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Fulford heads into Ag Hall of Fame

By Cindy Lane
sun staff writer

CORTEZ — There's only one thing that would delight Blue Fulford more than his induction into the Manatee County Agricultural Hall of Fame and that's the elimination of the commercial ban on gill nets.

But at the moment, Thomas Rollan Fulford Jr., 73, is so moved by the event that his sky blue eyes get cloudy when he talks about it.

"I've seen those portraits at the agricultural museum and thought what an honor it must be to be there among the elite of Manatee County," he said, before the induction ceremony this week, crediting Providence with the honor. "I am truly humbled."

Agriculture and commercial fishing were the mainstays of the county's economy before tourism, Fulford said. "We thought it was something to be proud of."

But in 1994, voters passed a state constitutional amendment eliminating gill nets, used to catch mullet, a Cortez staple. Many fishermen, including himself and one son, were forced into other occupations. Fulford opened Cortez Quality Castnets, which he still operates from his home.

He sold his boat to another fisherman, but still catches sight of it occasionally while he's sitting on the Cortez docks having a bite to eat. "It makes me feel good to see him go by with it loaded down," he said.

There wasn't any good reason for the net ban, Fulford said.

"Fish just come in cycles," he said, adding that the biggest killer of fish over the years has been red tide. Outbreaks in 1947 and another in 1953 "killed more fish than all the fishermen caught all their life," he said. "There was no need to outlaw an entire culture and way of life."

It would take a monumental effort to repeal the net ban, he said, but it could be relaxed, and at least taken out of the constitution and put under the state's Fish



STAFF PHOTO/CINDY LANE

Thomas "Blue" Fulford Jr. works on his net at his shop, Cortez Quality Castnets. He is being inducted into the Manatee County Agricultural Hall of Fame this week.



and Wildlife Conservation Commission, he said.

Fulford was a lobbyist for the Organized Fishermen of Florida during the 1970s when two significant laws were passed – reserving the regulation of fisheries to the state rather than local governments, and removing non-power boats from the registration process.

“OFF tried to protect fish and not hamstring fishermen at the same time,” he said. “We always wanted biologists and scientists to decide the regulations.”

Relaxing the ban could throw a lifeline to the vanishing legacy of commercial fishing in Cortez, but it would have to happen soon, while those who know the business firsthand are still around, Fulford said.

“Nobody’s passing along the knowledge, so it will die,” he said.

He’s gratified that the 1912 Cortez schoolhouse is being converted to the Florida Gulf Coast Maritime Museum at Cortez. As President Emeritus of the Florida Institute for Saltwater Heritage, a grass roots group that bought 95 acres of prime waterfront on the eastern edge of Cortez for preservation, he has been involved in the creation of the museum, adjacent to the FISH Preserve. But it’s hard for a museum to preserve the knowledge of a type of fishing that’s no longer practiced, he said.

“You can’t really write it in a book,” said Fulford, adding that his idea of a museum is more than artifacts covered in dust. “You’ve got to show people.”

Fulford learned to fish as a boy by watching his uncle, Tink Fulford, and he passed it on to his sons, Larry and Paul. He and his wife, Juanda, also have a daughter, Terrie Canon, a former banker who works at the Ritz Carlton in Sarasota.

His family took priority during the 1950s, keeping him from serving in the Korean War. He had been too young to serve during World War II, but that suited him; he always had a dread of losing an arm or a leg in the service, he said.

Tragically, it was his chosen occupation of fishing that cost him a leg in 1987. But it didn’t stop him from fishing. “I’ve never been tolerant of those who don’t want to work,” he said.

His philosophy of fishing is to take care of nature. “We are responsible for this earth and should leave it in as good a shape as we found it,” he said. A recent boat trip around his old fishing grounds was poignant for Fulford. “I didn’t recognize the shoreline because of the development. All the old landmarks are gone,” he said.

But as long as there are people fishing off Cortez, he has hope for future generations.

What would he most like to see passed down?

“What has been our downfall – that is our fierce independence,” Fulford said, explaining that during the net ban controversy, fishermen with their independent ideas formed too many splinter groups to successfully fight the united opposition.

But that independence is what kept Cortez from relying on government assistance during the Depression, a point of honor among many longtime villagers.

“I guess it was hard times but I didn’t know it,” Fulford said. “We never missed a meal living in Cortez. We used to say that we had fish and grits for breakfast, fish and grits for dinner and leftovers for supper.”

There are a couple of stories about how Fulford got his nickname, Blue – his very blue eyes, for example - but he thinks it came from his mother, who used to make him recite the rhyme, “Little boy blue come blow your horn.” He did it so often, “People would say, ‘Here comes little boy Blue,’” he recalled.

A grandchild now proudly bears the name, carrying on the heritage of the unofficial mayor of Cortez.

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