

Title: Key West Oral History Interview with Mrs. Wm. Agnes Sawyer

INTERVIEWEE: Mrs. Wm. Agnes Sawyer

INTERVIEWER: Mary Malone and Unknown for the Key West Women's Club

TRANSCRIBER: Andrea Benitez

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Malone: --who was Agnes Sawyer. She is living now in an apartment surrounded by the beautiful things that were in the house that she was born in on Frances Street. The house got-- was so large, that it was so difficult to get service that just last summer, she moved into this apartment, but she has been in Key West for many years and I'd like to have her say something about her parents, first of all, where they came from.

Sawyer: Well, my mother was born in Key West and her mother, and I'm not sure but I think her father- my mother's father-- and my grand-- my mother's father was born in Harbour Island--  
[audio cuts off]

Malone: --the cent-- bicentennial.  
[inaudible]

S: Yes, two hundred years. Now what?

Unknown: How did your family first get here?

S: Well, as I said, my mother's people were here for generations, but my father came over here from a small island near Nassau when he was a young man, very young man.

M: What was the name of the island?

S: Spanish Wells. It's a popular, very beautiful little island. A lot of Key Westers go there.

U: What did he come here for? To work or to-- what?

S: To work. It seems like in the Bahamas at one time, they flourished, they made money, they shipped pineapples to New York, and then of course, there was the--

M: What?

U: [inaudible]

S: No, the--

U: [inaudible]

S: No, the-- when the-- shipwrecks.

M: The wrecking.

S: Yes, the wrecking. They did a good deal of that over there. Well then-- anyway, there wasn't much to do in the-- on the islands and my father came here and he was most-- as most men on the Bahama Islands, he was a ship-builder.

And he started out building the-- what we call 'The Big Fire' in Key West, I think it was 1886. Then he had three crews as he told me of carpenters trying to build homes for the people that had lost their homes on the lower part of Key West.

U: Where was the ship-building being done on the island, do you know?

S: Well here in Key West, down on the waterfront around Curry Sons' docks and--

M: There where A&B Lobster House is.

S: Yes, and then some peop-- some people built smaller things, you know, in their-- on their property.

U: Like they still do.

S: Yes, and carried them down. And then from that-- do you want me to tell more about my father? [laughs]

M: Well, you know, I heard that he built a recently restored Armory--

S: Yes.

M: --on White Street.

S: Well, at-- he-- he built this-- I think it was in 1900, he built the Armory. Has been restored, and it's really a very beautiful place.

U: Very unusual building.

S: Yes, the construction, it's really unusual. The-- I went up on the third floor and I was astounded at the size of the beams, you know, the overhead construction. And this is one thing I was very proud of- the archives in Washington, I found out the other day that there were three that-- from Key West and one was Fort Taylor, the other one was what we call the '(Grace-Kempt?) Home' on Duval Street and my father built that, and the Armory was also chosen and he built that.

U: Oh, how nice.

S: That's right, two out of three.

U: That is real good.

S: Mm-hmm.

U: Well, isn't there something special about the Armory, the ventilation in it or something? The way he constructed it, it is almost a natural air-conditioner or something to it?

S: Well, I didn't know about that but I did wonder about that big arch up above, you know, that held up two floors up above that. I thought that was really wonderful.

U: Well, I didn't know. I'd understood that somehow the construction of it made it (?) the ventilation in it that you didn't really suffer from air-conditioning in there as you did from some other buildings.

S: Well, it has a great many windows and these little cupolas on the top of-- not the widow walk exactly, but two little cupolas that are very-- it think they are very fascinating.

M: Now, let's hear about your home, the house itself.

S: Well--

M: You know, I've always wondered how people got along with just the water that contained in the cistern.

S: Mm-hmm. Well, as far back as I can remember, that was lots before we had electric pumps. In our yard, we had first a wooden windmill. It had two tanks, one for well water and one for cistern water and the wind would just blow and then when it ran over, we'd go out and cut it off. Then later on, my father put up a metal one and then the-- then we got electric motors and, of course, then the windmills were taken down. And there were great many people that wanted running water upstairs; that was about the only way that they could get it. And there were a great many windmills in Key West.

M: There were.

U: [inaudible]

S: Yes, I was--

U: [inaudible]

S: Yes, I was over at Ms. Falk's last night and I was asking her did she remember different ones. I just took it for granted, you know, and I don't remember. And she said, "Yes, there were a great many in Key West."

U: Didn't they heat their water also by pumping it to the rooftops and letting the sun warm it?

S: No, they didn't do much of that. I think that started out just before air-conditioners and I think that in Miami they did a lot of that and then-- I don't think there was much that down here in Key West.

U: I didn't know. I know that some houses today (?) there's a unit. That's not a very old site.

S: Mm-hmm. But, you know, that wasn't done years ago. And this-- speaking about getting materials and food stuff and everything, the Mallory boats came in here. They had stopped from Galveston, New Orleans, Key West, New York, and then returned the same way and they brought-- most everything that was sold in Key West was brought from New York. And I can remember my father had a ship chandler store fitting out the sponge boats. That was before we thought of shrimp. And we had--

M: Well, now, explain that, before your father shrimped.

S: Well--

M: They didn't have shrimp--

S: No. No. And that just happened, I think, World War Two. Some young man from St. Augustine or Jacksonville found the shrimp and I-- through Thompson- the company- they-- he knew where to go to find the shrimp. So--

U: This is the golden shrimp, a little different from the others were--

S: Yes. Yes.

U: -- being golden.

S: And then it became quite an industry here. And the--

U: Before this, though, they did do sponge fishing--

S: Oh--

U: Did they have people from Greece in here much? I understood there was some Greeks in here--

S: Well, that came later. At first, the people around the Bahamas and the Florida Keys, they-- off of their large boat, they went out in little dinghies and they had glasses-- a bucket with a glass bottom and they had the sponge hooks, and they took everything from the bottom; they never stepped on the bed. Well later on, the Greeks came, many, many years later, and it was claimed that that destroyed the beds. And then so there wasn't-- then, I think around Cedar Keys on the west coast, then--

U: [inaudible]

S: Yes. There was more of the sponge industry. But at one time here, it was quite a rich thing, that and of course the cigars.

U: I understand the sponges are coming back. But some of the environmental marine science people and so forth have been (?) and the sponges are beginning to come back. If they're not overly taken too much--

S: Yes.

U: --they hope they're going to repopulate themselves, and that would be nice. They're hard to find and nothing takes the place of a real sponge. [both speak at same time]

S: No, as a real one. And then of course, they were used for--and then they started making the synthetic sponge. That killed the sponge-- that is, the sale of them, a great deal. But as you say, a nice soft real sponge is--

U: Well, I still think it's divine.

S: Yes, it is.

M: What about food? Where did you get the food? Where did it come from?

S: Everything came-- it had to come in by sail boat or from up the keys or really, there was no Miami in those early days. It was Cutler and Coconut Grove, Lemon City. And then all the canned goods and things like that, of course, they were shipped from New York. And in the early, early days, sponge-- like when they built the towers here, they were built with the bricks that came, I think, from Charleston. You know--

M: You mean the forts?

S: Yes.

M: East and West Martello Towers.

S: We called-- you know, we always said the 'first' and 'second' tower but really the forts.

U: May I ask you something about, let's say, it the (line?) of the fruits or the vegetation here? Do you know anything about the type of vegetation-- was it very heavily wooded with the tropical trees like the mahoganies? And have they been basically cut back? Or is it more wooded now, or what is it?

S: Well, it seems like when I was child, when people had large lots, they mainly grew fruit trees. For instance, there was one fruit, the tiese [ties a.k.a. egg fruit], that I never see it, you don't--

U: What is it?

S: It's a yellow fruit [chuckles], beautiful, beautiful yellow and it has black seeds- about five black seeds- and it's very mealy, but it-- most people don't like it.

M: I think there's one in the Audubon house.

S: Yeah? And the--

U: What did it taste like? An orange? A peach? A--

S: No, to me it tastes like the yolk of a boiled egg.

M: That's exactly what they call it sometimes--

S: They do? [laughs]

M: --the egg tree. [laughs]

S: They do? I didn't know that.

U: --the egg tree?

S: No, I didn't know that.

U: Oh, I didn't know that. What else did they have that was native here--

S: Well, there were so many Spanish limes. And then--

U: What is a Spanish lime?

S: Well, that's small. It's much smaller than a citrus lime and it's mainly seed with-- when it's ripe with a very sweet, just-- very little sweet meat. And the kids like that.

U: It's almost like a big grape then, isn't it?

S: Yes.

U: I was wondering--

S: Uh-huh, a very large grape. And dillies, sapodillas, they were--

U: What did they taste like? What did they look like?

S: Well, they were very brown-skinned, black seeds, and they are very, very sweet and delicious and there used to be so many of them. Everyone grew, you know--

M: They're all over everywhere and what a mess they make on the ground.

S: And sugar-apples. Oh, sugar-apples, we used to have--

U: I've seen sugar-apples and they break up into little sections with little seeds in them?

S: Uh-huh. Little tiny black seeds.

U: They're very sweet.

S: They're very hard to eat, takes a lot of patience.  
[all laugh]

U: What do you do-- what did-- what type food to make in those preserves or jellies? What type of thing-- I believe some of them are ice creams--

S: Well, we had a man here named 'Kimono' on Duval Street, he had an-- what we called an 'ice cream parlor' and he made every-- I don't think he ever made Spanish lime, but I think he made every one of the ice creams from every one of the fruits.

U: Are there any other special type of fruits that are characteristic of--

S: Well, soursop, that was-- he made soursop.

U: What is soursop?

S: Well, that is a-- a big, big thing.

M: It's more like an artichoke than a--

S: Yeah, it's a big thing about eight or ten inches long, maybe larger, and it's-- it's very delicious, very sweet and that makes a very nice ice cream.

U: Is it like a melon?

S: No. It's really-- the fruit inside, it has a dark green skin bumped like an elephant hide, and inside, the meat is very white and stringy.

U: But it's very sweet?

S: It's very sweet. Makes a wonderful ice cream-- ice. Yes, it makes a--

U: I noticed when I first came down here people use coconuts differently from what they do up further in the north--

S: Yes.

U: --and I noticed that they use the three different stages of coconut: the very, very soft mushy stage,--

S: Yes. Jelly.

U: The little harder type, and then seldom do they use the hard, hard thing that you find way up in the northern part of the states, they use the softer kind in their food.

S: They like the jelly. It, you know, it's-- you eat it with a spoon. And then of course the milk, they use to claim that was very good for people that were sick, the milk of the coconut.

U: Well, they give you the coconut milk for many things.

S: Yes, yes. Oh, yes, it's good food.

M: They are not--  
[audio cuts off]

**END OF INTERVIEW**