

Transcript

Ben Brotemarkle

Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society, is made possible in part by the Department of State Division of Historical Resources and the State of Florida. It's also made possible by the Jessie Ball du Pont Fund, and by the historic Rossetter House Museum and Gardens in Eau Gallie, celebrating pioneer history, the natural environment, and women's history available for weddings and events at rossetterhousemuseum.org.

(Music Break)

This is Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society, on the web at myfloridahistory.org. I'm Ben Brotemarkle and coming up on the program, a new monument in Saint Augustine commemorates the history of commercial shrimping and shrimp boat building.

Brendan Burke

Saint Augustine now has six or seven shrimp boats, not many in comparison to the old days, where you could walk across the San Sebastian River on boats, just hopping from rail to.

Ben Brotemarkle

We'll discuss the construction and impact of Camp Blanding.

Connie Lester

Everything took longer than expected and required more work. Nevertheless, the first trainees arrived at the end of January 1941.

Ben Brotemarkle

And we'll talk about feminist Roxcy Bolton. All that ahead on Florida Frontiers.

Grace Paaso

This was my grandfather's fish house. Which was Salvadores, this was for Saji, this was Poly. They were the first fish houses here on the water and you can see the spur of the railroad, where they would unload the shrimp to.

Ben Brotemarkle

Grace Paaso is a descendant of one of the founding families of Saint Augustine's shrimping industry. She's pointing out locations on a three-dimensional bronze map that is part of a monument to local shrimping history.

Grace Paaso

Every fish house and every boat builder from the 1920s through the 1970s are memorialized on this map, and there's a number designating what's where and then if you can read the text on the panels around you know what you're looking at.

Ben Brotemarkle

The monument on the San Sebastian River in Saint Augustine is located on the boardwalk behind the new restaurant Otters on the Water. Grace Paaso.

Grace Paaso

From about the 1920s through the 1970s, the social and economic drive for Saint Augustine was shrimping. You either worked for in shrimping or you worked for the railroad. There was really no remembrance of it, and then this whole area, all of the boat building facilities, became restaurants or hotels. And I thought this should not be a footnote, you know, in history of this town.

Ben Brotemarkle

John Versaggi is also a descendant in one of Saint Augustine's founding families of the shrimping industry.

John Versaggi

When we began fundraising for the monument and, you know, advertising, floating the idea, people came out of the woodwork. Oh, my father was a shrimper. My father was a crewman. My father was a boat builder. My father cut oak trees for the boat industry. It was just a sprawling network and still is, people remembering how prominent shrimping and boat building was up through, and including, the 70s.

Ben Brotemarkle

Ed Long was a shrimp boat builder in the mid 20th century and is co-author of the book *Shrimp Boat City: 100 Years of Catching Shrimp and Building Boats in Saint Augustine, The Nation's Oldest Port*.

Ed Long

The four of us, Grace Paaso, John Versage, and Brendan Burke, and I, we pushed that, and Grace was the financial head of that. She got the donations from all the shrimping families and boat building families. They just came out of the woodwork and donated more than enough to build that beautiful bronze, a monument. It has a map on the top showing the San Sebastian River, and it shows 16 different docks, the boat builder, repair dock, or marine supply or whatever facility that was there, and around it, is panels saying what each thing is. You know, explaining the different ones. Chad, a local artist, reenactor, a good guy designed the top of it, and it was cast over in Sarasota, I believe it was, of all bronze and the young brothers did the foundation with the coquina. They cut the coquina in and did a beautiful job on that. So, it's there prominently for everyone to see.

Ben Brotemarkle

Maritime historian Brendan Burke is co-author of the Book *Shrimp Boat City* and helped to make shrimping industry monument a reality.

Brendan Burke

Saint Augustine now has six or seven shrimp boats, not many in comparison to the old days, where you could walk across the San Sebastian River on boats, just hopping from rail to rail, people used to talk

about playing on boats as a kid and crossing the river on boats. Boats jockeying to find a place to tie up. They had trouble parking, in essence on the San Sebastian River. Those days are gone. The fish houses are gone. They were never meant to last. But the industry is, and that is going away. And it's something that, it's critical that we remember, number one who it was and what it was, but also try to support our local fisheries in sustaining who they are.

Ben Brotemarkle

Sollecito Salvatore, later known as Mike Salvador, was a Sicilian immigrant who arrived in Fernandina in 1898 and started Florida's commercial shrimping industry. Brendan Burke.

Brendan Burke

He was an architect. He was a fisherman. He was a mariner. He was an entrepreneur. And in Fernandina in the first decade of the 20th century, he assembled what I would consider to be the greatest maritime chapter in Florida's state history. It spanned from about 1900 until the 1980s. It caused well more than a billion dollars' worth of fishing tonnage to be built in this state, it impacted the lives of thousands of people, directly or indirectly, 23 countries worldwide, and started a food way that we now know, and all participate in that in the previous century was unknown.

Ben Brotemarkle

Grace Paaso.

Grace Paaso

Well, the first person who became my great uncle and that was Sollecito Salvador, and he married my grandfather's baby sister, Anne Domenica. And they had all fished in some form or another in Sicily. Usually, and when they got here, they were catching shrimp and like the taste of it, although it was considered the scrap of the time, that was the by-catch, you know, they were after fish, not these things with tails and feet, big eyes and whatever else. My grandfather came over to Fernandina.

Ben Brotemarkle

John Versaggi.

John Versaggi

The person who came first was Sollecito Salvador, great uncle of Grace and myself. He came first, did some exploratory type fishing in the Fernandina area. Liked what he saw but had a false start. Restarted that business later and was joined by my grandfather, Salvatore Versaggi and Antonio Poli; all related. They all joined the business and felt it had a future, so they began developing new techniques and improving productivity.

Ben Brotemarkle

By the early 1920s, Mike Salvador and his extended family moved their shrimping operation from Fernandina to Saint Augustine. Ed Long.

Ed Long

They were coming down the coast, shrimping and the shrimping also, Saint Augustine, and down further toward Canaveral, was so much better. And the port down here at the inlet was so much deeper and better. And of course, there was a heavy Catholic community here, being the country's oldest city. That tended to make them more inclined to move down here and live here.

Ben Brotemarkle

John Versaggi.

John Versaggi

An uncle of ours, one of Salvatore Versaggi's sons, Joe Versaggi was the front men to go to New York and deal with the Fulton Fish market, the big giant wholesaler up there. And as the ability to ship shrimp transit times two or three days developed with the advent of manufactured ice, the ability to ship to New York became more reliable, and it opened up that market. They also shipped to Chicago to a similar place. So, our Uncle Joe was the leader for the Versaggis to establish a brokerage at the Fulton Fish Market, New York.

Ben Brotemarkle

Grace Paaso.

Grace Paaso

My grandfather was Salvatore Versaggi, and he had five sons and two daughters. Snd one of his sons, Joseph, was the one who went and interned for a while at the Fulton Fish Market, and then became the broker for shrimp at the Fulton Fish Market. Snd when it was being restored like Quincy Market was in Boston, I said to Uncle Joe, I said maybe they'll find some over Versaggi shrimp signs. And he said, what are you stupid? We couldn't afford a sign. And I said, well, how did people know where to buy shrimp? And he said they knew I had it and they found me, and I thought, well, I guess that worked back then.

Ben Brotemarkle

Maritime historian Brendan Burke says that the shrimping industry in Saint Augustine provided opportunities for diverse groups.

Brendan Burke

People you have African American families that are getting into the enterprise in fish houses as labor on the boats and as owners of some of the boats you have Greek immigrant families that are building boats mostly in Fernandina and Saint Augustine. But other places as well. Tarpon Springs. You have Italian families, immigrant families that are coming either directly from Italy or trends migrating from places up north, like the Fulton Fish market up in New York, which was a critical part of the infrastructure to get rid of shrimp. You know, catching them is half the battle. You got to sell them for the enterprise. So you have all these families that move to the region, but they bring something with them. And each of those talents conspired to form the modern commercial shrimping business.

Ben Brotemarkle

Ed Long grew up watching the shrimping industry thrive in Saint Augustine.

Ed Long

The boats were tied up at the Saint Sebastian Bridge King Street Bridge. They would back up there to where they were ready to go out the next day and they would raft against each other all the way across the river. And as kids, we literally went from boat to boat across from one side of the San Sebastian to the other side, to the West side. And of course the crews of the boats would chase us, but we'd outrun them.

Ben Brotemarkle

By the mid 20th century, the shrimping industry in Florida moved to Key West and more active Gulf ports. Brendan Burke.

Brendan Burke

What stayed in Saint Augustine, and this was really king for that area, was the ability to build the boats that supplied the fleets. And so, between 1919 and 1985, I can account for about 3500 boats that were built in town that went all over the place. And I mentioned 23 countries around the world, we built boats for. We shipped them out almost by the dozen. They were rarely built on speculation. They were a well-known quantity. And during the heyday of DESCO, Diesel Engine Sales Company, their motto was the Sun Never Sets on a DESCO Boat, and that's a pretty bold statement to make. But it's not bragging because it was true. And you know, it sounds a lot like the sun never sets on the British Empire, but it was true, and it probably in some ways still is true today. And that's a legacy that Florida has left on global fishing and global fishing and global food waste.

Ben Brotemarkle

Florida's commercial shrimping industry peaked in the 1980s, but still exists today. The new monument on the San Sebastian River in Saint Augustine commemorates that heritage.

John Versaggi

This site was the formerly DESCO Marine, which was the largest shrimp boat builder in the world. They were delivering an excess of 100 hauls a year. They built 2600 plus shrimp boats during their operation. Right here, the White Star. They built wood boats. They built fiberglass boats, they built one steel boat, and had a huge operation, international.

Ben Brotemarkle

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Joining us now, Ms. Connie Lester, associate professor of history at the University of Central Florida, director of the RICHES Digital Archiving project, and editor of the Florida Historical Quarterly. Connie, we're taping this episode in November month in which we honor veterans.

Connie Lester

One of the most important holidays of November is Veteran's Day, which began as Armistice Day to commemorate the end of World War One and is still celebrated as such in Britain and Canada. The

increasing interest in the collection of veterans oral histories, and the publication of biographies of soldiers, concentrates attention on battlefield experiences, but not all soldiers experienced the battlefield. However, common to all soldiers' time in the military is training, and for 9 divisions of American soldiers in World War Two, training occurred at Camp Blanding. Later, for others who received such grievous wounds that they were evacuated back to the US, recovery occurred in the 3000 bed hospital at Camp Blanding. George E Cressman, Junior, historian and docent at Camp Blanding, provided the Florida Historical Quarterly readers with a history of the construction of the camp in an article published in 2018. Camp Blanding had its origins in Duval County as a training camp for the Florida National Guard. In 1939, as the nation prepared for war, the U.S. Navy became interested in what was then Camp Foster as a potential site for a Naval Air station. After intense negotiation, the land was transferred to the Navy, and a new site in Clay County was purchased to construct a training camp for the Army. This new facility was named Camp Blanding in honor of Major General Albert H Blanding, of Floridian, who commanded the 53rd Brigade, 27th Infantry Division during World War One, which saw action at the Salm and the Meuse Argonne campaign. As Cressman outlines the challenges of constructing Camp Blanding make readers understand the complex intersection of military, labor, and social history. The land purchased for the camp was proximate to Jacksonville but located in a rural area without direct rail service or social services for the men who would work and live there. As with most Florida land, it was swampy and malarial. The nearest town was Starke, the site of the Florida State Prison and home to approximately 1400 people in 1940. Convicts would be used to clear land around Kingsley Lake in preparation for the construction of the camp. Florida was in every way ill-equipped to take on a project of the magnitude envisioned for Camp Blanding.

Ben Brotemarkle

Connie, constructing such a large training facility in a remote area under the time pressures that gearing up for war imposed must have been quite a feat.

Connie Lester

Southern construction firms were deemed inadequately experienced and capitalized to undertake the Camp Blanding project. A New York firm, Starrett Brothers, was awarded the contract to construct 10,254 buildings, including a 2000 bed hospital, later expanded to 3000 beds, barracks, laundries, mess halls, service clubs, theaters, target ranges, post offices, a fuel storage plant, a cold storage plant, bakeries, incinerators, sewer and water systems, electrical systems, and roads. The contract initially called for the hiring of 10,000 workers, but by November 1940, 22,000 men worked on the site. Timing was tight and the Army expected the camp to be ready by early 1941. Everything about the project posed a problem. Starrett operated with union workers who required a closed shop, that means all workers on the project would be union members. Southern workers balked at joining a union, and the state of Florida was not supportive of unionization either. There was inadequate housing in the surrounding area for workers at the camp, and men slept in shifts and rooms rented from local citizens. Roads were inadequate for transporting the men to and from the job site. The nearest railroad was 10 miles from the site and track had to be laid to bring construction materials and equipment to the camp. Starke was located in a tri-county with a small police force and the influx of thirsty men produced a rise in the number of sellers of illegal alcohol and an increase in crime. Finally, the presence of swamps and mosquitoes, and the unexpected cold weather in the fall, produced outbreaks of disease among the workers.

Ben Brotemarkle

And they were trying to build what would become the 4th largest city in Florida at the time. Sounds as if this was a potential disaster.

Connie Lester

Starrett found innovative ways to meet the challenges, including the creation of prefabricated pieces to speed the erection of buildings. Despite the adaptation of new technology, the project was behind schedule in the fall of 1940. Crushed limestone had to be brought in from Orlando to build the road. Work ceased for a time to build platforms for tents to raise them up out of the mud and water. Everything took longer than expected and required more work. Nevertheless, the first trainees arrived at the end of January 1941.

Ben Brotemarkle

Now you indicated that the camp includes some interesting social history.

Connie Lester

It did. Training took up most of the soldiers' time, but recreation was a part of their life as well. Supporters of the camp talked about the easy access to Jacksonville, Saint Augustine, and Daytona Beach. But most of the men's free time was spent at the camp or in nearby Starke. The construction plan called for the building of sports fields and gyms, theaters, and clubs, and there is plenty of evidence to support a conclusion that the men took advantage of all these opportunities. They organized baseball teams, staged musicals and plays, and engaged in band challenges. Wives, girlfriends, and families visited the men, and the USO brought more professional talent to the camp.

Ben Brotemarkle

Sounds as if things were going well for Camp Blanding.

Connie Lester

Certainly, administrators testified that morale was high, and training was going well, but there was trouble. In the summer of 1940, Republican representative Albert J Engel of Michigan launched an investigation into the costs of construction of the camp. He believed that all such construction should be undertaken by the Army Corps of Engineers rather than the Quartermaster Corps, which had handled Camp Blanding's construction. In April 1941, Engle delivered his findings on the floor of the House of Representatives. He implied a series of overpayments and collusion in the supplying of limestone by an Orlando firm. Finally, he charged the Camp Blanding site was "not only unfortunate and extremely expensive but shows gross inefficiency and a total disregard for taxpayers' interest." The ensuing House investigation was slow and produced no important information. In the Senate, the so-called Truman Committee, led by Senator Harry Truman, went through a series of investigations, homing in on the contracts for road building and sewer facilities. In May 1941, the committee held hearings at Camp Blanding. In August 1941, the committee issued a report that offered a strong indictment of the military construction process that produced inadequate plans and caused large cost overruns. The House committee disagreed, praising the army for "a magnificent and unparalleled job of preparing housing accommodations for an army that was created almost literally overnight." No matter how rocky the

start, Camp Blanding performed the service that was required. It trained 9 divisions, two of which were spearhead units for the Normandy invasion, and one that spearheaded the Southern France invasion. It was the site of several prisoner of war camps, with the last prisoners leaving in 1946. Throughout the war, it housed a reception center, receiving inductees from across Florida, and became a discharge center for returning soldiers. Families from across the nation have a history with Camp Blanding, and many have letters and postcards sent by their fathers, grandfathers, or now great grandfathers to sweethearts and family from that Florida training camp.

Ben Brotemarkle

Fascinating story. Thanks, Connie.

Connie Lester

You're welcome.

Ben Brotemarkle

Connie Lester is associate professor of history at the University of Central Florida, director of the RICHS Digital Archiving project, and editor of the Florida Historical Quarterly.

(Music Break)

This is Florida Frontiers. Roxcy Bolton was an important Florida feminist. Holly Baker has more.

Holly Baker

Feminist Roxcy O'Neill Bolton was a leading advocate for women's rights in Florida from the 1950s until her death in 2017. In 1957, Roxcy Bolton was an organizing member of the Democratic Women's Club in Florida and the Charter President of the Dade County chapter of NOW, the National Organization for Women. In 1969, she was elected as national vice president of NOW. Doctor Kimberly Voss is a tenured professor of journalism at the University of Central Florida in Orlando. She's also the author of several books, including *Women Politicking Politely: Advancing Feminism in the 1960s and 1970s*. Doctor Voss told me more about Roxcy Bolton.

Kimberly Voss

Roxcy Bolton is a relatively unknown name, but she made a big difference in the lives of women in Florida and across the country. And there's a lot of women like this, I think, who did things behind the scenes made a difference, but didn't necessarily make a name for themselves in such a way to attract attention to themselves. So, they helped others almost at the cost of who they were historically.

Holly Baker

Roxcy Bolton worked tirelessly for women's rights in Florida. In 1972, she founded Women in Distress, the first women's rescue shelter in Florida offering housing, legal aid, and other services for victims of violence. In 1974, she founded the Miami Rape Treatment Center to assist victims of sexual abuse and rape.

Kimberly Voss

She was a great community organizer. She was well connected. She had the personal phone numbers of politicians in her back pocket. She knew which reporters were going to be sympathetic to her cause. Because she was really a pioneer and very empathetic about topics that people weren't talking about at the time. So, you know, you are looking at, say, the 1960s, there wasn't a lot of discussion of domestic violence, rape treatment centers, really just helping women in ways that were nontraditional. So, she was concerned about helping women that didn't have a place. So homeless women, women who've been battered and needed to leave their home with their children, she did a lot of that at a time when it wasn't spoken about. And NOW was not initially considered a very acceptable organization. Being a feminist was a pretty negative word at the time. Now what made it a little bit easier for Roxcy is that she was married and had children, and she embraced that role too, because it was somewhat non-threatening to ask for things if you also had a traditional role.

Holly Baker

In the early 1970s, Roxcy Bolton also advocated for the renaming of hurricanes. At the time, feminine names were exclusively used to identify hurricanes, and she called for an alternating naming system using both male and female names. Doctor Voss.

Kimberly Voss

She fought for a lot of causes, but probably the one that got the most national attention was the renaming of hurricanes. It used to be that all hurricanes were named for women, and it started out in a relatively sweet way, early meteorologists would name hurricanes for their wives as they were tracking them, and then it became a formal practice that all hurricanes were named after women. And she didn't like that because the headline in the newspaper would be something like female hurricane name destroyed the community, drowned a neighborhood, that sort of thing. And so, she reached her limit after very, very bad hurricanes in Miami, Inez in 1966, Gladys in 1968, and Agnes in 1969. She'd had enough. And so, she went to the National Weather Bureau to say, I don't like reading these headlines that Agnes destroyed my community. And I love that her solution was that we should have hurricanes after politicians because politicians often like putting their names on things. You know, streets and buildings. So, she thought it would be really great to say Hurricane Goldwater destroyed the community. You know that sort of thing. And she was really ridiculed at the time for making the suggestion. In 1979, they changed the policy to alternate between men's names and women's names.

Holly Baker

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration ultimately agreed to a new naming system and created an alternating male-female list of names, a system that's still in place today. Roxcy Bolton was inducted into the Florida Women's Hall of Fame in 1984. In 1994, she donated her personal papers to the State Archives of Florida and Tallahassee. In 2017, Roxcy Bolton died in Coral Gables, FL, at the age of 90, and was buried in the historic Miami City Cemetery. Today, Roxcy Bolton is remembered for her courage, her lifelong dedication to gender equality, and the advancement of women. For Florida Frontiers, I'm Holly Baker, public history coordinator for the Florida Historical Society, and archivist at the Library of Florida History in Cocoa.

Ben Brotemarkle

You've been listening to Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society. Please join us right here again next week. Until then, find us anytime on our content rich website myfloridahistory.org and join the conversation on Facebook. Production assistance for Florida Frontiers comes from Holly Baker and Connie Lester. The program is edited by Jon White. Have a great week. I'm Ben Brotemarkle.

(Music Break)

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