

Captain Nickerson

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by spencer grey

Before establishing the Nickerson Lumber Company (now Mid-Cape Centers) in 1895, Captain Oscar Nickerson was a mariner, having first gone to sea in 1886 when he was twenty years old. In March of 1888 he was serving on a schooner that was caught in a severe blizzard that resulted in extensive damage to the vessel, as he recounts in a letter to his mother, dated March 18, 1888.

When the storm hit, they were sailing off of Long Island. At 10 p.m., there was loud shrieking of the winds as they began tearing the sails off the spars. As he put it in his letter, "... the heaviest duck knotted itself into a thousand knots." At 11 p.m., they dropped their anchor. At first the ship took hold and headed into the wind, but the wind and waves were pounding them so furiously that the anchor cable parted, leaving them to the mercy of the storm. While Nickerson was holding on to the forestay, a huge wave swept over them. After it passed he saw the Captain in the water about fifty feet away from the ship clinging to a rope. He was smashed against the side of the ship three or four times before Nickerson was able to pull him back on board the ship and take him to his cabin, by which time he was almost half dead.

By putting a hawser over the stern, he tried to make the ship run before the gale without the use of the rudder, which was not responding to the wheel. At this point the mid-ship cabin had been smashed and they were taking on water. While he was standing next to the damaged midship house, Nickerson was washed forward by a large wave and ended up against the spanker mast and was forced to go below.

The crew of Nova Scotia fishermen (the best he had ever seen) now had charge of the vessel and "worked like heroes." Shortly after dark one of the men who was lashed to the wheel shouted, "For God's sake, come up here!" Nickerson dragged himself onto the after deck and found that one of the men had been thrown over the wheel and split his head open. After taking him below to be treated, he returned to the deck to find that everything now was covered in ice, making it impossible to use the wheel.

Totally at the mercy of the wind and waves, they could not use the wheel and were washed about for the next two nights. By the third day the wind moderated, but the sea continued to be rough. Nevertheless, they were able use their spare sails to head west toward shore. But still the winds were blowing so hard that the waves washing over the ship spoiled their water and nearly all of their provisions. Two days later they managed to sail to the lightship off of Delaware Bay but could not get into the Bay as the wind was from the West. The next day, however, they were able to reach the mouth of Barnegat Bay where a tug towed them into calm waters where they anchored and "thanked God to have spared our lives."

Nickerson enjoyed relating his experiences at sea, including one that occurred during another more peaceful voyage when he moored in a port in Central America where he was acquainted with the priest in a nearby village. When he visited there he found that the priest was saying Mass in Latin in the village square with the residents gathered around him. As Nickerson stood on the edge of the group, the priest spotted his old friend and said, without missing a beat in the service, "O Captain Nickerson-O, go into my bungalow. There you will find a bottle-O. I will join you in a minute or so." A few years later in 1895 Oscar Nickerson "came ashore" and purchased the Kelley and Eldredge Lumber Company, which shortly was renamed the Nickerson Lumber Company.

In addition to running and expanding the company, Nickerson was active in several town affairs, including being the first treasurer of the Chatham Historical Society and spearheading the fund drive that raised the \$5,000 needed to buy the old Atwood House and make the necessary repairs to enable the Society to open it to the public in 1927. Alice Stalknecht included his portrait in one of the murals that are on display at the museum. He also served for thirty years as Town Moderator, which very likely is a record.

