

Early 20th Century Chatham Characters

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by spencer grey

In her recollections of their early years in Chatham, Alice Stalknecht Wight writes about some of the characters in their neighborhood. One of them was Darius Hammond, who peddled fish in a wheelbarrow in which he also carried a scale to weigh the fish when he sold them. She describes him as “the old man with the long pointed beard, who destroyed our woodpile.” Apparently when they first lived in their house at the end of Stage Harbor Road, Mr. Hammond went into their barn looking for a currycomb that he believed he had left there and threw out all of their wood in searching for the comb. He said that he needed the comb to scale fish. Later in his life when he was no longer able to push the wheelbarrow loaded with fish, he carried them in a box that he put on top of a baby carriage.

Mrs. Wight tells of how he always went “jig jaggig” along the road bent forward so as to be almost bent double with his beard point down toward the ground, but on one occasion when she had not seen him for a while, he passed by bent way over backward with his beard pointing up toward the sky. She writes, “It was startling and awful to see. Something was horribly wrong.”

She called to her husband, Carol, but before he could get to Mr. Hammond, Martin, “a wild Irish red-haired type” came along in his blue wagon. He drove close to Mr. Hammond, attempting to pull him into his wagon, but only succeeded in dragging him along beside it. By this time Carol had managed to hold the horse and get Hammond into the wagon. Realizing that he was in this odd position because he had had a stroke, they took him home.

Another man whom they often saw near their house near the harbor would come to the edge of the water and stand there still as a statue with one hand shading his eyes while he stared out to sea. The fishermen told them that the man had lost his ship but all the crew had been saved. When he came home, he found that his wife had died. The two disasters seemed to unbalance him, and it was thought that he spent so much time looking over the water because he was hoping to see either his lost ship or his dead wife.

Mrs. Wight explains how the fish that were landed at the Stage Harbor wharf were packed in large barrels that had to be taken to the railroad station to be shipped to Boston. The person who lifted the heavy barrels onto his wagon was Lewis Tuttle, an unusually strong young man who was the only mover in town for many years. Having been born totally deaf, Lewis did not learn to talk until he married, and his wife taught him how to speak by showing how to move his lips. He could lift the front end of an automobile and turn it totally around so it faced in the opposite direction. When helping to install central heating for the Wights, he could carry a radiator under each arm with ease. Lewis Tuttle continued as Chatham’s moving man well into the 1950s. A neighbor of the Wights was Captain Oliver Eldredge, who, like so many young men at the time, went to sea when he was nine years old. His father brought the first marine railway to Stage Harbor, which at that time was full of ships. He ran away from home and went to New York, where he approached the captain of a ship saying that he wanted a job. He was hired as the ship’s cook, but the only thing he knew how to cook were pancakes, which he calls “flippers.” As he explains it: “I gave them fried flippers every meal, nothing else. You used to fry the cakes in pork meal and eat molasses on them. I used to burn them dreadful. My how I used to burn them. Black as pitch.”

Between the ages of 11 and 20, he worked on fishing boats on the grand banks. He explains that the captain, two mates, and four crew men had to do the heavy work of hauling up the huge sails and pulling in the heavy nets. Their reward was a regular portion of rum.

“Yes, the men on those hips lived principally on rum. The Captain used to keep it and ration it out. Took about six barrels aboard when he went to the Banks. But if a man got drunk the Captain would cut out his ration. I know there was one man on board was so afraid he might get drunk and have his ration cut that he always made the Captain pour out his ration, for then if he did get drunk, it was the Captain made him, and so his ration was not cut.”

Oliver Eldredge left school when he was 11, became a mate at 18, and a master at 21. He spent between 60 and 70 years at sea, most of them as captain of ships that went to the Banks or engaged in the coastal trade. After he retired he served several years as a selectman, was elected a trustee of the Cape cod Five Cents Savings Bank in 1895, elected to the investing board in 1900 and elected president in 1912.

