

THE DUKES COUNTY INTELLIGENCER

Published by
DUKES COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, Inc.
EDGARTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS



THE LANGUAGE OF MARTHA'S VINEYARD

by

Annie Daggett Lord

ANNUAL REPORTS

November 1964 Vol. 6 No. 2

DUKES COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

OFFICERS OF THE SOCIETY

NELSON COON	<i>President</i>
GEORGE H. CHASE	<i>Vice President</i>
JOHN W. OSBORN	<i>Treasurer</i>
GALE HUNTINGTON	<i>Secretary</i>

Directors

ALFRED HALL, LAURESS FISHER	<i>Terms expire 1967</i>
FLAVEL M. GIFFORD, DORRIS S. HOUGH	<i>Terms expire 1966</i>
DR. SIDNEY N. RIGGS, ALLAN KENISTON	<i>Terms expire 1965</i>

MISS DOROTHY R. SCOVILLE	<i>Curator</i>
GEORGE H. CHASE	<i>General Counsel</i>
FLAVEL M. GIFFORD	<i>Genealogist</i>
HENRY BEETLE HOUGH	<i>Historian</i>
GALE HUNTINGTON	<i>Editor of Intelligencer</i>

DR. SIDNEY N. RIGGS, Cover Artist

DUES

Active members	\$2.00 annual dues
Sustaining members	\$10.00 annual dues
Life members	\$50.00

The Intelligencer will be mailed free to all members of the Society. Non-members may purchase it for fifty cents a copy.

This Society is supported entirely by membership dues, gifts, and bequests.

Your gift or bequests will be deeply appreciated and should be made to the "Dukes County Historical Society, Inc." All such contributions are deductible under Federal Income Tax Law.

Material from the Intelligencer may be republished provided that credit is given to the author and to the Dukes County Historical Society.

THE LANGUAGE OF MARTHA'S VINEYARD

by

Annie Daggett Lord

The effect of isolation on the language of a people is to preserve it. The customs and expressions of mountainous and insular people remain unchanged through successive generations. Accordingly it is not strange that a certain author found in common use among the inhabitants of New England many words which belonged to the time of Shakespeare, and which had become entirely obsolete in England.

The Puritans brought with them the English language of the seventeenth century and, having little intercourse with men of different nationalities, the old-fashioned form of speech was perpetuated.

It is as difficult to secure data regarding the spoken language of a by-gone generation as to portray facial peculiarities without the aid of silhouette or daguerreotype. But now and then an elderly person uses an expression which we know must have been a heritage of the past.

While not entirely unlike that of the rest of New England, the language of Martha's Vineyard has some unusual characteristics, and for a few moments let us study our mother tongue and try to recall some of the expressions of our grandmothers, the quaint old humor of our native isle, the proverbs, maxims, rhymes, and the apt nautical phrases of our seafaring friends.

First, we must remember that in the old days books were almost unattainable, and that, aside from the Bible, the almanac, a few school books (such as the Columbian Reader and a spelling book containing Aesop's Fables) and possibly Pilgrim's Progress, there were very few volumes in the home. Instead of reading the newspaper or the latest novel, it was customary to tell stories around the open fire and sing songs, some of which had as many as twenty-nine

verses. Many tales and rhymes were thus handed down, and remembered and repeated for a lifetime.

Among the early English words heard on the Island we note the following: "Fleet," used in the sense to move from one place to another, "clever," meaning good-natured or kind, "tole," to entice, "lockram," an improbable story, and "housen," (houses) the latter word being, to our knowledge, used in but one section of the Island.

Then there are words of doubtful etymology, but expressive to those familiar with them such as "hungkadory," (just about right,) "higgledy-piggledy," (in great confusion,) "licketty-whittle," (very quickly,) and "conkeechee" (exceedingly friendly). When an old lady was caught in dishabille, that is, without her fore-top and cap, she would exclaim to the unexpected caller, "I look like Tantra-bogus!"

There were also words of Indian derivation like, "musquash," (muskrat), "quahog," "hominy," "succotash," "squiteague," (sea trout), and "wequashing." The latter is a common Island word meaning the method of spearing eels at night from a boat, the eels being attracted by the light of a torch.

Some of the old-fashioned expressions heard most frequently are the following:

"Looks like Time in the primer."

"Blue as an indigo bag."

"As grand as Cuffy."

"As right as a trivet."

"In and out like a tinker's budget."

"As cute as a bug's ear."

"Looks like Sam Hill."

"As merry as a grig."

"A regular hen-huzzy."

"Looks like a shirt on a handspike."

"It isn't worth a Hannah Cook."

"I don't care a continental."

Note the power of habit. We use these phrases because we heard our parents do so, so now they spring naturally to our lips although

we have long since forgotten if we ever knew what was a "grig," "a trivet," or a "tinker's budget," or who were "Sam Hill" or "Hannah Cook," or "Cuffy."

When we are "put by" we are embarrassed, when "put out," indignant. But when we are "put to it," we are in difficulty, like the old lady who when making pies said she was "dreadfully put to it for shortening." These are colloquialisms never found in old manuscripts or letters, for correspondence was most dignified.

Our ancestors had a fixed belief in the influence of the moon upon the weather and many were the sayings and superstitions regarding it, such as seeing the moon over the right shoulder for good luck. They believed that there was always a full moon calm, and that if the Indian could hang his powderhorn on the new moon, he would take it down and go off for a hunt. In fact, the weather has always been a prolific source of proverbs, many of which were in rhyme.

Meagre, indeed, is the education of a Vineyard boy or girl which does not include, —

Rainbow in the morning

Sailors take warning.

Rainbow at night

Sailors delight

Mackerel scales and mares' tails

Make lofty ships carry low sails.

Evening red and morning gray

Will set the traveller on his way.

But evening gray and morning red

Will bring down rain upon his head.

April showers

Bring May flowers.

Open and shet

Is the sign of wet.

If the cock goes crowing to bed

He's sure to rise with a watery head.

Visitors to our Island have noticed words used in unusual connections and are wont to comment upon our "takers" which are pot holders, our "times" in the hall, our geographical designations of "off island," and "up island," and smile when we "admire to go," or "admire to do something," or when things "nerve us."

What seems to mystify most of all is the way in which we style our friends Eliza P., Henry J., or Charlie B., or use the first and middle names like Carrie Drew or Emma Gray. It is said in all seriousness that a resident of Farm Neck was asked why so many of the women of that area had been married so very many times. The Farm Neck resident said, "What do you mean?"

The answer was, "Why one Mrs. Norton has sons Thomas Howes and Isaac Carroll, and another Mrs. Norton has Henry Chaney and David Wellington."

Perhaps one reason why so much ancient lore has been preserved here is due to the fact that the native Vineyarder has a keen sense of humor. He is not given to the narration of his own experiences on the mighty deep, and has to be urged to tell his whaling experiences. But when it comes to tales of the days when he was young and went to the "herrin' crick" (never pronounced Herring creek) he becomes loquacious and even eloquent. Incidents illustrating the Island wit and humor are so numerous and familiar that I will merely mention a few characteristic ones.

One cold bleak day in November some years ago there assembled in the old wharf-store in Vineyard Haven a company of chilled travelers, some of whom had left their home in Chilmark at an unearthly hour that morning, and come hither on the lumbering mail stage. Someone after repeated attempts and the use of many card matches — the sulphurous fumes of which still permeated the atmosphere — had managed to start a fire in the old wood stove, the warmth of which was most grateful to the up-Islanders. There had been a session of the Teachers' Institute held on the Island, and two august members of the State Board were about to take their departure for the mainland. Thinking that the comfort granted by the said wharf-store might be agreeable they essayed to enter, and at

once noticed the fumes of the matches.

"Ugh," said one.

"Sulphurated hydrogen," said the other, at which they both fled and closed the door behind them.

An up-island farmer sitting in the corner said, "Seems to me if they never get where there's any more sulphur than that they'll be lucky."

A homeward bound Vineyard Haven boy, not many years ago, reached Oak Bluffs and took passage on the barge eagerly noting each familiar object along the route. A fellow traveler of the summer variety, observing the boy's interest kindly assumed the role of guide. "That place is called Eastville," he said, "and the height on the left is Cedar Neck. And see, that's the marine railway, and the imposing building yonder is the Marine Hospital."

The boy took all he could stand and then said, "But I'll bet you don't know where Cat Hollow is."

I cannot leave the subject of Island humor without giving at least one instance of what seemed to me a clever bit of repartee. A lady who had been spending the summer on the Island had somehow heard that there are some most peculiar characters among us. Meeting one day a young lady of the same name as our first governor she thus addressed her, "I have been informed, ah, that there are a great many, ah, fools on the Island. Can you tell me if that is so?"

"Yes, madam," was the reply, "There are indeed, in the summer."

Humor is both conscious and unconscious, and much that impresses the casual visitor as extremely entertaining does not strike us as funny at all. That is because many expressions, especially those relating to the sea we use naturally, for we have been accustomed to them since childhood. We seldom speak of anything on the right or left, but say starboard or port, or even use the points of the compass. It is the most common thing in the world to speak of a thing as being in the northeast corner of the cellar or on the sou'west side of the house.

We do not pull, we "haul," we "splice," and "rig," and "get under way," and "carry sail," and "get our bearings." We use these expressions, and many more like them so spontaneously that it never occurs to us that there is anything unusual in our mode of expression.

"I don't want the water-line of my shirtwaist above my belt," exclaimed one lady, while another declared that she couldn't see to do fine sewing for she had on her "off-shore glasses."

If one is late he is "astern of the lighter," if misinformed on some subject he is on the "wrong tack," if sick he is "under the weather," and if exhausted he is "keel out."

"Cut that turnip athwart ship, not fore and aft," one Vineyard man directed his daughter, and when she was making preparations for a trip to the city, said, "seems to me you're a'fittin' out for a long voyage."

Another who was rather slow was spoken of as taking as long to get under way as a ship with an eight-day windlass. One ancient mariner said that he always slept on his starboard side, and that on the night after the Fourth of July he put on the "whole foresail," meaning that he slept soundly.

One Vineyarder referring to a youth who had done something remarkable at the beginning of his career remarked that his folks had better not h'ist their colors to the topmast head quite yet. "Better not put 'em above the cross trees."

There certainly is a charm about our ancient usages and nautical phrases, and is it to be feared that with the passing of sail, and the diversion of our Vineyard young men to other avocations, the quaint forms of speech may become obsolete. If modern slang ever takes their place it will be sad. So, let us treasure and be proud of our old-time expressions, our maxims and appropriate nautical phrases.

EDITOR'S NOTES

What Annie Daggett Lord feared might happen, has indeed come to pass. And the speech of the Island, today, is not much different from the speech of any other New England community, and it is only very occasionally that any of the old Vineyardisms are heard.

But in the editor's boyhood the old ways of speech were still very much alive, and he feels that he must add a few to Mrs. Lord's list.

If anyone knocked on the door of a house, the hail from within was almost invariably, "Come aboard." The order to stop doing something was "Belay that." A polite way of telling a person where he could go was to tell him to "Go to Halifax." A rough acting person was "A regular Hessian." And, of course, a thunderstorm was always a "Tempest."

Mrs. Lord didn't bring in any peculiarities of Island pronunciation, but there were plenty of those, too. Oil was always "ile," edge was "age," boat was a "bought," and north was "knowth" and there were many, many more. If any readers of the *Intelligencer* will send in Vineyardisms of the past the editor will preserve them in the Society's archives, and perhaps print a list of them from time to time.

Mrs. Lord was the daughter of Captain and Mrs. Grafton Daggett of William Street in Vineyard Haven, and William M. Honey is one of her grandchildren. She was noted for her knowledge of Vineyard genealogy, and history. She read this paper before the Seacoast Defence Chapter of the D.A.R. on November 14, 1911.

DUKES COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

A SELECTION FROM THE REPORTS AT THE ANNUAL MEETING



REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT

The major activities of the Council have been reported by the secretary and curator, but only to the Council itself is vouchsafed the knowledge of how much work is done by so few persons. My truly felt gratitude goes to each member for his part in making the past two years successful ones.

Miss Scoville and Mr. Huntington have carried much responsibility since January, but may I add, with the wholehearted cooperation of the Board. Miss Scoville took over as house committee for me, and carried through to completion the work of adding new book shelves in the library and new underpinning in the small north room on the first floor of the Cooke House. Those of you who own old houses know how necessary is this work, also how dirty, expensive and trying. Too, that work never shows, so a casual observer might well wonder where the money went. Every member of the Council met with me at the Cooke House and all agreed that the work must be done.

Mr. Huntington has worked at rearranging the library.

Good reports have come to me of the gracious and intelligent way in which the Dukes County Historical Society houses and grounds have been shown to ever-increasing numbers of visitors. My special thanks go to Miss Scoville for shouldering the burden of work which was mine in the care of the House, to Mr. George Chase and Mr. Nelson Coon for carrying on the Council meetings, and to Mr. Flavel Gifford for his share in the annual meeting.

GLADYS PEASE REID, *President.*

SECRETARY'S REPORT

As of August 29, 1964, the date of the annual meeting, the Society had a total membership of 715. This compares with 720 one year ago. Breaking the membership down we have 560 annual members, 92 sustaining members, 55 life members and 8 honorary members.

During the past year your secretary, acting as librarian, has been engaged in making a cross index of library material, and arranging pamphlets in file boxes so that they will be more readily available. Several valuable donations of books have been received and a number of books have been purchased.

The value of the library for study and research is becoming increasingly recognized, and during the year a surprisingly large number of individuals — something more than forty — have made use of our facilities.

Genealogy heads the list in interest, with whaling a close second. Other subjects studied include local Indian history, the Vinland story, the Martha's Vineyard Railroad, Island physicians, the Edgartown waterfront, the camp ground, the flying horses, Privateering, and the work of both the Rev. Jonathan Mayhew and Rev. William Homes of Chilmark.

GALE HUNTINGTON, *Secretary.*

REPORT OF THE GROUNDS COMMITTEE

The garden continues to thrive. No major planting was attempted this year, just a continuing care. Our old friend bittersweet has been kept in its place—very back fence. The grass has remained green due to careful watering.

The old fashioned roses which survived winter before last lived through the season of 1963-1964. If you recall, these roses are by no means established as a rose garden. They were put in the ground wherever they might best be tended in an attempt to discover which of them would do best in the environment we had to offer. The Harrison's Yellows along the Cooke fence are growing well.

The herb garden is all perennial now except for a few marigolds. The only new items are a dozen strawberry plants—everbearing—with the smallest sourest of fruit but the neatest mounds of green leaves.

We also have two baby rabbits in a nest under a sage plant. What would a garden be without a few surprises?

We put six laurel shrubs in the northeast corner of the garden proper. These should do well and make a good background for bleeding heart, evening primrose and English daisies which grow there.

It is with very real regret that I must turn over the grounds to other hands and other hearts.

GLADYS PEASE REID, *Grounds Committee.*

CURATOR'S REPORT

This report, although written by your curator, is a record of continued support, not only on the part of the Council but of Dukes County Historical Society members. I deeply appreciate such co-operation and interest.

In spite of our president's illness which has kept her house-bound much of the time, she has continued to supervise maintenance of our beautiful grounds which draw so much admiration. Her interest in the Society is unfailing and always helpful.

Our daily schedule began June 1 with a number of changes. I hope you all approve. The curio room was papered, painted and completely rearranged. Rearrangements were made in all 12 rooms of the Cooke House, also in the museum-library building and in the carriage shed where we house our marine display.

July was our banner month this season with 1,709 guest book registrations and more who did not sign. Our year's total once again will top the 5,000 mark.

Publicising our Society are new 8 x 10 posters which feature a handsome block print of the Thomas Cooke House. The print is by our talented Council member and past president, Dr. Sidney N. Riggs, who donated it to the Society. From this print Mr. Nelson Coon of the Council has had postcards made.

Our helpful, courteous summer staff again consists of Debbie White and Tom Tilghman. Gale Huntington, our secretary and editor of the *Intelligencer* is in the museum-library building.

We are grateful for a variety of valuable accessions with Vineyard interest, contributed by members and friends of the Society. The items range from a 12 foot sharpie built about 1900 by a well known Edgartown boat builder, 'Dolph Morgan, to two oil paintings.

Mrs. Grace Norton Rosé of Edgartown gave the sharpie, oars and \$25.00 for maintenance. The boat is being reconditioned and will be added to our marine display. Mrs. Rosé also contributed an unusual string of Eskimo carved ivory beads brought from the Arctic by Captain Edwin Coffin.

The two oil portraits by Mme. Magda Polivanov, Oak Bluffs and New York, are of Otto Van Koppenhagen who has been a leader in Vineyard musical circles for more than 30 years, and Henry Beetle Hough, past Society president who edits the *Vineyard Gazette*.

A realistic model of a whaleboat with crew, fast to a whale in a plaster sea, was made by E. K. McCagg in 1933 and contributed by Mrs. McCagg. The beautiful "Hope, Faith and Charity" tea set which adds so much interest to our dining room table, was brought in by Miss Hope Gray in memory of her friend, Miss Laura Shelby Lee. Nine Vineyard steamers in eight inch model form are nostalgic reminders of boatline history. They were designed and given by Charles K. Van Ryper.

Mr. and Mrs. Manuel V. Sarmento of Nashawena Island gave the unusual mosaic in square rigger design which he made from quahog shells. The mosaic is a gift from Mr. and Mrs. Sarmento through the courtesy of their friend, Mrs. Weston Howland. The large cast iron anchor now on the society grounds, is from the two masted schooner "Liberty" once owned by Capt. Claude Wagner. The vessel was the last schooner to sail from Edgartown in the 1930's. The anchor is a gift from Capt. Wagner who also donated several smaller items associated with the fishing industry in the 1800's.

Two additional contributions of jewelry date from whaling days and are a pair of thin gold pinch back bracelets used for native trade, given by Miss Celina Lewis, Oak Bluffs; and a brooch and matching ear rings hand painted on porcelain, set in gold. This handsome set formerly was owned by Mrs. John A. Pease about 1824 and was given by Mrs. Frank Burke, Jr. and Mrs. Barbara Burke Tilley.

John Andreson of Los Angeles gave a donation of \$15 in memory of Charles K. Van Ryper, Stuart C. Avery of Edgartown gave a decoy black duck, natural finish, made by Keyes Chadwick, c. 1950; also Chadwick copper plate script bill of sale; and the Home Club guest book from 1900 to 1920. Miss Alice Cleveland, Edgartown, gave the framed charter of the Wilmons A. Blackmar Chapter, WRC

founded 1906, disbanded 1964 ; and also a small cut of Mr. Blackmar.

Lauress Fisher, Edgartown, gave a petrified shark's tooth from Gay Head. Mrs. Horace Hillman, Edgartown, gave a reproduction of the collected Edgartown whaling captains of 1820-1890, framed. Mrs. Sylvester J. Kelly, Lambert's Cove gave two pieces of black jet passementerie in leaf and bud design.

Miss Margaret Locke and the Peabody Museum, Harvard, gave a button mold of soapstone, probably made about 1675. It was dredged from the bottom of Tisbury Great Pond in the early 1900's by an oyster fisherman. Mr. and Mrs. Tobias Kramer of Vineyard Haven gave a brass kerosene hand lamp used in the keeper's house at Gay Head. Daniel Manter of West Tisbury gave an Eskimo fringed and beaded jacket that was brought home from the Arctic about 1900 by Captain Ward P. Vincent of West Tisbury.

Donald Mills of Edgartown gave a small piece of petrified wood found on Main Street in Edgartown. And besides the anchor from the schooner "Liberty," Capt. Claude Wagner gave a cod line sinker used about 1860, and also a "sticking tommy" candle holder used aboard fishing schooners during the last century.

DOROTHY R. SCOVILLE, *Curator*

