

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

JOHN (Jack) ELDRIDGE

Friday, September 30, 2005

Interviewed by Anne Schafer Doyle

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DOYLE: I am interviewing John --or Jack-- Eldridge. whose grandfather owned the Eldridge Hotel on the Quonochontaug Breachway before the 1938 Hurricane.

Jack, I'd like you to tell us your name, your birth date, and where you were born.

ELDRIDGE: My name is John Eldridge. I was born in Westerly, R.I. back in 1929.

DOYLE: Jack, if you could just tell me who came to Quonnie first in your family, and maybe a little bit about them.

ELDRIDGE: I think my grandfather, Charles Eldridge, built the original hotel. And then my father added on to it and built porches and things over the years. But --I -- there were several Eldridges around even before that, but maybe not into the hotel business. A lot of them were fishermen and Coastguardsmen.

DOYLE: Were these Eldridges that you were related to?

ELDRIDGE: Oh yeah; most their gravestones are now still in a little cemetery in Ashaway.

DOYLE: Oh. Jack, I'd just like you to tell me about your father.

ELDRIDGE: During the '30's, in the depression years, my father used to work on the hotel in the winter. He added a porch here and a porch there, and there was no place to work; so he continued to improve the hotel. And then he got involved in politics in Charlestown. And one thing led to another, and in the late '30's he became Postmaster in Bradford. And my father was made Postmaster in Bradford by Senator Greene, at that time; you know, Greene Airport—Theodore Francis Greene. So he was Postmaster as well as working at the beach in the summer until he died in —uh—'55 I think.

DOYLE: Now if you could just tell me a few things that we might like to know about what went on in the Eldridge House.

ELDRIDGE: I had the end bedroom, as you come up the back stairs, that visitors probably wouldn't want; so I was down on the end. We lived there in the summer, and we had a cottage across the street from the hotel that we moved into during the winter. And the hotel was nice; a lot of times being young--six, seven, and eight years old-- I was friendly with the guests, and a lot of times I ate in the dining room with the guests. And so I enjoyed that.

DOYLE: Now did they have entertainment going on, on weekends or anything?

ELDRIDGE: Not that I know of. They got in there on trains and buses from New York, and they were happy just to be there. The beach was a big thing. And I can remember buying a big Philco radio; nobody'd ever had one, and everybody gathered around the Philco radio to listen to that, in the hotel.

DOYLE: Do you remember listening to any particular events on that?

ELDRIDGE: 1937 baseball All-Star game! And Babe Ruth, and [Irving Knapp], and Jimmy Foxx, and Lou Gehrig and all that crew in 1937.

DOYLE: Did you help work around the hotel?

ELDRIDGE: No; I don't think I did much in the early days. My big job was to collect seaweed when we were having a clambake. I used to go out and get boats full of seaweed and box them up so we could take them to one of the clambakes.

DOYLE: Where did you get the seaweed?

ELDRIDGE: Right off the rocks in front of the breachway in Quonochontaug. They were always loaded with rockweed; you have to have the kind of rockweed that pops. So that was right off the breachway in

Quonochontaug. And because there was always a good low tide, you could always go out and get a whole boatload; the current wasn't like it is now.

DOYLE: So, did you have your own little boat?

ELDRIDGE: Yeah; little rowboats. I had mine and two or three of 'em, I think.

DOYLE: You were saying that you grew up in Westerly. But did you also—you said that you wintered over in Charlestown as well?

ELDRIDGE: Well until the Hurricane, we lived at Quonochontaug. After that, after the '38 Hurricane, we rented a house in Bradford, where the Post Office was.

ELDRIDGE: And we lived there and then my father bought a house in Bradford, off a church. It was a church house; there was no heat in it or anything, and [we] renovated all that and got that all setup. That's still there.

DOYLE: Now, did your father get involved in politics after he moved to Bradford?

ELDRIDGE: No; it was before that, in Quonochontaug. Charlestown was probably about 99% Republican at the time. He was about the only Democrat, so he got involved with Senator Greene. I can remember that there was one big issue and Senator Greene didn't [elect him]: Chris Del Sesto, who later became Governor of Rhode Island. And one particular weekend, Del Sesto and Greene came to the Hotel; they were courtin' my father's vote from Charlestown. And then Greene got elected, and he picked my father to be the Postmaster in Bradford. That's how he got that.

DOYLE: Well, did your father have to go up to Bradford when he worked at the Post Office?

ELDRIDGE: Oh yeah; because the Bradford Post Office delivered mail in Quonochontaug. Like it still does.

DOYLE: Oh --Well, they have changed that.

ELDRIDGE: Oh. Yeah.

DOYLE: It used to be called Niantic.

ELDRIDGE: Yeah. Way back.

DOYLE: Yeah. Did your father have any causes that he really felt very strongly about? As a Democrat?

ELDRIDGE: Not really. The Democratic Party –Democrat—I can remember him dragging me across the train station in Providence in the ‘30’s during the campaign because Roosevelt was coming across there—

DOYLE: Did you see him?

ELDRIDGE: Oh yeah; across from the train station in Providence -- That was ’36, I think.

DOYLE: Would you share with me your experiences at Quonnie during the ’38 Hurricane?

ELDRIDGE: On September 21, 1938, I was a third-grader at the Bradford School. And my father and mother picked me up at three o’clock, when school got out, and said, “We’re heading for Quonnie to pick up a couple of things, because there’s going to be a bad storm.” And that’s about all they knew. So we went to Quonochontaug, and we drove into the hotel driveway; and it was getting pretty rough. It was about 3:30, and my father went in and got what they had in those days, the moneybox. He got the moneybox out of the Hotel, and on his way out, he grabbed a bunch of raincoats that were laying there. He put them in the car. Then he went back and cut all the boats loose, because he said they’d all get wrecked tied up to the dock. Cut the boats loose. And they went across the pond, and they were all right.

And then there was another hotel up above there, called the Breakers, and that garage had already blown loose, and by that time it was blowin’ right around our car. When my father came back, it kinda hit him a few times, and he got cuts from that garage. And then he got back into the car and started to drive outta there. We went back across where the bowlin’ alley was, on the corner, got by there and got to that next little place where Ecclestons lived –the Eccleston family, C. P. Eccleston—we got as far as their driveway when the waves stopped the car: we were already up to the door in water. So he said, “You’ve gotta get out.” And at that time there was a house owned by a Dr. – I remember the name, I don’t know why –a Dr. Gerrish. Dr. Gerrish owned a house up there--

DOYLE: That was Sunrise, I think—

ELDRIDGE: Yeah; and Dr. Gerrish's house was comin' right down the road, in one piece! [Laughing hard] And that hit my mother, and she always had her bad knee from there on.

DOYLE: It *hit her*? Well, were you on foot then?

ELDRIDGE: Oh yeah; we were on foot. And so my mother was running up the road towards the mainland, and my father says, "No, no; come back." Because he knew the lay of the land; going back toward the ocean was a little higher. So we pulled through those briars. And every time a wave come along, he'd say, "Hold onto those bushes," and we'd hold on. And when the wave would go, we'd get a few more feet. And now there was two houses there--; both had come off their posts, and they were piled up on



DOYLE:

top of each other. And there were several women in the house. And we went in there, and that's where we spent the night.

Do you know where specifically that was?

ELDRIDGE: Yeah. It's on the way up that driveway going towards Ecclestons'.

DOYLE: Oh yes, I know.

ELDRIDGE: On the left, there. I can't think of the name of the people we spent the night with, the night-- till about 11:00 when the storm went down.

DOYLE: Did you all have to huddle in a particular space?

ELDRIDGE: No; we were all in one room --I remember that. The big thing was that they did have some fruit; about 9:00 at night, they passed out all the fruit. That was good.

DOYLE: Did you -- did you feel the -- Were a lot of the people fearful of what was happening?

ELDRIDGE: Oh yeah; one bolt—one wave went by, and there was a car, from another house, out in the yard there. And my father went out and grabbed the woman --there was a woman in the car, with a baby—and brought them in.

DOYLE: Was that the Pendleton—

ELDRIDGE: Yeah; that was Palmer Pendleton. About 50 years later, at URI, there was a guy working in the mechanic shop there, in the lawn department. And Dick Scogley, who was a professor there, said, "I'd like to introduce you to Palmer Pendleton." And I said, "I remember Palmer Pendleton way, way back--" [Laughter] "in the middle of the ocean!" [Laughter]

DOYLE: Did they stay with you, too? The Pendletons?

ELDRIDGE: Yeah; yeah. The house that they were in was the Crumbs'; they drowned. The Pendletons made it by my father pulling them into the house. But the

DOYLE:

Crumbs were in the other house, and they drowned. It was quite a night. We ended up at what was then the Sea Breeze Inn.

DOYLE: Oh, you were able to get to the Sea Breeze Inn?

ELDRIDGE: Yeah; after a while, when the storm settled down, we got up to the Sea Breeze Inn. And beyond the Sea Breeze Inn, the road was very deep. The water was up as high as a pole, and you couldn't go any further. So we went in the Sea Breeze Inn and got some refreshments there, I guess, or whatever. And by that time, my brother, who was not down there--was up on the main road—came in with a boat. And he took us out of there.

Was he up on the main road just by chance, or did he live—oh no, 'cause—how old was he?

ELDRIDGE: He was at Burlingame; he was the caretaker at Burlingame State Park at that time. And my other brother was a State Trooper. And they were both anxious to know where we were.

DOYLE: Yeah, yeah. Now, who else was at the— was the Sea Breeze Inn a gathering place?

ELDRIDGE: Yeah; there was quite a crowd there. I couldn't tell you—I think the Red Cross came in there and passed out some blankets.

DOYLE: Do you have any particular memories of the other families that were living along the breachway? Do you know the names of the families, or did you have any connection with them at all?

ELDRIDGE: The breachway? Oh; there were Kings, right there on the front of the breachway, and Lawrence Miller and I'd gone to a couple of small houses there. And some of them were hotels, a couple of hotels in there. But I didn't know too many because I was only eight, and I gathered in the morning in front of the hotel with my bathing suit on, to go to the beach—

DOYLE: Oh, so you got to go to the beach! You weren't put to work instantly every morning.

DOYLE:

ELDRIDGE: No; I went to the beach early in the morning. I'm paying for it now; about every three months I get something [to cover up].

DOYLE: Oh do you? Oh dear; that's too bad.

ELDRIDGE: I lived on the beach too long.

DOYLE: I know what that means, too.

ELDRIDGE: I just had one--

DOYLE: Now, tell me a little bit about after the Hurricane and where you came when you came to Quonnie, and also about the bowling alley.

ELDRIDGE: My father went back to the pond, across the pond xxx, and found all those alleys, most of them in one piece. And he floated them back, across the pond, to Quonnie xxx. And he rebuilt the building to go around them. So by '39 he had a little bit of a summer thing: he had a little business going there. But it wasn't the same; it slowed down.

See that's the building that I remember. And now I know why the alleys were so warped!

ELDRIDGE: Yeah. [Laughing]

DOYLE: But you didn't live up above the bowling alleys --

ELDRIDGE: Yeah, we did. I'd say between '39 and '44 we lived above the bowling alley. In the summer.

DOYLE: In the summer. But you said your father also built a cottage?

ELDRIDGE: Yeah; on the hotel lot. And then we ended up selling that --

DOYLE: Do you know when you sold it?

ELDRIDGE: Well, it went out in the '54 hurricane; we lost it again. And then my brother got a cottage from Bonnet Shores and moved it down and put it on

DOYLE:

that lot in the '50's. And that was about the time my father died, so we sold it, we sold it out; and that was the end of that. We sold it for about \$30,000; the last time it was sold for like a half a million!

DOYLE: Today it would even be more than that. If you could just tell me a little bit about the clambakes that your father had.

ELDRIDGE: He put clambakes on for various organizations. Usually, the Rhode Island Democratic Party had their clambake there at the Eldridge House every year. And different ones –whenever the Governor had a clambake in those days, he always got my father to do it. And usually, the whole family chipped in to do something; my job was to get the seaweed, the rockweed, off the rocks and bag 'em up so that we had enough rockweed; and my father would do the bakin' and my older brother would help with the cookin'.

DOYLE: Were the pits already dug?

ELDRIDGE: Yeah; the pits were dug at the hotel, across the street from the hotel. Yeah, the pits were dug. There was a big garage there, too; [it had] about 15 units. And above the garage you had a hall; if the weather was bad, they could have the clambake in there.

DOYLE: Now what was —was the garage used for people's cars that came down, or what?

ELDRIDGE: Yeah; the garage could be used – if they wanted to use ‘em, they could use ‘em.

DOYLE: Now were they also used for setting up the tables for people to eat at?

ELDRIDGE: Yeah; we could do that, too. And we used to have them sit and eat in the yard, or they could go in what they called the clambake hall, in the yard.

DOYLE: Now the pictures that I’ve seen, the photographs of before the ’38 Hurricane, in that area that was between the Eldridge House and the pond, I noticed that there were some other -- almost looked like farmhouses or little structures—that were obviously in a—what must have been very marshy areas. Am I correct about that?

ELDRIDGE: Yeah; there were several--it was a marshy area; there were several little streams that would go up and down; you could catch fish and clams in there and crabs—

DOYLE: Was it Ray Eccleston that had a little fish market or something right near the Eldridge House?

ELDRIDGE: Yeah; that --I think Ray did have it-- Ray was the oldest son of Charles. And Charles had a house there, and Ray had a house there, and a woman -- Ray’s sister had a house there; her name was Phillips, or McPhillips— there was three houses together.

DOYLE: Oh that was on the Midway area that you’re talking about --yes. I talked to Ray before he died—just briefly—

ELDRIDGE: I didn’t even know he died. Yeah, his sister was there too. They had a retarded son, Charles, used to come down and bowl every morning—not every mornin’ but two or three mornin’s a week. He loved to bowl.

DOYLE: Oh. There were other bowling alleys down there, too -- I mean, the Wilson Bowling Alley --Now why did some people go to your bowling alley and other people go to the Wilson Bowling Alley?

ELDRIDGE: I don’t know! Different fringes there! They were either one or the other; they didn’t make s--

DOYLE: So you mean there was like a certain type of person that might go to each of the hotels. Is that what you're saying?

ELDRIDGE: Yeah. Bowlin' alley!

DOYLE: Oh, the bowling alley, ok. Now I've heard stories about-- some of the hotels and boarding-houses that had liquor and others that absolutely didn't serve liquor at all.

ELDRIDGE: Well --I don't know anything about the liquor --I don't remember that!

DOYLE: OK; I heard that at the Breakers, it was like absolutely you couldn't touch anything --

ELDRIDGE: I think my sister-in-law and brother worked at the Breakers, and I never heard stories about that.

DOYLE: OK; OK.

ELDRIDGE: A captain across the pond -- Captain Larkin, who ran the Coast Guard Station—he used to come across in a boat every morning and catch the school bus.

DOYLE: Children; they would have children--

ELDRIDGE: Yeah; the Larkin kids -- Rit and his sister Edith. And I can remember one morning, my father was standing in the cottage, looking out the window. And the Larkins were coming; they always stopped in the house to keep warm until the bus came. And they were coming up the sidewalk to the house, and my father said, "Oh -- what's your old man mad about this morning? He's comin' after you-- I can see him coming right across the breachway!" And everyone was looking up there, and my father said it was April Fool Day! [Laughter] That happened back in the '30's.

DOYLE: Now did you go across the breachway and go into the Coast Guard Station?

ELDRIDGE: Occasionally. When we could xxx the tide; there was a deep hole there.

DOYLE: Where was the hole?

ELDRIDGE: On the back side of--on the breachway side of the Coast Guard Station. The water was pretty deep there, so you could dive over that wall.

DOYLE: At high tide particularly?

ELDRIDGE: Yeah.

DOYLE: That wall is still there you know.

ELDRIDGE: But the water doesn't go there any more.

DOYLE: Well, no; part of it –

ELDRIDGE: It just goes straight –

DOYLE: Yeah, but there's remains of the old breach there. Did you know somebody by the name of Walter Nugent? The Nugent family?

ELDRIDGE: Nugent?

DOYLE: From Westerly. And they had a little place on the old breach. You know where the King Cottage was?

ELDRIDGE: Yeah.

DOYLE: All right; well, then there was the Crandalls, and further down --they were the farthest down. Yeah. . Do you remember the Kings?

ELDRIDGE: Vaguely. But I remember the name, and I remember the cottage, the King Cottage. There were some pictures of them, too: postcards of the King Cottages.

DOYLE: Mr.[George] King lived across the street from me when I was little, down at Quonnie. And he never talked about his family—you know-- going through the Hurricane or anything. I never knew anything about him. So - But he was quite a fisherman. And he helped—he went fishing and berry-picking and helped with that end of the -- the food end of it-- for his mother, I guess, at the time, who was running the King Cottage.

ELDRIDGE: There was another family there-- the neighbors avoided them—that lived up where the Quonochontaug Grange Hall was, up on Route One there. . .

DOYLE: Was that the Woods –was it Wood? I don't know—I'm not sure—

ELDRIDGE: Dick – a guy by that name –Dick—

DOYLE: I don't know –

ELDRIDGE: Well, from the bowlin' alley I used to deliver newspapers to Central Beach, East Beach, so I got around a little bit. And also telegrams. Now telegrams would come to the bowlin' alley on a telephone. And my mother would take the message, type it up or write it up, and then she'd call me to deliver it.

DOYLE: Now how old were you then?

ELDRIDGE: This was after the Hurricane: probably nine, ten, eleven – had a bicycle, and I was up to Central Beach three or four times a day in a week.

DOYLE: Oh! Now was this just telegrams, or was there a telephone as well, in the bowling alley?

ELDRIDGE: Well, there was a telephone, but my mother would take the telegr-- people would send telegrams. Now why they did that I don't know, but probably because people on the beach didn't have a phone. So they'd send them a telegram; they'd come to the bowlin' alley and we'd deliver it.

DOYLE: Oh yes; probably the way people said "I'll be coming on a certain day at a certain time" or whatever: "Meet me at the depot" -- you know, that kind of thing.

Now tell me about your experiences during World War II.

ELDRIDGE: Well, Battery B was established along the Westerly-Charlestown line. And they had outlets. One of their huts was right near where the Ecclestons were. And they had a hut there—

DOYLE: What do you call a hut, what do you mean?

ELDRIDGE: A little barracks they built, and they'd put six or seven soldiers there, for night duty. And they'd walk the beach, and they'd come back. And a lot of them showed up at the bowlin' alley; I got to know them at the bowlin' alley. They'd come over and bowl, and sing songs; and they were a kinda nice crew. You'd get to know some of their names and when they left, we'd get letters from them, from Italy: one of them got hurt in Italy. And it was kind of a connection to World War II.

And there were ships along there, too, you know.

DOYLE: Did you see the ships yourself?

ELDRIDGE: No; no—we couldn't. On the day the war ended, there was one in Block Island Harbor – a German sub—They were there; [if] they had attacked – we had to watch that beach.

DOYLE: Did you ever walk the beach with the soldiers?

ELDRIDGE: XXX [Got too cold]. Sometimes we'd go over there when they weren't on duty, and you'd talk to them and ---

DOYLE: I've heard – the Ecclestons told me, when I talked to them quite a long time ago—that they would come into their house because, I guess, their barracks were right there –

ELDRIDGE: Right there, yeah.

DOYLE: OK; all right.,,

ELDRIDGE: It's interesting.

[ABRUPT CHANGE OF SUBJECT]

DOYLE: We're talking about the '54 hurricane.

ELDRIDGE: Yeah. In the summer of '54 --in the spring of '54, I had just come home from my tour of duty in Korea. So I was just getting established, getting ready to go back to college, and whatnot, this hurricane screwed up a lot of things.

DOYLE: Yeah. Can you tell me about --a little bit now about your own life. Where did you go to college and -- --

ELDRIDGE: I went to URI, then to Korea, then back to URI, and completed a teaching certificate. I started working at the Block Island School; was there teaching five years. And at the end of it, the administrators all left, and they didn't have any administrator. So I became not only teacher but also the principal and superintendent. XXX. And then I went from there to Exeter, and Exeter-West Greenwich, and developed their school systems.

DOYLE: How did you like Block Island?

ELDRIDGE: Block Island was fun. It was really good. In fact, I went there single, and after a couple of years, I got married. And when we left there, we had three children. So our first three were born on Block Island.

DOYLE: Now where did you meet your wife? If you want to talk about that –

ELDRIDGE: My wife? She worked in Seavey's Drug Store in Wickford. That's where we started, right there.

DOYLE: What was the school system like –What did Block Island have, in terms of schools, at that time?

ELDRIDGE: Just the same as they've got now: one building.

DOYLE: One building. What grades were they?

ELDRIDGE: K to—it wasn't K; it was one: 1 to 12. It's K to 12, now. And they've added on to it; the school is bigger, but it's still one school.

DOYLE: Hmm. I've heard a lot of good things about you being up there in Exeter. What did you have to—did you revamp their system? Or what did ---?

ELDRIDGE: Well, when it started, Exeter only had one building, Wauwaloam School when I went there. And West Greenwich, the next town up, they had one little building too. And both of them were over full; you know, the kids were coming in and there was no place to put them. And the first thing I did, we made a deal with the church there, on [Route]102; and they let us use their basement, and we created three classrooms there. And this was back in the early 'sixties. And then I started talking to West Greenwich.

They were having a big problem; they had taken some classrooms and put a wall between them to make two out of one. So they didn't know what to do. So we talked, and we got them to agree to regionalize. So we made one school system.

DOYLE: I see.

ELDRIDGE: And that enabled us to build a middle school. And several years later we built a high school. So xxx.

DOYLE: It sounds like you really enjoyed your career.

ELDRIDGE: Oh yeah; the last few years weren't so much fun; but the first twenty-five or so were good.

DOYLE: What are you the most proud of, in terms of your education [goals]--

ELDRIDGE: Building the school system, building the middle school. The first thing was putting the two towns together, and that was not an easy job to do - called regionalization. Charlestown's part of a regional district. And it wasn't easy to do. But we did it, built the middle school and several years later, the high school. I think that's the major thing.

[ANOTHER CHANGE OF SUBJECT]

DOYLE: [Tell me about] the WPA.

ELDRIDGE: The early 'thirties! My brother ended up being a state policeman, but before that, after getting' out of high school, he was down there digging ditches in Quonochontaug for the WPA.

DOYLE: Ditches? You mean those mosquito ditches? OH--

ELDRIDGE: Yeah.

DOYLE: Now this was in the early '30's?

ELDRIDGE: Yeah - they dug all these ditches -

DOYLE: You can still see them, you know.

ELDRIDGE: Yeah, I know. [Laughter] That was the beginning of the '30's, and WPA was the big project.

DOYLE: Now who were your brothers -- their names?

ELDRIDGE: My brother Ernie was the R.I. state policeman, and Charlie, who started out as the Director of Burlingame. He was the head of the parks there, for a while, and then he became a sheriff. Then he ended up in Governor McGrath's right-hand-man office. Then he became a United States Marshall.

DOYLE: Which one worked on the WPA projects?

ELDRIDGE: Ernie.

DOYLE: Now what about the --is it CCC? Civilian Conservation Corps?

ELDRIDGE: I don't know too much about that.

DOYLE: Because they worked up in Burlingame, I heard. That's what I heard.

ELDRIDGE: Yeah, yeah--Charlie probably--. He had a good friend up there in Charlestown; I think he became a lawyer, Jimmy Walsh. Do you remember Jimmy Walsh? He was from Charlestown.

DOYLE: [Indicating no.] You wouldn't remember this, but I don't know if you ever heard your father talk about it; but there's been some controversy about the original breachway, in recent history, like back before 1870: that the water in Quonnie Pond came in and probably went down around near where the Eldridge House was. It came in and went out the breachway where it is now. Is that true? Do you know if that's true?

ELDRIDGE: No; I don't know much about it. But I do know that high tide, underneath the Eldridge Hotel was always four or five inches of water. The tide ran right through there. Low tide it was dry under there. But high tide, the water came in.

DOYLE: Ok; yeah. But what part did your mother play in running the Eldridge House?

ELDRIDGE: Well, she was the boss, I guess. But [for] years, we always had a cook, so that she [mother] did a lot of cooking; but in other years, we had a cook, so she didn't have to do as much cooking.

DOYLE: OK. But did she love it there? Did she and your father make a good [living] there?

ELDRIDGE: Oh yeah; it was pretty good. . . She came down from Canada; she got a job -- she was from Ontario—and she got a job in the Providence Library. She was there for a while, and that's where they met.

DOYLE: That's interesting.

[TAPE BLANK THEREAFTER]

