

Steamboat Era Museum Oral History Project

Ella Wanda Edwards Oral History

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Ella Wanda Edwards: I'm Ella Wanda Edwards, better known as Teenie. I was born on Gwynn's Island, Virginia, September the 26th, 1920, in a family of thirteen. We didn't have any. We had plenty of room for everybody. We didn't want anybody to leave us. But of course, they had to. I just don't know what really to tell you all.

Michael Kline: Well, start out by telling us about all the children. Where did you rank in that lineup? Can you remember all their names?

EWE: I was the thirteenth. That's where I got my name Teenie. It was Teen at first. I'm glad somebody added an I-E to it. [laughter] Because I've enjoyed my name. I love it. I loved all of my family. My relatives were all around Edwards Creek, including Uncle Henry. But he went away about the time that I came along. It was all such a wonderful place to live because we had such honest, upright people on Gwynn's Island. You could trust anybody, anything. We had a colored fellow that worked for us. You could owe him maybe \$5 and give him \$20. It wasn't long until the rest of your money was back to you. (Bozo?), we called him. But he was afraid of the water. He wouldn't even let you take him across a little creek. He meant a lot to the people on Gwynn's Island, a whole lot to us.

MK: What do you mean he meant a lot? Did he work for different people?

EWE: He worked for different people. My sister would keep milk for him, maybe eight quarts of milk at the time. He'd come and bring the jars back, but she didn't want any money for it. He and his friends, they had parties, too, and made ice cream that they loved. We just had a nice time. Tootie and her daddy and all of them were just up the road from us. Her brothers and sisters were my first cousins, and I had to make her a cousin, too. [laughter] Because she really wasn't my relative. But I think I've worked on it until she is kind of my first cousin, and Stewart and Henry and my family. Mr. Stewart Edwards is going to give you some real good news about working on the Chesapeake Bay. I can tell you some about us playing on the Chesapeake Bay – on Edwards Creek, I should say. Because the Chesapeake is too big and too dangerous for us. But we used to row the skiff down Milford Haven, and they spoke about Scrooch and his store. He would come to the ferry dock, and I'd want to know if I could get something on credit. "Anything in the store you want," he'd tell me. He'd bring us our order and say, "If you need anything else, just let me know. I'll be here with it for you." They're the kind of people we grew up with. I did. He had a brother, Captain Homer Callis, that came up through the ranks on the ships. I was with my husband in New York one day, and we were invited out on a dock to watch this ship come in. She was piloted by Matthews County seamen, some that are known all over the world. This is Captain Homer Callis from Gwynn's Island. Well, my heart got real big. But that was a wonderful time. Because they said that nobody on the East Coast could dock a ship like Captain Homer Callis. He was a nice person, wonderful. He would never pass anybody by or never hurt anybody's feelings. He didn't know about things like that. He was too big for it. He has a wonderful son living here on our island today that we love, all of us. I don't know. I just don't know too much to tell you, but sometimes I could talk all day.

Carrie Kline: Tell us a story about Captain Callis.

EWE: About Captain Homer Callis? Well, he married a girl from Gwynn's Island, and they

lived up in Baltimore. Later on, they wanted to bring their children back home. They had two sons, Billy and Homer. They said when they'd get to the bridge, the Potomac River Bridge, Homer, Jr. would sing that he wanted to go back to Baltimore. But Billy wanted to come here. I believe I've got that right. But anyway, they were good students here in Gwynn's Island school. Homer, Jr. was killed on the Indianapolis during the war. He was a fine young man. We were so happy when they came back to Gwynn's Island to live. They built a beautiful home here just as you come over the bridge. It was really a show place. We were so happy for them, everybody was. We've just been that kind of people. That's why people come here, and they won't go home. [laughter] I said that not too nice, but I don't mean it that way. Because everybody is so welcome. If we didn't have Mrs. Tanner, we wouldn't have this museum. A lot of things we wouldn't have. She and her husband and children have been so wonderful to us.

MK: Tell us about the wharf when the big boats would come in. Tell us about your early memories of that.

EWE: It was nice when the steamboat came in. But after I went on the big boats with my husband, that was a little boat. [laughter] The steamer was just a little skiff. But anyhow, my husband sailed for 45 years, mostly for Moore-McCormack Lines. Some of the people that he was with day after day were graduates of the Naval Academy. I've just recently stopped hearing from them. I don't know. You all pry my memory a little bit. He used to. [laughter]

CK: What did the steamers look like? I was wondering what that steamer looked like when it came in.

EWE: I'm a little bit deaf, darling.

CK: What did the steamer look like when it came in?

EWE: It was pretty. When it went through the haven, we could see it from our home. It was beautiful. My husband thought so much about it because he was closer to the haven. He could see it better. He and his daddy – his daddy was a brother to Uncle Henry – they would go with it sometimes down to Fitchett's. He always talked about how deep the water was down there. I don't like to get in real deep water. Do you? [laughter] It's safer places to be. But we've been so lucky here because we've never lost too many people. But we have – we lost a father and his son at the back of the island. They were clamming. The chain pulled the boat over. Both of them were drowned. This is in Larry Chowning's new book he's written. But he didn't know about that. Because I think when he was away in college is when it happened. But the father, they found his body in Tangier, which is, I think, about 30 miles offshore still. It was a Methodist minister over there that had preached here for quite a few years. He identified Mr. Floyd Williams. It was something that Mr. – wonderful that this (Mr. Rishel?), was over there to identify Floyd. His son went to Eastfield. It was several days later before they found the son's body. But that was a disturbing time for the folks here and a sad time. I didn't tell you anything about my dad. He was also a waterman. He had a boat built named the *Wanda* in 1927 over in Deltaville. She was 63 feet long. And he would go out to the Hole in the Wall and wherever the men would come with their oysters and fish, clams, or whatever. He worked for (Ballard?) and Company from Norfolk. My two brothers worked with him, Bud, most of the time, my older

brother. Jack spent a lot of time with Stewart and his dad, Cousin Emmett. He thought something of them. During the 1933 storm, terrible storm we had, they lost the (*Rescue?*) for a little while, which was Cousin Emmett's boat. But they found it up back of the ice plant. A lot of people lost their boats. Stewart will probably tell you about that, My dad's boat was sold. I can't find where it is. I've had people helping me all over because I'd just love to go and see it one more time. The wheel in the pilothouse was built by my brother-in-law, really beautiful. I don't know how it would look today, but I'd like to see it just to find out. For a while, it was sold to a person that tied her up in the harbor up in Washington, D.C. They would take seafood up there from the Rappahannock and sell it from the deck like it had just been caught. It's ways to fool people, isn't it? Always. [laughter] But anyway, I've enjoyed being here with you all. I can tell you some more about your relatives maybe. Mr. C.E. Kline, he came to Matthews in May of 1938. He and a Mr. Sutton built a store, had a wonderful business here for many years. The store and the business is there. But of course, Mr. Sutton and Mr. Kline are gone. But he was a good fellow, I can tell you. His daughter – he had one daughter. I graduated with her, and what a wonderful girl. She's gone, but her daughter is here, the wife of Dr. Bland Hudgins. Wonderful couple. We just wish that Dr. Hudgins could still be in business, but he's been in real bad health. We've got good people in Matthews County. If y'all don't want to stay all the time, you can come every once in a while. We'll let you do that. [laughter] I thank you so much and thank Mrs. Tanner for asking me. I love it. It's such good company to be here with Uncle Henry. He's been a part of our family for many, many years.

Henry Gwynn Edwards: Did you know the sheriff is looking for me?

[laughter]

EWE: Sir?

HGE: Did you know the sheriff is looking for me? Sheriff.

EWE: Well, you see, I'm deaf, but one of these days I'm going to get a hearing aid.

HGE: I'm only kidding [laughter].

EWE: When people start talking loud – well, you don't have to worry about it because I don't know what you said.

[laughter]

CK: I've got one to try. I'm wondering what people did for fun. Did the boats provide any kind of entertainment?

EWE: Sure. We had a little dance all over right across the ferry. Sometimes we would want to stay a little bit longer. Mr. Edgie Majette was one of the fellas, the captains of the ferry. We'd go and ask Mr. Edgie, and he said, "I'm going to tie the ferry up for thirty minutes, but don't you all fool me." We never fooled him either. We'd get back across the haven at 12:30 a.m. Ordinarily, it would have been at midnight. What a fine fella he was. We had another fella that

was on the ferry also, and he was a nice man. But he wasn't a family man like Mr. Edgie was. His children were my age, came up when I did. That makes a difference, when you do things with children your own age, and especially that Mr. Edgie was their father. They were nice people, all of them. Their sister, Mary Majette Jarvis, she had organized the first business on Gwynn's Island for a little girl. She ordered her bicycle from Montgomery Ward. She went to the ferry and met the freight when it came in. She delivered the Times-Dispatch for Richmond newspapers. She was a wonderful businesswoman. From that, she became a beautician and had her own shop over here. We were proud of such a business girl, too. We did lots of fun – things for fun. We had fun at our homes. My dad had bought a piano in 1916. We danced out a whole lot of rugs, so my sisters told me. We didn't do quite that many because we had to dance all over there. But we were always happy to go around to Joe's place. It was just a nickelodeon there, but we had lots of fun. During the storm of 1933, the James Adams Floating Theatre was here, and that was really something. I don't know if y'all had ever heard of it, but you've heard of showboat. Edna Ferber was aboard her. They were in a little town called Bath, North Carolina, in 1925. She got a lot of her information for *Show Boat* just from that boat. They lost some of their tugboats during the storm, but they didn't lose any of the theater. That was tied up over at Cricket Hill, we called it.

[end of transcript]