

# WE NEVER KNEW ANY DIFFERENT



STOCKTON SPRINGS  
STORIES OF THE PAST CENTURY

collected & edited by  
Donna Gold

*Dedicated to the women and men of Stockton Springs,  
yesterday, today,  
and into the future.*

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ISBN 978-0-692-91207-2  
LOC 2017911344

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Printed and bound in the State of Maine, USA  
Photos courtesy of the Stockton Springs Historical Society unless otherwise noted  
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*Stockton Springs, with Cape Jellison in the foreground and Sears Island to the left. The Cape Docks can be seen in the center, tucked into Stockton Harbor, where the schooners are. At the tip of the long point to the right, which shelters Fort Point Cove, is the Fort Point Lighthouse.*



A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY: Except for Caro Hutchins, these stories are taken from transcripts of conversations lasting about two hours. In arranging these vignettes for publication, the sentences have been slightly edited for clarity and to avoid repetition, but except for a few minor changes, these voices of Stockton Springs are as spoken.

Caro Hutchins' interview was conducted for the Fireside column of the former *Waldo Independent* and not recorded; her words are not verbatim. For the rest, interview transcripts are in the Stockton Springs Historical Society.—DG

# INTRODUCTION

THESE PAGES CONTAIN STORIES FROM a world that is almost within our grasp, and yet is no longer—the tales of our parents and grandparents in the decades before World War II.

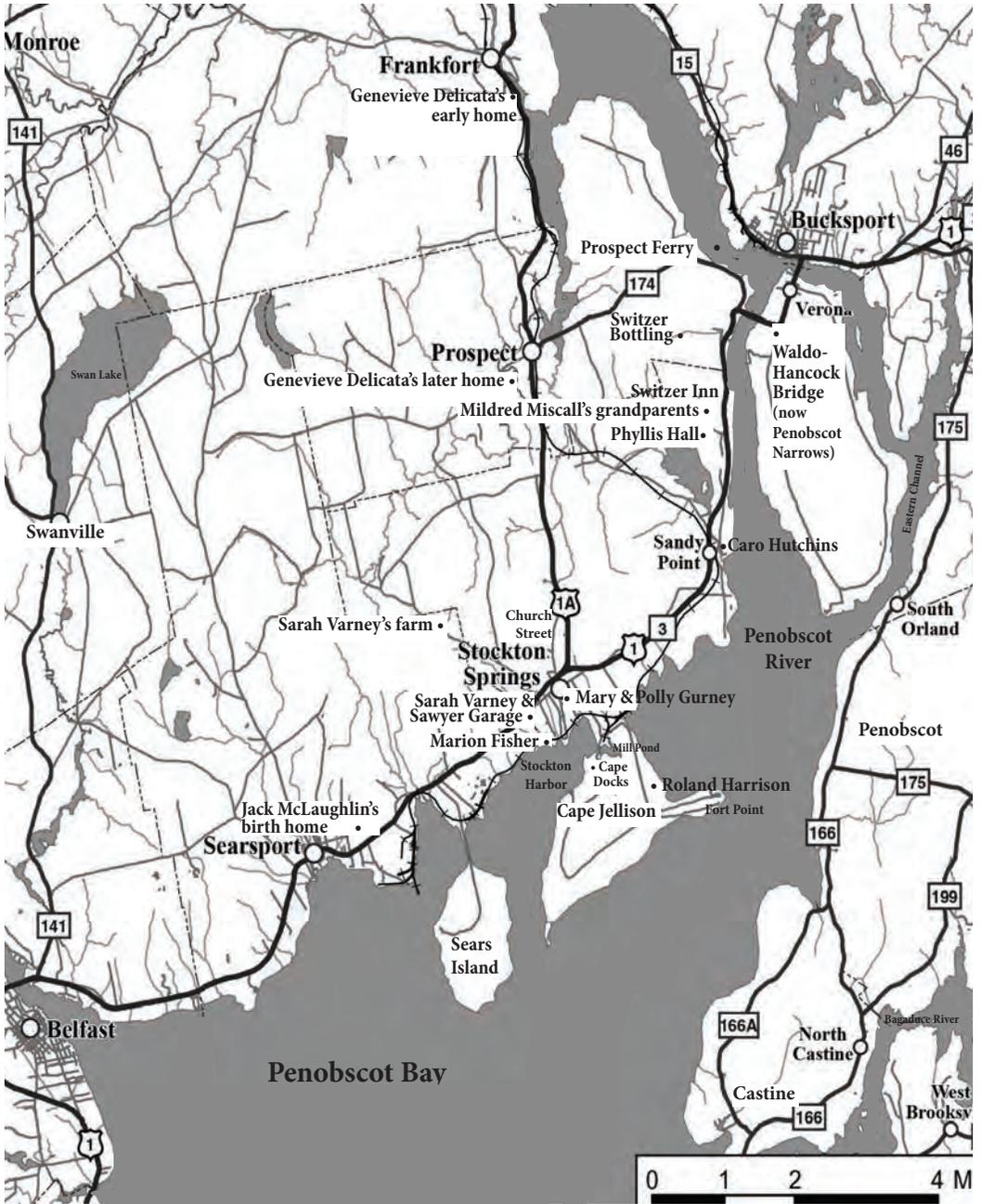
They speak of a time with minimal barriers between indoors and out, when work was on water and dock, in garden and forest; where except for kerosene lanterns, sundown meant true darkness for many; and winter mornings would find frost creeping through bedroom walls. They speak of a time of labor, when a cookstove was heated by logs, and ironing was requisite, the irons heated on those same stoves—summer and winter. A time when brain and brawn, together, were what made a life.

Though based in Stockton Springs, a town whose population has slowly risen to some 1,600 souls from a low of about eight hundred in 1930, these stories resonate throughout Maine. They tell of young men shipping out on steamers headed for China and Panama while young women longed for horizons—and education—broader than a town on the edge of Penobscot Bay could offer. They also tell of community, of vegetables left on doorsteps, of local movies and dances, a place where everyone knew your name, your family, and your family's history—even how many cows you owned—for better or for worse. And of a vibrant downtown, with stores selling hats and clothing, cards and caskets, where groceries were delivered from one of several establishments on a Main Street that for necessities today, hosts but one convenience store, along with a restaurant and bar.

These ten interviews were conducted during the first few years of this century, nearly fifteen years before publication. The delay renders the stories more precious, for so many of those in the generation that grew up before and during the Depression are no longer with us.

Reading through these pages, what I recall is the gleam in each person's eyes—that moment when the story moves from past to present, from recollection to event: Mildred Miscall leading her older sister into a tomb; Roland Harrison pulling his best friend out of an icy pond; Sarah Varney pulling her own self out of the ice. These stories are our histories, spoken and felt from the people who lived them. As you read, think of your own childhood, your own adventures, and so know the vitality of these speakers. And think of what someday your stories will mean to future generations!

—*Donna Gold*



*The approximate locales, or most of them, of the Voices of Stockton Springs.*

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*Top: Boats line up for cargo at the Cape Docks. Bottom: Trains carry lumber to be loaded onto ships at the docks. The old hotel stands in the distance. When the Cape Docks were active, lumber, paper, potatoes, and more were shipped out and coal, fertilizer, bricks, and cement received. In those days, Stockton Springs had about 1,100 residents and two newspapers.*

## CAPE DOCKS

*The whole coast of the United States didn't have the facilities that that dock had.—Sarah Varney*

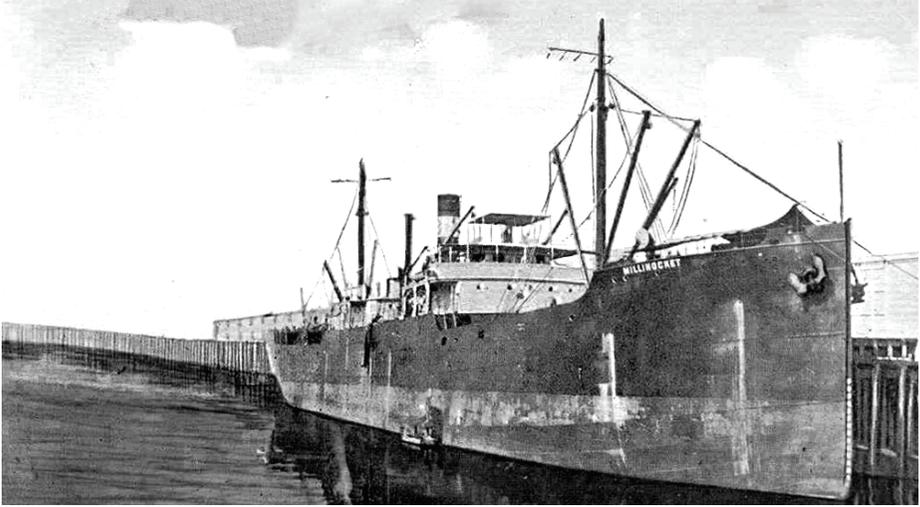
Roland Harrison: Cape Docks was supposed to have been the largest wooden docks in the world at the time it was built.<sup>2</sup> That was a big set of docks. My father became a carpenter there, building a big potato house, six hundred feet long, two hundred feet wide, something like that. A tremendous building. They brought potatoes down from Aroostook County, stored them, sorted them, graded them, and then put them aboard ships going down the coast. Maine was a big potato state at one time and the potatoes were shipped by water instead of by trucks or trains as they are now.

Stockton was where the railroad met the sea-going vessels. Bangor was icebound in the wintertime, and of course potatoes were shipped during the winter months. The last time I was at the docks, you could still see parts of pilings sticking out of the water. But that burnt on November 8, 1924. It didn't last very long because it was the railroad that built it—and the railroad was likely to build something that's already obsolete!

There was plenty of water for the sailing ships, but there wasn't water enough in Stockton Harbor for the modern ships. Immediately after they got it built, they found out there wasn't water enough there, then they went and built another dock over to Searsport where there's more water, and that one's been used right up to the present time.

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2. Kathy Harrison adds that the docks were built between 1905 and 1907. According to a 1924 news article, Pier 1, the bulkhead wharf, was some 1000' long; Pier 2, the main wharf was 80' wide for 600' then widened to 200' for an additional 1000'; Pier 3, the paper dock, was about 800' long.



*The steamer Millinocket loading paper at the Cape Docks.*

It was a lot of lumber shipped from the Cape Docks. The lumber was stored and sorted in a lumberyard inshore from a long bulkhead which extended south along the shore from the two main piers. From this yard, the lumber was loaded aboard mostly sailing ships lying alongside the bulkhead. One of the piers had a warehouse on it, and they shipped paper from there. I can remember the paper boats coming there, the *Ripogenus* and *Millinocket*, two of them that carried paper coming from Great Northern, from Millinocket to New York, I believe. They used to come in and take a full load of paper. Go right back and forth. On the middle dock, they discharged a lot of coal coming in.

In fact, there was a lot of coal loaded in cars over on the docks at the time it burned, though some of the railroad cars that was at the end of the dock didn't burn, all flat cars at that time. Cape Docks was quite an operation when it started, but it didn't last long, and it wasn't much of a building when it burned.

**Sarah Varney:** My dad and his father were part of those old docks. Dad was a timekeeper and paymaster for the dock area and his father was one of the stevedores there; the main room on the first floor of our house was the office for the dock area. We lived in the rest of it. I can just remember it. It was pine paneled, they called it sheathed then, little narrow boards and they were pulled together lengthwise and



*In 1924, the Cape Docks piers burned to the water. Only pilings remained.*

varnished. Made a nice wall, nothing like these today. Dark wood. It was a good-sized room, there were desks in it; that was the office.

A lot of people will never believe that that dock area was as big and as busy in a little town as this. The whole coast of the United States didn't have the facilities that that dock had. They used to ship by ship, lumber and potatoes, mostly lumber in the earlier days as I remember him telling, and then they burned. There was a pile of coal and it ignited somehow and burned the whole area. I remember sitting on the steps of the Vernier House or Sawyer House, where we boarded, watching the fire. I was just seven years old, something like that. It was a big fire and everybody was concerned, but I had no connection with it, I just watched it. We had left the area. Shipping was in a decline.

When we lived at the docks we had a housekeeper that got friendly with one of the workmen. This fellow had a sea chest and he had all these boxes of chocolates that he had gotten someplace, I don't know where. She'd go down every day, and every time he'd give her a box of chocolates out of that chest. We had another housekeeper that came from Corinna, I think it was, up in that area somewhere. She drove a horse and buggy down. She had a great liking for clams. She'd dig clams and my father always said, *I don't know why we like clams, because we have them almost three times a day.* That always stuck in my head, why do I like clams? But that's all that she knew how to do. She didn't last



*According to Ellen LaConte's History of Stockton Springs, these potato sheds adjacent to the Cape Docks piers, "were of the most modern and efficient kind, drawing on the Henry Ford assembly line model and electrified by nearby generators. In its day, along with the record breaking piers, Stockton Harbor's was the biggest potato storage plant in the world."*

long. She had an Airedale dog and the dog bit me one night, I don't know why. I stepped on him maybe.

I think the docks were very busy when I was little, but I was small and young and it didn't penetrate, you know. They had a lovely hotel there, a boarding house, a store overlooking the dock area, a barber shop. It was a little community. These are all things that my father told me. It's unbelievable that all that is gone.

## INDEPENDENCE

*What do you think people have lost by growing up now?*  
—Donna Gold

Roland Harrison: Self-sufficiency. For one. Being self-sufficient, I think, gives you an inner strength or something. I don't know what is lost, but they've gained a lot. I suppose it's been that way ever since long before the dawn of history. The only thing is, the tempo has changed. The rate of change is speeding up.

Of course, man never would have advanced from a primate to our present position if there hadn't been change going on continually. But the rate of change has been enormous. From the time my grandmother grew up until the time I grew up, there was a lot of change. She was a very, very frugal woman. She always had money, or wasn't considered poor at that time, but my God, she'd never use a match if there were some other way to light a lamp. She had a fire going in the wood stove, she'd get that fire shoveled, and reach in there and get some coals and put it in the other stove to save a match. And if you had to use a match to light a lamp—blow it right out and lay it in the case, and then you could light it off one lamp to light another lamp with. And I remember our old neighbor Noah, who smoked a pipe. He sat in front of the kitchen stove, and he'd take a newspaper, and got so he'd tie it up in strips, roll it on a pencil, tear the ends off, so it was that long, the length of a pencil, and tear the ends, so it would have a hole, let it out one side, and when he wanted to light his pipe, he'd take one of those, open it up, and stick it down the stove grate to get his fire to light his pipe with. My grandmother was so frugal with things like that. And that's the way they'd have been there, scratch our ancestor, and they'd have blood that ran in Scotland for generations. A long time.

We get our oil from Texas and Nigeria and I don't know where else. There's no sense in getting my heat from Texas when it was growing out over there in my woods, where I could get it myself. I had to be self-sufficient, it was a necessity. Probably if it hadn't been a necessity, people years ago wouldn't have been as self-sufficient. The world was a-hauling me. But you're observing everything growing, and observing the seasonal change in things. I think I might have had a better understanding of Mother Nature overall.

Teenagers today, they say they're bored, and I can't remember either I or my compatriots ever saying that they were bored growing up, because we always had something to do. We had the woods and the seashore and if there wasn't any work to be done, you headed to the woods or the shore. And one thing would just lead to another, you'd always find something to do if you headed to the woods or the shore, and when you started to the woods, you didn't know where you were going, didn't have any target ahead, but you'd pick a target as you went along. I took my son-in-law down to Fort Point, down along the ledges, and I told him that's where we used to play when we were growing up.

He said, *You used to play down here when you were growing up?*

I said, *Yeah.*

*And did your parents know you were down here?*

*Never give it any thought whether they know it or not, we were down along the shore.*

*Jesus, I should have thought you'd get killed on these rocks, says he—* and you know he weren't too good at rock climbing.

I said, *Two of us did, but the rest of us learned a lot from it.*

Around Pa's Ledge, where the ledges are, and the tide comes quite fast, we used to know the three different places that we could get up over there. You wouldn't think to look at it that you could, but we found out there were three different places you would get up over, climb over a little ledge. Sometimes in the spring of the year there'd be another place, or you'd lose a place because of damage from the frost, rocks coming down. Sure there were a few of us got killed growing up, but God, the rest of us were better off for it.

I know one thing, they don't know how to work as well as we did, because they don't have to. And there's no need for them to learn, because most of the jobs now are so easy, most any one of them can do 'em. Of course, I think the younger ones, being less self-sufficient, I

see they are more dependent on government than they used to be. You used to feel if you didn't help yourself, there's no one else going to. There was a stigma against asking for help anyhow, which there isn't so much now. You don't hide like you did. To go to the town for help, for food, was a disgrace. It was a disgrace if you weren't self-sufficient. And one thing sure has changed, it didn't use to take so much equipment to talk to anyone!

**Sarah Varney:** When you look back over your life, lots of little things come back to you. Really it was an education growing up, all its own.

**Genevieve Delicata:** What did I gain from having so little? That you don't need so much.

**Phyllis Hall:** Probably, growing up on the farm were the best years of my whole life. We worked hard, everybody worked, but everybody was happy. It just goes to show that you don't actually need all the stuff you have today. We were a happy family. We worked together and did things together. In the winter we were always out sliding and skiing, or just out in our field. Everything was done together. In the evening, especially in the winter, we played games after the dishes and things were taken care of, and we had our studying all done. We had popcorn and maybe made fudge. We didn't know about anything different, so we didn't miss anything.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

MANY ARE THOSE WHO MADE this volume happen. Crucial are two institutions: The Stockton Springs Historical Society, whose members encouraged these interviews, provided names of people to speak with, and later waited with patience for the culmination of this book.

The other institution is the Stephen and Tabitha King Foundation, whose generous grant launched and supported this undertaking.

Then there are the “voices,” the people interviewed: Genevieve Delicata, Marion Fisher, Mary and Polly Gurney, Phyllis Hall, Roland Harrison, Caro Hutchins, Jack McLaughlin, Mildred Miscall, and Sarah Varney. They graciously allowed me into their homes, complete with recorder and backup recorder, pen, pad, camera, and computer. Later, they read and corrected transcripts, allowing this volume.

Very special thanks goes to Kathy Harrison, current head of the Stockton Springs Historical Society, who has cheered me on, read and corrected numerous versions of this manuscript, and found photographs and details to enhance the stories. Marion Fisher likewise read and corrected the manuscript, and helped sort through and find photos, always offering kind, genuine support. Diane Coose Littlefield, too, also of the Historical Society, provided valuable insights. Back home, Bill Carpenter, offered multiple layers of support not the least being chart checking and paragraph proofing.

In earlier years there were many others, and I fear leaving out names. Essential were residents Robbie Pendleton, Basil Staples, Anne Spencer, and the students in Sam Fuller’s 2001 fifth grade classroom in Stockton Springs who interviewed Phyllis Hall. Later, Sara Bradford began this process by encouraging two poster-pamphlets for Stockton’s sesquicentennial.

Many names were tendered for interviews; would that I could have spoken with all, but these ten lovely people provide a good distribution of experience, geography, and decades.

### Stockton Springs Historical Society

THE STOCKTON SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY is located at the corner of Station and Main streets in the historic Colcord House. It shares space with the Stockton Springs Community Library.

A volunteer is available every Saturday morning from 9 am to 1 pm from May through October to provide a guided tour of the historical rooms and artifacts, to assist with finding information about Stockton Springs, and to discuss local history. Appointments are available by emailing [sshs.history.me@gmail.com](mailto:sshs.history.me@gmail.com) or leaving a message for an Historical Society member with the library staff during open hours.

Monthly meetings are held at 1:30 pm in the Colcord House on the first Sunday of each month, except during winter months or when otherwise noted.

### Donna Gold

A PERSONAL HISTORIAN WITH EXTENSIVE experience as a journalist, writer, and editor, Donna is devoted to preserving the stories of individuals, families, communities, and enterprises through oral history. Interviews are recorded, transcribed, edited, and then compiled into volumes for future generations. She can be reached at [donna@personalhistory.org](mailto:donna@personalhistory.org), or through the website of her business, Personal History, [www.personalhistory.org](http://www.personalhistory.org).

Cover Photo: Towing, c. 1910 from above the Narrows Cemetery. Photo by Parker Watts.

Back Cover Photo: Stockton Springs from Church Street hill c. 1910.

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Page 1: Peggy McKenna Collection; Penobscot Marine Museum

Page 4: John Bapst Memorial High School

Page 11: McLaughlin family

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Proceeds support the Stockton Springs Historical Society



Stories of a coastal Maine town in the decades before World War II in the words of those who lived them.

**Jack McLaughlin:** Sledding was the thing. The kids used to go way up on the top of Church Street, way up on the top of that hill, and boy, you could go all the way down, come right through the village, right down School Street, and go all the way down to the end of that street, where it curves—and you were going! They'd have somebody with a lantern standing in the square, in case there was a car coming. That was quite a thrill.

**Genevieve Delicata:** Every Christmas and Thanksgiving we'd make a hot plate of potatoes, gravy, and chicken, whatever we had—and run down across the field to the same man who lived by himself, like a hermit. Trudge through the snow, down we'd go. Share. It was good to share with somebody.

**Phyllis Hall:** Probably, growing up on the farm were the best years of my whole life. We worked hard, everybody worked, but everybody was happy. In the winter we were always out sliding and skiing. In the evening, after the dishes and things were taken care of, and we had our studying all done, we played games, had popcorn, and maybe made fudge. We didn't know about anything different, so we didn't miss anything.

ISBN 978-0-692-91207-2  
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