

**Talk on Shipwrecks (1954)**

**“Wicked” Walter Eldredge**

1954.005.001

**Brief Description:** This is a recording of a conversation between Sally Erath and “Wicked” Walter Eldredge in 1954. Walter recalls why he is called “Wicked” Walter, the different residents that lived in town and their houses, the Chatham Railroad, the Altahama, the H.S. Dimmock, salvaging ships, and more.

**Sally Erath:** Good morning Mr. Eldredge – very nice to have you here.

**W. Eldredge:** Well, I am here to help.

**Sally Erath** You are helping us. You know a great deal about the old days in Chatham. What I want to ask you about first is that nickname of yours, “Wicked” Walter.

**W. Eldredge:** Uncle Andrew Harding, that owned the store on Main Street years ago – Good Walter, (myself), and Wicked Walter used to by paints and oils and hooks and line, and when it came to the end of the month I used to get Good Walter’s bill and he got mine. His name was Walter W. and mine was Walter M. – looked so much alike, the W and the M, we got them all mixed up, so I told Uncle Andrew – I said we had that all the time and couldn’t he straighten it out and he said, “I think I can. I think I’ll call the other Walter “Good Walter” because he goes to church, and you don’t go to church, so I’ll call you “Wicked Walter.” So that is the way I got my name and Mr. Wilbur Patterson – of course, dead and gone now, lived down on Holway Street –

McCutcheon – summer people that used to come here – and they wanted to buy a boat and, of course, they wanted to find Good Walter – asked them where he lived and they said – well, he lives down on this street here. I said, “Are you sure you want Good Walter?” “Yes,” he said. “I understand there’s a Wicked Walter and a Good Walter.” So that’s how I got my name.

There was a lot of times after that when I was walking up the street – some of these summer people that have a child walking by their leg would say – “There goes Bad Walter.”

**Sally Erath:** It’s a name you’re known by and there’s no one that looks less wicked or is less wicked than you – and you were born down on Holway Street, weren’t you?

**W. Eldredge:** I was born on Holway Street.

**Sally Erath:** And that’s right near the old Hawes House. Wasn’t that a good spot to look to sea?

**W. Eldredge:** Do you want me to start in on this yet?

**Sally Erath:** Yes.

**W. Eldredge:** Alright. I was born on Holway Street on October, the 13<sup>th</sup>, in the year of 1878, in the old Cape Cod House that is still standing and is used as a summer residence.

**Sally Erath:** Do you mind if I ask you how old you are?

**W. Eldredge:** I am 79.

**Sally Erath:** You don’t look it.

**W. Eldredge:** They tell me that the woman who lived in this house a long time ago committed suicide – cut in the throat with a kitchen knife – and a long time after one could see where she whetted the knife on the bricks in the kitchen chimney.

Next house toward the water at the foot was Mr. Holway. Mr. Holway was a lobster fisherman and captain of one of the lifeboats used in assisting vessels stranded on Chatham bars – and a member of the Methodist Church. At the foot of this street near the water stood a building which housed the cable and, outside, large anchors and long skids used in floating stranded vessels – also two life boats. This cable was made fast to one of the anchors and went out ahead of the vessel and when the tide was at its height and the vessels began to rise a little off the bottom, the windlass aboard the ship was manned and, in this manner, the vessel was sometimes floated. After several attempts were made in this manner and failed, the cargo was thrown overboard, and if this failed the vessels were stripped of the sails and rigging and sold at public auction, and 50 percent of the proceeds going to the salvager.

The next house west from our house lived Captain Patterson, who was the captain of #2 Lifeboat. His father died of smallpox and was buried on Ram Island. This island was situated east of the Cow Yard in North Chatham and later washed away. Across the street stands a house, which at one time was owned and operated as a summer boarding house by Mr. Green. This house was called the Rhode Island House, and catered to factory workers and their families from Fall River, Mass. Mr. Green dug his own clams with his bare hands from a clam flat called the Old Farm, below the Hotel Mattequasson. Later this flat washed away. The steamed clams and lobsters were piled on a long table in the basement which was used as a dining room, and the boarders came to the table barefooted, and in shirt sleeves, and everybody helped themselves.

Mr. Green at one time, was an actor and singer under the name Billy Barrow and evenings he would sing and tell stories to his guests seated on the piazza. On the west side of the house was large letters which read, "Rhode Island House – Billy Barrow."

**Sally Erath:** I think that's very interesting.

**W. Eldredge:** Now, I'd like to tell – I'd like to relate here about the men who took part many years ago, who took part in floating vessels that ran aground on Chatham bars and the location of lifeboats used by them. One below Chatham Beach Club called Uncle Solomon's boat; two at the foot of Mistover Lane, one named Castor, the other Pollock; one at the foot of Holway Street; and two at Minister's Point in North Chatham. In those days there were many ships that grounded on Chatham bars and men took turns at night watching at the foot of Water Street, near the Hawes House, for distress signals. When a signal was seen the watchman would call others and they would hurry to the shore, man the boats, and go to the stranded vessel.

I would like here to tell the story about an Italian bark that ran aground on Chatham Bars at night – with a cargo of molasses, wine, and assorted nuts. My father and his brother were in one of the boat's crew that boarded her. His brother, in jumping from the rail to the deck landed in a hogshead of molasses. They found the captain of the bark somewhat intoxicated and the crew smashing in the heads of the hogsheads and wine casks, and letting the wine and molasses run overboard through the scuppers. The captain asked the captain of the lifeboat – "What you come for?" and he said, "We've come to assist you in floating your ship" and all the ship's captain could say was, "What for you come and what you come for?"

The life boat laying alongside was gradually filling with wine and one of the boat's crew turned his oil hat – which was called a Sou'wester – inside out, and holding it under the scuppers let it fill with wine and then drank from it. When they came ashore, and before they could haul the boat up – the wine had to be turned out.

On this same night, one man, in getting dressed, didn't stop to light the lamp. He couldn't find his rubber boots and went to the shore wearing his shoes. The lifeboat was just shoving off as he jumped aboard. When daylight came he took his pants off to dry them and one man said to him, "For God's sake, man, what have you got on?" This man - dressing in a hurry – had put on a pair of his wife's ruffled drawers. Will that go alright?

When I was ten years old we moved to the corner of Main and School Street. This house was owned by Mr. Bates who, at one time, was a sail maker and was in partnership with the late Charles A. Howes in the loft on the site of the Chatham cold storage. Later this loft was destroyed by fire. Later Mr. Howes done business for many years in the building on Bridge Street, which is now called the Sail Loft.

I'd like to tell you about the Chatham Railroad. After school nights I went with the other fellows to the Great Hill to watch the men lay the tracks. They were working round the clock at this time to hurry and finish the job. After the road was completed people in Chatham were given a free ticket for a free ride to Harwich and back.

The depot master was very witty and one time a man down from Boston asked him the price of a ticket and he told him \$3.06 and the man said, "What is the six cents for?" The depot master said, "Six cents for the Railroad and three dollars for me."

This is a true story about a man who drove a lady passenger to the depot on Labor Day and helped her with her baggage, and she gave him a ten cent tip. He looked at the dime and said, "Are you sure you have enough money left to buy your ticket?"

**Sally Erath:** Have you got some notes there about the Altamaha or would you rather talk about the Horatio Hall?

**W. Eldredge:** Yes. This happened in 1909. This ship was in collision with a steamer – H.S. Dimmock – and sank in Pollock Rip Slue, about eight miles southeast of Chatham Lights. The passengers and crew were taken aboard the Dimmock and landed on Nauset Beach. The next day a diver from Boston patched up the Dimmock's hole. The next day after that a tow boat with barges going by stopped and anchored the barges and the crew of the tow boat boarded the Horatio Hall and salvaged the silverware from the dining room. This ship was partly submerged – decks out of water. This same day, in late afternoon, Elmer Mayo, Good Walter Eldredge, Brad Bloomer, and myself rowed a large fishermen dory to the ship. We made the dory fast alongside and went aboard. Well, Mister – we didn't know what to take first. Brad Bloomer came out of a stateroom with his arms full of blankets, sheets, pillows from a bed. We loaded the dory with bedding, dishes, and coffee urns from the cook's pantry. We came ashore, unloaded the dory, and after supper we went back to the ship and loaded the dory with ropes and lowered one of the ship's lifeboats and loaded it with mattresses, carpeting, plush cushions from the social hall, and a brass radiator from the pilot house. Then we turned in for the night in the stateroom. Next morning about daylight we were awakened by something bumping against the ship and we went on deck to investigate – there was about 20 men from Chatham boarding the ship and they went to work salvaging anything that was movable. When they were through the ship was pretty well

guttled. One of the large mirrors was taken from the social hall, was at one time in the billiard hall of the late Elmer Emery – this billiard hall was on the site of the present town parking lot on Main Street. The other mirror was in the barber shop of the late Jack MacKay on Main Street. Later, a rumor going around was that the purser's safe contained a lot of money; diamond rings and other valuables belonging to passengers, so Good Walter, Wes Smith, Charles Mullet, and myself went aboard looking for it. We found it in the engine room on top of one of the cylinder heads, where it fell and landed when the bow of the Dimmock stove a hole in the broad side of the hull.

We hoisted the safe to the deck and loaded it in the dory and started for home. We unloaded it on the shore and rolled it over and over towards the house of Good Walter. This safe weighed about 600 lbs. By this time there were several curiosity seekers gathered and some of us were going to be rich when they got the contents of this safe. Every time we turned it over there would be sounds like coins jingling. Someone would say, "That sounds like diamond rings rattling."

After we had the safe in the house we decided to open it that night – so, after supper, with hammer and cold chisel, we went to work. Now I tell you, we had a hard nut to crack. We were working about half hour when we heard a knock on the door. I don't know who told the Underwriter's agent that we had been trying to open the safe, but when we opened the door it was him alright, and he was plenty mad. He forbid us to open it, and if we did he said he's have us arrested. Next day we decided to seek some legal advice, so we asked the Justice of the Peace if we could open it in his presence and he said, "Yes." So, we went to work again and in about an hour we had the darn thing open. Oh no, we're not going to be rich! When we finished counting

the money in that safe, the total was \$37.50 and no diamond rings. Later, the safe was sold with the other goods at public auction.

How's that for a story?

**Sally Erath:** Walter, that really is good. You mentioned the ship Asia.

**W. Eldredge:** The ship Asia. This happened in March, 1898. This was during a heavy thunderstorm and a southeast gale of wind at night. This ship was aground on Great Round Shoal, Nantucket. The ship went to pieces during the night and the entire cargo of Manila hemp – 11 thousand bales – floated to Chatham Bay. Later the wind shifted to the west and 2,000 bales came to shore on the beach on Chatham Bay side. All hands lost except the cook and one sailor. These two were adrift on one of the ship's hatches and were rescued when it was passing the Handkerchief Lightship the next morning – and rescued by the crew. The captain's body was found next day in the Lazarene – in the stern of the ship which came aboard in Dennis, Mass.

I was one of the party of three that salvaged 54 bales. A party in Chatham told us that the hemp was not worth much as it was full of sand and salt water. They offered us a dollar a bale and we sold it. The following August an embargo was on in the Philippines, on account of the United States war with Spain and the hemp was worth \$30.00 a bale.

Now, I'm coming to the Altahama, if you want to hear that story. This ship ran ashore near the Monomoy Brant Club with a cargo of hard pine timber. The entire cargo was unloaded on the beach and later skidded across the beach to Chatham Bay and loaded aboard a three-masted schooner and taken to Boston. This ship was built in Scotland in 1848 and named the Gypsy Queen. Later the name was changed to Tournigant and later sold to a shipping firm in the

United States, and the name changed to Altamaha, after the river in Georgia. Mrs. Joseph has the figurehead and quarterboard on her home on Bridge Street in Chatham. Later this ship was stripped of the sails and rigging and sold at public auction.

**Sally Erath:** That's a good story. Was there a four-masted schooner named the Orcutt?

**W. Eldredge:** The Clavin B. Orcutt – this schooner was light and she was bound south and foundered off of Chatham. The snow set in and the schooner anchored 100 yards from shore. During the night the wind increased to gale force, and it was sighted by a man about 4 o'clock in the afternoon in North Chatham, and he reported by telephone to the Orleans Life Saving Station. When the station crew arrived on the scene, the vessel's mast had fallen. The station crew shot a line across the vessel, but there was no one aboard to take it. The schooner went to pieces and all hands was lost. Next morning, one sailor, a Norwegian, washed ashore on the beach near Chatham Light. The captain's body washed ashore near Monomoy Point Light the following March.

One of the vessels masts was made into a flag pole and it stands today on the property of a man in Harwichport.

**Sally Erath:** Well that's good. I think there are some other wrecks that you know about. We'd love to hear about them. Anymore steamships to tell us about?

**W. Eldredge:** I have one here - ran ashore in 1893 – It's a steam yacht – Alva. This yacht was owned by William K. Vanderbilt. After visiting his mother in Bar Harbor, Maine, and was turning home and was passing Chatham when the fog set in. The captain, being unacquainted with the shoals, anchored in Pollock Rip Slue. Early the next morning, the steamer H.S. Dimmock, down

from Boston, ran into the Alva and sunk her. Mr. Vanderbilt and his guests came on deck in their night clothes.

The Dimmock took Mr. Vanderbilt, his guests, and part of the crew aboard and put them ashore at Nauset Beach. Next day, a diver from Boston patched up the hole in the Dimmock's bow. This is the ship that sank the Horatio Hall in 1909. Later, divers from Boston salvaged Mr. Vanderbilt's entire wardrobe, mirrors, carpeting, silverware, and cordage. The divers were unable to reach the wine locker on account of the bad list of the ship. A woman is still living in Chatham who was born on this day of this disaster and was named after this yacht, her middle name.

**Sally Erath:** What was her name?

**W. Eldredge:** Mrs. Stella Cleverdon.

**Sally Erath:** Oh for goodness sakes! One more I'd like to hear about. The Altoona.

**W. Eldredge:** This was a barkentine. This is one of the vessels that was in distress while I was at the Monomoy Station. This vessel ran ashore on the Shovelful Shoals. A distress signal was seen and answered by the patrolman and the folks at the station. We went aboard and found the vessel in no immediate danger and returned to the station. The next day, a tow boat with three barges going by stopped and anchored her barges and ran a hawser to the vessel and tried to pull her. The hawser parted and they tried again and succeeded this time in floating her, and the vessel proceeded east and anchored a half mile west of Pollock Rip.

The captain of the station this day went home on 24 hour liberty and I, being No. 1, was in charge. During the night, a patrolmen sighted a distress signal in the direction of Pollock Rip. We launched a lifeboat and went aboard the vessel, which we found was the Altoona. The captain of the ship wanted us to pilot him to Boston. This I refused to do so because, after looking the craft over, I found she was loaded with a cargo of coal and her decks awash and leaking very badly. I told him he would have to abandon her as she might go down any minute, so he decided to do so. He lowered the vessel's longboat and loaded her with the crew's belongings and, with the crew in the lifeboat, thought the crew would be safe. Later that night, one of our crew on watch reported to the station that the vessel was on fire. Next morning, we saw that the vessel had sank with the tops of the mast out of water. We went to her and recovered the riding lights and the American ensign, which was displayed in the rigging – Union down – a distress signal. Next day we took the vessel's crew to Chatham. This vessel sank in the middle of the channel and was a menace to navigation and had to be dynamited.

**Sally Erath:** How long were you at the Life Saving Station?

**W. Eldredge:** I was at Monomoy Point two years, 1904 and 1905.

**Sally Erath:** And then you went with the Geodetic Survey for a while –

**W. Eldredge:** I haven't got that –

**Sally Erath:** Well, we can hear about it some other time. Now, let us hear this – everybody knows you – you must have known a great many people here in Chatham.

**W. Eldredge:** Yes. I got one here about Barzilla Harding and I got one about Uncle Andrew, and about Uncle John Gould.

**Sally Erath:** Well, let's hear about these people in Chatham.

**W. Eldredge:** Uncle Ben. The first time I met Uncle Ben is when he was walking with other men digging a ditch for draining Mr. Tinkham's pond. He was a short man with a heavy long mustache and a ruddy complexion, and very jolly. I see him now in my mind's eye as he looked then – and had he worn a Santa Claus uniform, he would have been a typical Santa Claus. Uncle Ben, at one time, owned a bar room at Portsmouth, New Hampshire. I would like to describe the interior of his home. The kitchen had a wooden sink where he set the water bucket and a large tin dipper, and two chairs. When you entered the combination living and dining room, the first thing you noticed was a strong aroma of vinegar, dried out pork fat mixed with tobacco smoke, and on the west side of the room, the windows were covered with old newspaper the year 'round. Another window had the shade half drawn. In the front part of the house was one bedroom where he slept and a parlor that was closed the year 'round. This sitting room and dining room where he spent most of his waking hours was a long old fashioned settee with a cushion, a rocking chair, and a small round table near it. On this table at all times were peanuts, figs, and a turnip, which he scraped with a jack knife when eating it. On the dining room table was a jar of vinegar, sliced beets, Pilot bread, mustard and pickle. Which he kept there day and night.

Uncle Ben liked what was called a "smash across the bow" and sometimes the intervals between the smashes were quite short. He had visitors most every night of the year and he had a birthday every Saturday night. This was the night when his relative, who was the express agent,

called with a companion, and these also had what he called a “smash across the bow.” When the agent arrived with the package for him, he took it to his bedroom. I have often wondered if that package didn’t contain a bottle with “smashes across the bow.”

But, in my teens I was a frequent visitor of Uncle Ben. He read the news from the Boston newspaper to an audience every night, and when there was some extraordinary news or murder trials the audience would be larger. He would read a short time and then say, “Well, I guess Grandpa will have a little something to eat.” This little something would consist of corned beef with cabbage – with all the fixings – cold – then come back, read a little more, scrape him a little turnip to eat, read some more, and say, “Well, I guess I’ll have a little something to eat!” And this would be repeated several times during the evening. He was an epicurean of the first order, and when the fishermen were opening scallops he was always on hand for a mess, and the fishermen never charged him anything. He was a brother to Uncle Andrew.

**Sally Erath:** What was Uncle Ben’s name?

**W. Eldredge:** After his death his name was Barzilla Harding. Captain White lived in the house afterward and it is now the home of Charles Seymour, one time President of Yale College.

Now, let’s see what you want to hear – you want to hear about the lightship adrift in the Portland Gale?

**Sally Erath:** Yes.

**W. Eldredge:** All right, this is a story about the old Pollock Rip lightship when she parted her moorings during the Portland Gale in ’98. When she broke adrift the men tried to take the

lashings from her steering wheel so they could head her with the wind and sea. Before they could finish the job the vessel was drifting broadside to the sea, and was drifting towards a dangerous rip called the Broken Part and Pollock Rip. They hurried below and waited until she had crossed the Rip and then went on deck and saw that everything movable on deck had been lost overboard. Everything in the cook's galley had been turned bottom-up. The Portuguese in the crew were on their knees praying, and for two days the crew were eating food with one hand and

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