeral. This is who my grandmother was. She had it written down right down to the story.

Joe: Okay, so you have those.

John: Yeah, a lot of letters. What I'm trying to do is try and figure out what I'm going to do here. I'm still going to do photography. What I want to do, what I'm hoping towards summer, that I'll be able to get a place that I can sit down and quietly start going through all this stuff. There's a lot of history here. There's a lot of history.

Joe: Yeah.

John: What's so sad about it and what's got kind of a bad taste in my mouth is Charlotte County, because nothing against your boss or anything, but when you have opportunity knocking at your door, you know. And I know, for a fact, that, I don't care if I say it on the tape,

but basically, you can probably figure it out. One of the County Commissioners had a million dollars, okay? And instead of spending it on the property, where it can be generated into more money, they went and put it over on the court house. And, the court house wasn't going anywhere.

Joe: Right.

John: Okay, and to me, the court house might have been important, yeah, but when you have some place like that, the first marine biology lab in the state of Florida. A place where the kids, you know, now they're trying to put something together over at Lemon Bay School, um, it's your, what's your problem. They basically... (to dog) go lay down. I don't mind saying it on the tape, we were involved in... I was involved, and I still am, in Englewood Museum. Back when Mr. sharper was running it, we were invited down here to the library. And the people who collect the stuff down there and everything. And, I told her who I was. I said I'm a photographer. I do what I... you saw the stuff that I brought to you. I'm willing to come down. They said, 'Well, we don't have any money'. I said, 'I don't want your money. I just want to work in the laboratory and help you preserve the history'. And basically, they never called me.

Joe: Really?

John: Yeah. I'm not an expert at some of this stuff, but I've done photography enough. I know, I went in there, I basically told her. I actually told her that if you let me come in and help you, I know I can get you probably, because I know I was getting ready to do it for Mote, with genie, all her slides and pictures. I was in the process and mote shut me down on that idea. I was going to bring Mote 500 and some dollars-worth of software, free of charge to them. I was getting ready to do the same thing at the library down here and they never called me. They have a flat-bed scanner that I use, not the one that I use, but the same idea and theirs is a lot bigger.

Joe: The library down here by Tringali?

John: Yeah.

Joe: Okay.

John: And they never called me.

Joe: Our archivist is there right now, and she might be interested in that stuff.

John: Well, if she needs help.

Joe: I will put her in touch with you.

John: Sure.

Joe: While we're on the subject. At the Cookie House, there's a missing space where apparently, stoves used to be. Do you happen to know where any of those stoves are?

John: No, they want out in the crash. I can guarantee you that. That was basically how they kept things warm. Oil burners and stuff like that.

Joe: So, they're all gone?

John: Yeah. No, I don't know of any of those being alive. Basically, it would be the same thing that you would find up north. You know, a pot belly type thing.

Joe: Right.

John: Basically, no. They'd be done. Sorry.

Joe: Alright.

John: That was a long time ago. They're gone.

Joe: So, your dad was probably pretty young when your grandfather passed.

John: I think he was. I wish Larry were here. I'm not sure, but Larry knows a little bit more about it. Larry and my dad got along very close. They were very close friends and basically, I think dad was an only child. I didn't even know my dad was in a train wreck one time.

Joe: Oh, really?

John: Larry was telling me about it and said, 'I didn't know that story'.

Joe: He told Larry, but he didn't tell his son?

John: I never heard it. The good thing about Larry, that's why we keep him, we love him so much is because he's got good stories to tell.

Joe: He remembers.

John: Oh yeah, he remembers a lot. We get a little intoxicated and the stories start coming out.

Joe: I'll have to join you guys one of these nights.

John: It really... some of the things that Larry was, I remember growing up on the property and basically, you know what palmettos are and stuff?

Joe: Yes.

John: Basically, on the property, when you first drive into the property, um, there was palmettos down through on the road there. The road you saw on the map there.

Joe: Right.

John: Of course, back then it didn't look like that. That's where it started at, but many years after that one, there was palmettos and stuff down there. The kids, as soon as we'd get off the school bus, we'd actually go down to the palmettos and we had tunnels down through there

and we would throw rotten oranges at the people going by in their cars, you know. I was always the short little fat guy. I couldn't run worth a damn, but all the rest of my little friends could outrun me. So, I always ended up with all the whoopings.

Joe: Yeah, I bet. (laughs)

John: Larry will tell the story that we had this old guy who lived on New Point Comfort. I don't know what he was. He had a convertible. I took a big old grapefruit and I lobbed it at him. Hit him right in the side of the head. The tires went squealing. We all went down to the bay, jumped into the water, went out in the sand bar and said, 'Hey, it wasn't us.' Of course, we all got our butts whipped. But that was just the way... things we did. We enjoyed it. Nowadays, you can't spank a kid, you can't do this, and you can't do that. It's sad.

Joe: I grew up, up north, and we used to do that with snowballs.

John: Yeah.

Joe: We were just kids.

John: But nowadays, you dare, god, touch a kid, I mean, you're going to go to jail.

Joe: Had it changed much when you got back from boarding school?

John: No, it still pretty much stayed that way.

Joe: You know what it's like today. When did it change?

John: I'd say back in the, probably, 80's, 90's, back in there, it started changing.

Joe: It started growing more?

John: Yeah, you know, I don't plan on leaving the area. I can't find a piece of property that I want in this area, so we're looking at a piece of property over in North Port near I-75, 5 acres.

Joe: Is that where you live now? Do you live in North Port?

John: No, I live on that property there. A little house. I still live on the property.

Joe: Oh, I thought it was all gone. So, where's your house?

John: Basically, my house is back in here, roughly in that area. It's not one of the Bass' house. Dad bought it many years ago. It's 50-plus years old. It's an old, old, old house. And the whole property's up for sale. And then I'm living on it. Well the boat house is now, and once that's gone, that would be the last of the Bass property, basically. The Cookie House is where it is now.

Joe: Right. So, basically, before we got on and we started interviewing, we established that all of this, in this picture, is gone.

John: Yeah.

Joe: Except for that, right?

John: Where are we looking at here?

Joe: The boat house.

John: No, the original boat house is gone. Now there is a concrete, big structure that my dad kept his boat in and everything. That's still there.

Joe: So, the original Bass laboratory, that one is gone.

John: Yeah. That's gone.

Joe: Okay.

John: Yeah.

Joe: So, I guess we established that as well.

John: Yes. The only thing left on the property, the house and stuff are all gone. Basically, there's nothing really left on the property that has anything to do with the Bass biology lab because the boat house that's there now is a newer boat house, so the old boat house is gone. The house that I am living in is probably the only house that's actually still there, but it wasn't really part of the Bass family.

Joe: But is it old? When was it built?

John: Fifty-some plus. It's probably fifty plus. It's an old, old, old house. It's on a clock and concrete and it needs to be torn down, you know, but my wife and I are still living there. We got the property up for sale. But unfortunately, it's just the last piece of property. The lady who lived next door, or lived on the same house next to me, she knew my grandmother and she's passed now, unfortunately.

Joe: When did your grandma pass?

John: I want to say in the 80's, but I might be wrong. 70's, 80's, 90's, right in there.

Joe: So, she lived a long time.

John: Yeah, and she was a sweet lady. She lived, as time went on, she lived mostly up in Sarasota. She did jewelry, entertainment up there. She went back and forth to the beach and had parties up there for the family and so forth. A very smart lady. Very intelligent. Danish. Most of her family is gone now, unfortunately. Just great people.

Joe: Was she originally from... she's Danish?

John: I think she's originally from Denmark, I think. The Bass part of it, what I understand is basically, I wish my mother, uh I wish my wife was here, she could explain it to you better. But it was all, where everything came from originally from, on the Bass side, on my dad's side and everything, is from Chicago. I think you can probably go back in the history books and...

Joe: Your great-grandfather wrote a book, right? An Economics book, correct?

John: Right. Motes' has got a copy up there, I think, if I'm not mistaken.

Joe: Like an old copy?

John: He wrote about a war and they actually use it at a college somewhere up north. I forget where it is. And I was trying to see if I can end up getting the patent and everything. Well, some college has already gotten the patent...whatever. What I would like to do is go back to Chicago and see if I can find any history there, because everything I keep bumping into is Chicago, Chicago.

Joe: Yeah, right.

John: And how many Besses actually came out of there.

Joe: So, that's where your father grew up?

John: I think that's where my...

Joe: I mean grandfather, sorry.

John: Yeah, right.

Joe: Your father grew up, pretty much here, right?

John: Right, basically. It was interesting, to say the least. A lot of fun. Enjoyable, but we had hard times, and we all got through it. Some of the people, I think the Davises... J.R. Davis, some of his family members actually worked on the property and actually drove one of the sailboats for my grandfather. Unfortunately, he's passed, but some of his family members, they can probably tell you a lot of stories. (to dog) What are you barking about?

Joe: I might have to reference that at another time.

John: Yeah.

Joe: So, I guess I was going to ask about one of the things that happened around here was 2004, Hurricane Charley.

John: Yeah.

Joe: Were you affected in any way by that?

John: No.

Joe: I know it didn't hit Englewood as badly as others.

John: No, no. The only thing I can tell you about that is that... it's kind of funny in a way. Basically, Charley, Hurricane Charley... as a matter of fact, Larry and I were sitting on the couch at his house.

Joe: You've guys been buds for a long time.

John: Oh yeah. And he was looking at me. We were watching the TV and he says, 'I wonder where that thing is going to go'. And I said, 'I don't know'. And we're sitting there watching the radar and he says, 'I ain't believing this', and it just went right up the channel. A lot of people say, I did a lot of my, I think I was going somewhere shortly after that, the next day or something. But anyway, my wife was involved and basically, what I think Charley was, a lot of people kept pushing it as a hurricane. Yes, it was a hurricane, but I think it was more tornadoes and twisters involved in it. Because after the fact, it's very easy to figure it out because when you go look at where the damage is, and you see a house is completely fine and the next house over, or the next house or the next one after that is completely gone. It doesn't take much to figure it out.

Joe: Yeah.

John: We've gone through a lot of hurricanes here in town. Hurricane Donna, we had water up on our property.

Joe: So, you were here for Hurricane Donna?

John: Oh, yeah.

Joe: You were probably like 8 years old.

John: Yeah, something like that.

Joe: Okay, so that one was worse for you guys.

John: Yeah, we had some problems. We got through it.

Joe: What were you saying? The water?

John: the water, where we have the boat house now, came up on the property and basically, went back down. What upsets me so much, you know, I've seen all these hurricanes, been through all these storms and every time a storm comes up, or next year, they're talking about all this flooding and everything. And I don't see it happening, I really don't, because the land is not that low, like in a marshland and stuff like that around here. The water's gonna come up, yes, but it's gonna go right back out again.

Joe: Right.

John: I knew the guy who runs the evacuation, he's retired from Charlotte County and me and him got into a big argument at one time. They were going around putting these red markers on the street, on my street where I live on Homestead. And told him, I said, 'I'm not leaving'. They're going to have to get a boat to get me out of here, I'm not leaving, because Larry and me, we grew up, we lived through the storms, and his theory and my theory is, 'Where are we going to go?' You know, basically we had one of dad's, my dad's friends, and you'll love this. Basically, there was a storm coming in, a hurricane, this goes back many years ago, and the story I get was this guy, who was a close friend of the family, got in his car and said, 'I'm going to outlive the storm'. And dad said, 'What do you mean?' And he said, 'I'm going to go up the coast'. He went up the coast and guess what, the storm went up the coast with him.

Joe: Yeah.

John: I think he finally gave up, up in Tarpon Springs or somewhere up in there, then he said, 'I'm just gonna wait the storm out and I'll come home the next day'. If it's gonna happen, it's gonna happen. I'd rather be here and if something happens, it happens. At least I'm here with my friends, my relatives and whatever. We go back and rebuild.

Joe: So, that's your plan, for even in the future?

John: Yeah, I'm not planning on leaving. As a matter of fact, the piece of property that we're thinking of buying. Larry called me up. I think it was Charley. Not Charley, it was another storm that came through and he said, 'Did you go check the property?' I said, 'No'. And he said, 'Why don't you go check it?' It's over in North Port. And I went over there on the other side of I-75 and I said, 'Well, guess what. The driveway going in is a little wet, maybe a couple feet, but the house is bone dry, the property is bone dry'. I'm perfectly happy over there.

Joe: So, that's where you think your next move is to?

John: Yeah. Because Englewood is not like it is. I would like to live here. But trying to find a piece of property that we can afford.

Joe: Why? Prices have just gone that high?

John: Sky high. Yeah.

Joe: Oh, my.

John: And I think it will help me and my photography because the property is backed up to... the Myakka River is not that far from there. There's all kinds of woods and stuff that I can start taking pictures of animals and critters. I already do, but now I got a whole backyard to go out and do what I want to do.

Joe: Are you still going to keep this office here?

John: I don't know yet. I've been debating that. It costs money to run this. Basically, what my thoughts are, is once we decide to move over there, what I'm thinking about doing is making the business actually come to you. And what I mean by that is like say, for instance, we're doing an interview today. You want me to do like pictures of you or something. I would have a trailer behind me and my whole office set up inside there. So, I would come and take your pictures. If you're in the band or whatever and take the pictures and say, 'Okay, I'll be back in a few minutes'. So, I plug in an AC current. I go out sit in the trailer and work on the computer, get your pictures done, walk up and give you a CD, DVD, or thumb drive and we're done.

Joe: Okay.

John: People coming in the door? Photography-wise, it's word of mouth, basically.

Joe: Pretty much.

John: it's not like I'm selling laundry here or clothing or anything like that. It's not every day that the door swings open.

Joe: Well, judging from the Google results, you got your name out there quite a bit.

John: Yeah.

Joe: So, what can I expect on this zip drive?

John: That's the picture.

Joe: Oh, the picture's on there?

John: I put a jpeg and a raw file on there, so if you wanted to do something with it.

Joe: Oh, excellent.

John: I was going to...

Joe: Maybe we can blow it up and put it in there.

John: What should be done, if we have time, if you want me to, I'll be glad to. What needs to be done is where this road is, basically here, what needs to be done is shot this part first and then this part and put it together. What reason you'd do that, is a bigger file and now you can put it on the wall.

Joe: Crystal, our coordinator knows how to do that. She's the artist out of us all.

John: But basically, if she needs another picture of it, let me know.

Joe: Just to be sure, that's the Cookie House that we have.

John: Right. Let me see my map here. Yeah, right where that road

Joe: That's the Cookie House, that's your grandmother's house and that's where you grew up. These were all cookie houses along here.

John: They were all log cabins.

Joe: All log cabins here.

John: Yeah.

Joe: Excellent. I think a lot of people are going to be excited with that when I bring it back.

John: After I talked to you and I said where. I moved it over here and I'm not a very good housekeeper sometimes and I'm thinking to myself, 'Where do I put that darned thing?' And I walked back, and I started thinking and looking and I found the original. And I said, 'Well, the guy's coming'. I need to see if I can slap something together for you. As soon as I get more pictures, I'll definitely get it back to you.

Joe: Thank you

John: Yeah.

Joe: I'll give you my card, you've got my e-mail address.

John: Yeah. When are they going to have the (Cookie) House opening?

Joe: It starts tomorrow.

John: Yeah?

Joe: So, it'll be every Friday through February 8th and then Saturday the 19th, I'll be working out there, if you want to come out.

John: Well, call me and I'll come out.

Joe: Okay, excellent.

John: The sad part about it, and I don't care if we are on the recording. The sad part is, the first time they brought the house over there, the Cookie House, we got involved helping and they never came back and asked us what kind of roof needs to be put on. They finally got everything done, I said, 'What are you guys going to do with this thing?' I said, 'Why don't you put a naturalist, somebody to do with nature or birds or something in there that somebody can come by him and see him and talk to him?' And they said, 'We can't do that'. I said, 'Why not?' Now, you're going to love this. The reason why they won't do it is it's not handicapped. I said, 'Sir, it does not take a rocket scientist to figure this out'. And he looked at me kind of funny and I said, 'Let me try and explain something to you. You stand inside of that Cookie House, you can almost reach to the other wall and you can reach that wall'. Right?

Joe: Right.

John: Yeah. They don't need to come inside. You could build a ramp right up by the door there, and if you want to have a little more shade or whatever, and they can sit and talk to the guy and then go off and do whatever they want. Not Charlotte County, nope. 'We're not going to do that'. You know, and they spent close to a million dollars fixing that place up. I mean, I appreciate that part, but...

Joe: I read 600,000.

John: Yeah, and they spent the money. Fine. It goes back to Charlotte County. They don't have any idea of what the history and everything else. It goes back to when you see documentations that says this was the first marine biology lab in the state of Florida. I don't care of the fact that I lived there. It has nothing to do with it.

Joe: Yeah.

John: Science, I mean this is where it all started, you know. No, they can't do it, you know. And it's sad, it's really is sad.

Joe: Yeah.

John: And if the lady over here, or whoever you were talking about, calls me, I'll help her.

Joe: I'll definitely let her know.

John: You know, it's sad. It's really sad. I need to go down, and what I need to do, I keep telling myself to do it, I just haven't had time. There are certain things that I could probably drag out of storage, that I could bring over to the Cookie House, but I just hadn't had time. Most of the stuff that was not very valuable, historical part of it, and this is another thing. There's no reason why, if you have the Cookie House, you got power and electricity over there. It would be not that hard to bring the internet into it. If everything that Ernie worked on, basically, it's on Mote. It's on their website, OKAY? So, if you're looking for the information, there it is. So, if you have a TV screen or monitor there, this is what went on. But they don't want to do it.

Joe: Well, government buildings have to be handicapped accessible.

John: I don't know if you've been over to the Cookie House or not.

Joe: Oh, yeah. Several times.

John: But it wouldn't take too much to put a concrete step up there and be done with it. But, not Charlotte County. But it was actually, I don't know, we're talking about the Cookie House. When they actually moved it off of the property, I was standing there. The guy, who's a black guy, who raised me and everything, his dad did, John Mitchell. And his son was standing there with me. He was crying, I was crying. I looked at him and I said, 'I hope you're not going to be mad at me'. And he said, 'Why would I be mad at you?' I said, 'I named my dog after your

mother'. And he looked at me and said, 'Really?' I said, 'Yeah'. And he said, 'I'm very proud'. And that's Katie Belle.

Joe: Katie Belle? So, John Mitchell, he was like a nanny to you?

John: Yeah, basically, and took care of us and Larry. He'd take us to school. We have another person who's still alive, Al Stenstrom, he lived down in, he lives on Pennsylvania Avenue. And he grew up, not grew up, he took care of the property and cut the grass and everything. He's still alive. And I go over just about every Sunday and go have breakfast with him. Fix breakfast or whatever. We go out to breakfast or whatever. But he's got stories to tell too. He watched everything.

Joe: Well, I definitely want to learn more about Englewood. It seems like a lot of the historical interviews I've done have been with Punta Gorda. I interviewed someone from El Jobean, Mr. David Bartley. But I definitely need more people from El Jobean.

John: There's a lot of history here.

Joe: Diana Harris and I, we e-mail each other quite often.

John: Yeah. Well, when that is off (pointing at recorder), I will tell you something about that.

Joe: Okay. I'm going to turn it off in a second, so...

John: Basically, the problem with the history here, they're not preserving it. They're not, you know, it should be... there's a lot to be here.

Joe: I agree.

John: And unfortunately, I still got people every so often come through that door and they can't figure out why I got Mote involved in preserving the history. Well, the reason why is, when everything was closing down on my property, there were people going on the property, stealing stuff and I'm still getting it back to this day. And they brought it back, 'Oh, you're not going to want this now'. I go, 'Why did you take it?' The only thing I can say, and I've never figured out the story of love this. Dad woke up one morning and we had all the cookie houses and everything and basically said, 'I'm going to sell the property'. And I found out, I'm not going to get into the whole story but...

Joe: What year was this?

John: Probably, in the 80's maybe. I might be wrong. And to this day, I have not figured it out. I'm pretty smart, I'm pretty intelligent, where I can figure things out. I walked over and grabbed a hold of the phone and called Mote and got a hold of Ernie, who is still alive. He actually came to my wedding. Never met the man in my life and basically, he came down to the big barn. You saw on the property there where the big... where that's basically where the barn would be, basically, this big thing.

Joe: Okay, so that's the barn.

John: Basically, Larry and I used to play hide and go seek in it, many years ago.

Joe: Okay.

John: They basically came down and we opened the barn up and he looked at me and he says, 'Oh my god'. I said, 'What do you mean?' he says, 'You got the mother lode here'. And he said, 'It's unbelievable what you've got here'. And I said, 'Well, what do you mean?' He said, 'There's so much history here'. He said, 'I'll be back tomorrow'. He came back with his wife and kids and had lunch in front of that barn and we actually started taking things out and preserving it and trying to get it.

Joe: What was in there? Specimens?

John: All specimens?

Joe: Letters?

John: Letters. All that stuff from up at Mote. And he finally got good enough grants and stuff, that we digitized it and I'm sure there's more stuff on my grandmother's side that I haven't even dug through yet, that we'll find eventually. But he digitized it all, put it up on the web. A real fun story, you met Larry. They got all the stuff out of it and then they brought this guy in from Tampa, wearing his hazmat team outfit. I'm standing by the banyan tree that my grandfather grew for many years. It's still there. I'm standing up leaning against the tree and, you can either believe this or not. He said, 'Well, who are you?' I said, 'My name's John Bass'. And he said, 'Huh?' And he said, 'Well, what are you doing?' I said, 'This is my hide and go see place'. He said, 'What do you mean?' I said, 'I used to play hide and seek in that barn you're cleaning out'. And he said, 'No, you didn't'. I said, 'Well, if you don't want to believe me, I can call my friend up, Larry, and he'll come over and verify it'. He says, 'Okay, okay. Calm down'. And basically, he said, 'Let me put it this way. I'm here to remove chemicals from this barn. You're telling me you ran up and down this 2-story building and you ran up and down with all these specimens in the jars and the jars rattling and everything else'. And I said, 'Yeah'. And he said, 'Well, let me put it this way, I can take some of this stuff up to Tampa', where he was from. 'But, I think you'll take my word for it'. I said, 'Yeah, I'll take your word for it. What are you trying to tell me?' And he said, 'Well, basically, there was enough chemicals in there, left over from the marine biology lab that would probably level half of Englewood'. And I said, 'You gotta be kidding me'. He said, 'No, some of the stuff is so unstable, we're having a hell of a time getting rid of it'. It's just the stuff we used... we could have leveled half of Englewood! I said, 'Okay'.

Joe: It could have just exploded?

John: I mean it could have.

Joe: I'm glad it didn't.

John: I'm still alive.

Joe: Oh, wow. Well, that's crazy.

John: That's just the way it was.

Joe: So, Motes got all that stuff then?

John: Yeah, basically.

Joe: Okay.

John: The jars and stuff. They were all inventoried. It's all up online.

Joe: So, it spent decades in a barn, basically?

John: Oh yeah. I mean, Ernie was the one who basically, taught me that we find jars with dried up everything inside it or a name tag. Well, there's no liquid in it, I may as well throw it away. He says, 'No, you don't want to throw it away because there's a specimen in there and the DNA and everything else'. It will shock you when you start going through that stuff.

Joe: Cool, I want to look through it.

John: Basically, what Ernie was trying to accomplish, and he did accomplish this, is to try to give the people, young people like you who are doing the history and everything, a bench mark to start from.

Joe: Right.

John: What Englewood was and what the bays were. It'll never be that way again, unfortunately. But, we did enough science back then that you know it's possible. Clams, not clams, but scallops, we had truckloads of them in here. They are finally coming back. The clams will come back again, probably. But when they put the intercoastal waterway in, it screwed everything up.

Joe: That's what did it.

John: It killed everything. That's the sad part. But there's no way of stopping that. It was another government idea that didn't work and unfortunately, it hurt people instead, so.

Joe: Well, I guess that's where we'll end our formal interview. Thank you very much for your time. I appreciate it.

John: No problem.