

Steamboat Era Museum Oral History Project
Henry Gwyn Edwards Oral History
Date of Interview: Unknown
Location: Mill Point
Length of Interview: 16:39
Interviewer: MK – Michael Kline
Transcriber: NCC

Gazelle Moore: To help when you –

Michael Kline: It is important –

Ella Wanda Edwards: Would it be nice to let Uncle Henry talk first?

MK: Well, if you want Uncle Henry to talk first, then we can pass it to him.

EWE: All right.

Robert Stewart Edwards: Because he may change a lots of things I'll say. He's [laughter] older than I am. He's older than I am [laughter].

Henry Gwyn Edwards: I'm ancient. Let's put it that way. My name is Henry Gwyn Edwards.

MK: Wait just a second. I am sorry. I do not have any lined up here yet. Are you okay?

Carrie Kline: Yes. You are in full view.

MK: Again, my name is?

HGE: My name is Henry Gwyn Edwards. I was born on Mill Point, and still live next door to the old homestead, which is still there. Occupied part of the year by my sister's child and her husband. I'm sort of lost anyway.

MK: But what was your date of birth?

HGE: December the 18th, 1904. Born on Windsor Island there with my older brother, (Elliot, and sister, Lucy, and then Alice, Henry, Curtis, and Charles?). I'm the last of the Mohicans. I still live next door. So, anyway, the first day at school in this same building, I didn't want to go. I went upstairs and locked myself in my room. My dad said, "Look, Henry, if you don't open that door, I'm going to knock it down," and he meant it. So, anyway, I came out whimpering, and things of that kind. My dad took me to school on horseback. I was whimpering and crying all the way over it seems. Anyway, we got around the corner here, where the one block down. I saw my old buddy, (Bruce Beniston?). So, to make a long story short, the next day, I was the first out of the house. In the wintertime, certain windows, it got very, very cold. Back in those days too, you didn't have – oh, you had a (Wolfville?) shirts and things like that, but not the windbreakers they have today. So, anyway, I finished high school and boarded in Cubs Creek with (Shirley Hudgens?) lived down the (Trade Point?). Finally, after two years, I graduated from the Cubs Creek High School, which at that time was the only high school within the county. So, how did I get the money to board? I went to sea on (SS *Ville du Havre*?), a coal carrier route of Hampton Roads, and made \$27.50 a month as an ordinary seaman. I soon became a so-called qualified seaman, (37.50?) a month. Anyway, that helped to pay my wage to board there in Cubs Creek with (Professor Garrett? and Miss Garrett?). Anyway, the next year, I went to sea and made quartermaster at \$75 a month and had a room to myself – I mean, shared with another quartermaster. So, anyway, after graduating from Cubs Creek, I decided I didn't

want to be a farmer or a fisherman. So, I shipped out on the steamboat, (Piankatank?), I guess, it was. Then my first job with Fleischmann's Yeast (1413 North Charles Street?). Then shortly thereafter, it merged with Chase & Sanborn Coffee and Royal Baking Powder. The regional manager, his name was (Frank Loftus?). He lived in Washington. He didn't want to commute to Baltimore every day, so we moved the [inaudible] headquarters to Washington. Anyway, I was ambitious. I worked my way up in the [inaudible] to be the head accountant for the region there. Then New York headquarters decided the territory was too large, so they made it – they split it into the Atlanta region, going from Atlanta, to Miami, to New Orleans, and places like that. So, anyway, [laughter] –

MK: You are doing great.

HGE: I decided that I wanted to proceed or shall we say, improved myself. So, I worked my way up to be the head accountant – I started repeating myself – but anyway, in Atlanta. Then they consolidated and went to Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and I ended up there in New York. Let's say, once again, repeating myself. But anyway, after –

[talking simultaneously]

MK: Can we just back up here a little bit? You said in one sentence what I was hoping you would take ten minutes to tell me, and that was that you shipped out on the –

HGE: (SS *Ville du Havre*?) coal carrier.

MK: No. When you left to go to Baltimore, you shipped out on the steamboat.

HGE: Oh, I –

MK: We want to know everything that you can remember about that steamboat. What it was like? I mean, here you were leaving home and going to –

HGE: Yes. No roads. A ship that was on the – Piankatank, it was.

MK: Tell us about that boat.

HGE: Well, it wasn't bad at all. I had a stateroom there and overnight trip. So, anyway, I landed in Baltimore. My uncle (George Kurdish?), and he married my (Aunt Medy?). Anyway, ask me some questions.

MK: They met you at the boat?

HGE: Yes. My uncle George met me at the boat. They had -a summer place also out in the county there. Catonsville, I guess they called it. So, anyway, it was very interesting. As they were – once again, trying to improve myself, I went to a night school for a short time. But I was working, running the day's receipts to the bank down in Baltimore, down on their area, shoreline down on the – and docks. Incidentally, one night, since I was taking all their money from the

day's receipts to the bank, somebody was shadowing me. So, I ran and then opened the release slot, where you put the money in. But anyway, I got the money in there.

CK: Shadowing you, what does that mean? Shadowing you?

HGE: Following me, I meant to say.

CK: Oh, shadowing you.

Female Speaker: Shadowing.

CK: Behind you?

HGE: Yes. In other word, he was chasing me. So, anyway, everything was fine. I got the money in the slot there. We pulled the slot like you do at the Bank of America now. When I deposit, you pulled that open.

MK: So, what was it like traveling on the steamboats in those days?

HGE: Very, very nice. Very, very nice. A nice stateroom. The food was good. So, I had no complaints whatsoever.

CK: What did they serve?

HGE: [laughter]

MK: We want to know everything about it because we will never get to be on a boat. So, you have to tell us everything you can think of about the boat.

HGE: Well, the food was nice and served with the linen and napkins on the table. So, in my belief, it was quite adequate. So, you want to ask me some more questions?

MK: Did you know any of the other captains on the steamboats?

HGE: On the freighters only, my second cousin, I guess, (Captain Rob?). He was the captain of one of their freighters it was. But then as I'm repeating myself, I worked my way up from ordinary seaman to first-class seaman and quartermaster.

MK: What was involved in being an ordinary seaman?

HGE: Well, as an example, going out to Lambert's point loaded with coal. There were great big coal carriers from them. I would open the hoppers. Normally, coal would go down in the chute, but it came so fast, a lot of it would spill, some of it on the deck. But anyway, they had to work fast and get out of there. So, anyway, I went on one trip. They see they have the steel clamps with a great big, hinged doors to let the coal in, but one of the clamps had been left this way, rather than that way to be hooked in. So, it dented that big steel hatch. So, they couldn't sail.

The captain was suspended, I think, for one or two trips, simply because the captain he [laughter] didn't cause it, but he was responsible for it. So, therefore, that's the end of that story.

MK: What was your job in all of this?

HGE: So, I'm repeating myself. I went to the Business College.

MK: No. I mean, on the ship –

HGE: On the ship.

MK: – what was your job?

HGE: Well, at first, ordinary seaman. I worked myself up to –

MK: But what did an ordinary seaman do?

HGE: He did everything that could possibly be done on the ship. Shovel that coal that was spilled. Going out to Hampton Roads, you shovel it overboard. When you get to be a quartermaster, as I mentioned, you're going to get a second room together with the second guy. So, anyway, repeating myself again, I wasn't satisfied with that. I wanted to advance. I didn't want to go to the sea because I don't think it's fair to your family to go to sea, because your children gets old that, "Where is papa? Where is papa?" Papa is at sea. So, anyway, ask me some more questions.

MK: Well, I think we are going to turn now.

CK: Let us ask. I was just wondering, were all the ordinary seaman white?

HGE: Oh, it didn't make any difference. When the color didn't make any difference, white, black, yellow, whatever. So, there's no distinction but [inaudible].

CK: You all slept on the same level and ate together and –

HGE: Yes. We ate in turns. You have four hours on and four hours off. So, it's pretty rough on your sleep [laughter]. But anyway, you get into the routine so –

MK: But the conditions on board ship were not segregated by race or anything?

HGE: Oh, no. You could be Filipino, or you could Black, White, or Yellow, as I mentioned. No distinction whatsoever.

CK: Tell us a little bit about who worked above and below decks on steamers when you were working and traveling on the steamers.

HGE: Well, stevedores, of course, are the ones that have the catch. We're embarrassed of whatever you call them. Bringing in the freight from the ship, stevedores, they call them. They would bring in foodstuffs. Back in those days, there was no individual packaging like there is today.

CK: Were they White or Black or mixture?

MK: The stevedores, were they racially mixed or were they mostly Black or –

HGE: Actually, they're mostly White as I recalled.

MK: Mostly, White.

HGE: Mostly White.

MK: They would bring in the food and –

HGE: Yes. In bulk, as I mentioned. Distributed into [inaudible]. Also, the one area where the green post office is, the store there.

MK: Anything else?

HGE: You ask me questions if you like.

MK: Well, we are going to try to get everybody a chance here.

HGE: Okay.

MK: I will come back to you. Is that okay? Are you ready to grab a hold to that?

[end of transcript]