

William Steere: This tape is the property of Tales of Cape Cod, Incorporated, and cannot be reproduced without their permission. The date is October 27, 1977. Today, I am speaking with Mabelle Howes Eager of 482 Main Street, Dennis. Miss Eager is seventy-nine years of age. Mrs. Eager, could you tell us about your ancestor?

Mabelle Howes Eager: Well, the original ancestor, Thomas Howes, and his wife Mary Burr, came over here in 1637. They came down here in 1637 and built a home down in New Boston. He had three sons, Jeremiah, Thomas, and Joseph.

WS: Your grandfather?

MHE: Well, my grandfather, both of my grandfathers were born here in Dennis. One was in Thomas' house, and one was in Francis' house.

WS: What were their occupations?

MHE: Well, my grandfather, Thomas, he went to sea. He started when he was nine years old, as a cook. I think they said, cook or cabin boy. Well, he went to sea for several years, half of the time. Then he would go to school, half of the time.

WS: What did he do as a man?

MHE: Then as a man, well, he went fishing. But in 1849, he went out – thought he'd make his fortune, and he went to California to the Gold Rush. He stayed out there eight years and didn't make a fortune. But he made some money. The way he and his wife would communicate – he went by boat, of course. Then when a boat would land in San Francisco from the Cape of Boston, he knew when it would arrive. He'd give the captain of the boat a letter to take back to his grandmother. The letters didn't have stamps on them. They were local.

WS: How did they get there?

MHE: Then after that, he came home, and he stayed home. Well, as far as I know, he just fished and gardened.

WS: He returned to the Cape.

MHE: He returned to the Cape, yes.

WS: Your father, he was the sheriff of the town of Dennis?

MHE: Not sheriff, deputy sheriff in 1932. He stayed in that position until he was ninety-four years old. At that time, they had changed the laws that no deputy sheriff will hold the office after he was seventy years old. So, when he was ninety-four and they changed that law, then he had to step down. Well, he went to Bridgeport, Connecticut when he was nineteen. He stayed there for twenty years. When he was thirty-seven, he had lung trouble. The doctor said that he would – he had a year to live if he worked undercover. So, he worked outdoors. So, then he

came back to Dennis. After two years, he regained his health. He still didn't know what to do because machinery was his...

WS: Occupation.

MHE: – occupation. So, my grandfather had a horsing team. So, he thought, "Well, because I had a horsing team, I'd take people out." Everyone had to go to the Yarmouth Depot or to Hyannis Harbor or someplace. Everyone didn't have a horsing team. So, he hired out to take them. Then he gradually accumulated four horses. For quite a few years, he did the transport business. People would come down to the summer hotel at Mount Stetson House. They came by train. So, he'd have to meet them and then he would take them for rides around the Cape. Then eventually, then the automobile came in. His first automobile was a Stevens-Duryea.

WS: Can you tell me a story about you attempting to clean it one day?

MHE: Yes. [laughter] Well, one night father brought the Stevens-Duryea from Bridgeport down here. It took him about three days to drive it here because there was no bridge over the Thames River in London. So, they ferried it across. It rained those three days. The roads were nothing but dirt roads. The town was covered with mud. How'd it get there? Well, when the mud dried, the town looked terrible. So, I thought I'd be nice and clean the car. So, I went out with a fist wounded to get the mud off. He saw me doing it. Of course, he stopped me, but that scratch's finished.

WS: You scratched through the brass.

MHE: There were a lot of brass headlights around the windshield and everything. Real brass. That would be my Saturday patrol service. So, I was riding that. They started the Grange and, well, that caught on. Every town had its Grange. Then after that the Pomona Grange developed from it which was a higher part of that Grange.

WS: That would be state-wide?

MHE: Yes. For the Grange is state-wide, for the Pomona was also.

WS: Where was the Grange hall?

MHE: Thompson Hall. That's where they met. Some towns had their own Grange hall. But I was at Thompson Hall.

WS: You attended meetings and things like that?

MHE: Yes. You could join when you were fourteen. So, I joined. We had very good entertainers. Well, that was the thing they were called to.

WS: What type of activities did you have?

MHE: Well, they always had speakers on the subject of farming. Well, then they had other entertainment.

WS: Chicken and pie suppers?

MHE: Not then. Not connected with Grange. Grange had suppers and strawberry festivals.

WS: What was the strawberry festival?

MHE: Well, there was strawberry time in June.

WS: Well, what about the minstrel shows?

MHE: Well, we always had a minstrel show everywhere. All the local townsmen put on blackface. They had tambourines. We had some very good singing voices. That was very popular.

WS: This was a local talent?

MHE: Yes, all the voices.

WS: They would sing in the wintertime?

MHE: In the winter. All of our entertainers were in the winter. Because in the summer, well, both men and women had to work. Women take in roomers, orders. The men had their gardens. They are patient. But in the winter, everything was more or less dead here. So, we really had a lot of entertainment. The Lyceum, that perfectly covered the top and all. They would just discuss topics of the day. Topics pertaining to the community, but mostly topics of the day. So, they had Lyceum.

WS: What exactly was a Lyceum?

MHE: Well, it's where you talk and argue. There'd be two sides going on. They would announce what the subject was going to be, and then you would talk about or against it.

WS: Would these be local topics?

MHE: Yes.

WS: National topics also?

MHE: Yes. Well, some local, but mostly state or national.

WS: People would attend?

MHE: It's just local people.

WS: Would they ever have speakers?

MHE: Well, I don't know. I can't remember.

WS: Would all the people in the community attend?

MHE: No. Just those that were interested. Of course, it was mostly men.

WS: The women were the amateurs?

MHE: Well, those that were interested were mostly men. So, they had the Grange, and they had the Lyceum. They'd meet once a week. The Grange, every two weeks, I think. Then the Pomona Grange would be a lot more. Then there were all these church activities. We were always interested in the church. I went to church in the morning. I went to Sunday school afterwards. I went to church in the evening. We all did. Well, in the summer, he couldn't always go to church because he'd be driving himself. But Mother and I went.

WS: Why would you have two services a day?

MHE: Because everybody had one. They were all of them. In the evening, we didn't have a sermon. It was mostly hymn singing and went to church for an hour. Then we had a Christian Endeavor Society. That was on Tuesday. We even, not we, my mother, her generation built this building for the Christian Endeavor Society. It's still on the street. That was mostly women, men would be in that. They would have talk on religious subjects, so maybe it's the same. But that was the Christian Endeavor Society.

WS: Did they have a Temperance Society?

MHE: Well, as a meeting, you mean?

WS: As a working organization.

MHE: No.

WS: Was this part of the Christian Endeavor or?

MHE: I don't know.

WS: Well, you had to sign a...

MHE: I signed a Temperance Pledge when I was about eight years old. But just because my schoolteacher, who was very religious also asked us all to sign it. But we didn't have a society.

WS: What was the Temperance Pledge that you signed?

MHE: It means that I would not touch a drop of alcohol. I would never touch a drop of alcohol in my life.

WS: In your lifetime?

MHE: No.

WS: It was not up until the age of twenty-one or something like that?

MHE: No.

WS: The Richardsons played quite an important role in the community of Dennis when you were growing up.

MHE: Yes. The Richardsons were wonderful people. They took a great interest in the townspeople. When they first came here, they bought this beautiful old Cape Cod house. They made it into a tearoom. It was called the Sign of the Motor Car. Motor cars were just coming in there.

WS: The tearoom.

MHE: The tearoom.

WS: What would they serve at the tearoom?

MHE: Well, the sandwiches, cakes, things like that, and tea.

WS: Was it expensive?

MHE: Yes. It was expensive. We thought very expensive. But people will come and spend an hour or two there. But then in the winter, the Richardsons took a – they had no children. But they took a great interest in the young people at that time. There wasn't too much activity for the young people, of course. So, they taught us young folks to dance. The Richardsons' dances were great. She would be there with us, and she would teach us also. Then Mr. Richardson was in the dramatic club or something in Harvard. He was very interested in drama. So, he had plays up in Harvard. They had plays for older folks. But they also had plays with young people.

WS: You do not remember what you played in the...

MHE: I was the young girl. He was the old guy.

WS: This was Mr. Richardson?

MHE: Mr. Richardson.

WS: Mr. Richardson.

MHE: Mr. Richardson and Water McDowell.

WS: Where would they hold it then?

MHE: In (Park Moore?).

WS: Did you charge admission for it?

MHE: Yes. That would be for some village improvement or some organization that would raise the money.

WS: Did you clear the gate sometimes?

MHE: No, not clear the gate. Just wanted to showcase talents.

WS: Was this the beginning of the Dennis Playhouse?

MHE: No. That has nothing to do with this. The Dennis Playhouse started with Raymond Moore, who was from California. He had heard about the Richardson players. He thought that he would like to start his own theater. So, he toured around, and he found this park in Dennis. Mrs. Richardson was very instrumental in that, too. They found this land right here in the center of town. He had quite a lot of money. He bought all of it.

WS: There were no buildings around then?

MHE: No, pastureland. Then the playhouse – then he had to find himself a place. Well, the original building was a church. It stood in our centerfold, whereas it'd become a slaughterhouse. Then it was there a hundred years. Then it moved up here on Main Street. So, when Raymond Moore built a theater, there was that building. It was once a church and they moved it there.

WS: The church had become a slaughterhouse?

MHE: Yes.

WS: It was right next door to you when you were a girl?

MHE: No. I lived with my cousins next door. I didn't live there.

WS: Well, what were your family's activities with the theater?

MHE: Well, none except my father who drives the actors. He went from Providence to get the train or the Yarmouth Depot. He mostly just drove them back and forth to meet a friend.

WS: This was by the harbor?

MHE: This was by the harbor.

WS: Did you ever attend any of the shows?

MHE: Yes. We used to go there. Probably every week.

WS: When would they hold the event?

MHE: When?

WS: What time of the week? Day of the week?

MHE: Every day.

WS: Every day?

MHE: Well, six days a week.

WS: Would it be an evening performance?

MHE: Of course.

WS: Would it be a matinee?

MHE: Yes. Well, matinees twice a week.

WS: Was there any difference between...

MHE: I suppose there was some difference. I don't know.

WS: Tell me about the Nobscussett Hotel.

MHE: Well, that was a beautiful old hotel. People came then and stayed all summer. That was where I met my husband. He'd been going there for three years. I met him the last year, 1914.

WS: How did you meet him?

MHE: Well, one of my friends had a small party at her home. She knew she had puzzles and alcohol in her home. So, she invited some of the most festive boys. Then she invited several of the town's girls. This is a drinking party.

WS: What were the activities at the party then? Did you dance?

MHE: Yes. Well, it was just dancing. Then the next day, he called me up and said he'd take me to the Sign of the Motor Car Tea.

WS: You were sixteen at the time.

MHE: Yes. I had just graduated from high school. I was going to school that fall and I felt well.

WS: We were talking about meeting your husband for the first time and going out to the Sign of the Motor Car.

MHE: It was Sign of the Motor Car Tea. My mother, she didn't know [laughter] if I should go or not. One of his boys from the hotel in Nobscussett said to me I should go out with him now. I said I thought it was all right in the daytime, and I was going. We went, and we walked there, a ten-minute walk.

WS: It was considered proper to go out during the daytime, but not the evening?

MHE: Well, it was proper to go out in the evening with a chaperone.

WS: I see. Who would chaperone you on an evening excursion?

MHE: At that age, well, I just didn't go out alone. We went to the house, the same function, the hall, and everything.

WS: What about dating? When did you first begin to go out with boys? How did you meet other young boys?

MHE: Well, my first year in high school, when I was fourteen, all little poor girls in Dennis and poor boys used to go in East Dennis. We just had never met. So, my high school teacher who lived in East Dennis. He thought we should get together to know each other. So, the woman that he boarded with suggested that we have a party and invite us girls over to East Dennis. So, he got the boys to drive a wagon in East Dennis. Come over and get us girls and drive us around. We played games and had refreshments and read through. Then the boys brought us home. That broke the ice. We didn't know each other very well. After then we would have dances. Because those boys, when these dances came over – when Mrs. Richardson was teaching us dancing and if one of the boys would want to take me to the dance, he could come over with his horsing team. But my father went to the hall at 11:00 p.m. to bring me home, maybe a little later. But not until I was about eighteen did my parents let him get me and bring me home. Then I had to go home to see it's not past 11:00 p.m. Well, we did have parties occasionally in homes. Well, sometimes we'd take cars. Well, the dance, we had a shorter prologue. Then we'd meet the boys at different functions that were put on at the hall.

WS: With chaperone?

MHE: Well, no. Because if you usually went to a function, the boys were there. You could dance with them or linger with them. You didn't go out with them much, unless you went to a dance.

WS: These parties in the homes, would you have food?

MHE: I don't know. It's usual. I get food at home.

WS: Would there be sandwiches and (cold bears?)?

MHE: Yes, sandwiches, not (cold bears?). I never heard that word at that time. Sandwiches and cakes and taffy pulls, just invite a crowd in and pull taffy in. I don't know one thing or another. I just said it three times.

WS: What was taffy?

MHE: Well, somebody made taffy. Have you ever seen a taffy and pulled on your own around it?

WS: No, never.

MHE: [laughter] Well, you make taffy. You have to cook it on the stove.

WS: What flavor taffy was it if you have many kinds of flavor?

MHE: Molasses taffy.

WS: This was an activity for the boys and girls.

MHE: Sure. That was fun. A boy and a girl, we did all these circuses.

WS: Well, what were your home activities during the day? Did you have a formal breakfast before you went to school?

MHE: Well, we had breakfast.

WS: What did you have?

MHE: I know I always had hot cereal, always bacon and eggs and all that. In the winter, my grandfather and my father both had a pig. We always had hens, pigs, cows. In the fall, they killed that pig, and all that pork – I can remember, he loved pork. He was a good cook. Not pastries, but pizza, anything. He used to get my breakfast sometimes. I would have these bits of pork – the breakfast, fresh pork, frying it. They killed a pig in the fall. He got three hundred to four hundred pounds. Well, they didn't have refrigeration. So, you keep half a pig. You give the other half to another friend, a neighbor, who had a pig. They staggered killing the pigs. Then when he killed his pig, he would give you half of his pig later. So, you would give the hands to the butcher, and he would smoke them. But then you'd have all this lovely, fresh pork.

WS: Smoked?

MHE: No, pork. Well, smoked ham. But then you'd have this other fresh pork, pig.

WS: How would you keep that preserved?

MHE: Well, it was cold. They didn't kill until around Thanksgiving. It was cold.

WS: Who was the butcher that smoked the ham?

MHE: Mr. David Puddlemore. He didn't have – well, I don't know. But he had a wagon. He went around town twice a week, Brewster to East Dennis and Barnstable. You catch your meat from the butcher.

WS: It stopped at your house?

MHE: Yes. My mother, I don't believe she ever went to the store to buy anything. We had two stores in town, and both stores came around your house twice a week.

WS: What were the names of the stores?

MHE: Well, first, it was E.C. Matthews and then later Lovell Goodspeed and then the other one was Earl Davidson. The store still lives. It's up on Main Street. So, a man would come around and have a pencil, take your order, and then at 4:00 p.m., he'd bring you your order. They did that. My father instilled it in me. Don't buy anything if you can't pay for it. Don't charge anything. I learned my lesson. When I was a nurse, I was making \$35 a week for twenty-four-hour duty. This was in 1920. I wanted some nice polish. I would go to the store, and I would charge. I would buy dresses that cost \$55, and I was getting \$35. I was getting used to out of that. I would pay down a little. The bill would come in next month. Big bill now, I'm paying down \$17. Well, around the time when I was going to get married, I owed them \$150. They said I had to pay up or else. Because I always said, "Dad will pay for it," and then he used to.

WS: What store was this?

MHE: This was (Charity?). But this time, Dad said, "You are paying off that bill before you get married. That will teach you." So, as it happened, I had a case down here in Dennis. It was a five-or-six-week case at \$35 a week. I lived at home, of course, paid no home. So, I paid off my debt, but I didn't have any money. So, that was a good blessing in this house at the time. Because he had been paying the bills over the last. So, after that, when I got married, I did not have a charge of having until I reached the age of discretion. My husband would give me money to go out and spend, but I had no charging.

WS: The age of discretion? What age is that?

MHE: Well, when you know that you see something that you want, and you can't say no. Don't charge it. You know what your bills for it would be.

WS: But what age were you when you reached the age of discretion?

MHE: Well, I don't know. Twenty-four when I got married. I don't think I had a charge to count for five or six years afterwards. Then when you're buying children's clothes and things, sometimes you're – but I'd reached that. I knew I should.

WS: Is this a typical Cape Town attitude?

MHE: No, not necessarily. But he was always, you shouldn't have that if you can't pay for it. So, I pay for everything today. You pay for your car right now. You pay for this house right now.

WS: Well, tell me about the holidays that you experienced as a girl.

MHE: Well, there's the Fourth of July, which we usually think is wonderful. We'd go down to the big house. It's a large house with a lot of cousins. They had a big firework display. They had courts around two sides of the house. Well, there were only a few of us who spent a lot of time with our families. I used to think that was wonderful.

WS: What kind of fireworks did they have?

MHE: All kinds of – the displays, the highlighters. Then, of course, I had my own little firecrackers, torpedoes, or something.

WS: Torpedoes?

MHE: Well, the little things you snap on them. They call them torpedoes. You snap it on a stone.

WS: Horse and wagon?

MHE: Horse and wagon. We used to go in the hospital, right? It is, even after you get the car. You just didn't take your car to go from here to there, the way they do today. Well, that was Dad's business. But we didn't take the car.

WS: So, that was a period where you had both horse and automobile.

MHE: Yes. We'd take it out several times a year. We'd go like the South Yarmouth, going on the dirt road and all.

WS: This would be by horse and wagon?

MHE: Horse and wagon, yes.

WS: Who would go on the...

MHE: My mother, maybe my grandfather, maybe my father. He could be working. But my mother, grandfather, my aunt, she'd lived with us for a time.

WS: This could be during the middle of the week or any day of the week?

MHE: Yes. It would be on a weekday. Of course, church on Sundays.

WS: This would be during the summertime?

MHE: Well, yes, summer or fall, not in the winter. In August, for instance.

WS: So, you really only get to see your relatives from Yarmouth maybe twice a year?

MHE: Yes. They'd come down twice a year. We have a big dinner, probably a tea in the afternoon before we set home. It takes ten minutes to get over to South Yarmouth now, not more than fifteen. Then it would take us over an hour at least to get there or more. Because that was off the sand road over the hills.

WS: But it was really a...

MHE: But it was an outing.

WS: What was Thanksgiving like for you?

MHE: I think, well, if you compare it to that, a week – ahead of time. My mother did and my aunt. Of course, I had to help them do it. There was a lot of cooking.

WS: What type of cooking that they did? Did they make pies back then?

MHE: Pies and cakes and cookies and the others. I worked in cakes, been baking for a long time.

WS: Did you have pumpkin pies?

MHE: Yes. Pumpkin pie, cranberry pie, beets pie. They used to make beets pie, packaged mixing.

WS: What about the pumpkin pie mix? Would they be making real pumpkin?

MHE: Yes. Mother made it from pumpkin.

WS: That's quite a task.

MHE: Well, yes. The women, years ago, didn't have time for bridge or for frivolous things. You'd make a pumpkin pie. Well, you'd get a pumpkin, then you'd have to carve it all out. Then you'd have to cook it down before you could start making a pie. Everything took time.

WS: What kind of stove would you cook in?

MHE: An iron stove. That iron stove, we'd have that up to my shoulder. I remember that iron stove.

WS: That was a coal stove?

MHE: Yes.

WS: Where would you get your coal from?

MHE: In Dennis, I guess.

WS: What about Christmas? Was that a big holiday?

MHE: That was a large part of the culture. I had to have a Christmas tree. You'd get that ahead of time. Well, a few days. When I was about fourteen or fifteen, Dad thought I was crazy. I wanted one. Of course, you cut down your own Christmas tree. You didn't buy one. They wouldn't have it for sale. So, he hadn't gotten me another tree about three days before Christmas. So, I took a neighbor's boy, and I said, "Come on, we're going up in the hills and chop down a tree." Well, it was a sorry-looking tree that we brought back. So, then Dad realized I really wanted a tree. So, then he went and cut it. Then from that – well, I had it until I left home. Then when we got married, we always had a tree, a lot of trees.

WS: How would you decorate the tree?

MHE: Well, I had a tree when I was in Bridgeport when I was small. My folks who bought this were pretty luminous. So, I had those. Then hand strings and paper lanterns, if you will, and top cards. I had great decorations.

WS: What about gifts?

MHE: I had a lot of gifts. I had a lot of cousins, well, aunts and uncles. I had a lot of gifts.

WS: What would you receive as gifts?

MHE: Jars, teddy bears. I remember one teddy bear I had to take in needlessly. I took him to church. I snuck him out the door and I hoped for others at the church – mother didn't think I should take him. Then, of course, you had clothes. But I used to have more jars.

WS: Did you have a stocking?

MHE: Yes, I have, yes. We didn't have a fireplace because we had this tin thing back then. We had a stove in our living room. That stove gave out a lot of heat. But there was a metal in it. So, I ended up putting the stocking with this. I went downstairs. I left the door open. So, when I

was about ten, I hadn't stopped Santa Claus. But then I got disillusioned when I was about ten. But she used to pick me from the stockings.

WS: What would you receive in your stocking? Have anything of value?

MHE: I can't remember. I don't know. Small things that have been given to me I suppose. I remember my dad, they used to put an orange in all these stockings, two oranges. An orange in those days was priceless. You just didn't have oranges.

WS: In the wintertime?

MHE: Yes, in the wintertime. If you have an orange in your stocking...

WS: That is an extravagant find.

MHE: Yes.

WS: Well, we are about to celebrate Halloween next week. How does Halloween look like in your day as a child?

MHE: I don't remember anything that's happened.

WS: There would be no parties?

MHE: No. It's just another day. I have no recollection of anything.

WS: Well, did the boys ever played tricks during the year?

MHE: Yes, fourth of July. That was Halloween. Fourth of July, that was the trouble time. They started at 12:00 a.m., rang the church bell in the school building. They rang it for about an hour. Then all the young men come. Now, this didn't happen so much. When I was young, as it happened just before I was that age, it began to peter out by the time that I was born.

WS: This would be more or less your father's generation who would play the tricks on fourth of July?

MHE: Yes. They did awful things. They would take a hand wagon, pieces, and hoist the top of it upon a ridge pole of a vine. They would take a dab of red paint and dab on some of this vine. Then pull up fences and turn over waterfalls. They'd do all kinds of tricks like that, awful tricks. But then that kind of faded out. Then they had to do more or less tricks like they do now on Halloween.

WS: What about your first experience with the radio? Do you remember that?

MHE: Well, just before I was married in 1922, my husband told me about a radio. I didn't know what he was talking about. Then he explained he had this crystal set. Wireless set, he had. Then

you'd jump on earphones. Put those earphones on and you would hear people talking. I just couldn't believe it. I never heard such a thing. People talking from another city or town.

WS: You were dismayed by it?

MHE: I was dismayed. I couldn't believe it.

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