

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

JAMES DOLAN

March 26, ?

Interviewed by Peter Mogielnicki

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Q: This is Peter Mogielnicki, and I'm talking with Jim Dolan. And Jim's wife, Ann, is here. We bumped into Jim and Ann here in Portland very surreptitiously, and in the course of conversation discovered that Jim was in Quonochontaug during his youth. He also spent some time in Weekapaug, and now is here in Portland, Oregon. The date is March 26th. We are going to talk about Jim's experiences at Quonnie. Do you want to just start with what you remember?

A: Yes. In the discussion, we found out that my long-time friend, or friend in my youth was a guy by the name of Sammy Beck. When we visited last summer, I saw him after 50 years. We easily recognized each other. It was a wonderful evening at Peter's house. We talked about a lot of things, which gave us this idea of where we were and what we did.

Q: As I remember, you and Sam were both in the East Beach area of Quonochontaug.

A: Yes. I've been trying to remember the address. Sammy's folks rented a house for some years with a family—Sagosette—I can't come up with a name. I think they were Portuguese. They built a number of small houses. Sammy stayed at a wonderful place down the road almost across the East Beach Road. We stayed for years first—the second house was the Davis house, which was a big white house down that road heading towards the Great Pond. There were three or four bedrooms. I don't remember, but it was a big house.

Q: Would this have been after the 1938 Hurricane?

A: Before that, my family lived in Misquamicut. That was my mother's family, the Coughlin house. They had a number of children and husbands. They all came there. They had a big house on Ocean Road on the corner. I remember, because for years it had two big stone pillars there. Everybody had to bring up rocks and shells to build these

two—they were monuments. When the '38 Hurricane hit, it took the house. It didn't move the pillars at all. It took the house with two of my maiden aunts and carried them across the pond onto the golf course.

Q: Did they survive?

A: No. They did not. They were last seen going around with a candle. Each of them had candles checking on the windows. There was a nor'easter, and then with the hurricane, I guess they had two tidal waves. They did not survive.

Q: Did you know them?

A: No. That was the year before I was born. For a couple of years, nobody was that anxious to go. But finally good sense too over. My mother and father found the Davis'. They didn't want to buy a house. They just wanted to rent it. The first house we stayed—I use the Davis house as a point of location—the corner where the Davis' house was, around the corner was a smaller house—a cottage, which was the staple of that area. It had all sorts of things, like a screened-in porch and a couple of bedrooms. It was fun. I remember going to the beach. I'd get burned on my lips. I couldn't eat sweet corn. They had to cut it down for me. I remember the Davis house very well, because I was just a little older. I had a number of cousins that would show up. We'd entertain everybody. We had big family parties. It was great, because we had room. Aside from a couple of small cottages, there was nobody. When you walked down to the pond, on the left was a doctor that used to specialize in hay fever. He would give the women treatments for hay fever. What that was, I don't know. It was some sort of shot. Next to that was a wonderful home by an old man and his wife. This big house looked out on the pond. To the left of it was our dock where we could put a boat in. It was wonderful. We had a great, great time down there.

Q: Did we find that house when you were there?

A: I think so. In between our house and their house, a chief of police of Pawtucket, Rhode Island—it was his house. He had a daughter. I vaguely remember them. He was a nice guy. We stayed there a number of years. When I got out of school in Providence, we'd pack up everything. My uncle lent us one of his trucks and a driver, and a whole bunch of us would go down to the summer house.

Q: So, you were in Providence at the time?

A: Yes. Pawtucket. Right near Brown. It was right near the Blackstone Boulevard, which goes right up to Brown and Lincoln School.

Q: So, you would pack up a truck?

A: He was the hardware and tool supply, and so he had big trucks. Once a year, Gus was the name of the driver—I was supposed to be the scout, because I knew where I was going. It was kind of tough. Not all of us knew the road as East Beach Road.

Q: What would be in the truck? Was it a whole truck full of stuff?

A: Gear. We rented it. We would get all the stuff that we needed. In those times, my mom, growing up in Misquamicut, that's what they did. They took the train from Norwich, Connecticut to Westerly. That's how we did it then. We did the same thing. Clothing—Sunday clothes. I can describe Quonochontaug in the '40s and '50s.

Q: What was it like?

A: I remember the Davis house—the small one. My cousins came down, and they had this Model T convertible Ford. It would have to be '42 or '41. It was a classic. They threw it away after a while.

Q: That would be worth a lot of money now.

A: I talked to them in the past, and they were going to chip in at one point and buy an old copy or real. But the money was unbelievable. They would come down. They would go on dates and all that stuff. I was not invited.

Q: How old were you at the time?

A: My cousins were in their teens. I was probably eight.

Q: They probably wouldn't want you around.

A: I'd get sick of it too. What did we do for fun? We played a little ball. The main thing was you'd get up early and went down to the beach. When you came back in the late afternoon, at 3:00 or 4:00, I had a little boat that I'd get out and fish.

Q: In the ocean or the pond?

A: The pond. We would go for blue crabs. Sammy and I back then would do that. We'd try to get three to four crabs apiece and bring them home and let our families with it. My mother and father loved it. I didn't. I'd catch them, but I wouldn't eat them.

Q: They're ferocious animals. They can bite.

A: We had crab nets and all that stuff. I always remember we both had crabs in a basket, and Sam was in my way, so he was trying to get out of the way, I bumped into his rear end, and over I went into the crab hole. I remember going way down, and then shot up onto the boat and climbed out of the boat. I was frightened, because all you could think of was you're going to be meat for the crabs. I think I scared them away. I still

remember going down, and trying to get down to the bottom, if I could, so I could push up fast. That was one of many stories.

Q: Would you have 4th of July at the beach?

A: Yes.

Q: That was when fireworks were legal.

A: Yes. I don't remember where they—I remember a lot of times as kids we'd go to Atlantic Beach. There would be a couple of things, but nothing serious. That was a good time. I remember the day before Hurricane Carol in '54, I bumped into a couple of cousins of mine. She was my aunt by marriage. She had a bunch of kids, and she had broken her hip, so she was laid up at the house. Sometime along that fashion, it wasn't the hurricane. I think that was August 31st, 1954. I remember seeing them having a good time. At that time, they stayed in the Rock Haven Hotel in Weekapaug. I remember seeing this family with the grandmother floating around from where you could see across the bridge. I knew where the house was, because it had a red-and-white color to it. I knew exactly where it was.

Q: Was that in Weekapaug?

A: Weekapaug. This is an aside, but it was unbelievable. She rode the hurricane out tied down on the roof of the house so she wouldn't roll off and drown. Everybody else was up in their rooms. Fortunately for them, the water only took a certain part, so they were fine. I remember saying to my mother that day, "You know who I bumped into? Martin Shaughnessy and his kids, and Aunt somebody was there." That's an aside. We're not to '54 yet. But that's what I liked to do. At night, we'd go to the grange hall sometimes. There were square dances and so forth. When I was old enough to go—I think I had to be eight or nine—I could go, but not to cause any problems. They reported to my mother—"Was he good?" "Yes. He was great." Can you recall people who spent summers there? Yes. There was a guy who was a retired naval person down the street. He used to give Sammy Beck and myself—I'd go over there for cookies, and we'd talk about naval stuff. I remember how to tie knots and how to do sight bearings and so forth.

Q: Would this have been a few years after World War II?

A: Yes.

Q: Had he been in the war?

A: He'd been in World War II.

Q: You must have had some stories.

A: But it didn't click. They lived down there for years. I think he retired from the Navy.

Q: Were there any people who lived there all year?

A: There were very few, but a few.

Q: There used to be a guy named John McGlown who was kind of a handyman that my dad would often talk with. Did you know the McGlowns?

A: No.

Q: Up East Beach Road there were the Zabels. Do you remember the Zabels? They were in that big farmhouse on the right-hand side as you go up towards Route 1.

A: East West Farm?

Q: No. East West Farm was another place. Do you remember that?

A: Yes. We used to get all of our vegetables there. When the corn came in, we were first in line.

Q: They had milk and eggs as well as vegetables.

A: East West Farm was the big one. Then Brightman's. My father bought me my first fishing rod and reel there for seven or eight bucks. I kept that for years. Even when I quit working, I still kept it. It was great fun with that.

Q: That was a general store. They had everything.

A: Yes.

Q: They had food.

A: Brightman's had a meat counter and a fish counter. We used to get swordfish there, steaks and so forth.

Q: Were there trucks that would come around to your place and sell fish or vegetables?

A: No.

Q: When we were there, there was a truck that would come around. He would sell fish off the truck.

A: No. Not that I remember. Dunn's Corners—that was easy from Weekapaug or Quonochontaug.

Q: When we would come down from Hartford, I always used to really like to stop at Dunn's Corners, because they had Maine's ice cream. I would always get a Maine's ice cream cone on the way down to Quonnie.

A: There was another little place in Weekapaug next to the hotel. There was a little family store there. I hung around with this guy who was a little older than I was. He had a boat, and we'd go water skiing. I tried. Those are things that you remember.

Q: So, you would get your vegetables from East West, and meat and fish from Brightman's. Did you bring other stuff from home?

A: Yes. My father would come down on weekends. Many times he would stop by a place called Dolan's Market, who was no relation. But he lived in Pawtucket. He had been good to us during the war, according to my folks. If there was a little extra beef, he—

Q: You used to have to have rations during the war.

A: Yes.

Q: So, he could stretch your rations?

A: Yes, he did. He stretched for half of our family because of Dolan and tools and all that.

Q: Part of the clan.

A: Yes. Sometimes I'd have to go into the back room with him. He'd say, "What do you think? How many?"

Q: Where was this store?

A: Dolan's—you don't know Pawtucket, but it was down by East Side Avenue.

Q: Up in Pawtucket?

A: Yes.

Q: Not Pawcatuck?

A: No. We maintained dealing with him for years, because he did have great meat. There were times when you had to go for certain things into Westerly. There was a big box store. I can't remember the name of it.

Q: There used to be McCormick's Department Store. Was this just for food?

A: A supermarket.

Q: I don't remember that. I remember McCormick's and then there was Varr's Drugstore in Westerly.

A: I remember that, for some odd reason, because I had to go get something because of a cold.

Q: I don't remember the food store.

A: This was right around the end of World War II.

Q: What do you remember about the war and how it connected to when you were there.

A: I used to get *Life Magazine*. They had Japanese soldiers brutalizing Americans or Australian Flyer—it's not as easy as going to get his head chopped off. I used to run around and jump on Japanese faces.

Q: In the photographs?

A: Yes. I'd do that. I did that all over. My aunt came in and said, "It's over. It's done. It's over. Don't do that anymore." I remember there were guys that were patrolling the beach, especially East Beach, because there was a telephone or communication within a big mound of dirt. I think there is a house built in there now.

Q: Yes. There is.

A: This thing was security fenced all around, but we would go up to see if we could see inside. Every now and again, a mixture of old and young guys would say, "Stand away." We would immediately take off running. During the time of—I couldn't have been more than three or four—maybe five—I was born May 10th, 1939.

Q: The war ended in '45, so you would have been five or six years old. You probably have some memories during that period.

A: Yes. I remember my cousins—we'd sneak down and keep our eyes on these guys that were patrolling. It was crazy. I don't know if they had guns, but we assumed they had guns. They would walk up and down long stretches, because there were sightings of various subs around. I think they downed one or two off the coast there. Supposedly there were some people that got off the boats and swam in. That was never proven that I know of. We would walk there, and inevitably the guard would be walking down and we'd giggle. They'd say, "I know you're there." We immediately said, "Don't shoot. Don't shoot. We're Americans." "Get out of here," and we'd take off running. We would run into a tree or something.

Q: Do you remember any war vessels or airplanes?

A: Coming from Quonset. Some destroyers, barges and troop ships and all that stuff would be coming through that area. Sometimes they would stop at Quonset for various things, including pilots. The pilots used to practice runs over our area in East Beach. They would fly in and come in low. We'd wave to them, and they'd dip their wings. That was wonderful.

Q: I remember them towing targets.

A: Yes.

Q: Do you remember that too?

A: Yes, I do.

Q: They would practice shooting at the targets being towed behind another plane.

A: What I remember a lot of is some of these ships—they might have been destroyers, but they were smaller than a big ship, and they'd be towing things. All of a sudden, if the wind was right, you would hear a rumble. They tried to nail this thing. Then the airplanes would go at them as well. Maybe it was much further out. You could see them. The sound would get ripped around. It was fun. That was an exciting time. We were at war.

Q: Did you ever see dirigibles?

A: Yes. They used to come out of Charlestown. Maybe not. I didn't know exactly where they came from. But there was a lot of practice at the Charlestown Navy air field flying P-51s and P-52s. Some of the pilots—we'd get to know them, because they would rent a house. They wanted to get out of Charlestown, because they could be checked on much easier.

Q: So, the pilots would actually be on the beach in their time off?

A: Sometimes. Yes. Then they kind of slowly disappeared. They'd be there for a period of time. Five or six of the guys would have a house. I did the same thing when I was in the service. I was down in Cape May, New Jersey.

Q: So, you would have time off, and you would have a house that you could go to?

A: Yes. We cut a deal with a motel keeper. We had two or three hotel rooms. We would put money in the bank. We had to do food. It was just like a frat house. It was great. One guy would say, "Where did you go?" and I'd say, "I don't know." We did that for a number of months. We went in in June for bootcamp, and we were out by September or October. After bootcamp, we were able to do that for a period of months.

Q: That was well after the Quonochontaug part of your life?

A: Yes.

Q: Was that during the Korean Conflict?

A: No. It was Vietnam. I was told by orders that my time was coming up. I was working in an advertising agency in the '60s in New York, and then Providence. I was transferred from New York to Boston. Providence was what I was assigned to. They were picking guys. I made the mistake of joining one of those groups that called the special forces from the Coast Guard, which was called the Coastal Force. My job would be to be dropped off, go through the countryside, see who was there and could we have a landing, could we land troops. I would get that out of the way. In those days, I could run a lot further and a lot faster. I was 24. It was fun. It never beat Quonochontaug or Weekapaug. That was a great experience.

Q: Did you ever have any dealings with Howard Thorpe?

A: I don't remember him.

Q: He was the develop of a lot of the properties around there. I know he developed both Central Beach and the East Beach community. He would sell the lots. Maybe your folks had something to do with him.

A: I don't remember. It was all Davis.

Q: Was that the real estate?

A: He was the guy that built and owned.

Q: So, you would rent from him?

A: Yes. I think he did it strictly to pay his taxes and things like that. He was a nice guy. His family were nice people. Sometimes we had parties and he's show up. It was wonderful.

Q: Are there other things that you can think of?

A: I had a cat called Inky. Inky would bring treasures to the house. He would finish them off. Then he started bringing rabbits. We'd forget to close the garage door, and there would be a rabbit with half of them gone.

Q: Are there other things that you wanted to mention?

A: There was a country farm-like area that was wild in many of the areas close to the beach. Monroe's plums. It really was a countrified atmosphere, and it was wonderful. East

Beach was great for that. We'd go down to East Beach and walk to Tunsis—I called it Tunsis, and Mrs. Beck and everybody. Very few people know of it.

Q: What was it?

A: Tunsis.

Q: T-U-N-S-I-S?

A: Yes.

Q: Was that on the beach?

A: It was in the area of the beach. It had rocks on both sides, which caused larger waves. Rather than East Beach, these things would be much as a kid.

Q: So, you would walk on the beach?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you remember which direction? Would it be towards Narragansett Bay, or back towards Westerly?

A: Down there and take a right.

Q: There is that area that's now called Fresh Pond Rock. That has rocks that go out, and there's bigger surf right there. It's the borderline between East Beach and Central Beach.

A: Okay.

Q: And you called it Tunsis?

A: That was one area where you could get big waves. We'd go there. It was always Mrs. Beck taking care of me. My mom was cooking. That was good fun.

Q: There is a story about that area that those rocks used to be large, and then during the war they were dynamited so that it wouldn't be a landmark. Was there one huge rock there in Tunsis?

A: There were many.

Q: I'm glad to hear that about Tunsis, because I have never heard that word used. I think it's Fresh Pond Rock, because they would come down to the beach.

A: Blue Shutters and take a right.

Q: No. At Blue Shutters you would take a left.

A: No. A right.

Q: Was Blue Shutters near Tunsis?

A: Yes. Maybe half a mile.

Q: So, not right at Blue Shutters?

A: No. You had to walk until you'd get to the rocks, get around the rocks, and there you had many feet of a good chunk of beach that you could swim. It was great.

