

Transcribing History

Caroline Imparato

One of the many exciting projects that have been relaunched this year at the Atwood Museum is the long-awaited Oral History Project.

Beginning back in 1954, the early members of the Chatham Historical Society were thinking of innovative ways to preserve history. The group decided to begin recording various people from Chatham to have an oral history of the town. This way, generations to come would be able to learn about life “back then.”

Currently, in the Chatham Historical Society Collection, there are about 55 recordings of teachers, lobstermen, oyster farmers, shipwrecked brides, local church representatives, artists, local politicians, sea captains, and plenty of other Chatham characters. Overall, there is roughly 71 hours or 4,300 minutes of recorded conversation and interviews.

These recordings are packed to the gills with information about not only the fun, local Chatham, but also Chatham economics, architecture, coastal erosion, politics, state government, the evolution of the Life Saving Service to the Coast Guard, the education system, and more. All of this is recorded by people who lived through the ups and downs and changing tides of history.

One particularly interesting recording is of Ulah Deer in 1954. In this recording Ulah talks about her adventures of being a shipwrecked bride. She tells of how she married a sea captain in 1890. After they were married, Ulah decided to travel with her husband aboard his vessel. Very shortly after their journey began, their ship ran into trouble. Let us say the story involves lifeboats, possible mutiny, a Spanish bark, and a cat. The bride herself tells the story!

Not only is it fun to hear from these “old-timers,” as they are sometimes referred to, it is also enjoyable to hear from past Chatham Historical Society members and volunteers who are doing the interviewing. These are people like Sally Erath, Josephine Buck Ivanoff, Ken Matteson, and Ned Meaney, to name a few.

The Atwood Museum is now in the middle of the project to convert all of these old recordings to digital files and transcribe the content to digital and paper documents. The goal is to make these oral histories available to everyone online on the Museum website. That way, anybody needing research, family history, or if you’re just curious about what life was like back then, you can have access to these wonderful pieces of oral tradition and history.

The breakdown of the project includes:

Step 1- Collect all tapes of old recordings

Step 2- Make sure all tapes and recordings are properly accessioned (incorporated into our database) and cataloged

Step 3- Send out tapes to be digitized to transferrable files

Step 4- Transcribe recordings so that there is a “script” of oral histories to go with recording

This involves the use of speech recognition software (a talk to text program)

Step 5- Organize and upload recordings and corresponding transcriptions online

Step 6- Make accessible to the public

This project is being funded by a generous and anonymous donor. The Atwood would not have been able to pursue this endeavor without this financial support. The Museum thanks these supporters.

So keep your eye out for more information about the Atwood Museum Oral History Project. History has a voice, so get ready to hear it!

Caroline Imparato is Administrator at the Atwood Museum, Home of the Chatham Historical Society.