

Betty Richards: This recording is the property of the Tales of Cape Cod, Incorporated, and cannot be reproduced without the written consent of Tales of Cape Cod, Incorporated. September 19, 1977. Today, I'm visiting with Mr. Bernard Collins in Eastham, Massachusetts. Mr. Collins is eighty-one years of age. Can you remember anything about your grandparents?

Bernard Collins: Very little.

BR: On your mother's side of the family?

BC: Yes, that's the only ones.

BR: What were their names?

BC: (Allen?) Young.

BR: Where was Mr. Young born?

BC: I don't know.

BR: Was he born on the Cape then?

BC: No.

BR: Can you tell me about your father? What was his name?

BC: (Louis?) H. Collins.

BR: Where was he born?

BC: Northeast end.

BR: In what year?

BC: I don't know.

BR: What was your mother's maiden name?

BC: Wiley.

BR: What was her full name?

BC: (Eva W. Wiley?).

BR: Where was she born?

BC: I don't know. I think South Wellfleet.

BR: Can you tell me about your father as a young boy? Do you remember any stories he might have told you?

BC: No, I can't remember any.

BR: Your father used to be in the Coast Guard, right? Can you tell me about that?

BC: Yes. He was in the Coast Guard for thirty-one years.

BR: Tell me all about that. You used to live there with him in the Coast Guard Station, your family?

BC: No. He built a house near the Coast Guard Station and we lived there. But I practically lived at the Coast Guard Station, because as a kid, they used to feed me. So, I ate all my meals over there – most of them.

BR: Can you tell me about those meals?

BC: Oh, yes. They had some good cooks in the Coast Guard.

BR: What did they feed you?

BC: Everything. I don't remember anything special. Oh, that's one thing. The Coast Guard would always eat very hearty meals.

BR: Did you have a lot of fish?

BC: Yes, because back in those days – you know what I mean. They got very little pay, and they had to pay for their own meals. In those days, they used to go out fishing on a calm day in a dory and bring in fish and very little meat.

BR: Well, what sort of stoves did they cook on?

BC: Wood-burning stoves.

BR: Did you get your wood from the beach?

BC: No. They had to go and cut that.

BR: How many people lived at the Coast Guard Station?

BC: Nine.

BR: All the time, they were there?

BC: Yes, they lived there all the time. They had some time off in the spring and summer when there was no wrecks. But in the wintertime they, were attached as Coast Guard every day, every night, and so forth.

BR: Well, if they were married, when did they see their families?

BC: Just didn't.

BR: Just in the summer on vacation then?

BC: That's right. Well, I wouldn't say that, because, sometimes, they'd have a day off, and they'd go and see the family.

BR: Do you remember how they used to walk the beaches in those days?

BC: I certainly do, yes.

BR: Were you out there watching them walking?

BC: I went and lived with them.

BR: Tell me about that.

BC: Well, I was only a kid then, but I spent most of my time at the Coast Guard Station with the men, and I used to walk the beach with them.

BR: At night, too?

BC: Yes.

BR: How could you see them?

BC: You can see all right.

BR: Did you have lanterns or lights with you?

BC: No.

BR: What would you do if you happened to look out and you see a wreck? What would they do? How would they signal?

BC: They had a lantern that could light if the wind wasn't blowing too much. They'd light the lantern, and they'd wave it. Then they'd go either to the one way or the other, if they were halfway – because they walked the beaches about eight and a half miles, and then they'd run to the – because they had a telephone from the station to Cahoon Hollow. So, you'd go to the Cahoon's Hollow watchhouse that they had, a little house that they had a telephone in, and they'd

telephone back to Nauset, and they would come on with the – if it was a shipwreck, they'd come with either the boat or the breeches buoy cargo, which they decided to bring. The man that had been walking the beach would decide what pieces of apparatus to bring. Then they'd come from Nauset Coast Guard Station – which happened on the *Castagna*. That was almost at Wellfleet, down by the wireless station.

BR: Then you would have to bring the equipment all the way to Wellfleet?

BC: Yes, that's right.

BR: How did you get it there? By water?

BC: No, no. The Coast Guard, no.

BR: You had done it –

BC: They had it on a cart, and came with it over land. Now, you couldn't possibly walk from Nauset Coast Guard Station along the bank, because it's grown up so. But you must remember that back in those days, there were no trees, no beachfront bushes. So, it was easy going.

BR: When you say back in those days, when are you referring to? About what year?

BC: Oh, back fourteen.

BR: 1914?

BC: Yes.

BR: They were pulled by horse then, the boat?

BC: Pulled by horse.

BR: Over the sand?

BC: Over the sand.

BR: That was quite a job for a horse, wasn't it?

BC: Certainly was.

BR: Yes, for any distance.

BC: Instead of shoes, back in those days, they had pads on the horses' hooves so that you could travel on the beach sand.

BR: Instead of the regular shoes?

BC: Instead of the regular shoes.

BR: I have never heard that. What do you mean by breeches board? Can you explain that to me? Breeches buoy, is that you meant?

BC: Breeches buoy?

BR: Yes.

BC: It's where they shoot a line aboard a boat. Well, let me get down to telling you something about the *Castagna*, because that happened at 4:00 in the morning. The man that was going north discovered the *Castagna* on the shore there down by the wireless station, and he sent for a breeches buoy. The breeches buoy, in other words, it's a whole lot of apparatus that – when you put a line in the cannon, load the cannon, that shoot a line over the boat. In this instance of the *Castagna*, they shot three lines over the boat. But the men were so frozen up that they couldn't handle to pull it in to get a larger line aboard. So, then they sent, back to the Nauset Coast Guard Station, for a surfboat. The tide happened to be just right so that they didn't have to go on top of the high banks, but could get down and follow the sea along.

BR: Follow the what?

BC: The sea, follow the edge of the water down below the bank. So, they brought the surfboat from Nauset Coast Guard Station all the way down there. Well, when they got it there, they launched it and tried to get off to the *Castagna*, which was in the surf. But she was side to, so they made a lead. Under the bow of the *Castagna*, they got out – we were seven men rowing the boat. They got out to her, and they finally convinced four or five of the men to jump into the water overboard, and they had picked them up. So, that, they did. But then they came ashore. They knew there was more men onboard, but there was no way to get aboard the boat. So, they came ashore and picked me up. I got up in the bow of the boat, and they rode me off under the lee of the boat and the ship. I got hold of a rope that was hanging over the side of her, and I shinnied up and got aboard. Then I had a rope that wasn't frozen, and I stopped. I got that aboard there, and I hauled my father up aboard. The first thing we saw was the man that was frozen over the wheel box. He was laying and stretched over there and frozen stiff. Then we got an axe onboard and started to chop the ice away from him enough to get him off the wheel box. Then we dumped him over the board, and they took him up at the wireless station to thaw him out.

BR: Did he survive?

BC: He lost both arms and both legs. He lived for a short time after they got him to the horse. Then we had one more man frozen in the rigging. There was a man frozen in the rigging right there. So, father said, "I'm going aloft. I'm going to shimmy up there and get that man out of the rigging." I said, "No, I'll go." So, I shinnied up the rigging until I got up there. Then I had a rope tied around me in case I went overboard. Then I dropped the rope down, it fell and got the axe, because I had to have an axe to chop the ice off of the rigging so to get him off. Then I got the

line over the top of this cross tree here, and I tied it around the man and got him chopped out of the ice. Then I lowered him down. My father had the other end of the line down on deck, and he lowered him down on the deck. But that man was – his arm was holding on to a piece of – like this. The arm was out there. Unfortunately, the damn boat took a lurch. The ship rolled. When she did, when I was lowering him down, he hit the deck with the arm sticking out, and that arm broke off just like a piece of glass. So, we had his arm, and we lowered into the surfboat his arm section – lowered him into the surfboat, and then his arm after him. They took him, but he was frozen stiff.

BR: He was not alive?

BC: No, no, he wasn't alive, but did end up going on. But no, I was involved. Going along from there...

BR: Oh, let me ask you, Mr. Collins, that was in February 17th, 1914?

BC: Yes.

BR: That was the Italian...

BC: *La Castagna*.

BR: What was the cargo?

BC: Guano.

BR: Going to Boston?

BC: Going to Boston.

BR: So, did they get the cargo off the ship or did it go down?

BC: No, the ship broke up three days afterwards.

BR: The cargo was lost then?

BC: Oh, it didn't amount to anything. It was guano fertilizer. No, that went in the ocean. I suppose, today, they say it polluted it.

BR: When you fire a breeches buoy, do you attach it to the wreck somewhere, the line?

BC: If there's live men on that are not frozen up – the shot line, this can shoot. The projectile goes over the boat, and then the shot line comes out of a – it's attached to it. So, this little small line is the size my little finger, but very strong. Then whoever's alive onboard the ship pulls the shot line in. To it is attached another line, a heavier line. Then that, in turn, is taken in, and a heavy line is dragged off aboard the ship. Then that is attached to the highest place there is on

the ship.

BR: In the rigging, maybe?

BC: In the rigging. Then again, on that line, they put that line on shore, on a stand-in, and tighten it down. Then you see, they have a line that they can run a Charlie off on. A breeches buoy is nothing only a heavy pair of pants and a round floating ring on top of it. Once they get that off there, whoever's onboard ship gets in that, then the Coast Guard brings it into shore.

BR: They pull the line in?

BC: They pull the line in with the breeches buoy on it.

BR: Then if they were going to rescue another person, they have to shoot it back out again?

BC: No, no, they keep going on the same line, once they get the line taut onboard the boat.

BR: So, it just goes back and forth?

BC: Goes back and forth. But unfortunately, all the men were frozen up. By the way, too, I remember the temperature, four below zero that morning.

BR: Was it in a northeaster?

BC: A northeaster.

BR: Strong winds too, huh?

BC: Oh, heavy winds.

BR: You were about twenty-one then, weren't you? No, you were –

BC: Nineteen years old?

BR: You were not in the Coast Guard then. You were just visiting there. Was that it?

BC: No, I was just showing up at the wrecks. I always showed up at every wreck that happened. I always was there, somewhere over there. But unfortunately, I froze both hands and my feet, and I was laid up from that trip. I was laid up from that trip. They had me packed in ice for two days in the Coast Guard Station, because I was frozen so. In fact, the man at the bay, the middle fingers on their hand go numb so that you could chop them off in the cold weather.

BR: How long did it take you to rescue the people then that day?

BC: Oh, wait just a minute. Let me think. We were there at 6:00, still dark. The daylight came on. We started operations. When I got ashore off of the ship, it must have been 10:00. Well,

while I was frozen, the Coast Guard, one on either side of me walked me back to Nauset Coast Guard Station, and I arrived there. We arrived back at Nauset. With their help, I was staggering along. They got me up inside and packing me in ice.

BR: Did you have any medical facilities out there to treat people?

BC: No.

BR: Were there doctors around?

BC: No.

BR: You did that yourself, and end up with that.

BC: Yes. No, there was no doctor coming down there and you saw him. You couldn't get a doctor anyway.

BR: Do you remember any other wrecks that you were involved in rescuing?

BC: Oh, yes. Let me just remember. I can't remember now. I've got pictures of them. I've got pictures of being – we got off of them. But if a ship was off, or any vessel came by, if he had his flags up calling for the Coast Guard, the Coast Guard had to go whether they wanted to or not. It was a hard life for my mother, because – I remember particularly one square-rigged vessel came by with a flag set for a boarding party, and the Coast Guard went and left in the boat and rode off to it. Of course, there was no communication in those days. Although they could set flags and call for a towboat, they went aboard this ship. But we saw the men breezing up, and they set the flag for the call for a towboat. My father left on that ship and never came back.

BR: Your father did not come back?

BC: No, he didn't come back. None of the Coast Guard men came back, because they went south and they ended up in New York, eventually, and then came back on the train. But they were gone four days before we ever got a word what happened to them.

BR: They boarded this ship?

BC: Yes, and went along as an assistance to the crew of the ship. They just disappeared in the distance as far as we was concerned.

BR: Well, what did they do on the ship? Helped get it to steer it and –

BC: Yes, and get it...

BR: Had something happened to the crew?

BC: Yes.

BR: They were sick?

BC: Yes, they were sick.

BR: Your father and how many people went?

BC: Seven.

BR: That was a lot of people, was it not? Who took care of the Coast Guard Station while they were gone?

BC: I did.

BR: You did?

BC: I was the only kid left. Oh, wait a minute. We had to stand watch in the tower on the Coast Guard Station. After two days, they did send up to uptown, and they did get one more boy. It was a boy there in – (Alman Haus?), that was his son.

BR: Pardon? What was the name?

BC: Alman Haus. He came there and helped me keep things going at the station. That's right.

BR: So, can you tell me any other story that your father might have told you?

BC: No. I would tell you one thing that I got in trouble is – Abby, where's that picture that we was looking at the other day?

Unknown Female Speaker: What?

BC: Where's that picture that showed me at the Coast Guard Station?

Unknown Female Speaker: Well, it's in that booklet of *Entering Eastham*. Want me to get it?

BC: Yes. You see, Captain (Burse?) and his wife lived in the Coast Guard Station. They had a little apartment there, just a bedroom, and they ate all their meals with the Coast Guard people. As I say, we were just across the swampland there. I practically lived on the Coast Guard Station all my life. To prove it, I'll show you a picture. Just a minute.

BR: Captain Beers, did you say?

BC: Burse.

BR: Burse.

BC: Captain Burse.

BR: He was the keeper?

BC: Here's the old man. That's the Coast Guard Station. This tower on this is where they had to keep a watch twenty-four hours a day up in there. But this is getting the surfboat out. See that fellow there?

BR: That was you?

BC: That's me. Right on Captain Burse's apartment was right on this – and the doorway ended here. Well, they used to invite me in. So, I was traveling over across to here. One night, just dark, Mrs. Burse always had a beautiful cat that she thought the world of. Every once in a while, the cat knew me. So, in the semi-darkness, as I was walking across there, I thought it was her cat, but it proved to be a skunk. So, (kid fashion?) I picked up the skunk, went and opened Mrs. Burse's apartment, and threw the skunk inside. Boy, did I get my rear end leathered for that, my God, because they couldn't get the smell even out of the dining room with the Coast Guard.

BR: It did not spray you, though, did it?

BC: No, no, it didn't spray me at all. I said, "Nice kitty." Patted it, picked it up, go and opened the door, put it in. [laughter]

When I threw it in, it sprayed everything. But that's the worst leathering that I ever got.

BR: Gave you a paddling, did you not?

BC: Oh, my father did.

BR: This is the Coast Guard Station that was washed away?

BC: That's washed away. That's the one that's way out to sea, the remains.

BR: Do you remember what year that was washed away?

BC: No. I can remember it, but I can't remember year.

BR: So, this was the next one that was built?

BC: Yes.

BR: So, what did you do in the meantime while the new one was being built? What did you do?

BC: I lived the same place as I always did, but it didn't – because they built that new one in two stages. They built just living quarters first, and then – maybe that will give you some dates in there, I hope.

BR: You were born in the Coast Guard Station? Your mother was living there?

BC: No, she was living –

BR: You were not born in the Coast Guard Station?

BC: Not in the Coast Guard Station itself. We had a house that father had built down there. We were living in that. It was just a hop, skip, and a jump over to this house. But not that house there, because that's a...

BR: Can you tell me about school, your early days at school, what it was like? Do you remember any of those days or teachers?

BC: I never even went to school at all until I was seven years old, because I had no way to get to school except on (Shakespeare?). When I first started in school, it was in the town hall. The town hall used to be the town hall. I forgot the name of the spot who bought it. It was in the east end town hall when I first started. They held school there, except when the town had something going on, and then we didn't go to school. But I can remember it, all right. Then I went to the school where the historical society now is –that was the old school – after I got out of primary school, so to speak. Then of course, I got in a little trouble. So, I got thrown out of that school, and then I came home. If I wanted to further my education, I had to be in and out of school for a little while. My father came home on (LIMDU?) one day. He said he thought the least I could do was go on to school. So, I pulled some strings, a little heartbreak, and I went – we were living up here then, and I went to the old (Leeds?) School, graduated from there.

[end of transcript]