



Charlie Chace

Good day, viewer. My name is Charlie Chace. I'm a docent here at the New Bedford Whaling Museum. I also serve as vice president of a group known as the Descendants of Whaling Masters. Now I am going to talk a bit about life in the New Bedford area in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but first I would like to mention that there are a number of photos that are associated with this talk and the first of which is a picture of my great uncle, who I'm named after, and he would come to the museum in his retirement and tell stories to the schoolchildren. That was several decades before there were any trained docents here at the museum, and that's one of the reasons I am here now.

Before I turned 10 years old, my family moved from a location well up the hill from the museum here on Cottage Street to a location in Fairhaven, roughly a block from Fairhaven High School. A year and a half later, I was preparing to enter the seventh grade, and we were paid a visit from Carol, Hurricane Carol that is. Well, that storm, we didn't really know that we were going to get a bad storm. Hurricane prediction wasn't anything like it is today. But when it got going in earnest, my father had to leave. You see my sister was working at Hathaway Mills, which is down on the south end of New Bedford and right in the face of the oncoming storm. So they closed the mills down there, so my dad had to leave and go pick up my sister, and that was mid-morning.

Shortly after that, the storm was getting really bad and water was starting to come in our basement. So my mom and I went down, we tried to raise up a few things and stuff some rags under the leaky door but that didn't do much. So as my mom was trying to make lunch, I was watching the water work stair by stair up the basement steps towards the house. She did finish making lunch but by that time we were wading in water in our kitchen and we didn't see my dad for quite a while. He finally waded home and it turns out that he successfully picked up my sister but on returning, the bridges were closed because they were flooded. So he had to go around through Acushnet to get home, and he left my sister with the car, well up on the hill away from the house. And it was a good thing he waded home because just before he got home, he heard some screaming. A fisherman's wife a couple of houses from ours was all alone and a wall caved in, and she was trapped. So he pulled her out of there. That little rescue garnered us a really big lobster a few days later when her husband returned from sea.

You'll see a picture of my dad standing on the roof of our front porch. Just before that picture was taken, my dad and I helped our old Uncle Charlie up to the upstairs while we were teasing him about going back to sea. Turns out there was a lumberyard not far from our house and those two gentlemen lashed together a raft real quick so they could escape the lumberyard. The aftermath of that storm was a disaster. There were ships, fishing boats laying all around the harbor. There was debris from houses and other buildings floating around the river. There's a couple of pictures here that were taken not far from my house that show some of the devastation.

Well, [inaudible 00:05:11] fast forward several years, I had just completed my freshman year of college and I was working for the summer in a gas station not far from my house. I would go in the morning and open the gas station and spend a few hours and then take the afternoon off while the boss and the mechanic were there, and then I'd return in the late afternoon for a few hours in the evening. So with every afternoon off, quite often, I would go down to Fort Phoenix to take in some sunshine and get a swim in. Back then there was a ... Besides the large beach, public beach there, there was a smaller beach below the cannons facing the New Bedford Harbor. There's a photo here from a much earlier era of the view that I could see from where I sat and it was very pleasant. A view of the skyline of New Bedford that's been both painted and photographed by many very good artists over the last couple of centuries. So I rather enjoyed going there and taking a swim.

Well one day I went and I was surprised, there was some activity going on in the river. Well out in the middle of the river, there was a barge and it was driving what looked like sheets of steel into the water, into the bottom of the river. And then much closer to me, there was another barge, and it was just sort of sitting there and there was a couple of people on it that I could barely see, I couldn't see what they were doing. Well, I went swimming,



and I was swimming around in circles, and suddenly I heard an engine start and I looked and I saw this barge moving really fast towards the bay. I said, "Well I don't know what he's doing but I'm going to go up on shore and watch." Well just as I came out of the water, kaboom, this big explosion, and water spraying up over my head and everything. Well, I still didn't know, quite know what was going on, but I really learned quick that every time I heard that engine start, I got out of the water if I was in it. And this went on for several visits.

After a while I figured out what was happening. The larger barge that was driving steel was building a cofferdam. They'd a big, big circle of steel right in the middle of the channel in the river. And the other barge was blasting a new channel so that ships could get in and out of the harbor while this was going on. After they finished building that cofferdam, they pumped the water out so they built what became the center of the dyke with the floodgates and they were able to build it from the ground up. There is one aerial photo here that shows where the floodgates are located. So that's my little rendition of life growing up in the 60s or the late 50s and 60s and I hope you enjoyed it.