

Steamboat Era Museum Oral History Project
Robert Stewart Edwards Oral History
Date of Interview: Unknown
Location: Gwynn's Island, Virginia
Length of Interview: 36:50
Interviewer: FS – Female Speaker
Transcriber: NCC

Female Speaker: They didn't lose any of the theater. That was tied up over at Cricket Hill, we called it. I'll thank you all again and turn this over to Stewart. He might need it.

FS: [laughter]

Robert Stewart Edwards: You all pretty well covered everything.

Michael Kline: [laughter]

Carrie Kline: I'm going to take a little break and change these video tapes. I'm going to pause your Dutch in a moment.

FS: Cockrell's Wharf on Gwynn's Island. We were talking about that last night, Stewart. I'd never heard of Cockrell's Wharf. Have you, Stewart?

RSE: Well, Mr. Andrew Callis's Point, wasn't that called Cockrell's Point where Mr. Andrew Callis lived. Do any of you know of Bone Creek? Right in the mouth of Bone Creek, I think it was.

FS: See, I can't hear anything, Stewart. I'm just like Mr. Clarisse. I'm deaf.

RSE: Mr. Andrew Callis's place on Bone Creek. Well, on the point, wasn't that Cockrell's Point?

FS: Cockrell Point down Mr. Andrew Callis's.

RSE: I think that's right. But I don't remember of a dock ever being there.

FS: Because Mason lived down right there. They got lots of stuff ruined when the tide was really high. But that's all I can think about.

[crosstalk 00:01:26].

RSE: That sort of rings a bell. Never remember a dock being there. Maybe you remember. Do you?

FS: No, I don't.

MK: Can you say, "My name is?"

RSE: Robert Stewart Edwards.

MK: Start by saying, "My name is."

RSE: My name is Robert Stewart Edwards.

MK: Your date of birth is?

RSE: September the 30th, 1914.

MK: Well, if we added it all up today, we'd have something, wouldn't we?

[laughter]

A lot of years. Can you tell us about your people and where you were raised?

RSE: Yes. Born and raised on Gwynn's Island. All of my folks on both sides were raised on Gwynn's Island. Born and raised here. My mother's side was the Fosters. The Fosters, they had a canning factory, the Fosters did, down where (Pulley?) lives now. They had a canning factory, a big place. They employed a lot of people. Canned tomatoes and seasoning and herring roe. They packed herring there and big business. I believe it was migrant workers. Anyway, there was a lot of colored people who lived there. They had places for them to live. There was a lot going on in Mathews County then. A lot going on. A lot of fishermen. Everybody was fishing. That was the main industry. Quite a difference now. But there was a lot going on in Mathews County then. At Mathews Courthouse, Saturday nights there were just – I have a picture of it. I should have brought it. You couldn't walk for people. Everybody tried to get there. Nice, ghost down on Saturday night. Dance Hall and two drug stores and everything was going nice. We did here in this county. Now I think what I see of it, it's changed. People come in and everything's different. There's television and automobiles and computers. But all my folks were born and raised here. I've been here all my life pretty well. Shipped out two or three times. Somebody called me and I'd go like the rest of the kids. But I didn't care much about that. Is fished all my life pretty well. Later on in life, me and my father were partners. Later on, we built the Marine Railway. We've operated that – I have for sixty-five years. My son still operates now down Edwards Creek.

MK: How'd you happen to build a railway down there?

RSE: Well, the railway, we built it for our own use. See, we had one railway here that was about where the Sea Breeze is now, down here on the Bridge Road. That's the building that got washed away in this last storm, part of it. It was so busy we'd get to roping a wheel propeller or something like that and we'd lose a two weeks' work. So, we built a railway for our own use. That's how it came to get into that railway business. Then the fishing business played out after a while and we just made a business of that and built another one. We have two there now.

MK: So, how long were they and what did you haul?

RSE: We hauled boats up about 45 feet.

MK: Excuse me. Say it again.

RSE: We hauled boats about 45 feet long. We got two on there now, I think. One on each railway. We got into that work. Just a lot of hard work, though. That's hard work working on

boats. But the fishing business finally played out here. It's almost completely gone now pretty well. People moved in here. Things have changed. These people have pretty well covered all the steamboat days and all that stuff. I wouldn't know what else. Hard to tell you. There's a lot to talk about, but I don't know what else to tell you.

MK: Tell me the names of the boats you remember and what do you remember about them?

RSE: Well, my father had a Poquoson-built canoe, 40-foot long, built out of logs. That was the thing those days back then 1911, 1912. I worked that until ten years after my father died.

MK: What was that called?

RSE: It was called a canoe. They called them Poquoson-built canoe. They were built out of logs. People were going there. These people down here in Poquoson built them, (Kenny Moore?). They were Moores, I believe the name. You ever met them?

FS: Yes, my husband's family.

RSE: That's right. That's [inaudible]. They'd go in the woods and get these first-growth pines and tall virgin pines. Pick up the trees, cut them down. They had a smaller canoe that they called a three-chunk canoe. That was three trees. Haul them out and put them together. The canoe that my father had was what they called a five-chunk. It had a middle and two on each side. They made a beautiful boat. Before this deadrise boat that they have now, that's they build them with metal sticks. They were the rowing boat. That was the thing. Beautiful boats. These people did a lot of work. They knew what they were doing too. Beautiful boats. It was sharp at both ends, about 10 foot wide. The one we had, 40 foot long. In the beginning way back, they had sail before the motors here. That was before my time. We've always had motors since I've been here. But they had sail and that's the way they operated and fished with pound nets in the bay and all that stuff. Most of them used to dock at Cherry Point. Cherry Point has storms that's carried it away now. But it was a long point of land out there, trees on it. Most people would have to walk to Cherry Point and sail. If they didn't have wind, they'd have to sail out in the bay to fish the nets. Sail and it was something those days. Cherry Point was a nice place. It had a natural swimming pool on the south side of it. It was a great harbor. From the northeast, boats would come in and anchor at nights. Sailboats in nor'easters. But it had a natural swimming pool on the south side of it. It was as wide as this room or more, deep water. Every kid on the harbor was in there every afternoon [laughter]. Yes. All these things are going on. I remember when it was seven stores going on Gwynn's Island operating. I think all seven same time. You remember that?

MK: Can you name them?

FS: People had to walk to the stores.

RSE: Walk to the store, yes. I think it was dirt roads. Let's see. Mr. Billy Adams had one on Gwynnville Road. Mr. Billy Conney had one at Myrtles. Robert Conney followed up the road. That's three. Mr. John Hudgins. [inaudible 00:09:38]. That's five, isn't? Mr. John Grimstead,

six. Callis Wall, seven. There were more stores before my time. There was one at Cherry Point and one at Narrows Point, they tell me. I remember something about the one at Narrows Point.

MK: These were all pretty much the same kind of stores or did they have specialties or –

RSE: Well, pretty much. Mr. Hudgins, her father, had – she described that a while ago – they had almost everything. They had yard goods and they had canned goods and most anything that you needed. They had boots and shoes and groceries and all that sort of thing. It was a funny thing. Your father, I think Mr. John Hudgins, they had something going on one time. They pledged to not sell cigarettes, but he sold chew tobacco and all other kinds of smoking tobacco. But he never did sell cigarettes. He had pledged not to sell them. People couldn't understand that [laughter].

MK: He didn't sell cigarettes?

RSE: He didn't sell cigarettes. He had pledged not to sell cigarettes and he stuck to it. But he sold tobacco and cigars, but no cigarettes.

MK: Who made him pledge that?

RSE: I don't know how that came about. Maybe you do.

FS: We had an organization called The Good Tempers, to be temperate. So, that was one of the things that they decided that cigarettes were so harmful for the body, that they signed a pledge. My father did, and a number of the stores said that they would not sell cigarettes.

RSE: People coming to buy tobacco and so forth would ask for cigarettes. They couldn't understand why he sold everything else and didn't sell cigarettes. But anyway, there were seven of them going one time in my lifetime. They've pretty well covered the steamboat days and so forth.

CK: Now, did they pay for everything in hard cash then?

RSE: Lord. You'd take a basket of eggs to the store.

FS: [laughter]

RSE: If you didn't use the value of them up, they'd give you a due bill. They called it a due bill. Next time you come, you'd use that. That was years ago. People used to have a horse and a cow. Most families had horses and cows and raised chickens and raised ducks and geese and everything else. Raised all the vegetables, corn. Nobody does anything like that now. That's all memory.

MK: So, if you grew a field of corn, how would you get that onto the steamboat?

RSE: Oh, well, they didn't ship that. They used that up for the cattle or the horse or the cow or

chickens or whatever during the winter, see? That's the way they lived then.

MK: But what did they ship and how did they get it on the boat?

RSE: Well, if you raised a calf, you'd ship that to Baltimore. Your fish, you shipped to Baltimore. Ice came from Baltimore here. We didn't have an ice plant way back. They shipped it. You had ice come on steamers.

MK: Imagine that. So, how did you get your things loaded on the boat then?

RSE: Well, they had truckers on the boat. Fellows high, mostly colored. They had a little had truck, two wheels. They'd pick up the freight, but you had to ship and whatever they had to put on. We had steamboats about three times a week then. We had one steamboat, the *Piankatank*, and there were two others. One of them was the *Anna Ronald* and the *Potomac*. I think they made it about three trips a week. They were pretty well on schedule. Most times they were pretty well scheduled. Like they said, there was a gang of people who would meet them at the steamboat. That was a big day when the steamboat came.

MK: What do you mean?

RSE: Well, people would gather at the dock when the steamboat arrived. It was pretty near. I think these steamboats were pretty much on schedule, usually I think, from Baltimore. Everything you got then was from Baltimore. It came on steamers. They had the Montgomery Ward was in Baltimore and Monrovia Avenue, I believe, and (Seasonal Bank?) Philadelphia. They'd send out catalogs and you'd order whatever you needed. When I built my little house down there, I ordered the roof, the floor, windows, and doors. It came from Montgomery Ward in Baltimore. I paid them \$4 a month. Easy payment plan, they called it. \$4 a month. I saw some checks. I paid checks just two, three days ago [laughter]. Yes. Things were rough. That was in the [19]30s. It was a big boat.

MK: What were things like in the [19]30s generally? Pretty depressed or what was it like here on the island?

RSE: Weren't any money. Had no money. Nobody had any money. If anybody had a thousand dollars, they called him a thousand, now.

[laughter]

I remember one man was supposed to have some money and he said, "Yes sir, here's a thousand now."

[laughter]

RSE: Captain Bob Hudgins.

MK: Older than that.

RSE: Depths of the depressions. I was married in 1934.

CK: Once more.

RSE: I was married in 1934. We had ordered from the catalogs, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. It would come on the steamer. Everything we got came on steamer then, steamboats. We didn't have trucks like you do now. But sometimes before that when I was a kid, I worked at the canning factory and I ordered a bicycle. I made enough money there to buy a bicycle from Montgomery Ward. When the steamer came, I was there and I took it off the steamboat. They didn't have to take it off. I saw it sitting down in the creek, but they let me take it right off. Great days.

CK: They let you on the boat to take it?

RSE: They let me take it right off, yes. I saw it sitting up there. I can see it now. All created up.

MK: What color was it?

RSE: Blue and white. A hawthorn flower was the name of it. Full equipped. Man, I was –

MK: You were how old then?

RSE: I was about 14, 15. I worked at the canning factory in the summertime. Had enough money to. Things were tight here then. There wasn't any money. We had people here with families. We'd have a dip net that had the front of it straight like that. It wouldn't be round. They'd get little box prunes come in at one of these stores. A little, wooden box, tie a string on and tie it behind them and wade around the shore and catch soft crabs and peel the crabs and sell them to get a dollar. They made a dollar a day. They would make money. Went through all that, people with families. The captain of the ferry boat here – this was our last ferry boat. One from (Castle Wavo?) over to Cricket Hill. That was motorized. He made \$60 a month and he had the best job of anybody on this island. Everybody made \$60 a month, steady money. \$60 a month. That's the way it was in the [19]30s. I lived through it.

MK: So, you got married and ordered some furniture?

RSE: [19]34. Yes, sir.

MK: What did you order up? What did you get?

RSE: What did I get? Well, I got a table and chairs, kitchen set, \$5.95. I'm still using it. Still using it. Couch, dining room, a dining room set. Still using that, part of it. Yes. I lost my wife in 1995. Lost my wife. She died on Christmas Day in the morning, 1995 with cancer. Had cancer. She fought cancer for twenty years. Lived a long time with it. She was postmaster for about twenty years here at Gwynn Post office.

MK: Her name?

RSE: Her name was Doris.

FS: Stewart, may I interrupt? We still miss her around there.

MK: Still miss her.

CK: So, was she there when the furniture arrived? Tell us about that.

RSE: [laughter] I really don't know now. I don't know. Somebody on the island delivered freight from the steamboat. That came I think with a horse and wagon. But then later on somebody had a truck. Who was it? Somebody had a truck that delivered the freight. Marshall Callis drove the truck for her. They'd meet the steamboat and deliver the freight to your homes.

CK: How would you pay for a thing like that?

RSE: [laughter] on easy payment. \$4, \$5 a month. That's the way it was. I've got some checks. I just saw them two or three nights ago. I was looking at some pictures and I came across these things that I had paid Montgomery Ward back in 1930s. If it would come back like it was then, it would be a terrible time. I don't know what people would be doing.

MK: But in those days, everybody could, what, grow a little garden or –

RSE: That's the way they lived. They canned what they raised, vegetables for the winter. Then we had plenty of oysters and fish. They always had fish salted. They raised hogs and they had the meat. That's the way they lived then. That's the way they lived. The worst time they had is when we had this storm in [19]33. It came in August. It was just a boat time that people were canning for the winter and they lost all their vegetables and all that stuff and lost the boats and lost the pound poles and lost everything they had pretty well. Didn't lose the homes, I don't think really. Water came up in them and all that stuff. That made it rough.

MK: Do you remember that storm?

RSE: I was on a ship. I was at sea. Let's see. We were going from Baltimore to Corpus Christi. We were somewhere soaked. We had been in the Gulf then. I was working on deck there one day and the captain had been up to the radio shack. He came by me with a document in his hand. [laughter] I'll never forget what he said. He was from the island, the captain was. He said, "Boy, it's a hell of a time up home." I'll never forget what he said. That was Captain Homer Callis.

MK: That was who?

RSE: Homer Callis. It was a bad time up there too. But we got home. We got back. They were 28-day trips. We got back in Baltimore a day before Labor Day and they let us come home. I came home with – can't recall his name. What was your brother's name in Baltimore in the

insurance business?

FS: Hal?

RSE: No. Well, Hal was on that too.

CK: Oh, he was? Dick.

RSE: Dick Raspas. He had a thirty-model Chevrolet, brand new. He brought us home and we went back to the ship with him after. But it was a terrible time down here, I'm telling you.

MK: What did you see when you came back?

RSE: Oh, everything wrecked.

CK: How would you even travel back from Baltimore?

RSE: How then? Well, I came back with a friend then. He lived in Baltimore. Dick lived in Baltimore. He brought us home. He was your brother. We came back from Baltimore with him, three of us on there from the island. We came back with him and we went back with him to meet the ship.

MK: In an automobile?

RSE: Yes, sir. He had a thirty-model brand new Chevrolet, red [laughter].

CK: You witnessed the results of the flood?

RSE: Yes. It was about 8 inches high that storm. The water in the home in my daddy's place down there, about 8 inches high. Came up on the first step on the stairway. This time it came level with the floor. So, it's about 8 inches lower this time here in this area. I don't know of some places. I think it was just as bad as it was in the [19]33 storm. From what I understand, some of the old folks down around the coast or somewhere down there, had good marks. They said it was just as high there. The tide was just as much water there as it was in the [19]33 storm.

MK: You mentioned three steamboats. Could you describe them in some detail? Can you tell us how they were the same and how they were different?

RSE: Well, they were pretty much the same model boats. Pretty much the same. The *Piankatank* was the largest. The one named the *Piankatank* was the largest. Then the *Potomac*, which was a same type of boat, but it was a better-looking boat really. It was a pretty, little steamer. Do I have a picture of them here, Doreen?

FS: We do upstairs.

RSE: But they were pretty, little boats. They had state rooms and freight deck below. They

passed you in freight and they served good meals. I made a trip or two on them. They had good meals.

CK: You made a trip on one?

RSE: Yes, I made a trip on them. I made a trip or two to Baltimore and back.

MK: Tell us about that, about going on the boat.

RSE: Well, they docked down Pratt Street in Baltimore and you went on and paid your fare and picked up your suitcase or whatever you had. It had a state room and it had the good rooms. They were the thing in those days. They made several stops all the way up and down the bay. They would go in these rivers. That was the thing then. That was your transportation. Then the *Piankatank*, she'd layover up here at Green Point. Up here where the bridge is now across the Piankatank River, steamboat would dock there. They would lay over there one night out of some trips. I forget what trip, but one trip they'd lay over that and they were kind of on schedule pretty much, I think.

MK: Did you hear any music on the – did they have a band or was there any entertainment?

RSE: No.

MK: Nothing like that?

RSE: Not that I know of, no.

CK: What about sitting down to a meal? Describe that for us.

RSE: Well, they had a dining room and it was a white tablecloth and all that. It was nice. Yes, it was all right. Good food as I remember.

CK: What kind of food?

RSE: Well, they had a menu of cream potatoes and butter beans and corn. Breakfast, the eggs and bacon and all that usual thing [laughter].

CK: What about the service?

RSE: Service was okay. Service was all right. Yes. It was white outfit on and nice.

CK: Who was that?

RSE: He had a waitress. They had waitresses on there. They'd be dressed in white.

MK: So, these were paddle steamers?

RSE: No. Let me see. I think all three of them were propeller driven. One of them may have been a side wheeler. Do you remember a picture of side wheelers? Yes, that was way back. I don't think either one of them was a side wheeler. I think all three were propeller driven.

MK: How were they fueled? With wood or coal or –

RSE: Coal steam engines, up and down engines, little single engine. I'd be in the engine room and watching sometimes.

CK: Who would be doing that?

RSE: They'd have the engineer. The captain of the *Piankatank* was Captain Lucas. L-U-C-A-S, I think. Lucas.

MK: Local?

RSE: No. I don't know where he was from. Baltimore, I think. I think he was a native of Baltimore, I think. I'm not sure about that, but I think so.

CK: So, what were the other jobs on the steamboat?

RSE: Well, they had meat and maybe had a quartermaster. I really don't know. They had a full crew though in those days; the captain, mate, and quartermaster. I don't know whether they had three mates, not first, second, and third. They may have had (Pasha?). He tended to freight and so forth. Kept records. The engineer. It was a growing thing back then. They were pretty well up on what they were doing.

CK: I'm not even too sure what a quartermaster is.

RSE: Well, his job is to steer the boat mostly. That's mostly his job. He was a wheelsman. He has other duties too. He'd stand to watch at the wheel.

CK: Were there Black people working on the –

RSE: They didn't call them steamy doors. They were crewmen. I guess they were Black, yes. They were Black that did the transporting the freight with the carts. I don't know what they'd call them. They wouldn't call them steamy doors. Maybe they were. On these steamships, they had steamy doors and they were black. They'd load and unload the ships and run the wenches and load them with everything, automobiles, and freight. I was on steamship one time I had one whole load with matches. Yes, on a cloud on Captain Homer. Yes. It had five holes. I was on another one with a fruit chip on the way to Fort Pierce from Baltimore. Tween decks were refrigerated and loaded with fruit.

MK: What about the showboats? Did you ever remember the showboat?

RSE: You mean the theater boat that was over here at the Cricket Hill that I spoke about? Is that

the one you're speaking about?

MK: Well, yes, that one or any others?

RSE: That's the only one I know about. That was, like they said, it was there in the [19]33 storm.

MK: What was the name of it again?

RSE: *Adams Floating Theater*. Adams, A-D-A-M-S, *Adams Floating Theater*.

MK: It was here during the storm?

RSE: [19]33 storm. But that same dock where that was docked over at Cricket Hill, stood in that storm. But this last storm washed that place right away. Yes.

MK: Strange.

RSE: Yes. It's the way the tide worked or the wind worked or something. But it stayed there in the [19]33 storm.

MK: The boat survived it.

RSE: The boat survived it and the dock. But this storm, taking that same dock away, cleaned it right up.

MK: Tell me about the floating theater. Did you ever see a show?

RSE: No, I was a kid then. I didn't go to see it as much. I never did go there.

CK: What'd you hear about it?

RSE: [laughter] Really, I don't remember now. But I think it was a good, decent show, I think. They'd have a tug that would pull it around these roads in different places and they'd stay there for maybe two weeks or a month or whatever and move on to another place. That's the way they operated. I don't know whatever happened to it. I never did know the end of it.

MK: Did you ever see it, the floating theater?

RSE: Sure. She knew it.

FS: Well, yes, I saw it. But my daddy wouldn't allow me to go to dance [laughter].

RSE: [laughter]

FS: So, I didn't get to go.

RSE: Tinny knows about it.

FS: Tinny was on there.

RSE: Yes, Tinny knows about it. Did you ever go?

FS: But I remember it.

FS: You were on that floating theater. You went to a show there that night of the storm.

FS: Oh, yes.

CK: What's this now?

FS: Tell her about it when you were on the floating theater, when you went to the show that night at the [19]33 storm, I believe you told –

FS: The show went on okay.

RSE: Did you ever attend the theater? Did you ever go to the show?

FS: Many a times I went.

RSE: You did?

FS: Yes.

RSE: I never did go.

CK: The night of the storm?

[Crosstalk 00:35:24].

RSE: I went to the theater at the courthouse, but I never did go there. I never did.

MK: Tell us about the floating theater.

FS: Well, it was just really unique. It would go to Williams Wharf. There were the folks at the courthouse and come to Cricket Hill and other wharves, I'm sure were. It was just something –

[end of transcript]