

## TRANSCRIPT

**INTERVIEWEE:** Gary Rinn

**INTERVIEWER:** David Todd

**DATE:** March 7, 2024

**LOCATION:** Freeport, Texas

**SOURCE MEDIA:** M4A, MP3 audio files

**TRANSCRIPTION:** Trint, David Todd

**REEL:** 4195

**FILE:** FlowerGardens\_Rinn\_Gary\_FreeportTX\_7March2024\_Reel4195.mp3

**David Todd** [00:00:02] Well. Good morning.

**David Todd** [00:00:03] I'm David Todd. And I have the privilege of being here with Gary Rinn.

**David Todd** [00:00:07] And with his permission, we plan on recording this interview for research and educational work on behalf of a non-profit group, the Conservation History Association of Texas, for a book and a website for Texas A&M University Press, and finally for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History, which is at the University of Texas in Austin.

**David Todd** [00:00:30] And he would have all rights to use the recording as he sees fit.

**David Todd** [00:00:34] And I wanted to make sure that's okay with Mr. Rinn.

**Gary Rinn** [00:00:38] That's great.

**David Todd** [00:00:39] Okay. Let's go. Let's get started. It is Thursday, March 7th, 2024. It's about 10:30 AM Central Time.

**David Todd** [00:00:49] My name, as I said, is David Todd. I am representing the Conservation History Association of Texas, and I am in Austin, and we are conducting a remote interview with Gary Rinn, who is based in the Demijohn Island area of Texas, not too far from Freeport and, Oyster Creek.

**David Todd** [00:01:07] So, Mr. Rinn is an experienced diver and boat operator. For a number of years, he ran charter boats, including the M/V Fling and the M.V. Spree. They gave access, often subsidized, for researchers to the Flower Gardens and nearby dive sites in the northwestern Gulf of Mexico, as well as other places. He also helped found a non-profit group, the Gulf Reef Environmental Action Team, that organized installation of mooring buoys at the Flower Gardens, and did other things on behalf of the reefs out there.

**David Todd** [00:01:43] So, today we'll talk about Mr. Rinn's life and career, to date, and especially focus on what he can tell us about the Flower Gardens and the associated reefs.

**David Todd** [00:01:55] So, I thought we might just start kind of chronologically and wondering if you could fill us in on any people or events in your early life that might have influenced your interest in the outdoors, in the ocean, diving, boats, all those good things.

**Gary Rinn** [00:02:12] That's hard to say. From the time of my earliest memories, I've always enjoyed the water. We lived in Houston when I was a little kid, and, I can remember going to

the pool and begging my parents to let me jump off the diving board when I could barely swim. And, to this day, I'd rather be on, in or under the water.

**Gary Rinn** [00:02:46] Growing up, we moved to Jacksonville, Florida when I was eight years old, and we lived fairly close to the beach. So, I was either surfing or snorkeling or fishing growing up, you know, all the way through high school. I got into competitive swimming probably when I was about 10 or 12 years old. You know, not AAU level, but, you know, the different neighborhoods had civic association pools, and we competed around the city of Jacksonville. But, like I said, I've always loved the water.

**David Todd** [00:03:33] It sounds like a lot of this was just you were sort of following your instincts and, you know, interests. But did you have friends or were your parents really supportive in, you know, sort of driving you to the pool or, you know, were their friends that you might have linked up with, when you were surfing or snorkeling?

**Gary Rinn** [00:03:52] Well, you know, just the usual childhood friends. But, oddly enough, my parents were both born and raised in a farmhouse in West Texas. Had no use for the water. I have two brothers, neither of whom have any use for the water. For some reason, I was the, I was the only one. I was actually, they used to joke, I was the only one born outside of Texas. I was born in Honolulu, Hawaii. My dad was a Navy aviator and was recalled for the Korean War and stationed at Pearl Harbor. And, so I was the only one of the family, the entire extended family, including who knows how many cousins who was not born in the state of Texas. And, so they often joked about, you know, maybe it was being born in Hawaii that I was the fish.

**David Todd** [00:04:50] That may be the reason.

**David Todd** [00:04:53] So, we also like to ask people about their years in school, and I was wondering if there are any teachers or classmates or classes or field trips that you might have taken during that part of your life that were influential in your interest in the water and fish.

**Gary Rinn** [00:05:13] There's really nothing that I can really point out. It's just one of those things where, sure, I had childhood friends that we shared interest. You know, had friends with older brothers that, you know, had a driver's license that could take us to the beach and carry our surfboards. But, no, there's not any particular teacher or individual that stands out in my mind.

**David Todd** [00:05:44] Okay. Self-taught, I guess.

**Gary Rinn** [00:05:49] I will say this, like I said, I grew up in Jacksonville, Florida. My oldest brother married his college sweetheart, who lived in San Antonio. Both my brothers went to Texas Lutheran College. And when my brother was getting married, we came to visit from Florida, of course, for the wedding. And my brother's future brother-in-law was a SCUBA diver. And I was 12 years old. And his girlfriend had dropped a ring over the side of the boat when they were skiing in Canyon Lake. And, Eddie took some ranges on it and went out the next day with his dive gear, and I got invited to go along.

**Gary Rinn** [00:06:41] And long story short, he didn't find the ring. But I begged with him to let me try diving. And so, my dive class was, "Well, clear your ears on the way down. Don't hold your breath when you're coming up. And don't come up any faster than your smallest bubbles." And over the side I went. And so, even though I grew up in Florida, my first dive was

in Canyon Lake in Texas, and I didn't dive again until I was in college. I did snorkel a lot. I had a college friend who was a diver, and we went diving in Lake Travis when I was a freshman, and that's when I really got hooked.

**David Todd** [00:07:31] Do you remember any of those early dives, either in Lake Travis or Canyon Lake?

**Gary Rinn** [00:07:37] Well, the Canyon Lake dive was more or less go to the bottom at about 30 feet. Stir up the silt and come back up, hoping not to hurt myself. But yeah, as far as the dives in Lake Travis, I have no idea how many I made. Once I started diving in college, I ended up applying for a job at J. Rich Sports. That was a sporting goods store that started in Houston. There were two stores in Houston and they were opening up the one in Austin, and I heard that they had a dive department. So, I went out there and applied for job, got hired. This was when I was a, I guess, it was my sophomore year in college.

**Gary Rinn** [00:08:25] And so, I worked at the dive shop, and they encouraged me to go and get my assistant instructor's certification, which I did. And then, went on, when I turned 21 (back then you had to be 21) to become an instructor.

**Gary Rinn** [00:08:44] They financed my way through all my SCUBA instructor classes, which were held at Rice University. There was a NAUI, National Association of Underwater Instructors, training course.

**Gary Rinn** [00:08:59] So, I started teaching classes for J. Rich, you know, obviously sport diving classes. J. Rich had a pool there on site in Northcross Mall that we used for training.

**Gary Rinn** [00:09:15] And from there, we got a contract with the University of Texas to teach the Informal Union class for scuba diving. Back then, you could take literally anything from basket weaving to sky diving. It wasn't part of the curriculum. It was just informal classes through the Texas Union. And those classes, we had 30 students in. So, we used a lecture hall on campus. And then the students would come out ten at a time to our facility there in Northcross Mall and do the pool work.

**Gary Rinn** [00:09:59] So, I taught a number, assisted and taught, a number of these Informal Union classes. And we, you know, and I think it was the second class we did, I was talking to some of the guys after the class, I said, "You know, sure would be nice if we could do our dives somewhere besides Lake Travis". And we came up with the idea of running a motorhome trip down to the Florida Keys. We decided to see if we could pull that off during spring break.

**Gary Rinn** [00:10:33] And I found an individual with a big motorhome that would actually lease it to a college student. And we took the motorhome. I think there were, on those trips, I believe we took 12 people. We had the motorhome. We had a pickup truck towing a pop-up camper, and we had all of our dive gear stowed anywhere we could stow it.

**Gary Rinn** [00:11:00] And drove straight through down to Key Largo and stayed in a campground there. And I was familiar with Key Largo because I had been there on an aborted trip to the Bahamas (weather was too bad for a sailboat trip). So, we ended up in Key Largo the year before. So, I was familiar with one of the dive shops and, so we booked, they gave us group rates and basically we weren't, I wasn't making any money, but I was getting a free dive trip, and having a ball.

**Gary Rinn** [00:11:34] And I think it was after my third motorhome trip down there, that dive shop had offered me a job to come down, and, you know, work in the shop as an instructor. And so I said, "Well, you know, I've still got another semester left of school". He said, "Well, the job's probably not going to be open for another 6 or 8 months anyway". Well, we happened to be also diving with another dive shop on that trip because the American Diving headquarters, where we had been dining with, dove the north end of Pennekamp Park, which is now part of the Key Largo National Marine Sanctuary, or now Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

**Gary Rinn** [00:12:20] This other dive shop dove the southern end of the park. So anyway, I was in there, talking to, one of the owners, Charlotte Crawford, and I said, "Alice Kitchens up in American Diving headquarters offered me a job. I'm thinking about coming down, maybe for a year." And, she said, "Well, that that would be neat. We'd, you know, we'd be glad to have you."

**Gary Rinn** [00:12:47] Well, I no more got back to Austin from that trip when I got a call, when I'm at J. Rich Sports, from Charlotte Crawford asking me if I was serious about coming to work because they needed somebody to come right away.

**Gary Rinn** [00:13:02] And so I talked it over with my parents and I said, "I'm just going to take off for a year." At that time, I was big into still underwater photography. And, I said, "Well, I'll just go down there and I'll spend a year, have a good time, and, and come back and finish school."

**Gary Rinn** [00:13:22] So, I left and drove down to Key Largo in May after that semester ended. And, lo and behold, I ended up being there for seven and a half years.

**Gary Rinn** [00:13:34] But, I went to work for, it was Tropical Dive shop. And, that was the start of my dive career, you know, after working at J. Rich Sports, which was just a college job.

**Gary Rinn** [00:13:54] I did fail to mention that, while I was at J. Rich, I also made a number of trips out in the Gulf. My first dive at the Flower Gardens was, I believe, was in '75. There was a charter boat that went out of Sabine Pass, that really was a party fishing boat. It was an old wood boat - pretty rough, 65 feet - called the "Silver King II". The owner and captain's name was actually Alden E. Blood - Captain Blood.

**Gary Rinn** [00:14:29] Cap had run fishing trips and diving trips. He was a diving instructor. And of course, to me, he seemed ancient, but he was probably in his, I would guess, in his early 50s at that time.

**Gary Rinn** [00:14:45] And we slept wherever we could sleep on the deck. We could bring our own food, although they did have a griddle on the boat. But being a college student, I couldn't afford it. So, I brought, you know, baloney and cheese and such as that.

**Gary Rinn** [00:15:01] And that was my introduction to the Flower Gardens.

**Gary Rinn** [00:15:05] After I moved to the Keys, I used to come back to Houston every year for the annual SeaSpace Dive show. That was a consumer dive show. And I had a booth, you know, promoting my dive operation in Key Largo. And I did make a couple of trips to the Flower Gardens during that time, on converted or, actually, chartered crew boats. There was, you know, there were a number of times there were some lags in the oil field industry, and these boat owners were looking for anything to make a dollar. And, so they'd throw a

temporary dive platform on, and we'd make a run, leave out at 10:00 at night, run all night, get to the Flower Gardens, make two dives, and run back in.

**Gary Rinn** [00:16:03] So, even while I was in the Keys, like I said, I made at least a couple of trips to the Flower Gardens. But they were short trips.

**Gary Rinn** [00:16:14] But while I was in, working for Tropical Dive Shop, one of the boat captains there was a guy named John Haus and John and I got to be good friends. And, he approached me one time and asked me if I'd be interested in opening up our own dive operation. And of course, I reminded him, "John, I'm only, I only plan to be here for a year." But we talked it over and decided that it was viable. So, we ended up leasing a space. He had a six-passenger boat and I had \$1,800. So, we combined his boat, my \$1,800. And I bought all the rental gear, and an old ancient compressor. And that's how we got started.

**Gary Rinn** [00:17:11] After, maybe 6 or 8 months in business, we bought a 34-foot, 20-passenger boat. And we were routinely running trips, you know, day trips and night dives, out of Key Largo.

**David Todd** [00:17:37] Let's take a pause there and, ask you another question that may go back further in time, but that may be a starting point for some of these other adventures that you, you, have been telling us about. And that is, a lot of people that we talked to, had some experience with the public media, you know, books, movies, TV shows that might have gotten them excited about their eventual career. And I just wondering if that's the case with you.

**Gary Rinn** [00:18:14] Oh, yeah. Well, of course, my generation is "Sea Hunt", Lloyd Bridges. You know, never, never missed an episode. And then, of course, along came Jacques Cousteau, and, you know, his TV documentaries. You know, what's not to like?

**Gary Rinn** [00:18:39] I will tell you a funny story. I told you I made my first dive when I was 12, in Texas, and we were still living in Jacksonville. My next-door neighbor, had a swimming pool, and so I had gotten that diving bug. And so, Skip, Skipper, my next-door neighbor, and I decided we were going to we were going to make our own diving rig.

**Gary Rinn** [00:19:05] And, you know, looking back on it, we, we actually were getting fairly close to doing it right. But we started out with a Clorox bottle that we rinsed out thoroughly. And we had a garden hose and an old snorkel mouthpiece. And of course, we had mask and fins. And so, we decided that that that was worth trying in his pool.

**Gary Rinn** [00:19:32] Well, obviously, we couldn't sink with a Clorox bottle strapped to our back, and we couldn't pull the air out of it.

**Gary Rinn** [00:19:40] So, we came up with the idea of taking a plastic bag and sticking it in there. And, you know, because we realized it would act as a, you know, a bellows that we could suck air out and blow air back in. Well, that didn't work either.

**Gary Rinn** [00:19:57] So, then we got the bright idea of cutting slices in the Clorox bottle that would allow the water pressure to, you know, help compress the bag when we inhaled. And we realized we had a hard time exhaling back into the bag. And also, we couldn't get down.

**Gary Rinn** [00:20:18] So, we took a bunch of the pyramid fishing weights, like they use mostly for surf fishing, and we took some old Dacron fishing line and wrapped those weights all around that bottle to try to weight us down.

**Gary Rinn** [00:20:32] And the first time I tried it, I tried to make a surface dive, you know, dip down headfirst. And one of those weights swung around and hit me right in the back of the head, and we decided to abandon that idea after that. But, we tried.

**David Todd** [00:20:53] How old were you?

**Gary Rinn** [00:20:55] I think I was 12.

**David Todd** [00:20:56] 12? Very resourceful.

**Gary Rinn** [00:21:00] Yeah. This was over several days of trying to figure this out, you know. You know, of course it's a good thing we never got it to work because we'd have killed ourselves, you know, CO poisoning or CO<sub>2</sub>, you know, inhaling and exhaling out of the same bag.

**David Todd** [00:21:18] Well, quite an experiment.

**David Todd** [00:21:23] You touched on the Flower Gardens a couple times when you've been discussing your early dive experience. I was wondering if you could talk to us at all about, you know, the earliest days of Flower Gardens. I mean, before maybe you had personal experience, but, do you know much about these, you know, early years. I understand that the Flower Garden reefs first showed up on maps in, like, the mid-'30s. So, I guess it was known. Do you know when people might have started visiting and how they got there and what they did?

**Gary Rinn** [00:22:04] I've read some history of the Flower Gardens. And of course, it was a long time ago, so I've forgotten so much of it. But I think the Flower Gardens were actually known in the 1800s. You know, of course, it was a hit and miss if you happened to sail over them during the daylight hours, particularly on a calm day, you can see them from the surface. And, you know, when they were first charted, I really can't tell you.

**Gary Rinn** [00:22:34] But they were called the Flower Gardens because they'd bring up pieces of bright coral that, you know, looked like flowers. And it actually resembles, on a calm, clear day, you can see the different colors and the sand patches from the surface. And you could easily think that, yeah, it does kind of look like a flower garden.

**David Todd** [00:22:59] Can you recall this first dive that you made on the Flower Garden? I think it was in 1975. Is that right?

**Gary Rinn** [00:23:09] Yeah. The first thing that that comes to mind, I had a couple of my students that were fairly newly certified. They'd only been diving in the San Marcos River and Lake Travis. And we went out on the Silver King II with Captain Blood. And we pulled up the first morning, got anchored. The first thing one of them said, he looked over the side, he says, "You can see the bottom." Of course, the bottom, the sand there, was, you know, 75 feet or better. And, that, that was the first thing that amazed everybody was the clarity of the water - that you could actually see the bottom at that depth.

**Gary Rinn** [00:23:55] The Flower Gardens doesn't have any soft corals in the way of sea fans and things like that - basically all hard corals, very, very large, brain corals. So, it's a different looking reef than what you would see, say, in the Caribbean or in Florida. A lot of undercut ledges. Quite a unique place. Lots, lots of fish.

**David Todd** [00:24:34] So, this first dive, you're 21, but you're experienced. I mean, you know, you've dove in a pool. You dove in Florida, dove in Canyon Lake and Lake Travis. Do you remember what really struck you? The fish, the brain coral? Anything else that, you know, really hit you?

**Gary Rinn** [00:24:58] The visibility, you know - being that most people think of the Gulf of Mexico as what they see at the beach at Galveston or, you know, Corpus Christi. But once you get offshore, the water turns crystal blue. It's not always that way, but most of the time. And, you know, when you're going from 12 feet of visibility diving in a place like Lake Travis, to 100 feet of visibility in blue water, it's quite a, quite a difference. Makes an impression.

**David Todd** [00:25:32] Well, and it sounds like it was the sort of thing that not only would make an impression on you, but on your students from J. Rich and I gather you saw that there was a business opportunity there, that that maybe you could get into the charter boat business yourself. I understand that you bought a boat, the M/V Fling, in 1988, an old offshore service boat. Is that right?

**Gary Rinn** [00:26:03] Right. Yeah.

**David Todd** [00:26:05] Tell us about how that got started.

**Gary Rinn** [00:26:07] Well, again, I had a dive charter business there in Key Largo, and, I was there from '76 to '83, moved back to Texas in the fall of '83, decided it was time to get back into the real world. And so, I moved back to Houston, because I had family here and friends, and also, I met my wife, in Key Largo. She was from Houston, and she was down on a dive trip. I had already sold my business and was in the process of selling my house and moving back to Texas. But I was running boats for other dive operators, if a captain wanted a day off, or called in sick.

**Gary Rinn** [00:26:56] And I happened to be running a boat for that same dive shop that I actually went to work for when I first moved the Keys. I got a call from Charlotte Crawford that morning and said, "Hey, Captain Jack's sick and, could you run for him today?" And I said, "Sure."

**Gary Rinn** [00:27:14] So, I go in there and we had a pretty good-sized group. I think we had 16 or 17 people on the boat. And, but Charlotte asked me to hold on to the dock because another dive shop was sending two divers over who had missed their boat. And, it happened to be my wife and a friend of hers.

**Gary Rinn** [00:27:38] And anyway, so I was real impressed because she and her friend were the only two that didn't get seasick between the first and second dive. And I asked them to come up on the bridge on the way in, and, that's how we met. And it just so happens that I was moving back to the Houston area anyway, and I found out she was from Houston, and then she came back and visited me in Key Largo, I don't know, a few months later, while I was in the process of trying to just to sell my house, you know, and make the move. And so, anyway, we moved back to Houston.

**Gary Rinn** [00:28:17] And, I was not, I was ready to get back into the real world, but I was still kind of hooked on dive boats. And, you know, I made some trips out with friends that had boats, out diving on oil platforms and so forth. Nobody, at that time, was running trips to the Flower Gardens (so, I'm talking about in the, early to mid '80s).

**Gary Rinn** [00:28:47] I actually got into the commercial real estate business as a broker, salesman during that period of time in Houston, when the market was circling the drain. And, you know, of course, I had a captain's license and was always looking for ways to make little extra money on the weekends. And I ran a boat here and there for people.

**Gary Rinn** [00:29:12] And then one of the dive shops in Houston, whom I had some relationship with for years, even going back to my college days, asked me if I could help him find a dive boat that could run trips to the Flower Garden banks.

**Gary Rinn** [00:29:27] And, so I ended up driving down to Freeport and went to Captain Elliot's Party Boats. You know, they had party fishing boats, and just started asking questions if they knew of any boat that could be suitable for running trips to the Flower Gardens. And it just so happens that one of the guys there had just taken a phone call from a man in New Iberia, Louisiana, that had a converted crew boat, that was converted for diving, actually overnight trips.

**Gary Rinn** [00:30:02] So, he gave me the phone number. I called the guy, set him up with a dive shop. He brought the boat over. This was in '87. And we started running weekend trips to the Flower Gardens. But they were one-day trips. We left Friday night, ran all night, made two dives at the Flower Gardens, dived an oil platform on the way in, got back in, you know, early evening on Saturday and turned around and did it again. But, but only on weekends.

**Gary Rinn** [00:30:41] That's where I saw the potential for a business because there were a lot of people that wanted to do the trips. But I realized that doing one-day trips is not the way to go. It's too much wear and tear on the boat. It's too tiring for the people, you know. If you're running out there, even in a 100-foot crew boat, if you're running in anything more than just about a two-foot sea, it's hard to sleep if you're not, you know, a boater, not used to being on the water.

**Gary Rinn** [00:31:17] And so, after that, in '87, like I said, I realized there was a potential, you know, to make a business of it. I started researching around for boats that were, you know, possibilities for conversion to dive boats. And you got to keep in mind, back in '87 and '88, there are oilfield boats rafted up all up and down the coast of Texas and Louisiana because the oilfield was, you know, in the toilet.

**Gary Rinn** [00:31:53] And so, I started looking through different publications. There was one called, "Boats and Harbors" that advertised everything from boats for sale to boat parts, engines, hatches, whatever, whatever you could find. And I located a couple of boats that fit the bill, and they were in Patterson, Louisiana.

**Gary Rinn** [00:32:19] And I called the caretaker of the boats and, he said, "Yeah, I've got these two 100-footers. And I've got a 110." And they were, they had been foreclosed on by the Maritime Administration who had put up the financing. Like I said, there were boats who were foreclosed everywhere at that time. Oilfield was in the tank.



**Gary Rinn** [00:32:45] So, bottom line is a friend of mine and I drove over there and looked at the two boats and decided that the Fling was a little more beat up than the sister ship, Adventure. And so, I made an offer on it and it passed on to the owner, who was actually Gentry Pacific Marine owned it. They were out of Hawaii, and they had bought those boats, they were going to use them for offshore support for their racing teams. Yeah, they did offshore race boats. And, they decided, well, they don't need the 100-footers. They were going to use the 110-footer.

**Gary Rinn** [00:33:35] And, long story short, I made an offer. They grudgingly accepted it.

**Gary Rinn** [00:33:41] We took it to a shipyard there in Morgan City area and had it basically converted from a crew boat configuration where we took all the tires off of it, took all the seats out of it, built in bunks, built in a little galley.

**Gary Rinn** [00:33:59] And, we ended up bringing it back over here to Texas in June of '88.

**Gary Rinn** [00:34:10] And of course, for months I had been going to the dive shops all over Texas, you know, promoting this idea that we're going to have a dive boat and we're only going to run minimum of two-day trips. And, we strictly wholesaled to dive stores and they retailed it. I believe that first year, if it was a Saturday-Sunday trip, I think we wholesaled it at 225, and they retailed it for 275.

**Gary Rinn** [00:34:51] So, we didn't have to deal with any of the bookings. The dive shops would buy from us in blocks of ten, and it was their responsibility to retail the trips out. They were happy because they were making money per head, and they were getting all the rental gear and incidental sales.

**Gary Rinn** [00:35:10] And that first year, we ran mostly weekends. We had a few Thursday-Friday trips. And, we got lucky, though, and landed a charter with a company called Continental Shelf Associates out of Jupiter, Florida. They had done work in previous years at the Flower Gardens doing coral monitoring studies. And they booked us, I believe it was for ten days. And that really pretty much saved my bacon getting that charter, because not only did we get paid for ten days, that would have gone unbooked, but it started a relationship with Continental Shelf Associates that continued on for years.

**Gary Rinn** [00:36:10] We did a number of research jobs with them, not only to the Flower Gardens, but also over in Mississippi Sound. We actually did some toxicity studies where we took them out to various platforms around the Gulf where they caught fish and shot fish, and preserved them in special wraps and freezers for later analysis to see if there were heavy metals and so forth, you know, coming from these drilling operations.

**Gary Rinn** [00:36:46] But anyway, so back to 1988. We finished 1988 and made enough money to survive. 1989 pretty much turned the corner for us. Once we had our feet, you know, underneath us, and I did more promotions to dive shops, we started filling up trips way in advance. Like I said, we wholesaled to shops. Word spread. We ended up picking up shops in Louisiana, Mississippi, even Missouri, Oklahoma, Arkansas. And By 1990, believe it or not, we were full all the time. Every trip, we booked.

**Gary Rinn** [00:37:42] And again, it wasn't my spectacular salesmanship. It was the dive shops promoting the trips. We wholesaled. They retailed.

**Gary Rinn** [00:37:53] Of course, in order to have a dive boat, you have to have, you know, an air system, you know, for safe air fills. And that first year I bought a dump of a compressor that lasted all but one trip. Got rid of it, got another one, and, we ran, I think the first two years with only one compressor, which is a little bit scary because if it breaks, since you're a dive boat and you're 100 miles offshore, you're out of the dive business. So, you either fix it or you come back. I learned a lot about compressors pretty early on.

**Gary Rinn** [00:38:42] But by 1990, we had two compressors, where you had a backup.

**Gary Rinn** [00:38:50] The business continued to grow to the point where... You know, the problem with running 100 miles offshore in the Gulf of Mexico, there is no protection when you get there. You can't hide behind an island or a reef. The water's deep. So, our biggest enemy was weather - primarily wind. You know, trying to explain to some people that wind makes waves, sometimes doesn't compute.

**Gary Rinn** [00:39:22] But, you know, we got real tight with the National Weather Service office people in League City. Also, there was an oil platform adjacent to the East Flower Gardens, which was a Mobil platform, High Island 389. We got pretty chummy with them. And they only had (it was a production platform), but they only had two people on it at a time. That's all they needed. Everything was automated, and, I had their phone number. And I could pick up the phone and find out what the weather was really like out there, not just what the predictions were.

**Gary Rinn** [00:40:05] And so we used both the Weather Service, National Weather Service, and direct communications out there at the Flower Gardens to find out whether or not we were going to run a trip.

**Gary Rinn** [00:40:18] By this time, we were running trips where we left on Sunday night, and we returned on Wednesday night. Went back out Wednesday night, returned Friday night. Turned it around on Friday night, came back on Sunday night.

**Gary Rinn** [00:40:38] Of course, the summer season is the most calm, stable weather, particularly after you get through mid-July, right on through mid-September, is kind of what I would consider the sweet spot. So, our schedule up to that point was we pretty much started operations in May, and we went through October and shut down.

**Gary Rinn** [00:41:04] But the trips got so popular and the demand was so high, that people were willing to risk having a trip canceled, due to weather, to even go, you know, into later in the year - November, December.

**Gary Rinn** [00:41:25] And the way we worked that is, since our trips left at around 10 or 11:00 at night, we made our weather call at 12 noon the day of the trip. So, let's say you were booked through a dive shop in Dallas. Then Dallas was a five-hour drive to Freeport. We could let the dive shop know at 12 noon, the trip's a go, or it's a no-go. So, if it's a no-go, you know, the customer could go to work, you know, instead of taking Thursday or Friday off or taking the weekend, he could go play golf or take family out, or whatever.

**Gary Rinn** [00:42:08] So that was our time line. We called the weather calls at noon the day of the trip. And again, we'd be burning up phone lines with the League City office and High Island 389.

**Gary Rinn** [00:42:26] Now, of course, weather forecasting, particularly marine forecasting, back then was not very good. I mean, we cancelled a lot of trips that turned out to be slick calm. We ran some trips where we had to turn around and come back in. Some we made it out, had a nice day the first day, and the wind came up, seas came up and we'd have to cancel the second or even third day of a trip sometimes.

**Gary Rinn** [00:42:57] But that's ... it was a crapshoot.

**Gary Rinn** [00:43:01] But like I said, the trips got so popular that people were willing to risk cancellation knowing that wouldn't cost them anything. You know, particularly weekends, if they booked a trip leaving Friday night and we cancelled the trip at noon on Friday, they hadn't taken time off work or anything like that. You know, they weren't missing out on anything. And of course, they got their money back, or the dive shop would roll them over to another trip if they had room on it.

**Gary Rinn** [00:43:33] So, we started doing trips, like I said, later in the year. And we were out on a research trip in, I guess it was in January 1st year, and we realized there were sharks everywhere. As it turns out, wintertime - December, January, February and even into March - we had schooling hammerheads. We had silky sharks, particularly around High Island 389, literally hundreds of small silky sharks. They're gorgeous, gorgeous sharks. And we also had big schools of spotted eagle rays.

**Gary Rinn** [00:44:23] And, once that word got out, the wintertime trips booked up, just as good as a summertime trip's booked up. Of course, we probably lost 50 to 60% of those trips to weather, where we just couldn't go.

**Gary Rinn** [00:44:43] My criteria for weather was if it was going to be more than five-foot seas, we didn't do it. The boat could handle it. The crew could handle it. But you're talking about divers getting on and off a ladder, a dive platform, in full dive gear. Our demographics back then, oddly enough, the average age, I believe, was 53 of our divers. So, I know when I was 53, having been a diver all my life, I didn't have a whole lot of trouble, you know, climbing up and down ladders in rough seas. But a lot of other 53 year olds and older had problems.

**Gary Rinn** [00:45:34] You know, it wasn't worth the risk to run a trip and have someone get hurt.

**David Todd** [00:45:42] Well so you had lots of draws, lots of appeal, for taking these trips out, whether it's in the summer or in the winter. Can you talk about some of the sights that really were attractive to some of your clients at the Flower Gardens?

**Gary Rinn** [00:45:59] Yeah. Again, keep in mind, the Flower Gardens, for the most part, particularly people from Houston, was an easy trip. It was inexpensive. You didn't have to get on an airplane. You know, you drove down from Houston or Austin or San Antonio or wherever, and went out for two days.

**Gary Rinn** [00:46:22] Our typical trips went like this: when we left on Sunday nights, we did a three-day trip. We would run straight out to the West Flower Gardens, where we typically made two dives. And then we would move over to the East Flower Gardens, which is only twelve miles, where we would make two more dives. And that night, we'd make a night dive. Then the next day would be, we spent it primarily on the East Flower Gardens, because the

East Flower Gardens is a bit shallower, less concerned about decompression sickness, you know, nitrogen build-up.

**Gary Rinn** [00:47:09] So, we would dive, four daytime dives and a night dive, and then we would pick up and run into Stetson Bank on the third day, where we would make two dives. And then we would dive a platform on the way in.

**Gary Rinn** [00:47:27] So, I think, in the early years, running those three-day trips, of course, was back when diesel fuel was fifty cents a gallon, I believe we were getting \$375 for that three-day trip, which included, of course, meals, lodging, air-fills, dives. And, we were making, you know, twelve to thirteen dives in three days for \$375. So, we could outcompete, you know, any destination in the Caribbean.

**Gary Rinn** [00:48:09] Again, we did have weather issues. So, there was always that. You know, if you booked a trip to, say, Cozumel, unless there was a tropical storm or a hurricane, you're going diving. If you booked with us, depending on the time of year, you either had an excellent chance of going diving, or a not so excellent chance of being able to go.

**Gary Rinn** [00:48:35] Our two-day trips, didn't matter if it was a Thursday - Friday, or a Saturday - Sunday. Similar situation. We left at, you know, ten, eleven o'clock at night. Arrived at the Flower Gardens. And when I say ten or eleven o'clock, we tried to arrive at the Flower Gardens at daybreak. And of course, time of year, it varied, you know, with sunrise. But we tried to get out there at daybreak, where we'd make two dives on the West Flower Gardens, two dives on the East Flower Gardens, a night dive. Pick up. Head to Stetson and make two dives there. And dive a platform on the way back in. So, you got eight dives in two days.

**Gary Rinn** [00:49:18] The other attraction is, besides being convenient and inexpensive, it's, like I mentioned before, oftentimes spectacular visibility, and a very, very healthy reef. Not really dead coral, anywhere. Lots of fish, but the big pelagic animals, were a big draw.

**Gary Rinn** [00:49:46] Manta rays was one of our primary draws. They weren't always there, but, they were there more often than not. We did have one summer where there was a lot of survey boat activity in the area, and, our manta rays disappeared. Whether it was ... it was never proven if that seismic activity drove them off. But, in my mind, it did, because once that activity stopped, they came back. I mean some, some of those ships would be close enough to the Flower Gardens where when you're in the water, you could feel the tickle from their, you know, their shots going off.

**Gary Rinn** [00:50:38] The whale sharks were, if I had to hazard a guess without going back and look at my logbooks, I would say that we would see a whale shark every four to five trips - sometimes multiples. That also varied with the time of year. It always seemed to be late summer or into early fall was where we saw those guys. And, you know, some of them would be little ones, say 12 feet long, up to ones that looked like the size of a school bus. That's a thrill.

**Gary Rinn** [00:51:24] And of course, back then .... now, nobody wants you to touch a marine organism. But I have hours of video of people getting a ride on a manta ray, petting manta rays, holding on to a dorsal fin of a big whale shark cruising around. That was, like I say, that was a big draw.

**Gary Rinn** [00:51:57] And the manta rays, themselves, for some reason, loved the contact. They would, they would swim right up to you and almost settle down on you. You could rub their back, you know, stroke their bellies, and then if you swam away, they'd follow you. And they'd just settle right down again. They really seemed to enjoy the contact.

**Gary Rinn** [00:52:22] Most of the whale sharks were ambivalent. They're, you know, they're filter feeders. They pretty much didn't mind contact. I did have one instance at Stetson Bank where I was the only one in the water. I was getting ready to go back to the boat, and a medium-sized whale shark, probably about 14 feet, came, just showed up out of the blue, literally out of the blue. And so, I was swimming along, shooting video of it, and I reached down to get a hold of its dorsal fin. Just to rest. And, you know, it was always fun to hold that dorsal fin and hold that video camera straight out over that whale sharks back and watch the world go by. And when I touched him, it spooked him. And he shot out like a rocket from underneath me.

**Gary Rinn** [00:53:21] And fortunately, I was able to ball up in a ball and the tail barely caught my left shin down low, almost to my ankle and, ended up with a hairline fracture in it. Didn't have to treat it. But it was tender for literally a couple of years. Couldn't wear my cowboy boots for about a year.

**David Todd** [00:53:48] Boy, those close encounters are really extraordinary.

**David Todd** [00:53:52] You mentioned that you also saw sharks out there. Do you recall any of those experiences?

**Gary Rinn** [00:53:59] Oh, yeah... We rarely saw sharks in the warm-weather months, but when the water got cool in the wintertime, we saw a lot of sharks, not only hammerheads and silkies, but occasionally a tiger. When we had a tiger show up ... the first time I ever, probably the only time I ever, canceled a night dive due to marine life was we had a big tiger show up in the late afternoon. And I decided that if he's hanging around, I didn't want the divers in the water. Tigers are known to be aggressive, and this was a big one.

**Gary Rinn** [00:54:51] But during the daytime, we pretty much saw hammerheads. And when I say schools, I've got video of more than 30 hammerheads in one frame. The silky sharks, for some reason, liked to hang around the platform at High Island 389. So, we would move over to the platform during those winter trips so people could dive with the silkies. And these were small. They would be anywhere from, you know, two and a half to, maybe tops, four and a half, five feet. But their name's appropriate: they look silky in the water. They look smooth and silky.

**Gary Rinn** [00:55:41] We also had ... what was really fun is after the last dive of the afternoon, before the night dive, we'd sit on the back deck and watch spinner sharks jump clear out of the water. You know, if you just sat there and gazed at the horizon for long enough, you'd see them jump. And again, that was strictly wintertime phenomena.

**Gary Rinn** [00:56:07] Spotted eagle rays, large schools of them, also showed up in the wintertime. Rarely saw them in the summer.

**Gary Rinn** [00:56:15] Manta rays we saw year-round, but more, more in the summertime than in the wintertime.

**David Todd** [00:56:23] How about some sea turtles? Did you see them often?

**Gary Rinn** [00:56:26] Oh, yeah. Quite often. Yeah, as a matter of fact, the sanctuary had a turtle tracking program that, we actually went out, and typically at night, we would make a night dive and locate some unfortunate turtle, and we'd bring him up to the boat. Easy, easy to guide him right up to the boat. And we had davit, with a basket rig, where we could just guide the turtle into the basket. Then bring the turtle up. Set him on a tire, like an automobile tire, belly-down, so his flukes couldn't touch the deck. He couldn't go anywhere.

**Gary Rinn** [00:57:18] And they would mount a transmitter on his back. They used a two-part epoxy and released him. And they could track that turtle's movements that way. And, we oftentimes would, would go back and, you know, find that same turtle, and change that transmitter out.

**David Todd** [00:57:43] How about the corals themselves? Did you, see this phenomenon about the smoking corals, the spawning corals?

**Gary Rinn** [00:57:52] Yeah. And that's, that's funny that. [Excuse me.].

**Gary Rinn** [00:57:59] What happened, we were ... see, previously, we were running trips so often at the Flower Gardens. We were out there pretty much every day, except weather days, from May through October. There'd never been that kind of saturation out there. You know, there were weekend trips for decades. People only made weekend trips. But we got to see things, you know, regularly, on a repetitive basis. And so, we caught a lot of things that had been missed before.

**Gary Rinn** [00:58:35] And this coral spawning was one of them.

**Gary Rinn** [00:58:38] We were out there on a sport trip. And one of my galley crew came up from a dive. The passengers would make a dive, and then we would let the galley crew make a dive, then the divemasters, and then one captain, if he wanted to dive, you know, in between when the passengers were diving. Anyway, one of my galley crew came up, Matt Scherzinger, never forget him. He came, he came walking back up the deck, still with all his gear on, he goes, he said, "Gary, there's the weirdest thing going on." He said, "This, there's coral smoking." And I said, "Where is this?" We walked to the stern of the boat. It was a flat, calm day. And he said, "Right about there." And he pointed down into the water off the dive platform.

**Gary Rinn** [00:59:31] So, I scrambled and got my gear. Of course, I always had my video camera ready to go, because you never knew when a whale shark would show up or a manta, you know. So, it was always locked, loaded and charged.

**Gary Rinn** [00:59:46] I jumped in the water, dropped down, and I actually could see it from a distance. And it was a type of a star coral. I can't remember the scientific name now. And sure enough, it looked like it was smoking. And I shot video of it. And I thought, "Well, this is interesting." I think I know what this is, but I'd never heard of it. But I thought it's got to be releasing, you know, sperm or eggs into the water.

**Gary Rinn** [01:00:17] Well, that night, on a night dive, the diver started coming up, just raving that the reef was exploding. The corals were spawning. And, we could turn on a spotlight up on the bridge and shine it across the water. And you could literally see ... I won't call it rafts,

but, coral eggs all over the surface where they'd floated up. And, people got a lot of, you know, video and photos of that.

**Gary Rinn** [01:00:56] So, we came in from that trip, and what I started to say what's so funny about that? Well, let me skip that for a minute. I'll come back to that.

**Gary Rinn** [01:01:04] We got back to the dock, and I immediately called, actually, I called Steve Gittings (he was the sanctuary manager) from offshore. And I told him what I'd seen and what I got on video, and then what happened that night. And so, he got pretty excited. And I made him a copy of the video. And, I believe we had somebody on the boat that was from College Station. That's where his office was at that time.

**Gary Rinn** [01:01:34] He took the video to Steve. And, a few days later, I was talking to Steve on the phone when I got back in from a trip, and he had contacted a scientist in, I believe, the University of Miami, who he described what he had and sent her the video.

**Gary Rinn** [01:01:54] And she was able to tell him when she thought that event happened, because she had seen some of it actually in the lab. And it was, a period, in August, eight days from the full moon. Which, as it turns out, if the full moon was early in August, we might have two spawnings. We had one early and one late, but never as intense as the single. There was a full moon was in the 15th to 20th of August, that'd be the main event. Pretty, pretty interesting stuff.

**Gary Rinn** [01:02:38] But, so based on that knowledge, the next year, we had (this was before I owned the Spree), we had an old utility boat that a friend of mine owned, an oilfield utility boat. Real dump. But we took some researchers out on that.

**Gary Rinn** [01:03:02] And then I had my normal sport-diving trip on the Fling, mixed in with a few researchers. And, we set up that trip to be a five-day trip to make sure that we overlapped what we thought would be the spawning.

**Gary Rinn** [01:03:17] And, that, that was a very spectacular spawning. A lot of still photos and video happened on that trip.

**Gary Rinn** [01:03:29] What I started to say what's funny is, that's when, that's when scientists discovered coral spawning at the Flower Gardens. I always get a chuckle out of that. Like, you know, scientists will discover a new lemur in Madagascar that the locals have been eating in their stew pots for thousands of years.

**David Todd** [01:03:56] Yeah, it had been happening, but nobody had noticed that was in the official realms to recognize it and celebrate it. Yeah, I bet. I bet.

**David Todd** [01:04:09] So, one of the things I think is interesting that you've mentioned several times is that you did these dives and night dives and, I'm curious about the night diving experience. Is that something that gives you a sort of unique experience of the undersea?

**Gary Rinn** [01:04:29] Yes. There are fish that are almost strictly nocturnal, that you'll only see at night. You'll see some critters like octopus that you rarely see during the day that will actually be out on the move at night. Shells such as, cowries will have their mantles out

wrapped around. They're moving around, feeding. You can turn your lights off and wave your hand and watch the sparks from the bioluminescence. Night diving was totally unique.

**Gary Rinn** [01:05:18] We would see things like, occasionally we see a little group of squid in the water column, which, you know, we never saw during the daytime. And the turtles, we saw turtles more often at night.

**Gary Rinn** [01:05:34] I tell you, one of the coolest dives I ever did was on Stetson Bank at night. And all the divers and the crews had made their night dive. Most people were in bed and one of my dive masters and I decided to make a late-night dive, and we had slick, calm water - beautiful visibility, blue water and a full moon. And, Wayne and I went in and, you know, right off the bat, I got great video of an octopus, you know, moving around. And different shells, like I say, were out - you know, hermit crabs crawling all over the place.

**Gary Rinn** [01:06:23] And we decided to, I don't know which one of us. One of us turned our light out, you know, looked at the other one. And, you know, I turned my light out; Wayne turned his out (whoever was first). And we just sat there and let our eyes adjust. And with that bright full moon and the water being slick calm, you know, that light penetrated down. And we sat there for probably 10 or 15 minutes and we could see silhouettes of fish.

**Gary Rinn** [01:06:55] And we had a shark that we're pretty sure was a sandbar shark (that's about the only species of shark we saw at Stetson Bank) showed up. And we could clearly see him just in the moonlight, and he was swimming back and forth around us, not being aggressive, just evidently curious because we're sitting there, of course, blowing bubbles. And, he finally actually swam right over top of us. And to this day, I kicked myself. I didn't try to shoot video because I didn't want to turn the lights on, you know, my video lights. But as he swam over us, I looked up at him and I blew a stream of bubbles just about the time his nose came over me and watched those bubbles just, boom, explode, underneath the belly of that shark. That's one to remember.

**David Todd** [01:07:55] One last question about these dives. You know, I grew up having watched "Jaws" and, I think that a lot of us thought that there'd be sharks in every lake and stream and puddle and, they were all out to get us. And it seems like the attitude about sharks has evolved a lot since that day. Have you seen a change?

**Gary Rinn** [01:08:29] Yes. I was still, teaching diving at J. Rich Sports when Jaws came out. And it did put a damper on the dive business. There was a drop-off in interest in SCUBA diving. I'm sure that, you know, people going to the beach: those numbers dropped. But, yeah, Jaws had a big impact. And it was quite a while - years - before people started realizing that they really weren't that threat.

**Gary Rinn** [01:09:05] And the author of Jaws, Peter Benchley, actually came out, if I remember correctly, reading that he felt like he had done an injustice to sharks and their reputations and was actually out trying to rectify that, in that he became kind of a shark proponent. You'd have to check, check me out on that. But, I seem to remember reading that.

**Gary Rinn** [01:09:35] And sharks, was kind of like when diving was new, barracudas were just considered a major threat. By the time I was running my Flower Garden trips, the barracudas would hang around the boat at night, you know, just the deck lights and all that, you know, glowing into the water. And if you jumped in the water, there would literally be dozens of barracudas hanging around the boat. And we got to the point. We'd get up on the



upper deck and cannonball into them, just for fun. But, you know, back in the '50s and '60s, maybe even early '70s, everybody was terrified of barracuda.

**Gary Rinn** [01:10:22] Same with sharks. People feared sharks. And it got to the point where, again, we were running shark trips in the wintertime. We weren't anywhere near the first people running shark trips. There were a lot of shark trips in the Bahamas, that had been going on for a long time, where they had locations where they knew sharks would show up. Sometimes they would bait them, just to get some interest there.

**Gary Rinn** [01:10:55] You know, I guess it was last year. I believe it was just this past summer. I believe there were five shark attacks in southern Florida. And that got people's attention. Very, very rare.

**David Todd** [01:11:16] Well, we've been talking, I guess, sort of circling around this reef that has been so appealing and interesting to you -the Flower Gardens and some of the associated banks at Stetson and elsewhere. And I was wondering if you could help us understand a little bit about the history of, of not just the reefs, but its protection. I gather the marine sanctuary was set up in '92, and you were out there before that happened. Do you know much about how the sanctuary came to be?

**Gary Rinn** [01:11:53] Yeah, quite a bit. Like I said, I started running out there in '87 on a fairly regular basis on another boat that I didn't own. And then, you know, of course, ran in '88, '89 and realized that how, even though the Flower Gardens are 100 miles offshore, the corals are still delicate. They're subject to mechanical damage, you know, from boat anchors, chains.

**Gary Rinn** [01:12:29] And I became very, very attached to the Flower Gardens and Stetson Banks, both.

**Gary Rinn** [01:12:37] Now, there had been talk for some time about trying to create a National Marine Sanctuary designation for the Flower Gardens. We started having public hearings. I would think that would have been in '89. They were in Houston, where any interested parties, anybody from the Sierra Club, to sport divers, to oil company reps could come in and give their two cents' worth at these public hearings. And, it was pretty interesting.

**Gary Rinn** [01:13:29] You know, I had my agenda, based on experience from my Florida Keys days. The Florida Keys, back then, it was Pennekamp Park, and then, they made the Pennekamp Park, instead of going out past the reef line, they changed the boundaries to where Pennekamp State Park only went out three miles. And then beyond that, it was the Key Largo National Marine Sanctuary.

**Gary Rinn** [01:14:05] But, the Park was not that big. It went from Carysfort Light down to Molasses Reef Light. And from there, there was a gap all the way (this would be off of Key Largo), all the way down to Big Pine Key, it was unprotected. The next sanctuary was Looe Key, which was very small. It was a one-reef sanctuary.

**Gary Rinn** [01:14:41] And I saw the effect of ... you know, even though diving, of course, was allowed in the park. Fishing was allowed in the park, but no spearfishing was allowed in the park. If you dove at Molasses Reef, and you were surrounded with fish - thousands of fish, big schools of all variations of fish, big groupers, big snappers. They would swim out and look at you looking for a handout.

**Gary Rinn** [01:15:22] Whereas, if you went literally a quarter of a mile away over to a reef, down towards Pickles Reef, which was out of the sanctuary, if you saw a grouper, you saw his tail because he was taking off in the opposite direction. The fish life was sparse in comparison to just right over there. They seemed to know the park boundaries: where they were safe, and where they weren't.

**Gary Rinn** [01:15:55] So, I went into these public hearings, with the attitude that, number one, obviously, the reef itself needs to be protected some way, shape or form, to prevent anchoring and anchor damage. In addition to that, no spearfishing. That was one of my lines in the sand, if you will.

**Gary Rinn** [01:16:27] We had some people there that were in favor of trying to protect the reef, but they still wanted to be able to spearfish. They were a very, very tiny minority.

**Gary Rinn** [01:16:41] We had people from, and I remember there was a guy there from Sierra Club, who, they were so extreme, they did not want to have engine-cooling discharge in the marine sanctuary, which meant no boats. I mean, if you had a boat that had keel coolers for your engines, in other words, it didn't circulate water and discharge it over the side. And we're talking saltwater here. We're talking water that sucks up through the hull, goes through a heat exchanger and goes over the side. Well, Sierra Club didn't even want to have that put that in the rules, which of course would prevent any and all visitation.

**Gary Rinn** [01:17:30] You know, I understand we want to protect nature, but why have a park like that, or a marine sanctuary that you can't appreciate? Nobody will ever see it.

**Gary Rinn** [01:17:39] So there were a lot of very, very varied opinions on what should happen.

**Gary Rinn** [01:17:47] In the beginning, when the people from NOAA were writing up some initial proposals for the rules, they were allowing spearfishing. And, I was actually stunned that they would consider that because to my knowledge, there's no other sanctuary that NOAA had that allows spearfishing. And when I questioned it, the response was, "Well, we're worried that by not allowing spearfishing will kill the chances, because there will be so many divers, particularly, and this isn't a slur, particularly from Louisiana." Louisianans were big, you know, big spearfishermen.

**Gary Rinn** [01:18:41] And, my reply was, "I don't think so. I think you're going to have more opposition to not having spearfishing than having spearfishing." And they, they eventually took that out, and made spearfishing as part of the regulations.

**Gary Rinn** [01:19:03] Fishing was still allowed. My thought on that was, I want to see, at a minimum, no bottom fishing. In other words, you could you could troll, you know, through the area over the reefs. But no, you know, no dropping a weighted line with hooks to the bottom, because we were constantly taking out hook and line rigs that had gotten caught in coral. And every time you bounce a lead weight off of a coral head, you're damaging it. And once a coral head gets damaged, it's open to all kinds of potential diseases.

**Gary Rinn** [01:19:49] But they did allow fishing. Fortunately, we saw very little bottom fishing out there. For one thing, it wasn't all that good. Don't ask me why, but it wasn't. But

people weren't going to run 100 miles to drop a chunk of squid over the side when they could go to an oil platform, you know, a lot closer to shore to catch their snapper.

**Gary Rinn** [01:20:20] But we did see an occasional violation. I got, I got pretty chummy with the Coast Guard where I could make a phone call. Back then, I think it was a dollar fifty a minute, something like that, to use the Petrocon network. But we could actually make a phone call to the Coast Guard or the Marine Sanctuary Office.

**Gary Rinn** [01:20:49] I did have one incident where... And this was slightly outside of the sanctuary, between the East and West Flower Gardens, there was a ridge that came up, I think it was within a couple of hundred feet of the surface. And we would see these commercial fishing boats fish that, and we're only talking about barely outside the sanctuary limit of the East Bank. And, we were going over from the West Bank to East Bank after lunch one day, our normal routine. And I see the same snapper boat that I'd seen there many times, obviously in distress. I mean, he was on his way to going down.

**Gary Rinn** [01:21:37] So, you know, I headed in his direction, throttled back so I didn't throw a big wake on him. Luckily it was a calm day and I got there and sure enough, they were sinking. And we had a spare pump, emergency pump. We, you know, were able to pull up right next to them, lower them the pump, plug it in to our power and keep them afloat. Well, meanwhile, I called the Coast Guard. And they radioed me back. And said that they were going to send a plane out and they had a cutter in the area that would have been there in a fairly short while, within an hour or two.

**Gary Rinn** [01:22:29] Well, these guys on the snapper boat could hear this over the radio. And so, what do they do? They go to their fish holes and they start throwing these under-sized snapper over the side. Because now the Coast Guard's coming to rescue.

**Gary Rinn** [01:22:44] So, I sat up there on the bow with my video camera and told the guys that were chunking the fish over, "Say, 'Cheese'", and, shot a video of them throwing these illegal fish over.

**Gary Rinn** [01:23:00] Coast Guard did come out there, got them stabilized, took them under tow, and busted them pretty hard with that video. They were able to use the video to fine them.

**Gary Rinn** [01:23:12] So, I mean, there's story after story after story. I could talk for days about the funny things I've seen.

**David Todd** [01:23:22] Well, so, maybe you can sort of take us forward a chapter. So, there are these initial public hearings in Houston, and I guess, elsewhere, where Sierra Club, divers, oil industry reps come and give their opinions. And then NOAA writes up the rules that they might propose and, and I guess by '92, this all sort of comes to a head, and the sanctuary is designated? Are there more steps in that process?

**Gary Rinn** [01:23:58] Yeah. There were there were a lot of steps, actually. One of the main things that needed to be accomplished is to protect the coral from anchor and anchor chain damage. And I was told by, I'm pretty sure it was Ralph Lopez at NOAA, that that was one of the sticking points. If we couldn't get some sort of mooring systems in place, it would be very hard to implement a National Marine Sanctuary, because they would have to eliminate anchoring altogether, or have some way to monitor if people were anchoring and causing

damage. You can see where that that could be going there. You know, it's like, how do we monitor that? How do we enforce that? We need some sort of mooring system.

**Gary Rinn** [01:24:58] So, I contacted people that I knew in the oil industry and people that I knew that knew people in the oil industry, and the boat business, about seeing if we couldn't get help from oil companies or boat companies that serviced offshore, where we could use, similar system that semi-submersible rigs used, where they had these, they call them "anchor boats". They're basically big ocean tugs. And they would take these huge anchors and they would move them to position a floating drilling platform, floating drilling rig, a semi-submersible.

**Gary Rinn** [01:25:47] I thought, well if we can get ahold of one of those boats and some anchors (they don't have to be as big as those semi anchors, but, big enough to easily handle a 100-foot boat in rough seas), maybe we could get them to lay those big anchors in a sand patch. And there's a number of big enough sand patches on both the West and East Flower Gardens, more so on the East Bank than the West. And that would have worked well, if we could have gotten someone to do it.

**Gary Rinn** [01:26:28] But the reply that I got, and rightfully so, from people in the oil companies was they didn't want to have anything to do with the liability. That was the problem. You know, even if, let's say, they sent this huge anchor down there and they had a chain on it and a line to a buoy on the surface. If anything at all happened, whether it had anything to do with their anchor placement, and someone was injured, or a boat was lost, you know, a big company, like an oil company, is going to be a big target, you know, for liability.

**Gary Rinn** [01:27:11] And so that failed.

**Gary Rinn** [01:27:17] Then we started trying to figure out a way to put in permanent mooring buoys by putting some sort of anchor into the bottom, inserted into the bottom. When I was still in Key Largo, my old partner, I mentioned John Allis before, I bought John out of our business in '79, I believe it was. And John went to work for NOAA. He was actually a marine biologist by trade before we met in the dive business. Well, John went to work for NOAA.

**Gary Rinn** [01:28:01] And the Keys were suffering problems from anchor damage also, even though the reefs there had more open sand areas. The coral density at the Flower Gardens was much greater than, say, the reefs in the Florida Keys. A lot of sand pockets, a lot of deep sand. You know, visibility was typically good enough. You're only talking about 25 or 30 feet where you'd pull up over a sand spot, you'd drop your anchor, back down, and hook up. But still an anchor would drag, the wind would change and the boat would swing, which would take the anchor line over a ridge of coral that it was paralleling prior to. You know, now it's perpendicular.

**Gary Rinn** [01:28:45] So, the reefs are suffering mechanical damage from anchors there. And, we, I actually had, started a group called, the "Keys Association of Diving Operators" for a number of reasons. I won't go into great detail, but in these meetings, we were talking about what do we do to protect these reefs? How can we do this?

**Gary Rinn** [01:29:14] Well, John came up with the idea to install mooring points in the old coral rock, you know, long-dead coral, which becomes extremely hard. And he came up with a system where they put eye-bolts. In typical John fashion, he came by the shop one day and he said, "Hey, you got a trip tomorrow?" I say, "No." He goes, "You want to go out to French Reef

and pick some sites to put in some experimental mooring buoys?" I said, "Sure. You know, we're going to take my boat?"

**Gary Rinn** [01:29:58] So we, load up a cooler-full of beer, and our dive gear, and some marker stuff, marker buoys. And we went out and chose three sites that were popular dive sites. French Reef had a lot of small caves. We called them caves. Some were just arched overhangs and so forth. But we picked three spots that were popular dive sites and marked them.

**Gary Rinn** [01:30:31] And then, John went back out and actually drilled a hole in the coral and set these eye-bolts in with, I can't remember if he started out using two-part epoxy, or if he just used Portland Type II cement. Long story short, put those in. Once they hardened up, put buoys on them. And that became the beginning of the mooring buoy system in the Keys. That would have been '82-ish, maybe. I'd have to back and find out.

**Gary Rinn** [01:31:17] So, anyway, when it came time to try to figure out something to do with Flower Gardens, I called John, of course. Fortunately, he was already working for NOAA. And I'd known him for a long, long time. We'd been partners. And he had been putting in mooring buoys on coral reefs, literally around the world. He had started his own company, that his wife was the owner of. And basically, during his vacation time, he would travel to Phuket, Thailand, or Cayman or Bonaire or wherever and install mooring buoys and/or train people there how to do them. He had the equipment and they sold the equipment.

**Gary Rinn** [01:32:03] So, anyway, I called John, and I said ... (and he had been to the Flower Gardens once, I think just once before, with me), and I said, "We got this problem. We need to try to figure out how to put in buoys that'll handle a 100-foot boat, like mine." And of course, the ones he used in the Keys, the biggest boats were 65 feet. And those pins and those buoys were stout enough to handle that. But a 100-footer, particularly in heavy seas, you know, way out there.

**Gary Rinn** [01:32:38] See, in the Keys, people weren't out there in heavy seas. Because they were just, you know, five miles to the reef, you know, from shoreline. So, if the weather got rough, they just immediately left.

**Gary Rinn** [01:32:51] Well, in our case, we might have to stick around for a while, you know, suffer the rough weather, until we could leave.

**Gary Rinn** [01:32:59] So, we tossed around a number of ideas.

**Gary Rinn** [01:33:03] And, you know, during that time that we were debating what we might be able to do, I formed the Gulf Reef Environmental Action Team. The purpose of that was two-fold. Actually, it was multi-fold. Number one, if we were going to put in mooring buoys, I was heeding the advice of these oil companies, that there's a liability issue to be dealt with. So, by creating a 501(c)(3) non-profit, that would shield some of that, you know, potential liability.

**Gary Rinn** [01:33:45] Number two, being a 501(c)(3) non-profit, we could raise funds to use to purchase materials or, you know, promotion or whatever.

**Gary Rinn** [01:34:01] And another thing it did was it gained volunteers, you know, once we had an organization that people could actually get behind.

**Gary Rinn** [01:34:12] And my father filed paperwork for the 501(c)(3), and we put together a group of officers, which I was actually the first president. And we started trying to raise money, you know, to do this, not knowing how much it's going to cost.

**Gary Rinn** [01:34:39] And ironically, of course, I was the only dive boat operation that was running with regularity out there. There were a couple of smaller boats that showed up. Well, I got a call from a friend of mine who was with one of the dive clubs that said there was one of their members who was at a meeting saying, "Don't donate any money to GREAT. You're just donating money to Rinn Boats."

**Gary Rinn** [01:35:07] And that upset me to the point where I resigned as president. And, so, you know, obviously the money that came into GREAT wasn't a whole lot, went strictly into trying to put mooring buoys in, and also maintain them. We didn't have a marine sanctuary. This was all private individuals.

**Gary Rinn** [01:35:32] So, I eventually got in contact pretty well with NOAA even deeper, once we had GREAT formed. And again, we were looking for financial support. We were looking for logistical support, if needed.

**Gary Rinn** [01:35:54] What are we needing to do to deal with the Coast Guard, you know, to actually get permission? You know, my idea was more or less, you know, ask for permission later. Let them know that there's going to be buoys on these sites. In all honesty, I can't tell you exactly how it all came about, getting the permission or forgiveness.

**Gary Rinn** [01:36:24] But, bottom line is, as I said, once we had GREAT going, we had volunteers. John Allis determined that (he made a trip out, and we took a look, you know, at the reef structure and so forth), and he decided that we should try to put in two-point moorings. Use U-boats instead of eye-bolts, obviously for strength, for bigger vessels.

**Gary Rinn** [01:36:51] And so we, we speced it out. What size we needed. We needed 316 stainless. What size shackles we were going to need and so forth.

**Gary Rinn** [01:37:04] Well, one of my dive masters happened to know somebody that knew somebody that had a machine shop in Houston. The machine shop owner wasn't even a diver. Had never even heard of the Flower Gardens. But he heard we were looking for these U-bolts. And he made 12 U-bolts for us, at no charge. Using, I believe it was, I think it was one-inch stainless steel that he bent in the shape of a U, and welded little tabs on the bottom, perpendicular to the to the upper part of the U, which would become the lower part which stuck in the bottom.

**Gary Rinn** [01:37:47] And then, I was dealing with, corresponding regularly with Ralph Lopez, with NOAA. He was in Washington, and he was really pushing hard on the sanctuary idea. And he was pretty much the one that told me, "This is a hurdle that we have to overcome to get sanctuary designation. We've got to have a way to let vessels moor."

**Gary Rinn** [01:38:15] And somehow, Ralph rounded up some money. I'd have to go back and look at my letters. I've still got all that correspondence, but he got a check, from NOAA to pay for shackles and the mooring line, both the polypropylene and the nylon, which we ran through the buoy itself and the buoys.

**Gary Rinn** [01:38:44] I got together the group of volunteers and offered the use of my boat. And John Allis came out for this trip. We actually recruited some writers. One was a Houston Post sportswriter. What's his name? Grissom. Last name is Grissom. He wasn't a diver, but he was a, you know, conservationist type sportswriter. Wrote for the outdoor section. And we had a writer from the Corpus Christi newspaper. One from Dallas newspaper. So, we put together some publicity for this trip, and we had a group of volunteers.

**Gary Rinn** [01:39:33] I'm actually staring at a picture across the room of the group of volunteers on the back deck of the boat on that trip holding coral cores and a mooring ball.

**Gary Rinn** [01:39:49] But anyway, John came out. Another guy named Billy Causey, who by that time was the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary supervisor. He had experience with drilling moorings. And we went out on a four-day trip. Selected the sites. We ended up with perfect weather. We selected the sites to drill. We had my inflatable boats, where we could shuttle divers back and forth to an inflatable that was, you know, positioned over the drill site. We had a hydraulic drill. It was run by a Briggs and Stratton gas engine. And the drill itself, of course, hydraulically operated.

**Gary Rinn** [01:40:47] We just hung the hoses over the side, lowered it down. We had a two-inch coral-coring bit, diamond-edged. And the way it worked, you got down there after you picked your spot. You laid some weight belts over the handles of this drill to weight it down. You put extra weight on yourself as the driller. You had somebody there with you, of course, all the time helping position, hold, maybe, you know, hold the hose, if there was any current that was pulling.

**Gary Rinn** [01:41:21] And we drilled down before we drilled these cores out of the coral. You know, we set the U-bolt on there, took a hammer and a cold chisel. I told you about the perpendicular tabs in the bottom. We laid those down, took a cold chisel, hammered a spot on that rock, moved over to the other side and hammered that spot, so we knew where to center the holes, because we're putting a U in, and not a single point. And we drilled those down. Set the U-bolts in there, filled the holes with Portland Type two cement, which sets underwater.

**Gary Rinn** [01:42:01] And, we managed to set U-bolts, put five on the West Flower Gardens and seven on the East Flower Gardens, within three days. But we had a number of volunteers. We had plenty of bottom time.

**Gary Rinn** [01:42:19] You know, bottom time is the problem because of nitrogen buildup and possible decompression sickness. You know, you can only stay in the water for so long before you have to surface and outgas.

**Gary Rinn** [01:42:31] But we got that job done. And within I guess it was about two weeks later, I went out, set the first buoys on those U-bolts. And as far as I know, the majority of them are still there. Some of them have worn thin, you know, just from wave action. We actually used 316 stainless for the U-bolts and 308 stainless for the shackles so that the shackles would wear before the U-bolts would wear, again from constant motion from wave action.

**Gary Rinn** [01:43:09] And I maintained those buoys through donations from GREAT, you know, as far as having to buy. You know, if I had to buy more buoys, or I had to buy more line, until the sanctuary was established. And once it was designated, they took everything over,

meaning they now had ownership of those buoys. And so they had to maintain them, which they contracted me to do, which I did the entire time I had my boat business.

**David Todd** [01:43:45] Very generous. So.

**Gary Rinn** [01:43:49] Well, actually, I got paid.

**David Todd** [01:43:51] Oh.

**Gary Rinn** [01:43:51] I got paid to maintain them after the work.

**David Todd** [01:43:55] I see. Okay. Well, well, good. You know, definitely needed and merited.

**David Todd** [01:44:02] So, I'm curious if we if you could just take us back and give us a couple of examples of why these mooring buoys were so important to protect the reef. And I understand that there were some pretty dramatic impacts. I think the Nick Candies is one I've heard about. And maybe there were others, but can you sort of give us the example of what folks were worried about might happen to the reef if there weren't places to tie up properly?

**Gary Rinn** [01:44:38] Yeah. Well, first of all, when we got the buoys in, we designed them to handle, basically, a 100-foot, 100-ton vessel, 100-ton displacement. That's not the actual dead weight. And, they did well. We never had one break, as far as, you know, force from a vessel tied to them.

**Gary Rinn** [01:45:06] And with the Flower Gardens being a sanctuary, they were able to put in language that prevented larger vessels from anchoring. I mean, if every dive trip I ran, over all those years, I had to anchor, I would have caused significant coral damage myself, inadvertently, as hard as you've tried. The first several years I ran dive trips out there, I had only three dive sites - one on the West Flower Gardens and two on the East Flower Gardens, because they had sand areas big enough for me to drop an anchor into and lay out, you know, the road that I needed, you know, in other words, the angle of the chain and line, you know, for that size boat.

**Gary Rinn** [01:46:04] And again, even then, let's say I laid my anchor in the sand patch, which is roughly rectangular, and the wind and current is holding me facing southeast, and then the current and/or wind shifts and suddenly I'm facing northeast. Now my anchor line has swung over the reef, instead of down the sand channel. That was the biggest concern.

**Gary Rinn** [01:46:34] Putting in mooring buoys was mechanical, anchor damage, and associated chain and line. And believe me, I had video of a boat that had anchored on the West Bank with cable. It had an anchor with cable, instead of chain and line. And it's just horrific to see what it did with that bow pitching up in five-foot seas. That cable gets under a coral head and literally snaps it right off the bottom and rolls it over.

**Gary Rinn** [01:47:15] The damage in my mind that I saw when I first started running routinely to the Flower Gardens, over a number of years, dwindled. In other words, you didn't see fresh damage. The mooring buoys prevented that.

**Gary Rinn** [01:47:37] Now, we did have one incident where a survey vessel crossed the reef, and hung a fish, you know, their trailing instrument, and snapped their cable. We found that one time on a trip to the East Flower Gardens.



**Gary Rinn** [01:48:03] But once, pretty much, once the word got out, the oil companies were supportive.

**Gary Rinn** [01:48:11] At first, you know, it's kind of like, this isn't a very good example. But, let's say the NRA, you know, even though nobody needs to have a weapon that's capable of shooting 30 rounds, you know, semi-automatically, they don't want to see that banned. And logically, the survey companies and the oil companies were kind of in the same position. Well, what's going to happen next? You know, we lose, we lose this. You know, how much more are they going to close off to us over time?

**Gary Rinn** [01:48:52] So, I can see what their, their reticence was. But once everything fell into place, we had major cooperation with the oil companies. They all wanted a piece of the publicity, of course. Which was fine.

**Gary Rinn** [01:49:12] High Island 389 let us use them as a platform for flying people in and out, if we had a research trip going and had some VIPs coming out in our press. So, our relationship was strong, you know, with the oil folks.

**David Todd** [01:49:30] You know, that was something I was curious about. That northwest part of the Gulf is such a hotbed of oil and gas, you know, drilling and production. And then you get these protected sites. How did that, those two activities, you know, the Flower Garden protection, Stetson Bank protection, coexist with the oil activity nearby?

**Gary Rinn** [01:49:59] There was no friction, that I was aware of anyway. Like I said, it was more of a sense of cooperation. Particularly with Mobil. But I keep bringing up Mobil High Island 389. That's because their rig was 1.2 miles from the center of the East Flower Gardens. I mean, we could wave at each other, they were so close.

**Gary Rinn** [01:50:23] And actually, I would call them for weather, you know. We were on a first name basis. I know there was a couple of people that worked for Shell that were divers and supporters of the project. I'll say between Shell and Mobil, they were the biggest supporters of this.

**Gary Rinn** [01:50:50] And I've done a lot, in recent years, after I got out of the charter business, I had a breathing air compressor business, which of course started from the dive business, but became more attuned to the fire market, including offshore vessels and offshore rigs. You know, they all have to have firefighting equipment, and SCBAs, and I have seen how they are so strict on these drilling rigs.

**Gary Rinn** [01:51:26] And most of the work I did was on drill ships. But they're so strict on their environmental regulations. I was going out on one of the Mobil drill ships in, trying to remember where it was... They sent me all over the place. I've been to Africa, Bulgaria, South America, of course, Gulf of Mexico.

**Gary Rinn** [01:51:52] But on one of the rigs, when I went out, and there was no bottled water. Usually, they had in your state room, they left you a case of bottled water because everybody needed to stay hydrated. And so, I went looking for a case of bottled water and was told, "No, can't have bottled water on a rig anymore", because some bigwig from Mobil showed up and he saw there was a couple of plastic bottles of water down by the moon pool, where they go

through the bottom of the ship to drill, and he was afraid that they would end up in the water. So, he banned all plastic water bottles, period, off that rig.

**Gary Rinn** [01:52:40] I was reading a report one day. I was sitting in a conference room. I was doing training, and I was waiting for my students show up, and there was a a hemisphere report. This is just an example of how tight they are. These were reported incidences and what the response was on those rigs where a hydraulic hose had broken on a piece of equipment and hydraulic oil got on the deck, and it was immediately shut down and stopped, mopped up, cleaned up. No hydraulic oil went over the side.

**Gary Rinn** [01:53:22] Things like that. They are really, really environmentally conscious.

**David Todd** [01:53:32] Well, so, I'm just curious about this sort of interaction between the Flower Gardens and their oil and gas neighbors.

**David Todd** [01:53:42] But, I was wondering if you could also talk to us a little bit about some of the sort of natural activities that are going on the Flower Gardens. I understand that there are now lionfish out there. Is that something that you've witnessed? And, do you have any thoughts about how they can be controlled?

**Gary Rinn** [01:54:02] No. I wish I did. See, I sold my business in 2003. And I haven't been to the Flower Gardens since. So, I have not, I can't give you any first-hand, eyewitness knowledge, other than I've talked to people quite a bit, you know, about what's going on out there. And I get emails, and so forth.

**Gary Rinn** [01:54:29] The lionfish problem started in the Caribbean, ended up in the Florida Keys. I saw my first lionfish in the wild - that would have been, I think my son, I certified him to dive when he was ten. He's 23. It probably would have been anywhere from 10 to 13 years ago. We were diving off Key Largo and I saw my first lionfish. That was prior to them showing up Flower Gardens. I don't remember what year it was that I heard the first reports that they showed up at Flower Gardens.

**Gary Rinn** [01:55:12] And they are a menace. Whereas we had none when I lived in the Keys, now you can look under some coral heads and you might see 2 or 3 dozen under one coral head. And the problem is, they have very few natural predators. They're voracious eaters. They eat other fish.

**Gary Rinn** [01:55:40] You know, the state of Florida has, their fish and game people sponsor round-up tournaments for them. You know, they try to trap them, spearfish them, any way they can get them. And it's a tough row to hoe.

**Gary Rinn** [01:56:01] I know they they've tried introducing bigger fish. You know, like I've even heard they've trimmed off, they've taken a lionfish and cut it to the point where it can't swim away and dangled it in front of a grouper, hoping the grouper will get a taste for them.

**Gary Rinn** [01:56:25] There's all kinds of things in the works. They're trying to get rid of them, but they're not having a whole lot of luck.

**David Todd** [01:56:36] Well, maybe you can also just tell us about some of the impacts on reefs in general. I'm not a diver myself, but even I've read in the newspapers about bleaching

and coral disease. Are you seeing that when you go diving, or when you formerly used to visit the Flower Gardens?

**Gary Rinn** [01:57:03] Yeah. Coral bleaching is a, it's a natural phenomena. When the water gets warm, the coral will, you know, expel, I don't know how, the mechanism they do it, zooxanthellae that give color to the coral. Most bleaching will reverse itself.

**Gary Rinn** [01:57:31] I remember witnessing bleaching probably in around '92, somewhere in that period, for the first time. I mentioned Continental Shelf Associates, that group out of Jupiter. I communicated with them for years, even after they weren't doing Flower Garden projects. We were doing other projects with them. And I would get calls from some of their guys every now and then asking if I'd seen any coral bleaching at the Flower Gardens. You know, they were just curious.

**Gary Rinn** [01:58:03] Coral diseases? I don't think anybody really knows or understands the mechanism there. You know, when I was still living in the Key Largo, we had a major sea urchin die-off. I mean, they literally looked like they were getting sick because their spines, rather than being poked out rigid, suddenly started to look, you know, like they were collapsing in on themselves. And within a day or two, that urchin was dead.

**Gary Rinn** [01:58:42] There was speculation all over as to what caused it. It actually moved from, you know, the southwest part of the Keys on up through Key Largo. I witnessed it myself, and it was, it was bad. Pretty much wiped out every sea urchin. And sea urchins used to be everywhere. I mean, if you, if you were snorkeling around on top of the reef and the visibility was 50 feet, you might see 200 sea urchins right there within your area of vision. And they got wiped out.

**Gary Rinn** [01:59:23] I think it was determined some sort of pathogen got them. Where it came from? Who knows?

**Gary Rinn** [01:59:29] There's been these recent outbreaks of coral diseases in South Florida over the last number of years. Again, I don't know that anybody knows where they come from.

**Gary Rinn** [01:59:44] You know, of course, climate change is always chunked around as a major culprit. I don't know.

**Gary Rinn** [01:59:53] I know that there are species of coral that live in parts of the ocean that are in water that is much cooler than another part of the ocean where the same species grows. And whether there's a correlation between one die-off or disease, as another, I don't know.

**Gary Rinn** [02:00:20] So, I'm no expert on it. I'll say that.

**David Todd** [02:00:25] There are plenty of mysteries out there.

**Gary Rinn** [02:00:27] Yeah.

**David Todd** [02:00:30] So, one last thing about the corals. Did you ever visit the Flower Gardens after a major hurricane came through, like Rita or Harvey?

**Gary Rinn** [02:00:42] Well. Yes. I don't know if you recall Hurricane Gilbert. Gilbert did not hit the continental United States. That was in October of '88. Might have been September, but I

think it was October of '88. And Gilbert was massive. And, we actually went up the Brazos River along with a bunch of other boats, and tied off on big oak trees and stuff up there because we thought Freeport was going to take a direct hit.

**Gary Rinn** [02:01:20] Gilbert made a turn to the west and went into Mexico. But I'll tell you what the effect was on the Flower Gardens.

**Gary Rinn** [02:01:32] You know, I told you before, mooning buoys, we had sand patches that we had to anchor in. That was the only place we could anchor. Well, there was a big one on the East or the West Flower Gardens. It was in 90 feet of water. And, there was a coral head. I would describe it as half the size of a Volkswagen Beetle that was in the northwest corner of that sand patch, and there was a similar sand patch, that was much deeper.

**Gary Rinn** [02:02:05] And this was back before we had GPS. I mean, we had LORAN, but it was not very accurate. So, we had to get on the reef as close as we could, then navigate with our depth finder, and then physically view our sand patch.

**Gary Rinn** [02:02:23] But that one coral head gave me my point of reference that I'm at the right sand patch. This is the one.

**Gary Rinn** [02:02:30] Well, we went out after Gilbert. I mean, within, I'd say, four days a week of it passing. And the weather was beautiful. You know, seas had calmed down to nothing.

**Gary Rinn** [02:02:47] And I pulled up on the sand patch. First, you know, right after daylight. And I was going, "I don't know where I am. That sure looks like our sand patch, but our coral head isn't there."

**Gary Rinn** [02:03:05] And I moved around a little bit and caught the depth finder and I said, "Much too shallow to me." But it was the deeper one. So, I moved off in the direction that I knew the other one was, which was further towards the east, and when I came up on it, it looked like I was in 30 feet of water.

**Gary Rinn** [02:03:30] The visibility was absolutely incredible, but my coral head was not there either.

**Gary Rinn** [02:03:38] And so, now I'm really confused.

**Gary Rinn** [02:03:40] Well, we went ahead and dropped the anchor where I normally would drop it and myself and one of my divemasters went in. And because we always sent one in after we set the anchor to make sure that we had dug in and it wasn't going to drag.

**Gary Rinn** [02:03:59] And he came up. He said, "Gary, get geared up real quick. You need to see this."

**Gary Rinn** [02:04:04] We get down there, and again the sand bottom is 90 feet deep. That coral head, half the size of a Volkswagen, had been flipped over and the sand ripples were about two feet deep in that sand patch.

**Gary Rinn** [02:04:21] And a storm didn't actually go over the Flower Gardens. It just went near it and the wave heights flipped that coral head over at 90 feet and made these huge furrows in the sand.

**Gary Rinn** [02:04:34] But the visibility was well over 200 feet. I'd never, never seen it like that and haven't seen it like that since.

**Gary Rinn** [02:04:44] Now, whether that is because the storm blew in waters from way offshore, or aerated the water. Who knows?

**Gary Rinn** [02:04:57] But that's, that's the only time I've had a major hurricane go close, and then visit shortly thereafter.

**Gary Rinn** [02:05:07] Rita was after my time, as was Harvey.

**David Todd** [02:05:13] Wow. Pretty extraordinary. I love that you see these things, but it's hard to say exactly what you're seeing and why it's happened. But it's nice that there's some mysteries out there.

**David Todd** [02:05:27] Well, so, I think you've mentioned it that you've, sold the Spree, sold the Fling, gotten out of this business of chartering dives. Do you miss that? What do you recall, you know, about being in that business and being with divers and in the ocean a lot.

**Gary Rinn** [02:05:50] Well, I'll be perfectly frank. When, up until probably the mid-nineties, I absolutely loved the business. I loved the divers. I loved my boats. I still miss my boats.

**Gary Rinn** [02:06:13] But the dive instruction got so ... what's the best word is? Some of the dive instruction programs started touting that diving is for everyone. It's not. I mean, you know, heck, golf isn't for everyone, for that matter. You know, there are certain physical limitations. There are certain medical conditions. There's even a bit of a mental and emotional complex to diving. I've seen people scared to death that shouldn't be in the water, you know. But they're they're certified.

**Gary Rinn** [02:07:06] And so we started having instances of divers who were becoming of poorer skills and quality. And I even wrote letters to the certifying agencies, you know, outlining what I'm seeing, that I'm watching the skill levels, the experience levels.

**Gary Rinn** [02:07:28] It used to be, when I first started teaching SCUBA diving, we had a basic certification where you did a skin dive, which is snorkeling, and then we did two SCUBA dives and that was "basic". Then you could get "open water" by completing five more dives. To get an "advanced" ... I taught only a couple of advanced classes because they were so long that people just said, "Well, I don't really need that." But we probably made 40 or 50 dives to become an advanced diver. Well, an advanced diver, probably by the mid '90s, was like five dives. That was an advanced certification.

**Gary Rinn** [02:08:20] Instructors - their number of logged dives decreased. Got to the point where, they didn't have the experience themselves. The age limit went to 18 instead of 21, which I don't have that big of a problem with that.

**Gary Rinn** [02:08:38] The problem is some of these agencies were so ... They were making money off of generating instructors that generated SCUBA divers and certifications.

**Gary Rinn** [02:08:50] So, to answer your question, I miss the business. It got to where it was scary. You never knew. Every trip, I had to worry. Not, not like the old days when the divers were experienced. They came out of SCUBA classes.

**Gary Rinn** [02:09:09] Although I will say that, I would have, of course, we'd have people fill out and again, we didn't retail, we didn't sell the trips. The dive shops sold the trips. But they had to fill out forms that showed their experience levels and all that. And I would get divemasters that would call me over when we're getting ready to leave the dock at night, say, "Gary, you're not going to like this. We've got, we have three people on board that have never been in the salt water before." And of course we're going 100 miles out in the open water.

**Gary Rinn** [02:09:40] And my reply was always, "Well, obviously we need to keep an eye on them, but, I'm less worried about them than I am about the one that's got eight dives, because the one that's got no dives in salt water, is willing to listen, and pays attention to what you're telling them. It's the one that's got about eight that thinks they know everything, and they're not going to listen to you, and they're the ones that are going to get in trouble." You know, by getting down current or going too deep, whatever.

**David Todd** [02:10:13] Well, I've enjoyed listening. Learned a lot.

**David Todd** [02:10:19] I think we should probably let you go about your business. It's almost lunchtime.

**David Todd** [02:10:23] So, but let me just ask one open-ended question. Is there anything that we we may have skipped over, that we should address and discuss, if there's something you'd like to add before we wrap up?

**Gary Rinn** [02:10:40] Nothing I can think of. I mean, like I said, I've got story after story after story. I mean, just talking about, you know, how the Flower Garden sanctuary started. If I had laid out all my correspondence here, I could talk all day just on that one subject.

**Gary Rinn** [02:10:57] There were some people that, that hadn't been mentioned. I don't know if you've heard the name Tom Bright in any of your discussions. In my opinion, Tom Bright probably should receive the most accolades, whatever, or recognition, because it was primarily, in my opinion, it was because of Tom that the Flower Gardens came to the attention that they did.

**Gary Rinn** [02:11:31] There were a lot of volunteers that helped out. You know, there's a lot of wannabes that claim, you know, that they did this and did that. They came out of the woodwork. Again, I could tell a story after story about that.

**Gary Rinn** [02:11:49] You asked about, getting along with the oil companies and so forth. I had a call from a, and I never knew who the Congressman was, never even heard of him. I had a call from a Congressman's aide, you know, back when I was still in the boat business. They wanted to fly me up to Washington. It was one of the non-profit organizations, you know, environmental organizations, wanted to fly me up to Washington and talk to some Congressman's aide. They were going to pick up the flight, you know, all the meals and so forth, overnight stay, to talk to this Congressman's aide, not the Congressman, about how bad the oil business was for the Flower Garden reefs.

**Gary Rinn** [02:12:50] And I just, I just laughed out loud. I said, "You're talking to the wrong person. You know you have not a clue what you're talking about. They have zero effect on these reefs. They do their best to mitigate any problems. And they helped us with publicity, get the word out."

**Gary Rinn** [02:13:13] So. But yeah, there were a lot of wannabes that came out after the Flower Gardens got designated pounding their chest about what they did.

**David Todd** [02:13:26] What's the line? Success has many fathers and mothers? So, I guess that's the case with the Flower Gardens.

**David Todd** [02:13:33] Well, I know you're a big part of it. And, you're very kind to spend a little time today to, you know, recount what happened and how it did come about. So, thank you very much.

**Gary Rinn** [02:13:44] You bet.

**David Todd** [02:13:46] Well, with that, thank you. I will turn off the recording and let you go on about your business. But, again, best regards. And, I just wish I'd been on board one of those are great trips out there. It sounds like it's a fabulous place, but, you know, you give me the idea of what it's like. That's the next best thing.

**Gary Rinn** [02:14:11] Well Fling's still running trips. Maybe you ought to contact them and see if they'll let you piggyback on one. If nothing else, you can see it from the surface.

**David Todd** [02:14:19] It'd be pretty nice. All right. Well, thank you so much. You have a good day.

**Gary Rinn** [02:14:23] You bet, David.

**David Todd** [02:14:23] All right.

**Gary Rinn** [02:14:23] Good talking to you. Bye bye.

**David Todd** [02:14:24] Likewise.