

Irene Kleckner  
December 10, 2014

Interviewer: Bonnie Armstrong

Interviewees: Irene Kleckner and her daughter Monnie Terry

Videographer: Ennis Barbery, Museum of Chincoteague

Transcriber: David MacKinnon

Armstrong: Good afternoon, this is Bonnie Armstrong. I'm at the Chincoteague Museum. Today we are interviewing Irene Kleckner. She's here with her daughter, Monnie Terry. The videographer is Ennis Barbery. It is the 10th of December 2014. Let's get started Irene. Give me your full name.

Kleckner: Irene Sneed Kleckner. I prefer to use Irene Watson. That's my maiden name.

Armstrong: And your date of birth?

Kleckner: Eight, 29, '35.

Armstrong: Could you tell us a little about your parents, their names, their places of birth and what they did?

Kleckner: My parents were raised in the same neighborhood. They got married in--I can't remember that, when they got married, but they were together all their life. They never got a divorce. Nobody got into fights or argued. Whatever we got was shared. My mother was a little housewife. Every day of her life she made biscuits. Most Chincoteague women made baking powder biscuits at 12 o'clock every day. And my daddy, if he was coming around a corner and its getting twelve, and the biscuits weren't done; mother would go and turn the clock back because he'd get mad. And she'd say, "The day you die I'll never make another." We heard this for years. Dad said, "How many years you think?" She died when she was 90 years old. Anyway the children liked Christmas. Maybe get one thing from the family. Well we never had the toaster in our home. So if you want toast you light the gas stove. One Christmas we were so excited because my mother got a toaster which you could put a piece of bread in. Well on Chincoteague then there was no stores open nowhere, of course. My mother opened the toaster but we didn't have no bread. [laughter] We laughed over that all year. But we just had a real good life. We had animals. We were the outcasts on Clark Street, because we always had animals. Horses and everything. The man next door didn't like it. We had Billy goats that were brought into the

house. He said, "That man, I don't know what the H he's going to bring here next, an elephant?" Well the circus came to town. It used to come all the time on the elementary school grounds. Where we lived I was like glades they called it—like water areas. We liked out and the elephant had left the circus and was in the glades. So the man that was cussing said, "They gone and got an elephant." We used to laugh. Everything that people get mad at with your neighbors, we'd laugh. God we've been through something.]

Armstrong: I understand you found some pictures of your parents here at the museum. Perhaps Monnie would like to show us them?

Kleckner: My people, like my other and father [looks at photos]--these were horse races. This is picture at the carnival and Gold Dust was his horse.

Armstrong: Which one was your father there?

Kleckner: Oh yes. There's my father [pointing to the photo]

Armstrong: What was his name?

Kleckner: Linwood Watts, everybody knows it. And he was an outdoor man. He was a mess. He enjoyed life but he took care of his children too. When he was going off shore he would come home with all this food. And my mother would say, "Well, your dad's not going to come home [unintelligible] us." He was just like a mother to us. And everyone loved him, the kids and all, and he loved them. He was my best friend. I've never got over him though. My kids know how much I think of him. Now mother, she [unintelligible] going--she went to New York with the firemen. She did everything.

Armstrong: And you have a picture of your mother here?

Kleckner: My little mother. Like I say, she'd be down to the carnival end of the women's stand. And she would peel potatoes the whole carnival. Because those days they had chicken and dumplings and all that food like for hardly anything. They'd collect up the chicken. They worked very hard. At one time was like 80 women in the festival.

Terry: She was born on Jester Street, right?

Kleckner: Yeah, mother was born. They brought her up to Clark Street, 1909. And she was born on Jester Street. I know where all their homes are. We know where all our great, great grand people are buried. We go to all the grave stones, don't we? [looks at Monnie who nods].

Armstrong: Are they there on the island? Are they buried here on the island?

Kleckner: No we're all Chincoteaguers. Now my grandfather that was a Watson, he was the one--it's like three groups of Watsons. And his group came from Delaware and from the American Indians. And everyone else was local Chincoteague. And they all worked on the water. With all these [unintelligible] Main Street. Big houses.

Armstrong: You want to point out your mother on there? We can see her little face there.

Kleckner: She's not a very big woman. [pointing out in photo] But the homes, I was going to say. The men worked on the water and they had little boats, but they built them. Big houses up and down to the shore and all. And they had nothing to work with. The house we lived in. It was built in 1898. And I loved the house. The nails on that house were square. They was, really. It was our home. When I left there we rented it for two months because I didn't want to leave. I never got over it. I've been gone from up there for 30 years. And I went up there last year and met the lady but I couldn't talk to her because I kept crying. See I brung her a big basket 'cause she loved the house so much and it made me feel better. One thing I would say in town, the Legion, to change the subject. They let all the kids come there all school years. And I think it was wonderful. We would go there after school. We'd go nights. There only food there you had to cook or fry something. There was a booth over here that had different games. I think ping pong and shuffle board for the men. And we stayed there all the time. And we had juke box that was there. And we went there every day of our life. I think it was nice that they let us go up until, don't you, for years. The only time we couldn't go was if they were having meetings.

Armstrong: This is the American Legion? Was it on Main Street where it still is?

Kleckner: It looks just like that. And I thought it was nice of them.

Armstrong: So you told us a little about your early childhood but can you tell us a little bit more like what was it like as small child and as an elementary student? What did you do for fun and games? What's it like to be?

Kleckner: Well, for one thing we went to church. To the Baptist Church. If it hadn't been for them I don't know what we'd have done because nobody had cars. We walked everywhere we went. If you wanted to go anywhere you walked. We would walk to the carnival. We always had new clothes for carnival, new shoes. And you walk home like eleven o'clock at night. Kids are crying up to [unintelligible]. We went every night. Pony Penning. Somebody asked Monnie—I make my bed every morning—somebody said to Monnie, "What do remember most about your

childhood?" And she said, "I remember that during the carnival time my mother never made her bed." [laughter]

Terry: She was at the carnival for two weeks.

Kleckner: We left kids, house, dogs. We just went. And my husband, he always called bingo, worked for the bingo. You never left. When the bingo door went down it was time to go home. We stayed right there.

Terry: And you played on the docks days with Mary.

Kleckner: We lived on the docks. And my girlfriend Mary before she died, she said, "We were neglected as children." There'd be eight and ten kids. Nobody could swim. Nobody could swim.

Terry: No life jackets.

Kleckner: A life jacket? Down by the bridge. My brother Harold, he threw me out there one day. He said, "Could you swim?" I said, "No." So he threw me right out. We had good times.

Terry: No money. That's how we learned to swim. Your brother would throw you over and say, "Sink or swim."

Kleckner: Well, we did crab a lot down there. Crabs were plentiful. They would climb right the sides. But we always had a string with a shell on it. A piece of fat meat. Throw it like that and put your foot like, [gestures with her foot] get it in a basket. That's how we did it. Then we'd go home with a few and we'd come back. Nobody every came to look for us saying, "Are you doing all right." Just down there playin'. But one thing about the kids from Chincoteague that I remember, each part of Chincoteague in them days, you lived Deep Hole, East Side or where ever. You stayed in your neighborhood to play. Very seldom would a kid would come from another area, you know. But we had good times. We never had no money. I can remember being in one of the restaurants; my girlfriend and I had a quarter. We got French fries and we each got a soda. So we had to share French fries. And there was one of those better named people in Chincoteague. And that girl was like eatin' spaghetti. I'd never seen spaghetti before. I thought, a woman, a girl out by herself gettin' a big meal. We couldn't even believe that. We laughed over it later. We had a quarter and all. We went on hay rides to Pocomoke. Going down to the inlet. You know where that is. Well, the end of Chincoteague; the big homes, the very big homes, nothing new. When you end at that last house there was nothing. You saw nothing. The road, which was dirt, it wasn't built up. So I worked down there for two summers. This older man would come and get me at seven in the morning and I'd stay there till seven at night. So when we

got down to the inlet, what we call it. On your right was a little square house. And they rented boats. There was no trailers nowhere, nothing. And then this [unintelligible] squid and sold it for 50 cents a pound. I don't know what it is now. Anyway we stayed there from seven to seven at night. We had one day off, Saturday to Sunday night. So on my 16th birthday I went half a day and I went up to Ocean City. But when you come out from that very end where the boats are now, that was a swimming hole for everybody. And we took the kids when they were little. And every mother had all these little children; we'd sit around. And it's bigger now. It wasn't big like that. And that's where we went 'cause you couldn't get to the beach, remember. There was no way to get there.

Terry: No bridge.

Kleckner: So all the little people went down there. We still talk about with the little kids. Where all the trailers are there was nothing.

Terry: Just marsh.

Kleckner: Nothing. One day we had to walk home from the inlet to our house [unintelligible]. It was—I didn't think I would ever make it, me and Mary. [laughter]. Anyway, it was horses down in there from the Beebe's, Maureen and Paul. They were kids. Everybody loved them. I never remember seeing them up town like all the kids runnin' wild. They had work to do for the grandma and the grandpa. Everybody thought a lot of them people. And like on Sunday you'd say, "Well, daddy got to work. Come on we'll go down to the Beebe's." You weren't even invited and people would go down there and sit, just talk. And one thing in Chincoteague, you never invite anybody, somebody in the evening to come bring their kids to sit there two hours and talk. Or if they came in they'd say, 'We'll get ya a plate and get ya something to eat.' But every woman making hot biscuits. I can't make 'em good. My mother said you put two cups of flour, that much grease and salt and bake it. And she made them every day didn't she Monnie?

Terry: Tell them about how grandpa turning the bridge around. [the old bridge to Chincoteague] How you used to watch him do that.

Kleckner: I can't talk about that. [laughter] He worked as a bridge tender. And the guy up there with a cigarette, [points to a photo] he was his friend. They were very good friends.

Terry: They used to shuck oysters together.

Kleckner: Oh yeah, they'd shuck oysters.

Armstrong: What was his name?

Kleckner: His name was John T. His daughter is my friend and I call her John T. Even if we write to each other we put our daddy's name on it, card. But anyway, they worked every years. Worked hard.

Armstrong: What did they do on the bridge?

Kleckner: What did they do?

Armstrong: What was your father and what was the job on the bridge?

Kleckner: Oh, the job. All of them had the same job. When boats when out on Monday morning, like when we lived up North Main. You would hear these horns blowing, weird. And they'd pull up and wait for the man to get out of the house and go up there to turn the bridge. Well, the bridge would make all this--I could hear it because we never had air conditioners, you know. And what happened was they would have to, every so often, to grease the part that went under there that went around. And they would have to keep it painted and fixed, and they did. I don't know how many was working there. Somebody had to be there at all times. At all times.

Armstrong: Did you ever go out and visit him there?

Kleckner: Did I what?

Armstrong: Did you ever go out and visit him when he was out in...

Kleckner: Honey, we went there all the time.

Terry: They took his lunch every day. [laughter]

Kleckner: He would call, "Well I need a clean handkerchief. Well, would you go and get this and some life savers?" I mean and we did everything for that man but breathe.

Terry: That's the truth.

Kleckner: I had him in the ambulance one night. I had that thing over his mouth so he could breathe. And I pushed it. My mother said, "Well you scarred your father's face with that." Well, he couldn't breathe. I was trying to make him breathe. Oh, he was waited on hand and foot.

Terry: He'd shuck the oysters or he worked on the bridge. He had his lunch delivered wherever he was, twelve o'clock.

Kleckner: Yeah. Anything he asked for we tried to get him. He had ten grandchildren and they just catered to him, every one of them. It was sad when he was gone.

Armstrong: How old was he when he died?

Kleckner: Seventy three. All of the women lived to be 90 years old.

Terry: They were Sneeds, right?

Kleckner: Yeah.

Armstrong: I want to know about your brothers and your sisters. What are their names and what is the order of birth?

Kleckner: I'm the middle child.

Armstrong: I wanted to know about your brothers and sisters.

Kleckner: My brother was Louis Watson. They called him Frog. Some people don't know this name. And he worked out of Ocean City as a teenager on a boat. And he had a lot of burns from the sun. And over the years it got bad. And he had kidney trouble. And this is when he was young. Well in his later years he had to have his face redone because he was burned up from the sun. And we didn't have anything to put on that. He would lay with his burns and mother would put liniment and vinegar on. It was sad. But he loved life. He loved people. He loved fishing. He would do anything. He would take a broom. Get the wood sometime, hold the broom and jump threw it. So he tells my son it hurts your fingers when you fall on the ground. Now he jumped so he didn't fall. He told my son, "When you jump through it look that there on the sidewalk toward." Meaning, when you're little you don't know any better. He taught my son everything to know about fishing.

Terry: He worked club houses what we call up the bay.

Kleckner: Yeah.

Terry: The next island up... Bunch of club houses. He worked there.

Kleckner: He worked up there with people from Washington DC, money people. He didn't care. His little house, he was just as proud of it when they'd they come to the door. He didn't care about material things.

Armstrong: Those are the hunting clubs?

Barbery: Yes.

Kleckner: Oh they got em up there.

Terry: Up the bay.

Armstrong: Tell us a little about up the bay. Tell us a little about up the bay while we're on that and then we'll get back to your brothers and sisters.

Kleckner: What do you want to know?

Terry: Up the Pence Island, Uncle Lloyd used to...

Kleckner: Well he worked up there for years.

Terry: They were guides. He was for years.

Kleckner: He'd come down on Wednesday to pick the men from DC up.

Terry: It was where the Island Motor Inn is now. That's where they would pick the men up and take them up there for a week.

Kleckner: They really liked that. She [Monnie] was in on that.

Terry: Not back then.

Kleckner: Now I'm talkin' about when you were younger, when you were. They even got their picture on the wall in the den and everything. A second brother, Harold, you know Harold. He was a total man in the ocean to make money. He worked hard on those big clam boats and all that. He was always working the ocean. He traveled from New York down to Florida takin different boats and things and he had no education at all. He couldn't...

Terry: He started working on the ocean when he was twelve.

Kleckner: He really worked like a man. That one day I was diggin' in my yard when you [?] there. It was the root of a tree and I asked him to get it up. And he worked there. I kept puttin the window up and I said, "Harold, you got to quit. You can't get it out. I want you to stop." And he said, "Go in the house." I put the window up. I said, "You're gonna have a heart attack." He said, "You're not fooling with a boy, you're fooling with a man and I'm gonna to get this root up." Then he stayed there like three hours.

Terry: He was almost 80 when he did this.

Kleckner: He says, "I'll get it right up and your son will get it up and say he did it." He was really—he loved people.

Terry: He loved the ocean too.

Kleckner: Our family was out family. Oh, he was scared of the ocean. He said it would get ya. The last time he went out, way out up to New York he said he stayed on his knees for three days it was so rough. And it was quite a few boats out there. And it was men that he wasn't familiar with. But they made a lot of money on their trips. Some of them boats, I think that was the same storm. They lost a boat and man lost two of his sons. One of the sons came out from Carolina. They always had Carolina boys up here. And the boys floated back down to Carolina right to where the boat came out. They say that happens sometimes. But we were all...

Terry: He loved horses. He was married to Maureen Beebe of Misty.

Kleckner: Yeah. They were kids. His life was horses.

Terry: He always had a horse all of his life.

Kleckner: And they still got them there even though he was gone.

Barbery: Who was that that was married to Maureen? Was that your brother?

Terry: Yeah, her brother was married to Maureen Beebe.

Kleckner: My mother and father considered Maureen like...

Terry: Oh, she was wonderful to our family. She was young, you know.

Terry: Very nice girl. Very good.

Kleckner: She told daddy if he died first she'd get him a dozen roses. He said, "She'd die first."

When he died she sent a dozen roses.

Terry: She was very good to him.

Kleckner: She loved mother. Her mother got killed in a car wreck. Anyway, life goes on.

Terry: And you got Tommy, your other brother.

Kleckner: He was a waterman too.

Armstrong: So he was younger now?

Terry: He's the baby.

Kleckner: I was just about gone by the time he came. My mother had him at 40 some years old. She didn't take care of him. I did. Being as I was a teenager, people thought he was my little boy, you know. [laughter] I cried and cried when I left home because I was afraid something would happen to him. And I was in Memphis, Tennessee when I got this letter with pictures. He'd been run over and his eyes were all [gestures]. I just thought nobody could take care of him but me. I left Chincoteague. We lived everywhere. When Pony Penning came we would walk...

Terry: Oh yes.

Kleckner: I missed one Pony Penning. I was in Baltimore for four years. I cried all day. And it was some Chincoteaguers lived behind me that we knew, their family. So we drank a lot of coffee that day, with a lot of vodka in it. [laughter] It wasn't vodka, it was Thunderbird.

Terry: Oh yeah.

Kleckner: It was Thunderbird. We drink that in our coffee. I said I'll never miss another one. But one year we were in California. I'm goin home. And we got home didn't we?

Terry: And her father was very upset. Grandpa. Because we moved away.

Kleckner: Oh he got drunk every time I left.

Terry: Because when she married my dad, he was in the Marine Corps and he was very upset.

Kleckner: We were in the Marine Corps and then we went to Carolina. We went Memphis, Tennessee. We were; the longest we were gone was in Phoenix, Arizona. And Pittsburgh [said with disgust]. We lived there four years. I came home so much people didn't know I'd left home. When we would come home and you hit that base [NASA Wallops Flight Facility] turn, we'd roll all the windows down 'cause we could smell Chincoteague.

Terry: But you knew you were home.

Kleckner: And you saw them lights there was nothing better.

Terry: You were supposed to tell them about the Navy in the '50s...

Kleckner: Oh yeah. The base, the Navy base is over here. And a lot of girls got married to some of them boys up there but wouldn't leave home. And they got divorced. The people treated them really good, like you'd pick them up and take them to the base. Some people took them like to eat. Come eat with me. And we'd go to movies. We'd come out to the street and there was nothing but sailors, just sailors. [laughter] We had good times.

Armstrong: Where was the Navy base?

Kleckner: Right over there where the base is now. But the base, you went right on through where the planes go. You didn't have the big turn. None of that. Straight out.

Terry: That was a new road they opened they have now. Years ago you went right through the NASA base to get to the mainland.

Kleckner: There were lots of them then. There wasn't a lot fighting goin on. Everybody got along good. They all hung up in the restaurants up town. At one restaurant here; she was known for her tuna fish sandwiches. Nobody's ever figured out what she put on them [laughs] And Mary and I, my girlfriend still livin, and we talk about things we did years ago. She was quiet person, do a lot, like me. I want to have fun. The Baptist Church was very good to the children. The old bus—once a year they'd take it up to Ocean City. My daddy drove the bus. Well, you're whole life was like over there. They had things in the summer. What was that called when you went?

Terry: Bible School.

Kleckner: Bible School

Terry: It was two weeks back when I was there.

Kleckner: And they had woman named—what was her name?

Terry: Melvanie Shepard.

Kleckner: No, that's—Miss Lola. "Good morning Miss Lola." And it was just; everybody was happy. I never saw people, like now a days, in arguments. Like we shared what we had. And then with the band, we had a bus that would come get us. We went everywhere with the band. We went anywhere they were havin something. Even out to West Virginia. We went for three days. We went to Atlantic City in the Miss America contest. We were in the parade for Miss America.

Armstrong: Was that what, the early '50s?

Kleckner: Probably 1950. We had so much fun. I just can't believe that all that we did. We did so much I don't even know how to tell you, really. I liked being on Chincoteague, more than anything. We were down on the docks and all, like I said. You had your own little groups, you know.

Terry: Blackberry pickin in summer.

Kleckner: Yes.

Armstrong: Tell us about the picnics on little beach? Tell us about your picnics on little beach.

Kleckner: Oh, well we didn't go to little beach, we went to big beach where the Coast Guard dock is. You left town dock where they cleaned the fish by the bridge. And it was, a monitor they call it. Probably that on in here [looks back toward museum displays] And all these chairs they put on there. I never saw any life jackets or anything. You had these wooden chair. All the way down to the inlet. All the way out to Assateague. And you stayed all day, all day. We had no bag of chips or nothing.

Terry: No ice.

Kleckner: People had Pepsis in those days, but, you had no ice or nowhere to keep it cold.

Armstrong: So what kind of food would you have on this picnic?

Kleckner: Oh my God. Anything your mother could make and bring with no ice. And my mother always brought a big bowl of potatoes.

Armstrong: Potato salad.

Kleckner: No she didn't. She made mashed potatoes.

Armstrong: Oh, mashed potatoes. I'm sorry.

Kleckner: I don't remember mother making potato salad. And she always made a big three layer cake. And it was heavier than lead because it was from scratch.

Terry: Chocolate.

Kleckner: Yeah, she made chocolate.

Armstrong: In the summertime. [laughter]

Kleckner: Even if we went to Ocean City, our family would go over in our own cars. And over on the side as you're goin in by the bridge, we all would stop there. And we had all this food and you're goin to Ocean City. And mother had her little mashed potatoes and chocolate cake.

[laughter] Lord. We've had some good times I tell. I bet you're—are that we had...

Terry: That was modern times. That wasn't...

Kleckner: It was modern. Yeah, it was the condition we all were in.

Armstrong: So, in high school I understand you were a cheerleader and majorette. I think we have a picture of it here. Why don't you tell us a little bit about that?

Kleckner: That's when I was havin fun.

Terry: She was the leading majorette.

Kleckner: Yeah but I don't have my picture here...

Armstrong: She's got it [Monnie brings it forth]

Terry: This is when she were in the band, in elementary school. [showing photo]

Kleckner: My mother took great pride in curling my hair.

Terry: She had banana curls also.

Kleckner: Oh, on time she gave me a Toni perm. Where is that [pointing at the photo]. She gave me a Toni in the seventh grade. And it was like a big fuzz ball. And I said, "Mother, I'm not goin to school." She said, "Oh, you're goin to school." Well, I cried and everything. I put a bandana on and I went to school and I set there all day [puts her head down line in embarrassment]. They were saying, "Take it off." "No I can't".

Terry: In high school she was the lead majorette for years. My father...

Kleckner: I took the bandana off my hair, it was like. [demonstrates fuzz ball hairdo] But this one guy, his name was Wilmer Reynolds, I think I remember. He said, "She don't look bad." He made me feel good. I shouldn't tell this. A year or two ago he was down at the carnival. He was from here to there to me. I wouldn't let him know it was me, 'cause I gained all the weight. I took pictures of him. I got them at home. And he was there with his wife. And I just took his picture and I didn't let her know who I was, 'cause she was goin to my mother. I always wanted to talk to him and tell him that time I was so... Then he sent me cards when he was little. I always got used

to cards. I kept them for years, then I threw them away. And I just wanted to talk to him. I can't let that man see what I look like now, never.

Terry: Well, how long were you the lead majorette? All through high school?

Kleckner: I don't know when somebody—when you got up to get out of school they'd keep movin' them up. We had a good time. We had the parades. We had a lot of parades on Chincoteague back in those days. We had parades for everything 'cause the mayor liked to do that. He had a parade for everything.

Armstrong: Tell us a little about your courtship.

Kleckner: My what?

Armstrong: Your courtship, your husband.

Kleckner: My husband?

Terry: Pocomoke

Kleckner: You want to know the truth? He was a different man than what we are.

Terry: Well he was from Pennsylvania. He moved here when he was nine.

Kleckner: I've never met another Kleckner. I think he came down here to ruin my life. Where'd you come from, where's your people? We never found another Kleckner to talk to. Where did the man come from?

Terry: Allentown. [laughter]

Kleckner: His father had died in that steel place. He got overcome in gas. They knew people down here they'd gone fishing with, so him and his mother came down here. He was a hard worker. He took care of his family.

Terry: Tell them about your first date in Pocomoke.

Kleckner: No I'm not. [laughter]

Terry: He went to the movies to Pocomoke. It was a hay ride, wasn't it?

Kleckner: Yeah.

Terry: She was 14 and she's was with him ever since. Never had another date.

Kleckner: I never wanted to. I wanted to be with him. He was in a lot of organizations that he went too. He loved fishing. He worked on one computer all his life. When he was in with the computers it wasn't like now. We lived away. You had to be dressed every day with the overcoat and a hat. Moved here. We couldn't get over when we moved down here. That was his life. And

he was dying with cancer. And he studied every day for three hours, on computers. It was his life, but he didn't want—If he was livin now what he would do.

Terry: But he was in high school. He worked on the water and stuff and went down to the bay. He raised chickens.

Kleckner: Yeah, he raised chickens.

Terry: Deep Hole was nothing but chicken houses

Kleckner: Nobody had a car in high school. They were young, so he had his mother's car 'cause he had to leave at lunch time to go feed the chickens, 20 bags or you wouldn't have no money, you know. He worked hard.

Armstrong: So you met him when you were 14, so tell us a little about your courtship here on the island.

Kleckner: We walked to the movies. The only place we'd go. We'd walk to the movies, walk home. He didn't get a car and stuff for like the chickens.

Terry: And he'd come see you in a boat.

Kleckner: Yeah, I know that all right.

Terry: And it didn't have a motor.

Kleckner: I know. When you live over here [gesturing to the area around the museum]—and I lived on; at the bridge. And he rowed it all the way. He rowed, real; two oars...

Terry: All the way around the island to see her. [laughter]

Kleckner: We had a good life with the children and everything. I'm thinking what I want to tell you and I forgot. But the inlet was different—I can't get that off of my mind because there was no trailers nowhere.

Terry: Just mothers and children.

Kleckner: And that little restaurant. I don't know what they were doin with that but I went there for two years, seven to seven. And I think young kids now a days wouldn't do that for 20 dollars.

Armstrong: So tell us about your children.

Kleckner: I have three children. They're my life. I would die for them and it wouldn't even be a heart beat. Just take me. One son, they say he's my golden child. And Monnie, he is a good boy.

Terry: He is, you're right. Good heart, very good heart.

Kleckner: Now I had one son, he always looks to take care of me. We don't get along.

Terry: They're very much alike.

Armstrong: And what's his name, what's his, Paul's name?

Kleckner: The oldest one's Paul.

Terry: I'm the oldest. Then Paul's the oldest son.

Kleckner: Well, I know what you like. Anyway, Paul Kleckner is a nice boy. But he wants me to do as he tells me to do. And we do not get along. I know you hear it sometimes. [laughter] He wants—oh he; I sent him up to Maryland to get me a turkey breast. And he was gonna to get one with spices, like Mexican spices. I said, "I don't want that." Well we argued over the phone. He couldn't find them. I said to Paul, "Well, where are you in the store." He said, "Well I found the milk." I said, "The milk is no where near the turkeys." We argued two days. Sunday he come around; he brought be my dinner. He said, "When I go up there, I'm gonna get you a turkey breast. I don't care if its Mexican or what it is. I'm gonna get it."

Terry: But he loves this island more than she does.

Kleckner: Oh my God, he cried when he left here.

Terry: He worked on water in high school.

Kleckner: He worked on the fish dock. When he left Chincoteague to move—his wife wanted to move—he said, "When that sun was setting and the last truck full of furniture, tears just running right down off of my eyes." And he's been over there since how I'm old, about twenty something?

Terry: Thirty.

Kleckner: They moved back two weeks ago and you don't know any person that's happier. Now Monnie—she's my mother 'cause she thinks she's my mother—when she was eight years old, she did all the ironing and everything. I never told my daughter to clean your room. I did not do that. They had their rooms. I looked in there Fridays. If the room was messy they wouldn't go anywhere. I'm very hard on my children. But she'd put the food away. She done everything.

Terry: When I was twelve I got a little brother, Chris.

Kleckner: That's the one we called the golden. [laughter] If you had a child—I've never had a disagreement. If I call him come fix something he's supposed to come over tonight, he'll come. I've never had nothing to fight with him over.

Terry: He wasn't like me and Paul.

Kleckner: His father was young when he was cancer for four years. Of course Chris lived with me and he helped me take care of him. And he'd hug his father get his medicine. The other child,

I don't know where. He was down to South Carolina, Hilton Head. He'd say, "Oh my nerves is bad. I'm going to Hilton Head." "Yeah, what about my nerves." Paul is...

Terry: They both loved to fish. My God they would rather fish, I think, than eat.

Kleckner: I made three hats last week. Santa Claus hats, for them to wear fishing. They couldn't put them on until they caught a fish. They were in the Chesapeake Bay in pouring rain. He said, "It was raining sideways." They were soaking wet. And they wouldn't leave until they got a fish.

Terry: Always had a boat. They got a boat when they were about twelve.

Kleckner: Oh yeah. Their life was a boat. Paul—we lived out on the Main Street—he was surprised, he went on a trip, when he got punished about school work. We had a little Ford Pinto and I'd raise the top, put the boat in the car, walk across the street, low as I could. He'd be holdin the back. No matter. And that—the other boy never act—did things like that. Being to Chincoteague I don't know why anybody—I hear people say, "I'm tired of that place. Nothing over there. All tourists." I don't care who comes here. I want them to like it or leave it. I don't like to hear people runnin Chincoteague down.

Terry: No she doesn't.

Kleckner: If they don't like it they have to leave. I hear many a person say, "Well if you don't like it the same bridge that brought you takes you back." [laughter] Haven't you heard that all your life?

Armstrong: Yes Maam. [laughter]

Kleckner: If you did something wrong, years ago with the other bridge, they'd say, "We'll turn the bridge. You're not getting off here." [laughter] I think most people get along pretty good.

Terry: Very good to people on here. Everybody takes care of each other.

Kleckner: And the fire [volunteer fire department], to me, is the heart of Chincoteague. What would we do—the people that have never had to call them don't understand. We've had to call them many times. And those boys, they just would do anything for you. They'll come in a heart beat. Whether it a fire, a cat up a tree, or—they just come to you. And I think they need a lot of credit for it. My daddy went back and forth, three years in the hospital. And my husband had to go four. And I had their names right on my wall to call. I didn't even call where you're suppose to and they'd come flying down.

Terry: The whole family was firemen, great grandfather, father.

Kleckner: All my family were firemen.

Armstrong: Volunteer firemen?

Kleckner: Uh huh. Way back. Further than, the '40s or what when it was starting. Because my grandma, when she died—I didn't know she had been in it. Somebody had said she had been in it. The fire company, my mother, my father, they were down there. They didn't know where we were. They were gone. [laughter]

Terry: They were at the firehouse or carnival.

Kleckner: They were gone. And the horses, when they would go to get down, they didn't do like they do now. I loved when they'd go down Main Street. The horses would actually trot like run. But now they have to walk them, you know. Everything's changed.

Armstrong: Tell us about the horse races. I noticed one of the pictures of your dad. Tell us about the horse races on the carnival.

Terry: The horse track around the carnival ground. The horse track.

Kleckner: Oh yeah. They had races. I read something, I read in that one book that I got about Chincoteague. They had races. The boys were like makin, I don't know what they made, 25, 10 dollars or whatever when you come in. And that was great. Everybody got there and waited for them, you know.

Armstrong: Was the track actually at the carnival grounds?

Kleckner: I'm going to show you a picture sometime.

Terry: It went all the way around...

Kleckner: All the way around. Clear back into the next street. Because, see back there were just a lot of trees and stuff.

Terry: It wasn't a street.

Armstrong: When did they stop doing it? And why did they stop?

Kleckner: They quit—when I got married they were still doing it. That was '50s.

Terry: Probably early '60s they quit doing it.

Kleckner: I don't know. Could have been before that. Little Paul Beebe, you know, Maureen's. I think Maureen probably was in them too, the races.

Terry: Uh huh. I think she was.

Kleckner: She really was a horse person. She was very quiet.

Terry: My brother Harold, he used to do it. He raced around everything.

Kleckner: Oh, Harold. He raced. He went anywhere with a horse. They used to go; the boys used to go up—I can't remember where they went. Maryland or somewhere. And they'd stay a week at a time. Now them other boys, my oldest brother, they would go to the beach once a year. There was no bridge yet. You had to go around. And they'd take their supplies. And they stayed there a whole week. Didn't come home. And their food and all that. They didn't know how to keep it good. They used to dig a hole, deep, and put their drinks in there because all you had was of 12 ounce drinks, you know, to keep them cold. Imagine that was delicious. [laughs]

Armstrong: So they would be fishing out there?

Kleckner: My brother was a fisherman.

Terry: Tell them about Grandpa's...

Kleckner: Oh, okay.

Terry: They used to have boat races up here.

Kleckner: I got to tell you.

Terry: Like late 1800s or early 1900s.

Kleckner: All of my grandparents, both sides, in winter they went to New York to shuck oysters. Now my mother was born in 1909. So her mother and her husband, all them were up there before 1909. But we don't know—what we have here, we don't know. It was, I can't think of his first name, Sneed.

Terry: Tom, Thomas.

ir: Tom Sneed. There's more than one Tom Sneed. I think it was a great grandfather and one beyond. So my grandma went in the house, 1909 [pointing]. I don't mean to point. She went in there in 1909. This cup was there. We've always known about it. The family has always known about it. And the man, the Sneed man, sailed a sailboat to New York. New York was the oyster capital like.

Terry: Of the East Coast.

Kleckner: Where everybody went for oysters. And they would go there stay the whole winter, with the kids. And they'd open oysters. Well, he ran up in a sailboat, a sailboat race they had. And he won.

Terry: He was the captain.

Kleckner: One of the Tom Sneeds. He won the race. Take that thing out. [Monnie takes out a big, peuter pitcher to show] That's what he won.

Terry: That was what he won.

Kleckner: And it's been in their house since 1909. And you can find that on the computer or something. We don't know what year. I mean it had to be 1800s.

Terry: It's heavy.

Kleckner: Show Bonnie. It's not very clean.

Terry: That's what he won, because all the big ships would come in.

Kleckner: And when he came back with his boat he brought bananas in the boat.

Terry: Right behind Tommy Clark's. That's where they used to come into.

Kleckner: That's what you won when you won your sailboat race. [laughter]

Armstrong: It's very heavy. So you've had that in your family since?

Kleckner: We know it exists because it's been in his house since before 19...

Terry: Before 1909

Kleckner: Well we're just going by a number.

Terry: His tombstone is behind our house on Main, where we used to live on Main Street and it's got a picture of a boat with like a little saying about being a captain on his tombstone.

Armstrong: And his name was Sneed?

Terry: Sneed. Tom Sneed.

Kleckner: I brought my son, at the time that he wants it, and he's going to leave it to another Thomas Sneed that's living, you know. But it's nothing. It's not worth a thing. It's ugly.

[laughter]

Armstrong: I think it quite beautiful. Was this the surprise?

Kleckner: Yeah.[laughter]

Armstrong: She told us she had a surprise. [laughter] It's beautiful. Thank you for bringing it.

Terry: That was it.

Armstrong: Because he was born in what, 1879 or 1880?

Kleckner: I don't know. I got it wrote down. Way back. We would love to know which man it was. But I know he was Sneed because my grandma moved into the house and that was always in the house. She never moved.

Armstrong: Well, Irene, another item on your list that you wanted to make sure we covered was the chicken house. Your father working there. How about you tell us a little about that?

Kleckner: Back in there there's a lot of pictures of that. Well you didn't own the house. You would rent it and try to make your money for the man that owned the house. And they ran chickens, I think, 14 weeks in those days. Now, I think, they don't grow them that long. The whole family took care of the chickens.

Terry: The chicken houses were all over the island.

Armstrong: You say run them. That is how long you raised them before they slaughtered them?

Kleckner: That's what they were supposed to be. Well, I mean, I think it was 12. I think the 14 weeks they were gettin too old or somethin. But we would got there. You had to feed em with your hands. All the bottles had to be washed; put the clear water in. You worked yourself to death. And then somebody would go by and blow their horn and the chickens would go into the corner and smother. On the chicken houses they had a sign, 'Do not blow your horn', you know. Well daddy lost three times. And when you're doin it you don't get no money until you sell your chickens. One time, I remember, I wasn't very old, and daddy said, "Come on, we all got to go to the chicken house 'cause our chickens were bunching up." And we went up there and big old trucks came to get them all one time. You get em, tie em on their feet, put em over a clothes line because they wanted the blood to run down. Now this was way back, not how they do now. We had a time. Whatever we did, the family, whole family had to do it. My mother and father cleaned the Island Theater. Before I went to school you had to go down there and clean the theater before 8 o'clock. And we had good times runnin through there cleanin out the popcorn thing. Mother goin to check the—and we, me and my girlfriend, had a ball down there. Get up before 8u o'clock and go clean. Pull all the seats up lookin for trash and all that. And we'd be at the Baptist Church. Daddy would go fix the water, heat it for baptize on Saturday night. And I'd go with him. But, we were everywhere and everything. Cleaned that up there, the theater. Mother would get up there and cleaned them windows. I don't know how we got to school, whether we ran or what. [laughter] But we had good times.

Armstrong: Irene, I don't know if there's anything else you want to tell us about. But I would like to hear, its Christmas season, and I'd love to hear about maybe some of your Christmas traditions.

Kleckner: Well I can tell you that very quickly. We were not raised to get gifts for Christmas. If you said, "I want," my mother would say, "Is it your birthday? I thought it was Jesus' birthday."

Terry: That's what she said.

Kleckner: And she'd make Jesus a cake. That big cake. And nobody touching it. It would sit on the table. That was Jesus' birthday cake. I had one out too. We didn't have Christmas, I mean, and we got—my daddy, believed in oranges. An orange, that's all he ever got growing up. Orange for Christmas. He went to her [Monnie's] house one day. He says, "It was a disgrace she had so many toys." Well, we got—if we got a toy—but I got a bike. Well my brother had it all the time. He wouldn't let me have it. Then I got a pair of white ice skate, figure skates. And mother got the biggest things. I thought they were too big. She said, "You'll grow into them." Well Lloyd, my brother, he could really skate backwards and anybody knew he could skate. No boy would ever wear white ice skates but Lloyd. Because he didn't care. I said, "Give me my skates." And he said, "I'm goin to use them today." But we never got mad.

Terry: Because you ice skated all over the island.

Kleckner: Oh yeah.

Terry: Little pond or anything would freeze up. Everybody would have their kids on ice skates.

Kleckner: Just like the chicken houses, they were all up by us where we lived. All in back. The motel across the street. They were all chicken houses. I guess they're still raising chickens. I don't know. On the main land they do.

Terry: Just the main land.

Kleckner: For Christmas we didn't do anything. I told mother, I said, "Mother, up town you can buy a tree." I said, "You can get em for a dollar fifty or three dollars." "Have you lost your mind. With all the trees out there in the woods and you're goin to buy a tree?" [laughter] My mother was rough.

Terry: Didn't you get one of them from school one year?

Kleckner: Yeah. Yeah, tell that. [laughter] Where they burned the paper and all that there. Wait and see, make sure we get one before they burned it. Get it before they burned it.

Terry: Because each class had a tree. And then when it was the last day of school they would throw them out to the burn pile.

Kleckner: It was an incinerator and things like that.

Armstrong: So you'd go and get one?

Kleckner: I don't remember buyin a tree. And what we had under the tree. I never remember a gift in my life, a gift wrapped. We got socks, night clothes; they just be laid under the tree. And I

never, I'm not mad about anything. I never remember a birthday present from my mother and father, never.

Terry: They didn't celebrate birthdays.

Kleckner: They didn't celebrate mine. [laughter]. Now Mary, my girlfriend Mary, her mother one year had me a birthday party. And mother took one of them big cakes. But we made out good. And you didn't go anywhere. When the sun went down you were supposed to be home. My mother was at a fire down Ridge Road. And my mother says, "Get that tree down and clean the house up before I come back." When she come back I had gone. Every piece of my clothes and everything. I went to Memphis, Tennessee for the winter [laughs] They didn't even know where that was in 1950 something. The worst place for me was Pittsburgh. I couldn't hear the ocean there. [laughs]

Armstrong: So when did you move back here, the island, to stay?

Kleckner: 1965 or...

Terry: '66 when she moved back. And we were gone 11 years.

Kleckner: Well we were home as much as we were gone, you know.

Terry: That's true.

Kleckner: But our home...

Terry: The time we lived in Florida we come home for Pony Penning.

Kleckner: I guess we did. My husband, he didn't like Pony Penning then. He wasn't in the fire company. And we come up that road after 18 hours. In those days you didn't have nice roads anywhere. You went through every town on the bus.

Terry: He couldn't get off from work and she says, "I don't care, I'm going to Chincoteague with me and my brothers." And he put us on a Trailways bus.

Kleckner: Her daughter, what is she 30?

Terry: Five

Kleckner: Her name's Irene.

Terry: After her.

Terry: She was in San Diego and it was Pony Penning. She said she cried all day. Her husband said to her, "Calm down and go put a movie on." Well she turned the TV on.

Terry: To the educational channel.

Kleckner: She heard gallup, gallup, gallup. It was Misty's ponies runnin up the beach. She fell like on the floor, crying and crying.

Terry: It's so funny that the people who...

Kleckner: She will not miss a Pony Penning ever again. And I'm just like it. And she's got four years. And she's going to go to the Kentucky Derby. I love it but I'll never get there.

Terry: But the people, most men in our family, I think, they didn't take their vacation time for like Christmas. They saved their vacation time for Pony Penning. Well, we didn't go on vacation because dad took his vacation to be at the carnival.[laughter]

Kleckner: It was—he loved the carnival. He used to drive that old truck. My best place that I like. I've been on the boats. I've been on shore. Been everywhere. But when they made that turn...

Terry: the Pepsi stand.

Kleckner: It just breaks my heart. Last year it was a little colt. And it was no horses. He came by himself comin in. And they said, "That's all we got this year, that one horse." And he got away from em. Everybody was laughin at him, it was so cute. It was rainin. See, last year they had downpour rain and the boats—I got a picture of it with the rain. You gotta love it. Well we hang down there like gypsies. [laughter] It's funny. You feel bad all the time, but when you get down there you don't have an ache or pain. It was, "I won't go down there. Don't know anybody. They all come from away." I don't care. [laughter] I want to know, like for me, knowing its the week of the carnival, just knowing its going on, I'm happy. Because my last days on earth will be connected with the carnival. I won't go into that. Like the kids know what to do. Some people think its stupid. It's part of my life, all of my life. Is that all I'm going to talk about?

Barbery: Unless you have anything.

Armstrong: Irene, I think it's getting to the end of our time. So I need to thank you. It's been wonderful stories. Thank you very much.

Kleckner: I doubt it very much. [laughter]

Barbery: No it has been. It definitely has been.

Kleckner: Did I tell you anything you didn't know about?

Barbery: Oh yes.

Barbery: You really did.

Armstrong: Oh Absolutely. I learned new things today. I always love your stories. Irene, thank you so much.