

Recording is property of the Tales of Cape Cod Incorporated, visiting with Beatrice L. Lapham

Frank Rudd: This is an oral history interview with Beatrice M. Lapham for the NOAA 50th Oral History Project. The interview is taking place on May 12, 1978, in Marstons Mills, Massachusetts, and the interviewer is Frank Rudd. When and where were you born?

Beatrice M. Lapham: I was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on October 17, 1895, but I came to the Cape when I was three years old so I never knew any other parents but my foster ones.

FR: And who are your Foster parents? What were their names?

BL: Mr. and Mrs. Henry Harding.

FR: And they lived in Orleans. [inaudible]

BL: They lived in North Eastham.

FR: What kind of home did they have?

BL: They had a nicer one, very comfortable warm and friendly. They were much older than my own parents would have been.

FR: Did they do any farming?

BL: Just a small garden my dad had, my dad had just a small garden on the place. But he had a cow.

FR: Any other livestock or animals?

BL: Few chickens, a cat.

FR: Did you have any foster brothers and sisters?

BL: No

FR: Did your foster father do for a living hood?

BL: He was a fisherman for a number of years, and then he was postmaster for ten years in North Eastham.

FR: Who did he sell his fish to?

BL: They shipped it to Boston.

FR: How big a boat did he have?

BL: That's right had his partner.

FR: How long was the boat?

BL: How long was the boat?

FR: You said about twenty-five feet and he had a partner.

BL: He had a partner. He had a partnership with this other man.

FR: And then he became postmaster. How long was he a postmaster?

BL: Ten years.

FR: How did he get paid as being a postmaster? Do you know his salary?

BL: He didn't get. He was not on a salary, it was the cancelation of his stamps. And he also had a little, sold puffed tobacco and candies and cookies.

FR: His wages were predicated on the commission, on the stamps he sold.

BL: I think my father averaged forty a month as I can remember correctly. He was a fourth class post office.

FR: What did your stepmother do?

BL: Just kept house.

FR: She didn't work at all?

BL: No in those days the ladies didn't work. They kept house for the husbands.

FR: Mrs. Lapham what was a typical day in your early childhood?

BL: Every day was almost the same. We would go I would go to school and come home maybe read for a while, play with my cousin who lived next door.

FR: What were your meals like?

BL: Very simple but good. My mother was a wonderful cook and we raised all our own vegetables. Had our own cream and for breakfast this may sound funny, but often for breakfast I would have cream on my bread for breakfast and it was delicious.

FR: Was that raw milk?

BL: Raw milk, always raw milk.

FR: How did you keep the milk refrigerated?

BL: In the little potbelly cellar.

FR: Did you have other things in that cellar?

BL: Just about everything that was edible.

FR: How did you get back and forth to school?

BL: Back then it was called a barge and it was run by a pair of horses. And sometimes the barge went on such a roundabout route that some of us children would walk home.

FR: How far would it be to walk home?

BL: Probably be about three miles.

FR: What did the barge look like?

BL: Will I think it might have looked like Noah's Ark without the windows. [laughter] It was a very cumbersome affair and had side seats.

FR: How many children were in the barge?

BL: I think fourteen or fifteen maybe from North Eastham. We went to Eastham School.

FR: When would you have your large meal?

BL: All was at noon.

FR: Why was that?

BL: Because I think my dad always had his meal at noon and he expected it. He would walk home from the post office a mile and half every day. My father always walked to work and he came home, must come home at noon as I said before and he went back to the office and made that trip three times a day about a mile and a half each way, and he was then seventy years old.

FR: He's had a rugged constitution.

BL: We all, all the children took their lunch in a pail and I had a little log pail that I took my lunch in.

FR: What did your lunch consist of?

BL: We'd have a sandwich and homemade molasses cookies, and we always went down what we called the hollow to eat our lunch outdoors.

FR: Tell me what were your weekends like?

BL: On Saturdays we would always walk to the library to get our books in Eastham about three miles away, so we could read on Sunday because we weren't allowed to ever play with anything on Sunday, we must be very quiet. On Sunday we went to church three times a day, the morning Sunday school and evening service.

FR: How did you get to church?

BL: We walked.

FR: How far was the church from your home?

BL: About three miles, about a mile and half from home.

FR: What kind of toys did you have and did you have pets as a youngster?

BL: I always had a cat for a pet. I would always bring the stray one's home, but my mother would pick one and send the rest back. I had very few toys, but the ones I had I loved. I had a rag doll which my mother made and her head was so floppy that it would always be on my chest. I had a little table

and two chairs.

FR: What did you do for entertainment?

BL: We played games, we played Croquet. We rode hoops, which were made out of old wagon wheels down the dirt road. Walked on cans.

FR: You walked on cans, how did you do that?

BL: We punched holes in the top of the cans put the rope through and held on with our hands and walked like a pair of stilts. We could even run with them. We had to make our own entertainment in those days because we couldn't go in to the store and buy all these nice things they have now.

FR: Did you go swimming?

BL: Always every day when it was good weather.

FR: Did you go in boats?

BL: Out with my father fishing one day. I got so sea sick I had to come home.

FR: Didn't you tell me about an experience swimming?

BL: I was a good swimmer. In fact I was even swimming since I was three years old. And we would go in swimming every day. We would wait until the tide went out and then we would walk to Billingsgate Island which is now nonexistent. We would stay over there and play around until the tide turned and then we'd walk back. And before we got to the other side the water would be up around our waist but we never knew any fear.

FR: That was rather dangerous. What happened to the Island?

BL: It sunk, went under. It was an Island that is where the Billingsgate Light was it was Billingsgate Island. And it is all sunk now and it's all gone.

FR: Erosion took care of that, is that correct. It eroded away?

BL: It eroded away and the water came over. It was a lighthouse there Billingsgate light for years.

FR: Did you go to parties?

BL: May basket. We had May basket parties.

FR: Did you go to dances later on?

BL: No dances for me because my father and mother were very strict Methodist and they thought it was a sin to go dancing so I didn't go dancing until I had left home.

FR: Did you play cards?

BL: No cards either. No cards and no Sunday paper.

FR: They were very strict?

BL: Very strict, but very nice people.

FR: Tell me how did your husband court you. What did you do when you went out on dates?

BL: I never went out on a date with my husband.

FR: How did you get to meet him?

BL: When I was twenty-three years old my father passed away and I was left without anything and I had to work so I went to East Harwichs and kept house for gentleman there and that is where I met my husband.

FR: What was your husband doing? He was what?

BL: He was a plumber.

FR: And where was he working?

BL: He was working in East Howards.

FR: When were you married?

BL: I met him on the first day in early April and was married on the thirtieth day of May.

FR: I would say he was a fast worker.

FR: Tell me what did your husband do for a living?

BL: My husband was a registered plumber. And at the time we were married he was making thirty-five dollars a week. We moved in to our rented home paying fifteen dollars a month, but we would put fifteen dollars a month in the bank every month fifteen dollars. We saved.

FR: What did you do with the money that you saved?

BL: Put it towards the future.

FR: Did you buy a house? When did you buy a house?

BL: Will we rented until we bought, owned our first home in 1943.

FR: What did you pay for it?

BL: We paid fifteen hundred for an eight room house.

FR: Did you have indoor plumbing.

BL: No indoor plumbing, no water inside, the well was outside the door.

FR: Did you have electricity?

BL: Yes we had electricity.

FR: Let's take a walk down the main street in North Eastham in 1910, tell me what was there.

BL: Main Street was a dead road at that time there were very few houses. My Uncle had a General Store at the end of Main Street.

FR: What did he sell in the General Store?

BL: He sold everything. As the old saying is, from soup to nuts.

FR: What else was there on Main Street?

BL: Not very much. The Methodist church was on Main Street.

FR: Were there any other stores?

BL: No other stores in North Eastham.

FR: Did you have a school on Main Street.

BL: No schools in North Eastham.

FR: Where did you go to school?

BL: We had to go to school in Eastham.

FR: Tell me about your school.

BL: Our school was just a little one room schoolhouse which later became the headquarters for the historical society.

FR: How many students in the school?

BL: Forty or thereabouts.

FR: How many teachers?

BL: One teacher

FR: How many grades?

BL: Four

FR: How was the school heated?

BL: We had in the school there was four grades, fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth and then later the ninth grade was added.

FR: Do you remember your teacher?

BL: Very much

FR: Did they have any problems with discipline?

BL: Not too much. But I was one of the ones who acted up sometimes. We went to the candy store and got what we then called N [Molly, I don't say that word or type it] babies and made mustaches on our face. We came back and the teacher would make us stand up all the rest of the day in the front of the school so the other children could look at us.

FR: Did they ever kick you out of the school?

BL: No, no

FR: You must have been pretty good kids then.

BL: Will as I could remember we never had very much trouble.

FR: Did you have indoor plumbing?

BL: No we had outdoor plumbing.

FR: Did you have any traveling sales people call on you?

BL: I remember one young man who came with a pack on his back selling dry goods, needles and pins and some cloth and so forth. He would come down from Orleans in the morning on the train, go from house to house and then go back in the afternoon.

FR: Do you remember any other salesmen?

BL: Oh I remember when the hook and ladder man came every year with their chairs and hooks and ladders and calling and everybody would run out and see what he had.

FR: Why did they call him the hook and ladder man?

BL: He had ladders, I don't know I don't rightly know, but they always called him the hook and ladder man, I don't know why, and then the Grand Union Pacific Tea company came and everybody flocked out to that you know to buy things from there.

FR: What did they have for display, how was it displayed?

BL: All hung out on the outside of their horse and wagon. They had their wares hung out on the outside and then some in the inside, pots and pans, I can see it now as plain as anything.

FR: But there's only one store in the town of North Eastham is that correct?

BL: That I know about, that I remember about yes.

FR: When they sold groceries in those days, like sugar or flour, how was it handled? How was the merchandise sold?

BL: The flour and sugar came in barrels and was measured out. And the pickles were put into little wooden chips and there was always a big cheese on my Uncle's counter and one day when I was waiting for something I saw a little head peeking out and a little mouse ran through the cheese. But my Uncle still sold the cheese and as far as I know the customers enjoyed it. [laughter]

FR: Probably made it more tasty.

FR: Can you tell me anything about Industry in North Eastham?

BL: The main thing at that time was their fishing. The men went out in their boats and then of course they got their clams, and the women would go too and make almost as the men.

FR: That work was seasonal, what would they do in the wintertime?

BL: They did most of their fishing in the summer until it got too cold and then my Uncle who owned the General Store would provide their groceries during the winter to be paid for in the spring, which was always done, he always was sure that he would be paid.

FR: How did you celebrate the Holidays?

BL: We always had a happy time on 4th of July, because we always had firecrackers, torpedoes and the sparklers.

FR: Did you have a parade?

BL: No parade that I can remember. North Eastham was a very quiet little town.

FR: What other Holidays do you recall?

BL: On Memorial Day we had to learn poetry and recite in school, and then we went to decorate the soldiers graves with wildflowers that the children went into the fields and picked.

FR: Do you recall Thanksgiving?

BL: Thanksgiving wasn't very much different even though we had a special dinner, we'd have a nice roast chicken, ice cream which we barely had in those days.

FR: Where did you get the ice cream?

BL: We got the ice cream, the ice cream that we had came from the other end of the town.

FR: What about Christmas?

BL: At Christmas time we always celebrated at home and my dad would go out and cut a little tree, put it in the corner of the kitchen and mom and I would decorate it with little homemade ornaments, cranberry and popcorn stung.

FR: Did you exchange presents?

BL: I never remember of mother or dad ever having a Christmas present, but I had maybe three maybe four gifts on the tree.

FR: What would you get?

BL: The first Christmas that I remember my father gave me a red leather testament and then I had wanted a pen knife and I received that one Christmas and a doll, but that's just about all I can remember.

FR: Mrs. Lapham do you recall the advent of the automobile?

BL: I remember the first automobile that I ever saw was a Stanley Steamer and it was driven by the lighthouse people at Northam and he would drive that Stanley Steamer through the woods road and come out and we would hear it long before we could see it and everybody would have to look out the window and watch it coming up that dirt road.

FR: Can you describe it?

BL: It was [inaudible] tall it was very low, big wheels and we would see the steam coming out in the back. It looked like exhaust. My Uncle Sam had the first automobile that I can remember, it was a red Maxwell with big glass lamps and all the gears on the outside and he would start to take my mother to church and at first she was afraid to go and she really never did like it.

FR: Do you recall the advent of the telephone?

BL: The only telephone I remember when I was a little girl was the telephone in my Uncles store and when anyone needed to call they would come and in an emergency sometimes he, my Uncle would have to get out in the middle of the night and go into the store so that folks could use the telephone, and he did charge them some, especially out of town because he was [inaudible] to a tree??

FR: What kind of a telephone did you have?

BL: We had the telephone on the wall and you, it was a cranked up affair, you cranked your number and the people answered, there was no operator except out of town calls and then you cranked to get the operator the same as we do now.

FR: How many parties did you have on the line?

BL: I don't know.

FR: Do you recall the doctor in those days?

BL: I remember our family doctor who would drive down with his carriage from Orleans until he applied a car in later years.

FR: How did he, did he have medicine for you?

BL: Always had his medicine, had his bag with all his little bottles, pills and so forth.

FR: Where would you go to see a dentist?

BL: Yes we went to Orleans, we went to Orleans to Doctor Bessy as the dentist.

FR: How many members in your immediate family? How many children did you have?

BL: I had six children.

FR: Their all born in...

BL: All born at home, except one. My second boy was born in the hospital because the doctor didn't think I could stay home I had developed a little bit trouble.

FR: Who delivered the children? What was the Doctor's name?

BL: Doctor Kenny.

FR: Can you tell us something about him

BL: Doctor Kenny wasn't really truly a family doctor, he delivered all my children but one, and he was born in Cape Cod hospital and my husband had no transportation and was in the middle of the night so Doctor Kenny came and took me to the hospital where Daniel was born and girl was born, she was born at home and we called Doctor Kenny, he came and he told me that the baby wouldn't be coming along for a while and I was really very uncomfortable so he laid down beside me on my bed and I was so mad because I thought he was so comfortable and I thought he should be taking care of me. [laughter].

FR: Remember how much it cost to deliver a baby in the 20's.

BL: I remember very well that the Doctor's fee was fifteen dollars and when my boy was delivered in the hospital, the hospital bill was ninety dollars.

FR: So a total was \$105.00 dollars.

FR: Did Doctor Kenny have a midwife to help him?

BL: He had, I don't think, yes I guess we would call a midwife, but we always said nurse. He always had, I had always engaged someone to come before but when my last boy was born the nurse didn't appear and I was alone with Doctor Kenny when Paul was born. When I had the babies at home we always engaged a nurse, she wasn't an RN and I doubt very much that she really had much training but she was very efficient and she would come in the daytime and then go home at night and I think she charged about fifteen dollars a week and she stayed ten days.

FR: Did she wash, cook and take care of the children?

BL: She washed, cooked and bathed, and one nurse especially made a concoction of crack a mush, which she fed the children and sent off a dish to me, and one of my children was sitting beside me and I said open the window and throw it out I can't eat it. [laughter]

FR: Do you recall prohibition?

BL: Very much so.

FR: What do you remember about it?

BL: I especially remember the rum runners who came into Boston harbor.

FR: Tell us about it.

BL: I remember so well during prohibition when the rum runners came into Boston harbor and one of the rum runners lived right next door to me and he would wait until night and then they would go out because some of the liquor was sunk in the harbor and then at night they would go in and retrieve it from the water.

FR: Did you see them do it?

BL: No, but I know it came from a very good source that they did do it and then I remember the, I never knew where the still was but I know there was a still close by and they would get the old turnips from the farmers to make their moonshine and the moonshine was potent because if a little spilled on the varnish floor it take the varnish off. The WCTU was very concerned during those days and they had many church meetings, they prayed for the rum runners to save their souls.

FR: Where did they sell the liquor?

BL: Nobody really knows, it was quite a secret organization, nobody really knows where they sold their liquor but some of them made plenty.

FR: What would they get for a case of liquor? How much?

BL: I have no idea.

FR: Mrs. Lapham do you recall the depression?

BL: I certainly recall the depression because my husband was allowed twelve dollars a week, and we then had five children at home.

FR: Was he on the WPA?

BL: Yes for a while.

FR: Did he live on twelve dollars a week?

BL: You might not say we lived on, but we survived. He had a nice gun (Molly?) and I had canned a lot of food and we'd put a lot of things in the cellar and when he could get odd jobs he did, somehow or another we got through alright.

FR: Do you recall any famous people visiting the Cape?

BL: I remember when the pilgrim monument in Provincetown was dedicated, and Theodore Roosevelt was then President and he came to Provincetown to lay the cornerstone and my dad took a load of some of the people in his boat, he and his partner to Provincetown for that occasion while I stood on the beach and cried because I couldn't go because little girls weren't allowed to those things. [laughter].

FR: Thank you Mrs. Lapham for this very interesting interview.

BL: You're very welcome and I would like to say that I am grandmother of eighteen, I have twenty-five great grandchildren and they are all here on Cape Cod, and I lived a very happy and eventful life and I don't think there is any other place any better the old Cape Cod.