

Mary Dunson Savery

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for

Southwest Seattle Historical Society

by

JonLee Joseph

Mary Dunson Savery
with Lary Savery, her son



Interviewed by: JonLee Joseph

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1st Oral Interview

Seattle, Washington

JonLee: Today is February 22nd, this is Jon Lee. I'm interviewing Mary Dunson Savery. She is the Light House Keeper's daughter.

Mary Savery: I went to a meeting down there and they gave me that.

JonLee: Yeah. That's good. Can you tell me what brought your family to West Seattle? Why did they move to West Seattle?

Mary Savery: Because my father was in the Light House Service and he was transferred to Alki.

JonLee: Were you born and raised in Coos Bay?

Mary Savery: No. I was born in Coos Bay, but I didn't complete my, you know, my Dad, then, he had to go where he was transferred. He had to be able to go to wherever they wanted him to.

JonLee: So when you came to Alki you were in grade school?

Mary Savery: I was just starting school. And one reason he got transferred to Alki is because of the schooling. There's, at that time, there was three children. We had six before mother stopped having children. But, he realized that. And another thing too, the grounds at Coos Bay, were really not the best for a man who had a family. They would, go about five miles somebody'd have to take us to school. And it was just, Coos Bay was just unsettled, at that time. It's a pretty good-sized little town now or city I should say. But that's one reason that we were moved was that he wanted to be where. And, of course, Alki is just like, you know, it's even grown since after we got there it changed considerably.

JonLee: Would you describe what the light house and the house was like at Alki when you lived there please?

Mary Savery: Well, it was, let me see now. It had an upstairs that had, I think, this is the way to start with it. It had an upstairs that had one, two, four bedrooms. And there was, and downstairs, it was a large kitchen and dining room and living room. And there was another room there that we used an an extra bedroom. You could have used it for whatever you wanted to. But there was another stairway downstairs. And then there was a basement. And it was heated by coal and wood furnace. So, and we did have electric light. And when I, it just amazed me when I got there and somebody put their finger on that little button on the wall and the lights came on. We couldn't believe it! [laughs] So, and now there were two houses like that. One was for the Keeper and one was for the Assistant Keeper. And they were identical, but--

JonLee: Was you father the Keeper then?

Mary Savery: He was the Assistant Keeper when he first went there. But he was only there, and this is one reason that he was transferred there, is because of his time in the Service, he had had in the Service, that the other Keeper that was there was wanting to retire So that left that open for my father to be the Head Keeper.

JonLee: So, when I met you several days ago, you told me that the beacon, the light beacon, at the Alki Light House was actually Kerosene and your father went up and lit it everyday just before it got dark.

Mary Savery: Yes. Every day. And there's a chart that they have, that they go by. Every day of the year, that that light is supposed to be lit at a certain time. Because the time, you know, of day changes. And that had to be lit at a certain time of day. And also it had to be extinguished at a certain time of day.

JonLee: Did he ever get a vacation?

Mary Savery: Oh, yeah.

JonLee: Okay, then the Assistant Light House Keeper would take provide it.

Mary Savery: Oh, yes. They had several men that did nothing but assist for, at times, that Keeper's, that different Keeper's wanted to have

a vacation, they had people to fill in for them. They were men that had been in the Service or maybe retired, didn't want a full time job. But, no, there were several, and that was another thing that they, the Light House Keepers wives had to make a place for them to stay, where they could sleep. And they ate with us. There's always, there was one of them I, that I always looked forward to coming, 'cause he was always real jovial and played with us a lot. And he'd call me "Maria. Maria. Oh, here's my Maria." [laughs] It was really a, you know, I can see that as plain today as the day I walked on it.

JonLee: Now, what made the sound in the fog? How did they do that? 'Cause now the fog horns are probably electric.

Mary Savery: Now, that I can't answer. Because whether they, and every station probably would not be the same. Because the motors and everything, a lot of them have changed. Some of them have gone through complete electricity and some of them are still kerosene. Depending on where they are.

JonLee: Would you describe what that part of Alki looked like when you came? 'Cause you talked about a little sandy path and no sidewalks. Would you describe that?

Mary Savery: Well, there was always a sidewalk right around the house. 'Cause it was fenced in. And we had cement sidewalks through each residence. And also then one, there was from each residence had a cement sidewalk down to the light house. Because that was a pretty spot for them to, you know,

to have to, in the wintertime, if it was of course, there was very seldom we had snow down there. Because if it snowed it was, it would maybe melted because of it being so close to the salt water.

JonLee: Do you remember the sand dunes?

Mary Savery: Well, now, that was not at Alki. Sand dunes, yes, I remember the sand dunes. That's one reason my Dad got the Alki. Because we were living down on the Coast and we had to go and well, I was six years old and my, and I had a sister that was two years younger than me. And I was ready to school and she was getting ready. And we would have had to walk through those sand dunes.

JonLee: At Coos Bay.

Mary Savery: Yes, yes, that was at Coos Bay. No matter what the weather was like, you know. And when the wind blew, and that sand blew, that is, you know, it was just almost blinding. And my father, rather than have us live in that, the house that was there, he rented a place in this little town that was close. And he walked to back and forth and we lived in that house until the transfer to Alki came through.

JonLee: Now, what was Alki and West Seattle like when you moved there? Did you go to Alki Elementary?

Mary Savery: That's where I started. And then I went follow it up through to West Seattle High. And I finished there.

JonLee: You must remember the Field House.

Mary Savery: Oh, yeah.

JonLee: And Hessel Viney and Doug Viney?

Mary Savery: Uh-huh. I don't, I think Lary, Hessel Viney.

Lary: I remember Hessel Viney, that's how long he was there.

JonLee: I got to interview his son Doug. Who you might have known, right? Did you know Doug Viney?

Lary: No, no, I didn't. No, I knew Hess Viney.

Mary Savery: I knew Lary knew him. Because he was into sports.

Lary: Yeah. He was our coach.

JonLee: What did you do as a elementary school child?

Mary Savery: I went from, that's really where I figured that I started school. Because I was in, maybe, a couple of weeks in the other ones that had started and I just was not ready for school. The schools, with all the, to tell about how bad it was. When we were down there in the sand dunes and all, the teacher we had, she had all eight grades, all eight of the grades. And she was eighty-four years old! She couldn't even, and the reason I know this, my mother, I've heard her tell the story.

She couldn't even pronounce the words for us kids to read, you know, we didn't know what she was talking about when she, if we try and figure what it was. That's how bad the schooling was. So then, Dad put in for, and of course, he did have, was, ready for to be transferred anyway. It was coming to him because he had much an awful lot of time in the Service. And he grew up in the Service.

JonLee: His father was a Light House Keeper?

Mary Savery: Yes, uh-huh. His father was.

JonLee: Now, you described how you worked after school at Spano's.

Mary Savery: Shano's.

JonLee: Shano's. Did you work out of necessity? Was there a shortage of money? You mentioned that your mother also worked at Hoskin's grocery and your father cared for little children.

Mary Savery: Well, you know, a Light House Keeper doesn't make much money.

JonLee: So, it was a necessity.

Mary Savery: Yes, it really was. Well, because of the size of our family.

JonLee: Six children. And your father could change diapers. That's very unusual in that generation.

Mary Savery: 'Course he didn't mind either, Dad didn't. He was pretty good with us kids.

JonLee: So at Shano's, was that a restaurant?

Mary Savery: Restaurant.

JonLee: You waited tables--

Mary Savery: Uh-huh. It was, I waited tables. They had one long counter and then they had about, I think there were about nine or ten tables. And then there was a little extra dining room where they could make a reservation if they wanted family dinners served, that they could have that at special time and be secluded from the rest of the restaurant.

JonLee: Now, did some of the money that earned go into the family budget?

Mary Savery: Yes, uh-huh. My mother kept track of every cent we earned.

JonLee: So that helped the whole family. Would you talk about baby sitting at the Stockade Hotel? Because some of us don't remember the hotel at all and you do.

Mary Savery: Well, I started in the Stockade Hotel. Do you know what, have you ever seen a picture of it?

JonLee: Yes.

Mary Savery: Okay. They really had a pretty good restaurant there. And people would come. In the summertime there was one family that had a yearly reservation there for their whole family, kids could come play on the beach. And they had this big restaurant, and a special place where the children could eat. And then there was this one woman, she was a friend of my mother's. And my mother let her know that I baby-sat. And I wished she'd never told her. Because I hadn't really had [pause]. Because she would take advantage of me.

JonLee: Who would, your mother?

Mary Savery: No, no, no, the lady.

JonLee: How?

Mary Savery: Well, she would, I didn't want to have to take care of the baby. I had to wash their pants and everything for you know, when she went out for the evening. Her husband, he was a traveling man, a salesman, and I think she went out on her own. Took advantage of me. And she knew my mother was close and that if I needed any help that she'd have it.

JonLee: Well, did she pay you always?

Mary Savery: Oh, yeah, she paid me.

JonLee: She was fair in what she paid you?

Mary Savery: Oh yes.

JonLee: Do you remember what you earned at that time?

Mary Savery: Twenty-five cents an hour. That wasn't very, and that, her, she had one little girl that was three years old. I always tried to get her to bed because, it was, she would try, and the older one, it was, I don't have much trouble with her, but the baby, you know, change it's pants and try to take care of the three year old. And I had a lot of stuff to go up and down in that Stockade Hotel. There was three stories of it. And I not only did that but I waited tables, too, when I wasn't. At dinner time. There was one family that was so taken with that spot I think it's because of the history of it. They had yearly reservations. They came clear from Eastern Washington. And they wanted their kids to be able to play in the sand and in the water.

JonLee: Well, it is beautiful down there. It is. Then after high school, where did you go to work? Is that when you started to work at the photographer's. Kendall Ellis?

Mary Savery: No, that was later, quite a bit later.

JonLee: Was there any possibility when you got out of high school that you would go to college?

Mary Savery: No. no.

JonLee: Was that because of economics? And helping the other children?

Mary Savery: Yes, we had another six children. And I was the eldest. No, I and I had not really studied for a college or further education, because I knew we couldn't afford it.

JonLee: You mentioned too that you were sick, you had a hearing problem and that you were timid.

Mary Savery: I was.

JonLee: And that you had a lot of mastoid ear infections. And that you couldn't hear the teachers well.

Mary Savery: And I was always was afraid of raising my hand for fear that she would, you know. I was very timid because the first part of my schooling, where we had to go to school was, that our teachers were not qualified to be teachers. The first one, I told you, was eighty-four years old. And that's when they used to teach with sounds, you know. Mother just, she just had, my mother had been a school teacher. And when she heard how she was teaching us, she would get in, and we wouldn't have been as well off in school if it hadn't have been for my mother. She went to school, about two or three times a week, to see how we were doing.

JonLee: Your mother did? Did she help out?

Mary Savery: Yes. On the QT, because we never would have gotten, some of those kids'd never got through school if it hadn't been for her.

JonLee: Now, when you graduated from high school then, where did you go to work?

Mary Savery: I guess the Kendall Ellis was the first place I really, really worked. And I still worked at Shano's a lot of times on Sundays or if they had special parties or something come in, I would go and help Mrs. Shano.

JonLee: Kendall Ellis was a photographer, right?

Mary Savery: Yes, they were photographers. They were probably the biggest photographer in Seattle for a long while.

JonLee: Now, when did your neighbor, Mr. Savery, begin to court you? After high school?

Mary Savery: Oh yeah. Because I can remember being on the streetcar that's what there was there, and he'd be on the streetcar, the same on that I am, and he'd get off so fast and walk way ahead of me. He was very timid and so was I really.

JonLee: How did you ever manage to come together?

Mary Savery: Well, his mother and my mother got to be real good friends. And we played cards together and just a gradual, you know. And then he liked to hunt and fish. And I started going on those trips with some of the others couples that did that. And then his mother and my mother being such good friends. And his father died quite abruptly with a heart attack. His mother

was just lost. And mother helped her a lot and it just kind of brought our family together. So it was, that was,

JonLee: Did he need to take care of his mother then? Was he an only child?

Mary Savery: No, he had two younger brothers and sister. He was quite a bit older than the rest of them. It was kind of hard on him because his mother expected him to be a father to them. And they resented his trying to tell them what to do. I know what that's like 'cause I was the oldest. And you know, if I'd ask one of my sister's to do something, she'd go, "Well, I don't have to do that. Mother didn't tell me I had to it." [laughs] Kids. If my mother had hear him say that, they didn't do it again.

JonLee: What would she do?

Mary Savery: Well, no, she never used her hand. All she did was, yes, tell them, punish them in such a way, well, you could do this for a while. [pause] I never once, we used to get awful upset that she, my sister, next younger than I. It seemed like she got by with more than anybody else. But, we all come out okay. Had one, my youngest sister died when she was about three years old, with a heart murmur. But that's the only one that [pause] and she wasn't sick very long. In fact they had her in the hospital so many times trying to find out what was wrong with her.

JonLee: So, you lived at home until you got married?

Mary Savery: Uh-huh.

JonLee: And then when you married, did you continue living in West Seattle?

Mary Savery: Yes. We lived in West Seattle.

JonLee: And you have two boys.

Mary Savery: I have two boys, uh-huh.

JonLee: What is there about West Seattle that keeps you here?

Mary Savery: Well, [laughs] there's lots of things. I just wouldn't want, it's just more home to me than anything else. And I feel, what keeps me here? Well, my, [pause] I had a brother, all the family has passed away except me and my brother that lives in Spokane. And I think probably the fact that I know so many people here and it is, the surroundings are home to me and that and then my family, my two boys have grown up here. And there, you know, would just be taking them out of away from what they like.

JonLee: Now, I want to ask you, you were born in 1911. And so, you graduated from high school about 1930.

Mary Savery. Right:

JonLee: That was in the Depression, wasn't it? What kept you and your family going in hard times? Did you have any kind of religious foundation? I notice you wear a little cross.

Mary Savery: Yes. We went to the Congregational Church there in Alki for a long time. That was at my mother's faith where she had gone. [pauses]

JonLee: So, what kept you going? Alki Congregational Church?
I went there when I was a child. I remember David Rose. He probably came much later, in the '50's.

Mary Savery: There was a family that lived around South Alki. You know where that is when I say "South Alki." Oh, there was quite a big family. And the daughter just died about a year ago. What was the name of them? [pauses]

JonLee: I don't need names, it's just more the flavor of what it was like for you and then what kept you here.

Mary Savery: You probably knew that family, 'cause their dad sang in the choir. And two of their daughters sang in the, not in the beginning, but they sing in the choir. And there was one sister by the name of Gwendolyn. She was the oldest. There was no brothers. Yes they did. They had one brother. [pause]
And I remember the principal, was Foster. He was the first and then there was a principal named Cassidy.

JonLee: Right. I've heard stories about Mr. Cassidy. He was quite well, liked, wasn't he?

Mary Savery: Yes, very much. And I can tell you a little story about my Grandpa Dunson. He was from the up around in Minnesota in that area. And when he came out here, and then, he was in the Light House Service, too. And he used to come and spend, when it was nice weather, after he retired would stay with us there at Alki for a few days and then go back home. And one day when he was down on the beach, guess who came and sat down beside him? And they got to talking and it was Mr. Cassidy. And so the next, first day I went back to school, Mr. Cassidy came to me and told me all about their conversation. Isn't funny how things like that happen?

JonLee: Isn't that lovely? It's very neighborly, isn't it?

Mary Savery: Oh, and his daughter Dorothy she taught school, too. She taught down there for one semester and then she went up and taught at West Seattle High. Dorothy Cassidy was her name. Did you go at all at West Seattle?

JonLee: I did. But I don't remember her, I went in the '50's.

Mary Savery: I had two sisters that went there. Alice and Ruth, they both went through West Seattle.

JonLee: They're gone now?

Mary Savery: Yes. My brother in Spokane was the youngest in the family and I was the oldest and we're the only ones left.

JonLee: So, do you still go to Alki Congregational Church?

Mary Savery: No, I go up here to Methodist Church. Just, when I got married and I got out of that area, why, and, of course, it was that was, right over here. It's only about ten blocks.

JonLee: So it's closer to where you were living, your neighborhood,

Mary Savery: Uh-huh. And a lot of the people there used to go down to Alki.

[End of Tape One, Side One]

JonLee: You still attend the Methodist Church right at Gatewood or Morgan?

Mary Savery: Morgan. Uh-huh. And there's just an awful lot of West Seattle graduates and all that live right in this area.

JonLee: It's just a beautiful area.

Mary Savery: Yes it is.

JonLee: With the views of the sky and the water and the islands.

Mary Savery: I like trees and all to look at them. There's four trees over there that I wish I could chop down. 'Cause it cuts off my view to the--

JonLee: --to the Alki area.

Mary Savery: --to Alki. And not only that, you could see out farther out in the Sound.

JonLee: To Bainbridge. Is there anything more that you'd like to add about businesses you remember in West Seattle? You remember Charles Ritchie's Drug Store?

Mary Savery: Oh, yes I knew Mr. Ritchie and he was a good friend of my mother's. And of course, my two sons, they knew his family too.

JonLee: Did you know Nellie Curtis' house? It was the house right on Alki Avenue. Had big hedges around it?

Mary Savery: Oh, yes. Yes.

JonLee: Would you tell me about seeing any of her or her girls who were dressed so beautifully?

Mary Savery: Well, I don't really know, except that just like you described them, they were dressed, you know--

JonLee: Beautiful silks.

Mary Savery: Yes. And that house with that hedge around it, you know.

JonLee: They were pretty girls.

Mary Savery: Yes, they were.

JonLee: And she had a little dog. Remember that?

Mary Savery: Uh-huh.

JonLee: Mrs. Watt had a grocery store and described how Nellie Curtis would come in to the grocery store and get certain special cuts of meat that, hamburger was not for that dog. That dog got steak. Little tenderloin steaks. Did you ever see her? Nellie Curtis.

Mary Savery: Yes, yes, yes. 'Course I didn't--

JonLee: Did your mother say "hello" to her? Apparently some of the people in the neighborhood, the ladies in the neighborhood would not say "hello" to her.

Mary Savery: Well, I'm sure that would not be my mother. Because my mother was very sociable. And she was a member and held an office in the Women's Society in the church, well, not in the church, in the school, you know --

JonLee: Like PTA?

Mary Savery: PTA, yes.

JonLee: Well, what I understand, Nellie Curtis did not practice, her business was not at that location on Alki Avenue. Her

business was in Hoquiam, Aberdeen and downtown Seattle.
She was the madam of brothels. Had you ever heard that?

Mary Savery: No.

JonLee: Oh. What had you heard about her?

Mary Savery: I really hadn't heard of her, I mean anything bad about her.

JonLee: But you knew who she was?

Mary Savery: Yes.

JonLee: Then you must remember the old Spud's Fish and Chips?

Mary Savery: Oh, Spuds, yeah. And they were--

JonLee: The Alger Brothers who started it.

Mary Savery: Yes, yes Alger. And they had a daughter.

JonLee: Did you know Jack Alger?

Mary Savery: Yes. And I knew Gwen, Gwen, that was the sister, the older sister. And Helen was the youngest sister and she has died. I cut it out of the paper. Well, it's been within the last two years. I think it was maybe only one year. I cut, I didn't know she married again, after. But I saw it in the *West Seattle Herald* and I cut it out.

JonLee: Well, then there was Clare who married Sylvia. And they had a house on Beach Drive for many years. And Sylvia just died this Spring. But they started Spuds. Nobody thought it would go. But it went very well.

Mary Savery: Oh my heavens, yes! It sure did.

JonLee: Those two brothers in the second year of business went to Tahiti for vacation.

Mary Savery: And, oh, their dad sang in the choir.

JonLee: He did?

Mary Savery: Oh, yes, uh-huh. I can remember--

JonLee: At Alki Congregational?

Mary Savery: At Alki Congregational Church. Yes, and oh, how he could sing. He could just, he generally every Sunday sang a, what I want to say, when you sing by yourself? Solo.

JonLee: So the Alki Church, was that before it moved to its present location?

Mary Savery: Yes. That's where it started. It was around Beach Drive. Did you know where it was? Yeah, that's where I started, when we first moved here, why, my mother walked over there with us and it was a little walk for her, but we did it. It was a good growing church. I know their choir was quite outstanding.

JonLee: So it was quite a gathering, wasn't it, of people?

Mary Savery: Yes, yes it was. And I think that that church had a lot to do with that part of they, it grew, it extended, it growthed out. Because there wasn't hardly anything down there for a long time, just the beach people went to. And when they got that church going and then they built that other, the newer one. Were you ever in the newer one?

JonLee: Uh-huh. [pause]

Mary Savery: Well, you know, I told you that I worked for Kendall Ellis and I also worked for, oh gosh, I can't think of one of the biggest--

JonLee: Frederick's?

Mary Savery: No.

JonLee: The Bon?

Mary Savery: No.

JonLee: That's okay. I'm asking you to think back almost ninety years. So, that's a lot. You've remembered a lot. And only you have the stories. It's just for people who have never been to West Seattle or seen it or heard about it, that's the flavor of what I want to bring out with you is how unique it is as a neighborhood. Not only of businesses, but it's landscape and it's people.

Mary Savery: Well, it sure is different as far as that's concerned.
Landscape. And it's grown so much even since, you know, I
can't believe, since I came here how it's grown.

JonLee: Lots of people in the world. Okay, well, then I thank you very
much.

Mary Savery: Well, I'm sorry I had such a--

JonLee: No, you've been great. Nobody else has your stories. You're
the only person I knew who grew up in a light house.

Mary Savery: [laughs] Well, I guess I didn't know if I grew all the way up in
it. See that little picture over there? That is where, it's hand
painted by a lady that was eighty years old, who was my
aunt. And that is where I was born. Coos Bay.

JonLee: That's beautiful.

Mary Savery: She never, she gave herself her own painting lessons.

JonLee: It's beautiful. She did well.

Mary Savery: And that other ocean, my brother, youngest brother, painted
that.

JonLee: Thank you very much.

End of interview.

