



Bait Lady

A FORMER SCULPTOR, LOCAL LEGEND
BONNIE VAN ALLEN SELLS BAIT AND ICE CREAM
ON THE HOMOSASSA RIVER



One fine Florida morning this summer, photographer [redacted] and I eased quietly down the Homosassa River toward the Gulf of Mexico on a rented pontoon boat. Unlike many Florida rivers, the Homosassa is rocky. As we purred along, wending our way through a maze of sloughs, false creeks and dead-end bays, the limestone outcroppings on the sides of the serpentine channel made me nervous. The rental contract I'd signed said I was responsible for any damage that might befall our outboard's nether regions. And even 30-hp outboards these days are pricey.

I looked astern to gauge our position in the channel. Warm, low light illuminated the sawgrass vistas, and eagles and ospreys lorded over the wild country we were moving through, with its shadowy palm-tree hammocks and colorful hardwood swatches. We were headed to meet Bonnie Van Allen, known locally as "Bonnie the Bait Lady." For starters, I knew she's 80 years old, or thereabouts, and that she'd once swapped a fairly ordinary life in Florida for another in New York City, where she became a successful artist creating giant sculptures of machine-shop-manipulated aluminum. And I also knew that, back in Florida, she's ensconced on a small west coast island, living yet a third life, one that makes her previous two seem tame.

The regimen she sticks to is rigorous, by all reports. She awakens virtually every morning at 4 o'clock; leaves her island home for the mouth of the Homosassa River in a quirky pontoon boat at 7; anchors at 8; sells shrimp, pinfish and ice cream to passing anglers until noon; and then moves farther offshore to haul and set oodles of bait-replenishing wire traps, heading home in the early evening to spend time with her husband, Ted Harless.

The Edge of Nowhere

As we approached Bonnie's boat, with "LIVE BAIT" hand-lettered on the sides and a giant shrimp (composed of PVC tubing and aluminum panels) on the roof, a brisk offshore wind seemed to emphasize the remoteness of the place. To the west, the vast emptiness of the Gulf of Mexico stretched off into a gray haze. To the north, south and east were mangroves. The beauty of the tableau was real, but so was its unforgiving nature.

Bonnie, by contrast, was warm and inviting. She's of medium height with long, graying hair and the browned, exposed hands of an outdoorsy octogenarian. Her ensemble consisted of a couple of thick shirts doubled-up against the chilly dampness, duck pants and a well-broken-in pair of canvas deck shoes. She sported a big smile and giant sunglasses.

"Welcome," she said, as we tied up. "You're right on time."

As circulating seawater gurgled in plastic 55-gallon drums

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Bonnie Van Allen's bait boat is instantly recognizable.

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Bonnie sets wire traps for pinfish and shrimp, which she sells to loyal customers.

alive with fresh shrimp and pinfish, and the occasional gull hovered for a curious moment or two, I asked Bonnie why she had made the jump to New York in the early 1980s.

She had been a sculptor, and a well-known feminist painter admired her work. She told Bonnie that New York was where artists had to be. After finishing graduate school and her first husband's untimely death, she took the small inheritance she received and plunged ahead. "I just decided, I'm takin' the whole wad and goin' to New York to see if I'm any good," she said.

Things went well in the Big Apple, and over the next decade or so, Bonnie enjoyed artistic success. She had numerous exhibitions in the Northeast and elsewhere, and she gained the respect of colleagues and contemporaries in the art world. Through a mutual friend, she met and married Ted Harless, a retired mechanical engineer who was "just magnificent" at helping her deal with dicey issues related to hanging large metal sculptures from ceilings.

"I was very, very lucky," Bonnie said. "I met people who taught me about the art world — I knew a lot about art but very little about the art world — and I was getting commissions and shows, and the years just kept going by."

But then her landlord raised her rent to \$60,000 a year, she says. "I couldn't afford it," she recalls. "I couldn't find anything of studio size I could afford in or around New York."

She and Ted left the city and bought an island on the Homosassa River. "I remembered it quite fondly from my childhood, when I'd go with my father and my uncles on trips from our home in Miami to fish at Homosassa," she said.

"What's the name of the island, Bonnie?"

I asked, leaning in slightly, intrigued by the mere idea of making such a purchase. Austin leaned in as well, as did a stalwart little cormorant known on board as "Miss Piggy." Other birds zipped around, too. One of them, a starling, dive-bombed a granola bar Austin was attempting to eat just as a center console bumped the opposite side of Bonnie's boat.

"Hello," the skipper said. "We gotta have three dozen shrimp, a Nutty Buddy and an ice cream sandwich."

"Three dozen shrimp?" Bonnie clarified as she hovered with a small net over one of the bait barrels.

"Three dozen," the guy's wife confirmed. "And





the ice cream, o’ course. It’s so good to see you again, Miss Bonnie.”

The center console zoomed off, and Bonnie returned to the question about the name of the island. She was sliding damp bills into a cash-register-type tray with a faintly quizzical smile. “It’s called Pinfish Island,” she said, still smiling. “It’s about an hour south of here. It’s 6 acres. It’s just a small island.”

No Name Storm of 1993

When Bonnie returned to Florida in the early 1990s, she was middle-aged and no stranger to life’s vicissitudes. But for the next few years, life went smoothly enough. Pinfish Island had come with a house, a pontoon boat and an outbuilding, which Ted converted into a studio. Bonnie’s sculptures continued to sell, and she lectured about feminist art around the country.

On March 12, 1993, a powerful, unseasonable storm slammed Homosassa with 90-mph

winds and a tidal surge so powerful that most of the little island was either damaged or destroyed. Bonnie and Ted were materially wiped out; the house and studio were gone. Only the boat remained.

“And that was that,” Bonnie said, resuming her seat on a 5-gallon bucket. “Again, I had to change things out of necessity. What could I do to make money? My studio was gone — sculpture was no longer feasible. Then I remembered my father complaining about how every time he went fishing, he’d run out of bait and have to go all the way back up the river to Homosassa for more. That’s how I got the idea for selling bait at the mouth of the river.”

It took several months to transform the pontoon boat into the bait boat. Bonnie contributed sweat equity to the project, and Ted put his engineering skills to work dealing with all things technical, such as installing enough batteries to make a generator unnecessary and creating a plumbing system to keep seawater

fresh and circulating for the live wells.

“You know,” Bonnie laughed, shaking her head, “I’m a bait lady — I ultimately ended up a bait lady. Had anybody told me that such a preposterous thing would happen to me 20 years ago when Ted and I decided to do this thing, I’d have said they were crazy. Back then, I gotta tell ya, I didn’t even know how to drive a boat.”

The Happy Rock

Friends of the American writer Henry Miller often referred to the old boy as “The Happy Rock” during the latter part of his life, mostly because he’d managed to retain an unflappably positive attitude despite a personal history fraught with psychic, financial and artistic challenges. While I listened to Bonnie’s life story — which like Miller’s seemed characterized by difficult circumstances turned to advantage — Miller’s epithet kept coming to mind.

In December 2008, Bonnie tripped while pulling a trap, fell overboard and did not have the strength to pull herself back aboard. A longtime customer, returning from a fishing trip, noticed that her boat was not proceeding from trap to trap and came to investigate. Bonnie had been in the water for almost two hours when the customer pulled her out.

In 2010, three big center consoles zoomed past Bonnie one afternoon, temporarily draining the channel and leaving her boat on a ledge, splitting her pontoons. “The whole town got together and had a fish-fry benefit,” Bonnie said as she tossed shrimp to cobia eyeballing her from alongside. “All the guides — and this was such a big thing because Sunday is their best day — they all took Sunday afternoon off, cooked the fish and raised enough money to rebuild my boat and get me back on the water.”

Noon eventually came on the day of our visit, and Bonnie’s traps awaited. But before saying so long, I had to ask one final question: Does she ever miss being a celebrated New York sculptor?

“I can’t imagine ever going back,” Bonnie said. “I love what I do now. I really do. Maybe not quite as much as the sculpture, but almost. In fact, I’d love to continue doing this for another 10 years. Or maybe even 20 years. At least!”

