

# QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Oral History

# RUTH FRANCES DREW

September 4, 2001

Interviewed by Anne Doyle

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Q: Today is Thursday, October the 4<sup>th</sup> in the year 2001. And I'm doing an interview with Frances Drew of Post Road, Westerly. I'm going to have you say your full name and when you were born.

A: I'm Ruth Frances Drew. I took my mother's first name, Ruth, and his second name, Frances, and it was supposed to be Ruth Frances, like Maryanne is, but it never was. I went through school as Ruth, and I played with the kids—my whole life was Frances. I was born December 30<sup>th</sup>, 1911.

Q: Where were you born?

A: Hartford, Connecticut, 55 ½ Edgewood Street. They told me it was a Saturday and it was kind of a blizzard.

Q: You were telling me about your father.

A: My father was a chauffer for the Robert Allens. There was an Allen Thompson in Hartford, which was a huge hotel. They had a place in Weekapaug—a lovely home in Weekapaug where they spent the summers, so my father had to come down here. That was the day and age of chauffeurs. He had to come to Watch Hill every summer, because he had taken them around. Luck would have it, my grandfather had a farm here. First, he started with vegetables, and then he had a peach orchard—two peach orchards.

Q: Was this in back of McDonald's?

A: In back of McDonald's. That's where his farm is.

Q: Did you grandfather live here most of his life? Did he just happen to be living in the same community?

A: No. They came from New York state.

Q: What brought him up here?

A: He was born into the Seventh Day Baptist family. And they traveled between Ashaway—he was born in Ashaway. They traveled between Ashaway the southwestern part of New York State, because it was on the Pennsylvania border. It was not too far from where oil was discovered in Pennsylvania. The name escapes me now. I thought of it a minute ago. He liked to fish. He married my grandmother. She was fourteen. Can you imagine that? She had been out working as a kitchen helper. Because out in New York State, there were a lot of German families, and they were farmers. They had big families. She had been working for two years. She got married when she was fourteen. She was sixteen when Grandpa would come down here. He would come down here back and forth. They lived here from that time on. I've got their marriage certificate. I know I've got it, but I can't seem to find it because I'm sorting out so much stuff.

Q: Did your grandfather live in this house that you're in now?

A: They lived on the beach when they first came down. You know where Henry's is down there? Henry sells plants.

Q: Yes.

A: There were farms. Everything was farms here then. You could drive down to the pond. The people that owned that were called the [inaudible 04:37]. My grandmother stayed there, and my grandfather fished. Later on, they lived on the beach. They had a house on the beach.

Q: What part of the beach?

A: Do you know where Nopes Island is?

Q: Yes

A: That was in back of where they lived. In those days, there was a group of men that would set a [inaudible 05:14] out there, and then they'd have a horse and wagon come down. I've got a picture of that too. They would come down to the beach, and they'd pack that fish in it and take it to town and send it to Fulton Market in New York.

Q: Did he do the fishing mainly in the warm season?

A: He didn't buy this house until 1908. It went up for sale for taxes. He was able to buy it, because—it's a long story. His mother died when he was five days old. His Uncle Luke adopted him. He was a brother to his father. His father couldn't take care of a little baby. His father's name was Benjamin Franklin Maxon. My grandfather's name was Grant Maxon. My grandmother stayed at Mrs. Devault's. In the summer she worked at a short dinner house in Quonochontaug. I don't know which one. That was one of the joys of the people that came to the Haversham was to go to the beach and shore dinners. She was paid \$3 a week and room and board.

Q: If it was Quonochontaug, maybe it was the Seabreeze in or the Kenyon House?

A: That was the people named King down there.

Q: Mr. King lived across the street from me.

A: I knew Mr. King. For a couple of years, I would drag him to the things at the center of arts up there, because he asked me to. Our family had known them for a long time. He lived next to Kate Leakey. Kate would have my mother and I lots of times for lunch. She was awfully nice to us. She would say grace in German, and he would say it in Latin, and then [inaudible 08:05]. She worked there one summer. She said it was [inaudible 08:19] fish and lobster and [inaudible 08:24]. It just was delicious. Grandpa went fishing after he bought this place. He painted that picture for my [inaudible 08:38].

Q: Did you pain that yourself?

A: Yes.

Q: That's beautiful.

A: I gave it my mom. See how grass grew?

Q: To the water.

A: Yes. He had two buildings down there. One that he lived in. It was pretty, but they were—

Q: Is this right near Nopes Island now?

A: Yes. The beach was very wide, because my mother went blind, but last of her being able to see, she said, "Where we had our home is under water." She died in '89. We used to see stubs of the old inn on the beach, which you seldom do anymore.

Q: I've walked that area of the beach. It looks like remnants of part of the lifesaving station down to the breach.

A: The lifesaving station was right on the beach. That probably is.

Q: It's been exposed through erosion. Is the grandmother and grandfather that you're talking about on your father's side?

A: My mother's.

Q: You said that your grandmother was living down on Post Road.

A: Yes.

Q: That was before 1908.

A: Yes. That was before my mother was born.

Q: Was she an only child?

A: Yes. She was born in 1892.

Q: Your mother?

A: Yes. She was born in Sara Gavitt's house, which I think the Turcotts own now.

Q: Is that also on Post Road?

A: Yes. At one time they lived in the Shelter Harbor Inn, but that was an old farmhouse at that time, and two families lived in it.

Q: Did the caretaker also live in it?

A: I don't know. In that time, the houses were few and far between. Almost everything was farms, because down here at the end of Shore Road was the Dunn family. They owned a vast piece of property, which all those cottages down on the pond and all along there weren't there. There was only a few. Those few came after my mother had grown up. My father was a chauffeur for Doctor Gladwin down there. The pictures show it. It was nothing but natural woods. It's been built up tremendously.

Q: If your mother was born in 1892, that was just about the time when they started putting in these rooming houses along the breachway. It was the late 1800s. Her mother and father were here before.

A: Yes. I don't think there were too many shore dinner houses down there. Probably one.

Q: I think the Kenyon House was opened in the late 1800s.

A: Was that on the beach?

Q: No. Was she on the beach when she worked at a shore house?

A: Yes.

Q: It probably was one of the first rooming houses along that breachway area.

A: I heard her speak about it. Somehow or other I got it in my mind that it was the Kings.

Q: That was one of the few that was there before 1900. That's probably what it was. Is the connection that you have with the Kings through your grandmother?

A: Yes. We weren't close friends or anything like that, but through the church. They belonged to the church. Kate Leakey and—the name is on the tip of my tongue. His sister was here too, but I understand they didn't get along.

Q: Who didn't get along?

A: George and his sister.

Q: Was the Curry that lived up on Post Road?

A: Richard Curry.

Q: And she's the one that came across during the hurricane.

A: Yes. That's right. She apparently was a King.

Q: Do you remember your grandmother talking about [inaudible 14:53]?

A: He worked in the kitchen, I guess. It's hard to think back that far. [inaudible 15:19] nuttier than a fruitcake, because I can remember my grandfather had one of the first old Fords, because he was a genius at engines. He could fix anything. He had one—I don't think they even had secure glass. They called it windows that he put up in the wintertime between the bars, because it was an open car. When I was a small kid, and he had to go down to Quonochontaug once in a while, he'd take me there for the ride. I can remember I was small, but he took me around. Of course, I knew after why he took me around, because I was a bowler. He taught me how to bowl. But I remember it was a narrow dirt road. Halfway down the road on the right-hand side—maybe that was the Kenyon House.

Q: Yes.

A: Nobody believed me. You're the first one.

Q: I've heard people talk about that.

A: They had Quonochontaug church. I can remember this room right here set up with a frame to do a quilt. All the church women came. I can't remember their names. I was small enough that I could walk under that quilt [inaudible 17:11]. I remember it. I was so anxious to see what they were doing. I had to keep out of here.

Q: Did your [inaudible 17:29]?

A: They lived in Hartford. She was here in the summer.

Q: Is that when you [inaudible 17:40]?

A: He had Sunday afternoons off. That's all. And then there was a trolley that went from [inaudible 17:49] Street to Watch Hill. And from Watch Hill to Weekapaug bridge. He went there to meet him every Sunday afternoon. He did spend a night here and would have to go back the next day.

Q: So, he would come down by [inaudible 18:07]?

A: He lived right here in the summertime over the garage. Once a week we saw him. He always brought me Cracker Jacks. Isn't that funny?

Q: When we think about meant the most to us, it's usually very little things that come to our minds. It's because [inaudible 18:40] your dad giving you those Cracker Jacks.

A: I thought the world of my father. It took him [inaudible 18:53] who was a friend of my grandmother's. The Hoxies lived up in Burlingame on Watchaug Pond. She had a horse and a wagon. The wagon was one of these big wide things. I know nothing about wagons, except that on the [inaudible 19:20], and I'll never forget it. I sat in back of that wagon with my feet dangling off, and I had to watch the coconut cake that Grandma made for sale and see that it didn't slide around.

Q: What sale are you talking about?

A: The church sale at the bowling alley. The only other person that agreed with me was Mr. Grenon. He lived down there somewhere. You know where the balls go here? I could stand and put my hand out on the balls. That's how big I was. I was given a nickel to spend, and I cherished this all my life.

Q: Did you buy it?

A: I bought that with my nickel.

Q: Where did you buy it?

A: At the sale. And look at it. Isn't that beautiful?

Q: Do you know who made this?

A: I have no idea. That's my proof of the bowling alley. I just loved that thing. I don't know what to do with it. I just don't want it sold for junk when I pass on.

Q: Give it to somebody special.

A: But would they understand?

Q: I think if they knew your story. I just think that is so beautiful.

A: It cost a nickel. They let me have it because I looked at it so long and wanted it so bad. But can you imagine the workmanship on that?

Q: Even the laces.

A: Look at the tongue. Even as a kid I knew what—this is the one thing I'm going to have to have [inaudible 21:33].

Q: It goes to the heel part. They have little, tiny nails in here.

A: Isn't that beautiful?

Q: Yes.

A: I used to use this at church until somebody—you think everybody is honest. When the public comes in, you can't tell. I used to put greens and red bows in this on the table. I had a collection of trophies, but I don't use them anymore.

Q: Which church is this?

A: Dunns Corners. To me, that represents a lot of loving patience that somebody did, and it might have represented some child. There is a story in that shoe. If I was a writer, I might think up something, but I'm not. But I treasure this thing.

Q: At one time, there were three bowling alleys down here.

A: I wouldn't be surprised, because they didn't have things like they have now.

Q: Do you remember going into the King's house over on the breach?

A: No. I graduated from high school in 1930 from Dunns Corners. My mother was taken sick when I was twelve. That was up in Hartford. I had to be taken out of school until—I was out of school so much that I wasn't going to pass. I was in the eighth grade. I went to high school in Westerly when I was thirteen. It was the next year. We had to move down here, because the doctor told us my mother wasn't going to live. We came down here, and Doctor Wilcox in Wakefield—he had done so much for this neighbor woman, and he got her back on her feet. He took an x-ray, and her whole side was black with inflammation from her liver and gall. It was a long haul. It took quite a few years. We had moved down here.

Q: Is this when you moved to this house?

A: Yes. To live with my grandmother and grandfather. My grandfather had given my mother a piece of land on his farm. My father built a building up there that could serve as a garage to see if she got better. He wanted to be up there. It was awfully nice.

Q: Which part of the farm was that?

A: It was up in back of McDonald's on the other side of the road where the water gardens are. He built his house right over my father's little house—incorporated it in there. That's where my husband and I set up housekeeping for the first six years. Then when my grandparents died, my mother couldn't operate alone, so we moved down here.

Q: So, your mother needed help for a long time?

A: Yes. And that's why we were down here. That was a time when gradually Quonochontaug began building.

Q: What year was that?

A: After I graduated in 1930. In the '38 hurricane, there were a lot of houses.

Q: Would you go down into the Quonnie area for any other reason? You mentioned the sale.

A: That was when I was a child. My grandfather had associations with different neighbors and people, and lots of times he'd take me down there. I never had a chance to bowl, because I was so small.

Q: You couldn't hold the ball?

A: But I used to want to do it. We'd go down to the breachway, and it was different then—the formation. The hurricane changed things. I can remember it as being kind of a grassy—not a parking lot like it is now, but a swampy place. A marsh. That's the word. But then I got involved in high school and 4H Club, so I didn't go down there so often. I did go to Quonochontaug church.

Q: The Baptist church?

A: Yes. That was the only church that operated in this neighborhood, until the woman up—Mrs. Crandall thought the children at Duns Corners needed a church. There was a church at Duns Corners that was no longer in use, and she conducted a Sunday school there, which was nice. We did need it.

Q: How did you get back and forth?



A: We walked. We never thought anything about walking. I'd walk with my friends way up to Wood Hill and come crosswise. You walked everywhere. In the winter, you walked to the pond. It was nothing.

Q: That's part of the reason why you're a strong woman now.

A: Yes. I never minded it. When I was in Hartford, I'd roller skate for miles. We all did. We all had chores to do on Saturday morning, but when we got them done, after lunch you'd have to have a pear, an apple or something, because we'd get halfway along our trip and we'd have to eat. Kids could eat 24 hours a day. I have no [inaudible 29:17] growing up, except when my mother was sick. Then I had to go over night and be there.

Q: So, you helped your mother since she was sick.

A: Even when I was married. That was my mother's place up there. We had to put in a bathroom. I'd come down every day, because if I didn't, she was upset. Ever since I was six months old, I have been here in the summer. What else have I got? Do you want to hear about the lighthouse man?

Q: Sure.

A: My grandfather used to be in that substitute corps at the lifesaving station. I always called him Uncle Will. Clara Gavitt was my grandfather's cousin. Uncle Will was her husband. He worked there. A nicer man you'd never know. He was an awfully nice man.

Q: What did he do there?

A: He was a member of the crew. They walked the beach. They had to walk up to Weekapaug. I used to know where the key was that they put in, because they had to check it out at a key station.

Q: I've heard about this key station. What was a key station?

A: A key station meant that they would have walked the beach to the end of the key station and report it.

Q: What did it look like?

A: I have no idea.

Q: Was it a box that they signed in?

A: I have no pictures of a key station. I don't think it was any more than a box like that, because there would be pictures of it, but there never has been. I've never seen a picture of that key station. But they had to walk up there day and night.

Q: Was it 24-hour surveillance?

A: Yes. I'm pretty sure. It's an awful thing to say, but my mother, as a child, would look out on that ocean and it was just filled with all kinds of boats. You don't realize that today. But Grandpa took pictures of the wrecks along the beach, and he was able to tell this one and that one and the other one was. They had to walk the beach. They also had to look for frozen crops, and they'd farm them. It must have been bitter cold walking that beach in the night, but they did. Then when they got back to the station, that was a complete trip. When the cook went on vacation, my grandfather would cook. He was growing a lot at that time. I guess he did a lot of that when he was on the beach and fishing. He didn't fish in the winter. But he used to tell about the different ones. There was one man named Armstrong. He was a big man. He ate and he ate and he ate. He had an awful appetite. I used to hear about that.

Q: Was that one of the crew members?

A: One of the crew members. What else did he tell? I can remember he took me down there when I was all grown up and working. He took me in the building. I looked out through a telescope. Block Island was right down there in front of me.

Q: Was that first time you had ever looked through a telescope?

A: Yes.

Q: Is that was upstairs?

A: Yes.

Q: I've seen pictures of it, but I didn't know what was in there.

A: There was a telescope in there. He would tell about the different wrecks and all that stuff. They needed it, because people were in distress. There boats. There was regular shipping.

Q: Did they talk about people that they saved?

A: Yes. They talked about the families. Of course, it was not unusual for the whole family to be on those boats. Children too. One family in particular—I hesitate to say their name, but I think it was Cappel. Take it with a grain of salt. But they had a little boy. That was not unusual. They had their work cut out for them in the winter much more than they did in the summer. There have been some very tragic shipwrecks.

Q: Was there ever a shipwreck when you were here?

A: No. There was a time when a plane went down somewhere, and they never found it. Not a shipwreck. When I was a kid growing up and way into the '30s, when you worked in the kitchen, you could look right straight down and see the steamer that came from Boston to New York every single day.

Q: From your kitchen here?

A: Yes. We could see the ocean from this first floor.

Q: I have seen photographs when there was low growth.

A: There were farms. The Dunns had a farm. Annie Chapman or Harris Chapman had a huge one down at Weekapaug. There used to be cows across the street. I can remember that.

Q: Across the street from here?

A: Yes. They'd roam around. The next-door neighbor had cows. That kept the woods open all the time. You can't get through the woods [inaudible 37:10]. It makes a cushion against noise and dust. I love the growth in here.

Q: Now that the road is bigger and there is more traffic, it helps.

A: They used to tell how they'd sit on the front steps on a sunny afternoon. Once in a while a car would go by, or a horse and wagon. One time I guess it was a warm night, and my grandmother and my mother were sitting on the front steps, and they used to laugh about it—this horse came wandering up just as he wanted to, and there were two guys in the wagon, and one of them says to the other, "Which of us is Jones?" My grandmother and mother laughed. "Which of us is Jones?" We would get confused sometimes, and we'd use that as a byword in the family. But they all went to Quonochontaug to the shore dinner places.

Q: I wonder what went on in some of those places.

A: I think they drank a lot.

Q: I think they did. Somebody told me there was one hotel or boarding house down there that did not serve any liquor. But all the others—

A: I think they drank a lot from general comments. I think they did. That incident is true, because they used to laugh about it. They didn't have daylight savings time in those days. But my mother said it was so funny. We used to use that.

Q: Back to the lifesaving station, do you remember going into the station? How did it feel inside?

A: It was immaculate. Everything was in readiness. That boats were gorgeous. All the equipment was so that they could put their hands on it immediately.

Q: Did you ever watch them practice?

A: No. I never did. I never had that opportunity. But I do know that my mother as a little girl on the beach—no kids to play with. The station men taught her how to wigwag.

Q: What's that?

A: With flags. It's a message. I don't know whether it's a Morse code with flags or what. But certain flags said certain things. She learned how to wigwag with them and communicate. That's the fun she had, along with her dog.

Q: I think the children these days are missing out on a lot.

A: They are. I can remember such happiness. That picnic that I rode in the wagon, we didn't have that every day. You didn't have ice cream. We made it at home. And you'd have a basher and real cream. It was a big occasion. You remember those things. But if you have them every day, you don't.

Q: Everybody takes things for granted, because they're available all the time.

A: You looked forward to something. Your anticipation was great. You enjoyed it. And you remembered it. You lived it over and over again.

Q: There was more talking. Entertainment might be sitting around the piano.

A: That's it. Maybe I shouldn't say this, but some rich people are very condescending, and some not-so-rich can be condescending, but there was the Munson family who manufactured shirts in Albany, later on Harriet Munson, which was one of the children, married a man named Lyman who was the editor of the *World Almanac*. But were they ever condescending? No. But the Munson family in particular used to come down, and Grandma played the organ and they sang. That was the entertainment when I was a kid. Up in Hartford, we didn't have radio and everything. My mother played piano, my father the mandolin, and they'd sing. I could sing too. That was our entertainment. Grandpa and Grandma played at a lot of the dances that they had at that time.

Q: Where were the dances?

A: The dances would be in somebody's house. There is a house partway down in Quonochontaug that the Hoxies lives in. Do you know that house?

Q: Yes.

A: Asa and Clarence. One of them played the violin—a fiddle. Us kids went down there on their invitation one evening. I don't know whether we had strawberry shortcake or not, but we had something awfully good. I was probably between fourteen and fifteen, because I joined the 4H when I was fourteen.

Q: I have talked to Monroe Hoxie. Is this a relative of Monroe's?

A: Probably so.

Q: Would you go down West Beach Road?

A: A white house.

Q: There were Hoxie families.

A: I think it was West Beach. It's on their side, and it's off of the road.

