Tales of Cape Cod
Frances Johnson Oral History
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Interviewer: BR – Betty Richards
Transcriber: NCC

Betty Richards: The recording is the property of the Tales of Cape Cod Incorporated, and it cannot be reproduced without the written consent of the Tales of Cape Cod Incorporated. June 26, 1978. Betty Richards visiting with Mrs. Frances Johnson of Monument Road, Orleans, Massachusetts.

Frances Johnson: My father's name was David Eldridge. My mother's name was Fanny Foster.

BR: How did Mr. Eldridge spell his name?

FJ: E-L-D-R-I-D-G-E. My mother always said we had to spell it that way. My mother says, "Your name is Eldridge, and don't you let them write it any other way." I don't know what her reason for that was but –

BR: It was spelled with an I.

FJ: – it was an I.

BR: What was the difference in the Eldridge with the E and the I?

FJ: I don't know. I went to a party one night and – what's his name – Kenneth Eldredge was there, in the one up here. (Holly Merrick?) and I was introduced to him, and I says, "Oh." I says, "You're an Eldridge, too." He said, "Yes." He said, "How do you spell your name?" He says, "Mine is E." He joshed me. Whenever he sees me, he begins to grin and say, Eldridge [laughter].

BR: It's pronounced the same, though.

FJ: Yes. I don't know what the difference is. There must be some difference in their birth or something – a section of where they came from.

BR: Can you tell me about your family? How many were in your family? How many children?

FJ: Well, nine lived to be grown up, and three of them are living today. I am one and my youngest brother and my youngest sister – and so we all live. My brother lives in Dover, and my sister lives in West Roxbury.

BR: What was life like, growing up with nine children?

FJ: We didn't squabble much. We had friends that used to come. They said they never saw such a family that they always got along so well together. We did. If we had a doll and my sister wanted it for a while, she could have it. There was only one doll in the house, because we couldn't have all those dolls. The children then, in those days, couldn't have things for what you're doing today – to be thrown around the yard.

BR: You shared the doll [laughter]. How many girls shared the doll?

FJ: Huh?

BR: How many girls shared this one doll?

FJ: Let's see. There was Caty and Sally and Anita and Dorothy and myself. My mother had a house given to her. Her cousin gave her a house, which is the chateau now.

BR: Where was that?

FJ: In Brewster, East Brewster.

BR: What is it now?

FJ: The chateau. People bought the place after a while. It's on the corner of the road going up to the end of the camp. What do we call it now? We used to call it Gideon Road, after my grandfather.

BR: Gideon Road?

FJ: His name was Gideon. The house on the opposite corner was where my grandmother and my grandfather and my father and his sister lived when they were down. Then, I don't remember when my father sold those houses. He only had one sister.

BR: What did your father do for livelihood?

FJ: He was a farmer.

BR: In Brewster?

FJ: [affirmative]

BR: What did he grow?

FJ: He went to sea too. He went to sea a lot.

BR: Who did he go to sea with? What ship did he go to sea on?

FJ: (*Madawaska?)* was one. I remember that because my sister, Mattie, was named Mattie Wasca, for the boat.

BR: What kind of a boat was it?

FJ: I don't know. I've seen pictures of it. It must have been a sail – one of those masts.

BR: You know many masts it had?

FJ: I don't know.

BR: Where were the trips that the ship made? To what point?

FJ: I don't know. It seems vague.

BR: What kind of fish did they catch?

FJ: I don't know that either, but he didn't go for long. Then he went to work up in Boston. They lived up in Boston after the children began to come.

BR: What did he do in Boston for a livelihood?

FJ: He was foreman of a Forest Hills Cemetery.

BR: Tell me about your trips to Cape Cod.

FJ: I'll tell you one trip home. We were here for the summer, all of us kids. My mother always dressed us up swell and pretty. We got on the train at Brewster, at the East Brewster station. Then, the conductor came around for tickets. She gave him the tickets. He said, "What home are you from [laughter]?" My mother couldn't get over that. She said to him, "This is my family, and we don't go to any home. We go right straight where we belong." "Oh," he said, "you don't belong to a home." My mother says, "No. I protect these children." So, she was so indignant to think that she would be asked if she was going to have help from the – whatever it was.

BR: How many children were on that trip?

FJ: There was my sisters and my three brothers.

BR: There were six girls?

FJ: Five girls. Let's see – there was Mattie, Caty, Sally, Anita, myself, and Dorothy – six of us. Then there was Fred and Foster and Harold.

BR: Now, what year are we talking about when you made this trip?

FJ: When I was probably around twelve, fourteen years old.

BR: What year were you born?

FJ: I was born in 1890. So, figure that one out.

BR: That would be around 1902. What month and day were you born?

FJ: April 21st.

BR: What else do you remember about Cape Cod in the summertime?

FJ: I remember when they first put in the macadamized road. My father came home from the post office, and he said, "Well," he says, "we're growing up." He says, "We're going to have a macadamized road." I thought that name was so wonderful, I just couldn't get over it. I said, "What is a macadamized road?" My father says, "Well," he says, "it's a mixture – they clean the roads and put a mixture on." I don't know what it would be. He says, "Oh, it takes a long time to do it." He says, "Probably by next summer, when you come down, part of it will be done." I thought that was the most wonderful thing that ever happened, it was.

BR: What were the roads like before that?

FJ: Just sand. When the wheels go around, you follow the sand over the wheel. I remember every year – my father had a sister that lived in Chatham, and she always invited the family, kids, and all, over to her house for one day. So, he always rented a carryall.

BR: What was the carryall?

FJ: Two-horse buggy with a –

BR: Fringe on top [laughter].

FJ: We all got in that and went over to my Aunt Lily's. Oh, she'd have the most wonderful meal for us. We'd stuff ourselves all day. Then we'd get home about 6:00 p.m.

BR: What was that meal like?

FJ: It was usually chicken stew and with all the dumplings. It was just great. Then for dessert, she always had brambles.

BR: What are brambles?

FJ: I don't know, because we all liked them.

BR: Was it a dessert?

FJ: Yes. It's a pie crust with a filling of raisins and lemon and [inaudible] in it. It was like a little pie. We each had one. She had all the cookies, molasses cookies and sugar cookies – oh, everything that was on that table. She was a good cook. When we come home and before we come home, we always had to have ice cream and cake. We were so full with everything, we had to walk up the hill to save the horse and horses and, oh, it was really comical.

BR: Did all nine children go on the visit?

FJ: We all went. We couldn't leave any of them home.

BR: How many seats did this carryall have?

FJ: Let's see. Three, I think, three seats.

BR: Three rows of seats?

FJ: Yes. From side, right across the whole wagon. My father used to get the rig at – there used to be a livery stable, they called it.

BR: In where?

FJ: In Orleans, right at the corner where the Esso station is now. He gets the wagon and horses from there and then, because the man knew my father, he knew that it would come back just as he had taken it. We had a lovely day.

BR: How long would that trip take, from Brewster to Chatham?

FJ: Well, we went through the woods, you know. I don't know – we'd get there by noon [laughter].

BR: You went through the woods?

FJ: Yes.

BR: There were no roads?

FJ: There were roads through the woods, just paths.

BR: That wasn't the main road?

FJ: No. Then we'd get onto the main road when we came out of the woods.

BR: Did the people take a lot of shortcuts in those days, through the woods?

FJ: Yes. I know when we were married, and we came down to my grandmother's, we took a day and went over. We walked from Brewster, through the woods, to Chatham, and stayed overnight and walked back. We took oranges and all kinds of stuff with us.

BR: What are some of the other things you did in the summertime on Cape Cod?

FJ: There's one thing my mother always had us do. After breakfast, we had to clean up. Then we had had a half hour of sewing.

BR: What kind of sewing would you do?

FJ: Well, we'd make pillowslip, or we'd make him a towel. We all had to do something. If it wasn't done right, we had to take that out. If we didn't have a good work, we'd have to take it out and do it over again.

BR: That was for half an hour. What did you do after that?

FJ: We used to climb the trees. We had a cherry tree in our yard, and we used to climb that. We used to take the cows to the pasture. The boys had to take them, but we always had to go with them. We had three or four cows. We lived on the farm. There was nothing that we didn't have, you know, good things to eat and to play with. We had a swing. Then after a while, we graduated and had a chair swing. Four of us could sit in it, and we enjoyed that. But we never had many neighbors. We always had enough children around without having to go out for other children in with us.

BR: Tell me about that day you were talking about, when you took the cows to the pasture. What else would you do? Climb the cherry tree?

FJ: One day, we let the cows get in an old green apple. The next day, the cows were sick, and my father gave us a heck. He came, and he says, "Which one had charge of the hot cows? They got into the green apples." Fred, I think he had to take the blame [laughter] because he was the older boy. He says, "The next time," he says, "you watch out. Those cows are sick, and we don't get any milk tonight." So, we thought, "Oh, dear, that would be terrible." But my brother, Fred, he milked the cows mostly. My father wouldn't let Foster do it because he didn't have the touch [laughter].

BR: What do you mean he didn't have the touch?

FJ: Well, he'd squeeze the udder, and he pinched it every time. Fred was light on his hand. So, he was the one that was – Harold had to brush the cows, keep the flies off the cows while Fred was milking. Then we put them out. When they got through, we put them out to pasture until the next day. If it was a good day, we all had to go to the pen and take them to the pasture way up the road. But it wasn't a chore. We liked to do it because we –

BR: How did your brother keep the flies off of the –

FJ: He used to take a big switch or stick with leaves on it and just wipe it gently around so that the cow wouldn't kick and spill the milk [laughter].

BR: What would you do with the milk afterwards?

FJ: We have to bring it in the house and get the pans out and fill the pans with milk, put them in the cold room, and –

BR: What were the milk pans like?

FJ: They're great, big, round pans. Sometimes, they were made of crockery. Then the next

morning, we had to skim the cream off so that we can have cream on our cereal. My brother Foster like cream on potatoes.

BR: How deep were those milk cans?

FJ: Like that? Four or five inches.

BR: Four, five inches.

FJ: They were big yellow pans. Not pans – they were crockery.

BR: You said you put them in the cool room?

FJ: Yes.

BR: Where was the cool room?

FJ: Down in the basement. My mother had a cool room down there, plus a big refrigerator.

BR: You had a refrigerator?

FJ: An old –

BR: Eddy?

FJ: It was. We had to have the ice put in on top. Yes, we used to have that. Every Sunday afternoon, we'd make ice cream, and we'd go to the icehouse. It was a big icehouse, quite cold. We'd go and get a big chunk of ice, put it in a bag, and pound it out and get the salt, make the ice cream every Sunday. I was the one that had to pick the strawberries, get them ready for the ice cream. We had a very lovely garden.

BR: You mentioned that you had to make pillowcases. What other things did you learn to sew?

FJ: Dresses. My mother would cut the dresses out for us. We made a lot of things – doilies. All summer long, it was our chore. We had to do that.

BR: You make boys clothing too?

FJ: No. We never had to do that, just the girls. Although we did make the boys blouses. We used to have ruffles down the boys' blouses, and it just was nice. But they don't do that today.

BR: No. Did you make your sheets?

FJ: Yes. We got unbleached cotton and overstitched the middle of them together. This was for the children. After we grew up, we didn't have to bother with having a seam down our bed. But they all would wash out after a while. You know, unbleached cotton was very nice. When it got

washed out, it was just as fine and nice as some cotton we have today.

BR: You mentioned that was the children's sheets. Did the adults have different sheets?

FJ: No. We had the big beds. Oh, no. We had regular beds.

BR: Did you make your quilts?

FJ: Quilts?

BR: Patchwork, you were taught to do that too?

FJ: [affirmative]

BR: How old were you when you made your first quilt?

FJ: Fourteen.

BR: You mentioned your father would get the horses at the livery stable. What else do you remember about Orleans?

FJ: It wasn't the way it is today. There were very few people on the road. You could walk from Brewster to Orleans, and it was no trouble at all. It was nice.

BR: Would you see many carriages on the road?

FJ: You'd see most the blue dump carts. You know, the way they used to have the dump carts and the heavy horses.

BR: What was the dump cart like?

FJ: Well, two wheels and shafts.

BR: Pardon?

FJ: Shafts, to hold the horses in.

BR: Shafts?

FJ: Yes, shafts. They used to go down to the weir. We used to go out to the weirs too, with one of the men. He'd take us out because we used to help him some.

BR: What would you help him do?

FJ: Gather the fish out of the weir.

BR: How did you gather them?

FJ: With a net. We used to have nets.

BR: What would they do with the fish after?

FJ: They take it to the man's house. He would ice it in big boxes and send it away.

BR: Where would he send it to?

FJ: To New York.

BR: How?

FJ: By freight – take it to the station and send it.

BR: Were there any other stores in Orleans back then?

FJ: They had – the movie house was there. You probably remember that. Graveyard, the railroad station, and Nickerson's house.

BR: Harry Nickerson's?

FJ: No. Harry –

BR: Snow?

FJ: Harry Snow's house was there, and his mother used to live there. Then they had the same barber shop for a long time. Then the A&P was there, across the track, and Livingston's was on the corner. It's something different.

BR: Do you remember the [inaudible] movies?

FJ: I remember that.

BR: Do you remember the theater then? What did the theater look like?

FJ: It was nice. You could go once in a while. You couldn't go every night. Then we used to have dances up there, upstairs in the movies.

BR: Over the theater?

FJ: [affirmative] I was never allowed to go, but my sister Caty could go. She was older than I. She was six years older.

BR: What year was this? What year would this be?

FJ: Well, before she was married. I don't know. I know it was before she was married. She was six years older than I. She was married when I was about 20, probably.

BR: That would be around 1910. What kind of dances did they have?

FJ: I don't know. I didn't go because –

BR: Did you tell you pass them?

FJ: Yes. But then they'd have to walk home. Because the boys, those days, didn't have an automobile. She used to go. Then she used to bring a friend of his down. Her name was (Alice Tuffin?), and she'd stay all the time. She could go with Caty. My mother tells me, "Frances, you stay home. You're too young to go out dancing."

BR: Did they have chaperones when they went to the dance?

FJ: No. They all went together. They didn't mind how many miles they've walked to go to a dance. My brother Fred used to go with them. He was a good dancer.

BR: Different members of the family would go together, brothers and sisters then?

FJ: Yes.

BR: Was that usually the way it was?

FJ: Yes. You kept track of each other. We all had to go home and come home together. No matter where we went, we did that. We always were together.

BR: Tell me what it would go at night.

FJ: After the dinner was cleared – and my mother was very smart – she'd go through our lessons with us every night. If we did well, we should have a game of cards with us. So, we'd have a game of cards, whist or something like that. If we started squabbling over it, my father would say, "Put the cards away." We knew that we had to put the cards out. You don't need that. It was a well-run home. Because they let us know from the beginning that we had to do what they said. There was no talking back. If we wanted to go anywhere where we had to plan to go with somebody and get home with somebody, just you couldn't go off by yourself like some children today. They would go off, and you never know when they're coming back. But I don't blame them. I blame the ways that we all live.

BR: What was the name of the Nickerson family?

FJ: I am related to the Nickerson family.

BR: Roland Nickerson?

FJ: Roland Nickerson family. It's through marriage. My mother's uncle was Albert Crosby of the Albert Crosby mansion there. Because my grandmother was his sister, and we had an (Aunt Cage?) that was his sister. Then through the Nickersons, we were related there quite a bit. Sam Nickerson married –

BR: Nickerson estate, what is now La Salette. Did it have a name back then?

FJ: Yes, Tower Senth.

BR: Pardon me?

FJ: Tower Senth.

BR: How do you spell that? Do you know?

FJ: Tower, T-O-W-E-R. Senth, S-E-N-T-H.

BR: What did it look like – the building?

FJ: The building? It was lovely. Big building. It was all wood. I never was in that house, but I had been in the other house, when they moved in there.

BR: The present house you're talking about?

FJ: Yes. You know, you feel when you go in – I don't know what it feels like now. But when we were kids, and we went over there to visit, they had – Roland had two sons, Roland and Sam, and Helen was a girl. We used to play together when we'd come down summers. If we were ever invited over there, we felt it was just such a lovely, big home. But got to feel that your building isn't what you what your home is.

BR: It didn't feel like a home?

FJ: No. You go in; it was too polished and too big. Then we used to play down in the windmill. We played school down there. Now it's taken up in Dennis, is it?

BR: [affirmative] Do you remember the windmill?

FJ: Yes. We used to play in it.

BR: What was it like?

FJ: It was nice. We could do most anything in there, you know.

BR: What else do you remember about the original house?

FJ: They had lots of people –

BR: What happened to them?

FJ: – servants.

BR: They had servants?

FJ: Yes, they had servants. They had coachmen. It was some place.

BR: What happened to the original house?

FJ: It burned.

BR: Do you know how? What happened?

FJ: I don't know how it happened. When we went down to Albert Crosby's, where we used to go quite often – because that was my grandmother's uncle or my mother's uncle – he'd show us around and have a great time. They'd get the horses out and harness up the horses and take us way around, up to (Dennis?) and all around everywhere. But kids always were looking, thinking, "Well, maybe they'll stop, and we'll have ice cream." But they never did. Never, never. Oh, they were [inaudible] people [laughter]. That's why they had the money.

BR: What would you do if you went up to Dennis?

FJ: Just wander around, look at everything. They'd tell us this and that. When Aunt Georgia got tired, she'd want to take us home [laughter]. I can imagine all the questions we always asked.

BR: After your marriage, you came back to Cape Cod to live.

FJ: Yes. Well, I was married in fourteen. Was it then? W came down to live permanently in the [19]20s, [19]21. Because that was the time of the crash. Everybody got stung grand, I guess.

BR: Yes.

FJ: So, we had the house down here, but it wasn't finished. We came down just the same. We thought it was a better life than living the way we were. So, we came down and enjoyed it every minute since. Even David used to say, "Oh, Mother, we had everything up there – big rooms and everything, but this little house is just what we need."

BR: What was the house like?

FJ: It's the Anchorage there, on Route 6A.

BR: Yes. Did your husband build that?

FJ: [affirmative] It was a nice house, very nice. But we had a long time getting it – to get it all done.

BR: You said that it wasn't finished?

FJ: No. The roof was glued tight. Everything was ready to finish but we had –

BR: What do you remember about the depression?

FJ: It was terrible. You couldn't have anything decent.

BR: What do you mean anything decent?

FJ: We had to – you never had your payroll come in, for one thing. You had to go out and earn today's pay that you have.

BR: How would you go out and earn a day's pay?

FJ: Clamming. Clamming, mostly.

BR: The men did this?

FJ: The men did, yes. It wasn't that bad, really. I didn't mind it. We had a good time.

BR: Did the women work during the Depression?

FJ: If they had a job, they would, but the jobs were scarce. Nobody had any money to pay you with. The boys used to go dig clams. David was a baby – our little boy David was just a baby when we came down. Delbert, his father, used to go out and dig clams and sell them from the road there. Now, I don't know how much clams are a bucket, but we got 25 to 50 cents a bucket – lovely clams. I thought, "Oh my goodness. It'll keep us just for a little while." So, that was – it was all right. I'm afraid that maybe we'll have to go back to that, some way. It doesn't seem any way out – the summer people, and we sold enough to live, you know. We didn't have any extras, nothing extra, lamps and –

BR: You had lamps?

FJ: [affirmative]

BR: When did you have electricity?

FJ: I don't remember.

BR: Do you remember your first telephone?

FJ: Yes. We had a telephone. Because Del's mother was living up in Boston. We had to see

how she was every so often – if she needed anything.

BR: Did you have indoor plumbing then?

FJ: No, not then. But I remember when we had it in. It was quite a treat [laughter]. It's wonderful how you can really get along.

BR: Well, what was it like? You said it was a treat having your indoor plumbing.

FJ: You didn't have to think of going out in the cold [laughter].

BR: Do you remember your first radio? Electric radio?

FJ: We used to have a battery set – about this big.

BR: About four by four?

FJ: Yes. When we got the electricity in – it was a struggle to get that in.

BR: Why was it a struggle?

FJ: Because you had to pay for it, and they don't charge you. I think sometimes it's better to pay to wait until you can get it, then you know you are not going to be hounded [laughter].

BR: Entertainment when you first came to Cape in 1921?

FJ: When we first came to live here, we worked so hard that we didn't need any entertainment. We were ready to go to bed and have a good night's sleep and get up in the morning and start in again. We went to the movies perhaps once in two weeks or something like that and just lived along.

BR: You said you worked hard and were ready to go to bed. What did you do?

FJ: Well, I helped do the work in the house, cooking and what mending I had to do. Then we were finishing the house. I helped finish the house because I could pound a nail as good as anybody [laughter].

BR: Did most women help build houses? Did most wives help build houses?

FJ: No. I don't think so. I think I just wanted the house. I wanted it finished. I didn't want to have it hanging over my head. My husband plastered the house. He didn't know anything about plastering, and I didn't either. But we made out – we got it plastered, and we got it finished. We sold the house to Del but after we came up here, he sold it to a woman for 160. No. He didn't sell it to her, but she sold it to somebody else for $160,000. So, it wasn't that they had a house.

BR: What is it besides the house? Are there cottages?

FJ: There's cottages. There's a couple of good cottages there.

BR: Did you and your husband have the cottages too?

FJ: We had always built cottages there and rented cottages and rented rooms.

BR: This was in 1920?

FJ: Yes.

BR: How much did you rent a cottage for then?

FJ: I think about $100 a week.

BR: Back in 1920?

FJ: [affirmative]

BR: Where would the people come from?

FJ: Where?

BR: Where would they come from?

FJ: Connecticut and quite a few places.

BR: Was this the beginning of cottages?

FJ: Yes. Because they had those little cabins first. We never had a cabin, but we had two cottages. The cottage in the back of the house – we went to the beach and gathered all the wood we could to build that cottage.

BR: What was this wood from?

FJ: It would fall off of a freighter or something,

BR: I see. Were you able to get enough to build a cottage?

FJ: Yes. All the finished wood we had to buy, but the studs and things like that, they could use them.

BR: Did a lot of people do the same thing down at the beach?

FJ: I don't think so. Nobody's so foolish.

BR: How could you get it from the beach?

FJ: We'd fill the car. We'd go down with the car and pick up pieces – any length at all. So, it did all right. That's still a nice cottage. After a while, Delbert and dad bought a boat and went fishing. Did I ever hate that. Oh, if I ever – no – I hated that every morning – getting up and then getting their lunch ready and getting them off. Then they'd get down to Rock Harbor and come home. It was too windy. They couldn't go today. I said, "Oh, my Lord. I'd be glad when this war is over." The reason that they did buy the boat was they were asking for food – fish and so forth. Delbert was rejected in his draft because he had a bad eye. He had his eye wounded when he was around fourteen. There was a scar. So, they wouldn't take him, and I was glad. But when they bought the boat, that was another thing.

BR: What year was this?

FJ: I don't know. I'm not any good at it.

BR: Was this World War II that you're talking about?

FJ: Yes.

BR: You said they needed food?

FJ: Yes.

BR: You mean for the family?

FJ: No, for the country.

BR: I see. What kind of boat did they have?

FJ: Well, they had a big boat. They had it built – this lovely, big boat. He had kept it at Rock Harbor, and they went fishing. I guess it was good.

BR: What kind of fish did they get?

FJ: Clams, quahog, and anything that was out there, which is flounder, cod, and things like that. Then I think there used to be a truck come down from New Bedford to pick it up. Roland Nickerson went out West, and also my uncle, Albert Crosby. They went out West – and pork and liquor. I guess it's about what they did.

BR: I didn't understand you. What did they do?

FJ: They had a market of pork, and then they had this liquor. They had liquor that they sold. My uncle had an opera house out there. He had made two fortunes, lost one and lost another one. Then he got the other fortune. He was really worth a lot of money, but it didn't do us any good [laughter].

BR: This was the Nickerson summer home here?

FJ: Yes.

BR: They lived out West in the winter?

FJ: [affirmative] He went to Europe and lived six years – traveled with his wife. So, good luck to him [laughter]. That house is nice.

BR: Did they live here year-round, ever? No?

FJ: Only when he was a boy. When I was a girl, some time.

BR: Do you remember the park – Nickerson State Park?

FJ: We used to go up there and fish in the pond.

BR: Was this before it was a state park?

FJ: Yes.

[end of transcript]