

Her memories are part of a 'Living History'

PROVINCETOWN — Last winter Provincetown City Spirit, a Bicentennial project, in conjunction with the local library, began what they called a "Living History" series. City Spirit staff members contacted several of the older Provincetown citizens and invited them to talk informally before a small group of people about their lives and Provincetown.

The former Alternative restaurant donated the space and the library the tape recorder, and the City Spirit staff transcribed the tapes.

One of the persons who volunteered to share her experiences with the group was Grace Collinson, director of Provincetown's senior citizen programs.

The following article is a part of her story:

I came to this country in 1917. At that time there was a great exodus from Europe coming here and the majority of these people landed in New York, but the line in which I came stopped in at Providence. From there my father brought us here to live in Provincetown.

When I was a youngster of 13 or 14 I had a terrific opportunity and a great curiosity to learn much about this land that my mother and father didn't quite seem to accept 100 per cent. I wore Portuguese clothes, I had to speak the Portuguese language and I lived in the Portuguese neighborhood where only Portuguese was spoken.

In this town the Portuguese were divided into two factions: those who were continental and came from Portugal proper lived on Standish and Alden Streets, and those who came from the Azores and were insular people lived in the West End.

The West Enders came long before the continentals came. But the continentals always looked down upon the Islanders, and because they were educated (they had attended not public schools but tutorial schools) they lorded themselves as being superior to those who came from the Islands of St. Michael and so forth. It reached such a point that the Portuguese girls could not marry because their parents frowned upon mixing the two factions. But eventually that disappeared.

I "baby sat" although at that time there were no babysitting jobs as we know them today. But there was old lady sitting. The women who lived alone and didn't like to sleep along hired girls of 13 or 14 to sleep in their homes. In order to entice you, they told the most beautiful stories.

I was fortunate in being taken by the hand into the closets and parlors that were shut off from the rest of the house, and I saw lots of things hanging upon the shelves or sitting on the tables and terrific mementoes that people had collected from their grandfathers and great grandfathers in plying the trade from here to China and all parts of the world. And that curiosity of mine paid off because I absorbed a great, great deal.

Now, in order for you to understand a little, I don't think the Pilgrims were the first ones who wrote down that they were here.

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Truro washed its hands, couldn't stand, oh the sin that was going on in this place. They went up to the State House and said "We don't want anything to do with them."

The nucleus of New England, the beginnings of New England, took place at Plymouth. And from Plymouth the pilgrims went to a place called Duxbury up near Boston. From there they went to Sandwich which became the oldest

town on the Cape. From there another group from Duxbury or Plymouth filtered into Yarmouth and on to Nauset which today we call Eastham and Orleans. Finally a few petered down into Provincetown.

At that time there were no streets in Provincetown, but possibly one very hard packed dirt road which later turned out to be Commercial Street.

They had the need to go other places. It's a wanderlust. You could feel it in the people who came to Provincetown.

They didn't like to stay here, so they founded a little colony we call Race Run. That is where the New Beach is that is called Herring Cove, and if you look further, there's a light and at that time a community was out there. The water would come in, and the water from there, go behind the Visitor's Center, way on the back of the dunes. The boats used to go up that path, and so a bridge had to be built across that dike in order to go into the community.

I became acquainted with the first teacher they ever had who used to go out there through the Race Road which exists to this day. And he told me that everybody in that family was deaf. The two daughters were deaf, the mother was deaf, the father was deaf, and each one tried to outshout the other.

The community out there was made up mostly of people who used to have pilot boats. You have to understand that this area was full of sandbars and very treacherous shoals. And so these pilots would guide ships right around the harbor past these obstacles. Later on some pilots did them wrong in Boston and tried to cheat them and so forth so they disbanded and that was the beginning of the end of that colony out there.

Actually, it was not called a colony, but it was called a district. So you find Provincetown in districts. You had three distinct districts. The one at Race Run, one in Provincetown and then they developed another one over across the harbor at the narrowest point which called Long Point.

The district across the harbor developed because there were some people here who were not exactly satisfied with the way the people were living in Provincetown or Truro. They didn't obey the law of the Sabbath. They spat on the

sidewalk. Somebody's wife was shacking up with somebody else. So they just did not like what was going on.

The people in Truro and Wellfleet who didn't like what was going on in those towns joined them with the result that just about 1840 a third district was founded. The people who lived there were very self-sufficient. They had a school and they had a recreation hall to hold town meetings in, and they paid taxes.

But things didn't pan out as well as they expected and the water got brackish, the water kept coming in on both sides and they were afraid they might wake up someday and their homes would be underwater. So they came back in 1866.

Now, most of these houses were built in the 1840s and 1850s and they were transported across the harbor on scows, or what they call flat boats which you sometimes see on a river. This is how they floated them across. And the people were right in the houses and couldn't care less. They would stir their soup and go on knitting while they rode across the harbor. But it was absolutely safe because halfway across there was an island where they could if they needed to.

In another chapter of the area's history Collinson talks about "some entertaining things that went on between Truro and Provincetown.")

Truro washed its hands of Provincetown and the state gave Truro the authority to be over Provincetown.

Truro washed its hands, couldn't stand, on the sin that was going on in this place. They went up to the State House and said "We don't want anything to do with them." They wanted to be dirty. So this is what they did. They released all their pigs, their cows, their sheep on the shores of Provincetown. And so Provincetown went to the state and said they didn't want anything to do with Truro so the boundary was made where the Patrician shop is located. Then, because they weren't satisfied, the boundary was extended to where the Green Moster is today. That remained the boundary until they finally decided to move it to where it is today.

Later, down where Herring Cove was, there were some fishermen who can there, lived there the built shacks. It was easier to live there. All they had to do was go out fishing and bring the fish back.

Because they were lonely men they obeyed nature more or less and had camp followers — women came from Boston and probably some good homes in Provincetown, Truro and Wellfleet. And they shacked out there. They used to have a hell of a good time. They played music, they danced, they lived it up and they had such a happy town at this section that the other section called it Hell Town.

If you go swimming at that beach you can still find the pilings left from the old wharves that they used to be there. History does not tell us when that ceased to be. We only know that it's mentioned, but not in great detail. They just say they were a sinful lot.