

Ernestine Gray: I'm Ernestine Gray. This tape is the property of Tales of Cape Cod, Incorporated, and cannot be duplicated or reproduced without written permission from Tales of Cape Cod, Incorporated. This is July 31, and I'm interviewing Mr. Kenneth Coombs in his home in Mashpee on Route 130. Mr. Coombs is a retired principal recently retired from the school system of Mashpee. How nice of you to have me in your home, Mr. Coombs. Can you tell me something about your experiences when you were a child? Where were you born, Mr. Coombs?

Kenneth Coombs: I was born in Boston [on] April 21, 1914, and we moved to Detroit, Michigan, during the war, where my father worked for the Ford Motor Company. It was also the home of my mother. During the recession following the war, we moved back east, and for a couple of years, we lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts. My father's brother persuaded him to come to Nantucket, where he was making a living fishing – shellfishing – scallop and quahog and lobstering. Here we lived from 1921 to 1935. I attended school along with my three sisters in a small town – approximately three to four thousand year-round residents. This became our home, and we grew up in a town where everyone knew one another. Everyone was friendly. A contented small New England town. I was successful in school and active in everything a boy growing up took part in. I was active in sports, Boy Scouts, and I played varsity baseball and basketball and was the class officer for most of my high school days and valedictorian of my graduating class. I feel I was accepted by all because of my ability and personality to get along with everyone. I would say I had a very pleasant childhood. My parents were strict but firm and fair. I enjoyed life with all my friends. I was taught to respect my elders, to share everything, especially with my three younger sisters. I had my share of chores to do at home, like keeping the coal buckets filled and the ashes emptied in three coal stoves. Plus, added chores on Saturday. Together we shared all the work of the home, and my mother came from a religious background. Her father was an ordained minister, and he was the head of her family of five. I was the oldest of four children and the only boy, so I was chosen to set an example for my sisters to follow, and I – in being brought up in a nearly complete white culture, I had to set good examples. I must say I had very few problems growing up. I knew my parents' wishes and desires, and all of the path of straight and narrow. It was not too hard to follow, for I was guided all the way by two loving and dedicated parents.

EG: Your mother's name, Mr. Coombs?

KC: My mother's name was Myrtle – Myrtle Hill. Her maiden name was Hill.

EG: And your sisters? Are they still living?

KC: I have three sisters still living. Edna, the youngest, lives in California, in Los Angeles. I have a sister in (inaudible) by the name of Eleanor, and Myrtle lives in Stamford, Connecticut.

EG: Can you tell me something about the favorite meals in your home as a child?

KC: Well, my father was more or less of a fisherman. We had an ample amount of fish. In the wintertime, we had scallops, and today, they're a great delicacy, as they were then.

EG: Was that his main occupation?

KC: Yes. And scallops were very plentiful in Nantucket, and at an early age, I learned to open them, and I became a very good opener.

EG: How much were you paid?

KC: We – at that time – I started fifty cents a gallon opening, and I could open a gallon an hour, which was considered fairly good [at the] time.

EG: Certainly is.

KC: We also had a lot of fish, depending upon the season. My grandfather and grandmother used to come over from Mashpee and spend some winters with us, and they'd always bring a barrel of apples from their apple orchard and some smoked herrings, of which my father was very, very fond and happy to get.

EG: Who were your parents? Your grandparents, rather?

KC: My grandfather was Oakes A. Coombs, and my grandmother was Amanda Coombs, and they had five boys and no girls. My grandmother was very strict, and she taught all the boys how to cook, how to wash, and then how to do all the household chores besides doing what men did outside. And it came in very handy to them, especially when their wives were ill or not able to cook. And they were very good cooks.

EG: Several of them got into cooking as an occupation. Well, of your family – not directly.

KC: The boys did. They wouldn't have done an occupation. But had they needed to, they could have easily cooked in hotels or anywhere.

EG: Did you tell me the name of the school you attended in Nantucket?

KC: The name of the school that I attended – there was only one – it was called the Academy Hill School.

EG: How many grades?

KC: And it had all grades, from first grade through the twelfth grade.

EG: Do you remember any teachers?

KC: What?

EG: Do you remember any of your teachers?

KC: Oh, yes. I remember my fifth-grade teacher, Miss Perry. And Miss (Mendonsa?), my sixth-grade teacher. Marie Kay Swayze, seventh-grade teacher. Mrs. Williams, eighth-grade

teacher. I remember them all because in the small school, you become very close to teachers and everybody knows one another.

EG: Right.

KC: And they were outstandingly good.

EG: How about transportation? Did you live near the school, or were you transported?

KC: I lived about two miles from the school, and we walked to school every day. There were no buses, and we walked home for lunch.

EG: No school barges? No school barges?

KC: We had no school lunches. We didn't bring our lunches. Everybody walked home for lunch and back to school in an hour.

EG: What did you take to school for lunch?

KC: I didn't take any lunch. I walked home for lunch and –

EG: I'm sorry. You went home for lunch. Excuse me. What did you have at lunchtime? Do you remember?

KC: Usual thing, I think. Soups and sandwiches.

EG: What did you wear? What kind of clothing did you wear in those days?

KC: Oh, I think in those days, back in the late '20s and '30s, clothing was a little different.

EG: Knickers?

KC: Knickers.

EG: Long stockings.

KC: Long stockings. Sweaters. About the same.

EG: Mufflers.

KC: Caps instead of hats.

EG: Did you wear a tam o'shanter?

KC: Yeah, I suppose so. And in the wintertime, we often wore boots on rainy days.

EG: Were they rubber?

KC: Yeah. Rubber boots. Being a seafaring town, everybody had a pair of boots. They kept our feet dry and warm.

EG: So, was that any particular section of Nantucket, or what did you call –

KC: I lived right in –

EG: – the area?

KC: – the area where most of the year-round people lived. And it's a great summer resort, like many of the communities on the Cape. We had a lot of summer people. I used to caddy. Most all the boys used to caddy.

EG: Where?

KC: At the golf clubs. And we started quite early when we were seven, eight – when we were eight and nine years old. We rode our bicycles to the golf course, which is about five miles from our home.

EG: What kind of salary did you get then, caddying?

KC: At that time, we made – we started at fifty cents for eighteen holes, and we averaged around two dollars a day and ten dollars a week, which was –

EG: Very good then.

KC: – very good for boys ten years old.

EG: Certainly was.

KC: Most of this money we saved to buy our winter clothes. At that time, we didn't have supermarkets to go and buy things every day. Often, we'd go to Bedford and do our winter shopping.

EG: How?

KC: By boat.

EG: And what was the name of the boat?

KC: There were regular steamers that ran between Bedford and Nantucket. They no longer run, but only between Hyannis and Woods Hole.

EG: How much did it cost to go to Bedford?

KC: Oh, I don't know. I think it's two dollars and fifty cents round trip, but today that's perhaps tripled.

EG: Do you want to tell me something else about caddying? Who did you caddy for?

KC: Caddying – who did I caddy for?

EG: Mm-hmm [to indicate yes].

KC: I don't think I caddied for any great men or any great players. But I learned to play golf because all caddies learn to play golf. And I think one thing that I did learn from caddying was oftentimes, a caddy walks with his player almost for three hours, and during that time, they often have conversations. So often, the men are interested in boys, and they ask them what they are interested in. A friendship and understanding of fatherly advice often comes from this type of association because most all golfers are gentlemen, and they're interested in the welfare of young people.

EG: That's true. That's very true. Now, I'll let you continue with the other things you wanted to tell me.

KC: As I went through high school, I had hopes of either becoming an electrical engineer or a scientist. But I graduated from high school in 1931, and, at that time, it was the beginning of the Great Depression. No one who has not lived during that time can appreciate or understand the hardship that most people went through in the United States. My mother wanted me to become a dentist, but at that time, money was so short the decision became – she tried to get me into a state school where the tuition rates were low, and we might be able to get enough money available. I was successful to qualify, and so, in 1932, I entered Bridgewater State Teachers College to enter a career in education. I wasn't exactly excited about this new role, and for a period of time, I was very lonely, disillusioned, and unhappy. I knew no one here, and I felt, for the first time, I was different than the rest, for I was the only non-white male in the college. But I soon made friends, became active in sports, and did well in my academic life. Later, during my sophomore year, my mother passed away after a very short illness, which was a massive heart attack. As she was the dynamo of our happy family, everything changed. My desire to finish school became less and less. This was a time of national unemployment. My father was out of steady work, and things were bleak. My father wanted me to continue, and I knew without more money, and with the conditions as they were, I would never get a job, even if I did graduate. I knew I was taking money away from my family that they needed to live on. But somehow, my father persuaded me to remain in school and found money for me to continue. Later, I found out that he borrowed from friends and even on his life insurance in order to carry out the dreams of my mother. In 1935, I did graduate – a proud boy, but one deeply indebted to my parents and sisters for the sacrifices that they had made during these four difficult years, and I was ever mindful that there were no jobs available. Less than five percent of my graduating class received jobs in teaching during the first year following our graduation. My father also died before I became a teacher in 1937. For two years after graduation, I had several menial jobs, but they were jobs that I welcomed. I was a waiter, a butler, a laborer, a Phys. Ed. [physical education] director. I wanted

to travel at this time, but the answer was always the same. I tried to get in the Merchant Marine; I tried to join the navy, but the answers were always the same. “We have no openings at this time.” I joined the teachers’ agency. In the late summer of 1937, I had an offer for a teaching position in Columbia, South Carolina. At the same time, I heard of an opening in the town of Mashpee. I wrote the superintendent of schools in Mashpee and was interviewed by him, Mr. James F. Peebles, the week before school was to open. The interview was successful, and he told me if I wanted the job to report the next Tuesday the following week. To say I was happy is, to put it mildly, for I was the happiest person alive.

EG: I’m sure. After all those years of struggling. Mr. Coombs, what were your feelings about your job in Mashpee? Can you tell me something about those experiences?

KC: I can tell you everything that happened. My first few years of teaching were exciting and very eventful. I enjoyed every day, for here I was, teaching in the town I had always prayed I would choose if I ever had a choice – a town with a population under six hundred people, a school with an enrollment [of] around a hundred, a school where everybody knew one another, and a town in which my roots reach way back as far as one could go, for my father Otis was born here, his father, my grandfather, Oakes A. Coombs and grandmother, Amanda Coombs, and my grandfather’s family and my grandmother’s family reach back as far as one can go. Isaac Coombs was one of the first selectmen when the town was incorporated in 1870, and one of the first converts to Christianity was a Coombs. Hiakamus was a historical name, and here I had a chance to add to the legacy. I didn’t see it this way until many years later. At first, I was proud that here the citizens, my people, were giving me a chance to work and play with their children. What I did here as a teacher during these years, it’s hard to measure, but I always lived in hope that I might have inspired some boys and girls, by being one of them, to become good citizens, to raise their heads and walk proudly in the sun, for they had the ability, they had the talent, and they had the opportunity to become anything they wanted to become. Over the years, I found that this same desire was the hope of many dedicated teachers, my peers who often remained here for many years, like Miss [inaudible] Miss Betty (Pierce?), Miss Hester Smith, (Ruth?) Sigler, Mrs. Stanley Cotton, (David?) [inaudible], and many others.

EG: Yes, continue on, please, Mr. Coombs. Tell me more about the school, the Mashpee school.

KC: First, I think I’d like to tell you a little bit about Mashpee as a community. Mashpee, when I first started teaching, was a unique community. It had a great historical significance, for here, ever since there was an America, these people lived together, they governed themselves, and they were respected by their neighbors as Indians. They were the original native Americans, and history records them as the first to greet the pilgrims. Here they lived in peace with their later white Caucasian neighbors. Over three hundred years, contented, peace-loving, and later became isolated in the late 1800s as an incorporated town and the only town on Cape Cod with an Indian name. Here they lived as a closely-knit family, slowly absorbing the ways of their white brethren but, in some ways, still holding their identity as Native Americans. It was a happy community in the 1930s and the 1940s and even the days before those. People shared their good fortunes with their neighbors, and times were often difficult because of the Depression in the 1930s. Mashpee was never a wealthy town – its wealth is measured by others – but a town rich

in love for one another, a town where people had a concern for one another's welfare and wellbeing, a town where one was not measured by material gains, but by his love for his neighbor, where all shared alike and where all could go anywhere they could go. There were really no fences or keep-out signs. The water, streams, bays, and beaches belonged to everyone, and they shared them with everyone and anyone. For that reason, the great spirit provided game and fish aplenty. The school, church, and the home are the center of the community. There was a oneness that in some way may be hard for you to understand. There was respect for the elders because, over the years, they taught the young to be respectful. It was an honor to be a leader, whether in the church or the town government, for the people were proud and confident. Past records would prove they were prudent and capable. Up until the end of World War II, they were ardent workers, skilled in trades, and sought after by contractors. They gave their best, and they were reliable, hardworking, and industrious people.

EG: You were telling me about weather changes when the harbor froze at one time. Do you remember the year, approximately?

KC: I think it was approximately in 1934 that we had a very cold winter, and the harbor froze up, and no ships were able to get into the Nantucket harbor for several days.

EG: What did you do?

KC: And at that time, many of the foodstuffs were getting low in the grocery stores. Newspapers used to be brought in by plane and dropped at the airports. One day, I had the experience of riding on the boat the first time that it broke through the ice, and the journey from Woods Hole took about twice as long because, as we entered Nantucket harbor, we had to go ahead and back up, go ahead and back up and break the ice as we came in.

EG: That's quite an experience.

KC: Many people were at the boat to watch the boat come in for the first time in several days. And there was ice all the way from Nantucket to Woods Hole – large cakes of ice. It looked more like Alaska than it did Nantucket with its beautiful summer seasons.

EG: Well, they were very isolated, but of course, they could walk, perhaps.

KC: Yeah, it's an unusual island because all things have to be imported. At that time, people burned a lot of coal, and there used to be coal barges, and had to bring the coal before the winter set in.

EG: How were they operated?

KC: Nantucket does have its own electric light plant. But when I was a boy, many of the homes still used oil lamps.

EG: What did the barges look like – the coal barges?

KC: Well, they were square, wooden barges?

EG: Steel?

KC: Wooden. And they were drawn by a tug. And it was a big day, and – when they came in, coal was piled up. It was all shoveled out by hand. It was a very dirty job, very hard job. And I remember the men used to make four dollars a day.

EG: How much did coal sell for? Do you recall? A bag of coal?

KC: We used to buy our coal in the summertime and have it all ready for the winter. Five tons, I think, would cost maybe a hundred dollars, or twenty dollars a ton, at the most. Maybe it was cheaper.

EG: How did you carry it home? How did you transport it? Did you have automobiles?

KC: They had trucks that carried it. And then, one time, they had horse-drawn wagons, and they carried it in bags – coal bags, they'd call them. The men put them over their backs if they had to go downstairs or upstairs. It was very hard work, but they earned a living, and it was a good living.

EG: Did you have a garden in your home?

KC: Oh, yes. My father had a garden every year.

EG: How about livestock?

KC: We raised most all our vegetables to last us during the winter. Potatoes, beans – my mother did the canning.

EG: On the coal stove?

KC: – those were busy days – on the coal stove in the hot August. They came in very handy. We also gathered a lot of blueberries, grapes, and jelly was made. Beach plums were plentiful. We had beach plum jelly, which is great.

EG: Very popular.

KC: Popular. In wintertime, there were plenty of rabbits and deer. My father was a good hunter. We had always a string of rabbits hanging outside. –

EG: Hanging? Do you mean drying?

KC: Yeah. He would hang them –

EG: How did he do that?



KC: – with the head down, so the blood runs to the head, and then he'd clean them. But I imagine he learned a lot about hunting when he was a boy living in Mashpee. On days when he wasn't fishing, he would always go hunting. And there was plenty of game, plenty of ducks, but he liked rabbits, and there were plenty of them.

EG: That was your favorite dish – rabbit? How was it prepared?

KC: Oh, we had most – as far as I can remember, we always had fried rabbit, and it's delicious. Tastes somewhat like chicken but even better.

EG: Were there many cranberry bogs –

KC: In Nantucket?

EG: – in Nantucket at that time?

KC: Yeah, I imagine Nantucket being an extension of Cape Cod. There were some bogs there, and they have a very famous bog called the largest bog in the world – largest single bog in the world, much larger than any bog on Cape Cod.

EG: Where is that located?

KC: That was located on one end of the island called Sconset – S-C-O-N-S-E-T.

EG: Were they developed – were they shipped commercially or just for local use?

KC: Yeah. They were gathered and shipped to the mainland to be made into cranberry sauce [inaudible].

EG: [inaudible] town meeting? People became friendly after heated discussions. They had a dance.

KC: I think it's an unusual thing in the native people of Mashpee. They could be very angry with you in a moment, and they quickly forget incidents that happened. For example, people often go someplace, and when they get there, they seem to get together as if they hadn't seen each other for a long time. An unusual thing, but a very strong feeling of being together and wanting to be together. They forgive, but they don't forget.

EG: [inaudible] children?

KC: Yeah, might be interesting. I think we've done enough today for them. Today, I think a new chapter is being written on the town of Mashpee. The conclusion of this chapter's not clear. But [inaudible], in some way, [inaudible], and out of it, the native people [inaudible] lovely community in which all can live and enjoy as unique and marvelous history [inaudible].

EG: [inaudible] Indoor plumbing in your home as a child?

KC: When we first bought our house in Nantucket, we did have outdoor toilet facilities.

EG: Electricity?

KC: No. We had lamps, and later – in the later part of the '20s, we had lights, electric lights, indoor toilet facilities, and a bathroom.

EG: How about a telephone?

KC: And a telephone.

EG: When did you get a telephone? As a child?

KC: Our first telephone, I can remember, was one that you had the receiver separate from the speaker. It was a tall, long thing like a question mark. But I also remember in many of the stores and telephone booths, you had to crank to get the operator a number, and the bell would ring. At first, we did a lot of scalloping, and the boats used to be inboard motors. But today, you very seldom see them because we have so many outboard motors, which are easier to take care of.

EG: What do you mean by inboard?

KC: Inboard motor is the motor that stays in the boat. You can't remove it. It operates very easily. It has large – what they call a flywheel which moves around and pushes the propeller around. They operate very inexpensively, much more so than the modern outboard motors.

EG: They were gasoline powered?

KC: They couldn't go as fast, but they were more dependable and good for working.

EG: By gasoline.

KC: By gasoline.

EG: Do you have any more references to local historical events on Nantucket?

KC: In Nantucket?

EG: Yes. Any famous –?

KC: When I was a boy, I used to read a lot of Nantucket history because Nantucket was a very, very important place in New England. It was famous for its whaling ports as a whaling port, and fishermen used to – whalers used to go from here in New Bedford to all parts of the world to catch whale and bring back the whale oil, which was very valuable at that time. Some of the finest ships left from Nantucket and went around the different whaling areas around the world.

EG: Do you recall a lighthouse extended from Popponeset? Someone mentioned one time that it extended quite a bit into the sea, and it was washed away during one of the storms. Can you recall that time?

KC: A lightship?

EG: Was it a lightship?

KC: It might have been a lightship.

EG: Can you tell me about that?

KC: There is a very famous lightship called the *Nantucket*, which is the last lightship you see going to Europe from New York or coming from Europe, and it's the first one you see entering American waters. It's been located south of Nantucket in the shipping lane. It's a very dangerous place to work out of because many of the ships aimed for it coming either way, from Europe or going to Europe. They come very close to it. It's perhaps the most modernized lightship in the world and perhaps one of the most famous. Today, it's more or less operated automatically with all kinds of radio beams and signals, radar. Years ago, it had to be manned by men, and they would be on it a week –

EG: I heard a Mr. (Jeffries?) –

KC: – and then they'd be off two weeks. It was a very dangerous job and a very lonely job.

EG: I heard of a Mr. (Jeffries?) who worked on it at one time.

KC: Yeah. Many people did work on those ships and lighthouses.

EG: Do you have any idea what salaries they received for that dangerous –?

KC: No. I imagine they received fifty dollars a month at the most if that much.

EG: By the states?

KC: By the federal government.

EG: Yes. I see. Did you meet any famous people on the islands? Any celebrities that summered or –

KC: Yes. I did have opportunity to meet several outstanding people.

EG: Tell me about that, please.

KC: And how I happened to be able to be in a position to – not to meet them, but to see them and maybe talk with a few of them – was when I went to college, I worked in Nantucket in the summer, and it's a summer resort. And I worked as a butler, and I also waited.

EG: Where?

KC: In Nantucket, in a private home – homes. I also worked at the Sankaty Head Golf Club, which was a very fashionable golf club. And here, I came in contact with several outstanding national celebrities. One day, I was serving cocktails on the courts, and Jim Cagney was one of the guests of one of the residents. I had a chance to hear him talk and to look at him without being introduced because I was a waiter. He had one of the most interesting soft voices that I have experienced any man having.

EG: Heaven's sake.

KC: I learned later that he also was just the opposite as he appeared on the screen – very delicate, gentle, kind person.

EG: They so often are.

KC: I worked for a lawyer by the name of Emory R. Buckner, who was a corporation lawyer and a graduate of Harvard Law School.

EG: Really?

KC: And I worked very closely with him. I became his valet for a while. And one summer, he had several guests that I thought were important and I enjoyed being there. One was Gene Tunney, the heavyweight champion of the world. He represented him in court on some case that came up – Gene Tunney's boxing career. It was the first time I ever saw a man who was over six foot tall – six foot two or three. Must have weighed about two hundred and twenty and built like a football player, and also a very kind person. Mr. Tunney stayed there – the place where I worked – for three days. I later found out he was an authority on Shakespeare, and it seemed so odd that a boxer would be an authority on Shakespeare.

EG: Doesn't it?

KC: Gene Tunney was a very highly educated man. I also had the pleasure of seeing and being very close to a very, very capable person, perhaps one of the outstanding Supreme Court judges that we have ever had in the United States – Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, when he was dean of the Harvard Law School.

EG: Interesting.

KC: The man I worked for used to have a bull session of outstanding lawyers come in and talk with Justice Frankfurter and ask him questions on points of law. I was there because I had to empty the ashtrays and serve them drinks. But I was amazed at the quickness and how, with

great authority, Justice Frankfurter answered question after question without even looking in a book. All of these men who were asking the questions were outstanding lawyers themselves. And such respect that they showed for his unusual intellect. There were other people that I met, too. But I think this had a great bearing upon my life because in watching other – in watching great men, how they carry themselves, how they answer, how they talk with other people, I've always felt that if I could, in some way, copy some of the things that I saw them do, that it would help me, too.

EG: Molding yourself, more or less.

KC: Yes. I met a lot of people.

EG: Could you spell that Sankaty for me?

KC: S-A-N-K-A-T-Y. It's a lighthouse.

EG: Sankaty Lighthouse Club. Very interesting.

KC: Sankaty Head, H-E-A-D.

EG: Very interesting.

KC: [inaudible]

EG: Did you tell me the name of the proprietor of the Sankaty Lighthouse Club?

KC: No. It was a club, and they elected new officers every year.

EG: Not one proprietor, but a cooperation –

KC: It was a business operation. [inaudible] make ends meet.

EG: I see.

KC: They had lunches and dinners served there – cocktails and dances and Friday night [inaudible]. I watched the dances.

EG: That's very exciting.

KC: I didn't take part, but –

EG: Very exciting.

KC: – you would see how the other half was. And they aren't any different. Today, everybody's the same, almost if you get to know them. But it was nice to me.

EG: It was an age of lavishness and pompous –

KC: Excitement. I was young [inaudible] see the girls. At that time, they all – there was no catsuit. [inaudible] dances and beautiful girls and beautiful tans that they'd get in the summer on the beaches. I know many of them by name.

EG: Did you know some theater personalities?

KC: Cagney was the only one.

EG: Any other?

KC: No. [inaudible] There was a great Shakespearean actor. [inaudible]

EG: How about the dances? What orchestras played? Can you recall the names of some orchestras?

KC: No. They had an orchestra that was local, more or less [inaudible].

EG: Can't recall the name.

KC: No.

EG: Oh, that's too bad. How about the theaters? Were there many theaters here in Nantucket?

KC: [inaudible] – there wasn't that many. They had one called [inaudible].

EG: That was in the '30s or the '40s?

KC: Yeah. It was '30s and '40s. It was just [inaudible].

EG: Dennis?

KC: Dennis Theater. But I never went to those.

EG: Did you ever meet Judge Welsh? Welsh from the lower Cape.

KC: Harwich?

EG: Yes. We had an interview –

KC: Yeah, I know him well.

EG: One of our interviewers interviewed him.

KC: Yeah, I like him.

EG: Very interesting person.

KC: Yeah, he is. I know him quite well.

EG: Very colorful.

KC: [inaudible]. His father was a judge.

EG: A judge also. And his son is becoming a judge.

KC: Yeah. I guess he's originally from Provincetown.

EG: Yes. Tell me about the main street – the changes in Mashpee or the islands.

KC: Okay. I can [inaudible]. I have –

EG: The stores and the businesses, groceries.

KC: The houses on Main Street – the three whalers [inaudible] houses. You know Macy's is a [inaudible] here in New York – big department store.

EG: Yes. Oh, yes.

KC: They built them, and they also built Macy's – the same family.

EG: Three buildings in Nantucket?

KC: Yeah.

EG: They were new at the time when you were a young man?

KC: Oh, no. [Recording paused.]

EG: They were built in the early 1800s by the Macy family, and they were just the same. They haven't changed. Are they clothing stores?

KC: What?

EG: Clothing stores?

KC: You taping now?

EG: Yes. I try to eliminate the horn blowing on the highway. They were built in the 1800s. Are they clothing stores?

KC: The Macy house?

EG: Yes.

KC: No. The Macy houses were homesteads of whaling captains, and there were at least three of them, very beautiful brick mansions. They're on Main Street. Main Street is a very unusual street because most of it is cobblestone, and it dates way back to the cobblestones – way back to the days of the whaling industry when the horse-drawn vehicles used to go over them. But the Macy homes were built by whaling captains, and later, in New York City, the large department store, Macy's department store, is a branch of the same family. Many whaling captains – famous whaling captains – outstanding stories written about the whaling captains and also the whaling ships that traveled all over the world. There's a boy that I went to school with. His name is (Starbuck?) – Edward. He has written many, many stories on whaling, and he was the curator of Mystic, Connecticut, and I think he's curator now of a whaling museum in Nantucket.

EG: I've seen some of the [inaudible].

KC: Very picturesque buildings. On top of all these buildings and many other buildings in Nantucket, were what they call widows' walks and some places on the Cape and the Lower Cape – Chatham and Barnstable, they are also there. The story goes that the whaling captains used to go out to sea, and the women would go up every day when they expected their husbands to return and watched out in the harbor to see a ship come in out of the ocean, entering the harbor. Many of the women became widows because their husbands' ships never returned, and they called these widows' walks because even if they didn't return, they often went up above the house and on the widows' walk and watched the water to see if their husbands would return.

EG: Someone mentioned that the shorelines were much different back in the '20s because their mother stood at the shoreline and watched the father arrive in his fishing vessel. She mentioned riding the crests. And when I look out there now, I don't see those large swells. So there must have been some very drastic changes.

KC: Perhaps there was.

EG: Hurricanes and whatnot.

KC: Yeah. Hurricanes and weather erosion, different types. Changed lots [inaudible]

EG: I can't imagine a large surf, you know, coming in on our shores there.

KC: There is large surf. Nantucket has very, very heavy surf on one side and a beautiful harbor on the other side. Most of the people coming to Nantucket enter the harbor, where the water is very calm and protected.

EG: But how unusual.



KC: But at times when we have storms, the sea can become very, very angry and very dangerous.

EG: But can you imagine Popponesset having large swells?

KC: I know it had – it is possible. I can imagine it.

EG: Years ago.

KC: But the water is not that deep near the shore, so it wouldn't – it perhaps could go out a lot farther than they can in other places. The water is relatively shallow. But there are some places on the Cape that do have large swells – the lower part of the Cape.

EG: [inaudible] Right. It's very interesting. Can you tell me anything –? You mentioned the Depression years. Is there anything else? Can you tell me something about family gatherings? Was there any particular way that your family celebrated holidays? Any community special events, or did they just have quiet home celebrations? Any community celebrations?

KC: In Mashpee –?

EG: Celebrate any particular holidays?

KC: In Mashpee, always birthdays were celebrated among the family. Ice cream cake – usual things – and maybe one or two guests.

EG: What about Christmas?

KC: Christmas was the occasion where everyone had to have a tree that was carried out of the woods, and there were no artificial trees. At one time, we had real candles that were on the tree for decorations. Later with electricity [inaudible].

EG: It's amazing there weren't any fires.

KC: And they were very, very – I never remember any fire. The candles were wax, but I think they only lit them at certain times in the evening. And people were much more conscious of fire because lamps were on the table and everything was dangerous, to some extent. We had wood fires in the stoves. During the Depression in Mashpee, especially, I remember many things changed. Before the Depression, many of the homes had oil burners in the kitchen stoves instead of wood, which was burned up until that time. But during the Depression, throughout our whole country, there was absolutely almost no work and no money, so people had to take out their oil burners and go back to burning wood.

EG: Oh, yes.

KC: And you might be interested. So many times, people complain about they aren't making enough money today, and there's strikes, and there's all kinds of labor negotiations and things of

that type. At that time, many of the men who had families earned less than twenty dollars a week, and they certainly didn't – weren't able to buy new cars, but they were able to feed their families and somehow pull through this difficult period. Depression lasted several years, and it wasn't a two or three-month Depression. It was one of the – it was the worst Depression the United States has ever faced. But somehow, people became closer to one another because of it, and what things they had to share, they did share.

EG: Did the plague bother your family?

KC: What?

EG: I didn't mean to interrupt you. Did the plague, the epidemics bother –?

KC: No. There was an epidemic that I heard my parents speak of and others. During the '20s, a flu epidemic – I think it was in late 1918, 1919. It was so severe that in some places, people were dying so fast they couldn't bury them fast enough or dig holes fast enough for them. Since that time, we've developed a vaccine which has cut down on the epidemics of flu. But at that time, it was really unbelievable how people died so quickly.

EG: Was your family affected?

KC: Yeah. My father had the flu, but he didn't die. The rest of the family made it through. But there were many, many around us that didn't.

EG: Did you have special medicines? Do you recall special treatment?

KC: I was too young at that time. I just was about five years old.

EG: Oh, yeah.

KC: Most of my knowledge of it was hearing about it later.

EG: Well, those are the stories that others would be interested in hearing also if you can recall any of them.

KC: [inaudible]

EG: How about rum running? Have you heard any rum running stories? Prohibition days?

KC: Not exactly.

EG: Can you remember people in your family that were in World War I?

KC: No.

EG: Spanish-American War? You heard any stories about that?

KC: No.

EG: Your father was a whaler?

KC: No, my grandfather.

EG: Oh, your grandfather. What was his name again, please?

KC: Oakes. O-A-K-E-S.

EG: In what area did he whale? In one particular area, or did he travel?

KC: My grand –

EG: Oh, yes, we'll get back to your grandfather.

KC: My grandfather was a whaler, and he sailed all over the world. I think he started when he was quite young, but he, like myself, didn't talk much about what he did.

EG: Unfortunately.

KC: I saw many of the mementos of the – he brought back to my grandmother – has shells from the South Sea Islands and other things. But he died before I was old enough to show him I had an interest in this type of thing. I imagine he had many, many exciting experiences, which I certainly wish we knew of now.

EG: I know. So do I.

KC: We never will. But I do know that he was a whaler like many of the Mashpee men.

EG: Do you recall the ship that he served on?

KC: No. He never mentioned any of the ships or – others had told us that he sailed the seven seas.

EG: Too bad you missed all of that.

KC: It is too bad.

EG: Treasures.

KC: So many things go with the people, and you think they're going to live forever, and they're gone, and you never know what they do know.

EG: Tragic. Really tragic. Can you tell me anything about old ghost stories?

KC: No.

EG: Any old medicines that were handed down in your family?

KC: There's one medicine – one occasion that I do remember of a medicine since you mentioned it. My father, being a fisherman, like many fishermen, sometimes, because of the oilskins or the coats they wear to keep out the wind and the rain and the water – are called oilskins – developed boils on his wrist and on the back of his neck. Many of the men wear wristers to protect them, which are made of – my mother's parents made them out of wool. They fit over the wrists. And evidently, he didn't use them. Sometimes they get wet, and boils are caused. They either have to be lanced, or you have to suffer with them. But my grandfather told my father that he could take care of the boils, and he brought him some pitch from pine trees, made a salve of it, put it on the boils, and in a short time, the boils disappeared, and he never bothered with them again.

EG: Wonderful. Was there anything else mixed with the pitch pine? Did you hear?

KC: I imagine he mixed something, but the major ingredient was pitch pine. It was very good.

EG: Very good as a cough medicine.

KC: Another remedy that my father used quite often was – every spring – and I guess he wasn't the only one using it. I don't know how widely it was used. But we had to have sulfur and molasses blown down our throats, or we had a tonic of sulfur and molasses.

EG: Blown?

KC: It was a very terrible-tasting remedy, but it worked for sore throats and for other things. I often thought of it because, during World War II, sulfur drugs became very, very successful in treatment of many, many things. Maybe this was one of – the Indians used sulfur to cure different things and – throat and sore throats.

EG: Especially the wood ash.

KC: Yeah.

EG: Wood ash mixed with it. Very interesting. Can you recall anything else about the entertainment [or] games that you played as a child?

KC: No. In Mashpee, as I said earlier, there was a oneness in the community, especially any time before the early '40s, when everybody went to the same thing. They used to have dances, and everybody went. At town meetings, people could become quite angry with their opponents. But after the election, they always had a town meeting dance.

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 10/13/2022