

Oral History Interview Transcript

Course Title: Energy in World Civilizations

Institution: University of Chicago

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Transcript of Student (O) interviewing J on 5/19/2024 over Zoom

O: What's your relationship to Woods Hole and with your background in the area?

J: I was born there in 1966. There's a town called Falmouth and within Falmouth there are a certain number of villages. I don't remember how many... 11? or 13? The place that I lived initially was really low status. Now it's high status, which is kind of funny, but it was called Falmouth Heights. So I grew up in Falmouth Heights, but my favorite place in Falmouth was Woods Hole and so I would go hang out there a lot. People knew Woods Hole because it's where the ferry goes to Martha's Vineyard. I was born there in 1966 and I lived there until I was 14 and then I spent four summers there after that. Two years in my own house, then we had to sell it and then two years at my friend Geoff's house. So that got me to 18. There's a lot of things about it, but that's sort of the intro of why it's a place for me... there's a crazy story of how we got there.

O: What do you mean?

J: My parents were low-income school teachers. My father had a difficult life, but my mother was very ambitious and so my mother came up with this idea of buying a house. This was the 60s, so it was very much sort of a hippie community and what people would do is they would live in a boarding house for the summer. So my mother got this idea. She bought this house with a bunch of bedrooms and they rented out rooms to people. They had four [other] kids but they rented out rooms to people. But it turned out they took like the worst summer in the history of Cape Cod to do this. At the end of the summer, they hadn't rented out enough rooms. So instead of moving back to where they were from they ended up just staying in Falmouth and selling their house and staying where they were. So that's how they moved to Falmouth. They bought a boarding house but then they didn't have enough money to move the family back to their old house, so they just stayed in the boarding house.

O: Where were they before?

J: It's a good question. It's one of the suburbs of Boston, if you said it I'd remember it. They were raising their children in this suburb of Boston and then my mom had this dream of getting rich in real estate and having this boarding house. And then of course it failed and that's how that's the reason I was born in Falmouth is because my parents had ended up having to move there because they ran out of money.

O: Could you tell me a bit about Falmouth and what the area was like? What was the community like? What would people do? What was the way of life of the place?

J: Yeah, so you were raised in Los Angeles and if you get in your car in Los Angeles and you start at the ocean and drive for four hours, you're still in the outskirts of Los Angeles, right? It just goes on and on and on and on and on. My town was a very defined town. There was water on most sides and where there wasn't water, there was woods. The town was very defined physically. It was I don't I'm gonna get this wrong but the wintertime population was 20,000 people and then like the July 4th population was like 130,000 people. So most of the time nine months a year, 10 months a year, there was nobody around.

I would walk in the middle of the street and take my dog to the harbor, which was a central part of the town. There'd be nobody there. It was very desolate, not desolate. It's really not the right word. It was like being in a museum piece, right? There's a song by Morrisey called "Everyday is like Sunday."¹ It was like that. It was gray and nothing was going on and nobody was around in this small town and then come Memorial Day, there would be people everywhere. The roads would be crowded and there'd be people in yachts, people asking for directions and just a ton of tourists. There were advantages and disadvantages too, but tourism was really the central feature of the town. The defining feature found within Wood's Hole.

¹ Lyrics provided at the end of the document

The other weird thing about Wood's Hole is that it's one of the most important places for marine biology. [U]Chicago has bought or is affiliated with one of the big research institutes there. I always forget if it's Wood's Hole Oceanographic Institute or Marine Biological Labs.² There are dozens of people with PhDs who don't look like they should have PhDs who are these marine biologists. I think Jacques Cousteau's boat was harbored in wood's hole.

I'm just kind of riffing here, but water is obviously a central feature of the town There's beaches everywhere, and it was created by a glacier as the ice age was retreating. This glacier pulled back really quickly and it left all these lakes and and we call them kettle holes which are these bodies of water that are wider at the bottom than they are at the top. It was a fun town to grow up in some ways. It created a lot of nostalgia. The 70s were a weird time. It was an interesting place.

Terrible food across the board. Everything was fried right... fried fish, fried clams, french fries. When I was a kid we didn't eat out... I mean we maybe went to a restaurant two or three times a year and then if we got food it was a sub which is essentially Subway, or pizza. But even then it wasn't worth going because the food wasn't any good. Although it was worse at my house because my mother was a terrible terrible terrible cook... so bad... [*pauses and shakes head*] oh my god... and then it was the 70s, right? So breakfast was Captain Crunch with crunch berries and lunch was a piece of american cheese and two pieces of baloney on white bread. Fruit came out of a can. Literally. Fruit came out of a can. In our Christmas stockings we would get an orange or an apple because it was like, oh my god fruit! That's worthy of a Christmas present. We'd go to a supermarket and you go to the fruit and vegetable aisle and there'd just be nothing. There'd be potatoes and garlic cloves and yams. And I like yams and potatoes, but we ate them every day.

² It is the Marine Biological Laboratory.

O: Was this the same kind of food that the vacationing population was eating?

J: So it was different in the summer, so there was more fruits and vegetables. The strawberries in my hometown were pretty good. There was a strawberry festival at the Protestant church that you'd go to over at St. Andrews and we had good strawberries, but not much else. We'd have clams and oysters and fish... when fish was cheap. Fish is now expensive.

O: Would you describe there as being a two tiered food system? Was certain food catered towards the vacationing class versus the townie class?

J: Yeah. So, I lived across the street from a restaurant called the Flying Bridge and when I was a child, I lived 200 yards from the Flying Bridge and 200 yards from another restaurant called the Regatta. Never in my life... never in my pre-adult life did I ever eat at either restaurant. But what I did... There was a kid named Mark and Mark's dad owned the gas station in town. So Mark came over to my house one day and we went dumpster diving. So we went over to the restaurant, we opened up the dumpster we got inside the dumpster and we looked around and what we found was a bunch of restaurant stubs from the Flying Bridge. We sat there, Mark and I sat there at my house for two hours and just looked at what the rich people had been eating at the Flying Bridge, right? The bills were like 200 dollars. This is like 1976, 1978 and we were like, oh my god... They had a 200 dollar dinner where they got stuffed co-hogs, grilled bluefish, and corn on the cob. People like me and Mark never once ever ate at the flying bridge. Never once ever ate at the regatta, which was even fancier. But if you went to the Regatta or you went to the Flying Bridge meaning you, O, you would not be impressed by it. There's a family called the Lilies, they own the drug pharmaceutical company, Eli Lily. Yeah, yeah, so Eli lily lived in my hometown. Eli Lily would drive up in his Rolls Royce to the fish market I worked at and buy lobster and buy shrimp. I never once in my life had lobster with my parents. I never once in my life had swordfish with my parents, right? That was way out of reach of the local people.

O: You mentioned sort of sparsity in grocery stores. Did the rich people go to different grocery stores or do they just eat out because they're on vacation?

J: Yeah, so I grew up 300 yards from the A&P. There is now a rich person grocery store in my hometown, but when I was a kid there was the bad grocery store, which was A&P and there was the good grocery store, Stop and Shop. We were A&P people because we live so close to it. When I had fresh seafood as a kid, it's because my mother would get a permit and she would go pick, get clams out of the ocean. My sister, Mary, cut her foot pretty badly on a razor clam. But for us as locals, we had a lot of steam clams... My mother would go and go clamming for five hours. Come home. Boil them. Then we would eat them in the backyard with a little butter and lemon. That was the only time we got to eat local food. The advantage was that you could pick it yourself. When I was a kid, there were mussels on the rocks and we would just grab mussels and eat them. The 70s were pretty depressed... You know, recession, Jimmy Carter and waiting in line for gasoline. The rich people in Cape Cod were eating not great food. They were eating more expensive food and better food than I was, but in general the food was kind of bad everywhere. I mean, the food is still bad in Boston. It's not a good food area.

O: Can you draw out the connection between the oil crises and and and like what was going on in Falmouth?

J: I don't remember what year it was exactly. We hated the tourists or you're kind of raised to hate tourists even though the whole town is dependent on them, but when they were there there was always a line and there was always issues. The couple summers that we had the oil crisis, there were just massive lines to get gas. We sat in line for I don't know 45 minutes to an hour. Maybe that's hyperbole from memory, but you're doubly mad. Gas is expensive. You're waiting an hour for it and every tourist from Newton is in a fancier car that you'll ever be able to afford in front of you in line.

The other weird thing about the town is there's a ton of gas on the water too. All those boats run on gasoline. I killed my dog, Spotty, by letting him swim in the harbor too much and the gasoline that gets dumped into the harbor basically ate at spotty's stomach and we had to put him down because of that. That's a random tie into gasoline in the town. There's gas everywhere, right? All over the town. It's not just at the gas station. There are fueling pumps surrounding the harbors.

O: Were there less people during the oil crises?

J: That's a really good question. I don't know. I don't know what the population of my town was then versus what it is now. It feels like there's a lot more people there now, but I think the wintertime population hasn't changed much. There's a lot more money... there's so much more wealth in the United States. There's so much more wealth in Boston. The Lilies were the richest family you could imagine at the time. They had a 50-foot yacht. It was across the street from my house. This is part of my mother's aspirationalism... we shouldn't have lived where we lived. We lived in a stupid stupid house on the harbor. We should have had a normal house not on the harbor. It would have been much better for the quality of life. As a result, from my kitchen table, I looked at Eli Lilly's yacht. Eli Lilly had a 50-foot yacht right? And now the guy who runs Boston Scientific, he's got an 180 foot yacht and then he's got a 90-foot yacht. He's got like six boats in Falmouth Harbour that are worth hundreds of millions of dollars. The Lilies who were rich rich rich had like a medium-sized okay yacht. But so the wealth in the town has exploded and the rich people don't just have one yacht.

And now my grocery store, the A&P has been converted into some fancy market that has cilantro and turmeric and saffron, which is shit we never saw or dreamed of. At some point in the 70s, they introduced Ben and Jerry's ice cream and that was a culinary event.

O: Can you clearly differentiate the kinds of people and the sorts of industries that were at play?

J: There's a really terrible TV show called the Outer Banks. But it makes a good distinction. There's the locals which when I was a kid were called townies. Then there's the summer people. But some people are different like my best buddy, Geoff is a summer person. Geoff came down for 10 weeks and lived there the whole time and knew the town and knew stuff. Then you have people who come for the weekend, so like, if you go to Cape Cod or July 4th, you can't get over the bridge because there's so many people coming down for the weekend. Those are kind of your three classes.

When it's September 15, everybody, all the summer people are gone. The weekend people are gone, the people who own the big homes are gone. So what we would do is we'd go get an ice cream and we'd drive around the rich neighborhoods just to look at the rich people's houses. I used to break into... I spent my childhood breaking into people's houses and getting on people's yachts. I have been on to Eli Lilly's yacht a dozen times.

To circle back to industries... It's a big retirement community. There's a lot of old people who've saved up. It's a nice town and they live there, and then they go somewhere like Florida for the winter. Tourism has to be the number one industry and it's serving the summer people and the people who come down for the weekends in the day. Then you have marine biology. There's probably 10 or 12 organizations that do marine biological stuff and then you have a shocking amount of farming. There's cranberry bogs and strawberries everywhere.

We're not a big fishing town... the real fishing happens in New Bedford. Now back in the day, it was a whaling town. Nantucket was your big big whaling place, where a lot of the guys got really really rich. Nantucket makes sense because you're further out there, right? New Bedford, you can read Moby dick, is a big whaling town. Falmouth was a whaling town. If you go to the center of town near the Protestant churches, there are big mansions with widow's walks up top where the wives would wait for their husbands to come home. So,

there's a little bit of fishing. There is more sport fishing for tourists than there is actual fishing. When you and I would go to Woods Hole, we would fish on the dock. There were six to eight boats that did were actual fishing boats

The other one of the other industries... Your friends' parents were things like, venture capitalist, studio directors and studio owners. My friends parents were like the mailman, the substitute teacher, the hostess at a restaurant. I had one friend whose dad was a doctor. And then one friend whose dad owned the local construction company. But for the most part, it's a small town life doing small town stuff.

O: We have touched on this a bit already, but what changes have happened over time?

J: I mean I was born there in '66. It has been 58 years... The value of the town to an outsider is the amount of water. There's literally water everywhere. People have this desire to be near water. My parents probably bought our house for \$12,000 to \$14,000. When we moved to the house with a view of the harbor my parents probably paid \$50,000 for it. The value of any property proximate to water has just exploded, right?

Geoff called me up when his mom decided to move to an old folks home in 2008 or 2009. He offered to sell me his childhood home with private beach rights. An acre and a half. Not a great house, but kind of beautiful. It was like \$850,000. Now it is worth three million dollars. The value of real estate with water views and proximity to water and beach rights has gone crazy. This might be true in a lot of places, but it is especially true within Falmouth heights. It is now trendy and fancy.

What other changes were there? I'll bet you the winter is not much different. I bet you if you go there in November. It's super quiet... the other big thing that's happened is there's a ton of uh drugs. There's lots of stories about, I guess it's meth. I don't really know my drugs very well. There's a special, I think you can watch on Netflix, that talks about the amount of drugs devastating the community and it's pretty bad. People sneak to the church and do drugs and

die. Die in the Dunkin Donuts bathroom. In a lot of ways it's changed a lot. In a lot of ways, it hasn't. It's still pretty and there is still a lot of traffic in the summer.

O: Are there any specific attractions or events that people come for like the Fourth of July?

J: Yeah, that's a good one. So you've seen me run it – the Falmouth Road Race is a big deal. It starts in Woods Hole and it ends in Falmouth Heights. In the original race, you were supposed to drink a beer at the Brothers Four and go outside and run along the water until you got to the casino, which was the fixture of my childhood. It is about seven miles and then you're supposed to drink a beer at the casino. Now, it's a famous race and really elite runners run it as a warm-up for some marathon. I forget which one. July 4th. All the big holiday weekend. Memorial day. Labor day. A big feature of the town is people coming to Woods Hole to get on a ferry to go to Martha's vineyard. For a lot of people, it's a waystation to get to the vineyard, which is even more famous, prestigious and fancy.

O: Yeah, could you say a bit more about that? Do you have an idea of how many people were going to the vineyard?

J: I have no clue, but you could sit there and say the ferry goes this many times and takes this many people. Now there is a ferry from New Bedford and there was always a ferry from Hyannis. The advantage of the ferry from Woods Hole was that you could take a car. All these people would line up in their Saabs and their Volvos and line up in Woods Hole. This resulted in a lot of traffic. People just piling in to get over there

When I was a kid, my dream job was to be a captain of one of the ferries. One of the things I started doing before I could legally work was I started delivering newspapers to Martha's Vineyard on a fishing boat called the Patriot Two. I would get up very early in the morning. You had to have so many hours on a commercial vessel before you could train to be a captain. I was 12 or 13 years old... I didn't know what I was doing. I spent a bunch of time

trying to get hours on a boat so I could train to become a fishing captain or a captain of the ferry or something like that.

I don't know if you remember from when we stayed in Wood's Hole, but there was a piece of land called Penzance Point. There's a bike path that goes through town and it goes all the way to Wood's Hole. It goes all the way to the end because Penzance was a guano factory. It was where the ships would deliver bat shit then the factory would turn it into fertilizer. Then they would put it on trains and send it up to Boston. Ironically Penzance, I believe, this may be hyperbole, but I think it's the most valuable real estate on all of Cape Cod. So, the houses routinely go for 15 to 20 million dollars on Penzance, which is really high on Cape Cod.

O: Were most of the tourists from Boston?

J: Yeah, I would assume the high volume of tourists came from Boston and the surrounding town. At the beach where I grew up in the heights we had, we called them the Quebecois who were French Canadians. They would wear speed-o bathing suits and were very funny and very different from most americans. The other thing to know about the town is that it has a very large Portuguese population. They teach Portuguese in the high school. Most of the elected politicians now are Portuguese, so there's a lot of subcultures in the town. I grew up with a family that were Cape Verdean, which is an island, that was famous for I think the slave trade and it's essentially has all African and spanish Population. So, there is a big Cape Verdean population. It was colonized by the Portuguese... There were some interesting racial issues and religious issues. There is a Jehovah's witness population.

Lyrics to Everyday is like Sunday

Trudging slowly over wet sand
Back to the bench where your clothes were stolen
This is the coastal town
That they forgot to close down
Armageddon, come Armageddon
Come, Armageddon, come
Everyday is like Sunday
Everyday is silent and grey
Hide on the promenade, etch a postcard
"How I dearly wish I was not here"
In the seaside town
That they forgot to bomb
Come, come, come, nuclear bomb
Everyday is like Sunday
Everyday is silent and grey
Trudging back over pebbles and sand
And a strange dust lands on your hands
And on your face
On your face
On your face
Everyday is like Sunday
"Win yourself a cheap tray"
Share some greased tea with me
Everyday is silent and grey