

# QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Oral History

# ALICE BENNETT

Including Alice's son-in-law, Mike [M], and Alice's daughter, Allyson.

Sunday, August 14, 2022

Interviewed by Cary Bradley

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Q: *This is Joan Lawlor and we are going to take an oral history with Alice Bennett. Today is Sunday, August 14<sup>th</sup>.* Welcome, Alice, I am so happy to finally meet you. Now obviously, you have a lot of knowledge, you know, for our Historical Society that we can't get anywhere else so we're really happy to be able to talk to you. I believe, and we discussed this just now, that you purchased the house in the early '80s, right?

AB: Correct.

Q: From Beatrice Horsbrough and at that time, was it a primary home, a second home, or a beach house?

AB: Yes, as a beach house, starting in the '80s. Mike: The whole way through. It's not insulated so can't be used in the winter.

Q: You've had it since 1982, 42 years. It's hard to believe, right? M: My parents looked at it in December of 1981.

AB: It was very cold when we came down looking at houses with our realtor. I said I would like to see the inside to plan, so he took me in.

Q: Now what brought you down to Quonnie? Had you visited here before? Why Quonnie?

AB: My husband. He was in Coventry also, but he got friendly with some of the young men here in Quonnie.

Q: Because it's a pretty special place that lots of people didn't even know existed, right? AB: Right.

M: His mom and dad would bring him down here from the point he was a kid.

Q: Okay, were they renting houses or there were hotels?

M: They would always rent.

AB: They really wanted fresh water, back at home, but then he got friendly with some of the young men and he wanted to come down here.

Q: And once he saw the ocean and the pond, you know, that is what's so exciting about this area. You have options, right?

AB: Right.

M: And the way I heard it too, he was very asthmatic as a kid and his Mom thought the salt water would be good for him.

M: They would come down from the point, I'm not sure of his age, but he was a young child. AB: His father didn't come down. He liked the fresh water back then.

Q: But they couldn't convince him.

M: So he would work, come down and stay until Sunday or for the weekend. Q: How many children do you have? I know I've met Allyson.

AB: I have three.

Q: When you came down here in the '80s what was life like? What did you do? Obviously, because it wasn't winterized, you used it only in the summer. What were the kinds of things you did? It sounds like you probably did fishing.

AB: We headed right for the water, down there. We started walking and we got acquainted with this area.

Q: In 1982, it was a lot different, right, than it is today? I purchased my home in 1999 and even the difference between then and now, where unfortunately a lot of these original cottages have been taken down and bigger houses put in their place. I imagine in 1982 it looked a lot different than it does today, right? And you have lived through that.

AB: When I got into the history and we found out that the first family down here, I was related to.

Q: You're related to them? And who are they?

AB: From England

M: She does genealogy and she suspects that she may be related to the Sheffields.

Q: Oh, you may be related to the Sheffield's, that's interesting.

A: In fact, the first family had children and they were across the way. I read the histories and the children, they had a name for this, they liked to go from the house all the way down without touching anything but the stones. That's why the stones are all here.

Q: And they could easily do that around here because we have lots of rocks, right.

AB: Yes.

Q: In the summer they must have been hot though.

M: I think that was one of the original houses down there.

Q: Yes, Sheffields, from the 1700s.

M: This was probably just land at the time.

AB: That was the first house.

M: Her husband would come down and bring his fishing pole down to the shore line and do fishing, quohogging, and they had a canoe and they would do scalloping in October when I think it was allowed, and he enjoyed it greatly. They would always come down the whole month of July and then as we got married, they started letting us use the house for a week for each child, and then when they first bought it, they stayed for a month and they would rent it for a month just to offset the costs and they did that a couple years and then it was like we were done with that.

Q: I can understand that [laughter]. I've heard that before.

M: Everything was not how you left it.

Q: Especially when it was your belongings. It was different then. It was setup as a rental. So, in the '80s, could you see the water? I mean obviously now trees have grown and those big houses have been built.

AB: We still have the L in the back that blocked it.

M: We had a little more view, but 4 houses down the people from Vermont, I can't think of their name. They redid their house and when they did it, they built it back from the street. We lost a little bit, but not too much. Like this house, very close, they did a little addition here, but it didn't affect us.

Q: How about towards the pond there?

M: That's always been kind of woodsy so the view hasn't changed at all.

Q: What kinds of things did the kids do when they were young? I assume they were at the beach?

AB: Oh yeah!

Q: Sailing? Maybe boating? M: They had a little sailboat.

AB: We'd take a walk up there so they could go sailing. Oh, they did everything.

Q: Watched the sunset? One of my favorite things to do over the pond, right?

M: Yes.

Q: What is your favorite memory of Quonnie?

AB: Some of the people that I met I hadn't met before so it was just getting reunited.

Q: Yes, you mean in the summers, coming down and seeing them?

AB: Yes.

Q: You lived in Coventry this whole time, right?

AB: Correct, and before that Hope, Scituate.

Q: I love Scituate.

AB: I was born in Cranston almost into the Coventry line.

Q: Someone had said in one of our discussions along the way that, I think, they lived in Providence and his father bought a house here, and he said that they thought the trip was so long they had to pack a lunch and they stopped at around the intersection of 138 and 95 for lunch. [Laughter]. How long did it take you to get to Coventry?

M: About 50 minutes, depending on the traffic in the summer, depending on the way around. From her house maybe a little bit less.

Q: So you didn't stop for lunch in the middle?

M: No.

Q: Okay good. You know, I don't think you ever met Beatrice, right, because had she passed away by the time you bought this house?

AB: Correct.

Q: Had you met any of the relatives?

AB: Once while walking with my husband and we were looking this way and she was sitting in the chair on the porch.

Q: Who is that? Beatrice? Before you bought it?

AB: She got up, "Hi."

Q: Ah, nice. So what do you know about Beatrice? You said that she worked at Columbia.

M: She was a professor at Columbia University.

Q: That is a good thing to know because I can obviously look that up.

M: She played the violin.

AB: In fact, I have her yearbook?

Q: You have her yearbook?

AB: Yes.

M: There are books that were left.

Q: Horsbrough? That's incredible.

M: Yes. So this was in the house when they took it over, but I guess apparently she used to play the violin.

Q: That's nice to know. M: And that was commencement in 1966.

Q: Good, I would like to get some pictures of that.

AB: She bought that house next door and got friendly with some other

ladies.

Q: So she rented that house next door that she bought?

AB: Yes.

M: I'm not sure if she rented that one or she may have owned that one too because the [Perchins?] used to live here and they bought before they did. So they bought that one. I think she owned both of them and then she had, I'm not sure, one of her colleagues or a friend or whatever, staying in that one when they were coming down.

Q: Besides these books that you have here, were there any other documents in the house when you bought it? Particularly related to the Sears Roebuck house?

M: Were there any Sears Roebuck catalogues or anything? AB: No.

M: I don't recall seeing any and I'm sure if there were, she'd be showing them. I was dating Allyson in 1982.

Q: Okay, so you go back that far too?

M: I go back until they bought it and I go back even further because I use to rent a house on East Beach, it use to be an Inn.

Q: Yes, there use to be lots of them.

AB: His wife is Allyson is out somewhere.

Q: I know she told me she was shopping for Christmas.

M: She is shopping at the Quonnie store.

Q: So there were never documents in regard to Sears Roebuck?

AB: No. I wish there were.

Q: Yeah, that would have been really exciting to find those because, you know, it is very unusual, that whole issue with Sears Roebuck houses. That's interesting. Yes, I definitely want to get a picture of that.

What is this book?

M: This is another one.

Q: You said you had a copy of her book. Other

than these?

M: This is 1962.

Q: Oh, so this is another?

M: This is a later book.

AB: It is probably somewhere. Right now my eyesight is not great.

Q: She was an associate, wait am I looking at the right person? Of modern languages. Okay, who happened to play the violin?

M: Yes.

Q: Interesting.

So I had seen some information, and I think this may be a copy of what I had seen how the name Bercon on the house came about. Do you remember this story?

AB: Bercon?

Q: See it says Bercon. This is the letter that you've got framed here, was built by my cousin, Beatrice; this is her cousin, and her friend, Olga, and was named in memory of her mother, Constance, and her brother, Bernard. Hence, the Bercon. And you've kept that name? That's good.

AB: Yes.

M: It can be bad luck if you start changing names.

Q: [Laughter.] I didn't know that. That is good to know. Exactly.

M: Especially when you buy a boat. Some people don't really care.

Q: So why do you think this is a Sears Roebuck house? Did someone tell you that?

AB: I came across something and I don't know where it is, but Beatrice went to Chicago and the pieces came from there. Well, I don't know if she went there or ordered it from a store here, and they shipped it from Chicago.

Q: Because these houses were, supposedly, I haven't gotten a copy of their catalogue at the time, but they had a house catalog, and there were hundreds of houses and you picked the type that you wanted and they shipped you all the materials.

AB: Right, that sounds more realistic.

Q: And then, it sounds like this person, Harris Taylor may have been the one who put them together.

Unfortunately, there was nothing left in the house because wouldn't it be a great find? One of the big things they say if you find the installation guide because if you can imagine, there were hundreds of thousands of pieces and you had a 74-page installation guide that you followed.

Supposedly, it took you a couple of months to put it together.

AB: That one book..

M: Which one are you looking at, Mom? AB: It was over there.

M: I think Allyson brought them over. This is a yearbook and this is too. AB: It was up in the eaves of the attic.

M: We'll investigate a bit more and if we find something we'll get that to you.

Q: Yes, I'd appreciate that because it is really hard to find. You know, there are people across the nation who study this because there weren't that many Sears Roebuck houses built that way where they sent you all the materials.

So what are some of the distinguishing characteristics of this house, and what would you say? First of all, have you done any upgrades to this house since '82?

M: Well, the roof needs it again, but the roof has been done, the siding has been redone. We changed out windows; they are vinyl window now. Those were original initially.

Q: I can imagine what condition they were in.

M: That would have been quite the feat to reglaze every window and door..

Q: What about the bathrooms and the kitchen? Have they been updated? M: The toilet has been changed. The flooring.

Q: The kitchen is essentially the way it was?

M: The kitchen cabinets are the same, but the countertops are new.



Q: Okay, but there are certain elements that are still the same.

M: The sink is original, but toilet isn't. The sink wasn't ready to change that out.

Q: If that's the original sink I'd like to look under it because one of the things they say is it's a pedestal, right?

M: It is not. It is actually bolted to the wall.

Q: Oh it just hangs up there. One of the things they say is sometimes you see the Sears insignia on the bottom of the sink.

AB: No.

Q: So you don't think it's there?

AB: No. It might have been before me, however.

Q: Anyway, we can look, obviously.

M: I would say it is definitely the original.

Q: Yes, it definitely looks like that. This is very exciting.

AB: But the walls.

Q: This is a 2-bedroom house? AB: Are tung and groove.

M: Three bedrooms. The loft is used as a bedroom. We have two single beds up there.

Q: Wow.

Grandchild: It appears that there is no Sears insignia on the bottom of the sink.

Q: Thanks for checking. It appears that there is no Sears insignia on the bottom of the sink.

M: The unique thing I find about the construction is that all the boards are all tongue and groove so your exterior boards are your interior boards. What you're seeing here.

Q: Oh, I see what you're saying.

AB: And the fireplace was there.

Q: And the paneling? Is that original?

M: This is all the interior.

Q: Wow, you have got probably the most original home right here in Quonnie.

M: And I would guess the fireplace, looking at the brick and stuff, has been either rebuilt and the interior going up could be original, but down there, it has been rebuilt at some time.

AB: We don't have any furnace or cooling.

Q: There is no basement, right? It is on pillars, yes? And that was typical of Sears Roebuck houses as well.

What else? Obviously, there is no garage. You've done no additions?

M: There is kind of a glorified shed/garage. Not sure what they call it on the town records.

Q: But that is something you did?

M: That is original from when we bought it. I don't think she added it.

Q: Now return to the fireplace, you haven't done that so that would have been done between '29 and '82, somehow.

M: Maybe when she was coming down and staying in it, either a little earlier in the season or later and needed something to give her some heat.

Q: Although I think we can look that up if the house had a fireplace, or not. You're saying maybe she did the whole fireplace?

M: Maybe she had something and it became unusable and she had them redo it and then they put an insert in so it actually gives you some heat then just a straight up fireplace.

Q: So, tell me more about life here in Quonnie.

AB: My husband was the one. I didn't know anything about this area. He would come down and he loved the beach.

Q: And you loved it down here too, right?

AB: Yes, but his father, in the beginning, was fresh water, Johnson's Pond?, and

my husband said no, and the other three kids outvoted him.

Q: They do that sometimes.

[Laughter].

M: A-huh.

Q: What were the kinds of things that you did when you were here?

AB: A lot of walking.

Q: Cooking, I imagine, with  
your family?

AB: Yes. With my husband, it was walking.

Q: Alice's daughter, Allyson, has joined us. I forgot to mention that Alice's son-in-law, Mike, has been chiming in so if you heard a male voice, that's who you heard.

So, Allyson, tell me about life here in Quonnie.

Allyson: I've been coming here since before I was born.

Q: That's a long time. So you were a young girl when the family bought this house.

Allyson: This house was bought by the family in 1982. Before that, we rented, mostly over in East Beach. We lived on East Beach Road. There was a house up there for rent. That was the house that we rented from '67 to '69, and then we also rented on Midland and on Upland Road, we rented, and one near East Beach parking lot, before this. Those are the four that I remember.

Q: What kinds of things do you remember doing here in Quonnie as a young girl.

Allyson: We had our friends down here, we would hang out at night. We would all walk to everybody's houses, all up and down the streets, and then go hang out on the beach, and just go back to somebody's house afterwards and just was about teens and our friends.

Q: At the time, did they still have the, I think they called it the casino, but it had a bowling alley in it?

Allyson: That was before our time. That was in the '50s.

Q: Unfortunately, that was gone. But there were other things, I believe, there was a drive-in movie in the vicinity?

Allyson: Yes.

Q: You probably spent a lot of time either at the beach or the pond, right?

Allyson: Yes. This pond and the other pond on East Beach too.

Q: What is your favorite memory of being a young girl in Quonnie?

Allyson: The beach! We used to dig big, big holes in the beach the kind that you needed to build stairs to get out of [laughter]. We used to do that. Having cousins always coming to join us every summer before and they were born, as well.

Q: And Mike, you've been coming here for a long time. What did you used to do?

M: We used to go quohogging for sure and we would hit the beach. I really enjoyed bike riding so once we started coming down for our week, we'd bring bikes and do biking. We'd cover more territory on bikes. And they had a little sailboat, we've taken that out numerous times on the pond.

Allyson: The pond has been always about us and with our kids, take the sailboat, that the canoe, take the kayaks, take the windsurfer. That's where they learned everything out on the pond. We even had a little motorboat at one time and we went and explored the big rock in the middle of the pond and the kids thought that was great, just being on the water.

AB: And my husband's friends with Howie Sweet up on the hill, on the main drag.

Q: On route one?

AB: Howie Sweet, one of the original builders down there.

Q: I asked your mom this, but when you look back, since you've been here 42 years essentially, maybe more, you said you used to rent, what do you see as the biggest changes around here?

Allyson: The houses. The houses are not what they used to be.

Q: I told your mom, I came here in 1999, and the difference even from then. There were so many more houses, cottage type houses, and they are almost gone. It is very hard to find them now.

Allyson: They've taken those houses and triple-sized them.

Q: Yes , McMansions.

Allyson: Yes.

M: They are beautiful to look at for sure though. Each one has it's own, because I'm in, I've done a little bit of building and stuff, kind of a weekend warrior guy and has you are walking by, you are seeing the different kinds of architecture and all the different lines.

Q: That is beautiful, but it is definitely different than it used to be.

M: I hope we don't get squeezed out, that it becomes unaffordable to come down as a beach house and enjoy what we've always enjoyed..

Q: The good news is, for me, is these McMansions add to the tax base with new people. My taxes aren't going down, but they're not going up because of all the increased tax base, but it is very different around here.

AB: It has a history.

Q: Yes. I mean I didn't know its history when I moved here, I just knew it was an incredibly beautiful place to live and when I heard about all the history going back to pre-hurricane of '38, and having all the hotels and the boardwalk and the shops and things, it was mind boggling to me that more people didn't know that. So that's what we hope to do here with the Historical Society is make sure that people don't forget how this has evolved and all the important people who made it happen early on because otherwise, who knows what would have happened to it.

AB: Of course, we had, for years, the masons, the men who had originated Quonnie - what Westerly was known for – the granite.

Q: Yes, that was another surprising thing to me to know how big of an industry that was in a little town in Rhode Island and across the nation and it still is. Westerly just celebrated, I think, its 350th year. That is how old a town it is and one of the exhibits they had was that the quarries, they used to have 50 of them in its heyday and how they're down to like 3 or 4 but could you imagine what it was like here then?

Allyson is showing us pictures of her dad, Robert Bennett at this house. Obviously, you can see this house.

Allyson: This is my dad and my aunt. This is 1954, in their 20s.

Q: Oh that goes way back. Yes, yes.

Allyson: They were coming since they were little kids.

Q: What date would that have been then? Just in the 50s, how old were they? Allyson: In their 20s. They were born in '32.

Q: So after the hurricane of '38, but you're talking about big changes, right? Change of landscaping apparently so he came after the hurricane of '38, but still that's far back in the 30s. I'd like to take a picture of this too. We'll do that after we stop the recording.

Allyson: So that's me in the 1970's but I think I have a picture in here, a black and white in the 1930's.

AB: No where was quite a history and it's something and my grandchildren can go back in time.

Q: Yes.

Allyson: Here is my grandfather. This is my father and this is my aunt. In 1937.

Q: Is that the pond?

Allyson: On the beach, in November. And my grandmother.

Q: On the beach, wow. [Unclear].

M: It's hard to make out. Kind of like a picture in a picture.

Q: Pretty amazing. So, I hope you're going to keep this house forever and ever, right?

Allyson: Yes.

Q: Is that the plan? Is it the plan for your children?

M: Well, that is the biggest take of the house is the amount of people that have come down and enjoyed it and got to see it. From my parents to my sisters, my kids as they've grown up, now their friends, husbands now and their family come down to visit them when they're down here and now have two grandchildren. It is sort of amazing how many people have gotten to enjoy the experience of coming down here.

Q: Right. And in a house that hasn't changed since it was built. We love these kinds of things in the Historical Society because it obviously takes a lot. You know, obviously, it's an investment and it's an investment to keep it even the

same look and feel and sometimes it's easy to knock it down and build something else, but you've lost so much history when you do that for you and the rest of the community because I think I said to your mom when I talked to her on the phone, every time I pass this house, I smile because it is one of the few original houses that are and it's so nice to see.

M: We are the "poor folks" of Quonnie!

Allyson: The house across the street was built in the 1600s. I think that was one of the first ones.

Q: You're talking about Sheffield farm?

Allyson: Yes.

Q: Imagine what that looks like inside.

AB: And we may be related to them.

Q: Yes, your mom thinks you may be related.

AB: I've just got to prove it.

Q: Yes, when you prove that, let me know. I would like to know that.

AB: The Rhode Island historical library is where I've spent many, many hours, and this is one of them.

Q: That is fun. I did myself with my family trying to trace us back. It was fun and you learn so much more.

AB: There are all the colleges I went to, had classes at night and I worked 60 years for a dentist.

Q: You did? Wow! In Coventry, I would assume?

AB: In West Warwick.

Q: Oh, West Warwick. I worked in West Warwick too.

AB: Dr. Kershaw and Dr. Jusic.

Q: They're still there

M: No.

AB: No, both have died.

M: In fact, Dr. Jusic died the night -- my daughter was his last patient of the day. He had a heart attack when he got home. It was unfortunate, yes, a great, great guy.

Q: So anything else you want to tell us about life here in Quonnie?

AB: You could not separate my husband from it.

Allyson: He is here with Beatrice and we always joke that Beatrice and Bob are probably sitting on the front porch.

Q: I forgot to ask you this question. In the summers, did you spend, you know, in the 80s and 90s, the whole summer here, or did you go back and forth to Coventry?

AB: Went back and forth.

M: They'd be here pretty much the whole month of July. Allyson would take a month off from work.

Q: Oh, I see.

M: And he played softball in the old goats games. He was actually the captain of the old goats every weekend for sure.

Q: And obviously in the winter, because it wasn't heated, although you did have a fireplace, did you come down? You closed the house down. Did you come down?

M: Once we know we're done, the temps are calling for 30's and below, you know you have to shut off for the winter. But we would come down in the Fall.

Q: Yes, the fall. I think the fall is a beautiful time.

Allyson: September is also beautiful.

AB: Yes, there are no crowds.

Q: Exactly. I consider it like two different communities. The summer, rush, rush, and I don't really mind, you know? It is kind of like pick me up, and then you



have the quiet of the winter, without moving.

AB: It was nice walking along the shoreline at a very nice pace. Peace, just peace.

Q: There's nothing like it.

AB: She always jokes that she was her husband's second love. [Laughter]. But you're a close second though. [Laughter].

Q: Isn't he nice!

Q: Where did that come from? I mean, obviously in the 30s but, prior to that, where did he grow up? Did he come from Coventry?

AB: Yes.

Q: But even as a young boy, did he come down to the beaches?

AB: Yes.

Q: I understand.

M: How old would you say when he started coming down? Allyson: My grandmother started renting in the 30s.

Q: In the 30s, but if this is him. Oh, this is him! Okay, that explains. I was looking at this picture thinking he was older. He was like 6 or 7 when he started coming down. And I can understand that. I've always said myself, I'd never move that far from the beach, and I can't even imagine doing that, so I can understand that connection.

AB: How long have you been coming here?

Q: I've only been in Quonnie since 1999.

M: Are you full time?

Q: Yes! Yes.

AB: Where are you?

Q: On Briarwood, which is off West Beach Road, opposite the yacht club. Allyson:

My friend rented over on Briarwood in 2011 at the end of Briarwood on the left.

AB: We kept on getting closer to the beach.

Q: I felt very lucky to be able to get here. I lived in Connecticut at the time, and if you looked at the areas in Charlestown, I remember telling the real estate agent, Charlestown Beach was number 3, , and number two was Greenhill area. And this is where I really wanted to live. Things were affordable then, I have to say, in late 1999.

AB: Who was the realtor?

Q: Realtors, I think it was.

Allyson: Dad went through Howard Thorp.

AB: The Sweets were here and my husband got very friendly with Howie Thorp.

Q: Well, I have to thank you for this, Alice. I'm so glad we got to meet. This is very helpful and I'm glad to have captured your thoughts as well as Allyson and Mike, because we'd like to have obviously have this forever so we can understand what it was like living in Quonnie during this time. Thank you so much.

