BR: This recording is the property of the Tales of Cape Cod, Incorporated, and it cannot be reproduced without the written consent of the Tales of Cape Cod, Incorporated. May 16, 1978. Betty Richards visiting with Heaton Vorse of Provincetown, Massachusetts. [Came] to Provincetown in what year?

HV: 1906. Family came down here on a two-weeks' vacation. Looked around, bought this house.

BR: And how many were in your family?

HV: There was, at that time, my father and mother, myself and my sister, and there was a governess – took care of the kids.

BR: What – you came on vacation, you say?

HV: Yeah. We came down on vacation. Mother and father were both writers, and they'd come down, spend a couple of weeks on Cape Cod, and here we are.

BR: What kind of writer was your father?

HV: He was a journalist more than anything else, so he wrote short stories and articles.

BR: What was his name?

HV: Albert White Vorse.

BR: And what was your mother's name?

HV: Mary Heaton Vorse.

BR: And can you tell me about your mother?

HV: Well, after her husband died – my father died – there she was left with two kids, and she had been writing more or less as a sideline to sort of help the family income out but never taken it seriously. And then, when father died, she had to support her two kids, so she went into writing seriously.

BR: And what year was this?

HV: 1910, about.

BR: When did she start writing seriously?

HV: About then. About 1912, she was – oh, we always called *Harper's Magazine* [inaudible], remember? Whenever we needed anything, she'd write a short story with *Harper's Magazine* and would sell it, and then there was a strike of – a wildcat strike up in Lawrence. [inaudible]

the workers decided they didn't like things. They went on strike, and the IWW [Industrial Workers of the World] was – and *Harper's* wrote up to mother, seeing if she was nearby – said, "Go up and see what the hell's going on there." She went up there, and what she saw she didn't like, and she got mad and wrote an article. *Harper's Weekly* published it and proceeded to lose a lot of advertising nearby. That was her introduction to the labor movement. She became known as a reporter – a labor reporter and was recognized as being sympathetic to the labor movement among – I think it was that she particularly didn't like seeing women and children having to work fourteen or fifteen hours a day.

BR: Where did she see that?

HV: In Lawrence and New York City, what was known as the Triangle [Shirtwaist Factory] fire. She and Frances Perkins were about the same age, saw that fire together, and Frances went on, as you possibly know, to become Secretary of Labor under [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt. She took the more – going through the legal channels – I mean, the executive channels of doing things. What happened at that fire was that –

BR: Well, which fire is this you're talking about?

HV: The Triangle fire. It's a labor classic in a sense in that the factory on the third floor, fourth floor of a small building on Washington Square – it was a sweatshop. The boss had locked all the fire doors to keep the workers from spending their time getting a breath of fresh air. So when the building caught on fire, there was no way of escaping except jumping out of the windows, which the gals did and died in droves as they hit the sidewalk.

BR: How many died?

HV: I think about fifty-seven died. I'm not sure of my figures there. I remember being kept by my governess way on the outskirts of the crowd.

BR: What year was this?

HV: l909 or '10. Somewhere along in there. No, it may have been later. But somewhere along all of that. That was where Mary Heaton Vorse, as I say, that and the labor – the wildcat strike up in Lawrence and then other – she got to know the various labor leaders and became interested in doing labor news, writing labor news, though she made most of her money writing very short stories for mainly *Harper's*. Everybody's [inaudible] and get all that material [inaudible].

BR: Did she ever live in Provincetown?

HV: What?

BR: Did she live here for any length of time?

HV: Well, we bought the house in 1907, I think, and it was the summer home – been here since.

BR: Did you spend your summers here?

HV: Mainly, we spent summers here, though it was, as you see, a year-round house. We used to come up very frequently for the Thanksgiving to Christmas holidays. But [inaudible], of course, is New York, so most of the – much of the winter would be spent as many of the artists presently who own summer homes here go to New York or Chicago. It's very [inaudible] during the winters do their teaching or selling of whatever and yet they called this home because it's where the property is.

BR: How did you travel from New York to Cape Cod?

HV: Mainly either by train or by – sometimes it would be – I used to come all the way by boat, by taking the New York to Boston boat and then taking the Boston to Provincetown boat.

BR: What year was that? Do you know?

HV: All the way up to the '20s.

BR: Do you remember anything about those trips to Provincetown?

HV: No particularly. No.

BR: Do you know how long they took?

HV: Well, yeah, I'd get the boat from Pier 19 in New York and get here next morning – the overnight. Go through canal and then take the ten o'clock boat that would get here around one or two to Provincetown.

BR: What do you remember about Provincetown when you first came here?

HV: Nothing particularly. That it was a nice place for a kid to be in the summertime.

BR: So what did a kid do in the summertime?

HV: Well, what all kids do – still do – in the summertime. Sail, row, go out to the woods, play base games, and so on. Nothing different very much than what kids do today.

BR: Do you remember anything about the artists that were here when you first came to the Cape?

HV: In what sense? Yes. There were a great many of them. Of course, some I knew were my mother's friends.

BR: Who were her friends?

HV: Well, where the artists that were down here – Hawthorne, Webster, [Oliver Newberry] Chaffee – all that group. Often, the younger students, whatnot – there were then quite a group of writers down here, too – Hapgood, Steele, (Good?) [inaudible]. If you look at (O'Brien's?) best short stories between '14 and '21, you will find at least one person from the Provincetown group in the list of stories published, and very often as many as three.

BR: Who were those that were mentioned? I beg your pardon.

HV: [inaudible].

BR: Where was she from?

HV: Mary Heaton Vorse. [inaudible].

BR: Yes. Where was she from?

HV: She was from Iowa originally.

BR: Had she come to Provincetown to live?

HV: Mm-hmm [to indicate yes]. She came – she – they – she and George [inaudible] Cook owned the house down the land, and they bought it, and they still – I still think their family owns some property in Truro. Let's see. [inaudible].

BR: What was his name?

HV: Waldo Frank.

BR: Where is he from?

HV: I don't know. New York City, I think, pretty much.

BR: And these were all short stories –

HV: Wilbur Steele here and again Mary Heaton Vorse in '21.

BR: And these were all short-story writers.

HV: Yeah.

BR: And what stories did your mother write?

HV: She [inaudible].

BR: How many books did she publish?

HV: Oh, I don't know. I've got a very incomplete list. Mainly they were light novels, potboilers.

BR: Potboilers?

HV: Well, I mean, like *Hart's Country, I've Come to Stay*.

BR: Whose country?

HV: Hart's Country. Nice, sentimental Victorian [inaudible]. Very little person, nothing more than [inaudible]. [inaudible] she had no [inaudible] she never thought of herself as [inaudible]. Real plain and simple, to make a living, and the work that she was proudest of was her labor reporting and her – she was a war correspondent for the first and second world wars. The second world war, she was, I believe, the oldest accredited correspondent, besides being a gal.

BR: And what year was that?

HV: That was during the war.

BR: World War II?

HV: Second – II. Yeah. She had spent a great deal of her childhood – oh, you came home, did you? To a great extent, the – they came down here during the summer season. They all owned property down here, but they'd come down here and write madly all summer. And then go back to the cities to keep up their contact with editors and publishers, you see. Many of them, again, were roving writers. The Hapgoods – both of them – Hutchins Hutchins did a good deal of sociological work, you see? Roam around.

BR: Well, did the artists have much of a social life here in the summer?

HV: Oh, yeah. Sure.

BR: What did they –?

HV: Well, Provincetown, even then – Provincetown, you see, most people forget Provincetown was dry from 1888 on. I never saw a liquor store or barroom in this town until after the actual repeal of the 18th Amendment.

BR: So there was no –

HV: There was no –

BR: No –

HV: There weren't any bars or anything like that. What drinking was done was done in people's homes. Anybody coming down for a week or a weekend to visit their friends in Provincetown automatically packed a bottle of whiskey.

BR: Brought it from wherever they came.

HV: The city where it was legal.

BR: Did people make their own liquor?

HV: No, no. Not until prohibition. Then, of course, once prohibition was repealed, Rumstown Harbor became a wonderful port for bootleggers. There was more booze –

BR: Right. And what year was that?

HV: Well, 1920 on, you see.

BR: Could you tell me any stories about that?

HV: Oh, there's so many of them. I've written a few. I could write a few more just on the [inaudible].

BR: How about giving me – give me some of those stories.

HV: Well, they last too long. There was one that was fairly – two chapters of mother's book, *Time and the Town: [A Provincetown Chronicle]*, devoted to – chapters called "Liquor Ashore" and "More Liquor Ashore," which tells about the complete nonsense of [inaudible] town.

BR: Complete nonsense?

HV: What?

BR: Complete nonsense?

HV: Yeah, there was one rumrunner – Canadian registry came ashore with a full load of booze on – right by the Race Point Coast Guard station. It seems we have a military treaty with Canada to take care of any cargoes on Canadian vessels wrecked on our shores. So the Army posted a guard around them, a boat out there, and when a vessel would be a Canadian flag – it wasn't the present Canadian flag; it was the Union Jack with a maple leaf on it. When that came in the harbor – so the Army transported the booze from the wrecked vessel over to the harbor. Army personnel rolled the booze out to the boat out in the harbor. It was then transported across the deck of the Canadian vessel, put in another dory owned by some good Provincetown fishermen. The two boats would row back to shore again. [laughter] And, of course, the Army wasn't enforcing the prohibition, so as far as they were concerned, once they unloaded the cargo from whatever it might be – it happened to be booze – and once they unloaded the cargo, it would be transported to the proper vessel, they had to wash clear of it. As I say, there was so much utter

nonsense that went on with prohibition down here. The Coast Guard – chief of the Coast Guard station lived right across the street here. He was a by-the-book man. So it was his duty to keep any booze from flowing ashore. But that didn't mean that he had – the commander of the Coast Guard station down here was very active in preventing any bootleg booze from coming ashore. But he knew perfectly well I was making fifty gallons of beer a week out in the back kitchen and [would] come over and have himself a glass of beer from time to time. That wasn't his field, you see. His job was to stop it from being landed.

BR: Did you make bathtub gin?

HV: I made beer.

BR: No gin, then?

HV: No. I didn't make hard liquor. A good many of them did. Now Spencer and his wife, Betty, made a very fine whiskey, and not only did they make it, but they would bottle it, and they put a very lovely label of a panther taking a pee. It was known as Panther Piss. [laughter]

BR: [laughter] Do you have any idea how they made it?

HV: Well, they were both artists, and so they simply made block print.

BR: How did they make the whiskey?

HV: I haven't any idea.

BR: Did you ever taste it?

HV: Oh, yeah. It was very good whiskey.

BR: Did you mix it with something?

HV: Oh, sure. One of the easiest things to get was straight alcohol, so we'd mix straight alcohol, about one-half water and one-half the alcohol, and then we'd cut it in thirds – one-third ginger ale, one-third grapefruit juice, one-third of this mixture. And then we'd stagger home. They were known as "mickeys," probably a foreshortening of mickey [inaudible].

BR: Do you remember any stories about bootlegging?

HV: Dozens of them, but I'm not going to try to remember them now. I'd say that whole era ought to be written up by somebody who was really down here and studied it and knew the stories because there were loads of them, as I say, [inaudible] two chapters out of mother's book.

BR: And the name of that book is what?

HV: *Time and the Town*. If you can get a hold of that book. Had mine chained. I've lost one – actually, unchained the goddarn thing and swiped it there. The [inaudible] Press will not reprint, and they had the copyright.

BR: Do you remember Eugene O'Neill?

HV: Of course, I knew Gene. [inaudible] no one. You can remember it, can't you, perhaps? He made it great – I think he moved more or less to New York when he did *The Great God Brown*, *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, *Desire Under the Elms*, and *Emperor Jones*. But he did most of those down here. *Hairy Ape* was another one that were – now, all of those plays were originally played by the Provincetown Players. But the Provincetown Players were – they were the same – partly the same group that started here in '14 and '15. But they made their name – their little theater, the first off-Broadway theater and serious note down on Macdougal Street, which is still the Provincetown Playhouse. All his plays there of that era were put on originally by the Provincetown Players.

BR: Were they tried out here?

HV: Not here. No. Down in the Provincetown Playhouse.

BR: And did they go elsewhere from the Provincetown Playhouse?

HV: Not until about *The Emperor Jones*. That was the – well, no, *Beyond the Horizon* was picked up, and the – oh, what's the one? I can't remember its name. I could check it. If I was doing an article, I'd go to my O'Neill in there and check it. While the [inaudible] cycle, which is the first – one of those first things – his one-act plays that brought him to the attention of the American public were first put down in Provincetown. While he did live here until about 1924 or five when he broke with Agnes Boulton. It's only Provincetown that remembers him as being somebody of Provincetown. He never himself – never was happy or contented here.

BR: Well, why did they stay here if they weren't happy?

HV: Because they owned – because his father bought him the old Coast Guard station – [inaudible] Coast Guard station, went back to the sea, and left here permanently.

BR: How long did he live in the old Peaked Hill?

HV: Well, until it went in the sea. That was about '24 or five, I think.

BR: Did you ever go out there?

HV: Oh, not often. He lived out there partly to keep away from people. He didn't want to have people surging around all the time. I think Gene worked hard. He was not a facile writer. And so he wanted to be alone. Again, that's one of the reasons James O'Neil bought the [inaudible] available and so much better than I could ever tell it. [inaudible] streets by (Ross?) Market – things like that. All that can be – I don't know – I knew them as friends, not as artists and

workers. A large [inaudible]. The ones here now are my contemporaries. People like Ed [inaudible] and Bruce McKane.

BR: They were painters?

HV: Painters, yeah. While I'm a member of the Beachcombers, which is still the only male chauvinist club around here. No women allowed. You have to have either sold a painting or a bit of writing or had your music played or been a musician. You have to have been an artist to be – a recognized artist. You just couldn't say, "I am an artist," and join.

BR: And you are a member of that because of your writing?

HV: I'm a member of that group, but I don't go to meetings, which is every Saturday night. They have a regular meeting throughout the year, every Saturday night. All the men get together and tell dirty stories and eat supper, which one of them cooks.

BR: Where do you meet?

HV: Right at the beachcomber club right down here, next to the flagship. And while I know them, I say I don't know them as painters, and I don't go down there too much as I'm not against – I'm not in favor of a male chauvinist club, for one thing.

BR: How many members?

HV: I would say during the height of the season, you will have as many as fifty or sixty there.

BR: What are some of the stories they tell?

HV: Dirty stories.

BR: About Provincetown?

HV: No, no. Just the regular standard. Now, originally, the group would discuss art a great deal, and there's still a good deal of discussion of art, I imagine, there. Regular meetings. But it's more of a social club now, and they do their art discussion in their various studios or other social time. I don't even remember who belongs now. I haven't been there in so long.

BR: Do you know how far back it dates?

HV: 1913 or '14, it started.

BR: And it was the same back then, just a male group. Just the same, then?

HV: Yeah. It's always kept the wives out, no matter if they were painters too. I say the list of people down here who were artists – I don't know of them all. It's not as large as it used to be, partly because the taxes are so bloody high they sold their houses here and moved to Truro.

Castle Hill is becoming even more important as a center of teaching art, I think, than Provincetown is. While the Morris Davidson school, I believe, is going to be closing as of this year, and I don't know whether [inaudible] is still teaching. Henry Hutchins still has a school here, and there's still some art schools here.

BR: How far back do those schools date?

HV: 1903 or '04, I imagine. Charles Hawthorne was the first.

BR: He was the first?

HV: And Ambrose Webster. Yeah. Ambrose Webster was the young – sunlight on the ocean here, the dunes keep the clouds away to a great extent during the summer. They get hot, and you will have a sunny day here and plenty of fair light on the ocean when the rest of the Cape is blanketed with –

BR: That's important, yeah, isn't it?

HV: And so that is –

BR: Is that what the attraction is?

HV: That is one. Of course, there is just the fantastic amount of subjects – waterfront, the backwoods, the old houses, the people themselves as models, you see, and among other things, the liberal attitude that the art association here from the first, while the abstract school, the impressionists and classical artists disagree and still disagree quite openly. The [inaudible] in 1915, when the art association was born, the abstract and the highly impressionist was accepted immediately, you see. And that's where they were widely separated and [inaudible] artistic communities.

BR: Was Hawthorne School the first school of painting here?

HV: Yes.

BR: Do you know how that started?

HV: No. That was, I think, as early as 1902 or '03, Hawthorne started an art school down here.

BR: How did he attract –?

HB: By the time I came down in '06, there were art students running up and down the street in droves already, you see. It was Chaffee and Webster and [inaudible] was another. By 1910, both the New York School and Columbia University and several others had groups of artists down here. And many students would come down here, and because this was a center for art student groups, they wouldn't necessarily be going to school, but going to – just to be in with their peers, you see.

BR: Well, how did these artists live? Were they wealthy?

HV: Down here in those days, you could live on practically – you didn't have to have too much money. You had to have some, but as Sam Oppenheim still does, you go down to the dock with a hook and line and catch some fish for supper. Not even when you can buy steak, you could do that. It isn't now, but up until World War II, it was a very cheap town to live in. Rents were something like eighteen a month instead of eighteen for a minute or two. But the growth of the tourist industry has cost the town so much in services that had to have – it's expensive to live down here now, and so, for that very reason, many of the artistic groups have gone to Truro and Wellfleet and further down the Cape.

BR: You mentioned that the light was good here for painters. Did they paint out on the dunes?

HV: Oh, yeah.

BR: Is that where the classes were held?

HV: No, they could be held anywhere.

BR: Did Mr. Hawthorn have a building?

HV: There's a studio still out there. Belongs [to] Morris Davidson. Of course, [inaudible] houses on top of the hill there. It's now owned by (Nicholas Wells?) and, as I say, the teachers nearly always owned houses down here – owned homes down here, and they still do.

BR: I saw pictures of some of the models. Did they have local models at the school?

HV: Many times they did. Sometimes they'd bring in a professional model because the local girls were brought up in the strict Catholic tradition or the Methodist tradition, and while their morals weren't as – all they should be, perhaps, their modesty was considerable and still is. It was an amusing thing. So very often, art students themselves, to make themselves a dollar or two, would do the nude posing as far as just for heads and figures – all kinds of people would do it. My sister made herself a nice piece of change in her teens and twenties as a model, usually – in clothes, but not always. She had a very good head.

BR: Did the local people frown on that?

HV: No. There's one thing they didn't do so much. Looked on the artists as being scatterbrained. But the thing that is still true about Provincetown is its tolerance for any kind of liberal thought or any kind of thought. For instance, that's one reason I think that the homosexuals made themselves a large community down here is because they didn't run into the sort of – well, anything. I mean, you just simply – a guy's a homosexual, and he can be perfectly open about it down here, and he's accepted, as long as he behaves himself.

BR: How long has that been going on?

HV: I never can remember when there weren't homosexuals around Provincetown. In my teens, when I knew that Charlie and Harry were together. Or before my teens. And it was quite accepted. I can remember that Captain Edwards – the Edwards are still a highly-respected family down here and own a great deal of property. He's married a white woman. In fact, his grandsons are very fair-skinned. There are still some Edwards that are as Black as my typewriter keys here. Captain Edwards had a white crew for the most part, and that was accepted as far back as I can remember. As I say, they were respected and still are a respected family in town. So the town has always had the tradition of a lack of prejudice. It isn't even tolerance. I mean, not even thought about as tolerance.

BR: And they're accepted socially, too, the mixed –?

HV: Yeah. Yeah. And now there's a great many mixed couples in town [inaudible] their children are accepted in every respect.

BR: And did the Portuguese people and the Yankees both accept the artists?

HV: Yes. The Portuguese more than the Yankees. The Yankees didn't like the Portuguese either, but they simply were plain outnumbered. By now, of course, the intermarriage has settled all of that. But up until about 1915 or '20, the Portuguese were definitely second-class citizens down here. There's still now and then a trace of that backlash. On the other side, the Portuguese aren't tolerating the Yankees now.

BR: Well, was the town separated into different (castes?) [inaudible] own sides of the railroad tracks, for instance? Anything like that?

HV: It still does, to a certain extent. It's no different from any other. The groups that have things in common more or less hang around together and don't mix so much with the other. But there's not the same friction that I've seen in other communities, where there were different financial levels, different religious levels, different this and that. For the most part, you can – there are definite groups. You can say that. There's that group, and that's a [inaudible] group. But the line between them is very hard to draw. Provincetown, unlike the rest of the Cape, is mainly Catholic, is mainly democratic, has a larger proportion of people who come down here to live, I think, than – maybe Truro's caught up of late. But Truro started from a very small population. But anyone who says I'm a native, the answer's so what? [laughter] Here, whereas you run into Orleans, and the final first families of Orleans and Eastham, and so on, further down the Cape, still a holding [inaudible]. Whereas every other house down here is practically owned by somebody who came down here to live.

BR: So it's not so important if you're not a Cape Codder down here, then?

HV: Not down here. No.

BR: No. I suppose it's always been that way.

HV: I think because of the harbor. The harbor makes all the difference. It's a place where people can come and land ashore from other places a lot more than any other. I imagine – I don't know. Nantucket may be the same way. Certainly, Martha's Vineyard's become that way a great deal

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Reviewed by Molly Graham 10/2/2022