

**THE FLORIDA KEYS WAY BACK WHEN...**  
**(FISHING FOR KING MACKEREL IN THE "GOOD OLD DAYS" OF KEY WEST'S**  
**HISTORIC SEAPORT DISTRICT)**

BY

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INTRODUCTION

If you are one of that special breed of anglers that contract "kingfish fever" every winter when the word spreads around the docks that the "run" has arrived, you probably already know quite a bit about king mackerel (*Scomberomous cavalla*). You know where the fish school up, how to get them to bite, and what to do (or just as importantly, not to do!) when a 30 pound (plus) "smoker" king makes that long first run after taking the hook. But, what you may not know is that fishing for king mackerel has long had an important role in the maritime history of the Florida Keys, and of the Historic Seaport District that

encompasses Key West Bight (also known as the "Inner Harbor"). So, read on...

Before we go much further, we need to clarify just when were the "good old days"? Well, in this article, I'm talking about the years prior to the time when the Keys finally, and firmly, got set on the road to being "civilized". That year was 1938. It was then that the Keys were (so to speak ) first "linked to every doorstep in America" by the Overseas Highway (U.S. 1). Before then, the Keys (except for Key West) were mostly an undeveloped "God's Country". In fact, until Henry Flager's southern extension of the Florida East Coast Railroad was finished in 1912, you couldn't even get to the Keys other than by sea. So, if your fancy runs to imagining what fishing must have been like in a virtually unspoiled, underpopulated, wilderness, let 1938 or before serve as a somewhat arbitrary ending for the "good old days".

#### SOME HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

History doesn't record who caught the first king mackerel (kingfish) in the Florida Keys. What we do know is that since the 1780's kingfish were known to colonial Americans and to European visitors to the Keys. For example, in 1772, William DeBrahm authored a guide to coastwise piloting that included descriptions of the natural resources of Florida. He reported that in addition to many of the inshore species of fish now known to us, "farther

off, near the stream, are king-fish, dolphins, bonetoes, albigores...". Incidentally, this spelling, "king-fish" was also used by John Lee Williams in his 1837 "guide" to the Territory of Florida. Conversely, another early chronicle of Florida, that of James Grant Forbes (published in 1821) cites "king fish (no hyphen) among the list of fishes of the Florida Keys.

Prior to 1822, the Keys still belonged to Spain. There were no permanent settlements on these islands. That year, the U.S. took possession of Florida. Soon, a few enterprising Americans began building a small town at Key West. Much of its economy centered on the salvaging of sailing vessels sunk or grounded on the coral reefs of the Keys. But, there was another business in addition to this "wrecking" (as the salvage industry was called) that contributed greatly to the prosperity of the new town: fishing for the market at Havana (the nearest large city). Spaniards from Cuba, and the English from the Bahamas, had long been frequenting the Keys to fish, to catch sea turtles, and to cut lumber. But, after the U.S. Navy planted the American flag at Key West, the government moved to exclude these "interlopers" from the Keys. It was not long before the rich fishing grounds of the region were being visited by American fishermen. They mostly hailed from New England ports. Each winter, they would sail their fishing sloops to the Keys. These vessels each had a live well amidships. The catch, which chiefly consisted of groupers, could be held alive in the well until the trip ended at Havana. In time, the crews of these vessels

"put down roots" at Key West's Historic Seaport. Thus, the fishing industry expanded.

#### THE FISHERY FOR KING MACKEREL PRIOR TO 1900

When Key West was only a small settlement, much of the islander's food supply came from the sea. Thus, from 1820's on, king mackerel were probably in demand among the populace. Also, in those early days, it seems likely that exports of salted king mackerel to Havana were begun. Salt was used as a preservative because until 1890, there was no ice-making plant at Key West. By the early 1880's Havana had become the major market for king mackerel caught off the Keys.

Fishing for king mackerel was usually done from November through April. That was when huge schools of this species migrated to the Keys. Fishing was done by trolling under sail. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the type of vessel that was used in the nearshore fisheries of the Keys during the 19th century (some of these craft were even used early into the 20th century). This was the Key West sloop-rigged "smackee". These sturdy vessels were seldom longer than 25 feet (LOA). They typically carried a crew of two. A catch of groupers or other "bottom" fish could be held alive in a well amidships. But, active, surface schooling fish such as king mackerel, did not survive in the well. So, when trolling for kings, the well served just to hold the day's catch temporarily. By nightfall, crew would

either return to the docks along the Seaport and sell the catch, or if the crew intended to also fish the next day, anchor out for the night, and split the kings open and salt them for temporary preservation aboard the boat.

Each smackee was equipped with kingfish "drails". These were cotton handlines that ended in a short leader of brass wire to which a single stout hook was attached (Figure 3) by wrapping ("ganging") with thin wire. The wire leader prevented the sharp teeth of the kings from cutting the hooks off the cotton line. The hook was usually baited with pieces of skin from a freshly caught kingfish. Of course, the question arises, "what bait was used to catch the first king of the trip, so it could be used in turn as bait"? A fisherman (asked in 1885) replied this way: "oh, anything we happen to have..., sometimes a pork rind, a white rag, or something that looks white. This trip I took his stockings (pointing to his shipmate, a lad of seventeen or eighteen years) and first rate bait they made, too. The fish bit fast, and we caught nearly thirty before we had a chance to put on any other bait".

When on the grounds, a smackee sailed back and forth until a kingfish school was located.

It towed two drails, one to each side of the vessel. The baits skipped near the surface almost ten fathoms astern. Two more drails were kept in reserve. Once a fish struck, and as it was being pulled in, one of the "reserve"drails was set out. So, at all times, there were two lines fishing astern. If the fish ceased biting, the smackee was tacked and sailed

back over the same track she just passed over. Often several boats would sail side by side and close together when "working" a school. Kingfish schools often bite very fast, so one can imagine the dexterity with which the crews must pull in the fish and still manage their boats. On a good day a single boat might take 200 to 250 kingfish. But, there were times when the kings refuse to bite, or when too little wind (or too much wind) prevented fishing. So, the crews often stayed out as long as a week before catching enough fish to turn a profit.

An interesting (to some nowadays) aspect of the fishery for king mackerel was the location of the traditional grounds. Various period sources state the "principal grounds are from Love [Looe] Key to Sombrero Key". The boats usually fished " outside the range of the coastline, over bottom that slopes toward the Gulf Stream, and sometimes even in the inside waters of the latter". These grounds are "resorted to by the fishermen in preference to waters nearer Key West, where the same species [kingfish] occurs, but are not so plentiful".

Towards the end of the century, there were approximately 20-30 vessels in the king mackerel fishery. In 1895 (the only year for which I've found catch statistics) 420,000 pounds of kingfish, worth a total of \$7,000 (!) were landed at Key West. This doesn't include the many king mackerel that were undoubtedly taken by the island's anglers for

sport and the family table.

We know (from a diary written in the 1850's by Key West lawyer William Hackley) that prominent Key West businessmen often embarked on expeditions to go kingfishing. At least one of the islands largest and finest wrecking schooners was employed in this service from time to time. As did the commercial fleet, these sports anglers also sailed up the Keys to fish, but not so far. They fished closer to home at American Shoal. The trips usually began at dawn and ended early in the afternoon. Hackley records that on two of the kingfishing trips he made, the catches were 23 and 79 fish respectively. Of the latter trip, the largest king weighed 40 pounds, and the smallest fish were "15 to 20 pounds". Not bad for short day's work, even by today's standards!

#### THE FISHERY FOR KING MACKEREL AFTER 1900

With the dawn of the twentieth century, change came to the fisheries of the Florida Keys. The old sailing craft were replaced with power boats. More importantly, the railroad linked the Keys to the great urban markets of the mainland. There, the demand for fresh fish was strong (particularly in the winter). In addition, over the years, the ice making facilities at Key West had been improved and expanded. Thus, by the end of World War One, the

seafood dealers of the Historic Seaport District were shipping fish to northern markets in lots that filled whole railroad cars.

As one observer remarked in 1923, "for kingfish fishing a seaworthy powerboat is of the first importance". Although some sailing vessels were still in use, they were considered "rather unsuitable except under unusually favorable weather". The powerboats (Figure 4) were wooden vessels 24-50 feet long with full displacement hulls. They were decked over forward of the helm and open aft. Few had wheelhouses or trunk cabins. Power was provided by "Palmer", "Regal", or similar types of two-cycle inboard gasoline engines. Such single and double cylinder engines were generally rated at 2 to 16 h.p. So, the boats they powered were no speed demons. Old timers remember going in such craft and remarking (as a joke) "look, she's making a ripple at the bow. We're really going fast now"! Because of the limited speed and range of these fishing vessels, they were often accompanied on the grounds by larger "runboats". These served as "motherships" to carry ice, fuel, and other provisions to the troll boats. The runboats also served as a handy means to transport catches of king mackerel back to port, so that the trolling boats could make more extended fishing trips.

The actual method of catching king mackerel differed little from that used in the 19th century. The two man crews trolled cotton handlines astern, one man fishing while the



other managed the boat. Strips of kingfish flesh were still the favored bait. Even so, block tin squids were trolled in order to catch the first kings of the trip for bait. Reportedly, it was "not unusual for a boat to cruise about for most of a day without catching a fish, and often the catch scarcely pays for the fuel consumed. But, in the long run, the fishing is usually profitable as a catch of several thousand pounds now and then more than offsets the days of loss".

By the early 1930's, it seems that the most popular kingfishing grounds had shifted more to the westward. These were described thusly in 1936: "About 45 miles west of Key West, in the vicinity of Marquesas Keys...is a watery waste dubbed "No Man's Land" ... Commercial fishermen risk the elements and dangerous straits to assemble in this place when the fish [king mackerel] are running... the author [angling writer Moise Kaplan] has observed there, during January, all kinds of vessels, from comfortable yachts to mere floating barques-everything that could carry one or more fishermen and hold a hundred or more of these fishes. The total poundage of great kingfishes taken from this single place, when the commercial fleet's operation is at its height, is tremendous".

That was indeed true. Annual catch statistics indicate that king mackerel landings at Key West averaged about 400,000 pounds in the years immediately following World War One. They reached the million pound level by the late 1920's. Reportedly, the crews were paid

about six cents a pound for their fish during the inter-war period. The number of vessels involved is poorly known. A number of crews and boats from more northerly ports came to the Keys each winter to join Key West locals on the kingfish grounds. A reasonable estimate is that 75-100 boats were in the commercial fishery. Most of these were based at the docks that once ringed the Seaport. Such craft were also joined by the vessels of the growing fraternity of sports anglers and charterboat captains. There were at least three charter boats operating out of Key West in the early 1920's, and with passing years, their numbers swelled. In addition, starting in the 1920's, there were a handful of charterboats based at Pirate's Cove resort on Sugarloaf Key, and at the Long Key Fishing Camp (before it was swept away by the 1935 hurricane).

The boats used for king fishing by sports anglers and by the charter captains differed somewhat from those used by the commercial trollers. Figure 5 shows a typical "sportsfishing yacht" of the early 1930's tied to the dock at Key West's Casa Marina Resort. Unlike the commercial boats, the sportsfishing boats usually had a trunk cabin, a glassed enclosed wheelhouse, more horsepower, and a higher standard of exterior finish. The sports anglers also had their own ideas about the tackle they used for trolling. No simple cotton handlines for them! Instead, heavy duty rods and reels were used. And, "patent spoons", trolling feathers, and other lures were usually favored by the anglers. Although sports anglers probably ventured all the way to "No Man's Land", most fishing reports of

the period indicate that fishing generally occurred closer to the Keys, along the reef, and off Northwest Channel. Such reports often cite catches of better than 400 lbs of kingfish per angling trip. Now, those were the good old days!.

*About the author: Ed Little is a marine biologist who works for the National Marine Fisheries Service. He routinely samples the landings of commercial fishermen and sports anglers to gather data on species biology, catch/effort, and trends in the fisheries. He has lived at Key West since 1976 and is an avid fisherman.*

*About the Key West Maritime Historical Society: This is a non-profit, all volunteer Society with over 200 members. It exists to increase public awareness and appreciation of the rich maritime past of the Florida Keys. The Society publishes a unique historical quarterly, **The Florida Keys Sea Heritage Journal**. It is mailed to all members, even those not residing in the Keys. For more information about the Society, you can call (305) 292-7903, or visit the Society's web page, [www.keywestmaritime.org](http://www.keywestmaritime.org)*