Mariners coming upon the village of Cortez can glimpse a historic fishing waterfront in crisis. Once one of the largest fishing villages in Florida, Cortez and its waterfront today are only a shadow of their former selves. Where once scores of net-drying shacks stood on pilings just offshore, today only one still exists (Photos 1 [1940] and 2 [1990s], pages 72 and 73). Where a dozen bustling fish houses once teemed with the fare of the sea, today only a handful still fight to survive. Development pressure increased populations targeting fixed stocks of fish and legislative changes in fishing techniques have created major changes in the working waterfront.

Cortez is a village of more than 500 people located at the north end of Sarasota Bay, seven miles west of Bradenton in Manatee County. It was settled in the 1880s by North Carolina fishers who came south seeking mullet. At that time, the village was comprised of about 16 extended families: Fulfords, Guthries, Taylors, Lewises, Adamses, Garners, Joneses, Culbreths, Bells, Mc Donalds, Capos, Greens, Coarseys, Moras, Carvers and Drymonds.

In 1879, a U.S. Fish Commission official traveled up and down the west coast of Florida conducting a survey of commercial fishing. Of Cortez, he wrote, “Mullet is the fish most largely taken, and 10,000 pounds were caught at a haul.”

The mullet and its roe were kench-cured, or rubbed with salt and dried in the sun, then shipped to Cuba to be sold, until a railroad was constructed between Tampa and Bradenton in 1884. Then, fish were shipped on ice to markets in Atlanta, Jacksonville and points north.

The village was not named until 1896, when the post office was built. Ironically, villagers decided to call their community “DeSoto,” after the first Spanish explorer to set foot in this part of the state. However, some nameless postal clerk in Washington, rumored to have discovered two other “DeSotos” in Florida, named the village after “the great conquistador Hernando Cortez,” even though Cortez never came near Florida.

At that time, the North Carolina natives found their village to be heaven. As Ben Green writes in his book *Finest Kind*:

“The immigrants had found what they were looking for. Sarasota Bay, sheltered from the Gulf by Anna Maria Island and Longboat Key, provided miles and miles of fishing grounds that were teeming with mullet, redfish, trout, bluefish, snook, sheepshead and flounder. Just beyond Anna Maria and with easy access through Longboat Pass lay the Gulf of Mexico, which had huge schools of mullet running along its beaches during roe season and, in the spring, a wealth of mackerel and kingfish.”

Fish houses were built, homes erected and docks constructed, and the little village flourished. In 1912, a brick schoolhouse was built.

Cortez prospered through the early part of the 20th century. Gasoline-powered engines greatly enhanced the range of fishers, and as the state boomed, so too did Cortez. However, a hurricane on October 23, 1921, destroyed the Cortez waterfront with 75-mph winds and 10-foot seas in the bay. Fish houses, netspreads and fish camps were destroyed, but the hardy villagers rode out the storm in the old schoolhouse and no one perished.

The village rebuilt, only to face another catastrophe: the stock market crash in 1929, coupled with a mysterious disappearance of mullet from the waters of Sarasota Bay. As Green quoted Earl Guthrie in *Finest Kind*:

“It was so bad you could leave Cortez on the flood tide, go across Palma Sola Bay and right on across the mouth of the Manatee River, past Terra Ceia and McGill’s Bay, past Joe’s Island, right on up to Bishop’s Harbor, be there on the high water, turn around and come back the same way; go across to Anna Maria and down the Gulf side of Longboat Key and back to Cortez and never see the first mullet jump. Not the first one, day after day after day.”

Fishers left the sea to seek other work until the mullet again reappeared in 1938-39. (During the financially wracked years of the Depression, Cortez became noted as the only place in the U.S. that didn’t accept financial assistance from the federal government.)

The ways of the water again confounded villagers in 1947, when one of the worst red tide outbreaks in history decimated fishing. The tiny microorganism visited the area again in 1953.

It wasn’t only the threat from sea that impacted the fishing village. By 1967, development along the shores had destroyed acres and acres of mangroves, a vital nursery habitat and food source for mullet. That year, legislation was proposed to ban commercial fishing in Manatee County within 1,700 feet of shore — a move that would effectively end fishing in the bays. Cortez fishers banded together with other groups throughout the state and defeated the legislation, but the die was cast, and developers continued to gnaw on the outskirts of Cortez, attempting to transform the village into a huge housing subdivision.
A change in the mullet market took place in the 1970s when Asian interests began to buy mullet roe at what for Cortez were astronomical prices. Some fishers would reap huge profits for fishing only in the weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas — traditionally prime roe season — and then selling the roe to Taiwan and Japan, where it was considered a high-priced delicacy.

That wave of prosperity ended in 1995, when a Florida Constitutional amendment was placed on the ballot by a petition of Florida citizens. Voters approved a ban on gillnet fishing within state waters; mullet, the village’s mainstay, now may only be caught by nets other than entanglement gill nets. This has reduced mullet landings and affected the economic viability of small-scale fishers and fishing villages like Cortez.

More than 100 Cortez homes, businesses and waterfront areas have now been placed on the U.S. Registry of Historic Places, protecting them from destruction. Manatee County and the state, through the Florida Communities Trust, have agreed to purchase the old school house and turn it into a community center.

This will assist in the survival of the village of Cortez as a traditional working waterfront community.

References

Photo 1
Aerial view of Cortez in 1940s
Photo 2
Aerial view of Cortez in 1990s