



Cutler Edwards

Gibson Inn

Apalachicola, Florida

Date: January 11, 2022

Location: Gibson Inn, Apalachicola, FL

Interviewer: Annemarie Anderson

Transcription: Sharp Copy Transcripts

Length: One hour and fifty four minutes

Project: Saltwater South- Forgotten Coast

0:00:00

Annemarie Anderson: Okay. Today is January 11th, 2022. This is Annemarie Anderson recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance in Apalachicola, Florida. I am with Cutler Edwards. Would you go ahead and introduce yourself for the recorder, tell us your name, and tell us what you do?

Cutler Edwards: My name is Cutler Edwards. I hang out in Apalachicola and try to make it a better place to live, which currently means I'm part of a hospitality concern that runs some hotels and restaurants and property management centered around the iconic Gibson Inn in downtown Apalachicola built in 1907 and fully renovated last year-- well, I guess two years ago during the pandemic. Yeah. And as a person who kinda grew up in the area, just trying to make the place I live a better version of itself. Yeah.

0:01:01

And really what I do is goof off and enjoy living here, but yeah.

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. I could see that this would be wonderful place to live. I was wondering if maybe could go back to your earliest days--

Cutler Edwards: Sure.

Annemarie Anderson: -- and talk a little bit about that. Introduce us to the place that you grew up.

Cutler Edwards: I guess I was thinking about this after we talked, and I think I lived in Spring Creek from the time I was in third grade. And we moved there from just a few miles away where I lived in first and second grade. So basically since getting out of toddlerhood I was in rural Wakulla County. So Apalachicola has twelve hundred people in it, and this is the big city

compared to Spring Creek. I think at its peak of my childhood it was a thriving hamlet of seventy-five.

0:02:00

Had a convenience store but no gas station. Five miles to a gas station. Twenty miles to a grocery store. You know, in the middle of nowhere, which I think is hard to imagine for people who think about Florida, and just sort of a reminder that North Florida is a lot more like South Georgia and Southeast Alabama than everything south of Gainesville, what you see on TV. So yeah, for sake of dating all of that, I'm forty-six, so I guess I moved to Spring Creek in [19]83 and I left in [19]93 when I finished high school which, in my memory, I think-- it might be the first time in a long time that I vocalize that I only lived in Spring Creek for, like, eleven years. It dominates every memory of everything before I was in college, other than sort of **flit** or something.

0:03:00

It was such a rich sort of sensory experience. And characters that if you saw them on TV, you would think this is unbelievable, these people aren't real, this is a composite of characters. But yeah, for most of the [19]80s it was at least to me-- history may disagree-- but I felt like it was the mullet capital of Florida. Everybody I knew either fished or mended nets or worked on boats or supported the fishing industry in some way. Even middle school kids I went to school with would be gone for a week in run season, jump in the truck with their dad, and head down south and chase the mullet for roe. And that was the Christmas retail season of commercial fishing, getting that stuff. Spring Creek stuck down right at the end of a highway that just dead ends into

a boat ramp, which only wasn't more deadly than it was because there was a curve right before the boat ramp.

0:04:07

The curve was right at our house. People were more likely to get drunk and fall asleep and run into a tree into yard than they were into the river, which was great except it's traumatic in childhood to have people in really dangerous car accidents in your front yard. Our mailbox got run over all the time, that kind of stuff. Dirt roads, and your dogs run free, and come home when you feel like it, and surrounded by national forest or water. It was, in retrospect, probably-- absolutely, not probably-- far more special than it seemed at the time. You're twelve years old and you're wishing somebody would get a car so you could drive to Tallahassee and hang out at the mall and eat Sbarro slices and pretend you're gonna talk to girls. But I think that's been one of the most powerful things about moving back to Apalachicola, which I did when I was basically the same age as my parents when they moved back to the Spring Creek area after leaving in their early twenties.

0:05:06

I live in the place that everyone else idealizes as the place they want to go when they're not at work. And Spring Creek really in the [19]80s was that. We had the little convenience store. We had some boat slips. They stayed rented. People from out of town came in and bought stuff on their way down to go fishing. They drove from all over to go to the restaurant. They kept their boats at Bud's Marina. The two other houses on our little road were doctors from Americus, Georgia, and retired military officers from some place up north. It was a tiny Apalachicola then. And then you couldn't catch mullet anymore and sort of that was that. With the exception of the

last few years, I think it-- yeah, it felt a lot more dead in the mid-2000s than it did in 1990, like a lot of other small towns.

0:06:07

But not in this case one because the railroad moved, or the interstate came by and took the highway. It's, like, the fishing was gone. And there wasn't any reason to stick around if you were a young person. Blah, blah, blah, common refrain, but it was the only gig in town. I would've left anyway probably, but I don't know what the Robinsons and the Kilgores and the Grays and those kids are up to now, but hopefully they got a county job doing something. So it was a sort of childhood wilderness wonderland full of huntin' and fishin' and boating and bike riding and getting in trouble and learning how to get along with people. 'Cause if you wanted to play basketball or stickball you had to be friends with everybody under forty or there weren't enough people to do anything.

0:07:04

So kind of Mayberry, I guess.

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. [Pause]

Cutler Edwards: Do you need me to repeat that?

Annemarie Anderson: No.

Cutler Edwards: I can do that. [Laughter]

Annemarie Anderson: No. 'Cause I switched it. I'll go back and make sure. I'll probably get you to introduce yourself but--

Cutler Edwards: Sure.

Annemarie Anderson: That's beautiful. And I think Spring Creek has become one of the most special places for me in the whole world doing this project because I've seen what it has been and what it is like. These people who are trying to be stewards of not only this place but also the environment, and who love the animals and the water and the place and the people.

Cutler Edwards: Um-hm.

Annemarie Anderson: Anyway, I could keep talking about that. But I'm wonderin' if maybe you could talk about some of those people who were there when you were growin' up?

Cutler Edwards: Yeah.

Annemarie Anderson: Or actually, before that, let's start with your parents' business.

Cutler Edwards: Okay.

Annemarie Anderson: Can you introduce us to your parents, give us their names, and then tell us about that convenience store that they owned?

0:08:02

Cutler Edwards: Sure. My dad was Don Edwards. My mom is Suzanne. He was a compulsive wanderer and sort of autodidactic sociologist and kind of like don't fence me in guy, but not in a show-offy way. He just always wound up working for himself in some capacity. I was born in Michigan where they had been for about fifteen years after leaving Tallahassee, and they had a thriving leather goods business there. And he just worked himself crazy, sleeping,

like, four nights a week. And actually when they sold to their partner and moved, it was a big enough deal in Ann Arbor that there was an article written about it.

0:09:02

And that article he talks about just-- they got in the motorhome and drove from Michigan to the Keys and when they got to the end of where they could go, he got out and walked to the water and threw his watch into the ocean, which was like a hard reset on life in 1981. And did a few things in Wakulla County while we were there, worked at the Olin plant in St. Marks and with my mom for a while making gunpowder. She's a microbiologist, and he didn't make it through college but could get along with anybody and do a little bit of everything. And they sort of wandered through the county. I'm trying to kind of remember what all they did. You don't think about that stuff the same when you're little. You just know they go to work and come home. But I know he did Olin for a while, as did she.

0:09:55

He sold real estate for a while, both in Panacea at the reality office that's right across from Angelo's at the little campground there-- I was talking about that yesterday. "Selling Florida's final frontier," was their logo, and I was, like, that's so sort of fraught with imperialism and bad histories of America, but also sort of like you're in a rush to get rid of Wakulla County as we knew it, which was interesting. Then he sold in Shell Point for a while. And when we moved to Spring Creek it was because this property had gone up for sale. It's a little block house with a sort of quickie mart convenience store, independent convenience store connected to it with a little beer and wine bar in the back called The Blue Mullet Lounge. So it was the Spring Creek

Stop and in the back was the Blue Mullet Lounge. And there was a little pond in our back yard that the bar looked out over. It was, like, three beer taps and salted peanuts and Corn Nuts.

0:11:00

And if you opened the door behind the counter of the convenience store you walked into the kitchen. And it had a living room and a bedroom and a bedroom, and I shared one bedroom with my brothers and my folks were in the end. And the second or third time we got flooded by a hurricane we closed the lounge ultimately and converted that into our living room, and then I got to have my own bedroom as a early teenager, which was nice. But that was kind of, for better or for worse, sort of the hub of commercial activity in Spring Creek, I suppose. It was the place that all the fishermen came on their way out in the mornings. One of the side hustles that my mom had when we had the shop is she would be up at four-thirty baking biscuits and wrapping ham and cheese biscuits and sausage and cheese biscuits in Saran wrap to sell to the fishermen on their way out at five-thirty to be on the water at light.

0:12:00

So it would be, like, come in and get a six-pack and two packs of Marlboro Reds and two sausage biscuits and a soda and a honeybun for later in the day, and go off to fish. And I think as you do in sort of small hand-to-mouth economies, we ran tabs for everybody and just kinda kept it in a book behind the counter. And if somebody caught a bunch of shrimp or got lucky and scored some cobia or something, or just didn't get lucky and came home with some mullet-- my dad loved the mullet, it wasn't lucky to me-- but it was a lot of barter. It was a lot of barter economy. We traded seafood and venison and my dad was a big squirrel lover, so he was always open to that. And bass and brim, things you aren't allowed to commercially harvest but you could

take them home in your own cooler and I guess theoretically you can trade 'em to people for Busch or whatever. So we ate a lot of seafood. We ate a lot of oysters cooked on the grill in the back yard.

0:12:59

We tried all kinds of weird stuff, possum and raccoon. I mean, you gotta try it all. Ate a lot of rattlesnake. Ate a lot of alligator. And a lot of that got traded through the store. He did a bunch of really cool stuff. I mean, my mom was awesome also. I'm—please, at some point you'll meet her. But he just was always looking for interesting ideas, and he was really a trader. And I'm realizing with the sort of luxury of hindsight that I can narrate it in a different way than I would've explained it twenty years ago. But in order to cut costs we bought beer from the distributor by the flat, by the case, because it was a lot cheaper than by the six pack. But nobody wanted to buy cases, they wanted to buy six packs.

0:14:00

So my dad paid us and neighborhood kids a nickel for every unbroken plastic six-pack ring holder that we could scrounge in the dirt roads and garbage cans or whatever of Apalachicola. Which, surprise, run down to one of the fish houses and it was, like, boom, I just made three dollars and all I had to do was pick these up! And then we'd sort of wash 'em in the sink and strap up those cases of beer into recycled-- he called 'em pig bras 'cause it looked like if you were putting a bra on a pig it would need to have sort of six little cups. But yeah, it was a nickel for pig bras. It was a standing offer. So if you needed a buck-- maybe a quarter. I don't know. It was enough that we, even in middle school, went out and tried to find plastic. Which you take it

down to Don and he'd pay for it, probably give you thirty cents if you took it in inventory rather than cash.

0:14:58

But it was just that he knew that it was gonna keep it from getting in the water and also kept his beer prices low, which mattered because we didn't have gas. So it was easier if those guys were driving for more than few miles away to stop at the-- it was a Junior Food Store on the corner of 98. But if they could get their beer cheaper, they'd come down and get it from us, which meant he was gonna get more mullet, shrimp, and deer legs or whatever that was getting offered to us. We did have a little six-slip commercial marina there, but the first hurricane kinda wiped out that boat shed. But regular clients were not just the fishermen but Barbara and Teeny and Doodlebug and all the Spears and the Lovels and the Kilgores and Hubert Hinton and his wife, and Tonja who was my-- I was thinking about this the other day, too-- definitely my first crush was Tonja Hinton.

0:16:03

I was in whatever, third grade. She was my first babysitter. But she was a cheerleader, but she was the one in the War Eagle mascot costume so it's, like, I don't feel bad about having a crush on the cheerleader 'cause she was really dressed up in a blue bird outfit all the time. So it was clearly it was her personality that drew me to her. But she also was the first person I knew with a cassette player, and she showed up to a babysitting gig one time with New Edition's first album. And we listened to "Cool It Now" and some of the other songs on that, and that was kind of a strong memory. And BB Spears-- have you gotten BB in any of your stories yet?

Annemarie Anderson: I don't think so.

Cutler Edwards: So that's what the convenience store was.

0:17:00

Had a five-hundred-gallon kerosene drum outside where people-- a couple of us saw skateboard videos of guys, like, bomb dropping off a wall, and skateboarding to jump off the top of the kerosene tank into the oyster shell dirt parking lot and break skateboards, 'cause it's not like they were gonna roll when you hit. But it was cool. It was a cool little spot. Bagging ice and trading people a lot of stuff and learning about so many different brands of cigarettes. I think we carried them all.

Annemarie Anderson: [Laughter]

Cutler Edwards: But yeah, it was a neat little community gathering point. And I'm sure if you had been a ten-year-old growing up at Bud's or a ten-year-old living on the property, one of the fish houses, it felt the same way, but all in that kind of ecosystem together. It's the same people at all those spots. And it was a really community-feeling little spot, the town in general.

0:18:00

We were probably 30 percent second homeowners at that point, I'm realizing, which really made the people who were there all the time feel really connected. I've lived in apartment buildings with a lot more people than lived in the town I grew up in, so it was pretty cool.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. Well, to that point, I wonder if you could maybe introduce us to your neighbors, to people who played a big role in your life and their role in the community?

Cutler Edwards: Sure. I was trying to think about going through this sort of chronologically or an expanding radius from my house or in some sort of more scattershot, but I'll do quasi-

chronology. Really, the first one who mattered probably that I interacted with on a regular basis was Barbara Spears who had, at least it felt like to me as a kid, the big fish house at the end of the road on the left, not Teeny and Doodlebug's on the right, which was just a different property.

0:19:03

But Barbara was my school bus driver also, so I spent a lot of time with her. And when your bus driver lives two blocks away, you can't really get away with much on the bus. So it also meant you're at the end of the line. You're gonna be the last one off the bus 'cause you live two blocks from your bus driver and she's gonna park it there. So I spent a lot of time with Barbara. And she was-- is it fair for me to ask you questions?

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah.

Cutler Edwards: I don't know if I was ever clear. I think Lee Nell is Barbara's dad.

Annemarie Anderson: I think that's true, yeah.

Cutler Edwards: So he lived in a house at the end of the road between the two fish houses. Never was clear on the relationship between Teeny and Doodlebug and Barbara other than they were Spears and they didn't shoot at each other, but I don't know how they were related.

0:20:00

But Barbara, I feel like, sort of in my memory mostly rolled solo. She was a woman of substance in a variety of ways. Usually that fish house and grounds in my memory was pretty busy and in pretty tight shape, and I feel confident saying she was not a woman to be trifled with, which may explain why she was-- maybe that's why I don't remember whether-- she was iconic to me, so I don't know if she had family living in the house with her or not. She occupied a lot of

psychological space for me, I guess. And Teeny and Doodlebug I didn't know as much, other than boy, those are good names!

0:20:59

And their fish house was really cool, right next to the sort of terminus ramp of the highway and the boat basin that they had, where there were always a couple of big, I guess, shrimp boats because they sure as hell weren't mullet or oyster boats. So there was a spring right there. One of the, I guess, seven or eight recognizable springs of Spring Creek was right in that basin, and in our lore was four-hundred-feet deep or something, which I'm sure it was, like, eighty. But it was dark, and you couldn't see into it. And it was active enough and big enough that you couldn't tell where the sides were or where it ended. A lot of the other springs on a low flow day or when the tide was just right you kinda see down, challenge yourself to jump into what is obviously a waterfilled endless pit. But yeah, Teeny and Doodlebug.

0:21:58

I think they wound up breaking up because I feel like I heard a rumor about Doodlebug being caught by Teeny someplace in Woodville with a woman with another amazing nickname that he was not supposed to be with. So I think maybe that relationship kinda petered out, but I'm not sure. Lee Nell's house was amazing. If you saw a painting of it, you would think this is fake, this house doesn't exist. Nothing this sort of rambling and precarious exists and certainly doesn't have a person living in it, but it did. It was really cool. I admired the house. Is it still there?

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. And it's still--

Cutler Edwards: It was amazing! A credit to the people who built towns like that all over America's coast but especially in the South 'cause they didn't have engineers. It was just some guys and ladies who were, like, you know, probably we're going to need to put some extra bracing on this. And, like, there it is! While Mexico Beach is busily rebuilding everything they built in the [19]70s.

0:23:02

So I think that's pretty interesting. So I think that takes care of the end of the road. I guess we went from Barbara as my youth contact to kind of across the end of the road. And the next row back from that would've been where the restaurant was. The Spring Creek Restaurant, which was Ben and Carolyn's when I was working at it. It was my first job. Did some push mowing for pocket change when I was twelve or whatever, but I got a job at the restaurant when I was thirteen. It was a nice little BMX bike ride the four or five blocks down to the restaurant where I was bussing tables. And instilled in me very early, as a complement to my parents' own insistence about the dignity of labor, bussing tables at a place that has a all-you-can eat mullet special is hard work, buddy, and it was thankless.

0:24:04

And it was not an enlightened restaurant structure in which support staff shared tips. So I was there from, whatever, \$3.25 hourly wage to pick up all the spit out mullet bones and chewed shrimp tails that didn't make it onto the plate. But it was fun. Ben was really active at the restaurant then and he was kind of round and jovial-- not overly round, but a gentleman who had settled into his age-- and fun and supportive and kind to work for. And Leo was sort of coming of age as a sort of assistant manager and really took the restaurant over before I left at sixteen.

And we can go back and fight about this later, but he just cut me down to four hours a week and I couldn't afford to do it anymore, so I had to leave. It's fine.

0:25:01

I clearly wasn't gonna be at the Spring Creek Restaurant forever. Julie was his sister, and she was kind of the lead server, front of the house manager. Her kids were friends with my little brothers. A pretty colorful crew in the front of the house, but the real sort of bulwarks were in the kitchen where Miss Bessie and China Gray and Loretta-- pretty sure it was Miss Loretta-- were the cooks who held court and made things happen. And I worked there from probably 1989 to 1992 or something.

0:26:00

And when I moved back here in 2016 that fall, I took Marilyn, my partner, to dinner there at the Spring Creek Restaurant. I'm glad we did. They closed a year and a half later after Michael and that was that. And Loretta was still in the kitchen. I actually went back there 'cause little Ben-- Leo's son, Ben, who is actually not small-- was, I think, running the restaurant that night and I just said hello. And he asked me if I wanted to go in the back and say hey, and sure enough I went in. And God, I really hope-- Loretta, when I was working there-- so Bessie was an older woman. God, I'm really hoping it's Bessie, too.

0:27:01

I know China. That was my buddy, Keith's, mom, and you don't forget China Gray. But Loretta was, like-- when you're fifteen, thirty-year-olds look old, right? But it was, even knowing that, both comforting and shocking to walk into the kitchen and there she was just cooking the same

stuff, and she looked like she looked the last day I worked there, which was really nostalgic. It really jerked me back to eating a cheeseburger in between bussing tables and talking with her about stuff and life and China. And those ladies were-- those were the sort of strong southern maternal stereotype figures you get in all the cool stories, but they were real.

0:28:00

You could get a hug if you were having a hard time. They were going to look over you as though you were family, and I'm sure that's colored by memory, whatever. But it really felt like a little family place. And so to come back twenty, twenty-five years later and feel like it was still that, I think as I'm saying it out loud now, makes it feel even more tragic that it's not there. There might be other places like that still surviving in the South, but they have been written about robustly and in great quantity, I'm sure, because there's just not much like that. And if you reopened that restaurant and gave people the same cast aluminum platters and the same fried shrimp and the same hushpuppies and Miss Carolyn's buttermilk ranch dressing and key lime pie, you would have to beat them off with sticks out the door if there were a place for them to stay overnight. It's a long drive from Tallahassee.

0:29:03

So yeah, that was a really special place, and I spent a lot of time there because it was what it was. It was a bring your own beer and wine restaurant because we were within a thousand feet of one of the little local churches in Spring Creek so you couldn't serve alcohol, which was kind of tidy for the convenience store. We definitely got to carry a little bit of wine and some fancy beer like Private Stock and Heineken for the wealthy sophisticates to pick up to take to the restaurant on their way to dinner. And we should swirl back around to China. They lived-- she, Keith who was

a year younger than me, and Leon, who was-- I don't know, Leon was probably eight or ten years older than me.

0:30:00

He was that guy-- the first memory I have of him he had a little pencil mustache and probably a vehicle, but not old. Young enough to still live at home, although who knows, right?

Multigenerational households were common. Leon got in trouble for stuff. He was just sort of like an up and down kind of knucklehead. A guy who lived in the area and worked and did some stuff, and he would come kick my ass if somebody tells him I called him a knucklehead, but he was just sort of like-- was a guy. But John, their older brother, was, like, legendary. This was a guy who had been in and out of jail or prison or whatever. I don't care what the story was, but he couldn't have a gun. Whatever he had done was bad enough he couldn't have a gun. But that family was rangy and lanky and industrious survivors. China herself was not an insubstantial woman, but there were all these-- my versions of the story.

0:31:02

I didn't get to see John do these things. He wasn't much older than I was, but you usually found out about 'em pretty quick. And he was sort of the, I don't know, like Pecos Bill of Spring Creek, I guess. He was the guy who bird hunted with a bow and arrow, turkey hunted by finding where they roost and then going and sitting in the tree while they were gone and waiting there silently until the turkeys returned at night and catching them by hand and killing them. He was the guy who was oystering out in Oyster Bay by himself, and it wasn't uncommon to see an alligator out there and you realized that partially it wasn't uncommon to see an alligator out there because deer were prone to use narrow parts of Oyster Bay as shortcuts and go from one side to the other.

0:32:05

Which is what was happening one day when John was out there, so he grabbed a flounder gig out of the bottom of the boat and, as the story goes, spear tossed it at the swimming deer and gipped it and then swam over to grab the-- at this point, I guess it's a deer harpoon-- and wrestled the struggling deer in the water back to his boat where he also harvested that. So a guy who lived off the land a lot and, without meaning it in any disrespectful way, in the way that people hadn't lived there in five hundred years. I don't even know if he drove. I don't know if he was allowed to drive. I certainly know he couldn't have a gun. And there was actually a time where if you weren't supposed to have a gun you-- he didn't have one.

0:33:02

He clearly could have, but he didn't go hunting with a weapon. I mean, good luck living up to that, Keith. Keith was a nice guy and lovely and we played football together and he did cool things. So I wound up totally embellishing stories about my older brother who lived in a different part of the state than me just to keep up with everybody else's crazy, cool older brothers. They also had a little hotel at the restaurant which, again, helped it be a destination. It was sort of a little fishing lodge, and I don't know if at some point it was truly more of a hotel that was part of the restaurant experience, much like the Spring Creek version of The Gibson. Drive to Spring Creek to eat at the restaurant and it's late, and you brought your six pack of Heineken, and so you can have a room to stay in on the way back. I never stayed there. I never had a friend who stayed there. Modest but a cool little spot. And then, next to that was Bud's Marina, which I never met Bud.

0:34:02

I don't know who Bud is. It was Hubert's, and as far as I can tell had been Hubert's for years when we moved there. Kind, gentle, one of the two most terrifying people I knew in my entire childhood. I created all these stories about what had happened to Hubert, but later found out that the real story is that he was a lineman for Florida Power, I guess-- maybe not Florida Power but for electrical work-- and had an accident on a pole and it blew him off the pole and it cost him an arm and a leg and an eye. And he had a very pronounced limp 'cause he had a artificial leg that kinda fit. I don't know how those things worked in the [19]70s, but they weren't fancy, apparently.

0:34:56

So his uniform was jeans and work boots and a white T-shirt with the sleeve flapping in the wind and a cigarette, which I think he slept with. He circular breathed through his cigarettes. It never left his mouth. He inhaled through it and out his nose, and when it got to the end, he lit another one. I'm sure that's an exaggeration, but I have very clear memories of being around him for some time down at the marina or whatever and it was just muscle memory. He didn't know it was happening. Which the reason Joe Camel is so dangerous as a kid, smoking's kinda fascinating. There's a thing on fire in that person's mouth so even in a regular world you can't help as a kid but think, like, they're so cool, they're grownups, they have cigarettes. But Hubert was special because of that. And he had a fake eye and one leg, and he was, like, half a guy but he also ran the marina.

0:35:59

And so you'd go down there and here's this guy with one arm and one leg taking, like, a hundred-and-fifty horsepower outboard motor off of a boat and schlepping it across the yard back to the

shop. It was a thing that seems like two people would stagger to carry, and he wasn't a big guy. He was probably, like, 5'8". But just a guy you were very careful when you shook hands with 'cause you could tell he could just smash coconuts if he felt like it. And was only challenged by BB, who was-- he seemed a hundred years old when I was little, and he lived at the corner of whatever-- we called the Spring Creek Cutoff, that runs left over towards Medart right before Keith and China's house, right where the Galloways lived.

0:37:01

And BB lived right there on the corner, and he hung nets. And he hung mullet nets and he repaired mullet nets, and he probably never did anything else. He was the guy, if you're gonna get a net, it's comin' from him, which means he just spent all day every day in the yard tying knots and doing stuff with his hands. And pretty similar uniform, jeans, white T-shirt, straw hat for the sun. I definitely as a kid sort of fantasized that one day Hubert and BB would come into the store at the same time and shake hands, and it was, like, I don't know what was gonna happen. It'd be like supernova. Either one of these guys could just break your arm. And I'm sure there were others.

0:37:59

The scion of the Kilgore clan for sure, whose name I can't remember, but those two gentlemen, because of my life and the store and the marina and BB coming down to get snacks or whatever, I got to talk to them and interact with them probably more than I did other fishermen. Any of those guys who were pulling mullet nets all day every day you don't want to be in an arm-wrestling contest with. But BB seemed like he was eighty, and Hubert was probably in his late '50s, and that sort of like terrifying old guy strength. And sweet and gentle, which makes it even

worse. They weren't surrogate grandpas or anything, but elders who had a ton of respect, and clearly were men who were about what they were about and enjoyed what they did and had made the conscious decision to do that and to do it there, which was kind of an interesting model.

'Cause, man, some of the people in my generation, it was real unclear why we were there, what we were gonna do.

0:39:05

But those guys seemed pretty happy. Last I heard, Hubert had-- I learned this because when I got back here and I started paying more attention, 2016, just kind of getting back into things like accepting friend requests from people who I went to high school with who I had sort of tried to leave behind. I thought, I'm back, it's important to be-- and I saw one day, in the classic kind of "posting for a friend" post, somebody had put on a Wakulla County help wanted page a picture of Hubert, who was somewhere up Spring Creek Highway closer to Shadeville Elementary School doing small engine repair and was looking for somebody to train, looking for somebody who wanted to train to take over that business and become a small engine repair guy. So they left the marina but didn't leave Wakulla County, and he still kept fixing stuff because he was a small engine whisperer.

0:40:03

And I don't know where he is now. But it was pretty cool to kinda come back and see that he kept doing that stuff. I guess by that point he had sold the marina probably to Leo and/or company. I don't know the order of events through which the marina went, but I know Leo was involved at some point. So those were the business-oriented people, I guess. The little church there, I don't really remember who was part of that other than I feel like Wilmer Dykes, who

didn't live in Spring Creek but-- or maybe he did. I think he just kinda lived up the road. I think he was part of the church.

0:41:00

That comes up 'cause I was talking with my mom last week. When I was in San Diego after college, she sent me a old Fannie Farmer cookbook into which she had entered sort of our family recipes and other ones we had gathered from people around Spring Creek, hoecakes and Wilmer Dykes' doughboys were one of those things. And we were just talking about it the other day. But I think that relationship was partially 'cause he went to the church. I went to a lot of vacation Bible school at the church. We didn't go to church growing up, but vacation Bible school give you free breakfast and lunch if you're in an economically challenged bracket. So if you can take advantage of the opportunity to spend a couple weeks learning songs you didn't know before and making macaroni paintings or whatever, you got breakfast and lunch and something to do. It was a little daycare so you gotta do that. Learned all the different vacation Bible schools. That was what got us through the summer.

0:42:03

Plus they had little basketball courts. That helped. The neighbors, not the one that shared the property line where the people who missed the curve always wrecked-- which I just forgot their name. My dad passed away recently and one of the things we did as sort of memoriam was just get all the brothers in the car and we drove through Spring Creek and drove through some his favorite haunts, and drove past to check on our childhood home, which actually looks really tidy and I'm excited about. But the house next door had burned down. The Bryants, they were like one of the retiree couples, but they lived there full time.

0:43:00

And the house next to them, which also burned down but years and years ago, that was where Bert and Court and their mom, Blonza, lived. And Bert and Court were-- I mean, as a kid, they were probably in their forties and Blonza was probably in her seventies. I could think back now and be, like, Bert and Court might've been twenty-eight and Blonza might've been forty-five. Time and southern sun are both weird. Blonza was old and had a bunch of health issues. Bert and Court were younger and had some health issues. I think the whole family suffered from a variety of mental health issues.

0:44:01

They didn't really work. I don't know if Bert or Court sometimes kinda cobbled together boat cleaning and things like that just for change. I mean, a really little, modest two-bedroom house that they shared. But I think she had Parkinson's and maybe Alzheimer's. One of the kids really just kinda had a hard time communicating and was not super productive in terms of interacting with people but came to the shop a lot and would come down for a honeybun or a root beer barrel or a piece of candy or whatever. Tragically, one of them fell asleep smoking while cooking dinner and caught the house on fire.

0:45:01

And I think they all made it out, but the house was gone. I don't remember what happened after that, they put a trailer in there or what. But they had, like, a two-hundred-and-fifty-gallon propane tank in the yard, which is how I learned that there are safety release valves on those tanks because the house was burning and it super-heated that tank and it released the pressure, which ignited and it shot a fountain of flame a hundred feet into the air for, like, ten seconds until

the pressure was gone, and then it came back down. [Whoosh sound] I mean, it was terrifying. But if a tank that big blew up it would've blown up all Spring Creek. But yeah, I don't think anybody-- maybe one of the sons did-- I think maybe nobody died in it. I think they got out. But actually, he might have burned up, and maybe his brother and Blonza were gone.

0:46:00

Annemarie Anderson: Leo wrote about that story in his Spring Creek Chronicles.

Cutler Edwards: And John and--

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. [Laughter]

Cutler Edwards: He took all the stories. It's fine. So how close does that comport with his version of events?

Annemarie Anderson: Oh, pretty close.

Cutler Edwards: Yeah. Yeah. I think they ran to our house to call the fire department. We were the closest people. It was them and then the Bryants who probably weren't home, and if they were they were in their eighties, and the convenience store. 'Cause they would come down and use the phone with some frequency anyway. So yeah, I wouldn't have been surprised. And the volunteer fire department in Shell Point was the closest thing. Best case scenario they were twenty minutes away. There was just no saving something that caught on fire in Spring Creek. You're done. Our house was concrete block. It would've still been ruined by the time anybody got there, but the walls would've been standing. But yeah, that was a big kind of excitement event, I guess.

0:47:00

And then, past that, you're back onto Stuart Cove Road, which like a whole 'nother neighborhood over there, so we could get into that another time. Although the clam digging and potsherd collecting was better at the end of Stuart Cove than it was at the end of our canal, although we still got some good stuff. Spent a lot of time digging up potsherds and other kind of evidence of previous lives there and doing a bunch of elementary school science fairs about 'em, and learning about people who lived there and where the stuff came from, which was cool. But nobody else in Spring Creek really, I think, had much interest in that. It was mostly a one-man pursuit. And my mom was very accommodating and started seventh grade the same year I did. She started teaching. And at that point had somebody kind of working in the shop and then it kind of petered out. My dad ran for county commission. I think he was commissioner [19]88 to [19]92.

0:48:03

And we didn't really have the shop after that. It just didn't make sense because we got hurricaned yet again, and after that rebuild, we turned the shop into a living room which, by the time we got done, all the kids were gone, and they actually never really used that space. But the ignominious end of the Spring Creek Stop business died off. The restaurant was down. Nobody was fishing. What are you gonna do? But it was fine. It was a cool place to grow up. Yeah.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. What were some of those activities that you-- you talked a little bit about it, but as far as, like, how did Spring Creek shape your relationship with the environment as a young man, as a young boy, and then maybe into your adulthood?

Cutler Edwards: Probably it shaped it in concert with the way that the people who already lived there felt about it.

0:49:02

People were pretty reverent about-- that didn't mean they didn't throw their cigarette butts out, but they knew they were there because of the natural environment. And my dad loved that stuff, too. But it also meant that if it's summertime you gotta leave the house at-- like, okay, you had your cereal, go outside. Be home at dark . . . or not. And it didn't matter. And so we really got to have free rein of whatever we wanted 'cause there just wasn't-- you could get bit by a rattlesnake, but that was really all the trouble there was to get into. Everybody knew where the four abandoned houses were and all the good stuff was gone already, but you could still go in and explore 'em. And nobody was gonna call the cops on you 'cause it was fine. But no, I think being able to-- one of my good friends, Jimmy, lived on Stewart Cove Road which was maybe a mile if you took the road.

0:50:03

Oh, God, it seemed really far as a kid, but maybe four-hundred yards through the woods behind our house to their house. And some of it was maybe our property, and I don't know the rest of it. People didn't care. And you go out and explore and built a fort which eventually turned into, like, a real fort. And then I talked to my grandad, and he helped me, and we put walls on it and put a little rolled roof on it and little prop-up windows so you could open it and little flip-up bunk beds that would turn into a table if you wanted or a sofa. So you'd go out and spend a weekend in the woods and cook hotdogs and just kinda like camp and do the stuff that you don't realize at the time was making you understand what the sounds are that you hear, and figure out what things are gonna be good to burn and which ones you don't want to sit downwind of if you burn, and which ones just won't burn.

0:51:07

And how to find your way home in the dark, and just really kinda feel at home in nature. And I think in a way that is different even from if you just get to explore outside all the time, but just having that sort of-- it felt like a real wilderness that we just kinda go post up in and really just sort of feel like part of it, I suppose. And all of our entertainment came from that stuff. It was either figuring out how to get a rope higher in a tree for a better swing, or learning that if you wanted to go canoeing, which for us most of the time was in a jon boat which is not near as much fun to paddle as a canoe, but you're gonna want to learn about how tides work. And don't try to head out the canal when the tide's coming in and then get stuck trying to paddle home as the tide's falling.

0:52:01

Work with the rhythm of it. If you want to paddle up Spring Creek, do it on a rising tide and it's not really very hard. And then when you're done, you can just turn around and steer the boat and it'll just float you back to the house. So you can paddle till you're too tired because you could use the river to get you back home again. But I guess I'm-- how did it sort of shape me?

Annemarie Anderson: That might be too [inaudible 0:52:27].

Cutler Edwards: Yeah. I don't mean to make it feel overwrought, but I guess it felt like you could have as much fun as you felt like creating. We didn't really go jump into the river down by the fish houses, but there were two real fishin' holes that we went to, one you could walk to and one you kinda had to-- I think we had express permission from the property owner, but it felt like we were trespassing to go out to the cold hole, which is at the end of a canal.

0:53:09

It's sort of like the last visible spring as you're leaving Spring Creek. If you go out from the marina you turn left and it's, like, two more-- kind of a canal, but really, it's just a dugout path that only leads back to the house that the cold hole is on, even though it's water and I don't really know who it belongs to. But that was a really cool spring to swim in that was very isolated and cold, as you might guess, but a pretty powerful spring. It was cool. If you were in the water, most of the time the force of the spring was welling it above the surface like a fountain. It was pretty dramatic.

0:53:55

And as you got older, and your friends came over or maybe-- I feel like at some point I'm sure I took some lady friend there-- but it's a really visually stunning place to go. And you could almost always catch an alligator there visually or evidence of an alligator having been there. And it was a place that just felt like a world apart, even from Spring Creek. And so I guess it helped me to kind of develop a sense of wander and wonder and getawayness that I think is partially genetic. That I think I got from my dad. He was a wanderlust guy who didn't really indulge it. I mean, he did but then life becomes a thing, and fortunately he decided to stick around and hang out with his family, which was cool, but was always excited about going someplace and looking at a thing. And it wasn't like Disney World or skyscrapers. It was gonna be look at this tree! Or look at this turtle! Or this is where a snake was crawling!

0:55:01

And so learning about and just sort of being able to discover that excitement for yourself, and it didn't hurt to have that sort of push from your parents who thought it was neat. My mom, the scientist, was always going to talk about something. And obviously, the fishermen and the guys

who just couldn't wait to be in the woods when huntin' season came. We weren't really those people. We squirrel hunted some, but it was clear that people were excited about where we lived and you needed to figure out why it was exciting, which I think is probably a good lesson to have. I sort of snarkily tell friends and students and whatever, when they say they're-- only boring people get bored, and that was really the case. It's just like St. George Island and Apalachicola, there's really not much to do here. There's all the nothing you could ever want. It's not boring, it's just that there's not a lot going on.

0:55:59

So you have to figure out how to make that good for you, which means at some point you go to the other spring, which was over behind Teeny and Doodlebug's which was also an old boat basin, and you combine your love of spring swimming and dirt bike riding and rope swinging and you build a ramp and you find the longest piece of rope you can and you tie it to a tree, and you tie the other end to your bike and make sure it doesn't get caught in the pedals, and you just ride as fast as you can and ramp the bike out over the seawall and see who can jump the farthest out into the spring and bale off of the bike and splash down. And hoist the bike back out of the spring and hope it doesn't catch on rocks on the side of the chimney, which happened once or twice.

0:56:54

And fortunately, Keith's brother, John Gray, or Leon would sometimes be down swimming, and that guy could-- I feel like he was honorary Weeki Wachee. It felt like he could swim underwater for twenty minutes. So I think on a couple of occasions he had to sort of free dive down to where the bike was stuck and free it. And this spring you could see twenty or thirty feet easy on a

regular day. And I feel like Leon swam out of view on more than one occasion down into the chimney of the spring just to do it. He was the guy who could swim underneath four shrimp boats in one breath. And it was humbling. You're a chubby twelve-year-old and here's this twenty-two-year-old who has never had an extra calorie in his life.

0:57:51

Clearly had he grown up in a different environment could've-- amazing physical specimen, but isn't a swim team at Wakulla High School, or track, or soccer, or anything that was aerobically driven. But I think he would've been a killer at any of that stuff. But yeah, climbing up, jump off the shrimp boats, jump out of the trees, keep an eye out for alligators, keep an eye out for rattlesnakes, keep an eye out for your little brother and your friend's little brother. I guess in that way it really meant we're in this together. If we want to do something fun, we have to make it happen for ourselves. If we want to make sure we all get home and that people we care about are healthy, we need to keep an eye on them ourselves. And yeah, I guess for a number of my friends, I was the place they could come and get a snack. We always-- it was gonna be a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or egg toast or whatever.

0:58:56

And we by no means were of means, but I didn't really think about that until I was probably in my thirties and just realizing the yawning gulf between being poor and feeling poor. And my parents certainly weren't snobs. They didn't talk down about other people, like, "white trash" wasn't part of our vocabulary. We knew plenty of folks in dire economic straits, but I don't think I realized until I was way into adulthood what an amazing job they did of not making my life feel like that. We mowed the grass, and they were also super anti-HOA. They weren't keeping up

with the [Joneses 0:59:46], but I thought that some grilled chicken on Sunday and chicken and rice on Monday and chicken soup on Tuesday was 'cause we just-- man, I really love chicken! And then I realized it was like, well, 'cause you could go shopping once and feed five people for four days if you know what you're doing.

1:00:03

So I guess on my dad's side that was the barter. You're gonna get a hell of a lot more mullet than you were gonna get for that four dollars that somebody owed you for two packs of cigarettes. And I think my mom did an amazing job with sort of caressing those things into meals that just felt fancier and richer. Which I think in that context gives me a deeper appreciation for seafood and comfort food. It's no mistake that fat and flour can do a lot to make you feel better. And it's cheap and it goes a long way, and you don't feel like you're getting cheated 'cause it's delicious. Like, suffering through some kind of high-calorie, low-cost gruel to keep yourself full of nutrients-- granted, not much nutrients in biscuits, I guess- but biscuits and squirrel gravy is pretty rich and satisfying.

1:01:05

[Whispering] It really doesn't cost much. And when I sorta look around and think about some of those people that I grew up with, and I mean I definitely went to school with kids who, if it was deer season, the snacks they showed up with in their pocket were little pieces of fried backstrap 'cause that was their mama's specialty, and they got some deer that weekend, and that was it. Or we have a guy here in Apalachicola, Old Man Richard [sp], who lives in a beached sailboat up the river a couple of hundred yards who's famous for walking around with a smoked mullet in his

shirt pocket to snack off of. And I had those kids, too. People brought smoked mullet to school for a snack. That was a sort of little special thing.

1:02:00

And it was a delicacy but in a way that it was, like, it's a delicacy, it's a thing that we make. It's local good stuff. Not the sort of exotic smoked mullet thing that you're going to drive from hours away to do. So yeah, I guess the sort of ways in which-- surprise, food runs through your memory and your understandings of life in really significant ways. But I've done a lot more thinking over the last fifteen or twenty years about the ways in which the same sets of ingredients, regardless of whether we're talking about food or community or whatever, can be combined and presented in different ways to create very different experiences. Our pantry could have felt like a terrible impoverished shit life, and we just wished we had honeybuns all the time, but that wasn't the case. And that little town-- not to gloss over it.

1:03:01

I grew up with plenty of kids who I thought were jerks and I got beat up randomly and left in the ditch and things like that. And there were kids who were just crazy. But all in all, that place really didn't have much going for it economically, but it was a pretty cool place to live. Not to say that those are voluntary choices and that any impoverished community could have that experience if they wanted, but it is to say that I recognize it that we got lucky there and sort of historic character and relative tight-knitness of that community meant that it didn't feel like a dirt-poor neighborhood at the end of the world, which is ultimately what it was. And that feels pretty lucky.

1:03:56

I'm part of that sort of-- my parents, too-- having the juxtaposition of people who were living in their great-grandparents' house or whatever versus us who-- my parents had grown up in the area but not there and so I was able to sort of compare the two. But I guess I hadn't really thought about it in that way. Regardless of the lives their kids actually faced, I feel like the parents and kinda elders of greater Spring Creek, which would extend, I think, all the way up to-- I don't even know what the-- there must be a name for the little neighborhood where there's the turn-off to Medart. I guess it's just Spring Creek, but I'm sure some map has some other name on it. But they did a really nice job of making it feel like a-- there were people I was afraid might beat me up if I was mean to 'em, but I wasn't afraid they were gonna shoot me or burn my house down or threaten my parents.

1:05:03

It was just, like, knucklehead kids being pains in the ass and beating up kids who were younger than them, which I feel like is a pretty time-honored tradition and I probably did something to deserve it. I've spent enough time with myself to realize that. So yeah, dirt bike riding and jon boating and shooting things with BB guns until you start to feel guilty about killing stuff and catching alligators with fishing lures and realizing you don't really know what to do once you've caught an alligator.

Annemarie Anderson: [Laughter]

Cutler Edwards: Surreptitiously harvesting alligators when there's still a law against that, but what're you supposed to do when you've got a pond in your back yard and three kids under nine and there's a eight-and-a-half-foot alligator that lives out there? And you've got two dogs,

and you used to have twenty ducks and now you don't have any ducks. The solution is to remove the alligator.

1:05:59

But that's also just sort of like small town remote decisions need to be made sometimes. You don't have time to call all the way into the big city of Crawfordville to see what the sheriff wants to do about it, which probably is what got John Gray in trouble ultimately is that kind of approach. It was probably cocaine. It was probably the early [19]80s and he probably got in trouble for coke. It feels like the kind of thing you would get in trouble for if you were driving a Camaro or whatever in 1979, so it was just probably drugs. Yeah, feels like probably drugs. You probably weren't gonna get out of jail for killing somebody. Probably could get out for drugs. Maybe that's why he couldn't go near the high school probably. Yeah.

Annemarie Anderson: Maybe it was a combination.

Cutler Edwards: Yeah, maybe. I mean, I don't feel like you lose the ability to own a firearm just 'cause you were involved in an underage relationship, so it was definitely somewhere between that and murder. Maybe the truth will never be known. Leo probably wrote about it in Volume III, forthcoming, Spring Creek Chronicles. We'll see. Yeah. Is that useful?

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah, that's beautiful.

1:07:01

I like that idea that squirrel gravy and fried mullets are your Proust's madeleines.

Cutler Edwards: Yeah. Yeah. Feels different when you're in it than when you get to look back at it.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. I've kept you for an hour now, and I'm sure you have other things that you need to do, but I would like to maybe finish up--

Cutler Edwards: Yeah, sure. Whatever.

Annemarie Anderson: [Laughter]

Cutler Edwards: We got at least twenty minutes. I promised Marilyn something at five.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. I'm wonderin' if maybe we could talk a little bit about Apalachicola and your role here in hospitality, as well, a little bit?

Cutler Edwards: Sure.

Annemarie Anderson: And I'm wonderin' about, knowing what you know and growing up in this really working-class fishing village and being a part of that and watching that, how that kind of impacts the way that you see hospitality here in this town that also has that history?

1:08:07

Cutler Edwards: Yeah. And to be clear, I'm not a trained hospitality professional. I stumbled into it when I moved back. Started working at a property management company on St. George Island sort of handling marketing for them, which really was much more sprawling and unwieldy than-- mostly trying to help people be organized and do things right. But a couple of things emerged from that experience, especially in sort of talking to reservationists and guest services people about how they interacted with people who were either potentially booking or booking or were on vacation looking for something to do. And I realized that, growing up in Wakulla County, I went to Wakulla Springs, I went to the St. Marks lighthouse, I went to the

wildlife refuge. We went and jumped in the springs. I went to the library, the historic one in Crawfordville, not 'cause it was a historic library, but it was a library, but it was historic.

1:09:05

We did so much of the stuff there was to do in Spring Creek or in Wakulla County. And I'm talking to these primarily young ladies at the management company and say, hey, when guests call on a rainy day and ask for something to do, what do you tell them to do? And they were, like, well, um . . . And I said, well, do you tell them to go climb the lighthouse or . . . ? Well, no. I've never climbed the lighthouse. Well, what about ANERR across the bridge, the research reserve? No, I've never been to ANERR. I'm, like, well, what about the Kendrick Dwarf Cypress Forest? It's the only place in the world where there's these dwarf cypress, and maybe they know, maybe they don't why they're so tiny. Like, no, I didn't even know that was there.

1:10:00

And I realized that in a shift of a half generation and partially just sort of the way that we live, most of the kids coming out of high school and staying locally from local working-class families or not, sort of middle class, just hadn't indulged in the things there are to do here. There is a disconnect between the people staffing the frontlines of hospitality and the people who are here to adventure and travel and see cool stuff. The TDC is really not much better at it. That's a different conversation. We can have that when I'm angrier, but . . .

Annemarie Anderson: [Laughter]

Cutler Edwards: But leave that part unpublished for a while.

Annemarie Anderson: [Laughter]

Cutler Edwards: And I could see them struggling to not sound like country rubes when they were talking to people who were calling to spend five- or eight- or ten-thousand dollars, even though they're all from Atlanta. They all got accents. And so the first thing that I talked to them about was, look, we're selling sort of fancy beach vacations but they're coming here and not Destin or Panama City Beach or whatever because it feels like here.

1:11:08

So please embrace your "y'all," say it. If we don't say "y'all" on the phone, it's not gonna feel like they're comin' here, right? They're coming here because they expect that, and I know you instinctively say it anyway, so stop trying to say, "you guys," 'cause A) you know you're talking to a woman 90 percent of the time who's calling to book, but we also-- linguistically the South got one thing right and it's a gender-inclusive plural pronoun and we should use it. Just say "y'all," it works, and people expect you to. And that sort of-- I guess I would say that that more sort of expansive thinking about marketing, not, like, how do my Google ads work, really allowed me to think about-- the mission is to get more people to know about this really cool place.

1:12:03

To come hang out for a couple days, leave some money here to take care of things so that we can keep it nice and pay our teachers and do all that stuff, and then go back home again, not come and build condos and make it just like someplace else. So how do we pitch it as an Old Florida, get people to come and visit it and embrace it as such, and I think in part that's by conveying-- that "y'all" in that conversation reminds them that they're coming to a place with the unique character which you hope you get them to invest in rather than exploit. So through really not

very circuitous, really happenstance but very direct conversation, I wound up being offered the opportunity to take over as general manager at The Gibson Inn, which had recently changed hands, bought by a guy named Steven Etchen who, little younger than me, but from the South, from Kentucky.

1:13:04

Which I know to those of us from North Florida that's, like, Yankee territory but it's still really the South. Vacationing in Mexico Beach with his family and coming over to Apalach sort of for the holidays-- I in Spring Creek only rarely made it this far west. If we went to the beach, we went to, like, Mashers Sands or Shell Point or whatever.

Annemarie Anderson: You lived at the beach. [Laughter]

Cutler Edwards: Yeah. I mean, I could ride my bike to Shell Point and go to the beach. But also it was more fun to swim in the springs. But I knew of Apalach and had gone to it more as an adult than I did growing up. But we both just really kind of hit it off over-- as a historian by training, he's a sociologist by training. Neither one of us are doing that for a living but hit it off over the sort of-- well, I told him I've been driving past The Gibson in one way or another for thirty years. I'm thinking, what an amazing place! I wish somebody would do something with it.

1:14:02

It could be so much cooler. And he said, "That's exactly what I thought. Let's talk." And so we talked. And I didn't realize at the time that he had grand plans to-- yeah, I guess to rebuild and kind of excavate what would've been the ideal history of The Gibson, which was for it to actually get to live life as the luxury hotel it was built as in 1907, which never really happened. The

economy of Apalachicola changed dramatically by the beginning of the first world war, then obviously there's a world war, and then J.F. Buck, who built the hotel, died in the early [19]20s. It was separated from his family, served as a boarding house and all these other cool things.

1:14:56

But this guy sunk his fortune and was staking his claim on building this amazing property to anchor basically North Florida's Gulf Coast and compete with the luxury hotels of New Orleans and Jacksonville and Savannah and the other coastal towns of the US South. And it's the first steam-heated property between Jacksonville and Pensacola. And I think, thinking about the way that Spring Creek is now versus when I was there, Apalachicola feels like a thriving town now, especially compared to the early [19]90s. They, too, suffered from the changes in the net ban and the sort of ensuing but unconnected decline in oystering tied to Atlanta's growth and a variety of other things. But Apalachicola was a lot bigger a hundred and fifteen years ago when the hotel was built than it is now.

1:15:58

This was a place that in the nineteenth century had a standing French consulate and a standing Italian consulate, and dignitaries from all over the world here, and it made sense to build a luxury hotel. But she never got to be it. And so as a historian who is interested in those kinds of stories and the rhythms of labor and economics, and how does something like this survive in a place that feels like hardscrabble oyster tonging, to get to talk to and potentially work with someone who has that same historic fascination and the economic means to do something about it was pretty exciting. And we realized, I think, pretty quickly that we got along esthetically, and we got along philosophically.

1:16:51

And that was summer of 2019 when I started, and that was supposed to be probably a three-year renovation project to get the hotel fully redone, which was gonna expand it from its original thirty-one rooms ultimately to forty-five rooms by reincorporating J.F. Buck's original house, which he built on the property and had been bought by the Hayes family in the 1930s and known locally as The Hayes House ever since. The Gibson opened as The Franklin Hotel in 1907 and was sold to the Gibson sisters in 1922. And so when we reopened the restaurant at the hotel, we named it The Franklin Café, which was the original restaurant in the hotel in 1907. Obviously, we kept the name The Gibson. It's earned its keep at this point. But we change The Hayes House back to The Buck House, partially to kind of pay tribute to J.F. Buck's dream. I think that Steven and I both felt like this was our opportunity to kinda make this the hotel that it was supposed to be.

1:17:57

And I think ultimately, with the hotel emerging as the luxury boutique destination with historic resonance that it should be, it's a way to kind of reposition Apalachicola-- what we have to figure out as a community is what does a post-seafood economy look like? And the way that we'll be successful in a post-seafood tourist-based economy is if we look and feel like a place that's still a seafood-based economy except there's actually other stuff that's driving the economic engine, which is the vacation rentals of St. George Island and Cape San Blas, which are what allow the businesses of Apalachicola to survive, 'cause in robust summer weeks we've got twenty- to twenty-five-thousand people a week coming on vacation to the beaches right around the corner, and this is the place with the shops and restaurants. So for a town of twelve hundred, we have an

outsized, both quantity and quality, sort of food and beverage hospitality shopping boutique sort of downtown.

1:19:05

They're struggling, historic downtowns all over the American South trying to get you to come and eat, play, and stay, and they're downtown, but there's just nothing there except an old main street, and it's, like, please come and eat ice cream and drink coffee. Fortunately, we've got something that brings tons of people to the area and sort of fuels it without Apalachicola having to transform physically. And so it's different than if we came in and built a Four Seasons in Apalachicola. That would obviously not fit with the character of the town. Talk about pushback, there would be some pushback. But if you say, look, we're making this the thing it was supposed to be in the first place and it never got to be, it gives weight to us being able to stand up and talk about our other business ventures or to other local leaders about-- when I stand up and say, I want to make Apalachicola a better version of itself, that feels more real because I can point at The Gibson as an example of that.

1:20:13

The rumors flew after it sold, they're gonna turn it into a Holiday Inn. It's gonna be a Radisson. Why would you buy something like that to turn it into that? And so I think getting The Gibson to where it is really gives a sort of focus and locus for the idea of making Apalachicola a better version of itself, and hopefully kind of ups the ante for other business in the area, not as a sort of condescending challenge-- but one of the things that the hotel in its post renovation, which we completed in 2020, the sort of happy accident, recognizing how that sounds, of the pandemic

meant that we just closed the whole hotel in March and did that three-year renovation in nine months.

1:21:05

But the sort of proof of concept there is that if you have a really nice hotel with premium features and amenities and pricing that is in accordance with that, and it's full of people who, five years ago would've spent seventy-nine dollars for that room and now there are people who are here to spend two-hundred-and-seventy-nine dollars for that room, it doesn't mean we're getting rich and fleecing people, it means that we're demonstrating that there are folks of taste and sophistication and means, or some combination thereof, who love traveling to Apalachicola because it feels like this. And you're a lot more likely to get somebody to spend meaningful-- let me talk less about the money they're spending-- but you're more likely to generate meaningful tax revenues to benefit the community if you're attracting people who are here to stay two or three nights at a place that costs three hundred bucks a night than people who are here to stay in a place that costs seventy-nine bucks a night.

1:22:09

That shapes their whole shopping experience and decision. They're here for three nights, obviously, they're gonna have the chance to eat at every restaurant in town and drink at every bar, 'cause we just don't have that many. But it also means that they're not gonna have two of their meals out and they're gonna be at the plastic basket places only and they're gonna stock their dorm fridge in their hotel room with stuff from the Piggly Wiggly. So I think it's important to remember the nineteenth century Apalachicola as a meaningful commercial center where-- it was one of the first places on the Gulf to have ice. And this was before John Gorrie figured out a

way to make it efficiently and we actually started doing it, we had boats coming in and trains coming in with ice packed on sawdust.

1:23:02

That's fancy times. That was a fancy times town. So those kind of reminders I think are important because we're also operating now-- sort of best-case scenario we've got people who have only ever known Apalachicola, if it was successful, as a place where it was a fishin' town. It was successful because of shrimp, oysters, and fish, not in that order. But we don't have active memory of Apalachicola as a cosmopolitan coastal town in the North Caribbean, which is really what it is. So if we can use this as a sort of springboard to tell stories about not the Apalachicola that was but use it as a reflection of the Apalachicola that could be.

1:23:58

Those people were coming to Apalachicola in the late nineteenth century because it was an economic center, because of trade, because there were things to do here that were interesting. You build a hotel like this because of the clientele existed then. So what we've proven is that clientele still exists. And if we can remember that the sort of heights of-- whatever, I'm sort of guessing here-- the heights of the Apalachicola oyster industry in the [19]70s and [19]80s when everybody was here, that's what it was then. And oysters were really important before, but it wasn't the only thing, and people were here to trade and to conduct business. And The Owl Café was open, and it looks like that building looks now. So that was one of their brilliant strokes. When they reopened The Owl, they built that building, it looks like it's been there forever, it's not. It's, like, thirty years old. But it looks like the picture from 1912 of The Owl.

1:24:58

We've got 1911 *Apalachicola Times* newspaper reprints on the wall in The Gibson and it's, like, competing restaurant deals between The Owl and The Franklin Café and all these places that are open here now. But if you look at the rest of those issues of the newspaper, there's pictures of a group of eighteen ladies and gentlemen in their finery being taken on escorted boats out to view the oyster beds. There's ecotourism happening in the turn of the century in Apalachicola newspapers. They're having an oyster festival and they're running launches out to St. Vincent Island for people to picnic for the day. Things that-- if you were checking into the hotel and I could say, hey, we've got a couple of special events going.

1:25:59

On Saturday afternoons we do a picnic boat excursion to St. Vincent's where you can hike and our naturalists can show you the sandbar, the imported exotic deer that still live there from when it was a private hunting reserve, and we got our sort of picnic basket-- sort of recreate that experience. Those weren't the wives of oyster fishermen who had dressed up for the newspaper, those were ladies of means who has traveled here by train from someplace else because it was cool. It was a cool thing to do. And if you can capture the combination of-- that, even at the time, was a tourism industry built around seafood and the natural environment of Apalachicola Bay. It wasn't grumpy people driving around in their beat-up pickup trucks grumbling about this should be a fishing town anymore and the tourists should stay out of here, nor was it well intentioned retirees and their overly redone southside homes in hundred-thousand-dollar European vehicles driving around grumbling about everything wishing the tourists would go home.

1:27:09

It was a bunch of people realizing that we get to have nice things here because we're a place that people want to come and hang out for a little bit. We're not gonna build condos. There's never gonna be enough people for a McDonald's to open in Apalachicola. They've got that over in the big town of Port St. Joe. But you gotta have door counts. You gotta have traffic counts. You're not gonna get that chain stuff in a town of twelve hundred, it doesn't matter how many people are coming, 'cause you're not gonna build those condos and hotels on the island or the cape either. They're just not gonna be that big. And the oyster issue is an important one and we haven't really sort of gotten to it, so it'll be our, like, part two.

1:27:58

And we've talked about it casually previously, but I think part of the-- oh, God. Look, I want to be frank. I'm a guy who's lived here for five years and I'm sort of like making things up. [Laughter] But my sense is what we have to do is sort of psychologically accelerate the next half generation of evolution to transition us from wild harvest oyster mentality to aquaculture oyster mentality. Because all those things that I was saying, the launches to St. Vincent-- we have a seafood festival now, but that's not what this was. It was the oyster festival. So turn of the century this was the oyster place. The signs in Eastpoint, "Eastpoint, Oysters Since 1898." Obviously, they were oystering in Eastpoint before that, but I guess they figured out how to can them and ship them effectively or whatever.

1:29:02

But if we can figure out how to move from hunter-gatherer oyster mentality to oyster farmer mentality among the communities who historically have done that, it's going to be transformative for our town and community. It's gonna be transformative, more importantly, for the economic

fortunes of those families who I know enough from Spring Creek and just sort of understanding human nature know that it's awfully hard to see your daddy have his own boat and go oystering when he goddamn well feels like it and not when he doesn't, and to have that turn into a you have to be on the water at eight o'clock Monday through Friday and punch a clock and do the thing, and you don't own the boat and you don't own the oysters and you don't own shit anymore, which is, like, right, welcome to capitalism, congratulations for making it that far.

1:30:02

And I don't say that lightly. Capitalism is a terrible place to wind up. I wish you could've avoided it. But it's a difficult move to go from doing whatever I want to doing what somebody else wants. And it's a lot of damn work to do and takes quite a bit of money to do your own oyster farming. But somewhere in there is a happy medium where, if somebody actually asked me and I were in charge of-- which I don't have time to do right now 'cause I'm working on some other stuff-- but the long-term economic and development planning that we need to be doing for this part of the state of Florida, and particularly Franklin County-- and it's happening.

1:31:01

We have oyster leases all over the place. Some people are actually farming successfully. Some are wholesaling, some are direct retailing, but not at great enough quantities that you can reliably walk into a restaurant in Franklin County and eat Franklin County oysters. Sometimes you get lucky, the server will tell you where they're from. Sometimes they'll just say they don't know and that means Louisiana and Texas, or maybe Alabama. They're doing some good stuff there, too. Or you're getting farmed oysters from Alabama, which is a nice little half step. But the day that you can walk into The Owl or The Franklin Café or Dockside-- I don't know the order in which

there will be an uptake-- but when you can go in and order oysters there like you do in landlocked culinary centers all over North America by farmer, by part of the bay, eat a farmed oyster sampler, taste what East Bay grassier bottoms oysters taste like relative to West Bay oysters or things coming out of Panacea or Spring Creek.

1:32:06

I mean, this place is pregnant with the possibility of rapidly becoming America's oyster capital again, but there has to be some kind of concerted effort to organize it as such. If I was the TDC, I'd be spending half of my time promoting the beaches, which they should be doing. I would spend a lot less time promoting Carrabelle and Eastpoint. Those aren't things that generate travel. But how do you tell the residents and business owners of Carrabelle and Eastpoint that nobody cares about them relative to the island? It's fine. I recognize it is hard. But surprise, that's what public service is about, hard decisions. So it'd be, like, yeah, guys, you're right. The jobs on the island support the people who live in Eastpoint but spending a hundred thousand dollars advertising travel to Eastpoint isn't going to get us anywhere.

1:33:01

But if we spent some of that money pitching the idea of Eastpoint as the sort of like emergent, resurgent oyster capital because, surprise, the guys who are raising oysters-- and ladies-- they're not boring. They're very interesting. They're photogenic. They're entertaining. They have strong thoughts about things. Be really easy to do an ad campaign with them telling you why you need to come down and try their oysters. And not to pin all the hopes on it, but the thing that we have missing from Apalachicola and greater Apalachicola and environs that people really want is, like, they still are operating in a world where they think they can get Apalachicola oysters, or

they're operating in a world where they think Apalachicola oysters are dead and gone, will never return. It just depends on which side of the Atlanta argument they fall.

1:33:59

But it's hard. It's one of the reasons we wound up with no oysters out there is the sort of rugged individualism of mythic America. If the last thirty-five working wild harvest oystermen had looked at each other on the Oyster Bay one day and said, we should go in and tell those guys these oysters are five hundred dollars a bag or we'll just take 'em home, I think we'd be in a different environment for wild oysters right now, too. But instead you get in a race to the bottom, and you sell your oysters cheaper just so you can sell 'em. And I want to be very clear that it's far more complex than that, and people have unknown and unthinkable pressures upon themselves.

1:35:01

And it's not like we live in a current economic climate in which things like collective action or unionism are socially acceptable talking points in the working world South. But I'm only tangentially connected to aquaculture oysters. I have some friends who raise them. I have some friends of friends who do it. I have some former business associates that were involved. But I feel like we probably have two kinds of people raising oysters right now, ones who do get that they should sort of team up and work together, and I haven't seen a really successful collective work yet. There's been some fits and starts, and, of course, egos get involved and profit mandates get challenged by ethical concerns and things fall apart, but eventually the right partnerships emerge, I think.

1:36:03

I mean, I'm, if nothing, a romantic about the possibilities of human nature. I mean, fundamentally we're all complete assholes, but sometimes people figure out how to get together for a couple hundred years at a time, which is how empires work. But I think that I'm worried, too, at least in the opening years of local aquaculture, there are too many people trying to figure out how to make sure they sell theirs first, which means you're cutting your margins, you're selling 'em for what it costs you to produce 'em to try to build your brand awareness or to establish partnerships, but that's not sustainable.

1:36:58

It's, like, we need a grant to take the people who are trying to raise and sell oysters to other places in the world where they raise and sell oysters because I think people's eyes would pop out if they realized you could get three dollars apiece for an oyster. That you really don't have to sell 'em for twelve dollars a dozen, or wholesale them for thirty-two cents apiece or thirty-six cents apiece when it costs thirty-five cents apiece to grow them. Tell people they cost a dollar, take 'em home and sell 'em to Husk. They'll ship 'em to Savannah, they'll ship 'em to Atlanta, ship 'em to New York, ship 'em to San Diego where they'll pay for 'em. Because once you start putting Apalachicola on the oyster label, you're gonna have to find the people to whom that still matters, but it's not gonna take very long. And some folks like Cainnon at Pelican have done a good job of that, and I think in part because Cainnon's a guy who's lived and traveled other places and understands that economic scales have different meanings in different places.

1:38:01

And I really hope that we get some kind of economic and business education as part of the growth of the local aquaculture industry, but I know that's gonna be a hard row to hoe for them--

to mix my farming metaphors-- because what are these guys supposed to do when their dads were selling oysters for thirty bucks a bushel and now they're gonna show up and be, like, these oysters are a dollar apiece, take it or leave it? And they're surrounded by friends and family and sort of like distant people they don't even know but encounter at a restaurant who still think oysters should cost fifteen bucks a dozen in Apalachicola 'cause that's what they always cost.

1:39:00

But I think the people who figure out how to get past that are gonna figure it out. But the downside is in order to do that, they're gonna have to take their oysters and sell them someplace besides Franklin County, which means we're right back where we started. So I've pitched this idea a couple times. So my job at The Gibson lasted until the beginning of 2021, and then I-- The Gibson is part of an umbrella company of hospitality businesses that include some property management companies on St. George Island and on the cape. The hotel is sort of the current flagship hotel, but there'll probably be some other short-term overnight lodging involved in that here soon.

1:39:58

And we are involved in several restaurant projects, not just The Franklin Café here at the hotel, but part of the partnership that has bought the old Boss Oyster building and property in Apalachicola and will be rebuilding and reopening that, which should truly be a place that shines a spotlight on Apalachicola seafood, Toucan's in Mexico Beach, which is more of a sort of definitely iconic but more of a kind of beach bar, and a couple of other-- LongBill's which is a sort of casual seafood and burger and pizza place on Cape San Blas, and some other projects. So it's a sort of multivalent hospitality concern, not just The Gibson, which right now has either

open or under development five restaurants, and we'll probably wind up with a couple more just because we have a sort of geographic spread from Mexico Beach to St. George Island.

1:41:04

And if you have places for people to stay in each place, you're gonna need to have a place for them to eat and drink in each place. And when you're operating five or six or seven restaurants and most of them are gonna be either right on the water or within view of the water and you're in this part of the world, you're obviously gonna serve a gang of oysters out of each of them, burger and pizza joint notwithstanding. You put oysters on the menu, you're gonna sell them to people here on vacation. And obviously Boss Oyster. And so for me, that restaurant-- we're sitting here in January of 2022. Boss would be awesome to have open in summer of 2023, which to me means there's time to either partner with a variety of or start our own oyster farm.

1:42:00

If you're gonna have that many restaurants serving seafood, you're kind of missing an opportunity to not have a house brand. I would obviously want to have other producers in there, too, but if I'm at Boss Oyster and you say these are Boss Oyster oysters-- just like they used to be. That's what made the place famous. They had their own oyster boats. They went out and tonged their own oysters and they served them in the restaurant. And so there's an opportunity here I think for us as a deeply locally embedded, emotionally and financially deeply invested company, but with the luxury of being led by people who've lived and worked in a variety of places while also always having been rooted here. We have this sort of scope and scale to fund something like that during the real pain in the ass startup phases.

1:43:00

And also actually we have a new general manager for The Franklin who started this week, and he's kinda leading us back towards a restaurant that matches the feel and expectations of the renovated Gibson. And we were having that conversation today. This is the time to start now. If you start now, you could have enough oysters to serve in that place when you open. And I'm nervous that in the next eighteen months sort of locally folks who are struggling admirably in a difficult climate-- I'm not confident that we will reach a place in the next eighteen months that we can say on the menu that we're only serving Apalachicola Bay, North Florida Gulf Coast oysters without more people jumping in and/or helping, 'cause I think a lot of people signed up for those oyster leases and then they realized it's a lot of work.

1:44:03

And you gotta be out there when it sucks and when it's hot, when it's cold, and early and late. And it's just hard. And I want to be clear that I hear the complaints and I hear the people making comments, and you can't find anybody good and blah, blah, blah, but I don't think I've-- I'll lump Spring Creek into it-- but I don't think I've ever been in a place where people worked as hard as they work here. There's not a shortage of people willing to do stuff that sucks and is hard. I think just sometimes people need help finding a path to it or feeling encouraged to do it.

1:45:00

But I never tonged oysters for a living, but I knew enough guys who did that I'm sure you can color your nostalgia but that feels like that's pretty damn hard work also. Mullet fishin' is hard work. Shrimping is hard work. Those aren't people who are afraid of doing a day-and-a-half's work in a single day. And I think it's hard to-- I don't want to say it's hard to imagine, but oyster

farming feels really hard also. I probably feel like in my own, again, novice analysis it feels like the hurdle there is more the psychology of the clock than it is the work.

1:46:01

And cages and things and spat and all that where, like, it takes more-- it's not just, like, build your own boat out of plywood with your friend's help, get a thirty-year-old motor running, and get some oyster tongs, which is what it took to harvest. It takes more strategic planning. But I'm concerned that we live in an environment in which even sort of state funding agencies are colored by the narratives of lazy lay-about coastal scalawags who are gonna take their startup grant money and smoke it up or whatever. I don't know if those programs even actually exist. I'm sure somewhere somebody is offering funding to somebody to get aquaculture programs started, experimental or whatever. But if we can make more farms happen Apalachicola can be Apalachicola and not have to become a different place to survive. And I think that should be the goal, how can this be a thriving town that twenty years from now doesn't feel like someplace else?

1:47:03

And I think the answer is the things that made this place what it is in the first place, awesome things to do on the water, awesome things to eat out of the water produced by the people who live here. And if we can figure out how to make oysters happen again-- which ain't gonna be wild harvest, sorry-- I think we could really see a shocking transformation that in noticeable ways could move an entire population out of pretty wrenching poverty while simultaneously providing, I think, the dignity of work that sort of our family traditions prize.

1:48:01

And that's really kind of a luxurious position to be in in the American economy. Your point about folks from the Marshall Islands winding up in Arkansas or whatever. I'm assuming they weren't hanging out in poultry farms in the Marshall Islands. It's a total transformation of their way of life to be able to survive. And I feel like we're in a fortunate position to be pretty close to being able to salvage some of those traditional ways of being, and we're not productively thinking about it like that. This should be a storybook community for hybridization of traditional existence and the sort of mandates of moderate society, which I think some of us are trying to gesture towards here. But it's surprising and uncomfortable for some people.

1:48:59

And so I think the next five or six years are going to be a really interesting time to watch, so check back with me then. But I'm optimistic about it. I'm optimistic about it. I think it's gonna be a tasty time to be here for the next few years.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. I know that you have to go. I could talk to you for another two hours.

Cutler Edwards: Yeah, we can do it totally another time.

Annemarie Anderson: [Laughter]

Cutler Edwards: Yeah, we can do it another time.

Annemarie Anderson: Is there anything else that you want to talk about that we haven't touched upon?

Cutler Edwards: Gosh. I mean, yeah, probably all sorts of stuff. Honestly, I'd like to spend some time thinking about-- and when I think about the centrality of Barbara and Spring Creek

and China and Loretta and those people, women, those ladies didn't own the restaurant, but Carolyn certainly was a-- right, Carolyn?

1:50:01

She did, right? And it's one of the things that I've thought about here. At a future date, yeah, I'd like to spend some time thinking about the significance of-- I'm going back to the Gibson sisters that bought the hotel when it stopped being the Franklin, but the sort of central role of women business owners in various periods of sort of rebirth for Apalachicola. You got the Gibson sisters and I think you've got this whole sort of disconnected but contemporaneous group of women who arrived here in the sort of mid [19]90s-ish to kind of start dragging Apalachicola out of the abandoned seafood town it was, or roughneck shrimp village that it was.

1:50:55

And then, I think over the last three or four years there's been another sort of influx of still working-aged women with independent businesses who are yet again sort of taking the lead and kind of reshaping the town, which is a different kind of focus than the, like, everybody talks about oysters when you're here. And sure, go look at the pictures of who's shucking the oysters in the canneries. But I also think it would be really interesting to think about how significant female-led endeavors have been in the sort of various periods of Apalachicola history, and I think why it's a really important part of what's going forward. I don't know, there's just something in the water here, I guess. But yeah, I would spend some time thinking about that. And I would probably spend some time-- I'm really interested in race and ethnicity and relations in Franklin County.

1:52:06

And sort of the ways in which membership and belonging have changed and flexed over the last two-hundred years. We have some pretty intriguing characteristics about the Chestnut Hill Cemetery over here where there are definitely folks buried in there who probably weren't recognized as sort of white when they were interred in the cemetery in a way that they are now. Being Greek and Italian and Jewish in the nineteenth century was a totally different experience in terms of reception. So it would be interesting to talk about that some, too. And black Apalachicola, which is a whole different can of worms.

1:53:02

And FAMU did a really beautiful exhibit I guess at the 2019 seafood festival. Took over a historic house on the hill and the exhibit there was part of-- it may have been part of the African American History Festival. But they're sort of reconstructing through physical archives and interviews black Apalachicola and mapping black Apalachicola. And much like Apalachicola itself, the dictates of a segregated South, but a much more thriving and robust community in the 1940s than now. And sort of seeing that be excavated and recovered was pretty cool.

1:54:00

And it for me was something to start a few conversations with some folks I knew here in town. And I'm curious in learning more about how and why people live in Apalachicola, I guess.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah.

Cutler Edwards: So yeah, we could talk about some of that stuff, too. But it's a totally different subject. But yeah, I should probably pick up Marilyn.

Annemarie Anderson: Thank you so much!

Cutler Edwards: Yeah.

1:54:31

[End of Interview]