

Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, NPS
An Oral History Interview with Jeanette Woolley Bower
Granddaughter of U.S.L.S.S. Capt. Joel Woolley (Keeper 1900-1916)
Lived at Spermaceti Cove 1910s-1920s
Interviewed by Bette Allen
July 30, 1975
Transcribed by Mary Rasa, 2011



Image from the 1907 wreck of the *Phinney*. Captain Joel Woolley and James Moran pulling in a victim on the breeches buoy.



Spermaceti Cove Life-Saving Station crew and family members.
Photos courtesy of NPS/Gateway NRA

Editor's notes in parenthesis ()

(Editor's note: This interview is a conversation while walking through the Spermaceti Cove Life-Saving Station and outside the building with Mrs. Bower, an unidentified person and Bette Allen. Much of the interview is difficult to understand.

Mrs. Bower's Grandfather was Captain Joel Woolley and her Father was Morgan Woolley. In her other interview, she explained that her Father and Uncles were also members of the crew at the Station and she was here in summers from a child in the 1910s to many years later including after her Grandfather was retired.)

JWB: I'm very glad you left this. The design up there, but these were very shiny like this and this was a darker brown cherry. That too, was just a pretty wood which was alright.

BA: What was in here, Jeannette?

JWB: This is the bathrooms. (laughter) It wasn't the bathroom. I remember having baths in galvanized tubs down in the kitchen. I remember having clams for breakfast, clams for lunch, clams for dinner. (laughter) Then, there was the season when we had to pick beach plums and can and can and can.

BA: They are going to be ripe in a few weeks.

JWB: They talk about holly and Christmas trees here and I don't remember you know, that being a big part of it.

BA: Really.

JWB: (inaudible) The rooms, my room, the walls came down sort of slanty.

BA: Well, you slept upstairs. Now when you come off to the left that's where Brookdale had all of its equipment. This is what's left of it. (inaudible)

JWB: And then, I mentioned I think when it got very, very cold we must have had someplace where we lived in Water Witch (Highlands). This was more of a summer place.

BA: Well, that's over in Highlands. You were only here in summer time?

JWB: We were living here year round. By the time we started school on the mainland I would go to Highlands. I would go to the Highlands. But everybody would come here in summer. And we used to have to go to over to Water Witch to get the ice that was so important and pick salt hay so that would keep the ice from melting.

Unknown voice: Oh really. But couldn't you use the salt out here?

JWB: No. Mr. Archer used to cut the salt. (inaudible) When we went to school, I always tell Irene this story, I would never tell where we lived. So they pretty much

decided where we lived. So we were always called clam diggers. It got so that I would never tell anybody where I lived until I went to college. Someone discovered, "Oh, I know where Sandy Hook is." Someone discovered that they could come over here in summer and I had all the friends in the world. And being a family it just went on and on. And you can't dig clams anymore. They are all polluted. Also there was a period, you know we had to have wells for fresh water. (inaudible) Well, aren't the experimenting with them to see if they (inaudible)

BA: I'll show you where they are doing that.

JWB: What was this? Accessible to the (inaudible)

Unknown voice: So you want to go up? (in the tower at Spermaceti Cove Life-Saving Station)

JWB: My Grandpa was he was very... I remember he used to hug us. I want to know where his desk was because his desk had a roll top. Fascinating. And I have pictures of him sitting at his desk. From his big old roll top. (climbing the tower) Most of the storms came from this way. There was always a lookout.

Unknown voice: They watched up here?

JWB: Well, they would watch the boats. They used to keep an eye out for the boats. And it was either a dumb captain or something that happened in a storm that would make a sand bars. All the boat accidents were just boats that got on sandbars.

Unknown voice: And then they would just tip right over.

JWB: And I guess the secret of the story is that every time the boats would break up, all the things that would come off the boats were stored somewhere around here. And they would build their homes over there. (laughter) The table would come off such and such a boat.

Unknown voice: They were all salvaged. Everything that came ashore was rightfully the finders, right?

JWB: Yeah. Still, I remember the time that the *Morro Castle* came up down at Asbury Park. That was long after this. People just thought, still thought that was their right and it was not.

Unknown voice: No more.

JWB: No. I don't think they could do it anymore, honey. The shipping company claims it.

Unknown voice: What's theirs was theirs. Well, these were the old days.

JWB: You have to see this without cars and no beach umbrellas.

EH: Yeah.

JWB: And no parking lots. And much more of, it looked more like this going up that way.

Unknown voice: Tell them about how you said your Mother said you were off limits for...you couldn't go anyplace except across the bay because it was so over grown and wild.

JWB: Yeah. I would get lost. Yeah. Some of the contours have changed but we had a nice beach out here.

EH: All the way across then? (inaudible)

JWB: But we were able to go down there and over there. But I could still get lost. Lost and get poison ivy.

BA: Oh the poison ivy is still virulent around here.

JWB: But the lookout here and all the trees was more of the look. Also this was not joined with the land at the time.

BA: Oh wow.

JWB: Well it wasn't. We were considered islanders here. That's why we had the boat. And then a couple of years ago there was some discussion about making an inlet. And I remember they came to my Dad (Morgan Woolley). He said, "If you build an inlet there this whole thing here would wash out." And they agreed. Something about this water. The way the water picks up the sand and rocks. Fascinating geological.

BA: Well, it was here before. The inlet was there when the island was there.

JWB: Yes. I think the island is filled up. But there is something about the way the sand is laying down now. If they built the inlet there which would have meant it would connect two, what do you call them, jetties?

BA: Yes. The sand is flowing south to north. (inaudible)

JWB: Yeah. It would have washed it way up there. And they came to ask my Dad where the wells were.

BA: Wells?

JWB: Well, we had to have water.

Unknown voice: Didn't you say a couple of uncles got sick and died because the water was bad?

JWB: Yeah. Some wells were...

BA: You had to go out and get it.

JWB: That was real serious.

BA: How old were they?

Unknown voice: What was the matter with them? Was there typhoid in them?

JWB: They did. They got the typhoid. This particular uncle that is in the hospital now. He wasn't supposed to live beyond twenty. He has lived longer than any of your brothers.

BA: May we go outside?

JWB: Sure. I was trained well. I never thought to go out there.

BA: Really?

JWB: You have to remember the era of attitude towards children then. (inaudible in the wind outside the building) I know what, we had to leave here during World War II. There were no women out here during World War II. That must have been when we went up, could you show me where Water Witch was? It must have been right over there.

BA: Over there. I don't know I'm not from the area.

Unknown voice: You see where that condominium sticks up like a sore thumb there. Water Witch is this way from there, Jeannette. It's south of there. Because where that condominium is, that's at the top of Scenic Drive. You come down a little road past that. And that's where Water Witch is. That Long John's that restaurant is right about there. Pointing, just straight across.

JWB: The other night I was looking at that little patch there.

Unknown voice: No, that's Plum Island.

JWB: Oh. Beach plums. (laughter)

Unknown voice: Do you want to go all the way around? They must have had a home here. You see the home, the chimney there. Right around here. Jeanette, (inaudible)

JWB: Well, somebody had to be always on watch. (inaudible)
I have my Grandfather's clock and a ships bell and some other things that were down here.

BA: What a lovely breeze.

Unknown voice: All you need here are a couple of dry martinis. (laughter)

JWB: During that era, it took so much time to get every meal done. It took so much time to get the laundry done. Nobody had time to go swimming. (inaudible) We were always working.

BA: Where were the wells?

JWB: Down in there.

(inaudible)

JWB: No. They were the fresh water though. That's what determined that this place could be built here, when the engineers... And that really interested me because look how it wasn't very far from the other end of the island.

BA: You know we found some freshwater ponds.

JWB: Oh.

BA: Down at tip down, down further close to the tip.

JWB: Look, there's a tern's nest up there.

BA: No, not all the way down at the end, but in the Fort area.

JWB: What have you people decided was the geology. It can't just be sandstone holding this up. It must be pure granite.

BA: The granite that they used is...

JWB: I mean down under the earth. What's holding this land up here? I don't think it could be sandstone that's doing it. It has to be a real hard...I really feel that way don't you?

BA: I don't know.

JWB: Because it would wash away.

BA: I heard it was built up from a sandbar.

JWB: Oh yeah. That's the top of whatever. The bottom is like the Hawaiian Islands. They are on top of, they are built on top of the volcano. But that was a heck of a lot of animals that had to grow there first. You know I will take the time today. I want to go see Uncle Ernie. I want to get into his house (inaudible) But my Grandmother and Grandfather, and all of us standing out, right down there. I will try to get them tomorrow. Now, Colonel Hayes got a hold of them a couple of years ago and took pictures of the pictures. He should have something and then Uncle Ernie (Woolley) took them back to his home and they are on the wall there. (inaudible) So you want to know what year that was? That must been 1915? That was quite large. How long was your Grandfather here before you Father got married? How old was my Father when he got married? 20? Very young. This looks to me as if it's gonna be preserved. When I was here last year, not last year, a couple of years ago and the lifeguards were here. I thought my gosh the place will never survive. (inaudible) I looked around and looked around and my pictures were in Freehold. I never got over here to this farmhouse. I knew that was going to be the film this year. We make films. Sandy Hook is I think part of the story. (inaudible) Where the whole British fleet was can you imagine that?

END OF INTERVIEW