

Christianson, Lennie: Alligator River Life ^[1]

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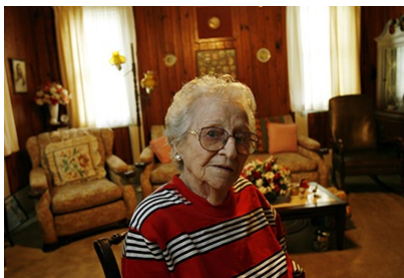
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Lennie Christianson: Alligator River life

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 9/10/2006. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Lennie Christianson is 103 years old. We talked at her home in coastal [Tyrrell County](#) ^[3], not far from where she grew up. She spent her childhood in an isolated farming and logging community called Gum Neck, next to the Alligator River. She worked for a year at New Holland, a historic company town to the south that tried to pump all the water out of [Lake Mattamuskeet](#) ^[4] and convert its bottom to farmland. She also taught school in Tyrrell County and later worked for the federal government in Washington, D.C., before she returned home.

"Miss Lennie" is one of the few people old enough to recall when life in much of North Carolina still revolved around the coming and going of riverboats. For centuries, country people depended on boats to travel to town and take crops, livestock and timber to market. Riverboats also brought the mail, groceries and even theatrical troupes. That world ended with the coming of automobiles, better roads and bridges, but Miss Lennie remembers it well.



Lennie Christianson. Photo by Chris Seward, 2006. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

My name is Lennie Christianson and I was born in 1903. That's the same year the Wright brothers flew their airplane. My mother was a homemaker. She not only cared for her children, but her sister died and left her and she raised her children. My father was a farmer, but he died very young. He had been sick and went to the hospital. I think he had pneumonia. They gave him leave to go home and he was the only one that could feed the horse. So the very first day he was there, he When I was little, my father would take us in a log boat and go down Gum Neck Creek and take us out for a ride. Sometimes at night, my sister and I would go with him and he would show us a bear up in the tree. Then he'd take us further down. On Christmas morning, we would go up around the house and we'd see the sheep tracks in the yard and think it was the reindeer. We used to have people in the community, maybe six or eight that would go around and play music and sing and I'll tell you what was fun: We had a boat that would come from Fairfield down the river to us. It was called the Alma. It would start out in Fairfield, go to Killbuck and Cherry Ridge Landing, and then come to Gum Neck and take passengers on. After they left here, they would stop at East Lake. You know what East Lake had, don't you? [East Lake was legendary for making moonshine whiskey during Prohibition.] I had a brother that was always running back and forth to East Lake. Then the Alma would go on to Elizabeth City. The Alma would go to Elizabeth City on Tuesday, and the passengers would stay there and it would bring them back on Thursday.

Oh, yes, I went on it. I'll tell you why I could go. There were three Sawyer boys that were on the boat, and one of the boys was married to a cousin of mine. I could go back and forth any time I wanted. I didn't have to pay. I went to the 5 and 1. When you get to Gum Neck, out on the water there is where the Richmond Cedar Works sent their logs out. They had houseboats that would pull a barge load of logs up to a place called South Mills. My sister and her husband, they had one. My sister and her child stayed on the boat. Sometimes that trip across the sound got rough, but she wanted to be with her husband. There were other men and women that did the same thing. They were neighbors, and they visited back and forth. There was another boat called the Roanoke Beacon. It was the mail boat. It carried groceries back and forth between Gum Neck and Elizabeth City, too, and my father would get a statement every week for how much he had bought and how. We used to go see the floating theater too. [She is referring to the James Adams Floating Theater. It was a repertory theater that performed on a barge that plied the state's waters and the Chesapeake Bay between 1914 and 1941.] It was pe. It was '26, I think it was, that they built the Intracoastal Waterway. [Gum Neck is located near a 20-mile-long canal between the Pungo and Alligator rivers. The canal is part of the Intracoastal Waterway, a series of man-made and natural waterways.] The man that ran the dredge was named Mr. Aldridge. The helpers that went ahead and cut the way lived on a houseboat in the back of the dredge, but he didn't stay on the dredge on weekends. He roomed on weekends over here with my mother. My cousin that lived right back of me married one of the men that was on the dredge. And the engineer, I got going with him. [She laughs.] I guess I met him through Mr. Aldridge, when he was here on weekends. He was from Minnesota, and my mama said, "Lennie, if you go home with him, people will talk themselves to death." I listened to my mother.

Additional information from NCpedia editors at the State Library of North Carolina :

Lennie Christianson lived from February 11, 1903-October 13, 2006.

Additional Resources:

U.S. Social Security Death Index, 1935-2014. Ancestry Library. Accessed 3/2/2016.

Image Credit:

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Years:

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