

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

SUSAN BRECK-CARPENTER

October 15, 2020

Interviewed by Leah Bradshaw in Charlestown

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Q: This is Leah Bradshaw. I'm at the Breck family residence on Surfside Avenue. I'm with Sandra, Breck and Susan Breck-Carpenter. If it's okay, maybe you could identify yourselves for the record.

A: I'm Susan Carpenter. I'm Susan Carpenter.

A: I'm Sandra Breck.

Q: Sue, I'll start with you. Where were you born?

A: I was born in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1951. And then in the summer of 1952, we came to Quonochontaug. That was the first summer.

Q: So, right after you were born.

A: Yes. And I used to scream, because there were open rafters. I wasn't a very good sleeper, so I'd scream, but then the babysitter would take me down to the beach early, early in the morning, and Carl Everingham was down there.

Q: Fishing.

A: Yes. Fishing and collecting sea glass.

Q: He had huge collections. And you were born in Springfield?

A: This is Sandra. I was born in Springfield in 1954, so every summer of my life we were here. As soon as school got out, my mother picked us up at school, and we came right here. And then we left the day after Labor Day.

Q: Was it always this house you came to?

A: No. We used to be down at the Campbells—where the Campbells are now. Well, it wasn't that house.

Q: What was that address?

A: Whatever the Campbell's address is.

Q: Surfside.

A: Yes.

A: It was just a beach house.

A: It was like the House's house that they just turned down. It's kind of like that.

A: Yes.

A: And then across the street was an empty lot for the—who's that?

A: Howie's now.

A: Howie's. It was an empty lot, and people said to my father, "You should buy that lot," and he said, "Nobody is stupid enough to build a house there."

A: That was after the '54 Hurricane.

A: Yes. And then somebody did build a house there. So, then they moved down here.

Q: I remember when that house was built down there. My father used to go by and think, "I'm a fisherman. If only I could live there and see the surf every morning."

A: Right.

Q: When did this house come about?

A: In '65 they bought the house behind, and this was the big pit.

Q: The snake pit. We called it the snake pit.

A: Snake pit. And then in '65 or '66 they built.

Q: Was this where Bill Holines' house was?

A: No. The Holines were behind the Carpenter's. Holines was where Ellen's is now.

A: Yes. Because the Sutherlands were—

A: The Sutherlands were there right behind, and then the Holines were next to that.

A: Right.

A: And the Barstows were on the end.

A: Yes.

Q: How did there get to be a pit?

A: It was always there.

A: I don't know. We have a great picture of the pit.

A: It was here. The Morans—it was always here. It was just a big pit.

A: Yes.

A: I guess in '54 it filled up with water in the hurricane.

A: Yes.

Q: Outdoor swimming pool.

A: Right. It was always here, as far as we knew.

Q: So, this house was built in the '60s?

A: In '66, I think.

A: Something like that.

Q: Was there a house here before?

A: No. The Tetlas owned the house behind. They had a view out to the front. They sold the whole—

Q: Parcel?

A: Yes.

Q: Like the Gerrishs sold their whole parcel.

A: Right.

Q: I'm not sure which direction.

A: Right there.

Q: Okay. Since the '60s have you both been in this house every summer of your life?

A: We've been here. Susan has been next door.

A: Right. After we grew up.

A: Yes.

A: I spent my summers at camp.

A: Right. And I was here.

Q: A camp in Rhode Island?

A: No. In Vermont.

Q: Sailing or tennis?

A: Horseback riding.

Q: So, you're a rider?

A: Yes.

Q: And you were here every summer?

A: I was here every summer.

Q: That's Sandra.

A: Yes.

Q: How did you family find Quonochontaug?

A: My father grew up going to summers in going to Misquamicut. He and my mother about 1950, '51, they were looking for a place to rent, and they were in Watch Hill with Mr. Thorp, and he said, "Why don't I bring you over and show you Quonochontaug?" and they came over to Quonochontaug. They loved it, and they rented that house at first, and then they bought it. I can't remember the name of the people that owned it.

Q: The Campbell's house?

A: Yes. Before it was ours, they rented it for a few years and then they bought it, but I don't remember the name of the people that owned it.

Q: So, they rented it and then they bought it?

A: Yes.

Q: And then they broke ground and built this house in 1966?

A: Yes.

Q: I remember the fascination of this house being built because of the driveway.

A: Right. Compared to what the old cottages were like, it was pretty big.

A: Yes.

Q: It was very much ahead of the time.

A: And now it's not so big.

Q: No. It's not average. So, besides this house, you also have your house where you live, which is on Ocean View.

A: Yes.

Q: And then you also have a house in East Beach on Highland?

A: Yes.

Q: But this is your residence?

A: This is our family house.

Q: And your personal residence is on Ocean View. And how about you?

A: I rent in Stonington, Connecticut, and then we're in Florida for the winter. We're going to Florida Saturday.

Q: One going south, one going west. So, you close this house up between now and then?

A: Pretty much.

Q: Normally your mom would have headed south to Florida?

A: Around now.

A: Yes. In the middle of October.

Q: So, your family has been in Quonnie since 1951?

A: The summer of '52.

Q: Sue, what is your earliest childhood memory of Quonnie?

A: I remember Frank Crompton crawling underneath the house and lighting the radiator so we could have some heat. And I also remember Frank Crompton coming down to the house to tell my mother that she had a phone call up at Crompton's, because we didn't have a phone. Sometimes my father would call, and my mother would have to go up to Crompton's and answer the phone.

Q: So, your dad hung on the phone while Mr. Crompton came down and got your mom?

A: I don't know if she called back. I don't remember. But I do remember they did that. For a while they didn't have a phone when they first came down here.

A: When they were renting, the renters probably didn't have a phone.

A: Yes.

Q: What a contrast to today.

A: I know. You don't go anywhere without it.

Q: How about you?

A: I remember walking down to the casino—to the bowling alley. Crabbing out front.

Q: Crabbing on the rocks?

A: Yes. Playing on the rocks.

A: Walking out to meet dad.

A: Yes. We would walk up on West Beach Road and sit on the rock in front of the Redding's house. What was it, the Grange?

A: The Grange.

A: And we'd sit on the rock and wait for my father on Friday afternoon when he was coming down for the weekend.

Q: Was the hotel there then, the Seabreeze Inn?

A: It was, but I don't think it was working then. I don't think it was really an inn then, but I think it was still there.

A: I think the building was still there.

Q: It hadn't been burned down. And to the right of it was the dance hall.

A: The dance hall. That's where the Reddings are now at the dance hall.

Q: Yes.

A: Yes.

A: I'm not sure about the Seabreeze Inn.

A: I don't think so. I just remember it was a—I called it the Grange. Whatever it was—the dance hall.

Q: It was the Grange dance hall.

A: Yes. I don't remember a hotel there.

Q: Do you remember as a child going to square dances there?

A: I kind of remember that long ago.

A: We'd go to the drive-in.

Q: Yes. Out on Route 1. What kinds of activities did you family enjoy here? I'll ask you first, Sue.

A: Mostly going to the beach, swimming and crabbing.

A: Didn't dad have a little boat for a while?

A: Yes. We had a little—the Jay Suzanne over at the pond.

A: Yes.

A: We'd go out just putting around.

A: Yes.

A: That's what we did.

A: Tennis.

Q: Did you play tennis?

A: Yes. We played tennis over in Watch Hill. We didn't play tennis here so much.

A: Right. We'd go to the little beach with the Ronalsons and the Smiths. We'd go down to the little beach.

Q: The little beach, meaning the Nuns Beach, or right here?

A: Right in front of Ronalson's house and Marler's. That what we always called it: the little beach. That's where we always went.

A: Right. And Chris Young, when he was here. They'd come for a couple of weeks. And Ann Young Miller and Steve Young.

Q: So, Chris Young is still here? Ann Miller is still here?

A: Steven Young.

A: Yes.

Q: Tonight, we're having a program. I don't know if you know about it.

A: Where Steve is doing the—

A: We saw it last year. He showed it at his house.

Q: You had a private showing. You had a special neighbor showing.

A: Right.

Q: What areas did you family enjoy? I'll ask you first, Sue. The beach? The pond?

A: Mostly the beach. My father loved to swim. He swam up into his 80s. He'd go down every day when he was here and go swimming. I'd say mostly swimming is what we did.

A: Yes.

A: And climbing rocks. Growing up, we climbed rocks like crazy. We loved climbing rocks and go crabbing.

A: Right. We were at the beach.

A: I wonder if kids still climb rocks like that. We used to climb rocks all the time.

Q: I'm surprised kids didn't die.

A: I know. We'd go full speed ahead.

Q: How about you, Sandra?

A: We'd go to the beach. We'd climb the rocks. We'd go home in the afternoon to watch some soap operas.

A: Right. We watched As The World Turns and play cards.

A: Yes. We played cards.

A: We played a lot of cards.

A: Yes.

Q: Your mom is a bridge player. Are both of you bridge players?

A: Yes. We play bridge.

A: I know how to play.

A: We always play. We played last summer with Jean and Bob.

A: Yes, we did.

Q: I brought Jean over here once.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you play cards in the early evening with your family together?

A: No. We mostly played with our friends. Jamie Ronalson and Leslie Ronalson.

A: Barbie Smith.

A: Yes. Barbie Smith.

A: Yes. At the old house, my mother would have Helen Moran, Margaret Ronalson. Who was their fourth? Mrs. Smith maybe. They'd come over and play bridge at night during the week when the husbands were—

A: Yes. When the husbands were all gone.

A: And then the kids would play games or play cards.

A: We'd play hide and seek.

A: Yes.

A: We played a lot of hide and seek.

Q: Did you do scavenger hunts?

A: Yes. We did some, but mostly we'd just go out and play hide and seek.

A: Vera Todd would let us hide on her porch. She hated everybody, but she liked us. She loved my mother.

Q: You passed the test.

A: We could hide on her porch. We played hide and seek.

A: That's funny.

Q: Did you do the Sunday morning baseball games here?

A: No.

A: They didn't let girls do it. I think Ellen Young—they wouldn't let her do it, and she's younger than we are.

Q: Did you have a brother, or is it just the two of you?

A: Yes. Our brother wasn't athletic.

A: He isn't a big sports guy.

A: I don't remember if played baseball.

A: Did they have it then?

Q: I think they had the kids, and then they had the young men against the old goats.

A: Back in our day?

Q: Maybe that was earlier.

A: I don't remember—

A: I don't remember anything about that. We went to church.

A: Oh, yes. We went to church on Sundays.

A: Every Sunday. We were gone.

Q: You were committed for Sunday mornings/

A: We were committed to church.

Q: Your parents took you and you went?

A: Yes. We didn't have a choice.

Q: What were your personal favorite activities, Sue?

A: Swimming, crabbing, climbing rocks, riding the waves. We used to have canvas rafts that we rode the waves on. We played games. That's what we did.

A: Yes. That's all we did all summer.

Q: Did you have any others, Sandy?

A: We played tennis.

A: I don't even think we rode our bikes that much. Did we?

A: Maybe we rode our bikes.

A: But not like our kids did.

A: No. We must have ridden our bikes. As a teenager, I'd get up in the morning and we'd go to the beach and be on the beach all day.

A: Yes.

Q: Hanging out with your friends?

A: Yes. And then at night you'd be at somebody's house watching TV or doing something. It was a big deal if we were going to Watch Hill or something for the day if somebody would drive you. We didn't leave here much.

A: Once in a while we'd go at night to the amusement park.

A: Yes. In Misquamicut. When we were little, my grandfather was in the Ocean House, and we used to go there every Sunday night for dinner.

A: That was fun.

Q: The original Ocean House?

A: Yes. And then they had bingo after dinner.

A: Right. Every Sunday night we'd play bingo.

A: So, we'd go over there every Sunday night.

Q: How fun.

A: Yes.

Q: Was it mainly older people, or was it kids or just anybody?

A: It was basically older people.

A: Because people would come and stay the summer there. But they did bingo. There must have been some young kids. I can't remember. I remember we did play bingo.

Q: Did you ever fish while you were here?

A: Dad wasn't into fishing. We didn't fish.

A: Not until you got with Bill. They were fishermen—the Carpenters.

Q: Did you do any berry picking?

A: No.

A: No. We'd go up and get gladiolas. Remember Manfredi's? They used to have gladiolas. We'd go buy gladiolas.

A: Yes.

Q: Would you like to talk about meeting Bill Carpenter?

A: I'd like to talk about the '54 hurricane.

Q: That would be fascinating. Were you here for that?

A: Yes. We were at that house down there—the Campbell's house. Sandra wasn't born yet, but my mother was pregnant. It was my brother and I and my mother, and Pow Wow, our babysitter was there. We had a dog named Dempsey. Dr. Von, who lived next door at the Carley's house came over and said it's going to blow tonight, so bring in the laundry that was out on the clothesline." She brought it in, and the next morning she woke up and the driveway was full of water. So, we couldn't get out. Somebody ran over—Leticia, the housekeeper. Leticia ran over to Vera Todd's, because Vera's driveway was on the side street, and she said, "Can we leave with you? We have to leave." So, we all piled into Vera's car, but we couldn't bring our dog, because there were too many people, and Vera had a Chihuahua. So, we all piled in. I think I remember walking from our house to Vera's, and the wind was blowing so hard. Somebody had my hand, because I was only three. I was almost three. Somebody had my hand, and we got in the car. We went to the fire station. Pow Wow, our babysitter was sick, so she had to go to the hospital. Then that same day our aunt came and got us at the fire station and took us to the Ocean House, because she lived there with my grandfather. At the Ocean House that night, everybody had candles. There was no electricity. Everybody walked around with candles. The next day my dad came down from Springfield, because he was up there, and got us. And we came over, and Dempsey was sitting in the front window looking out. But Dick Moran had come over and let Dempsey out sometime before that. Dempsey was fine.

A: Was there water in the house?

A: The front stairs got washed away, but I don't think there was water inside the house.

Q: Did you have an entrance at the front of the house?

A: Yes. The front. The stairs went right down there. There was a big rock, and the Campbells blew up the rocks. It's not as big anymore. Remember that big rock?

A: Yes.

A: There was a rock, and the stairs went right down next to the rock to the front. They got washed away. I think the water was in the garage, because it came in the driveway.

Q: The garage is—

A: The same spot it is now. It's over on that side of the house.

A: Yes. But it was facing the ocean. So, that was exciting.

Q: So, you were not actually here for the storm, but at the age of two or three, you came back and saw the aftermath of the damage?

A: Right. And we have some family movies. Don't we have some pictures of that?

A: I don't know.

A: I'm not sure.

A: We'll look at them again.

A: All I remember is the stairs being gone.

A: Did you leave that day?

A: We probably went back home. It was the end of August, wasn't it? I think it was.

Q: It was either the end of August or very early September. You know what? It was Labor Day. It seems to me it was right around Labor Day, because kids were getting ready to go back to school. Some had gone back to school, but mainly, like us, they went the Tuesday after the Labor Day Monday. And people were walking around going to the beach. Lots of times after hurricanes there are nice days.

A: Yes.

Q: And this was a nice day. But other people had—I talked to Mr. Ronalson, and he said, "There were all these people going to beach like nothing had happened. I have all this sand and water in my house, no roof covering, and my wife said something about let's clean out the garage, and I said, 'What would you rather have, dear, a roof or a clean garage?' and she said, 'I see your point.'"

A: Were they building that house then?

Q: They were building that house.

A: They were in the midst of it.

A: He built that house mostly by himself, didn't he?

Q: He did. And he had these beams. They were very dark beams, and he had to walk all around the beach and retrieve the beams, which were not light. He would find one, and it would be very water-laden and sandy because of all the water and the sand. He would have to pick it up and put it in a wagon, or tried to somehow carry it, plus the wagon, and get it back to the house.

A: Oh, my God.

Q: He had to recover all his beams before he cleaned them up.

A: Oh, my gosh. How did he do that?

A: He was something.

A: Yes. He was.

Q: So, you lost your steps.

A: That's all I remember. There was a front screened porch that went across the front. Maybe that got some water damage. I have a feeling that we just went home after that.

A: My mother always said after that she was never coming back here.

A: Yes.

Q: Apparently, she didn't mean it.

A: She didn't have any say.

A: I'm sure it scared her a lot to wake up and have the water in the driveway not knowing what was going to happen.

Q: So, your car was in the garage, and you couldn't drive it out?

A: Because there was too much water in the driveway. It was just covered. And she heard it blowing in the night, but no one knew a hurricane was coming. Now you know two weeks before it hits.

Q: I know. Whether it comes or not, you hear about it.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you have the National Guard knocking on your door?

A: I don't know if they did. We should have asked my mother. I have no idea. I can't remember. I remember that we just got up and went over to Vera Todd's and got in her car and drove off. They didn't knock on the door the day before, or we would have left.

A: Right.

A: They knocked on our door. Maybe because you had no lights. No, this was the day of the hurricane. They knocked on our door and told us we had to leave, and my father answered the door and said, "We don't have anywhere to go," which wasn't so, because

we had family in Ashaway. I don't know why he said that. The National Guard said, "We cannot protect you. We can't be responsible." And then they went down the way. We were on Ocean View. They went right down the way telling everyone they had to leave.

A: That morning?

Q: The night of. It was completely dark. It was when the hurricane hit.

A: I don't know. All I remember—mother always said that Dr. Von came over and said, "Get your laundry out." I thought she woke up completely surprised that there was water in her driveway.

A: She must have been, or she would have left.

A: She would have left the night before for sure.

Q: If she had known?

A: Oh, yeah. She would have left.

A: Because there was one time—maybe it was Hurricane Bob—the National Guard came and said, "You need to be out by 10:00 tomorrow morning," and she got up at 6:00, and she and the housekeeper left at 6:00. My father was still in bed.

Q: Did they leave him a note?

A: I don't know.

A: She wasn't going to stick around.

A: No question about that. I don't think that was Bob, because that was '91.

A: But it was sometime that we were grown up. We weren't here. And they were out.

Q: Did you father follow?

A: When he got up. He wasn't going to rush. She was like, "It's time to get out." She didn't want to get stuck. Then there was another storm we left here, and we were driving home. I was sitting in the front seat between them. Dad ended up in somebody's back yard. He couldn't see. It was raining so hard.

A: I don't remember that.

A: You don't remember that?

A: No.

A: I don't know if it was a hurricane. It was something bad.

Q: Was he able to get out?

A: Yes. And then he went and knocked on the guy's door and said, "I just drove all over your yard." He got out, but he couldn't see at all.

Q: Maybe there was no electricity or now street lights.

A: I think it was just raining so hard. The windshield wipers probably weren't that great then. And those back roads up through Norwich to go to Springfield. I remember that, though.

Q: Do you have any hurricane memories from your time here of Hurricane Bob or superstorm Sandy?

A: Superstorm Sandy—Susan's daughter came to my house in Massachusetts. So, we came down on Saturday to see what was going on down here.

Q: The Saturday before?

A: The Saturday after. And we went over to Watch Hill, because the sand went right into the parking lot in Watch Hill, and all the stairs and the cabanas that are along there, there must have been six feet of sand that had washed out. Here wasn't as bad as it was in Watch Hill and Misquamicut.

Q: They were hit very hard.

A: Yes. But it was fine here. We just had sand. The beach was okay.

Q: The superstorm was Monday, and the electricity came on, on Friday, so you came at a perfect time.

A: We came once we knew the electricity was back on. That's probably what it was.

Q: Do you have any memories? Were you still here then?

A: I was here for Bob in '91. We took the eagle down, and we took a bunch of antiques from the Carpenter's. We went to a friend that lives on Ross Hill Road. We had no damage here, but the friend had a little mini tornado come through and a tree fell on his house.

A: That's right.

Q: Amazing.

A: I know.

A: That's wild when they predict it's going to happen. Well, luckily it didn't happen.

A: I know. Lucky.

Q: The eagle must be incredibly heavy.

A: I haven't tried to lift it.

A: Well, you got it off once and got it back up there.

A: Yes. The boys did it. I didn't do it.

Q: What about the next generation? What does Quonnie mean to your children, Sue?

A: Willie loves it here. He is a Quonnie boy through and through.

Q: Is he the wind surfer?

A: Yes. The kiter and the sit surfer. It means a lot to him. His best friends are from Quonnie.

Q: Is it hard for him to leave?

A: He doesn't leave often.

Q: He doesn't go home in the wintertime?

A: He lives in Boston. He comes down here a lot of weekends. Anna lives more or less out west. She's not as attached to Quonnie.

Q: Does she live in Montana?

A: She works in Wyoming in the winter right now.

Q: And how about your kids?

A: I just have one son who lives in Maine, and he's not interested. We would come down on weekends, but he never got in with the crowd. Everybody else was boogie boarding. He never got into that.

Q: He likes Maine?

A: Yes. He's up in Maine. He's happy up there.

A: Were you in the Quonnie crowd?

Q: Only very peripherally. But I love it here, not necessarily for that, but for everything else: the swimming. As you like the natural phenomenon—the swimming, the rocks, the crabbing. I don't fish myself, but I love fresh fish, so if anyone catches some, I'm there. We used to go out crabbing on the pond. We had a boat and we would go out on the pond. We went Quahogging and clamming. Did you do that?

A: No.

A: No, we never did. Cathy Frasier is into it.

A: Yes. She's the clamming fool.

A: Yes. Now she is. We never ate mussels until I was an adult.

A: We used to have clam bakes

A: Right.

Q: Here?

A: Yes. Right on the beach.

Q: Did you dig a big pit?

A: We dug a big pit. We did it all. We probably had four or five.

A: It's a lot of work.

A: Not as we were kids, but as we were young adults, we did it.

Q: But you could carry it right across—whatever you were going to cook.

A: Yes.

A: Right. But it's digging the pit, getting the seaweed.

A: It has to be the right seaweed. That puffy kind.

A: We'd have to go over to Weekapaug and get that.

A: We could get mussels here, but now you can't get mussels here.

Q: You can't. So, you dug a big pit, and you put down big rocks?

A: Yes. We had to collect the rocks.

A: We'd have a big fire.

Q: A big fire in the pit?

A: Yes.

Q: So, the rocks got hot.

A: Yes.

A: Then the wood.

A: And then the seaweed. That would calm the fire down, and then we'd layer lobsters.

Q: Potatoes?

A: Yes.

A: And then put fish in the cheesecloth.

Q: So, it would stay together?

A: Yes.

A: Did you put more seaweed on top?

A: Yes. More seaweed. And then a tarp over the whole thing to steam it.

Q: To keep the heat in and to steam it?

A: Right. It tastes really good.

A: It's delicious.

A: But it's a lot of work.

A: Last weekend I was trying to talk the younger generation into doing it, but they're not sure they're up for that. They want to hire someone.

A: It was a lot of work, but it was fun.

A: Thank you. That was fun.

A: Yes.

Q: Anything else you want to add that I didn't ask you?

A: I don't think so.

Q: Sandy?

A: No. I can't think of anything. It was a great place, because it was so quiet.

A: Safe.

A: Safe.

A Raising the children, letting them out at night without worrying too much.

Q: Letting them ride their bikes.

A: Yes. And then when the kids were old enough, they would cut through to go over to Blue Shutters for lunch. That was a huge deal. They could start doing that. I feel like now there are so many people with big cars, and there is so much more traffic.

Q: Thank you, both. I appreciate it.

