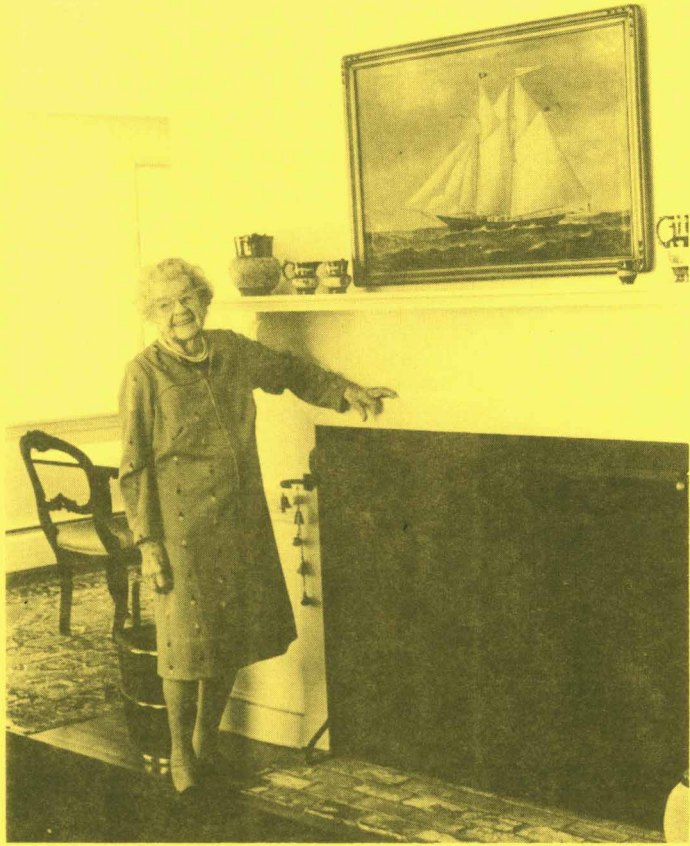


CARRIE KNOWLES COOK'S

*Early Tales*  
*of*  
*Provincetown*



*Carrie Knowles Cook at the age of 107  
enjoys a painting of her namesake.*



*Carrie Knowles in her bathing suit.*

This is a recording made in 1978 by Carrie Knowles Cook telling of the early life in Provincetown on Cape Cod. Today Mrs. Cook is 109 years old. She carries her years with grace and is a person with many admiring friends.

And, now with stories of the early years in Provincetown here is Mrs. Cook:

One hundred and one years after the seaboard colonies started the American revolution and 11 years after Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomatox, after Abraham Lincoln had been shot by the crazed actor Booth at Ford's Theater, after the House tried to impeach Andrew Johnson, when Ulysses Grant was president of the United States, when Boss Tweed was robbing the city of New York and the carpetbaggers were active in the south - on February 5, 1876 there was great excitement in the town of P-town at the tip end of Cape Cod. That was the morning that a little girl was born to George Osborn and Georgie Dyer Knowles - I was that baby. All the hubub was not for me, however. It was because the high school on the top of the hill burned to the ground -

Now I will tell you a few of the things I remember about growing up in P-town before the turn of the century.

Our town had five churches so we were a religious group. In those days Sunday was a long, quiet day - Sunday school in the morning - home at 12 for dinner, back to church for afternoon service at 2 - a Praise service at 6:30 and at 7 a prayer meeting. It was an inspiration to attend the praise service which was led by Obediah Snow, an old man with lots of white hair and one long tooth which hung from his upper jaw right down over his lower lip. It didn't seem to interfere with his singing a bit. I am sure I don't know why - he had a good voice. He would stand in front of the piano which his son, Olin played and announce the number of the hymn. Then, after Olin struck some fancy chords and

fiddled around with some notes everyone would sing lusterly. Sometimes the singing did not please Obediah. He would say, "You can do better than that, sing it over again."

After the singing there was a session of prayer. Everyone knelt and, each one taking a turn, offered an earnest prayer. All was quiet until people got excited and piped up with "Ah Men" or "Praise the Lord" - then came the testimonials. People rose up to praise the Lord for their blessings, others confessed their transgressions with tears in their eyes; still others repented and burst into great sobs.

When things got too tense someone would start to sing, "Jesus, Lover of My Soul."

Mrs. Mary Lizzie Rich, who never missed a prayer meeting, was a very nice little lady, short and fat with red cheeks and a lot of reddish hair piled up in a bun on top of her head - the hair was such a peculiar shade of red I think the color must have come from a bottle. Mary Lizzie was very religious - almost every Sunday night when it came time for testimonials she would rise and talk about her dear dead mother, beginning by saying in a very tremulous voice, "I once had a mother," then as she talked on her voice became more trembly and her eyes more tearful until just about time for her to collapse someone would pipe up and sing a song about mother which always calmed her and she would sit down, making way for the next testimonial.

I loved to attend Sunday night services with my Aunt Julia. One night someone shouted "fire, fire," which broke up the meeting and caused a stampede. My Aunt Julia was so frightened she tried to get me to jump out of the window. I wasn't foolish enough to do that. Later we found out the fire wasn't in the church at all or anywhere near it.

My father owned seven whaling vessels - the *Arizona*, built in 1861, the *Quick Step* - I liked that name, can't you see it with all white sails set dancing over the water in a stiff breeze - the *Ellen Rizpah*, the *Alcyon*, my grandson, George always liked that name, the *Gage Phillips*, the *B.F. Sparks* and the ill-fated *Carrie D. Knowles*, named for me and taken by pirates off the coast of Venezuela.

My father hired captains and fitted out the vessels. Knowles Wharf was at the foot of Pearl Street. The first building on the wharf was the office where my father worked at a large, roll-top desk; nearby was a high desk that a clerk had to stand up to, although there was a stool he could shin up on if he got tired. Here also was a safe and some heavy scales.

In one drawer of the desk were lumps of sugar for his horse Prince and there was a round glass paperweight with a turtle suspended in the glass in such a way that the legs wiggled if you moved it - I have that paperweight in my desk today.

In the back room they carried ship's stores, ropes and blocks and tackle - everything a ship needed.

Around a big iron stove were seats where friends dropped in to talk and smoke and chew tobacco and spit in a round earthenware spittoon. I think this took the place of clubs today. Beyond this was the storehouse filled with hogsheads and barrels containing sperm oil waiting to be taken to market in New Bedford. Next was a small building used to store oars and boats and harpoons. Next, on an upper floor that was reached by an outside staircase, was a sail loft. It was immaculate. The sail makers' clothes and shoes were very clean, the floor spotless. Here the sailmaker sat on the floor and sewed the sails. George Pettis, I remember well.

The wharf extended beyond these buildings where the vessels tied up when they came home from a voyage. When the cargoes of sperm oil were discharged they stayed there for the winter. All the vessels were not there at once because some went on two year voyages, which reminds me of a story about Captain Joshua Freeman who was leaving for a voyage. He said goodbye to everyone who came to see him off. Someone said, "Captain Freeman, aren't you going to kiss your wife goodbye?" "Why?" he answered, "I'm only going to be gone two years."

When there was a bad storm in the winter men had to tend ship; this meant keeping them from being blown from one end of the town to the other. Often at night men would rap on our door to get my father to go out and help them. My mother always worried until he came back.

One captain who was gone for many months and saw no whales at all was asked about the trip. He replied, "The lookout never once shouted 'thar she blows' but we had a damn fine sail."

It used to be a great thing for a man to belong to a fire department. When there was a fire, the bell on the church nearest the fire would be rung. Then all the others would ring and the men belonging to the fire department would rush out hollering "fire" at the top of their voices.

There were different fire engines and sort of a pump for each one, with their own building where they kept the apparatus such as engine number one or two or a hook and ladder or a pumper or buckets or a hose which they could put in the ocean if the fire was near enough to the ocean. All of the men would rush to see who would get to the fire first. My father, one of the engineers, had a fire hat which was a great big white hat with two visors, one in front and one in back, heavy as lead. He always kept this hat hanging on a peg right near the outside door.

When he heard the fire alarm he rushed to the door, grabbed his hat, crushed it down on his head so it wouldn't fall off and ran down the street in the direction of the fire hollering "fire" at the top of his voice, which always scared me more than the fire.

Well, Mr. Bangs was a sea captain and he went on very long voyages - I think he went to the Orient and his wife accompanied him often. On one voyage she was going to have a baby and when they were way off, far away from everyone she was in labor and having a hard time and of course Captain Bangs was frightened as there were no women around to take care of his wife. As a last resort he prayed to God for help and he promised God if He would let his wife and the baby live he would name the baby for the first bird God would have fly over the boat. Just after the birth, Captain Bangs went on deck and an albatross flew over - so he named the little girl Albatross Bangs. As that was a hard name to say she was called Trossie Bangs her whole life long.

The worst storm I remember was when the steamer *Portland* sank in 1898. It was the second night after Thanksgiving, there was a terrible gale, the wind was blowing hard, the wind was cold and there was snow. It really was an awful blizzard which came without warning. This all came up at night and the harbor was terribly rough. Ships were blown from the east end of the town to the west end and the men in the ships couldn't get ashore so many lashed themselves to the masts. In the morning many men were found frozen to death still tied to the masts. The wind and rain made the tides so high that many buildings near the waterfront were blown over and many small boats were blown onto Commercial Street. Fortunately, by morning the wind calmed down some. I can remember sitting in my mother's bay window and looking down the alleyway and across Commercial Street and watching the water and the waves.

At the end of our pier was a seat where I used to sit at night with my father and count the flashes of the various lights in the Cape lighthouses. I watched the seat being taken away by the waves and then the planks of the pier being forced up until the whole pier was battered to pieces.

Later we went out of the house and across the street but there were no piers left on the ocean side. The water came up so high it made an island out of P-town so there were no trains or communication of any kind for three or four days.

Irving, later my husband, had come to spend the weekend, arriving before the storm began. He was working in the Hyannis Bank and wanted to get back to work but could not get out of town so when the water subsided a little he waded across Beach Point and walked to Orleans which was the furthest point down the Cape that the trains could get to and there he got the train which took him back to Hyannis.

When the first newspapers got to P-town they told of the steamer the *City of Portland*, which set forth from Boston bound for Portland, Maine just before the storm struck. People were hoping that the steamer was riding out the storm in P-town harbor - but it was sadly blown off its course and wrecked off Peaked Hill bars with all hands aboard lost. The next day many bodies came ashore all along the outer beach. People gathered up broken wood from the boat which came ashore and made tiny oars and souvenirs with the name of the boat printed on them.

George Taylor was a teenage boy and as large as any man you ever saw and not quite right in his head. He had a love for funerals - when I was a girl and they had a funeral they had only a hearse and no carriages, so after the service, which was held in the home, all the people present came out of the house and formed a procession

two by two, the chief mourners leading. It was usually a long procession because everybody used to go to funerals. As they started for the cemetery the bell on the church (whichever the person had attended) tolled all the way, which was a very mournful sound. But George Taylor, feeling so interested, rushed to the head of the procession and proceeded to head it, making great gestures with his arms and with a very doleful expression on his face. That lasted until Mr. Joseph Whitcomb, the undertaker and also the chief of police, would rush over and grab George and send him home, then in a dignified manner all would proceed to the cemetery.

In the summer, first the *Empire State* and then the *Longfellow*, the excursion steamers from Boston, came around Long Point and tied up at Railroad Wharf at exactly one o'clock every day. The passengers swarmed up the wharf for they were allowed only an hour to sightsee. Out in front of Johnnie Birches and the Central House and the Pilgrim House men in white aprons beat on gongs calling out the menu and price of their shore dinners. When it was time for the steamer to leave, it gave a toot which could be heard all over town. A few people who dallied too long and were late always ran down the wharf as the steamer was backing away. They had to return by train. Capt. Smith and Mrs. Smith lived aboard the steamer in a nice stateroom with a rocking chair. The captain was as pleasant as could be and looked like Santa Claus.

I suppose there was no place in the United States where so called accommodations and jiggers were used except P-town. An accommodation was a long vehicle drawn by two horses with six or eight seats running crosswise - so high a person needed a step to get aboard. It was driven up along for three miles and down along for three miles - a passenger for ten cents could hop on wherever he liked and hop off wherever he wanted to. Some pleasant evenings we boys and girls would hire the accommodation and spend the whole evening riding

and singing such songs as Jingle Bells, A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight, Daisy Bell and the Sidewalks of New York.

Charlie Giles drove a jigger which was drawn by one horse. It was a low platform slung between four wheels so that it was only about one foot off the ground. This made a jigger good for loading barrels of fish and easy for children to get a ride on as it went up and down the narrow streets.

Hoppy T. was the first town crier I remember. His real name was Walter Smith but as one leg was shorter than the other we called him Hoppy. Every day he walked the board sidewalk ringing his bell - Ding Dong-ding dong, calling out the news. A bean supper at the Methodist Church tonight at six o'clock or an entertainment in the town hall at seven o'clock. The next town crier was George Washington Ready, the biggest liar that ever was. He sometimes went to sea and came home with tales of sea serpents he had seen. It must have been the most awful thing anyone ever saw, but of course he hadn't seen it himself.

There was a town home called the Poor House - Beckey Hill lived there. She often gathered berries and peddled them to make a little money for herself. All of a sudden, Beckey was going to have a baby and she wouldn't tell who the father was. Finally she had a little boy baby so they said, "Now Beckey, you must tell us who the father is," and all she would say was, "I got him huckleberrying."

Often Portuguese men would push wheelbarrows filled with lobsters up and down the board sidewalks, hollering out "lo best ers, lob est ers, 25 cents each." Eggs were about 18 cents a dozen and round steak 18 cents a pound and the best cuts of rump about 38 cents a pound - Scull Joe didn't cost anything at all. You just took what you wanted. Scull Joe is sun dried cod fish laid out on wooden stands called flakes. Men cut pieces off with

their jack knives - we ate it raw and it was salty and delicious. The first scallops I remember, we didn't know what they were - nobody bought them although they were only 25 cents a quart.

A summer visitor said goodbye to the proprietor of a little store in our town. "You folks are all right but you need to get out and see the world," said he. "Come to New York this winter and I will show you around." The proprietor of the little store thanked him but didn't say that New York had been his home port for 25 years from which he sailed to every port from Hong Kong to Liverpool.

Captain Angus MacKay and his wife, Lottie were our very good neighbors. The captain came to P-town from Nova Scotia and by working hard soon became captain of a Grand Banks fishing vessel. He told me this story - his mother had ten children, the first one she named Angus. When the tenth baby was born she thought, what can I name this new little boy. She had run out of names so she called him Angus also as she was very fond of that name. The MacKays had three children. When they were babies and needed attention the captain would rock them and sing at the top his very deep voice, "Bringing in the Sheaves, Bringing in the Sheaves," an old hymn. It didn't sound at all like a lullaby. I wonder if the babies were soothed or so scared that they became quiet.

Down at the depot a young city fellow was buying a ticket to return to Boston after a two-week stay in P-town. "Uncle," said the young chap to the ticket man, "you certainly have some queer characters here on Cape Cod." "Un ha," said the ticket man, "they come in on every train."

One record we all thought was remarkable was made by a Brava skipper of the *Julio Costa*. In 17 hours between six in the morning until 11 at night he sailed out of the harbor to the sailing grounds, 15 miles off High-

land Light, caught 150,000 pounds of cod and made a fast run to the market at the Boston wharf and in 1917 the brig *Viola* owned by Captain John Atkins Cook brought in 1250 barrels of sperm oil and 121 pounds of ambergris all valued at \$75,000.00.

If we had a tooth filled we went at one o'clock and stayed until five.

Among my early schoolmates were many of Scotch and Portuguese descent. MacKays, MacClouds, MacKenzie, MacDonald and Mathewson, Alves, Sousa, Enos, Selva, Avilar. Their parents had come from Nova Scotia or Lisbon or the Azores or the Cape de Verde Islands. We were all friends and did not think much about our different backgrounds. The Portuguese had some customs from their old country. One was to have a chimarita - I do not know how to spell it but that is the way they pronounced it. It was a party in someone's home; the kitchen would be cleared of all furniture except the large table which was pushed to one side. Three or four men with guitars would sit on top of the table; they played and sang, making very sweet and plaintive music, beautiful but sometimes weird and sad. Those who wished to, danced in the center of the floor. Portuguese wine flowed freely so after a short time things got very lively. I loved to go to chimaritas but was not allowed to very often. My parents let me go only to the homes of a few people they knew very well. The P-town Portuguese celebrated New Year's Eve by building elaborate altars in the parlors and decorating them with fancy paper flowers and wax candles. They were lovely when the candles were lighted but invariably those lovely candles would set fire to the paper decorations. The fire would soon spread to the other parts of the house and suddenly the fire department would come to put it out.

We used to go to the seashore because it was the nicest place for children to play. We built sand castles and picked up bright pieces of glass that the waves had made smooth. We put these in the sand castles for windows and doors with walls and paths paved with pretty polished stones which we gathered. At low tide near Railroad Wharf, extending nearly to the end of the wharf, was a large sandbar. It was fun to walk barefoot and search for treasures in the little pools along the edge of the bar, starfish, horseshoe crab, tomy cod, periwinkle, concawinkle and many kinds of seaweed and little fish. Before the tide came in we gathered up all our little treasures and took them home but before long they didn't smell so good and finally we would have to throw them away.

In an old paper I have an advertisement of my father's, which says "George O. Knowles - importer of sperm, whale and cod oil - pure refined sperm oil, put up especially for use on any fine machinery - warranted a strictly pure article."

There was Barney Gould with a bit of lacking in his upper story. He was a self-appointed errand boy and expressman of the Cape. For a dime or 15 cents he would deliver a package five miles away. He always started at a dog trot and ran along the railroad tracks. "Why don't you take the train, Barney?" someone asked him. "Don't bother me, can't stop for no train," vowed Barney, galloping off.

Long ago the United States Navy maintained a group of war ships which was called the White Squadron because all were painted a dazzling white. They often came to P-town to anchor in the harbor. I stood on the town hill to watch these white ships against the dark blue water, sailing past Race Point along Wood End and around Long Point until they entered the inner harbor. It was a beautiful sight. Things were very lively in our little town while these visitors were there. The officers,

members of the crew and sailors came ashore on leave at different times, thronging the streets. Afternoons there were visiting hours - small boats manned by the sailors were sent out to take visitors back and forth from Railroad Wharf to the different ships, where members of the crew were always willing to take guests over the ship. When World War One came these beautiful ships were repainted battleship grey, so inconspicuous one could hardly notice them.

Well, beauty often has to be scrapped for safety but it is a pleasure to remember the lovely White Squadron.

Perhaps you would like to hear about the *Carrie D. Knowles*, the ill-fated vessel my father named for me. In those days they didn't christen a boat with champagne. We all went to Essex where she was built and watched her slip down the ways and stop in the shallow waters up the Essex River. For several years the *Carrie D. Knowles* had successful trips to the whaling grounds of the West Indies and the Hatteras. November to July was her longest voyage, countless whales were killed, blubber was cut and boiled aboard and gallons of oil were barreled and stored under her hatches. Then came the day of her last voyage whose mystery has never been unraveled. With Mr. Collin Stevenson as captain, she sailed January 27, 1904, intending to head directly for Dominica. By March letters began arriving from the Island, asking where she was and why she didn't arrive. At last my father gave up all hope and the families mourned their lost ones.

Then suddenly in 1909 a man claiming to be Elisha Paine, a member of the crew, arrived at St. Vincent Kingston, British West Indies. He was dressed in tattered and torn prison garb. He told a tale of his ship, *Carrie D. Knowles*, being caught in a terrible gulf storm just before reaching Dominica and for several days blown off their course south westward. At last, land was reached, an obscure port off Venezuela. The captain



managed to make port and ascertain his bearings but hardly had they heaved anchor, when they were boarded by a number of Venezuelan officers without the slightest reason or explanation, they were all ironed, taken to shore and thrown into prison, which was in a damp vault in an old stone fortress facing the harbor.

From the moment of their seizure the crew had been separated and their only means of communication was through one of the jailers, who was won over by some money which Captain Stevenson had managed to keep concealed. By means of this one thing they were able to send messages to one another but they never saw anyone except their jailers. All protests against their imprisonment was met with jeers and Paine said that whenever he asked for something he was knocked away from the cell grating by the blow of a gun or the cut of a sword. As far as he knew the crew was all still alive although the captain had been sick. Though suffering, they continued to cling to life. Paine said he effected his escape after four years of constant plotting by overpowering one of the guards who entered his cell in order to reach him in answer to his taunts. After stunning the jailer with his water jug, Paine got into the corridor but he was unable to come to the assistance of the other prisoners. He fled through dark alleys to the light and crossed an open field under a fuselage of rifle shot and made his way into a swamp. Pursued for days with soldiers at his heels most of the time, half starved, weakened by exposure, he finally almost incredibly, made his way to British territory on St. Vincent Kingston.

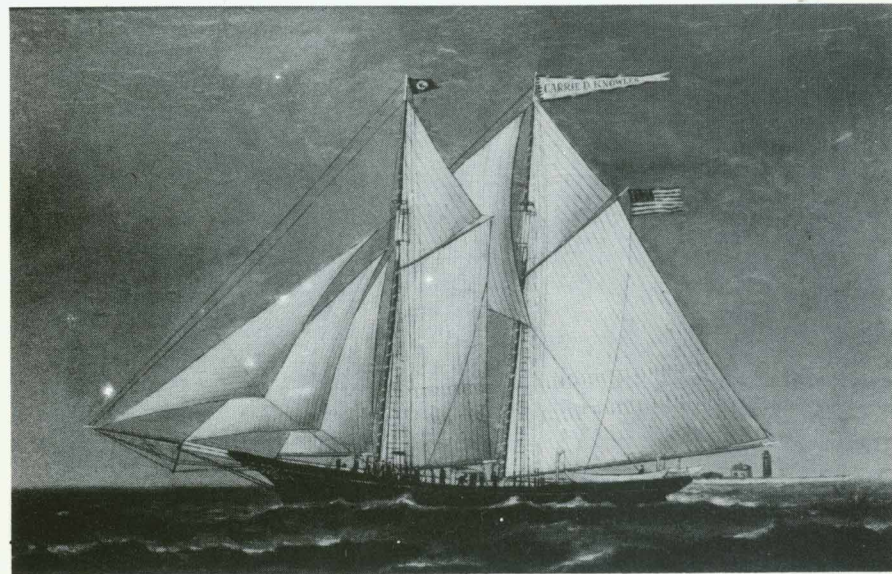
This story created the wildest excitement and it was readily believed in Kingston because it became another of the countless tales of the high-handed action of the Venezuelans under the administration of the dictator despot Cypriano Castro, the Yankee hater.

The story continues in believable fashion when it tells how the women of P-town, led by Mrs. George Knowles,

my mother, brought the matter to the attention of the United States government, asking that some action be taken at once. No word was received from the consulate at Kingston and it was firmly believed that the crew was in prison and their plight deliberately was not made known to the American consul.

Thus it happened that the disappearance of the *Carrie D. Knowles* became not only a mammoth puzzle to the state department but after its rekindled excitement died down the schooner became a member of the annals of unsolved maritime mystery.

Now I will end these recollections as my grandmother Delia Knowles would have ended by saying, "Farewell, dear children until the morning of the resurrection."



# PROVINCETOWN

at the turn of the century

