

**Growing Up in Chatham (1909)**  
**Josephine Buck Ivanoff**  
**1982.004.001**

**Brief Description:** Josephine Buck Ivanoff details life in Chatham during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She talks about her mother, Dr. Minnie Buck, and her father who died when she was still young. Some events and things that she discusses in this recording are WWI, her father's Model T Ford, walking to Monomoy Point, and learning to swim in the Mill Pond. Towards the end of the recording she tells about the establishing of the Chatham Historical Society.

**Josephine:** When I was born I think there must've been strong feelings on both sides of the family about naming me. Grandpa Gifford was all for naming me Celeste, for his great grandma, I think, and the Buck side of the family – well, there had been Benjamins and Josephs for generations, and since there were no male children to carry on the Buck name in this generation, they wanted me named Josephine, for my Buck grandpa. At any rate, there was a compromise and I wound up Josephine Celeste Gifford Buck – a real embarrassment when I was small since almost no one had two middle names!

My mother had been a dentist in Chatham for some years before she married and I came along. She continued practicing until her death in 1940, started this chapter of the Eastern Star, was one of the charter members of the Reading Club and Historical Society, at one time president of the Cape Cod Dental Association, and very active in the Universalist Church here.

My father started out going to sea with his father – Joseph – when he was only nine. Imagine that! And as a cook! But later he came back to Chatham, served on the School

Committee, and took up painting. He painted houses for the money, he said, and pictures because he loved it.

My early recollections? It's hard to separate reality from hearsay when you're little; they all seem to get mixed up in another lifetime and remain as vague as impressions. For instance, every time I hear the wind whistling through the screens I have this sharp feeling of – of déjà vu, of being transported into another place with the same sounds in my ears. And, you know, it wasn't until I ran across an old photograph of a small beach camp with all the family on the veranda, and me, a little squirt of about four hanging onto a dog – Teddy – the name jumped at me, that that same wind sound came to me again. Probably from lying in a bed, listening to the sea.

There's another startling recollection about World War I. I was – let's see – 1909 to 1917, eight years old, and I remember one day seeing my father and some of the neighboring men standing together on the front lawn with open newspapers in their hands, reading and talking so gravely about the great big, scary black letters on the front page. I couldn't understand it, but it was very frightening. When the Naval Air Station came to town, some of the Navy families came along too, and my mother and father fixed up some rooms upstairs as apartments to rent. Good grief, I think we still had only a privy in those days too! I remember my father had some kind of a set-to with the military on account of the good, practical Earth color he had painted his model T Ford – they said that it resembled the camouflage they used too much; I think he changed it.

That Ford was kept in the big barn, which is now a duplex facing Shattuck Place. But that barn was a marvelous place to me as a child. Along one side, we partitioned off two spaces, one

that my father used as a workshop, and another smaller one for all the sorts of odds and ends; I suppose originally they were horse stalls. Above them was a loft – it simply vast, it seemed to me, with still a few wisps of hay up there. Against the wall, downstairs, were pieces of decrepit furniture. One of them was a beautiful cradle that belonged to Grandpa Gifford, at least he was rocked in it and it was brought from Provincetown when his mother died. That cradle is now in the old kitchen of the Atwood House. But I first remember it in the barn with a broody hen nesting in it! Oh my!

But how many years in spring and summer I used to stand in the barn door watching the swallows swooping in and out, building their nests against the beams in the peak of the roof, twittering in happy excitement, and paying little attention to a kid. And I think some of that springtime delight communicated itself to me. I think my father too, in his quiet way, felt some of this. At least he used to leave the barn door ajar in all kinds of weather.

I don't recall my father going fishing, although he may have; almost all the men in town did. I remember him saying one time, "There's no use in being afraid of the sea, but you must respect it." My mother, I think, was afraid of the sea because she seldom got into a boat. Or maybe she just got seasick, and for that I can sympathize with her.

Quite early on, I began to take piano lessons from Josephine Atkins, and I have to confess that practicing bored me to death and the traditional "Happy Farmer" left me cold. In fact, sometimes when Miss Atkins would come to the house for my lesson I would crawl into the henhouse to hide until she had left. Maybe my mother suspected something for I never recall getting a scolding. Some of the basic skill did stay with me, I think, for later on, when she could no longer afford lessons for me, I managed to teach myself something more and even

taught piano, young Willard Nickerson was a pupil of mine, and majored in music for one year in college.

Now I'm wondering a little bit. Well, back to my first year in school. The town was still divided into districts in 1916 and everybody walked to school. The place was called the Atwood School – now the Doc Keene Scout Hall and the location of the Head Start program – at the corner of Cross Street and Stage Harbor Road. It was a one-room affair with a pump in the yard, an entry, classroom and privy. There were four grades there, but not more than 15 or 20 children altogether. Lunch hour was time enough to go home for a meal. There really were only a couple of things I remember about my three years there (because I skipped fourth grade). Believe it or not, the one that troubles me, and comes to my memory first of all is the mystery, and the annoyance connected with my primer. It had illustrations of the Sun Bonnet Twins, but always the wide brims of their bonnets concealed their faces. They had no eyes, no faces, just little wooden bodies and huge bonnets. Believe me, there was precious little communication between them and me!

Grandpa Gifford had retired by that time and he and his second wife were living three houses down on Cross Street. He had diabetes and so had to give up smoking, but as a substitute, he kept cloves handy in every pocket. That sharp, aromatic smell even today seems to take me back to the times I would sit in his lap and listen to his weaving all kinds of fanciful stories about Prince Itchy-Scratchy.

My father died in 1920, after a long, agonizing battle with cancer. Somehow, I have very few intimate memories of him. He was about 55 when I was born and I wonder sometimes if a

new baby at his age wasn't a mixed blessing. At all events, I don't think his nature was very outgoing.

My mother was very faithful in taking me to visit with Grandma Buck and my Aunt Minnie Eldredge in South Chatham, and as I got a little older I was encouraged to walk there – of course, with little or no traffic and safety taken for granted in those days, it was no problem. Sometimes I would stay overnight, sleeping upstairs alone and enjoying the simple meals. Dinner at noon was frequently baked beans, bread and butter and once in a while, a lovely chocolate cake. There were cookies in the pantry, but I never went after them unless I was invited. I learned how to knit from Grandma and how to braid rugs from Aunt Minnie. Once I went out to cousin Delmar Eldredge's weir when they went to haul, I guess you would call it. It was rough and he was seasick and I was stuffed into a safe, solid space somewhere in the bow so that I wouldn't interfere with the business or fall overboard or something. It was an experience, all right. It gave me a tremendous respect for the fisherman's hardihood. When the days were fine, Delmar's children and I used to play Indians around the old cranberry swamps that were at the foot of the hill just below the South Chatham Cemetery. Occasionally I would take the train back to Chatham, but even then, railroading was a declining business. Many times, I was the only passenger, paying a 15-cent ticket, and there was Mr. Snow, the conductor in his fine uniform – just for one passenger.

When weather permitted Margaret Guild and her sister Josephine, who we called Mina, would take long walks around the town or along the beaches – good for all of us, and gave me strong leg muscles. I think back now and wonder if my mother urging me to get out and walk might have been part of her plan to improve my health. For, bless her heart, she fed me steak

for breakfast and that kind of heavy cream that had to be spooned up, just to fatten my skinny little body that had all sorts of ailments, including rheumatic fever and scarlet fever.

Anyway, we three children had a good time and became fast friends as the years went by. Twice I remember walking to Monomoy Point, once while I was in high school, with cousin Milton White, and once a few years later with Mama's friend, Effie Waddell. You know, I still chuckle over that last trip. We were returning almost at sunset and the shadows were beginning to cover the beach as we came in sight of Morris Island. It seemed we would never be able to reach the mainland before dark. Luckily, there was a very small shanty close by with two small bunks, a little stove and outside, a pump. Well, it was a place to stay, anyhow. The first thing that had to be done was get the pump working. So I got the pail from inside that had some pretty ancient water in it, to catch the pump, you know; and there was a drowned mouse and it! Eff screeched and wouldn't let me touch the pail again. She then looked carefully through the bunk mattresses and when some mouse droppings turned up, that ended it – no sleeping inside. We had to huddle up out on the sand, but I tell you I didn't close my eyes for a long while, not saying a word, but wondering when some curious skunk would discover us, for there were plenty of them around. Some of the boys used to trap them and sell the pelts – 50 cents apiece, I think.

I think I began to perceive some of the beauty of the sea, and the beaches, and the sky colors on a couple of summers I was allowed to go sketching with William Parrish, a friend of the family, and a Chatham resident. I didn't do any painting, but I watched him, trying to see what he saw and how he interpreted it on paper. He was an older man and very deaf, so deaf that not being distracted by noises he seemed to become totally absorbed in the acts of seeing,

thinking and painting. Sometimes I think that children learn more, well, maybe not learn in the formal sense, but develop attitudes and traits just by silent proximity, a lot more than we suspect, perhaps.

Margaret's mother, Alice Guild, was another person who taught me a good deal in that way. Not in the matter of art, but in her very poised and tactful handling of situations.

Mr. Guild kept cows and often would pasture them in the fields that before my time was called Rink Hill, the land all around about where the Old Mill now stands. In the spring, that spot was purple with violets and in March, we would listen night after night to be the first to hear the "pinkwinks" down in the Mud Hole, below the mill. I learned to skate on that Mud Hole one winter. I guess the greatest danger there was catching your skates on the grasses that's straggled up through the shallow ice. There are still a few wild grapevines that grow among the bushes there to this day. I wonder if there is a scrap of that charming little evergreen vine there that we called "Creeping Jenny" and fashioned into cemetery wreaths for our mothers. It just comes back to me – there was a big circus with the band and huge tents performed in the field up on that hill one summer and I remember I got into trouble with my mother for running away one whole afternoon to see all the sites.

Learning to swim in the Mill Pond was another thing my mother didn't exactly approve of either. A bunch of us kids used to scramble into the water any old which way. Some of us with water wings, churning up the seaweed and water and having a lovely time. Several times I remember going scalloping around the shores of the ponds – Big Mill Pond and Little Mill Pond. The Oyster Pond doesn't seem to be connected with swimming somehow in my memory;

perhaps because in those days it meant oysters and eels in the winter, or perhaps because a good deal of our world for us then was bounded by the immediate neighborhood.

Transportation was not easy for one thing. West Chatham was like another country, and children might not know others from the Village, or North Chatham or South Chatham until they went high school.

I shall always bless the memory of Miss Bertha Arey who introduced me to Shakespeare in the sixth grade. I have no doubt she was censored somewhat by quite a few people for teaching that highbrow stuff, but for me it was pure delight. I've no doubt too that she chose some of the expurgated plays and glossed over some definitions, but the sheer harmony and rhythm of those lines did turn me on. Memorizing passages here and there became a pleasure that has had a healing effect on me all my life. From *The Merchant of Venice*, "There's not the smallest orb which thou beholdest, but in his motion like an angel sings."

Speaking of singing, I did study some voice with Mrs. Ethel Eldridge and did well enough. As a matter of fact, the year in Boston when I was majoring in music, I did give a recital and sang in the Handel and Haydn Society my senior year in high school, when I attended and graduated from Medford High. However, I was never talented enough to make a living at music, and except for church organ jobs through the years, I'm afraid the investment for lessons and courses really hasn't paid off. I have a love for it, but I learned early that unless one has extraordinary talent and burning ambition music isn't the thing for a lifelong profession

Here I go, off on a tangent again!

My mother, along with Alice Guild, Rebecca Nickerson, Josephine Atkins and Bessie Taylor – there were others, but I don't remember their names – felt it was important to

preserve some of the historical facts about Chatham, and formed a society for that purpose – about 1924, I think. There were many of the old sea captains still around then and much memorabilia too. So they had ample sources, but little money, you see, to accumulate much. When the Atwood House was bought I remember what a sorry old place it was – tall grass, weeds, a well and a well-sweep, a hops bed, long gone to seed, along the south foundations, and inside, bare neglect. There was even a small tree growing up in the kitchen fireplace. And how those ladies did work to clean it up; down on their knees, scrubbing floors, washing windows, sweeping out musty closets, and finally each contributing from their own homes pieces of furniture, mirrors, crockery – whatever they could spare. For many years, all the meetings of the society were held there, and with the onset of the depression of the 1930s it was very hard to continue. But I remember, as the purpose of this group became better known, more people were attracted.

I sometimes think as the years go by that our gifts, whether they are artifacts or money, or hours of work, seem to act as a kind of tie into the procession of life. Haven't you ever had the feeling that your gift to such a museum, or library or whatever, is more like an out stretching hand that links you to many more hands, some long past, some not yet arrived, all going somewhere with direction? A very mysterious feeling, but then, not so different from watching the tides come in and flow out.

Where was I? Oh, yes, back in the 1930s. I taught a year in the North Carolina Mountains, a year in the girl's reform school in Trenton, New Jersey, graduated from Boston University, and came back to Chatham to teach for five years. Sarah Nickerson taught in the next room, and Marjorie Hammond, Dorothea Allen in the same building. After two salary cuts,

I wound up in the last year with something like \$900, but I could live at home and had no car. I remember a couple of funny happenings during that time. The lunchroom was in the basement of the building – a gloomy place too, nothing like the modern ones. One of my little girls gave a special boy a piece of her birthday cake, but he made no response, just gave it a sidelong glance. I whispered to him, "You didn't say thank you." He looked at me thoughtfully and said, "Nope. I ain't tasted it yet."

Well, the next 30 odd years I was busy with a husband and two children of my own, living in Kansas for two years, and finally I was teaching in Florida until 1970. During those years, I got a master's in education and my students ranged from primary level to English at the Homestead Airbase, and Graduate Assistant in English at the University of Miami.

So back to Chatham in retirement and picking up the threads again, at least those that are still here in 1982.

**END OF RECORDING**