

We are delighted to share this splendid reminiscence by David MacAdam. Photos are the author's unless otherwise noted. Happy fall reading! - *Ed.*

Eldredge Garage Memories

by David MacAdam

I first came to Chatham in 1947 with my parents and brother Keith. We stayed at Gesina Tuttle's "Whistling Whale" on East Main St. We returned to the Old Village every summer after, staying in several different places before settling on Connie and Bub Chase's cottages - first Sunset, and later Barnacle. My parents came to be fast friends with the Chases.



Founding owner Joe C. Eldredge in front of his home across the street. 1960

So in late 1957 after Sid Cortnell passed away, Bub Chase purchased Sid's property, knowing he had in my dad a ready buyer of the old house, and desiring the back half of the lot to build a road (now Chase St) to his holdings on the Little Mill Pond. I graduated from high school in 1958 and was about to go off to college, but had never had a job beyond substitute paper boy. In those days, college students competed for summer jobs in Chatham. Connie Chase hooked up my parents with her brother, Clement Eldredge, who had taken over the running of the Eldredge Garage from his father "Joe C". The Garage had long employed a "boy" or two during the summer season, and was then in need of one. So, there began my association with Eldredge's Garage.



Left to right: John Caton, Millard Eldredge, Madeline Eldredge, and Clement Eldredge. 1961

At that time, the cast of characters at the garage was extensive. Besides Clement “Clem” Eldredge, and his wife Madeline “Mad” who did the books, there were their two grown sons, Ken and Bill, who worked as mechanics and taxi drivers. In addition, John Caton was a regular taxi driver. Millard Eldredge (“Aunt Milly”), and Clem’s brother, Norman, also drove when we were short drivers. Starting with my second summer I graduated to “out back”, and my younger brother Keith took over the front, pumping gas, answering the phone, and generally minding the “store.” Keith and I were the only ones who didn’t drive taxis.



Ken Eldredge, dressed for his other job, beside his Ford Galaxy, outside the showroom and the washstand. 1960

The Eldredge Garage complex consisted of several buildings. The heart of the operation was the small white front service building with its Tydol green interior. It was built on a concrete slab and uninsulated. There was a door in the front out to the three gas pumps on the island, and a door in back leading to the asphalt sloping up to the other buildings. The men’s room was accessible from inside, but the women’s room was accessible only from outside at the back of the building. On the east side was a small room with windows on three sides, raised one step up off the concrete slab. This was Madeline’s domain. When she was out that’s where we took taxi orders, as that was where the phone was. Mad was the driver of choice for older women. Just outside the window from Mad’s space was an ancient white gas pump, where we’d mix outboard motor oil and white gas in five-gallon tanks that boaters brought in to be filled. In addition to this building there was the large livery stable building at the back. It had a concrete floor and was used to store cars. Well-to-do summer people would store their summer cars there through the winter. Early and late in the summer, cars were often packed in there bumper to bumper, so close together it was near impossible to get in or out of them. Off in a far corner was an old work

bench to which was attached a hand operated kerosene pump. Yes, kerosene lamps were still in use at that late date. There was also storage space (not accessible to cars) above and below. I was never taken into these spaces. Attached on the front left of the livery was a more recent structure that had served as Chatham's firehouse until sometime after WWII. As a kid in the early 1950s, I remember the noon siren going off there every day. By the time I was working there, the front half of this structure was the "showroom" serving as storage for new tires, batteries, and the like. The back half, sandwiched between the showroom and the wall of the livery, was the "washstand" where I spent many a hot summer afternoon hand washing cars - both those of clients, and the taxis and limousines belonging to the business. Clem, if he wasn't out driving, would not tolerate his boys just sitting around for their paltry (to us) 45 cents an hour, and could always find work for us. Lastly, there was the tiny "grease house" at the head of the outdoor grease pit. A big old air compressor filled half of this building. The other half was taken up by an old grease-impregnated work bench, covered with a great assortment of tools, ancient and modern. Eldredge's was the only place in town that still had the tools necessary to work on old Model As. In those days, the western boundary of the property was the grease house and grease pit. An old split rail fence separated Eldredge's from "Joe Pete's field", later purchased by Clem, and today the western portion of the property. There was nothing new about the place. Most of it was constructed early in the century.



Ken Eldredge with his buddy, Dave Nickerson, outside the Grease House. 1961

My work activities evolved a bit over successive years. My first year I was dressed in a white uniform - shirt and pants - and operated exclusively out of the front office building. My day always began with cleaning the restrooms. Mad was most particular about the ladies' room, and would thoroughly inspect my work afterwards. She did not hesitate to send me back in to bring it up to her high standards. The rest of the day was spent inside taking taxi orders over the phone, pumping gas, checking oil, tires, radiator water levels, and scrubbing bugs from windshields and headlights. A generous customer might reward me with a nickel or even a dime tip. Every sale, down to the penny - gas, service, taxi, candy, you name it - had to be entered on a day's sales sheet. One of Mad's daily rituals was to balance the sales recorded on that sheet with the cash in the cash register, and the gallons of gas pumped as registered at closing on the pump meters the previous evening. If the difference came out to be more than a penny, we would all hear about it. On the slow afternoons of good beach days, if Clem was not off driving, he'd park a taxi next to the office and set me to Kozaking. A Kozak cloth was a proprietary cloth that could be used to wipe dirt and grime from a car without damaging the finish. If Clem wasn't around to set me to work I got to sit inside with the others and listen to the old timers' stories. For my second, third and fourth years I worked out back, now in a dark green uniform, and Keith took over my front duties - and my white uniform. My activities became more varied. On lube, oil and filter jobs I learned to do the work underneath the car from the grease pit. On hot days, it was cool and shady down there. In time, I learned tire repair, both of inner tubes and the novel new tubeless tires. I replaced mufflers and exhaust systems. Ken did all the work under the hood. Though he worked out back, he often drove taxis too - on occasion even in a white uniform. Regardless of color, he was particular about messing it up. His uniform was safer for his not venturing into the grease pit. When I was not servicing cars, or fixing tires, Clem always had a car or taxi waiting to be Kozaked or washed. After my first year, in addition to working days, I was allowed to work nights for an extra 5 or 10 cents an hour pumping gas and taking taxi orders. At day's end Clem was more tolerant of my just sitting around, and it was a great time to listen to the old timers who came in in the evenings. Even John, Norman and the other taxi drivers were full of stories.



Service out front at Eldredge's. 1960

When Andrew Harding's store on East Main closed, so I was told, the old timers (all male) moved down to Eldredge's. There were a number of dilapidated chairs set up inside near the men's room door and out of the way of business. The old guys would be there summer and winter. In the winter an old pot belly stove was set up in the middle on the concrete slab to heat the place. The old guys would come sit, reminisce, exchange gossip and make fun of the tourists, and even on occasion, us boys. They would stay around a bit, then go, and often return later. There were always a few around. The ideal number was three because that was how many chairs there were. Extras sat on a bench in front of the old curved glass candy display case, or sometimes just stood around. Some stopped in for gas and stayed on for a while. Others just came in to chat. Any garage workers and taxi drivers at loose ends would join in with them. These guys came from all over town, but a large number came from the Old Village. In those days, most of the Old Village homes were occupied by year round local families who had passed the properties, pretty much unchanged, from parents to children for generations. This ensured that the stories told were timeless. Some of the stories were a bit ribald, but Mad was thick-skinned, and her mere presence always maintained some semblance of order.



Eldredge's from Joe (Pete) Peterson's field. 1961



Eldredge's from Max Klauser's Dolphin Court Motel. 1961

I graduated from college in 1962, and never returned to work at Eldredge's again. The next two summers I worked at UCSD in California. There I got in on the ground floor of programming mainframe computers. The rest of the year I studied mathematics in graduate school in Michigan. I concluded that study with a master's degree and returned to UCSD, working full time as a research mathematician in optics. This budding career ended abruptly when federal investment in science was cut in 1968. I moved back east and eventually, in late summer 1969 settled in year-round in my family's summer house here in Chatham - a better base from which to search for a comparable position in academia or industry in New England than the family home in Rochester, NY. There was nothing to be had. The funding cuts were nationwide. In desperation, early in 1970, I accepted first a part-time, then a full-time position in mathematics at Cape Cod Community College. Initially I regarded this as temporary. But at the same time, I began my solo summer adventures in the eastern Arctic of Canada. To accommodate this new passion, I eventually accepted that my temporary position at the College was in fact permanent.

Earning tenure made it even more permanent. I came to enjoy working with students striving to master a difficult subject, and frequently put myself in their place to understand their difficulties from their perspective. I was by then committed to teaching, the Cape and to Chatham. My meager teaching salary limited my housing options to the family's summer house in the face of sky-rocketing real estate values. Thirty years and two stints as Department chair later, I retired. Ten years after that I "retired" from my solo arctic adventures as well, to spend all my time in Chatham, still year-round at the family's summer house.



"Uncle Zene" and Keith set to watch the 4th of July parade. 1960



"Captain Paintbrush" (Ritchie Hamilton). 1961

Without a doubt my most vivid memories of my time at Eldredge's Garage are of the old timers, and their endless store of colorful local stories and oral history – some stretching back to the late 19th century. Everyone who wasn't an "uncle" was a "captain". They had names like "Uncle Zene" (Zenus Kendrick), and "Captain Paint Brush" (Ritchie Hamilton, owner of the Cranberry Inn next door). Yes, I suppose the work experience was important, but I have less memory of that. As an aside, while writing this, I compiled a list of names of people I remembered from the Garage. I came up with almost sixty names after sixty years! For nearly every one I have at least one story or anecdote.

Its particularly sad how sixty years of development forever changed a once vibrant, lower-middle class, multigenerational year-round community east of the rotary, and its rich, living oral history

- a history once kept alive by being told every day around the old stove at Eldredge's Garage. Over the years I've watched the gradual demise of Eldredge's Garage, not without a touch of sadness, as time left it behind, the old families died off and moved away, and Chatham lurched into the 21st century. The Eldredge Garage buildings, never built to last as long as they did, were certainly in serious disrepair, and improvised from the beginning to serve a need long gone. But at the same time, they (especially the front office building) were central to the life of Chatham during most of the 20th century. The interior walls of that soon-to-be demolished front building just ring with the history of Chatham from the late 19th century through the late 20th. And this history is of the richest kind - oral history. Except for my memories, and those of a few others still living, the site is now just one more storyless piece of prime Chatham real estate. While I am a strong believer in historical preservation, there was not much to preserve there. The architecture was utilitarian New England mishmash and the stories of the old guys pretty much died with them.

To end on a bittersweet note, the public were always welcome to the restrooms I once cleaned every morning. I find it amusing that the over-the-top public restrooms being planned to replace the old office building will essentially be the only monument to what once stood at the site. Surely the old guys upstairs will get a good chuckle out of that!



Eldredge Garage nearing the end of its days - photo by Joan Horrocks, 2016

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