

ED AND CYNTHIA RISLEY
August 21, 2007

Interviewer: Margot Hunt
Interviewee: Ed Risley and Cynthia Risley
Transcribed By: Shirley Fauber
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(TAPE SIDE A – 1st Side):

Margot Hunt: I am at the home of Ed and Cynthia Risley at 5398 Deep Hole Road, in Chincoteague, Virginia. We are interviewing them this morning as part of the Oral History Project for the Library. It's August 21, 2007.

Margot Hunt: The first question I would like to ask you is how you came here, how did you come to come here and secondly, how did you come to have this wonderful house?

Cynthia Risley: That was all a long time ago. We used to come here, I think the first time was in 1962 or 3 and we stayed at what my children called was "mosquito haven," which is on Maddox Boulevard. And the car broke down. We had come for a weekend and the car broke down so we stayed longer. And in doing so we really liked the place.

Ed Risley: They had just finished the Maddox Bridge over to Assateague Island and not too many of the Chincoteaguers ever used that bridge. They – this was an alien country to them. But to us that made all the difference in the world because we came because we enjoyed the beach and the wildlife and we didn't think too much about the town itself, except as a logistical support base. So . . .

Margot Hunt: Did you stay at the campground ever, the Maddox Campground?

Cynthia Risley: No, we're not campers! We couldn't do that. (Laughing)

Ed Risley: No.

Margot Hunt: And where did you stay?

Ed Risley: We stayed, sometimes with a lady on Piney Island.

Cynthia Risley: I can't think of her name now, but her husband was a fisherman. And she had two or three cottages she used to rent over there. And all our friends stayed there and so we used the same cottages and came here.

Ed Risley: And at that point there were no motels open in the wintertime.

Margot Hunt: Oh.

Ed Risley: And we liked it because we could have heat over there.

Cynthia Risley: Yeah, we did come in the early spring. But . . .

Margot Hunt: Well how did you happen upon this house?

Cynthia Risley: Well, that was another story. We were visiting somebody else over at so called "Clark's Landing," for the weekend. And there were two houses full of guests from Washington, D.C. or Alexandria, Virginia. And Sunday morning we didn't know what to do so we got in the car and drove up and down the side streets, supposedly looking for a house for us. And we saw this handwritten sign out in front of this house. So we knocked on the door and a very nice man came to the door and we trooped in. He told us that his wife was at church.

Ed Risley: It was Sunday morning.

Cynthia Risley: Yeah, it was Sunday morning. And his wife was at church and she would know more about selling the house than he would, but he would show us through. We were embarrassed when we left because we realized he was in his stocking feet and his shoes were carefully left by the front door, whereas we all tromped in our sandy sneakers and went through the whole house looking at it. (Laughing) There must have been five of us I think. But we knew then we wanted the house.

Ed Risley: That was twenty-five years ago or thirty.

Cynthia Risley: Close to thirty. So you came back the following Wednesday and talked to Mrs. Jackson and . . .

Ed Risley: Uh-huh.

Cynthia Risley: And signed the papers then and there. But that was early in May I think.

Margot Hunt: And what year was that?

Cynthia Risley: Probably '77, 1977 I think.

Ed Risley: Yeah.

Cynthia Risley: And we did not get – take possession of the house until September.

Ed Risley: We had tried for a couple of years with Island Properties and we weren't communicating. They kept showing us inexpensive places that were pretty crummy. And . . .

Cynthia Risley: That needed a lot of attention and loving care to put it in order.

Ed Risley: Finally, they showed us a house and we said no, no. And Mr. Vessley said, "I don't think you know what you want and don't ever come back here to see me."

Margot Hunt: (Laughing) Oh!

Ed Risley: And he got very upset with us.

Cynthia Risley: But we have been friends since then.

Margot Hunt: What were you doing up in Washington and where were you living up there – Ed?

Ed Risley: We lived in a place called Highland Hills and it's a progressive subdivision in Alexandria, Virginia and it's in Fairfax County. And several people there had purchased houses over here before us.

Margot Hunt: In Chincoteague?

Cynthia Risley: Yeah.

Ed Risley: Yelp. And there is one who is still here, that's Jean Grave on Eastside Drive. And she knows a lot more about how they discovered it and so on. Someone else spotted an abandoned chicken house and they were relocated out west and asked us if we would look after their house. And they had cleaned it up some.

Cynthia Risley: (Laughing) No more chickens.

Ed Risley: Cynthia and I just liked the idea of being able to have a pied-a'-terre, you know, some place to leave things when you came over here. And prices in those days were pretty low. People still remembered the great flood of 1962 and the prices hadn't gone up. So it was really to our mind a bargain. We had been going up to Bethany Beach mainly, north of Ocean City. And that was fine, nice beach, but much more expensive and didn't have the character that Chincoteague had.

Margot Hunt: What was your work up there, both of you worked? What did you do Cynthia?

Ed Risley: Well, you had the shop.

Cynthia Risley: Oh, I just worked for a friend. Actually, Jean Grave. She ran a children's store and I was one of her sales persons and then later on became one of the owners of the store. But that was after my children were grown.

Ed Risley: Oh.

Cynthia Risley: Oh what?

Ed Risley: Well I'm trying to think. You – you've always been busy doing something.

Cynthia Risley: Oh I was a volunteer in their schools.

Ed Risley: At Burgundy School.

Cynthia Risley: Yeah.

Ed Risley: And at Junior Village.

Cynthia Risley: Uh-huh.

Margot Hunt: Ed, what was your work?

Ed Risley: I'm trying to remember because every three or four years I would change. But . . .

Cynthia Risley: Government. You worked for the government.

Ed Risley: I worked for different branches of the government. For a while I was in the Pentagon. I worked at the Academy of Science for a couple of years. I worked at Department of the Interior.

Cynthia Risley: Compliance.

Ed Risley: Yeah, by profession I was a geographer. But geographer covers many fields. But I ended up at the Interior Department making – working with satellites to make maps. And I enjoyed all the jobs I had so it was no problem. Maybe when we bought the house I was at the Pentagon.

Margot Hunt: So that was in 1977. You've seen lots happen here, when you got here in 1977, tell the story, I guess it was when you got here, tell the story about the Judith Johnson and the road that was being proposed to go down Assateague Island, would you?

Ed Risley: Well, I was just a bystander reading newspapers.

Margot Hunt: That's okay.

Ed Risley: But I was impressed that Judy was so determined and managed to rouse some public opinion that was opposed to a road. It seemed to be such a logical thing.

Margot Hunt: What was the proposal Ed?

Ed Risley: To run a road all the way down the middle of the Island.

Cynthia Risley: Assateague Island.

Ed Risley: Assateague Island from Chincoteague to Ocean City. And there were plans drawn up. Every so often there would be a development where they were allowed to build motels and things.

Cynthia Risley: Leon Ackerman was pushing it.

Ed Risley: He was up at the north end. But Judy did have some influence with her garden clubs and so on. The Fish and Wildlife Service privately was opposed to the idea of a road.

Margot Hunt: Why did they oppose it?

Ed Risley: Well, they could see that this area which was unspoiled would become Ocean City, you know, a developed area. And John Shrock was one person at Fish and Wildlife who was privately lobbying against it. But Judy managed to get to the Senator, what was his name, not Mathis, but . . .

Cynthia Risley: Sorbain, no that was later wadn't it.

Ed Risley: This is a man there, your Father knew him.

Cynthia Risley: I don't know.

Ed Risley: Yeah.

Cynthia Risley: Sorry.

Ed Risley: But they gave Judy an award one time and the Senator walked up and put his arms around Judy and called her a heroine. (Laughing) That was the highpoint of Judy's life I think.

Cynthia Risley: (Laughing)

Margot Hunt: Well what had she done actually?

Ed Risley: Just lobbied.

Margot Hunt: And prevented the road from going through?

Ed Risley: Yes.

Margot Hunt: And what year was that, do you remember, was it in the 70's?

Ed Risley: Let me see now. (Pause)

Margot Hunt: Do you remember what the feeling on Chincoteague was toward that road?

Cynthia Risley: I don't think they cared.

Ed Risley: I think that to the extent they were business people they looked forward to more traffic, more visitors, more tourists. And I'm pretty sure they were unhappy about the road being stopped, but . . .

Margot Hunt: Well in your opinion has it been a good – was it a good thing that the road was stopped?

Ed Risley: (Laughing) Yeah, well God intervened here.

Margot Hunt: (Laughing)

Ed Risley: And caused the great flood, the flood of '62 and that completely covered Assateague and persuaded people it would be a good idea not to – not to try to develop the land but leave it to the ponies. So that's what happened. I consider that some of us who came down here were a new wave of interest. People interested in wildlife as well as the beach and Chincoteaguers did not grasp what was going on in my opinion. They . . .

Cynthia Risley: They made fun of plover's eggs. (Laughing)

Ed Risley: They couldn't understand why – why people would come here to look at birds. To them it was unfathomable. And there was a prominent businessman who owned – owned Landmark. His name was . . .

Cynthia Risley: I don't know.

Ed Risley: Well, it will come to me. And he wrote a letter to the Beacon or the local newspaper and deplored the fact that these . . .

Cynthia Risley: Come-here's.

Ed Risley: Yeah, well, they were people who drove VW's and didn't spend any money, they just come over here to look at wildlife and, in his opinion, they were a nuisance and the real plants of Chincoteague were hunters and fishermen. Well, I took a copy of that letter and ran it in the local Audubon newspaper.

Margot Hunt: In Washington?

Ed Risley: In Washington. And my comment was that we should not be hostile to each other, we should be working together because the burrs who came here needed a place to stay, a place

to eat their meals and Chincoteaguers could use the business. One person who took that to mind, that was Kelly Conklin. Kelly came around and said he understood my letter and I had to understand that people here are a little backward. Kelly is a graduate of the University of Virginia, so he is considerably more advanced. And his parents were come-here's. So – uh – I, along with a few other people, got together with the manager of the Refuge - at that early date it was J. P. Apple. And we formed a Chincoteague Natural History Association. And for the next ten or twenty years I was active in it and held office and one thing and another. We managed to get some come-here's to join us and Kelly was one of them. But otherwise, there was no interest by the Chincoteaguers. And that is when I began to realize that the Chincoteague mentality was separate and distinct from the outside world. Then we had – well examples where we could try to help change things in a positive way. I wanted to introduce Chincoteague children to Assateague Island, which most of them didn't know about. There was a school teacher named Jan Nichols and Jan was a come-here from New Jersey. She was very outspoken. Jan was . . .

Cynthia Risley: (Sneeze) You better be careful.

Ed Risley: Yeah. Jan – Jan finally got in trouble, but she was teaching the school – she was very popular with the kids. So Jan wanted to take classes out to Assateague and walk them around. Show them some of the wildlife. And the school principal said he wouldn't object to her doing that, but that they would have to have parents volunteer to go along and chaperones. And Jan couldn't raise any support from her parent group so I volunteered to go one time. And she finally did get a few groups out there. The only other thing to say is that Jan's principal suggested once that she should get closer to the local people and she should join a church down here.

Cynthia Risley: (Laughing)

Ed Risley: And she said that would be hard for her to do because she was Jewish. And (laughing) no facilities. (Laughing) Jan subsequently left the school system and now works on the Island, last I knew she was working at the laboratory for . . .

Cynthia Risley: Not any more.

Ed Risley: No, she doesn't do that any more.

Margot Hunt: Ed, do you know anything about what the Chincoteague Natural History Association is doing now?

Ed Risley: Well, they're good sized and they have programs and invited the showing of the _____ (inaudible).

Cynthia Risley: Movie, no play.

Ed Risley: So I think they are pretty worthwhile. The idea is they run the book store at the Refuge and the profits from that go to the Refuge. And every Refuge manager always has a wish list of things he would like to do that he cannot get funds for. So this provides him with them.

Margot Hunt: How about the lighthouse?

Ed Risley: Well, the lighthouse is Coast Guard property – originally – still is. But it's all automated now and they don't have a need for the buildings there. And it's been a kind of a task to keep them to order, in order. And the Fish and Wildlife Service regards the whole hook part of the Assateague Island as a nesting ground for three species of birds. The skimmer . . .

Cynthia Risley: Hern and plover.

Ed Risley: Yeah, and the plover. And that to them is very important so they would not allow traffic through for three or four months of the year during nesting season. Other people have felt that it should be part of a chain of bed and breakfasts or campgrounds. (Laughing)

Margot Hunt: How about the kayak trail, is that part of that?

Ed Risley: I understand it was, yes. (Laughing) And the whole idea of the kayak trail is fine, but if you get into something like a bed and breakfast where you have to bring in supplies by automobile, it's not so good.

Margot Hunt: Well what was the relationship of the Coast Guard, the old Coast Guard Station to that idea of the kayak trail and so forth? Where did the kayak trail, where was that proposed to go?

Ed Risley: It was on the Assateague Bay side, Chincoteague Bay, and it was supposed to go the length of the Island which is sixty miles.

Margot Hunt: For real?

Ed Risley: There is a very primitive campground right at the state line now so if you want to hike up there and stay overnight, but you have to bring your own water and everything.

Margot Hunt: And their proposal was to have a string of campgrounds, kayak, and then stay overnight at the campgrounds?

Ed Risley: Yes. That's right.

Margot Hunt: And then have the Coast Guard Station as a bed and breakfast, right?

Ed Risley: Well, that's what I've heard. (Sigh/Laughing)

Margot Hunt: (Laughing)

Ed Risley: Well, the Fresnel lens is a fairly rare thing, but we had one here in Chincoteague that was sitting out there in a chicken wire enclosure and people used to throw coins at it for good luck, which wasn't good for the lens, lenses actually, thousands of pieces of mirrors that are all put together.

Margot Hunt: And where was it?

Ed Risley: And it was sitting right next to the lighthouse, a little sign identifying it as something they had used for many years.

Cynthia Risley: Made in France wasn't it?

Ed Risley: But – it seems as though they could take care of it better and one Coast Guard, no, one refuge manager, Apple, drew up a plan to have it – have a – do a replica of the top of the lighthouse and put the lens in it. But that didn't seem a good use of the lens. Well, the idea was that the Natural History Association was invited to raise the money and . . .

Margot Hunt: To do what?

Ed Risley: To build a shelter for it. And we got a local architect to design a very attractive (laughing) – and it was decided that we needed Forty Thousand Dollars besides that, well to build the shelter and maintain it, and a good spirited person in Chincoteague came forward and said that he would give us the money provided that he could put a plaque in there identifying his parents, I think it was her parents maybe.

Cynthia Risley: Uh-huh.

Ed Risley: As the – in their memory and everyone agreed that that was okay to do. But at that point someone on Chincoteague discovered that there was a trade in Fresnel lenses and that this lens was worth who knows, Five Hundred Thousand Dollars – large sums of money! And they thought well, you know, this belongs to us, we in Chincoteague. Up until that point they had taken no interest in it at all, but away they went. And they had influence with the local congressman and . . .

Margot Hunt: They being the Chincoteague people? (tape noise, inaudible).

Ed Risley: So they had a hearing down the Shore someplace and a representative of the Association went and made a presentation. But - we should have a copy of the presentation around, I think I have it. There is quite an interest in lighthouses and very active group of people who follow that sort of thing.

Margot Hunt: And where is the Fresnel lens now?

Ed Risley: Well if it had been on the government property it would have been available for all visitors to admire, but they put it in a small museum run by the Town's people. And they thought they would – people - support the reconstruction and so on by charging dues.

Cynthia Risley: Not any more.

Ed Risley: Not any more, you can walk in free now and look at it. But they're not – they're not restoring the lens to its full – full ability. So that's a case where the Chincoteaguers won out.

Margot Hunt: It's in the Oyster Museum, is that correct?

Ed Risley: Yes.

Margot Hunt: Uh-huh.

Ed Risley: Oyster and Maritime.

Margot Hunt: Uh-huh. Well, that's an interesting story and all of your stories are interesting. And thank you very much for being – being our guests this morning. We've enjoyed it a lot.

END OF TAPE.