



**Gilbert L. Voss.** *Pioneer Son at Sea: Fishing Tales of Old Florida.* Gainesville: University Press Of Florida, 2016. 200 pp. \$19.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-6252-5.



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In *A Pioneer Son at Sea: Fishing Tales of Old Florida*, Gilbert L. Voss recounts his early days as a fisherman during the Great Depression and World War II, which instilled in him a passion to preserve Florida's delicate marine ecosystems. A collection of eleven far-fetched yet true stories, *A Pioneer Son at Sea* provides a window into the overlooked, forgotten, and richly colored communities of early to mid-twentieth-century Florida. Voss's accounts depict vanished scenes almost unimaginable to the modern state plagued with hotels, condominiums, and strip malls.

Gilbert L. Voss ("Gil" to family and friends) was an innovator in biological oceanography, known for his tireless conservation efforts related to Florida's coral reef ecosystems. Born in 1918 to pioneer parents on Lake Worth, Gil came of age during the Great Depression, making a living fishing the rich Florida waters. After serving four years in the US Coast Guard during World War II, Voss joined his brothers in the emerging charter-boat fishing industry before enrolling at the University of Miami, where he launched his illustri-

ous career in biological oceanography. Teaching for many years at the Marine Laboratory of the University of Miami, Voss became an internationally recognized specialist on cephalopods and played a seminal role in the establishment of the United States' first undersea park, the John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park. Later in life, Gil compiled a memoir of his years as a fisherman and coastguardsman during the 1930s and 1940s. This memoir would later become *A Pioneer Son at Sea: Fishing Tales of Old Florida*. Published twenty-seven years after his passing, this volume was edited by Gilbert's son Robert S. Voss, who offers invaluable explanatory material that appropriately situate his father's legendary tales within their historical and cultural context.

From the moment I picked up Gilbert L. Voss's memoir, I asked myself, what is "Old Florida"? On the book's dust jacket stands a young Voss, bearing a weathered captain's hat with rod and reel in hand, gazing off into the Old Florida horizon. For Gil, Old Florida was defined by a colorful collection of fishermen, Prohibition agents, rabble-

rousers, and the diverse communities that these rugged individuals called home. Old Florida was something of a southern frontier, unspoiled by commercial rental properties and corporate interests. Gil describes a Florida teeming with wildlife, breathtaking scenery, and characters larger than life. Voss's Florida was one that few knew and unfortunately one that has all but vanished.

Like any good fisherman, Gil begins his storytelling by making sure the reader knows that "the events described here, as far-fetched as some may seem, are all true" (p. 3). In each chapter Gil takes the reader on a journey into the Florida he grew up in and learned to love. Chapter 1 highlights an understudied piece of Prohibition history. According to Voss, nowhere in the country was Prohibition ignored like it was in Florida. For a young boy living in a small fishing town, Prohibition-era rum running was a spectator sport. Voss had a front row seat to the insufficient attempts of the federal government to regulate the wild southern frontier. Chapter 2 puts Gil's fishing knowledge on full display. Employing language unfamiliar to outsiders, though navigable through a provided glossary, Voss describes his introduction to commercial fishing. The reader receives a first-rate education on gill nets, the difficulties of commercial fishing, and how to name a trusty fishing vessel ("Dream Girl," "Old Wheezy," "Fun," and "Lucky Lady" come to mind). In chapter 3, Gil discusses the nuances of mullet fishing while introducing one of the most memorable characters of the book: a barefoot and shirtless restaurant owner known as Cap Knight. A skilled fisherman and a better cook (that is, if you're not troubled by fish with a side of sweat and cigarette ash), Cap Knight represents the essence of Voss's Old Florida. Cap was intimidating yet welcoming, deeply devoted to his community yet not hesitant to heave a man off a dock if he didn't enjoy his food. In many ways, Cap Knight and Voss's Florida seem locked in a struggle to remain in a disappearing frontier

while the rest of the world marches into the fullness of modernization.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 briefly describe the "art of cast netting," snapper fisherman, rumors of war, and a murderous barber with a disdain for "damned furriners from Georgia" (p. 44). While Voss paints a romantic picture of this bygone era, it is not without its fair share of racism and nativism. Though not exhibited by Gil himself, the characters that inhabit these pages lived with a deep suspicion of outsiders. On more than one occasion, Gil helped navigate prejudice that pitted "east coasters" against "Cedar Key Crackers" or his own coastguard crew and the "crooked Greeks." Voss does an exceptional job at highlighting even the more unfortunate realities of Old Florida. Easily the most life-changing of these realities was World War II. Gil enlisted in the US Coast Guard on December 22, 1941, to help protect Florida's coastline against the looming threats of German submarines and suspected landing of enemy spies. As chapters 7 through 11 illustrate, Gil's time in the Coast Guard allowed him to experience the colorful communities and characters of Old Florida, while furthering his love for the ecosystems that not only provide a backdrop to his tall tales, but also gave life to a young man in search of his place in the world.

After Gil was honorably discharged from the Coast Guard in December 1945, he worked at a number of odd jobs in and around Hypoluxo. Enrolling at the University of Miami in 1948, Gil began a long career that sought to conserve the Florida that he came to love. Gil knew what Florida's ecosystems once looked like--"what they were supposed to look like"--and he found himself in a position of authority to speak as one who had been deeply influenced by the Florida he saw disappearing (p. 138). Gilbert L. Voss passed away in 1989, leaving behind a legacy that earned him the title "Keeper of the Reefs" (p. 142).

Though Voss had an illustrious academic career, this collection is by no means academic in

nature. However, it provides a priceless window into untold local histories of Florida. It should serve as a reminder that there is always more to history than what the elite, institutional, or consensus narratives are able to capture. History is full of vibrant characters like Cap Knight, “Cedar Key Crackers,” and the “Filimingos,” waiting for their story to be told. Furthermore, Voss’s stories call attention to issues still threatening the Florida we know today. From the deterioration of Florida’s coral reefs to the unjust debt burdens carried by commercial fisherman, Voss challenges the reader to invest in the preservation of Florida’s ecosystems and all that inhabit them. In many ways, this memoir is one of great adventure and laughter, but also one that highlights the unfortunate realities of change. While Voss recounts experiences that are gut-wrenchingly funny, in the end, he witnessed entire communities disappear or be rendered unrecognizable. Gil’s tall tales call us to invest in our communities and preserve what one day might be our own “Old Florida.” At the end of this spirited collection of fishing tales, I am not entirely sure I know what Old Florida is, but whatever it is, Gil made me feel like a friend, longing to be a part of that bygone era and willing to help in the fight to preserve what’s left of it.

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