

Title: Key West Oral History Interview with Charlotte Haskins

INTERVIEWEE: Charlotte Haskins

INTERVIEWER: Amelia Cabot for the Key West Women's Club

TRANSCRIBER: Andrea Benitez

TRANSCRIBED: August 21, 2007

INTERVIEW LENGTH: 00:17:33

Mary Malone: Just a minute, I'll tell you.

Cabot: This is another in the series of tape recordings of Key Westers who are contributing to the project entitled, 'Key West As It Was', sponsored by the Key West Women's Club. Mrs. May Malone and Mrs. Annette Lee are chairmen of this bicentennial project. Today, we are interviewing Mrs. Charlotte Haskins who will tell us interesting anecdotes of her life as a young Conch. Charlotte, I've always listened with interest to your tales of your growing-up days in the years between 1916 and 1924. Where shall we begin so that we can get an idea of life in your early years?

Haskins: Well Amelia, one of my most vivid memories is watching the boys on our street playing 'Baby in the Hat' and 'klee-klee'- the favorite after-supper games. Of course, 'Baby' always preceded 'klee-klee' because not everyone had supper at the same time in those days, and 'Baby' could be played by three participants. All one needed to play was a cap for each player and a stocking ball.

C: What on earth was a stocking ball?

H: Well, it, Amelia, it was made from a ladies long cotton stocking. By twisting and turning from the toe to the top, a remarkable round ball was produced. The top rim of the stocking was sewn to the outside of the ball.

C: Well, how was the game played, Charlotte?

H: Well, caps of each player were placed in a row in the street. One player was designated as 'It'. He held the stocking ball and went from cap to cap deciding on his target. When he saw a player several yards away from his cap, he would deposit the ball in that unlucky player's cap. This player had to retrieve the ball and try to sock another player before he went past the goal line; well, I guess it was about fifteen yards away. But if he succeeded, that player would then be 'It', and a pebble was placed in his hat. If 'It' failed to hit a player, a pebble was placed in his cap and he continued to be 'It'.

C: Well, why were the pebbles placed in the caps?

H: Well, the first player to receive ten pebbles had to run to (Hot?) Alley and this was a lot of boys with small branches who proceeded to pelt the victim.

C: Well, how long did these games last?

H: We were allowed to play on school nights until nine p.m. At that time, we were promptly dispatched to bed by our parents, who were gathered on the open porches enjoying in the cool night breezes. Games in the street were on the agenda during every weeknight except Friday, but that was our night for pudding parties.

C: What do you mean by a 'pudding party'?

H: Well, each pudding partygoer would take a pound of cookies or candy to the designated house where the party was being held. He proceeded to the dining room and deposited or put in the pound of refreshments while his host or hostess provided the red water.

C: Exactly what was 'red water'?

H: Red water was actually raspberry syrup, Amelia, mixed with water and poured over cracked ice.

C: What happened at these parties?

H: We played such games as 'Clapping In and Clapping Out', 'Forfeits', and we sang along with a Victrola or a player piano. It was considered a great honor to wind the Victrola or pump the player piano. When the pumper's legs got tired, everyone jumped at the chance to take his place.

C: Well, what other interesting experiences occurred in your growing-up days?

H: Growing up in the early decades of the twentieth century was do-it-yourself games in pastimes. One of the 'must' items on a Saturday morning was a walk underneath the plank boards.

C: What do you mean by the 'plank boards'?

H: It was a wooden sidewalk covering a six-foot ditch which drained the highest area of Key West known as 'Solares Hill'. It ran east from Southard to Grinnell and it turned northward at Grinnell down to Fleming Street. A large, underground pipe at Fleming drained the ditch to the water's edge. At any rate, every Saturday morning, the neighborhood boys and some of the girls- me included- would walk under the sidewalk, searching diligently for coins some unlucky passerby had dropped through the openings in the sidewalk. What a joy when you located a nickel or a dime! Although we earned money selling condensed milk cans to coffee shops and sold alligator pear seeds to Mr. Clark on the corner, the coins found under the plank board were highly treasured, for they were supposed to bring us luck.

C: Did the coins really bring you luck, Charlotte?

H: Well, if every one of the boys in our neighborhood- the Uptown Conch Gang- found a coin on Saturday, that was a signal to go after the Rocky Road Savages and usually, they won the battle that day. Whether the coins were lucky, or the idea of being lucky gave the boys added strength, that's hard to say.

C: Well, who were the Rocky Road Savages?

H: They were a gang of boys who lived east of Truman Avenue. Of course, Truman Avenue originally was named a business street, but Conchs had early nicknamed it 'Rocky Road'. The boys were called 'savages' because uptown Conch boys considered them uncouth and uncivilized for they sometimes used sticks and stones in their battles instead of fists.

C: I can't help thinking about your remark: selling alligator pear seeds. I've heard of others doing the same thing. What did they do with these seeds?

H: Ethea Stricker bought pear seeds in the late-twenties and she says she shipped hers to Belle Glade and Plant City. I know Mr. Clark sold his seeds to growers to Naranja and Homestead. These seeds were planted and became the avocado groves which are now in and near Homestead. But Amelia, my most delightful chore was to pay the weekly bill at the corner grocery store where the family had tipped or credited all week.

C: Why was it considered a delightful chore?

H: Because when I paid the bill, the grocer always handed me a contra bag full of goodies: candy, fruit, nuts, and cookies.

C: Well, what do you know about the word 'cuntra'? Where did it originate?

H: I have heard the custom started in small Cuban groceries. When the customers presented his bill, the shopkeeper murmured "La cuenta"- meaning 'bill'. When the customer paid the bill, the grocer gave the customer a bag of goodies- a token of appreciation for his trade. This custom was adopted by English storekeepers, and the Spanish word 'cuenta' was corrupted by the English into the term 'cuntra'.

C: Do you remember other delightful chores?

H: I surely do, Amelia. I often have a feeling of nostalgia for the good old days when my mother sent me to buy fish for our dinner.

C: How was buying fish in those days different from today?

H: When we bought fish in my youth, we always went to Peter's dock. This was a small dock at the foot of Front Street. It was lined with small boats, and beside each boat was a fish car.

C: What was a fish car?

H: This was a slatted rectangular box about six by six and three feet deep. It floated in the water and was secured to the dock by ropes. The fisherman's catch would be imprisoned in the car. The buyer would look the catch over, point to the fish or crawfish desired, then the fisherman would dip those selected from the car, scale them, clean them, and tie them on a string. This string was for easy carrying. A mutton snapper or a hogfish for a family of five costs seventy-five cents. Pan fish, such as grunts and yellowtail, were three for a dime, or thirty cents a dozen.

C: How different from today. I went to Pete's place on Duval Street the other day and got jewfish for \$1.79 a pound. Now, why was this dock called 'Peter's dock'?

H: Because actually, Peter Roberts was responsible for the main attraction on the dock: jewfish. Peter would start each day by skinning as many jewfish as he thought he would sell. He would pack them in a wooden icebox, cover them with chopped ice, and then he'd store them in a wooden shed adjacent to the dock. Peter would cut the jewfish-- Peter would cut the jewfish in a waist-high wooden table on the open dock. The table contained a leather moneybag, a scale, several knives, a whetstone, a bucket, and a scrub brush.

C: Well didn't the cutting of fish attract flies?

H: Strange as it may seem, but they didn't. After each sale, Peter would get his scrub brush, his bucket of seawater, and really scour that table. You know, I often get fish-hungry for some of Peter's jewfish steaks, and when I think of jewfish, I invariably think of Conch nicknames.

C: Well, I can't see the connection between jewfish and Conch nicknames.

H: Well, you would if you'd lived in a neighborhood where you could hear the boys shouting all day, "Jewfish! Jewfish!" Of course, they meant Earl Adams, retired clerk of the Circuit Court and a writer for the *Key West Citizen* who once lived in our neighborhood.

C: Well, nicknames are an interesting facet of old Key Westers. Do you recall any others?

H: I surely do. My brother, Charles Lund, is always called 'Commie'. He got his nickname while he's on an encampment in Fort Myers with the boy scouts. He was reading aloud the early features on a movie billboard and he says, "Charlie Chaplin in a Commie" instead of saying, "Charlie Chaplin in a Comedy" so 'Commie' he's been ever since. My younger brother was called 'Ah-ah' because when he was learning to talk, he couldn't pronounce 'Arthur', it came out 'Ah-ah'.

C: [laughs] What was some of the other nicknames?

H: Prominent in my memory, Amelia, are boys who were named after food, such as 'Old Bread', 'Fried Rice', 'Egg Pie', 'Coffee', 'Raisin Duff', and '(Tutu?)'. Raisin Duff got his name because he smelled the delicious aroma of a duff cooking and exclaimed, "Raisin duff, I can't get enough. Mama, make some more".

C: [laughs] Now-- that's funny. Now, please explain what a duff is.

H: A duff, to a Conch, means a boiled cake, very similar to English plum pudding. It was made by mixing cake batter with raisins, guavas, or other native fruit. It was enclosed in a cloth bag, which was then immersed into boiling water. When the done-- when it was done, it was cut while hot and a delicious sauce made from stiffly beaten eggs laced with brown sugar and flavorant. This was poured over the hot duff.

C: Makes me hungry. You mentioned 'Tutu', Charlotte. Was that a food also?

H: No, Amelia. Tutu got his name because he opened his mother's pot while she was cooking stewed fish and (dumcondies?). This caused the (dumcondies?) to fall and his mother approached him with a strap. In his fright instead of saying "True, mama, I thought it was cabbage", he said "Tutu, mama", and from then on, he was known as "Tutu".

C: Well, I presume that (dumcondies?) were dumplings.

H: Yes, Amelia. But they were not dropped or soft dumplings, but dumplings which had been kneaded a little. Well, they were hard on the inside, but soft and fluffy, very tasty and light.

C: I know you lived in the heart of Conch town, Charlotte, but were all of your neighbors of English descent?

H: No, because our backyard adjoined the backward of a Rabbi and a Cuban family. We often watched the Rabbi's congregation waiting in line in Griffin Lane, which now adjuncts (DePoo's?) Hospital. Each member had a chicken, ready to be killed according to Jewish custom. We would peer through the high board fence to see the Rabbi kill the chicken, hang them on the clothesline until all blood had drained from them.

C: But what about your Cuban neighbors?

H: The family consisted of father, mother, daughter, and baby brother. The daughter was my age and we were friendly, but I attended Harris School and she went to San Carlos School.

C: The San Carlos School has always intrigued me. Do you anything about its history?

H: As you are aware, Amelia, the San Carlos School was housed in the second floor of the San Carlos Theater. I understand it was subsidized by the Cuban government for the purpose of keeping alive the Spanish language, old Cuban customs, and to teach Cuban history. I've also been told that an act of the Florida Legislature in 1895 assigned an English teacher to the school; she was paid by the Monroe County School Board. This teacher was to make sure that the pupils could speak, read, and write English. It wasn't until 1964 that the English teacher was withdrawn. Alice Roberts, the last one and a native Conch, taught English there for quite a few years.

C: In reviewing the past, what else is deeply impressed on your memory?

H: One of the most exciting events in the six hundred block of Grinnell Street was to go to the nearby cemetery-'graveyard' we called it in those days- to watch a Negro funeral.

C: And why was this so exciting?

H: I guess it was the (pump?), the ceremony, the marching, the music, the drums. Most funerals had dozens of honorary pallbearers. The women wore white dresses, white hats, and long white gloves. They had a broad band of blue satin ribbon extended from the right shoulder to the left waist. The men were all in black with a blue sash around the waist, somewhat like a cummerbund. They all marched in cadence to a famous funeral march played by a drum and cornet band. The band was dressed in ornate blue and gold uniforms. Members of the deceased's family,

including many nieces and nephews, marched, too. They were dressed in white or black. They all had a broad black band worn around the left upper arm.

C: I imagine most of these memories were from your pre-teens. What do you recall about your teens?

H: First and foremost, Amelia, it was Conch Night. Saturday night was called 'Conch Night' because almost all native Conchs descended on Duval on Main Street. Dressed in our best finery, we would parade up one side for about two blocks, cross over to the other, and parade down the other side. We stopped again and again to greet friends, flirt a little with the opposite sex. The grown-ups were meanwhile stopping their friends and catching up on the latest gossip. Before going home, we visited an ice cream parlor. My favorite was (Lucy Nanny's), how about telling us something about the delicious taste of your father's ice cream, Amelia?

C: Well, I think that his ice cream tasted so good because he used mostly cream in his ice cream. He had the contract for the Navy and the Coast Guard and the Army and they required that he use ten percent butterfat in his ice creams. So-- and then of course, with this rich vanilla ice cream, he used to make what is called a 'Florida Special' and it was rich vanilla ice cream with tropical fruits such as guava, mango, tamarind, soursop, sugar-apple in the centers and then with the same tropical fruits, he would make what is now called 'sherbets', but they were called 'Italian ices' and they were very delicious.

H: After our trip to the ice cream parlor, we would go up Duval Street and shop at the Monkey Man. Monkey Man was an Italian whose first name was Frank. He had come to Key West with a hand organ and a monkey. He later operated his fruit and vegetable market on Duval Street near Petronia. He spread his wares over the sidewalk and he sat in front of his store in a chair. A big moneybag clutched in his hand, looking (for all the world?) like a bloated, impassive Buddha. His fresh fruit and vegetables were the cheapest in town and he stayed open until midnight in order to accommodate the late shoppers.

C: Charlotte, I'd like to tell you a tale I once heard about the Monkey Man. It seems that the young men, whenever they wanted a watermelon, they would get a fishing line with a hook. They'd hook a watermelon and then start pulling it and Monkey Man would sit there and call the man that worked for him (Melusa?), "Melusa! The melon is walking away!" [all laugh]

H: I remember one, too, Amelia. One day, Monkey Man was sitting outside of his store and a police, which was on the Duval Street beat, came by, and he looked down and he saw a basket of very beautiful peaches so he picked the biggest one he could find and started eating it and walked by and says, "Hi Frank", and he walked on until he passed Petronia Street and just as he got past Petronia Street, a little black urchin who hadn't seen him saw Frank is sitting out there with his moneybag, so he rushes up, grabs the moneybag, and starts running and of course, Frank makes an outcry, the policeman turns around and starts going after the boy, so Frank turns, looks, says, "Melusa! Melusa! Look! He's chasing the robber!" [all laugh]

C: Well, thank you so much, Charlotte. Your narrative has surely depicted the many changes that have occurred in Key West through the years.

H: Yes, Amelia. Key West is an island which man is ever-changing, but let us hope the magic of its clear blue sky, its crystal turquoise waters, and its magnificent sunsets may never be despoiled by man.

M: It can't be. Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW