Recollections of Chatham
By Benjamin Oliver Eldridge
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Brief description: Benjamin Oliver Eldridge recalls memories of Chatham throughout his life and career. Subjects that he discusses are transportation, shipping, stores, the Life Saving Service, and shipwrecks.

MRS. GUILD: I am Mrs. Guild, president of the Chatham Historical Society. I am very pleased to present Benjamin O. Eldridge who will give you recollections of his lifetime in Chatham.

BEN: I want to – I was born in Chatham in 1878 in a house situated on Stage Harbor Road, one that my father moved from East Harwich, built by his father. I have seen many changes especially in that part of the town. In my first recollections the stagecoach and the packet were the chief modes of transportation. The old stagecoach ran between Chatham and Harwich. The train left Harwich about 7 o'clock in the morning. The old stagecoach had to get under way about half past 4 or 5, go about town picking up the passengers and then in bad weather to get to Harwich on time. The packets which ran from the coast – er, as fur north as the coast of Maine, as fur south as perhaps the capes of Virginia, north bringing in our lumber, and once in a while we had a very moderate, mild winter and they had to bring in a load of ice, a great deal of our groceries, and things of course came in from Boston. The packets that went south, of course, would bring in our coal, they would bring in our corn. Perhaps you've often wondered why 3 or 4 or 7 mills would be in this town, how farmers found grain enough to keep the mills going, but it was vessel-load after vessel-load of corn that came into Chatham, of course by packet, but of course

salt was brought in. A man was moving, why, he would take his family, goods, and everything, and put them aboard of a packet and he'd go to his destination there.

There was only one telephone when I was a boy and I thought it was quite wonderful to see my father go up to Cap'n Ziby Nickerson's and talk in this instrument on the wall. There was no bathtubs of any description, no running water, no plumbing of any description. And of course we know about moving pictures and television and such stuff as that. Of course that's come in very lately.

Roads was old, dusty roads in the summer and muddy in the winter. There was one thing about it that was kind of peculiar. When the old stagecoach ran up to Harwich, they would clay the road on the right hand-side going up the hill and leave the left hand-side sandy, so when the coach came down that the horses could hold it back. So, now of course Stage Harbor Road was probably the chief road in the town – most important road because all of our goods came that way and they were carted from Stage Wharf out through the town and I think perhaps there was more stores in that vicinity perhaps than in any part of town. In my remembrance, there was 3 or 4 grocery stores right on Stage Harbor Road, and besides there'd be 4 scales we'd drive on a whole horse and cart onto 'em, and things of that description.

Now of course my grandfather brought the old marine railway. It was called a small shipway, across from Nantucket around Civil War times. It was first put up to the west of the Cold Storage and there he built a vessel, the T. and C. Hawes. He had a man by the name of Cannon that was the chief builder and he was getting 37 ½ cents an hour for building a ship. And then, of course, my father – grandfather – died or went out of the business. He run a store down there at that time, too. But, when the railway changed hands and went into the -- where they

took up shares and they called it the Chatham- Harwich Marine Railway, taken up in shares, I forgot how many shares there was. But, see, the vessels would come down from Dennis, they'd come from Harwich and they have come from as far as Gloucester and up as far as New London, hauled out on the railways.

Course, a good many of the wrecks happened off here. They got 'em off – they'd put 'em onto the railways and repair 'em. The old railways, of course, went by horsepower. The old horse went round and round in the head-house and pulled the vessel up. Of course a heavy vessel, they'd trip the pawl and she'd run off herself, but a small, light vessel they had to back her down just same as they'd pull 'er up. And you'd be surprised to see the number of vessels that was in Stage Harbor. They was so thick they even had to haul 'em up in the winter in the Mill Pond and the Oyster Pond. On Harding's Beach there were two stores and two wharves, fish companies. They had then of course – they had fitting-out stores. They carried salt, they carried groceries of some description.

Then of course as we go farther down towards Monomoy we find Brant Island where the branters or shooters came twice a year to kill brant. That was a club. And we found Inward Point which was quite well inhabited by small shanties. Then we went down a little farther and we found these weir shanties, and then we found between the weir shanties, a factory for making guano. And then of course we went on to Monomoy and found the big stores; we found the fitting shops or stores, great stores down on them wharves. That's where all our fishermen fitted out during the Civil War to go to the Grand Banks. Course the codfish was a principal food at that time. And I never knew, I often tried to find out, why 'twas called Powder Hole, but I don't know's I ever found out.

I could perhaps tell you of some little experience there going to the Grand Banks. This was something my father told me. He was on the Grand Banks off Newfoundland in the Civil War times. He had the schooner D. W. Nickerson, and Sunday morning (they'd just wet the salt, that means they'd got their trip) the salt all up, that means they was getting ready to come home, washing down, storing the dories away, bending the mains'l, and the fog and wind – the fog lifted – there was no wind – the fog lifted and the Confederate privateer Tallahassee was amongst 'em and he came aboard the vessels and took off the crew and bored holes in 'em and sunk 'em. Father said that they prayed for wind and fog and it shut in foggy and he got clear. And when he came in to the Point, into Powder Hole, they asked him if he'd seen anything of Stephen Howes. He had the vessel the Mercy J. Howes, named for his wife, and Father said no, he was to leave the Banks the same day he did. "Well," Father says, "then they've got him." "Because," they says, "his vessel is faster than yours." But they had, they'd captured Cap'n Howes and they'd taken him and taken him down, sailed down along the coast of South America and he was – they was capturing ships at that time, and finally they captured an old brig and they'd put all the prisoners aboard this brig and told 'em, "If you'll steer such and such a course – you've got just enough food and water to last you until you get into that port." So the men from here started for the Grand Banks and they ended up in down in South America. And course they lost all their dories and things, but I dunno whether 'twas paid for afterwards.

Now, of course, it would seem kind of strange to you young folks to look off back of Chatham in the wintertime in a nor'wester perhaps and see two or three hundred vessels anchored off there. You see they get up as fur as Cape Cod in a nor'wester and they couldn't get by the Cape. They'd come back here and anchor, and the old folks used to say it looked like a

cedar swamp, the masts was so thick in the day time; looked like a city in the night when 'twas all lit up with the riding lights, and so forth and so on. But I don't know as I can go on too much now. If I run out of material – if you want to ask any questions –

QUESTION: _____ the early days of the tourist business?

BEN: Well, the most beautiful hotel that was ever built on Cape Cod was built up in Chathamport, now where the Eastward Ho Country Club is, and they had a railroad station in West Chatham – I think 'twas called the Hotel Chatham Station at that time. All the lumber came there to West Chatham and was carted across. I can remember as a boy my father started out early in the morning to cart lumber there and I would walk up to the West Chatham depot and then had to go across with him to cart the lumber. But, unfortunately it was a little bit too early. It was nothing but the horse and buggy days. There was no automobiles and it was only run for three or four years and it was finally tore down.

There's one other thing I would like to say about the ships. I was reading an account where they kept count of the number of vessels that went by Chatham Light in one year and I presume that was in daylight, and it was 14,847 vessels that passed Chatham Light. That was being in the daytime. Summer Light gives around 22,000 ships. That's in 1876 as I read in this account.

Around 1846, I was reading an account where they had a Debating Society in town, and one of the questions was whether – resolved that the shipwrecks in Chatham was of no real value to the town. Course I don't see how they could stop it by debating on it, but that was the debate. Of course, some of 'em said, why, the men they got a lot of business, made a lot of business employment for the men to get the ships off, to strip 'em and of course they said it

made a wood pile for 'em, and then they could get the metal out of 'em, and so on and so forth and so on. That was the question. Now, how much more time have I got?

MR. TOABE: Well, go ahead, Mr. Eldridge. You have one more incident you wanted to mention, I think.

BEN: My really first experience in the Life Saving Service was at the old Monomoy Station. I joined the station then as a substitute, Thanksgiving eve. I know I went out on the beach at 12 o'clock that night in a nor'east snowstorm. Hard work to find the halfway house which was up abreast the brant shanties. Next morning the lookout came down at daylight from the tower and reported a small schooner, anchored down off the Stone Horse with the flag Union down at half-mast. We immediately launched our boat on the inside and went down to her. And 'twas a little schooner Fair Wind from Elsworth, Maine, bound up the Hudson with a load of staves. The night before they was up off the Handkerchief and they tried to tack ship. She wouldn't tack so they had to wear ship. They hooked on the bottom-tackle (pronounced taykle) hauled the main boom out and it parted. The cap'n was to the wheel and he got caught in the main sheet and around his ankle and it took him down between the bit-head and a load of staves. Sprained his ankle, dislocated his shoulder and broke his ribs. We went aboard of her and got her anchored, and we tried to get her into Hyannis. That was early in the morning. At noon, the cook said "Dinner!" and _____ beside the cook and the cap'n – and he goes in. The cook gave the crew two pieces of salt pork for Thanksgiving dinner, fried up crisp. We had no dinner at all. We went in there - finally, we got up pretty well up off Hyannis. 'Twas moderate and we took the boat, left one man aboard, took the boat and rowed into Hyannis Harbor and went ashore to get the doctor. Got an old horse and team, and a man name of Crocker I think kept the lighthouse there, went up, got

Dr. Hawes and brought him down. By that time, the schooner had got into Hyannis. We took the doctor off aboard and he tried to etherize the cap'n. He was an old man, Capt. Keith, and he'd been a deep-water man. He'd had a fortune of $50,000 and he'd stayed ashore and lost it, and he'd had to take a small vessel again. And he'd been married again and had a family of children. His oldest son was lost in the Jonathan Bourne down here – load of ice. She rolled bottom-up off Pollack Rip. So, anyhow, they couldn't etherize him and had to take the doctor ashore again and he had to go up to Hyannis and get chloroform – had to chloroform him. I remember now he was breathing, sleeping there, but he knew what was going on 'cause we was cutting clothes off him and he said, "No need," he said, "cutting these clothes off." He seemed to know everything; we cut his clothes off and bound him up and I remember the doctor got down on the floor alongside of him and took his shoe off and put his foot up under his shoulder and hauled, and set his shoulder back. I remember, so that's my first experience in doctoring.

And now I guess perhaps I'd like to tell a little story I was reading about a Nantucket man. This Nantucket man said that he had drank 73 barrels of liquor in 34 years and still was unhappy. So I think I'm unhappy about talking on this thing.

MR. TOABE: At this point, Mr. Eldridge, possibly those of us who probably haven't read too closely of the whole Life Saving Stations and the halfway houses you mentioned – if you could describe them a little more in detail as to how many men were stationed there at the time and how many wrecks you participated in and so forth.

(Confused voices)

BEN: Of course, the Town of Chatham had perhaps more stations than any town on the Cape. We had 4. You see, the Old Harbor Station was the third that was built. The Monomoy Point

Station, after the loss of the crew down there that was the next one that was put on the Point. The Old Harbor Station was built in 1898 and 'twas manned out the May first. I was one of the first members that went on there. 'Twas manned out May the first, 1898. It was a beautiful Sunday morning, as beautiful a day as you ever saw, and 'twas the day that Dewey took the battle of Manila Bay. See, that station was built on account of the schooner Calvin B. Orcott being lost with all hands. That was the only ship that ever came onto the Chatham shores, and the men knew we was there and never made any effort to reach her. You see, 'twas such a tight blizzard. I know old man Rufus Nickerson, been boat- fishing all of his life and he said he lost his way going to the shore that night and he didn't think 'twas any use trying to go across to the beach. Course they had pilot boats they rowed.

MR. TOABE: Oh yes, there were other wrecks before that.

BEN: Oh yes, there was other wrecks all up and down through there. 'Course in a bad weather snowstorm, thick weather, or very dark, of course we had to have marks on the beach where we knew. We had the _____, we called it. And we had the Richard K. Fox, a part from her timbers. You see, we knew just where we was, nights. When we come down it was dark or thick fog. I've come down the beach with a southeast rainstorm and I couldn't breathe hardly but I had to turn back to, once and a while, and I've heard say you couldn't see your hand before you. But, we wore those white Nova Scotia mittens, and I held 'em up like that and couldn't see 'em. So you see we had to tell pretty nigh where we were.

MR. TOABE: What other equipment did you have to carry and wear?

BEN: Well, only when we came south of course, we didn't meet anyone; We had a time clock. We had a key on our time clock that unlocked a safe, then we took the key out of the safe and

punched a clock. Why you see, first along, the cap'n had to get up 12 o'clock every night and change that dial. See, it made an impression, a little hole in the dial just what time we – so he'd know we'd covered our beat, see. And the halfway house of course was fixed up with a little ram-cat stove in it and then it had a telephone and that's about all. As I know, when we took off the Elsie M. Smith I think we had about 13 or 15 men in that 6 by 8 room, there in that little building, wringing out the clothes and things. Sure was pretty crowded.

MRS. GUILD: Did you have to patrol the beach?

BEN: Oh yes, we patrolled the beach. We had 4 hours each way. Two men went out, one went south, one went north.

MR. TOABE: Well, now could you tell us just what would happen if you received a call or if you saw someone in distress, just what would you do – what would the – describe how you would go about it - the boat, the equipment and so forth?

BEN: Well, the only thing – of course we tried what we called the Coston Signal. We had a kind of a frame or something that we had, made of wood, then there was a thing on the bottom of it we punched and we put in a red flare, set that red flare off, so that was to tell the people on the wreck that we'd seen 'em and assistance would be given as soon as possible. Well, then, of course if we were at the halfway house, why, we'd telephone to the station, but if we were near to the station we'd run back and get all hands out. I know one night that was – course we were on there during the Spanish- American War. Of course the old Life Savers is the forgotten man. It's the only man the government has forgotten. They'd never give them a pension or anything.

MR. TOABE: The government used to give them a medal, though, once in a while –

BEN: Once in a while. Oh, I've got a medal, but 'twas given to me by the feller that I saved, not by the government. Course the government used to give 'em, but the old Life Savers there was never any pension or anything. They was the forgotten men.

MR. TOABE: How about Mr. Bloomer? Did he receive any recognition at all?

BEN: Mr. Bloomer –

MR. TOABE: George Bloomer. He was the old Life Saving –

BEN: George Bloomer? Yeah, but he got it before he was in the Life Saving Service. He took – I think he took – it was he or Herbert Bearse or Zenie Hawes – there was quite a few of 'em got medals at that time, they was taking the schooner. I know at one time that I went up and down the – as I was telling you – during the Spanish- American War we were called back – when I went on in 1898 we had 10 months on and 2 months off. We signed up for a year. But, when the Spanish-American War come on, why, we was called back into signal service and I went up and down that beach 5 times between 8 o'clock and 4 the next morning. I went up – we used to meet at – that was before we had the halfway house – that was when the station was first manned out. We used to go up and meet the Orleans man up there, and we'd set in the hollow and build a fire and watch the sand fleas hop into it. So this time I was going up and I got most up to where we – the halfway place – and I saw this light and, think I, I guess it was Cap'n Abbott Walker. Thinks I, Cap'n Abbott's got down ahead of me. I see 'twas a red light, then it went out. I rushed up there and 'twas a schooner Zenobia loaded with box-herring. She was right onto the beach so I'd gone up – 'twas thick fog – I remember that night – 'twas warm weather I think – 'twas the twenty seventh of July – so I started for the station and he started for the north station. Well, just when I went into the Old Harbor the cap'n of the Orleans station was talking

with Cap'n Doane. Well, that made two times I went up and went back. That was 5 miles. Then Cap'n Doane – we got out and we all hands started up. I think the Orleans station was going to bring their boat down. So we run up there again. That made 3 times. Well then, Cap'n Doane said along about 3 o'clock in the morning – 2, 3 o'clock in the morning – he says, "Guess you'd better go down to the station." That was a Saturday night. Says, "Your cook day next day," says "Guess you'd better go down to the station." So I started- so I commenced to pick up clothes. The boys running up there you know, they'd throw clothes off, so I had a load of clothes. Got most down to the station, looked off-shore and there was the little schooner Sea Bird. She was ashore. So I downed all my clothes that I had then and let it go back again. That made 5 times. Then we took the boat and come down. We got the Sea Bird off, but the Zenobia laid there with box-herring – they unloaded all that, and finally I think after 3, 4 weeks they got her off and took her into Provincetown. Carted the box-herring up to Orleans and shipped them on. So then when we met up there we had plenty of herring to chew on, don't you know.

MR. TOABE: Could you tell us how many shipwrecks that you can recall that – just approximately – that you participated in? (Confused voices) Quite a few hundred, would you say?

BEN: No, no. Of course the worst trouble that we had – one of the greatest troubles that we had was – as I told you before, when this fleet of vessels was anchored off here in a heavy nor'wester, why then there was always somebody be in trouble. We'd always have to go off to 'em. Some of the vessels had parted and gone to sea and the boats and the boats had taken the crew off and we'd go off and get the crew. Or there'd be one there full of water and all listed over – list you know to port or to starboard, and I'll always remember I think 'twas around January first, I think 'twas a day or 2 after that, we went off to a new towboat, she was the

Lackawanna, she was a 2-stacker and she was in trouble off here and we went off to her, and as we went off, the Chatham crew was off to the schooner Emma D. Endicott, and she had loads of coal and she had listed over – cargo ship, didn't I? – I'll always remember Charlie Howes, you remember, Edwin? He was aft, he was on the outside and I hollered, "Charlie!" as we went by astern of her. I says, "Happy New Year, Charlie!" Charlie says, "Happy New Year be damned!" I'll always remember there was a little boy aboard of her and he was around there; had his head all tied up with a rag, you know. He got hit in the head with a tail-block on the fore stays'l. And they was wading around in water it was. Finally they got her under way. I think towboat took her. That's the way we had a lot of trouble that way, don't you know.

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