

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

DONALD CONRAD

August 4, 1997

Interviewed by Barbara Adams

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Q: This is the 4th, and I'm sitting with Johnnie Aileen Conrad and her husband Donald Conrad in their home at 68 Ocean View Avenue. We're going to be talking about some of the fondest memories of Quonochontaug, and when they first came here. In what year did you first come to Quonochontaug?

D: It was 1950 or '49.

A: 1949, I think, because Buzz was a baby. He was just about a year old. We first came here as guests and Elaine and Dick Henry. It was before they had built their home, and they had rented Grandma Fisher's for the month of July. They would invite us down. That was the first I ever laid eyes on Central Beach or Quonochontaug—either one. Then in a year or two the Henrys built their house. They were very generous, and they kept inviting us down. After a few years of this, we decided we would build our own home. We found out, from Mr. Thorpe, the lots that were available. We decided to build on this one. That was in '53 that we finally bought the lot, and built the house in '54. Fisher built it. We came in the end of July. Then Hurricane Carol came the end of August.

Q: You were saying that there was not too much damage done, except for a few shingles.

D: This house was [inaudible 02:12]. It practically had no damage at all.

A: It had a big scratch on one of the front windows where somebody's asbestos shingle slid across it.

Q: Do you remember how far the water came up from the ocean?

D: We weren't here. We left at 10:00 in the morning.

A: But the water came up around Old [inaudible 02:39] and up around the Hurtado house that was on that opposite corner. But it didn't come up through here at all.

Q: Just in those two low spots?

A: Just in those two low spots. They were low places. The water came up on the road and down into those low places. We didn't have any water around us at all.

Q: How old were your children when you built the house?

A: Buzz must have been in either kindergarten or first grade. He would have been around six. Jeanette would have been eleven. She was five years older than Buzz. We came every summer as soon as school was out. We would go home the day after Labor Day, the day before school started. We spent our summers here.

Q: Were you just coming on weekends, Don?

D: When I could. When I was in town.

A: When the children were young, he spent a good many of the weekends here.

D: Not enough according to Buzz.

A: When he got to traveling more, he would always be here on the weekends. I have pictures of Don and Buzz on the beach.

Q: You said Buzz was interested in building boats.

A: He loved to build things. That's right. He and Ron Henry used to do a lot of boat building out of scrap wood, tie a string to it and go down on the rocks and float the boats. When they were young, even though Ron was a couple of years older than Buzz, a couple of years doesn't make any difference. When they get to be teenagers, it's a different story. But they were real buddies. They spent a lot of time together fishing, crabbing and playing on the beach. They were great at digging holes—just gigantic holes, and burying each other. They had quite a few really good years playing together as little boys.

Q: Did you always walk to the beach, or did you take a car down?

A: For a long time, we walked to the beach. Then as the kids got older and we were carrying more chairs and the rafts—our kids had the air mattresses—then we took a car to go to the beach. It was a little easier. The kids rode their bikes to the beach a lot, but we didn't have bike racks. They would line them up around the rocks. The parking lot at that time was bigger than it is now. We would go to the beach every morning. They'd play and have a swim. We would eat lunch and go back midafternoon and stay for another couple of hours. That's the way we spent our days. When we came to the beach, that's how we spent our time. The kids took tennis lessons. John Randall and one of the Saunders girls had day camp a couple of years. Buzz went to day camp. I don't think Jeanette ever did, but Buzz did. Things like that.

Q: Was this when they were small?

- A: Yes. When they were little when we first came here. The Saunders had rented the old Jordan house. I think that's where day camp met, but then they took them off on a field trip.
- Q: Nature walks?
- A: They'd go over to the pond or something like that. They didn't go any distance. There was no transportation involved. Everything was done by foot.
- Q: Foot or bike.
- A: Yes.
- Q: When they became teenagers, it more or less stayed the same as far as the transportation.
- A: Very much the same. It was a different era when our kids were growing up. They were content to stay here at the beach. It wasn't a matter of we've got to find someplace to hang out. We had parties in different homes. Not organized things, but they just met and got together. They'd have popcorn and Kool-Aid to drink. They played records and danced, or they just sat and talked and played records. We had a lot of parties here. We didn't have any rugs on the floor. It was easy to dance. It was never, "Oh, we've got to go someplace." We didn't have to put up with that at all. Rainy days we would take them to the movies. None of the boys of Buzz's age and the girls that Jeanette hung out with—Buzz had friends with cars. Pete Smith was one of them, or Tommy Farrell. They could usually command a car. One of their favorite things was every day they'd ride up to Burlingame with multiple people and their kids. That was the excitement.
- Q: Who were some of the families that were involved—the parents of these teenagers whose homes they might be in?
- A: The Schafers. Norma and Jeff Fisher. Earl and Helen Schafer. They used to be the third house. The Henrys.
- Q: The Davises?
- A: I don't think they ever partied. But the Davis boys used to hang out with them, and Sue Lodge. David Lodge was older. He wasn't involved with the kids. But when Jeanette was growing up, when she was in her teens, there could be 25 or 30 of these kids off and on during a summer that hung out together. They sat in big circles on the beach. The boys picked them up and threw them in the ocean. They had it made. I think they still do it. That seems to be a favorite activity on the beach.
- Q: You served on the special events committee, and the main event was the 4th of July Parade.

A: That's right. That was the big thing of the season. We didn't have all these other organized activities that they do now.

Q: Do you think they have too many organized activities now?

A: I don't think so. Not as long as people participate and enjoy it. We never had any picnics on the beach or anything like that. In fact, they were very strict about it. There was no eating on the beach. I think organized activities are fine as long as you get people to participate in it so that it isn't the same one or two couples that have to do it all the time.

Q: Don, you were on several committees. Tell us about those. When did they make this marina up here? Do you remember? You were on the committee when they did that.

D: When I was on the committee, they had one lot over there that they used.

Q: On Sunset Drive?

D: Yes. They wanted more space, because a lot of people were using the area. We had a lot of boats lying around. There was no place to park. Mary wouldn't sell the property to Thorpe. Thorpe had wanted to buy it for a long time, but we finally got Mary talked into letting us buy the property. There were people around there. I can't remember all of them. As I remember, \$100 bought the lot. We got the lot and got title to it. Then we expanded it so they had more area for their boats.

A: In the early days, an awful lot of people used this landing to walk down by Mary McSweeney's. That got to be too much.

D: I have no idea who actually bought the lot and started the boat landing on Sunset. That was before my time.

Q: As a member of the Real Estate Committee, what were some your functions?

D: We tried to make sure we weren't getting taxed for things that we didn't own. This had happened a couple of times.

Q: Really?

D: Yes. We had been paying taxes on two or three lots that we never owned for a number of years. In those days, it wasn't that expensive. Taxes were low. But when it got to be more expensive, we started looking into the property. Then were reviewed all the properties at that time when we put in the new water system.

A: Was there something [inaudible 14:24] the roads?

D: That was later. That was when we were putting the water system in. We found out that we never had the deeds to the road back on what they called the Central Beach Extension.

Q: The highlands?

D: Yes. We didn't own that property, but we corrected it by getting hold of Howard Thorpe.

A: Nelson.

D: Yes. Nelson. We had been improving the roads. Howard started it. He tarred the roads. We were keeping them up and putting money Central Beach's Fire District money into those roads, but we didn't own them.

Q: When you first came here, were the roads dirt or were they tarred?

D: They were all dirt. I can't remember exactly when they started tarring them. But people started complaining about the dust and so forth. A lot of people didn't want them paved, because they thought if they did, then there would be more traffic through here. Thorpe just went ahead and did it.

A: I can remember every spring the chloride on the roads, and he'd be out there in his white shirt and his necktie and his Panama hat with a push broom or a rake or whatever it needed. He was right there taking care of everything.

Q: He really got in there. When he wanted something done, he did it, didn't he?

A: He didn't ask anybody's permissions.

Q: No. He just did it. Howard Thorpe owned this place. He set it up.

D: That was his hobby.

A: No one questioned it. He just went ahead and did it. We have to thank him, because he certainly started something that turned out to be quite an asset for everyone involved.

Q: On the Real Estate Committee, are you familiar with the lots on the other side of our parking lot?

D: Yes.

Q: Who owns those?

D: I don't know exactly. For a long time, there were absentee owners when I was on the Real Estate Property Committee. Everybody on Central Beach owned those lots. We were trying to buy them. Howard Thorpe tried to buy them. Nelson tried to buy them. The people wouldn't sell. This was left over from the '38 Hurricane. There were

properties, and apparently they kept paying taxes on them. Then they finally sold them. One of the fellows that's out on West Beach Road finally bought one of them. Somebody from Chicago.

A: [inaudible 17:53]?

D: Yes. Nelson finally bought one of the other ones, because we expanded the parking lot by just one—I'm not sure if it was one or two. They were further back.

A: [inaudible 18:14].

D: I heard that rumor. I don't know. I knew nothing about it.

Q: Originally that was road. It was the continuation of Surfside.

D: Prior to the '38 Hurricane, this road went all the way from West Beach Breachway—

Q: To Charlestown Breachway. It was actually the road.

D: That's right. There were people who owned the property of both sides of the road. A lot of the property got a road in. That was another problem.

Q: Yes. Under water.

D: The '38 Hurricane chopped this place up pretty good. Subsequent, afterwards they kept [inaudible 19:06].

Q: Yes. All those cottages that were on Central Beach got wiped out.

A: There are a number of houses down here that were washed back from the front down here. [inaudible 19:27] Lodge is parts of two old houses. And the [inaudible 19:32] property that was torn down, that was parts of a couple of houses—the tops off of them. They did a lot of moving around. I can remember after the '54 Hurricane, there was nothing left on West Beach. Everything was moved around or washed down and destroyed by the storm. There are a couple of houses on the right-hand side of West Beach Road as you go towards the breachway that washed back. They were put on foundations and redid the houses.

D: One of those houses sat in the middle of the road.

A: We had to drive around it for a long time.

Q: West Beach was devastated in '38, because that breachway and the boardwalk that came around to the Midway and Ashaway group was completely wiped out.

A: In fact, when I was in school in Ohio, I never even heard of the '38 Hurricane. I didn't know there was such a thing. I was in nursing training, and I was in a different world. We were in this medical complex.

Q: Did your children go to the bowling alley that was down on West Beach?

A: Jeanette did. I don't remember that Buzz did. I can remember Jeanette and her friends going down there. They would ride their bikes.

Q: Mother Brindley's was down there.

A: It was gone. It wasn't there. But the old bowling alley was there.

Q: We used to set up our own duck pins.

A: Yes. I don't think that Buzz and his group ever bowled. But Jeanette and some of her friends went down there some. Not a lot, but a little bit.

Q: What about shopping and where you got your food?

A: We used to go to an A&P in Westerly. Also, the S&S Market. It was Sarah's grocery store. After that went out of business, there was a food market and a liquor store that was still S&S.

Q: In Westerly?

A: Yes. That sold out. And now it's auto parts. We had vendors that came around selling the vegetables. A fruit man. He would have a red truck. I think it was Arnold's, but I don't remember for sure. WE had a milk man, but I can't recall any name to go with the milk truck.

Q: Did you go to Crompton's at the end of the road for a loaf of bread?

A: Yes.

Q: He has gasoline pumps then, didn't he?

A: Yes. I can remember after the '54 Hurricane there was no power. He couldn't pump gas.

D: He hooked up power lines.

Q: Did he really?

D: Yes.

A: I can remember that.

D: He hooked the power lines up.

Q: So, it took place of a generator?

D: It worked on the pump to let him pump gas into the tanks.

Q: And all the people with gas stoves—my mother in Old Salt, she had people coming over to cook their meals because of the power outage.

A: We went home the day after the '54 Hurricane. We spent the night here.

Q: Was that in August?

A: That was in August.

Q: Do you remember the date?

A: Either the 29th or the 30th. It was the end of August. The day of the hurricane, Dick Henry and Don went down from East Hartford from Pratt & Whitney. The Henrys stayed here on the beach. They went to Brad Fisher's. But we went up to Carl Moral's folks up on 1. Then in the afternoon, after the storm was gone out to sea, we came back. We cooked our supper in Henry's fireplace. We stayed the night, and then we went home the next morning. That would have been on a Tuesday, I think it was. We went home. It was Tuesday or Wednesday. And then we came back in on Saturday. They told us to be sure to bring our deed with us to prove that we belonged in here. Your father and someone else was with the police out at the end of the road.

Q: Was it the National Guard, or just the police?

A: I think it was the National Guard identifying people and saying they are actually the owners, and they let us back in that way. By then, the power was back on.

Q: The following year, in 1955, we had Hurricane Diane. Do you remember that? It wasn't as large a storm as Carol.

D: It didn't hit directly here. As I remember, that hit the Connecticut Valley.

A: I don't remember which storm it was, but instead of coming down this way, it went up the Connecticut River. My mother was coming by train. She got held up in New York. She was supposed to take a train to Westerly. I called her and told her to go to Hartford. She would have been better off to go here and stay here, because nothing happened here. It rained like crazy up the Connecticut River. It was a good thing I went home, because all my windows leaked. I can't remember whether it was that year or the following year. But it was another storm that spared this area.

Q: Can you talk about your fondest memory of Quonnie?

A: I don't think I have any one thing. I do remember how nice of what we thought of as older people were to the young people that were moving in. We made most of our friends through the Henrys, because Elaine had known so many of these people practically all her life—the Morans, the Randalls, the Romleys, Dave and Marge Grape. They were all so nice to the younger people. We used to have parties and generally had a good time. I do remember how much we enjoyed being on the beach, seeing the ocean with the kids growing up. The pleasure of just living in a place like this. It was smaller in those days than it is now.

Q: It wasn't a social affair. Everything was family oriented.

A: Family oriented. We were almost like one big happy family. People that rented here were people that had rented here over and over and over year after year. Their kids were part of the group that was here all the time. They fit right in.

Q: Were they mostly cottage owners, or were there quite a few renters?

D: I didn't spend an amount of time here.

A: I wouldn't even guess whether it was like 50/50 or not. But you knew everybody. Not everyone socialized in the same group, but you still knew everyone that was around. You saw them on the beach and that sort of thing.

Q: You said that you went to the beach in the morning.

A: The kids would get going to the beach by 10:00.

Q: Did they have to do their chores first?

A: They didn't have any chores to do.

Q: Make the bed, or do the dishes?

A: Yes. Everything like that had to be done. We'd go off to the beach and spend a couple of hours, and come home and have lunch. We had to go to the grocery and stuff, but I really didn't spend much time running around.

Q: So, you went back in the afternoon?

A: We went back every afternoon. Mid-afternoon. You have to stay out of that awful early afternoon sun. And then come home about 4:00 or 4:30 in the afternoon. That was the way we spent our days. Buzz and Ron Henry, the minute they got up in the morning, the first thing they did was get on their bikes and ride down to look at the beach. They had to make sure it was still there.

Q: Did anybody rake the beach in those days?

A: Yes. They raked the beach.

Q: Who raked the beach?

A: The kids.

Q: Did they rake and bury the seaweed?

A: That's right.

Q: There wasn't a big parking lot then. We didn't have stickers and passes and things like that.

A: I don't remember when they put in parking stickers for the cars. I don't remember when that happened. The parking lot changed after they put in all the boulders and rocks and so forth to help build up the dunes. I think that was done, because several storms had washed clear over the parking lot into the pond. Isn't that what started the remodeling of the parking lot?

Q: Then they came and took all of that Riprap away, because they said that we needed to build up the dunes. The Riprap was not the way to do it.

D: This was part of Pete Skipper's, Bill Schwarz and Stu Pomeroy—actually, Stu Pomeroy was the one who started all of this. I remember.

A: He was the one who did all the studies.

D: The research determined that the thing that was happening to the beach was, it was just holding it year by year. That's why they took the Riprap out and put it back. A lot of people objected to it and thought it was a waste of time and money. But it turned out to be a pretty good idea.

A: Every storm would hit that wall and rock.

Q: Do you remember the year where there was nothing but rocks on the beach?

A: Yes.

Q: Little rocks. Big rocks.

A: We had several years like that.

Q: I can't remember what year that was.

- A: I can't remember either. But we had several years where to go in the water, you had to wear your old sneakers, because you couldn't walk.
- Q: We haven't had that in a long time. We have a beautiful beach now.
- A: I haven't been down. Buzz said it was the most beautiful beach he had ever seen down here, but he hadn't been around for 25 years either. We talked about what a nice beach we have. Also, the little beach down here in front of Carpenter's. They say that is so built up and it's such a nice beach now.
- Q: Up by the Old Quonochontaug Inn, that's a nice beach up there too.
- A: As crowded as this beach has gotten, it's a good thing that we do have some areas where people can go and sit on the beach and enjoy themselves.
- Q: We're seeing lots of changes. Some good. Some bad. What do you think?
- D: As my father used to say [inaudible 33:57] is everyone.
- Q: You were talking earlier about the changes in the aesthetics appearance of Quonnie over the last few years.
- D: There are a lot of people that like it, and there are people that don't like it.
- A: These great big houses have changed the complexion of Central Beach. One of the other beaches down the road, you don't even look at it a second time. But over time, they're too big for the size of the lots. They're blocking people's views and making enemies out of the neighbors over lot lines. It's just unfortunate. It used to be one big happy family when we built here. I think we were house number four in '64 when we built, and look at it now.
- Q: There are at least 200 cottages now. I say cottages—houses. I don't think anybody builds a cottage anymore. Are you allowed to build a cottage here?
- A: I have no idea.
- D: I don't see why not. Most people can't afford it with the cost of buying a lot. They have to build a house. That's the difference.
- Q: Hopefully our septic systems will hold out if we don't get too crowded.
- A: That is another problem.
- D: One of these days, we'll have to put sewers in, I'm sure. I don't know how you can do it, but it's got to be done.

Q: In order to do that, you would have to rip up the roads, right?

D: Yes.

Q: Since we're a fire district, would we be paying for that?

A: So what? We had to pay for our own water system.

Q: And our roads—maintenance.

D: The only way you wouldn't have to pay for it if it was forced on you by the town. This is a private area. All of these properties are owned by individuals. The state might come in and condemn the cesspools. In order to do that, they'd have to put in a sewer system.

A: We would get charged.

D: Yes. One way or the other, you're going to pay for it.

A: By putting in a year-round water system, I think people used their properties more than we used to. They used to close up Columbus Day weekend. Then you didn't open up until—usually it was Easter.

Q: Was it that early? You didn't wait until Memorial Day weekend?

D: No.

A: Whenever the water was turned on, we would come back.

D: That used to be the 15th of April.

A: We used to open up late in April. We would come for weekends.

Q: Did you have your own well?

D: Yes. After we winterized this place, when we would go to Florida, they would still turn the water system off on Columbus Day or thereabouts. They would turn the water back on in April.

A: We had to put in a well.

D: Any time we were here, we had to have a well.

Q: What year was it that you winterized?

D: We started here in '77.

A: He retired in '75, and Jeanette, Ben and their family got transferred to Florida by the company that Ben worked for in '76. The next year, we decided to move to the beach year-round. He started winterizing. In '77 we came here year-round.

D: It was twenty years this August.

A: July or August. We went to Florida for nine winters. Since then, we've been staying here in the wintertime.

Q: Do you like being here in the wintertime?

A: Yes.

Q: Is it very lonesome?

A: No. It's extremely quiet. When an automobile goes by us—the oil trucks and the garbage is the biggest part of your traffic, except the last few years there has been so much construction going on that we always have something to watch. But it's nice and quiet. It's nice and peaceful. I'm not the kind of person that gets lonesome and pines for something to do. I have thoroughly enjoyed being here in the wintertime. I did a lot of walking. I spent a lot of time—I hardly missed a day that I didn't walk on the beach, which I can't do anymore. Someone came here year-round said, "I like living in Quonochontaug in the wintertime." She said, "It's great. The roads are great. The rocks are great. The houses are great. The sky is great."

Q: Everything is gray in that time of year. You don't have that much snow.

A: No. We don't. A time or two we've had a good dose of snow. One winter we had what they called a blizzard. Dan McCleod went around and took pictures of everybody's house with the snow, and gave everybody a picture of their house of how it looked snowed in. As a rule, we don't get much snow. A couple of winters ago, we had a lot of ice. It would snow. It would rain. It would freeze up. Before the ice would clear up, we'd get another round of that.

Q: That's when you're supposed to stay in.

A: Billy Compton saved our lives. He hauled sand from the beach.

Q: Do they live here all year-round?

A: They didn't live here all year-round. No. But they spent more time here. Now right after Christmas, they have adopted the habit of going to Montana for the rest of the winter. But now since Roy is in school, they are going to be in Montana more than they're going to be here. They're going to Montana at the end of August, because he has to go to school before Labor Day. Billy used to come in, and [inaudible 42:36] in

December while he was still around. He would sand a path to the mailbox, he'd sand the Henry's and he'd sand the path to my bird bath and bird feeder. He was just great. Before he left for the rest of the winter, he made sure that I had a lot of sand stored in the garage so that if we needed it, I would have it. But that icy mess lasted for just a few weeks, and then the rest of the winter was okay. I don't think I used a pint of sand. We had so little ice.

D: Last winter, they plowed the roads once. Not because they really needed it; because we were afraid they were going to have frozen weather and the ruts would freeze up and it would be hard to drive back and forth. They only actually plowed once.

A: A few cars go by, and then the sand comes out and the black top gets dried off.

Q: Before we close, tell me your story about making all the blueberry pancakes.

A: Buzz's friends were always hungry. I used to spend a lot of time, especially on rainy days—they'd come in and they'd play cards or play Monopoly or some kind of games. Then I'd give them their lunch. Very often it was blueberry pancakes. I have made as many as three large mixer bowls of pancake batter for one meal for seven or eight hungry boys. I think it was a matter of let's see who can eat the most.

Q: Do you have blueberry bushes here?

A: No. The kids used to pick blueberries and come to the house and sell them. I bought blueberries up here at Henry Crandall's.

Q: I remember picking blackberries and grapes.

A: Yes.

Q: I don't see any of those around any longer.

A: The kids would pick blackberries and come around and sell them. They used to dig cherry stones and come around and sell them. There is none of that anymore.

Q: Too much of that wild stuff left.

A: They keep mowing until it's all gone. It used to be you could smell the grapes in the fall. But you can't now. I haven't had any grapes for jelly in years.

Q: Those are some of the changes that I miss. Do you miss those things?

A: Yes. I miss a lot of those things. There used to be a lot of wild flowers along West Beach Road. They're all gone. A constant mowing.

Q: We're looking more and more like suburbia.

A: That's right. I can remember when I started the flower garden along the driveway, Dave White was the only other person on this beach that had flowers.

Q: Everything else was wild, wasn't it? There were bayberry bushes and wild roses.

A: People had lawns. But you didn't see the hanging baskets and the flowers. It's so beautiful here in the spring. I don't think there is a yard that doesn't have daffodils in it. You go up one street and down another and you see daffodils everywhere. It didn't used to be that way. I love my flowers. I think the main thing that I miss is the smallness that we used to have—the family-oriented beach. Now it's so large that you scarcely know your neighbors. The renters come in and you never get acquainted with them. When our kids were growing up, we got to know everybody through the kids.

Q: This concludes our interview on August 4th, 1997 with Johnnie and Don Conrad. This is Barbara Adams signing off.

