

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

EDITH THAYER FISHER

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Interviewed by Ruth Schafer Hopkinson

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Hopkinson: So that we may record the history of Quonochontaug, we're talking to different people at the beach, who have been down here a long time. And we're starting with our Great Aunt Edith Fisher. This is the person who is talking now, and she is reflecting on her girlhood down here, which dates back to approximately 1910, when she first came down to Quonochontaug.

Tell me about the groups that were down here, Aunt Edith.

Fisher: Well, as far as my memory goes, you know it was Uncle Arthur's summer place down here, long before I knew anything about Quonochontaug. There were five groups [of cottages]: one, above Blue Shutters, mostly from Providence people; the next one, between the Blue Shutters and the Fresh Water Rock, was the Pittsfield group—

Hopkinson: Pittsfield, Massachusetts?

Fisher: Massachusetts—mostly from, the people from there; and then Central Beach, which is the last one of all of them to come into being; then there was the Ashaway group, a group of people from Ashaway, Rhode Island-- and this is kind of nice about that, or funny about that: originally in Ashaway group were seven houses, built alike, at the cost of \$500 apiece.

Hopkinson: That was down from West Beach -- what's now West Beach.

Fisher: Well, it's below Central Beach. Between Central Beach and the Breachway. Then the Breachway [cottages] --probably the Breachway's the oldest of them all because that's where the Life Saving Station was.

And when I first came down here, which was in nineteen hundred and seven or eight, as a high school girl –

Hopkinson: About how old were you then?

Fisher: Well, I was in high school; I visited my girlfriend, whose parents had rented a house at the breachway. And you know, Ruth, the funny part of it was, how we traveled in those days –I came down on the train, got off at Niantic, which is now Bradford; and we were met by a surrey with the fringe on top, a three-seater. I don't really remember whether there were one or two horses; but there must have been two horses, because we had to come over the Bradford Road, which is now Route 216, to the Breach Road, which—at the Farm House turned down—went to the breach. And it took us a long while. I can't remember how long, but anyhow –

Hopkinson: Tell me about xxx—

Fisher: Oh yes— We had xxx and veils to put on because the road was so narrow and dusty that we ruined our clothes. The breachway was where the hotels were, the old wooden hotels, on a boardwalk. And, there were several of them, perhaps four I think. I can't remember the names of all of them.

Hopkinson: One of them was Quonochontaug Inn?

Fisher: No; no. Quonochontaug Inn was, well, north or east— some people say east up the coast and down the coast west; I always say north and south; but I don't know which is right. No; that wasn't in that group. There was the Breakers --first I think the Eldridge House; but anyhow there were wooden hotels, and they were on the ocean front, with a boardwalk in front of them. And big verandas. And weekends, Saturday nights, they had these dances, or hops they called them in those days. And everybody would congregate around; and the group from –the Providence group—the boys used to walk way over – up to the main road and down the other road to go to those dances.

Hopkinson: Now, wait a minute now. When you were talking before, the boys came from East Beach. They had to go all the way up East Beach Road, all the way down what is now Route One, back down West Beach Road. OK. Tell me about if they wanted to take a short cut—

Fisher: If they wanted, if they could -- if it was low tide, they could walk up the beach. Only about a mile or so up the beach—or down the beach if that was the case. But there are a lot of rocks in front of what is now the Quonochontaug Inn, that went right down to the water's edge. So if it was high tide, they could not pass those rocks. They had to come up into the land. Well now, the land then was a farm, a big farm house. And all that land went with the farm. And it was very dense of vines and everything. And the farmer left this dog, his watch dog, out every night. And the boys were afraid of the watch dog, so they'd really come up the beach-- I mean up the road.

Hopkinson: And the farm was what is now Sclaters' house.

Fisher: That's right. That was the original farm. That afterwards was developed into Central Beach.

Hopkinson: I see. OK.

Fisher: So at the breachway, the big excitement down there was to go down when the Life Savers had their training period, when they all came out and jumped in the boats and went out the breachway. They trained every -- like the policemen do or firemen, or anybody; they had their training, and you could go watch them. So that was always xxx [fun] for the young people; a time to get together. And that was the big excitement there. They also had Mother Brindley's store. Now Mother Brindley was a character.

Hopkinson: Isn't that West Beach?

Fisher: Yes. And afterwards. After the Hurricane, she came up to the Pittsfield Group. She was a character. She wore – she had short hair. In those days, women didn't have short hair. And she was very pompous. But she had a little penny-candy store, and ice cream; and everybody congregated at Mother' Brindley's. And that was at the breach. So those were the two things to do.

If you wanted to go in bathing, you had to cross the breachway, to the beautiful ocean and the dunes over on the ocean side. There was no bathing, except to jump into the breachway and just swim, if you were a good swimmer. But the two ways to get across there was—[one]: they had a rope that went across to a pole like, on the other side, across the breachway. This was right down in front of the hotels. And you either had to pull yourself across or, if you were a good swimmer, you swam across; or [two] you got in a boat, several people in a boat, a rowboat, and pulled yourself across. And then went over to this beautiful surf. But if you went over there, you spent practically all day over –take your lunch or go over and [go in] bathin' all day.

Hopkinson: Didn't it make a difference if it was high tide or low tide? The water was coming in –

Fisher: Oh yeah! Yeah; you had to watch the tide. Of course you wanted to go when it was – it didn't make much difference in the ocean when it was low or high tide, but if you went in that breachway, across that breachway when the tide was going out, you had to be pretty careful because it was so fast and furious. And if you weren't a good swimmer, you needed that rope to get across on the other side. If it was coming in, you had a better chance, because you'd only land in the pond. But that was – uh, the man that was with the life-saving crew patrolled the beach; they had him stationed--I've forgotten what they called him. But anyhow the man from Watch Hill would come up to Misquamicut, Misquamicut to Quonochontaug –Quonochontaug went to Charlestown. They patrolled the beach every night. Sometimes they had dogs, and sometimes they didn't.

Hopkinson: What were they looking for? Just patrolling?

Fisher: Just patrolled the beach. It was part of their duties. And they were watching for anybody that might be in trouble out in the ocean. But they did that and up to the time of the War –the first World War, wasn't it, I think.

Hopkinson: You're asking me?

Fisher: Time flies! Well, anyhow, the reason I tell you this about those patrols, fellows, was because of course they always had their eyes out for any young girls in the houses. [Laughter] And they found out that I made fudge a lot for my children, and so they would come up there and make a remark about I didn't have a curtain down. Oh, by the way, when the war was on, we had to have black curtains, and pull them down. If there was a ray of light around the—outside the-- curtain, why these guards that patrolled the beach would come and tell you about it. They found out I made fudge quite often and so I always had some for them. And they'd come up and tell me they saw a light when they didn't! [Laughter]

Hopkinson: xxx all the time! Xxx [More laughter]
Well tell me : you were talking about -um—that there were hops, the dances. Was it like every weekend?

Fisher: Yes; weekends. And it was usually Saturday night. And you know what the orchestra consisted of? A piano, a viola, and a cello. After a while, they included a cornet, they called it; trumpets they call 'em now. But it was a cornet, which is different from a trumpet. Really and truly, they're not really just alike. But that was the—you got a trumpet, you really stretched the money!-- And we had- oh we did have masquerades -- every year there was a masquerade, every year there was a sheet and pillowcase party. Do you know what that is?

Hopkinson: No!

Fisher: A sheet and pillowcase—you would take an old sheet and cut a hole in it. in the middle, and put your head through it. And you'd take a pillowcase and cut slits for eyes and nose and mouth, to breathe, and put it over your head. Now you went to these parties disguised that way. Everybody looked the same, and there was always a prize for the one who could last the longest not being identified.

Hopkinson: Well, did you talk to each other? Did you –

Fisher: Oh yes, you danced with them and everything!

Hopkinson: Well, did you have to muffle your voice and change your voice?

Fisher: Well you tried to! And I remember going in with a – now my girlfriend and I (she went in with my mother, to one of them, and I went in with her mother) trying to fool the public, you know. But xxx was a lot bigger than she was and xxx [laughter from both].

Hopkinson: Well, tell me: did you ever go quahoging then?

Fisher: Oh, well, quahoging was over in the pond. You know—

Hopkinson: Was that an activity? That you ever --?

Fisher: Yes; [but] crabbing; we did a lot—crabbing. We had a boat. Well, this was after -- you want to get back to Central --we haven't gotten to Central Beach yet, so I wasn't going to say about what we did there. But I was only down to the beach as a visitor. So maybe I only stayed but a week or two in the first, 'cause I had a summer home up on Narragansett Bay. Until after Bradford was born, so you can see it was after we were married. So most of my youth was spent at another summer home. This was Fisher, a Fisher summer home. Although Brad Fisher never owned a house; but he rented every year, so that brought your grandmother and her children down here before I ever came down much.

Hopkinson: OK; let's get talking about that. Central Beach: Tell me about when it was first -- the first home that was here and --just start from there.

Fisher: Well, Central Beach was developed by Howard Thorpe, of Westerly. And he built this house -- the Farmhouse was here. There might have been one or two other houses put on land that was older and afterwards incorporated in Central Beach. But as I remember it, in 1926 at least, Howard Thorpe built this house on the waterfront—

Hopkinson: On Central Beach.

Fisher: On Central Beach, down near Central Beach bathing beach. I know it was at least 1926 because I have my pictures and the dates when we rented the House, in 1926. And then xxxx, Uncle Arthur and I bought our lot, which we later built on, which was practically right in back of this house, which was on the waterfront. Now, there were only two or three houses built when we were down then. And two houses in the field up by the baseball field: Dr. Waterman's and Mrs. Jordan's were there. And then Thorpe's house was there, and Dr. Arnold and your family, they were cousins, had houses at either end of that block—that first block.

Hopkinson: What is now --what? Ocean View? No, no, no. What's the front road?

Fisher: You know, since I've moved away from that, I've forgotten what the names are.

Hopkinson: The Thorpes' house, Arnolds' house, and Saunders' house were all on the same stretch of road.

Fisher: Yes, but Thorpe's was on the ocean front.

Hopkinson: Right. OK.

Fisher: And then Mr. Goman built a house within two or three houses of his, on the front; then there was Dr. Tetlow and the Barrows and the Wholeans and , well two or three others – I just can't think of their names now – on the waterfront. Then behind, across the ocean road there, across right in back of Thorpe's first house is where Uncle Arthur and I bought a lot. And Aunt Lois Soule bought a lot, and Mr. And Mrs. Herrick Brown bought a lot.

Hopkinson: Right.

Fisher: xxxxx Your grandmother Annie Seamans and the Raymond Seamans bought a lot there, which they afterward sold to Herrick Brown. Now, it was in 19—we bought that lot in 1926. But we still had a summer place up at Field's Point, on the Bay. We didn't build until 1937. And we brought down a builder from Providence, at the time, to build our house, who afterward built several houses on East Beach Road: George Sarcy built cottages over there, known now as the Sarcy Cottages.

Hopkinson: Tell me about when Mr. Thorpe originally bought all the land in Central Beach. He had the intention – of what? Tell me about what he wanted –

Fisher: Do you want that?

Hopkinson: Yeah.

Fisher: Well, it was the intention of having a Mason colony. And as far as I know the first people that were here were Masons. That was what I remember – I know they started the Music Colony over to Shelter Harbor before that, which was a music colony for Masons, training for their Demolay boys. And the band, and everything, came down. But that financially didn't work. So Mr. Thorpe was a great Mason and Shriner and he liked xxx rock away. And that's how we happened to come down here.

Hopkinson: And also tell me about how you xxxxx and how he intended for it to be only Freemasons and then how it got out of control --

Fisher: It got out of control by the young generation, marrying different people, you know. It was dropped. And of course his own –[long pause; then much laughter]

Hopkinson: We won't have that on tape! [More laughter]

Fisher: No! Well, anyhow. Central Beach was the last one to be developed. And when we built our house, it was –there were fewer houses than after – nobody stayed all winter of course; they weren't winter houses. We'd come down here late and early, spring and fall. My father thought we were perfectly crazy because we had a perfectly good place nearer Providence that wasn't so far away. But after the automobile came along, why it wasn't so far to get here.

Hopkinson: How long --After the automobile came, how long did it take to get from Providence to --?

Fisher: Well before that, Uncle Arthur used to come down—now Uncle Arthur, you know, Fisher, and your grandmother – they came down in the first place with horses. And they had to drive the horses down; and Uncle Arthur used to come down with the Walcott family, who owned horses – the boys had horses; I don't know how many they had. But they had two or three anyhow. And he'd come down with them. And they had to come down from Providence and stay overnight in Hope Valley, 'cause they couldn't make it in all in one day.

Hopkinson: But they'd ride their horses.

Fisher: Yes. Or, they might have come with carriages, with loads in the carriages, you know like caravans. I don't remember about that, because I wasn't in the picture then. But that's how they got down here first– and of course that was before Central Beach was developed.

When the Providence group, as we'll call them, it really was North Providence, around Fruit Hill, came down here, they were a group of friends up there; and I don't know how they ever came here to begin with because it was before I was around. But there was the Walcotts and the Parrotts of whom Elaine Henry of Central Beach is the granddaughter. And then there was the Moultons, David and Benjamin Moulton --these were all people from Providence. Then there was xxxman, Sayer, and Soule –all friends from the same location in Providence. And Dr. Sayer - there were two Sayer houses; his father had a house, and he afterwards had the house up on Governor Island, which is now there--way up Charlestown Pond. That group, when they came down, they had to come down through East Beach Road. Afterwards they had automobiles, but I mean originally with their horses, come down East Beach Road.

The Buddington Farm was there, you know. And they had to come down East Beach Road and through what they called the Dingle, which is a little cart path –well, East Beach Road wasn't much more-- but it didn't come down much farther. They [these Providence people] went [had cottages] down to the beach; and they had a little cookie stand there, which is now the Blue Shutters. But [to get water] they [had to come] through the Dingle, which turns off [East Beach Road] just below the

Sarcy Cottages, up through the barnyard of Buddington's farm. Farther was a gate, a swing gate, which you had to get out and open; also a big well right there, which is now there. But I mention this because everybody had to come up night and morning with their pail, to get fresh water from that well. If they had pumps in their house --only for construction.

Hopkinson: Can you estimate how long it took that trip from Providence to that same farmhouse, originally when Uncle Arthur would have to xxx?

Fisher: Oh, no, no no; they'd make it in a couple of days. But from North Providence, I don't really know; 'cause all I can remember is my experience of coming down, which by that time was automobiles, you know.

Hopkinson: OK, now when you took an automobile, was it a day trip?

Fisher: No; but it was a good afternoon trip. Or a morning trip. And you probably brought your lunch and ate it on the way.

Hopkinson: And there was only one main road, from Providence to here.

Fisher: Yes, and that was Route 2. We came down Route 2, from --. This group used to come over through Johnston and Olneyville to Route 2. They were north of Providence, so they didn't have to come through Providence to come down here. That group that I'm talking about, which cut off a little in going right through Providence.

Hopkinson: Originally, when people came down here and were situated over—the group that was over on East Beach--did they pretty much stay the whole summer? Or –

Fisher: Well, I think they came down and landed their family here, and then went back and forth. I know they did--

Hopkinson: How did they get around?

Fisher: Well, they did; and of course before then, when there were horses, they must have taken the train, and been met at the train. At Niantic [Bradford].

Hopkinson: Niantic. Right. OK.

Fisher: Mhm. Because I don't think they drove horses back and forth.

Hopkinson: OK. So you said that, you know, like Uncle Arthur would bring maybe a horse and carriage down, with provisions xxx. Ok; but women were here –

Fisher: They were here all summer. The women and children stayed here all summer.

Hopkinson: In the meantime, where did people get their food and things that they needed?

Fisher: They had ---uh—grocers and vegetable men and bakers came to the door.

Hopkinson: They came to the door?

Fisher: The milkman came to the door.

Hopkinson: Was Westerly there at the time?

Fisher: Oh yes; Westerly was a big town. And they probably came from Westerly. In fact, your Uncle Henry was a milkman.

Hopkinson: Was he?

Fisher: When he was in college. That's how he met Betty.

Hopkinson: No kidding!

Fisher: She was at the --

Hopkinson: She was part of the Fruit Hill group?

Fisher: No; she was in Tunxis, with her aunt, waitin' on table.

Hopkinson: OK. So, all during the summer, they got all their provisions from men--

Fisher: Men who would come to the door. Fruitman, milkman, --

Hopkinson: Milkman, iceman?

Fisher: Iceman? Sure. Iceman.

Hopkinson: OK. Was there ever any need to go into Westerly?

Fisher: No. Nobody went; it was too far. No. You came down here, and you stayed for the summer, with your children. That was all you wanted and all you needed.

Hopkinson: Was it hard work for the women down here?

Fisher: What do you mean, hard work? For who?

Hopkinson: Well, they didn't have of course half the things we have to make life more comfortable--

Fisher: No; the houses had --the old houses had pumps, you know what I mean: water pumps, which I suppose—the well was driven in the ground for water. But it was so salty that it was not drinkable. So as I told you before, everybody had to come up to the pump quick --they came up to the well—we're talking about East Beach. We're talking about the group over there by the farm --

Hopkinson: The Pittsfield group?

Fisher: No, not Pittsfield; we haven't got to that. We're talking about North Providence group. They got their water, their drinking water, at the farm. And I've got pictures, that you've seen, you know, of your grandmother and Henry as a baby, going up for that water.

Hopkinson: Everyone got their water at that well?

Fisher: Yeah! From the farm. From that well, right out in front of the farm.

Hopkinson: Why couldn't everybody have their own pump?

Fisher: They do [did] --But I just told you that it was all salty; they were too near the ocean.

Hopkinson: Oh, oh. OK.

Fisher: It was too salty. And it wasn't, you know, nice clean well water, like this other was.

Hopkinson: Well, now, once the women and children were down here -- **Fisher:** They stayed.

Hopkinson: Well, they stayed. But now, was a good part of the day spent on the beach?

Fisher: Yeah! That was your day!

Hopkinson: Well, it just seems to me that it was such hard work just to--

Fisher: Yeah, but if people did all their own bakin' and all their own cookin' in those days -- your grandmother was a wonderful cook—And they did all the bakin' and cookin', and the women were happy just to sit on the beach and let the kids enjoy-- and they didn't expect any other entertainment. They had little wagons and they had little tricycles and they had dolls, and which have gone out of style, and all their toys. Yeah!

Hopkinson: Well, now did -- way back when --

Fisher: Later on there was a group that played bridge --whist we called it then, of course. It originally was whist. And they had whist parties at the hotels, too.

Hopkinson: Really! Now, way back when you were a teenager, a high school girl coming here, this may sound like a silly question but did they have -- did the women wear bathing suits then?

Fisher: They wore bathing suits with skirts, and consisted of a garment that had bloomers attached to a waist; sleeves to the elbow, a square neckline or a round neckline, much as this; and the waist was attached to the bloomers. Then a skirt went over that --I think I got one upstairs that I can show you --the skirt went over that, and it came below the knees. You wore black stockings and sneakers in bathing. And you did --and a hat --

Hopkinson: Were they heavy?

Fisher: Well, I suppose we knew no different!

Hopkinson: Were they a xxx knit?

Fisher: No; it was serge--serge.

Hopkinson: What's serge?

Fisher: [Laughter] Serge is a thin woolen' it's a -- well, ya dunno what a brigantine was either, do ya? **Hopkinson:** No!

Fisher: Well, it's a thin, weightless--but men's suits are made--men's summer suits are made of serge. Very nice serge, yeah.

Hopkinson: Well, if it was a material that was--you know --if you get it wet, you wouldn't go around drinking water --it would dry up xxx--

Fisher: Oh no; it wasn't wool --I mean that way, you know. It was sort of like -- well, I don't know. It was serge to me! That's all I know! But they covered you pretty well. And nobody expected anything else.

Hopkinson: They were black, right?

Fisher: No, no, no! They could have black or blue or brown or tan -- but not the light colors.

Hopkinson: Not the light colors.

Fisher: Not the light colors. Shades of blue or -- I don't think I ever saw a red one --might have! But they pretty well covered ya. They did cover ya -- all ya had was your neck to your head out! Almost to your arms.

Hopkinson: But that was about the original bathing suit.

Fisher: Oh yeah. You've seen pictures of 'em. Even, you know, in the old pictures of [Atlantic] City. Sure, when I went to [Atlantic] City the first time, I took that bathin' suit.

Hopkinson: It didn't matter that it was xxx [serge?]

Fisher: Nope! [END OF CONVERSATION]

