

Alice S. Smith & Mamie Bassett

On Chathamport

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Brief Description: Alice Smith and Mamie Bassett recollect what Chathamport was like during their childhood. This recording takes place at the home of Alice Smith. Ms. Smith recalls the short-lived Hotel Chatham and Mrs. Bassett recalls the work her father did as a fisherman. Other topics of interest that are discussed are farming, Eastward Ho, the Chathamport Post Office, smallpox, the general layout of houses in the area, and much more.

Voice: This recording for the society – in the pleasant living room of a very old house in Chathamport. The house belongs to Ms. Smith and I have just come in to see her, what she calls, her 1850 living room. It is a recreation of what a very fine living room as it must've looked in those days. There's a beautiful big piano, lovely old furniture, warm and glowing with care, pictures all around that are charming. I'm loving all of these curtains, it's just really a museum piece.

(Unintelligible)

We are going to talk tonight to Ms. Smith and Mrs. Bassett about Chathamport and the way it was in the old days. And we're glad to have them tell us about it.

Alice Smith: Thank you. Mrs. Bassett and I have been asked to tell you something about Chathamport in the old days. We are the only persons, with the exception of Ralph Ryder on Crowell Road, who grew up here and can remember what Chathamport was like more than 50 years ago. Chathamport includes the land bordering Pleasant Bay, Crows Pond and Ryders Cove. And the land between Muddy Cove and Queen Anne Road to the Old Cemetery, then across the top of Great Hill to the Steppingstones Creek, where the Acme Laundry is now.

This section of town was called the port instead of some point of a compass as is usual in Cape towns, because in early days the opening through the outer beach, which we called the Bar, was opposite Pleasant Bay. And this was the harbor for shipping. The first settler, William Nickerson, located here and this was the center of the town. But, when the entrance to

Pleasant Bay became too shallow for vessels to come in and Stage Harbor became the port for shipping, Chatham Village became the center of the town.

Around 40 families were living in Chathamport when I was a girl. Those north of Ryders Cove were said to be in the “upper neighborhood,” those south of the Cove, in the “lower neighborhood.” These families were all well acquainted with each other and in times of trouble, sickness or death were ready to help in any way that they could.

Practically all the land that is now the new development called Eastward Point, Camp Avalon, the Eastward Ho Golf Club and Harbor Cove was owned by the Nickersons. Eastward Point was the farm of Uncle Jesse and Aunt Becky Nickerson, then referred to as Jesse's Neck. The titles uncle and aunt did not mean a relative, but a form of friendly address given to elderly people by the younger ones. Uncle Jesse was not what one would call a prosperous farmer, but he made a living for himself and his family.

The farmers of those days did not require a large investment or a large income. They raised their own vegetables, cutting up hay to feed their stock, which in turn provided them with milk, butter and beef. They raised corn to feed the hens and pigs, which provided them with eggs and all pork products. They sold milk for five cents a quart, eggs for 15 cents a dozen and butter for 20 or 25 cents a pound. They sold it to neighbors who were not farmers or to the grocer in exchange for groceries.

My mother sold potato yeast for making bread for up to two cents a cup. Rhubarb and vegetables were given away. People would come to get some little thing and then ask if they –

(Tape breaks up)

So I would have to climb over the fence and get rhubarb and they expected to have it given them.

Within my remembrance, there was no general store in Chathamport, the grocer came from East Harwich once a week to take orders one day and deliver them the next. The butcher cart came from Orleans once a week.

After the railroad came to Chatham in 1887, changes began to take place. A few people came from Boston and other cities to spend the summer. And two or three people in town kept boarders. Several men from Boston who had a large interest in the Old Colony Railroad and the American Express, admiring the marvelous view from what is now the third tee on the Eastward Ho Golf Links, conceived the idea of building a hotel on this site that would surpass anything on the Cape for elegance. And so the Hotel Chatham was built and opened in 1890. It was really par excellence as a resort hotel with about 75 rooms for guests, broad verandas, a band stand, billiard rooms, ballrooms, an orchestra, all colored servants, a special railroad stop in West Chatham where the airport is now, and transportation to the hotel. All this for around four dollars a day, American plan. The natives were quite overwhelmed to have anything like this in their midst and some of them made it a practice to go to the hotel on a Saturday night to sit on the veranda and look in the windows to see the dancing and hear the music. There was a stable in connection with the hotel with a fine string of horses in all kinds of fancy rigs, phaetons, box boards, surries. But where could the guests go over the sandy rutted roads? No gift shops, no movies, no golf links. To lie on the beach in an abbreviated costume to get a sun tan would've been a shocking, unheard of thing. In those days women wore a sun bonnet and big capes and stocking legs on their arms when they went out to hang the clothes for fear they might get a tan. The guests couldn't sit on the veranda and look at the view all day and day after day. So after four seasons, Hotel Chatham was closed and eventually torn down. It was ahead of the time. Many years later the land was purchased as part of the Eastward Ho Golf Links.

The next thing that happened on Jesse's Neck was the building of a naval air station. At the beginning of the first World War, the United States Government erected an immense dirigible house and several seaplane houses, also barracks for the servicemen as a coastal protection. This was all abandoned after the war. The foundations are still there and the housing development called Eastward Point is being promoted.

One of the Nickerson's from this area, Samuel Nickerson, went to Chicago in the early days and became a man of wealth so that his relatives in Chathamport could live very comfortably without much manual labor.

Where the Eastward Ho caddy camp is now was Ensign Nickerson's house, a brother of Samuel. I think he died before I was born, but his sisters Sally Anne and Josephine lived in one half of the house and Edward Kendrick and his wife Maddie lived in the other half, to take care of the place.

At the top of the hill is a big square topped house where Ogden Nickerson lived, one of the relatives. The Chathamport Post Office was here. There were five houses in Chathamport which we called "square tops." I think they are peculiar to this section of the town. The Lumbert Nickerson House, which was in the valley below Hotel Chatham and torn down when the hotel was built, the Ogden Nickerson House, the house on Crows Pond where General Clay now lives, the Christopher Ryder House and the house on Crowell Road where Ralph Ryder lives, once owned by Squire Bea. The first floor of these houses is arranged the same as all the double Cape Cod houses, but there are two stories instead of one and a half and four slants on the roof instead of two.

The house on the corner of Orleans Road and Fox Hill Road was the home of Orrick Nickerson, a brother of Samuel and father of Ogden. He and his wife, Mercy, were spiritualists, as were Jesse and Betsy Nickerson. I can recall that there were three on the peninsula between Crows Pond and Ryders Cove, which is now Harbor Cove. In them lived the Burchell family, the Tripp family, and Uncle Thaddeus Bassett and his wife. About 1900, Fisher Eldredge bought the whole area for a farm. This was carried on until his death and then given up. The three houses were either moved away or torn down.

Roads used to be designated by the people who lived on them. The Queen Anne Road was the exception. This was the old road between Harwich and Chatham and must have been used in the early 1700s, as Queen Anne ruled from 1702-1714. Some of the roads have been recently named and very aptly so, Old Comers Road and Training Field Road as examples. Old Comers refers to the first settlers who came over on the Mayflower. Investors, who were then called adventurers, financed the expedition and in order to reimburse them the settlers, called the Old Comers, had to give them all their earnings, outside the bare necessities, to the adventurers for the first seven years. This road extends from Queen Anne Road to the Orleans Road near the boat yard. The training field was in the triangle between Queen Anne, Old

Comers and the Training Field Road. At the time of the French and Indian War, King Philip's War and the Revolutionary War every man between 16 and 60 was trained at frequent intervals to handle firearms. This road extends from Queen Anne Road to the Orleans Road in another direction from Old Comers Road.

Another place of historic interest is the "Wading Place" between Chathamport and East Harwich. The road leading to it from the Chathamport side was just south of Mrs. Robertson's house on Training Field Road. Geneva Eldridge has written a very interesting account of it in a recent edition of the Cape Codder. May I read it?

"Where Long Cove and East Harwich empties into Pleasant Bay at the head of the bay, near Joshua Nickerson's, is the old time wading place. Here at low tide both Indian and white man could easily wade from shore to shore to visit friends and relatives in the various neighborhoods nearby. Otherwise the trip must be made by ox team or by foot, by way of Queen Anne Road, which would take several hours. As the population grew in the two towns, the need of a bridge of some kind became imperative and one was built which was always known as Wading Place Bridge from then on. I do not know the date of the first bridge, but the one I remember back in the '80s was an old wooden structure built with tall stiles crisscrossed and topped by heavy planking, wide enough for teams to pass easily. And with a stout railing on either side – I can remember that bridge. After many years of horse-drawn vehicles clomping across the loosely laid planking, the old bridge became unsafe for travel and beyond repair. So in 1894 it was torn down and tide gates that control the waters ebb and flow were installed in the wide causeway where the wooden bridge had been. This now has become a paved highway of busy traffic both night and day. Long been forgotten are the days when it was a wading place and it could be forged only at low tide."

When I was a girl there were three houses on Training Field Road. The house on the east side of the road was Joshua Ryder's and almost opposite was the house and farm of Rupert Smith, my father. Beyond the four corners where Old Comers crosses was the house and farm of Samuel Smithson(?), that house has been moved away and its location is marked by a dense grove of Silverleaf trees.

My father acquired during his life a large portion of the land in Chathamport. What we called the big field extended from the Orleans Road to East Harwich, about 400 acres. This was fenced in with a post and rail fence and there was much more grazing land than now. Young cattle from surrounding towns were brought out here in May and left until October, there being two ponds in the field called Spectacle Pond (?). These young cattle needed no care for the summer. By October they became rather wild and there was much excitement on the day the owners came for them. Another field extended from Training Field Road to Stillwater Pond. The Stillwater development is a part of it. The land on which the radio corporation is situated was here, as well as the northern half of Great Hill.

My father always had other interests besides his farm. In Civil War days he drove a four horse coach between Chatham and Yarmouth. It was the end of the Old Colony Railroad line. At one time he had a store in Harwich. He was part owner with his brother, David Smith, of an ice refrigeration plant in Washington. In his later years, he had about 16 acres of cranberry bogs in various places in Chatham.

By the side of the road on Training Field Road is a white headstone. This was put there by the Historical Society – I'm not sure if they paid for it, I think perhaps the town did that – but it was through the efforts of the Historical Society. This was put there to replace the old headstone that strangely disappeared. Here was the grave of Dr. Samuel Lord, who died of smallpox in 1765. 37 died in this frightful epidemic. Just beyond the four corners on Old Comers Road and a short distance back from the road is a small fenced in graveyard. Here are buried a number of the smallpox victims. Among them my great-great-great grandfather, Deacon Stephen Smith, his wife Bathsheba and his two daughters.

Further along Old Comers, one comes to two ponds with a roadway between them. Today they are called Stillwater Pond and Lovers Lake. I knew them as the North Pond and the South Pond. And the William Smith history he calls them Pasture Pond and Nexpoxet Pond. I like those names better. Between the ponds are two houses still owned and occupied by descendants of the Smith family that have lived and owned property in Chatham for nine generations. The first purchase of land from the Indians was in 1690 by Samuel Smith, for his son John.

On the top of the hill, where there are several brown houses belonging to the radio corporation, was the one room schoolhouse where I first went to school. There were never more than 10 or 12 pupils and there were six grades. When it was our turn to recite, we came forward to a settee in the front of the room. The rest of the time, we pretty much amused ourselves. Our teachers were high school graduates with no teacher training. But we learned to read and write, add, subtract, multiply and divide. The best part of the day was the noon hour when our playground was all the fields and woods in every direction. There was no superintendent. One of the school committee would visit occasionally and ask us a few questions or make a speech. I remember one of them saying to us, "Scholars, be very careful with your pronoun-cations." When we had finished the six grade, we went to town for grammar or high school and walked 3 miles to town and back unless someone gave us a ride. It wasn't a hardship, in fact we enjoyed it.

I remember only the names of the families that lived in what we called the "lower neighborhood." Along the Orleans Road, Route 28, on the left were the houses of David Crowell, Stillman(?) Nickerson, Deacon Rogers, Rebecca Kemp and Fred Allen. On the right, Joseph Young. On Crowell Road lived Joshua Crowell and his mother in a house that has since been moved away, then George Henry Nickerson – his grandson George Nickerson lives there now, Kimball Ryder in the Squire Bea House, Samuel Young, James Young and Mariah Lewis (?). If you're acquainted with this section you will know that several houses have been built in the last 50 years.

Mamie Bassett knows much more about the Ryder family and the Bassett family at the head of the cove than I do, and also about the fishing industry. I'm going to turn the records over to her.

Mamie Bassett: My father, Dr. Ryder, went to sea at the advanced age of 11. After marriage to my mother persuaded him to leave the steamer, which went from Boston to Orleans. She didn't like to have him gone so long. He bought a catboat and went fishing. He had a fish house – shanty, it was called then – and as a child it was a great pleasure to watch the boats sail up Ryder's Cove, there were no engines in them. There were 10 at the cove at that time. A good

fish could be bought at the store for 10 cents. All fish was dressed and split and salted (?). There is a natural spring near the fish house and he used to wash the fish in freshwater – usually codfish. It was a favorite.

After they had been in the salt, they were then washed and dried – to dry better. After they were dried they were sold by the –

Voice: Where was that? Can you tell us just where that is?

M. Bassett: Down on Alice's landing. On Alice's, Mrs. Smith's land, where the old road joined 28. Just at the head of the cove there.

Voice: Now, that would almost be across from the Christopher Ryder House?

M. Bassett: A little further down on the right. It was an old road that came up and it was right there.

Voice: Well your father was one of how many Ryders?

M. Bassett: Nine children. His father was John Ryder and he had five boys and four girls.

Voice: Tell me, I heard tell that Old Peppermint Spring was down here. Do you remember that?

M. Bassett: That's over here on -

Voice: Well you know where it is. And I suppose the peppermint grew around it. It sounds lovely.

M. Bassett: Peppermint grew very luxuriantly down there. Up near the John Ryder place. They had peppermint and hops and all the older herbs.

Voice: Now whose house are you living in now? Was that a Ryder house?

M. Bassett: –in the next house of Christopher Ryder, and the next house was Kimball, Kimball Ryder. It was later bought by the Bassett's and that included Burial Hill–

Voice: Did you go to the same school as Mrs. Smith? Do you remember the small schoolhouse?

M. Bassett: Yes, very well.

Voice: Did you have parties?

M. Bassett: Yes, we had little birthday parties.

Voice: If you could tell us about them I'd love to hear about it.

M. Bassett: They weren't very elaborate. We just had, we used to play games, guessing games—in the daylight, daytime. Sometimes we had ice cream and cake. We didn't have ice cream every day like you do now.

Voice: Tell me about your mother and father's parties, the parties that they had.

M. Bassett: I don't remember that they had parties. They were rather quiet people.

Voice: Was there much community activity around or just visits back and forth?

M. Bassett: Well they had a circle in the neighborhood. And there was little hall, but there wasn't the amount of amusement, of course, as there is now. As Ms. Smith told you, there were no movies.

Voice: What do you most remember about Chathamport when you were a girl?

M. Bassett: Well I liked to watch the boats when they came up and to go to the shore when it was time for all those boats to land. We would see them coming and we'd go to the shore. And wait on the shore to see them. We all enjoyed that.

Voice: Was it quiet?

M. Bassett: Very quiet— as it could be.

Voice: Was this all farmland down around here?

M. Bassett: Most of the land was mowed for hay for their oxen and cows. We had a horse. My father had a horse and phaeton — and afterwards we had a two-seat cart —

Voice: What was Scrabbletown village? I picked that up somewhere.

M. Bassett: We used to call the lower neighborhood sometimes Scrabble town —

Voice: Do you know why?

M. Bassett: No.

Voice: We'll have to find that out sometime. As Alice said today, people that live here remember it with such warm affections. It must have been a tranquil, quiet life.

M. Bassett: It was. And we used to go berrying in the summer. Blackberrying and blueberrying. And later on we went cranberrying. Cranberrying was the only thing that we could make any money when I was going to school. We used to try and make us enough to buy us a new outfit for the fall.

Voice: Did you have a garden the way that they have gardens now?

M. Bassett: Well most everyone had a garden. My father didn't have a very large one, but we would raise enough of beans and potatoes –

Voice: What about flowers?

M. Bassett: Yes we had dahlias, we had a big dahlia garden. We had a few hens, very few.

Voice: How long have you lived here?

M. Bassett: Since I was five.

Voice: My goodness that's a long time.

M. Bassett: I hope I always live here.

Voice: Can you tell us anything about what you think are the biggest changes that happened? Was it building houses, was it roads, was it people?

M. Bassett: I think It's people, yes. And in the change of the Ryder place. Mrs. Ryder lived there alone all my younger days. She was a very nice lady. She was the last of the Ryder family.

Voice: Is he the one that had a store?

M. Bassett: Yes.

Voice: Tell us about the store.

M. Bassett: He had a little store. There wasn't very much in it, but – and she was a very, very smart woman in her day. She lived alone, she was very deaf. But, she never seemed to be frightened.

Voice: What did she sell?

M. Bassett: She would sell candy and peppermints and – the story goes she'd bite the peppermint in two and –

Voice: Did you ever go out fishing with your father?

M. Bassett: Not over the bar. I wasn't allowed to, but I used go fish, what we we'd call “down the channel.” I was excited about it. We'd go sailing. Women didn't fish much in those days, but we went sailing a lot, rowing.

Voice: Did you have to help him fix the fish? And curing it?

M. Bassett: No. Women didn't do much work in those days in that line. As I remember, my mother never did.

Voice: She might of been pretty busy at home.

M. Bassett: Women didn't work outside the home the way they do now. And it was rather a hard job, they brought these fish ashore, you know and they had a table that they split them on, and then they had to be washed. It was rather hard work. – Then they saved the livers and those were put in a tub, and that made the cod liver oil.

Voice: Thank you Mrs. Bassett, this is been a wonderful experience tonight to hear you and Ms. Smith, our hostess, talk about the old days of Chathamport. We are ever so grateful to you. The members of the Chatham Historical Society are greatly in your debt. Good night.

END OF RECORDING