

Oral History Collection of the Woods Hole Historical Museum

From the Curator

Jennifer Stone Gaines

Within the archives of the Woods Hole Historical Museum is a jewel as wonderful as the photograph collection which was featured in the last issue of *Spritsail*. This gem is the Oral History Collection, a large group of tape recordings and transcripts of the words of our past. Though not as showy as the photographs, this collection is perhaps even more wonderful, because it tells us of the day-to-day happenings in our village over the years in the words of the people who have lived here.

The recordings are from two primary sources: private interviews and the public "Conversations" which have been a monthly event of our museum since they were first thought of in a board meeting of the fledgling Historical Collection Committee in 1975. The minutes record that the board "...slowly turned a suggestion of a 'browsing hour' at the Library into a format that sounded exciting and suitable to our goal. The idea emerged of having...some of our older residents come to the Library at noon (or some daytime hour) and reminisce about Woods Hole with words and artifacts if they care to bring them. Anyone interested would be welcome to join the group at which the Library would serve coffee. ...suggested calling the affair 'Woods Hole Conversations.' It was agreed that the first one would be on February 6 at noon with an invitation to be extended to the Redfields as our first principals. A note was also made that taping the program would be a good idea." Thanks to those early people and their clear thinking, we can now be very proud of our Oral History Collection.

The excellence of this collection is due to two devoted women of our community: Elsa Keil Sichel, retired professor of biology, and Dr. Lucena Jaeger Barth, retired researcher in biology. It was Elsa who first recognized the need and the importance of capturing the memories of people and their past. It was she who studied the proper methods of oral history and marched forward, interviewing many people in their homes. In fact, in the first six months of our organization's existence, pre-dating even our first exhibit, she recorded eight interviews. The following interview with Oscar Hilton was one of these earliest interviews. He was so full of information that Elsa interviewed him on three consecutive months, always hearing amazing details of the village's past which would otherwise have been lost. I notice with pleasure that Mary Lou Smith accompanied Elsa as an additional interviewer of Mr. Hallet in this early 1977 tape. Elsa eventually went on to interview more than seventy people.

I suspect it was she who interested Lucena in the project. It was a perfect match. Lucena, who was very shy, worked behind the scenes, carefully transcribing the tapes, going over sections again and again to be sure she had the words exactly right. Her next step was the preparation of an abstract. Her finished transcripts are all preceded by a (usually) two page abstract which summarizes all the topics covered in the tape. After Elsa died, Lucena also began interviewing people. In fact, it was because of her interaction with Clarence Anderson that we have his piece on ice harvesting. They had been talking about another subject and ice harvesting came up as a side-light. She was so intrigued with the subject, and Clarence had so much information that they went on to more fully cover ice fishing in a subsequent

interview. Another person who stepped in and filled the gap left by Elsa's death was Robert Livingstone, recently retired from the National Marine Fisheries Service, who took over the bulk of the interviewing. Thanks to him, we have fishermen well represented in our collection!

Lucena's final step in processing the transcripts, and the one which makes our Collection stand heads above all others in the region, was to create a subject file to the whole Collection. She created a card catalogue, with cards detailing and referencing all the subjects covered in the interviews and conversations. This became her cause and final goal. Though suffering from throat cancer, she continued to work on this subject index until it was finished. When it was completed, she delivered it to the Museum, then went home to die. Her work stands as a proud tribute to her.

We have well over 200 Interviews and Conversations taped and transcribed. By 1983, Lucena had produced more than 4,000 pages of typed manuscripts. (This, before the age of word processors!) Not surprisingly, it has been difficult to replace these two devoted women. Our interviews have dwindled in recent years; but our Conversation program has continued on a monthly basis. As you see, Conversations were originally conceived as truly a discussion among a group; however, they have evolved into a talk by one person with an end-session of questions, answers, and additional comments from the audience. But, as one would expect from a historical group, tradition runs strong, so we keep the name "Conversations."

We estimate that we now have approximately 350 tapes. Currently, we are exploring ways to ease the process of duplicating, transcribing, and indexing

our expanding collection with new computer technology. Word processors, of course, make the transcribing process a much less arduous task. With indexing options available, we should even be able to ease that very necessary chore.

Another major concern has been the preservation of the original material. We store duplicates in a fire-proof storage area off-site, but since the first tapes are now over their (conservative) life expectancy of twenty years, it is past time to take steps to transfer to a more stable medium. In a nice parallel to the recent management of our photograph collection, the best choice is digital transfer to CDs. Discussions are underway with experts on how to best start the process of transferring the tapes to CDs. We expect to start within the next six months.

Some of these jobs are now or will soon be within our means. My wish list includes a small cadre of people willing to transcribe our back-log of tapes, and otherwise help with the processing. There are, of course, many more fascinating people out in the community to be interviewed. All volunteers, please call the museum! Help keep this valuable and vibrant program in good shape and growing!

Jennifer Stone Gaines first started as archivist of the Woods Hole Historical Collection in 1982. Since then her responsibilities have expanded to encompass all aspects of the museum. As a result, her title was elevated to Curator in 1994. She also works as an assistant librarian at the Woods Hole Library. Jennifer grew up in a coastal Rhode Island town where her forbears had lived for eight generations. She studied literature and botany at Pembroke College and the University of Rhode Island, receiving a B.A. in 1969. After five years of teaching environmental education with the Audubon Society of Rhode Island, she returned to the University to take graduate courses and earn a teaching certificate in science education. In the past few summers she has renewed her love of teaching nature studies by joining the faculty of the Woods Hole Children's School of Science.