

Betty Richards: The recording is the property of the Tales of Cape Cod, Incorporated. It cannot be reproduced without the written consent of the Tales of Cape Cod, Incorporated. Interview started October 3, 1977 and continued on October 4, 1977. Visiting with Howard Clifton Atwood of Wellfleet, Massachusetts. Mr. Atwood, would you give me your full name, please?

Howard Clifton Atwood: My full name is Howard Clifton Atwood.

BR: And what is your present address?

HA: It's Mayo's Beach Road, Wellfleet.

BR: And what was the date of your birth?

HA: June 4, 1896.

BR: And where were you born?

HA: By mistake in Somerville.

BR: Do you have a nickname?

HA: No. Well, when I was in the service, [inaudible] it was Atty.

BR: Atty?

HA: Yes, Atty.

BR: A-T-T-Y?

HA: But around here, I don't have any nicknames.

BR: Can you tell me about the first generation of Atwoods in Plymouth?

HA: Well, as near as I can figure out from things that we have had handed down was, there was three brothers, the first record they have of Atwoods when they registered for the militia in Plymouth. The one that I am from is Stephen Atwood. As I understand, Governor [William] Bradford sent Captain John Smith down the Cape to see how many families the Cape would support. He went back, and I think he said forty or forty-four [inaudible]. Stephen Atwood was one that moved down the Cape and moved down to Wellfleet now. But in those days, it was all Eastham. Orleans, Eastham, and Wellfleet was one town of Eastham. And there has been somebody here in Wellfleet ever since. What? I start in on my grandfather?

BR: Well, yes, but first, tell me how did the name Atwood start.

HA: Well, the name of Atwood started in England from [inaudible] I think, is the name of the town in Surrey. I don't know what they call it there. But it's just below London, a ways below

London. The name of Atwood is made up of people that lived at the woods, at the edge of the woods – “at wood.” That’s how it originally started. Since then, a lot of them have dropped the “At” and are just straight Woods. But the three brothers of Atwoods hung on to the Atwood. There’s several ways that you used to spell it. The last one was [with] two T’s, A-T-T-W-O-O-D. Now, everybody drops one T. So, it’s just A-T-W-O-O-D.

BR: Tell me about the earliest ancestors you remember on your father's side, the Atwood side. Which is the first you remember?

HA: I don't remember any of my grandfathers.

BR: Any stories about them?

HA: My grandfather passed away in '76 [1876]. But my grandmother – that was different. Oh, she died in 1922 or there, along in there. Because I know when my younger brother and I come home from the first war, he followed me by three weeks coming home. Then we waited and come down and spent a few days with my grandmother here in Wellfleet. I think she only stayed a year down here alone after that, and she moved uptown with her daughter, Jennie.

BR: Do you remember your grandmother's maiden name?

HA: Yes, Sarah A. Cleverly, C-L-E-V-E-R-L-Y.

BR: And where was she born?

HA: In Wellfleet.

BR: Do you remember what year?

HA: No, I don't.

BR: And your grandfather was born where?

HA: He was born in Wellfleet.

BR: Can you tell me about your grandfather?

HA: Well, my grandfather – of course, the big industry in Wellfleet in those days was fishing. He was here. His first marriage – he married a woman by the name of Nickerson. He had two sons by her, and she passed away. I forget the dates. One of them, Joseph Atwood, lived in Truro for years out on North Pamet Road and was a member of the lifesaving station there in Truro until he retired. The fact is, he tells about the night that the *Portland* went down. [Editor's Note: Editor's Note: The PS Portland, a side-wheel paddle steamer built in 1889 for passenger service between Boston, Massachusetts, and Portland, Maine, gained notoriety as the namesake of the devastating Portland Gale of 1898, a catastrophic blizzard responsible for the loss of over

400 lives and numerous vessels along the New England coast.] He was on patrol last night. He did most of it on his hands and knees up at the bank. It was such a vicious storm.

BR: He did what? Most of what?

HA: Most of it crawling on his hands and knees. See, going down to the halfway house was the *Truro*, the one that come up.

BR: What was the halfway house?

HA: Well, it's where the two men that are patrolling. They used to patrol the beach. They were coming towards this little house, a little shanty-like, and it had a little stove in it. They would go in and meet, sit down, and rest. If it's the winter, have a little fire. Get a little warmth out of it. Then, start back. That night, he had a heck of a time. When he finally got there first, the fellow coming up from high land hadn't come in. He built a fire and was sitting there. When daybreak come, the fellow showed up – coming up. He did a heck of a job making it. Then, they began looking out on the shore, and they saw bodies all along the shore, so they went out. There was only three bodies that were ashore on my uncle's side. Of course, he got them out of the surf. But there was a bunch of bodies on the other side. Of course, they had contact. Of course, then the crew all come out, and they gathered up the bodies. Most of the bodies from the *Portland* wreck come ashore along there because I know there was one woman there that my uncle pulled in. Well, her husband was a wealthy man. That's what it was. He didn't want her to go, but no, she wanted to go. So, it's just too bad. See? He became a friend of my uncle's and used to come down and visit. It was a rugged night, I guess.

BR: What did they do with all these bodies?

HA: Oh, they shipped them to Boston so that they could be distributed to their families, wherever they were.

BR: Do you remember any other stories your grandfather might have heard that were passed down?

HA: No, see, that was the son from his first marriage, Joseph. But he himself – the Civil War come on, and he enlisted. At Fredericksburg, he lost an arm. Of course, he wasn't any further, and he was discharged. I think [inaudible]. [RECORDING PAUSED]

BR: He was discharged in 1863.

HA: Lost his arm in '62 [1862]. See, my grandfather lost an arm at Fredericksburg in –

BR: 1862.

HA: Was discharged from the Army in –

BR: 1863.

HA: That's when he met and married my grandmother. I suppose that was '63 [1863] or four [1864]. I don't know. I can't remember. [inaudible] so terrible. He had one arm. He couldn't go to sea. He worked around the docks here, unloading fish, but they said that he took and had a hook attached to his arm. They said he could handle more fish than those that had two hands. Made an application to the government for the lighthouse keeper's job at Mayo's Beach Light. He was given the – appointed keeper of Mayo's Beach Light. I think it was August of 1865 at three hundred and fifty dollars a year salary. Then, after he'd been keeper for four or five years, his pay was raised to five hundred dollars a year. Well, I said he married. While keeper at the light there, they had four children or five children altogether. It was three boys and then my aunt Jennie Amelia. The last one – I think her name was Gertrude. She died very young as an infant. But the three boys and my aunt, of course, grew up. My grandfather passed away in 1876. Then they made my grandmother keeper of the light at five hundred dollars per annum. This house that is on Mayo's Beach now, where the Mayo's Beach Light was, was built in 1877. When they opened it up, my grandmother and the boys and girl moved in and run the light from there. Really, it was my grandmother and my aunt were the real ones that run the light because the three boys were fishing and odd-jobbing around. They were here today and gone tomorrow, see? They wasn't home steady, so they could take their turn at watching the light. My aunt stayed with my grandmother until she was nineteen when she married Captain Tom Bryne and went to sea with him. That left my grandmother alone, so she gave up the light in 1891 and moved uptown.

BR: Tell me about how they clean the lamps in the lighthouse.

HA: Well, on all those lights, especially that is a flashing light, it's just a little bit of a kerosene lamp. It was copper. Of course, they'd fill every day with the heat. But it was the prisms of the – what do they call that? – around it. Pick up those lights and shoot them towards the bull's eye, and they would flash as the bull's eye turned around. This light, I don't think, turned around like Highland Light did. It was timed. You know what I mean? That bull's eye would flash out to sea every so many seconds. Well, [inaudible] Joseph, he was down there – down to Highland Light. The usual procedure in a lighthouse was – of course, there would be two. One of them would take turns during the night and watch the light, keep an eye on the light so that if it went out, they could get it going again. Then, in the morning, when they turned the light off, they turned two and cleaned the light – take the lamp out and reset it up, put kerosene in it and everything, clean all the light inside and everything, and spend the morning working in the lighthouse, cleaning it. Then, at noontime, afternoon, they would be off until dark again. As my young brother and I were coming along, we would be – after school was closed in the city in the summer, we were here at my grandmother's. Never went back until the day before it started again in the fall. My grandmother, through that routine, having followed that routine for so many years, after dinner, she'd wash the dishes, then go in and change her dress, and put a big white apron on – starched apron – and then sit down in a chair alongside the window. She could see anybody, any horse and teams, or anything that went up and down the road and see what's going on. She rested all afternoon. If it was rainy like that, where [my] brother and I couldn't go out and play, she would often take and put a couple of hassocks in front of her and set us down and tell us family history. That's how we got a lot of that information. Well, a lot of I haven't been able to confirm and only remember it as she told it. Want me to tell about her father now?

BR: Yes. Tell me about her father.

HA: See, in the latter part of my grandmother being at the lighthouse, President Roosevelt was off the backshore in a government boat on a vacation. They told him about her being the only woman lighthouse keeper in the country. He said he would like to meet her. So, they brought him around, around Provincetown and into Wellfleet Harbor. They rode him ashore. He shook hands with my grandmother. Now, my grandmother told me – told my brother and I that story. But when I was gathering up everything, there was a discrepancy. She gave up the light in 1891, and President Roosevelt wasn't President until 1903. So, with the help of the librarian, she looked up the history of President Teddy Roosevelt. When he first went to Washington in Congress from New York, he advocated a bill and presented a bill to Congress that all employees of the government be under civil service. They passed the bill and made him the first Civil Service Commissioner. That's what he was when he was off the backshore and was so interested in her being the only woman lighthouse keeper. He was civil service commissioner at that time. Although, in telling us the story, she didn't say it that way. It was President Roosevelt. There are newspaper clippings in the papers and everything about it. They call it President Roosevelt, but it wasn't until about thirteen years afterwards before he was President. What the heck is next?

BR: Pardon me?

HA: What the heck will come next?

BR: We're talking about the high tides around the lighthouse.

HA: Oh, on the original light, there was a compound built around it and filled in the bulkhead all the way around. In high-course tides, the water surrounded the lighthouse. Mary Freeman, who was the mother of Raymond Freeman, Jr. today – my grandmother was an aunt of hers. She used to like to go down and visit down at the lighthouse weekends – go down and spend weekends with her. She used to be scared to death when she was out there on a high-course tide and it was completely surrounded by water. Of course, in those days, there was a bridge across there. Water all come in all into here. Water used to be here. When they put this new light in, they built the road – and everything has been built up out here to a level to where it don't come over – the tide didn't come over across, see? So, they had a bridge, and to shut that off, they put a dike – they brought it down to about – so you could still bring the first [inaudible] you could bring a boat in, but you'd have to – you know what I mean? You'd have to ease it in. It wouldn't come under sail or power. As I know then, that's when we got the – took the sand from Taylor Hill right where that house that [Warren] "Bing" Harrington used to live in. One horse tip carts – and you couldn't get on a ride; it was too short. So, they used to have kids leave the horses. Well, there's a bunch of men at the sandbank. You'd back the tip cart in, and they'd fill it up. They'd tell when you to go, and you'd lead the horse out onto the road, turn them around, and back him down. When you go down to where it should be dumped, the men there would tip it, dump it, you'd pull ahead, and then you'd put the tip car up, hook it on, and you'd go back to the sand pile and get another load.

BR: What year was that? Do you know?

HA: Lord knows. I was real young.

BR: That was just the start of what you remember. Yeah.

HA: I used to fill in for a fellow that did it for Silas Young. He lived on Railroad Avenue there. We'd work ten hours and get ten cents. Cora Holbrook – her father had two horses and a couple of tip carts. She and her sister Josephine used to lead her father's horses back and forth. But they'd do it every day. I didn't have to do it every day. The dike was built by Brown – I don't know what his first name is. I know I played with his son, Paul Brown. His grandfather was Captain Kennedy, who lived next to my grandmother. He lived up in the house where Dr. Bell lived for years. But along the last end of it, they moved to the city after he built the dike across. Paul went along with him. Of course, they put him in the maritime school there, and he followed the sea. He was captain for the American [inaudible]. I never was able to catch up with him. The original light – for a while, it was a bridge that crossed there. As I say, the tide used to come in here. My father and brother, too, if they got on a high-course tide when they go home from school, of course, they couldn't get out there to the light. In case of emergency, my dad said they used to take their clothes off, tie them on their head, and swim out. That was quite a chore. That didn't happen too often. But when they put in the new light, they built the road and everything up. This road is [inaudible] what it used to be, and this new lighthouse that was built in 1877 was built up on that new land, you see? Because they were much higher than what the original lighthouse was. I guess that covers all of that.

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 3/16/2024