

**ROBERT J. ATKINS
(Oral History)**

His grandfather, William H.H. Atkins, built the house at 2 Stacey Court, Marblehead, where Bob Atkins was born on Christmas Day 1917 and where he has lived all his life. The attending physician, Franklin R. Ireson, charged \$4.00 for the house call and always enjoyed teasing Bob about nearly causing the good doctor to miss his Christmas dinner.

Bob's grandparents adopted him following his parents' divorce in 1921. Nicknamed "Kaiser Bill" for his resemblance to Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, William H. H. Atkins earned his living as a plumber, but he also headed the town's fire department.* Bob's grandfather told him of how, at the turn of the century, he and Dexter Goodwin, a fellow plumber, would walk to Beverly, lunch pails in hand, work all day installing plumbing in some grand new summer home and then walk back to Marblehead at the end of the work day.

Mr. Atkins, who could trace his family's roots in Marblehead for several generations, married a feisty Irish girl, Helena M.J. Roche, from County Cork, Ireland. Mrs. Atkins, at age 13, traveled to this country steerage class and upon her arrival obtained work cooking for wealthy Bostonians who had summerhouses in Marblehead. Throughout her life Mrs. Atkins remained a prodigious cook with an enviable reputation for her baking. Bob proudly demonstrated the apparatus that held his grandmother's barrel of flour still in place in the cupboard under the pantry counter

The Atkins had six children: Marion, George, Harold, Jack, William and Lena. The latter three were afflicted with an unfortunate crippling disease that became progressively worse as they grew older, eventually confining them to their house. Until the illness made it impossible for them to continue, Bob's uncles designed and made wooden toys for which Bob still has some patterns. Curiously, in 1921 Hugh David ("Daddy") Scott, Marblehead's more well-known toy maker, started his own business in a large building at 4 Stacey Court just behind the Atkins' house.

Bob has vivid memories of his Stacey Court neighborhood and its inhabitants. Bill Brown, who ran a meat market in the first floor at 1 Pickett Street, kept a piggery on Stacey Street. Other neighbors were Dora Thompson ("hated kids"), Walter S. Williams (he became a dentist with offices in an imposing Victorian house once located at the corner of Pleasant and Bessom Streets), Bill Conklin and his sister (one of Marblehead's few black families) and Huckle Sweet, a fisherman whose shanty opposite Fort Beach is pictured on page 48 of the 1940 edition of Samuel Chamberlain's OLD MARBLEHEAD. Bob remembers the excitement when his grandfather sold Huckle a \$75,000 winning ticket in the Irish Sweepstakes. There was a small pottery on Stacey Street that manufactured tiles. Bob and his friends liked to prop some of the discards on a fence and use them as B.B. gun targets. In a meadow, now the site of the Old North Church parking lot, there was a large two story barn where the E.S. Doane plumbing company stored supplies. Each year the meadow was mowed and burnt over.

The Stacey Street area has been called "Chinatown" by generations of Marbleheaders. At one time a number of small shoe factories were located here and their owner was said to have turned a deaf ear to requests for wage increases. Instead the workers were reminded that they were part of an organization, a team working for the common good.

The disgruntled workers felt they were working for "coolie" wages – and "Chinatown" came into being.

There was plenty for a youngster to do in Marblehead when Bob was growing up. It was fun to chase the herd of goats on Brown's (now Crowninshield) Island as long as you avoided the billy goat that guarded the flock. There were wrecked barges on the island to explore and when lunchtime arrived the boys would catch cunners, skin them and cook them over an open fire. Molly's Rocks, a favorite swimming spot near Gashouse Beach, provided a great place to dive into the waters of Little Harbor. Bob recalls that it wouldn't take more than an hour to dig a good sized bucket of clams in Little Harbor at low tide. He and his pals often liberated apples, pears and grapes from downtown gardens. He recalls going from Stacey Court to Redd's Pond via public ways and backyards with few obstructions save the occasional stone wall.

Bob and his friends played the usual games such as "Kick the Can" and one he called "Buck, Buck" (a singular game from his description and one played only by boys) And then there was baseball. Saturday mornings there was almost always a game going on at Ft. Sewall. "Whatever time you got there you'd join the team with the fewest players." Sometimes there would be as many as 19 to a side, so some players never got a chance to get up to bat! The three younger Goodwin boys, Hildy, Bob and Webster, brought the bat and a glove. The ball, with its hard center (material unknown) and its surface covered thickly with black tape, often wound up being hit into the water. The Fort's trees became sudden obstacles from time to time especially to a player whose eye was on a high fly ball.

There was a wetlands area off Orne Street and behind Franklin Street (Doak's Lane) where Elbridge ~~Goodwin's~~ ^{boat (B.H.)} Goodwin's moving company was located. It was a great place to look for frogs and polliwogs and Bob remembers a long tin shed used for storing boats. It was also a dump. Bob and his friends often took a flashlight and a 22 rifle to shoot rats in the dump at night.

When Winslow's potato chips cost 60 cents a pound and ice cream could be had for a dollar a quart, Bob was able to go to a spot on Little Harbor off Beacon Street where the local fishermen landed their catch and cleaned the fish. Twenty-five cents would get you all the fish you could carry including haddock peas (roe) one of Bob's favorite treats.

Swimming in Redd's Pond was fun, but it was also dangerous. Many of the rock ledges around the pond extended into the water for quite a distance making diving a risky business. In the winter, however, Redd's and Black Joe's Pond were fine places to skate. The boys skied at Peach's Point and one of their favorite places to slide was Idler's Hill. Lookouts were posted to warn of on-coming vehicles. When the coast was clear, they'd push off at the top of High Street, turn a sharp left onto Orne Street and, if the snow was packed just right, they could make it all the way to Gas House Beach. If, on the other hand, they were moving too fast to accomplish the sharp turn at the bottom of the hill, they'd continue their run down Franklin Street. Whenever there was a particularly heavy snowfall a call would go out for all able-bodied men and boys to report to the Town Barn then on the corner of Creesy and Green Streets to shovel snow. They earned \$4.00 a day.

When Bob was growing up Marbleheaders were able to satisfy most of their needs for goods and services within a short distance of their homes. The Moses A. Pickett

on a Saturday morning.

Building, 80-84 Washington Street, was (and has been) the home for many businesses. For a time E. E. Gray Provisions, a small grocery chain, maintained a branch store here managed by "Gigger" Arrington and boys could earn 25 cents ~~an hour~~ delivering groceries. "Muggsy" Harris and his wife owned and operated a combined lunch counter/newspaper/telegraph office in the space once occupied by Gray Provisions. "Muggsy" made "great ice cream sodas" according to Bob and his home made chocolate syrup was "the best I ever had until I went to Holland." "Oompah" Musto, remembered for his excellent grapenut pudding, once ran a restaurant in the State Street corner of the building. Mr. Musto earned his nickname playing tuba with local bands. Bob also remembers watching through a sidewalk window as a machine formed the Downyflake Doughnuts made in a shop that at one time had space in this building.

Horace Cloon's hardware store at 86 Washington Street (corner of State) was a Marblehead institution. Just a few steps away at numbers 96 and 98 there were two drugstores – Shepard's and Lemmon's. Word at the time was that Mr. Lemmon had never seen a railroad train since he'd never gone as far uptown as the depot! (The Marblehead depot was on Pleasant Street opposite the Y.M.C.A building). Bob has a vivid memory involving Mr. Lemmon. He and Bob's grandfather once contrived to get Bob to swallow his yearly spring tonic of castor oil by attempting to disguise its taste in an ice cream soda (that cost 10 cents). Men who smoked frequented Lemmon's to buy from the fine line of cigars the store stocked. On the counter was a gas device resembling a Bunsen burner and by touching a button a smoker could ignite the gas to light up his newly purchased cigar.

The Salkins & Laskey clothing store took up the first floor of the Mugford Building at 114 Washington Street. Knickers were standard attire for boys at this time. Because he was allowed but one pair a year until he reached age 18 and was no longer required to wear them, Bob was very careful when he and his pals waded out to Brown's Island. If it was necessary, he'd take his knickers off and hold them at arm's length over his head to keep them dry. Little wonder, then, that the boys much preferred skinny-dipping off Molly's Rocks.

The E.S. Doane plumbing company, for whom Bob's grandfather worked, owned 118 Washington Street and it was here, "in a corner" set aside for him by Mr. Doane, that Samuel O. Penni started his grocery business. There was a yard between the shop and the imposing Doane house and a barn which was home to the Doane's horse, Babe, who hauled the company's plumbing supplies and equipment. A little farther up the street, at number 126, Ambrose Brown ran a meat market. The chickens and squabs he sold were kept in a barn across from Redd's Pond.

Boardman's Bakery in Market Square made "great hard crackers" for chowder. And like many bakeries of the time it baked the family's Saturday night beans in its capacious ovens. The store owned by John S. Rogers at 85 Washington Street offered an unlikely combination of fruit, penny candy and fireworks. In the same building Jack Destito ran a barbershop. Bob said he also made "great spaghetti".

Peter Mormino's cobbler shop at 75 Washington Street was a few yards away from Jack Clay's barroom that sold Pickwick Ale for 5 cents a glass. Nearby, at the street level of the Lyceum Building **, was "Sooner" Reynolds' barber shop. The Senate Club at 59 Washington Street was a male establishment whose purpose, if indeed there were one, is apparently unknown. Bob said the members chewed tobacco and were known to

let loose from time to time through the open windows along the very narrow sidewalk in front of the building.

Number 34 Washington Street was a Russian tearoom for a very short time and Bessom's antiques was in this small building as well. The Goodwin sisters owned a periodical store at number 6, managed by Annie Savery, who lived in half of the house at 10 Stacey Street. (The house, heavily restored in 1998, is owned and used by the Old North Church.) Bob vividly recalls Miss Savery's combination outhouse and coal shed. Mr. and Mrs. Christy Burrige lived in the other half of the house. Mr. Burrige was a call fireman and his son, a driver, was a permanent member of the fire department. Next door to the Goodwin's store Hattie and Bill Howe operated a restaurant at 2 Washington Street and lived upstairs in the same building. Across the street, at 1 Orne, Arthur Stacey had a small grocery and "Ducky" Standley sold hotdogs at 10 Orne Street. Workers at Graves' lower yard were the best customers for a variety store (razed) opposite 2 Beacon Street, but Bob remembers the tempting mocha cakes in the window and how, at 5 cents each, they were too expensive for his pocket.

For Bob, schooling consisted of primary education at the Gerry, on to Story Grammar School and then St. John's Preparatory School in Danvers. One of his early jobs was driving a delivery truck for the E.F. King Chemical Co. on Jefferson Avenue, Salem, who supplied chemicals to the tanning industry in Peabody and dry ice to the Marblehead Bottling Co., maker of Manataug Beverages. The Davis family made grape soda, orangeade and golden ginger ale in a plant located in the hollow between Cowell Street and Dunn's Lane. The tonic cost \$2.00 a case for 24 bottles, \$1.00 for the deposit. Another of Bob's jobs brought back a fond memory for the writer. I can remember with great nostalgia the lemon ice cream I used to enjoy at Rodger's ice cream shop at 7 School Street. Bob told me he used to make Rodgers' ice cream in the basement under the store.

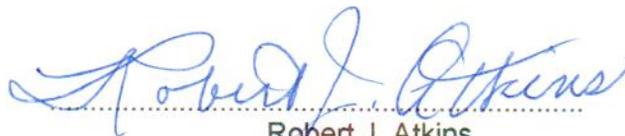
*Prior to 1939 Marblehead had a call fire department. At the time Bob's grandfather was in charge, there were 125 men on call who were paid a small sum at Christmas. The only salaried employees of the firewards were the drivers. In lieu of the office of fire chief, William H.H. Atkins served as engineer, receiving a stipend of \$400 per year. A fire alarm device was installed in his house that Bob called a "clapper" and when he was old enough to drive, Bob chauffeured his grandfather to fires.

**The Lyceum Building (razed) was a large structure that occupied the land from 69 Washington Street, approximately, up to Mechanic Street. In the sidewalk between 69 and 75 Washington Street there is, at this writing, a large piece of granite that was the 1st step at the b.h. Washington Street entrance to the building. It should probably be noted that the small building that is 69 Washington Street was used by Samuel Chamberlain as his studio in the late years of his life.

During our interviews Bob mentioned attending a court hearing in a building at 27 Pleasant Street, Marblehead. At this writing the building is a residence, but it may have been the site of civil court sessions at the time. (1921) b.h.

Bette Hunt

I, Bette Hunt, talked with Robert J. Atkins in his home at 2 Stacey Court, Marblehead in July and August 1999, as part of the oral history program I am pursuing for the Marblehead Historical Society. Rather than conduct the interviews on tape, we decided that I would take notes and write down the information Bob gave me. To be sure I have recorded Bob's reminiscences correctly I have asked him to read these notes and to sign them at the bottom.


Robert J. Atkins

Bette Hunt
September 4, 1999

See copy Boston Evening Transcript (1934) article on Huck Sweet and Sweepstakes.