

## Oral History Podcast Transcription

**This is Molly McElroy recording an oral history with Mary Bercaw Edwards. So just to start things off, did you grow up as a local to Connecticut or were you born somewhere else outside?**

*"I was actually born in Illinois, but I grew up in California, so my whole childhood was in California, Southern California."*

**And did you always have a connection to the maritime?**

*"Yeah, so my father was a first mate on a square rigged sailing ship, which was named the Yankee, so he sailed twice around the world as first mate. It was a sail training vessel, and his captain was Irving Johnson. And so then after that- the second trip -I was actually born during his second trip, and then after that, he worked in oceanographic research. He worked as a sailor on an oceanographic research vessel. He wasn't the captain or a scientist, but just one of the workers. And so, yeah, he was in that field all his life, and then we had a boat from the time I was little. When I was 16, and my sister Katrina was 15 and my brother Shaun was 10, we sailed around the world on a 38ft ketch. We spent three years and seven months at sea. And then after that, I spent the rest of my life working at Mystic Seaport Museum and before I started working in the museum I also taught at sea on sail training vessels. I taught literature and history. So yeah, my whole life was maritime."*

**So you sailed all around the world, I suppose! Any particular examples that you saw during your time?**

*"Yeah, so we were gone for three years and seven months and sailed 38,000 miles, which is pretty amazing when you think the boat averaged about 5 miles an hour so it was pretty slow. And we sailed through the South Pacific- down the coast of Mexico, through the South Pacific to New Zealand, Australia, across the Indian Ocean, then down around the Cape of Good Hope down at the bottom of Africa, and all the way up to Gloucester, Massachusetts and down the east coast of the United States, through the Panama Canal, and back home to the town I grew up in, which was Santa Barbara, California."*

**So what, in particular, drew you to Connecticut after all that time sailing?**

*"So when we-- So when my father had been on the square-rigger, the brigantine Yankee, he had-- In-between the world voyages, so they usually sailed for about 18 months. That was how long a world voyage would take. And then, they would spend the 18 months in between the voyages making money for the next voyage, and one of the ways they made money was to take Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts out sailing, and so*

*during that was done in New England. And on those voyages, my father visited Mystic Seaport Museum many times, and he really fell in love with it. And so, when I was growing up, we always knew about the museum even though we were in California. When we sailed around the world, my whole family sailed around the world, we visited the Seaport, and I fell in love with it too like, 'Ah, what a great place!'*

*So we returned home to California at the end of April, and I was going to go to university in the fall, and I needed a summer job. So I applied to Mystic, and came back and-- Actually I worked on the Conrad Program --And I spent the summer working at the museum and totally loved it. I went on and got my BA and my PhD, and when I was getting my PhD, I started coming back and working at the museum in the summers, and then after I graduated with my PhD then I started working at the museum year-round. So it was completely Mystic Seaport that brought me to Connecticut. I never-- When I was in California, I never thought 'Ooh, I want to live in Connecticut!', but I always wanted to work at Mystic Seaport."*

**I understand that you were around during the restoration of the *Charles W. Morgan* and being able to see that 38th Voyage. Would you like to describe that experience of being able to see her in action once again?**

*"On the years before the restoration happened, the Morgan was-- She was not in good shape. She was getting in worse shape, and they were trying to raise the money to restore her and we were able to do less and less. Eventually, we couldn't set-- At first. We could set a lot of sails, and then fewer and fewer sails. Like, they took the chain-sheets off the lower topsails because that was too much weight aloft, and eventually we couldn't set any sails on the ship and we could raise and lower the whaleboat, but that was all. And it was becoming less and less because we were trying to protect the ship, and they were having a really hard time raising all the money until Steve White-- President Steve White came up with the idea of sailing her, and all of a sudden it got everybody excited and interested.*

*So I was actually at the staff meeting when he announced it, and we couldn't quite believe it. We were all like, 'Did he just say that? A-Are we going to sail the ship?' And he didn't tell the staff until he cleared it first with the Coast Guard, which took a long time. Several years, I think, to get the clearance from the Coast Guard to be allowed to do it and then clear it with the Board of Trustees. So it was an amazingly well-kept secret. I couldn't believe that they kept the secret so well. And then suddenly, they announced that we were going to sail, and that really increased donations. People were so excited about it. So, then, the restoration then started in earnest and we had-- We were trying to finish everything that had to do with the ship, and we got a very large grant from the National Endowment of the Humanities to send what's called the '38th Voyagers'. People like scholars and ethno-musicologists and artists and sculptures and*

*musicians and descendants of whalers and school teachers and Melville scholars, all kinds of people, nine of them on each passage. So there were over 85 of them, and that was a huge- international actually -contest to be allowed to be one of those Voyagers, and that helped by getting that money.*

*And so, that all led to the Voyage, and then Susan Funk, she's the Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer at the museum, she was determined that the boat wouldn't just be sailed by the sailors or outsiders. She wanted to make sure that anybody who worked at the museum got the chance to sail on it. So they allowed staff to apply for staff positions as crewmen. Staff sailors each sailed one-third of the voyage. And then they hired some professional crew, and then they allowed every single person who worked at the museum, if they wanted to. People who worked in finance, people who worked in facilities, people who were groundskeepers, everybody. Curatorial got a chance to go out for one day. Pretty much everybody did that. So that's how it happened, and it was interesting because even though we were just staff sailors and they were professional sailors, we actually-- Many of us knew more about the Morgan because most of the professional sailors were people from schooners, and they weren't used to square-riggers. And we, you know, we're used to not only square-riggers but THAT square-rigger in particular. We knew more about the Morgan than certainly any of the professional sailors, since we all spent years on her."*

**And slightly shifting gears, going back a tad to look at the education aspect of Maritime that you have a lot of experience in. You said you taught maritime education on board a ship. Is that correct?**

*"Yes, so when I first got my PhD, I was teaching for Long Island University, which had an at-sea program and also Northeastern University-- for Long Island University, obviously in New York and Northeastern University is in Boston, Massachusetts. And I was the History and Literature professor, so the students would spend the entire semester at sea and then I would give them classes just like they do at SCA at Williams, Mystic nowadays. At that time, I would teach them a class on literature and history and then they would do credit that could transfer to school to either Long Island University or Northeastern. And I also had a captain's license, so I was especially-- I was somebody good for them to hire because sail training vessels were required to have two people with licenses on board if the captain, obviously, had a license and then they could use me as their second license but just pay me to be a teacher. It made economic sense for them, and it was great for me. So, yeah, I did that for a while and then eventually I was kinda sick of being at sea. I started teaching at Williams, Mystic, and then from there when University of Connecticut decided to ramp up their Maritime Studies program, I already taught maritime literature, so I got hired as did Glen Gordinier who already taught maritime history. We were both hired, so that they could sort of start with people who are already recognized in the field, and that was a big boost to the program*

*because it made the program look really serious and not just look like someone who says 'Yeah, I like to be on boats!'. You know, that kind of thing. So Glen and I were both hired at the same time."*

**Your specialty when it comes to maritime literature, from my understanding, is Herman Melville. What about him as an author interested you? Either from a maritime perspective or an english perspective.**

*"So when I first went to graduate school, I was interested in Henry James, another American author. So obviously I was already interested in 19th-century American, but I was studying James and then my major professor, whose name was Harrison Hayford, who was, at the time, the leading Herman Melville scholar in the United States. He looked at me and he said, 'With your background, you should study Melville!'. It was kinda funny because I was just an undergraduate, I hadn't really thought about this too much, so I was like 'Oh okay. If that's what my teacher says.' And then now, I can't imagine ever studying anybody else. But he thought that Melville would work for me because I already love 19th-century American Literature and I was a sailor, so those two things combined and that's how I got into Melville. And now, as you know having been my student, I just LOVE Melville and love Moby Dick."*

**Thank you so so much for this interview!**

*"Thank you! These were good questions, you did a really good job."*

**Thank you so much for being a part of this interview today, and I hope you have a very good day!**