

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

ROBERT (Bob) GAGER

Thursday, March 29, 2001

Interviewed by Anne S. Doyle in Charlestown

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DOYLE: Now if you would just say your name and when you were born.

GAGER: OK. This is Bob Gager, born in Woodbridge, New Jersey, way back January 8, 1917. Nobody's that old, really!

DOYLE: [Laughing] Oh, you'd be surprised! OK, and the way you got here to Quonnie was through your ---

GAGER: Family! Family: My family knew Quonochontaug from the early 1900's.

DOYLE: Because of friends.

GAGER: Yeah; because of friends.

DOYLE: And the friends were the Moulthrops -

GAGER: The Moulthrops.

DOYLE: So, you came – starting about 1921 or 1922—

GAGER: 1921, I guess; we'd take the train from Woodbridge or Danbury, New Jersey, then take the New Haven Railroad and get off in Westerly.

DOYLE: And you'd stay the whole summer.

GAGER: Yep. My mother would pack a trunk. And that contained everything.

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Gager

DOYLE: Now, when you came from New Jersey, did you stay with the Moulthropps, or did you stay where the Mungers live?

GAGER: We stayed at the house on the breachway that was owned by—I'm going to say Hoxie. My father rented it for the entire summer for two hundred and fifty dollars, he told me.

DOYLE: Wow!

GAGER: And that's where we stayed. It used to-- Mother Brindley—that house-- at one time Mother Brindley ran an ice cream parlor there.

DOYLE: Can you tell me about her?

GAGER: All I can tell you is that she was just a sort of a character in Quonnie, that ran a little convenience store – you'd call it a convenience store today; and I remember my mother – when she'd run out of things for supper, she'd say, “Run down to Mother Brindley's and get some soup or something.”

DOYLE: They didn't sell vegetables and things like that, did they?

GAGER: No; no. I'll tell you how people got their food in Quonnie. They had guys from Westerly that had a truck; one name was Fiore, I think. They'd come down -- One sold meat, another sold vegetables, another one –Lamb's Fish Market, came down – of all places: kind of like bringing coals to Newcastle! [Laughter] Come down to the beach to sell fish, while everybody's out on the breakwater fishing! But every l—once a week the meat man would come down from Westerly. He'd go from house to house, and all the housewives and people would gather around – big time stuff; and the vegetable man would come down, and that's how you ate. And Clark Farm delivered milk-

DOYLE: Yeah; the Clarks' farm was right across--right in West Beach.

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GAGER

GAGER: Yeah; yeah.

DOYLE: Now who was it that was—did you know anybody that ran the farm there?

GAGER: No; we never bothered with the farm. Unless the farm was on the big bathing beach, we didn't want any part of a farm!

DOYLE: So, your life was really centered around the water—you didn't ever go to the farm.

GAGER: Yeah; yeah. We were swimmin' by the time we were five.

DOYLE: In the breachway.

GAGER: In the breachway. That's how we became great swimmers.

DOYLE: Did you use the beach across from the breachway? Is that where you —if you were to go to a beach, did you cross over the breachway and go in front of the Lifeguard [Coast Guard Life Saving] Station there?

GAGER: Most of the people would wait to get to the big beach. Right next to our house was the Breakers Hotel. Next to the Breakers Hotel was the Worcester House. Next to the Worcester House was the Ocean View. Next to the Ocean View was the Eldridge House —spelt with an "i" — I got the biggest kick out of that.

DOYLE: [Laughing] You know the second printing of the book is coming out, and I changed all the —

GAGER: You did?

DOYLE: Oh yes; I did. I told him I would — so I changed them. [More laughter] Can you tell me about --what you remember of some of these people?

GAGER: The people that came down to stay at the hotel: because there was no transportation, you got --they'd come down, they'd come and they'd stay, every year, same hotel, same length of time, maybe one week or two weeks; that was the usual tenure. Then the older ones would just sit on the porch, in rockin' chairs and look out at the breachway. And the other ones, the younger ones of course, would go across the on the beach. Every afternoon the social place to be was on the big beach, the two-mile stretch between Quonnie and Weekapaug. Now to get over there, you either—at high tide— you took a --they had rowboats for the people in the hotel. Each hotel had its own dock with a couple of beat-up old skiffs.

DOYLE: They used to row you across at high tide?

GAGER: They didn't row us across! [laughter]

DOYLE: Could you safely swim or was the current really strong?

GAGER: Well, the current really ran in at high tide. But everybody would wait until low tide, and you could wade across. And especially at some of the neap tides, lower tides late in August, a little sand bar would show up in the middle of the breachway. And the Coast Guard had an awful time getting' in and out of that breachway! And all the people who had cottages on the pond—they had an awful time getting' out. That's what eventually led—they had enough clout -- eventually led to the dredging of the breachway in 1960.

DOYLE: So that the people could get their boats in and out more easily—

GAGER: Plus the fact that they didn't like the way Mother Nature would fill it in in the wintertime. But everybody—the social place to be was on the big beach, and they spent their afternoons there. Then they'd come home and I guess they would report for supper—dinner. And then after dinner, they would walk on the boardwalk. I call it promenading.

DOYLE: That's probably a better description!

GAGER: And then I guess they played cards; I don't know what else you could do! There was no such thing as "Tele"-- Radio hadn't come in in the early twenties; it wasn't till about twenty-eight or twenty -nine—

DOYLE: And people talked!

GAGER: They talked – right!

DOYLE: Yeah; see, I think we've got xxx that.

GAGER: And the Breakers Hotel was owned by – by Clark, or Clarks.

DOYLE: Not --any relation to the Clark farm?

GAGER: Yeah. Tom Clark and Bertha Clark. Bertha Clark was an avid WTCU, so there was no — now we're talkin' --remember, it was Prohibition. Now you could get a drink at the Eldridge House,--

DOYLE: M-hm! I never knew about this –OK!

GAGER: You could get a drink at the Eldridge House; the Worcester House you could get a drink, but – no way at the Breakers, which was the biggest hotel of all! And my grandmother was a great friend of Bertha Clark, and all they did was talk about the evils of –

DOYLE: Of drinking! Oh, my goodness –

GAGER: God, I thought Billy Sunday was preaching!

DOYLE: Now I heard, from one other person that –something about the possibility that this was kind of like the red-light district of Westerly, at one of those hotels. Is that true? –

GAGER: No. No.

DOYLE: You don't think so? OK.

GAGER: No; I've never heard that story.

DOYLE: Oh, all right; somebody had mentioned that, and I've just –been trying to verify it.

GAGER: Somebody said that?

DOYLE: Yeah. M-hm.

GAGER: It couldn't –no--

DOYLE: OK—That's why, when somebody says something—sometimes I'm xxx--

GAGER: Well, young girls were waitresses –I knew all of them -I—

DOYLE: [Laughing] OK; I just thought I'd mention it and see what you knew!

GAGER: Oh, the Breakers – that would have been--

DOYLE: Then, no; the Breakers –probably not.

GAGER: Oh, the Breakers – that would have been absolutely unthinkable. Worcester House—Blakeleys owned that, and they were sort of –I don't know, but that was -
-The Breakers was the Number One hotel, as far as clientele was concerned. The Eldridge House was political, because Thurm Eldridge was active in Democratic circles.

DOYLE: Where did he live?

GAGER: South County. Oh—I just read there’s no such thing as South County.

DOYLE: No, no; that’s right.

GAGER: Anyway, he was –they lived in Bradford in the wintertime.

DOYLE: So they were Rhode Islanders.

GAGER: Yeah; in Westerly and Bradford. And in fact the Eldridges –Thurm was always – he became Postmaster in Bradford later on.

DOYLE: Oh!

GAGER: His son Charlie, the oldest one, became--the number one man with Gov’nor McGrath, and highly active --I’ve got something to show you on Charlie Eldridge--highly active in R.I politics; in fact he and Governor McGrath started Bonnet Shores.

DOYLE: [With surprise] Oh!

GAGER: Yeah! Then the second one was Ernie. I think you know him I—I think you got a letter from Ernie.

DOYLE: All right, now, which one called me about the --

GAGER: Ernie!

DOYLE: Oh that’s Ernie; I couldn’t remember what his first name was.

GAGER: He was a great football player, high school, in Westerly. Then he went into the State Police. And retired as a lieutenant, in the Rhode Island State Police.

DOYLE: I thought his name was Gerald xxxxx–

GAGER: Oh, now I’ll tell you about Jackie; he was the youngest, he was the youngest son!

DOYLE: He’s the one that called me--.

GAGER: He called you? No, no -- Jackie wouldn't do that, would he?

DOYLE: Yeah, I think that was someone who called me.

GAGER: OK. Charlie was the oldest, Ernie was next; then there's quite a span between Ernie and Jackie. Jackie I practically brought up; I called him my son and brought him up. He went on to quite a career.

DOYLE: What did he do?

GAGER: He went to URI, graduated from URI, became the youngest superintendent in the country when he became Superintendent of Schools of Block Island.

DOYLE: Oh, I didn't know that.

GAGER: Then, after two, three, four years of Block Island, he took over Superintendent of Exeter, Exeter Schools; really built that up. He did a great job on that.

DOYLE: Did you remain friends? I mean do you still hear from him?

GAGER: I see him at every URI football game.

DOYLE: Did you also go to URI?

GAGER: No, no; I went to a little school out in Ann Arbor, called the University of Michigan!

DOYLE: Michigan! [Laughter]

GAGER: I should have worn my letter sweater.

DOYLE: [Again laughing] Now what did you study?

GAGER: Chemistry.

DOYLE: Oh, so you -- like your dad.

GAGER: Yeah. My older brother was a dentist; he went through Michigan Dental School. And my younger brother went to college in Pennsylvania: Franklin and Marshall.

DOYLE: Oh yes; that's where my niece went!

GAGER: He loved Lanca [ster]—He was just elected to the Franklin and Marshall Athletic Hall of Fame. And he died about a year ago. He became a great swimming coach at Niagara University. He taught for 60—He started out – he left Niagara Falls because of a health problem. Went to Miami, got in on the ground floor when Miami--the State of Florida --was developing their community college idea. And he took over at Miami xxxx, professor of Physics and Chemistry; had a great career. He was a tremendous swimmer at Franklin and Marshall--

DOYLE: It's a small school, too; my niece loved it.

GAGER: When he went to school, it would be in the '40's. What was their slogan? Colonial College for Men!

DOYLE: Oh, it was a men's --?

GAGER: Yeah; they didn't go co-ed –

DOYLE: I didn't know that.

GAGER: Michigan was co-ed!

DOYLE: Yeah, very co-ed—

GAGER: One of my classmates was Mike Wallace!

DOYLE: Did you know him?

GAGER: Yeah. We were both out for track.

DOYLE: And Mike Wallace is the –

GAGER: “Sixty Minutes”

DOYLE: “Sixty Minutes Wallace.” OK. He's still with “Sixty Minutes,” isn't he? Is he still on --?

GAGER: Sure! He'll never give up. Those guys don't give up! [Laughter] I got a lot of good stuff –

DOYLE: What did you do --Where did you work, Bob, when you got out of school?

GAGER: I went to work for DuPont in Niagara Falls. And I wound up finding my career working for Bendix.

DOYLE: Did you come -- Did you always come to Quonnie in the summers, no matter what, or was there a period of time when that didn't happen? When were you married?

GAGER: Nah; there was a space from about 1936, 'cause that summer I was on the road with a band.

DOYLE: Do you wish that that's what you would have done, professionally, too? Or is that just--

GAGER: Heck, no! I was starved! Come on --

DOYLE: Sometimes musicians, you know --

GAGER: Yeah; I know. But there must have been four billion bands in those days.

DOYLE: So you met your wife and got married in 1931, is that right?

GAGER: I met her on the campus of the University of Michigan, on a blind date! That's how. She was from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

DOYLE: Did she love Quonnie, too?

GAGER: Yeah. I got her to become a Quonnie-ite.

DOYLE: Just like what I'm doing with my husband. [Laughter]

GAGER: Yeah -- some people don't like the salt water.

GAGER: That's a nice picture.

DOYLE: Yes. Now do you remember it with this --?

GAGER: That's the St. George!

DOYLE: Now, was the St. George also a hotel?

[Each talking over the other, unintelligibly; then laughter]

DOYLE: Or was it just a restaurant?

GAGER: No; it wasn't a restaurant. It was a hotel; you could go in and stay.

DOYLE: It was a hotel. But you didn't know that much about it –

GAGER: Well, we knew the young guy whose family ran it. His name was Charlie Orr, and he was a slummer from Georgia Tech. Don't ask me how he got up to Quonnie, but--.

DOYLE: Oh gosh. Now your house –

GAGER: This was the Leonards' house, and they rented that. And our house—the yellow house now, that I showed you here, is right there.

DOYLE: OK; m-hm.

GAGER: And this is where the boardwalk started, and the Breakers is right there.

DOYLE: Yeah; I understand.

GAGER: So they would parade, Anne, they would parade up along around there and that's about 25 feet high there, go around all the way past Matt Brophy's house at the end.

DOYLE: OK; the Moulthrop's now.

GAGER: Yes.

DOYLE: Eventually I'll see a picture of that, I'm sure.Now, some of the people that you grew up with here other than – you've mentioned the Eldridges—who else stands out in your mind?

GAGER: Well, there was a great guy, that we as kids wondered how daring: he must have come right out of Hollywood: Franklin Purdy.

DOYLE: Oh, I've heard—

GAGER: He lived in Central Beach.

DOYLE: Yes; yeah.

GAGER: Frank was one of the great guys—

DOYLE: Wasn't he somehow connected with the Ecclestons? The Ecclestons are from New Jersey, aren't they?

GAGER: No; no; they're from Westerly and Ashaway. Ray's father owned the Atlantic Lumber Company in Westerly, where UBS is today. Very, very successful. But he blew all his money. He liked to gamble and this and that, and screw up everything. But Ray came from a family with some money. They built the Woodbridge Cottage, just before you got to Central Beach. The Woodbridge Cottage was about three stories high. He had that built-- in fact that was the first one that had an indoor toilet.

DOYLE: And this was —was it built when you were--

GAGER: Yes; he built it in --I would say he built it in maybe '38. [I was in my] early, early 20's; that's about -- yeah.

DOYLE: Now what about Franklin Purdy?

GAGER: Yeah, yeah; Frank Purdy, one of the greats ! He worked for Universal Pictures. He was sort of a troubleshooter, financial troubleshooter for the studio. And he would take the --and he dressed like a movie star. Great guy! And he would talk about -- tell all the stories about taking the Twentieth Century from New York to Chicago. What was the big train that went from Chicago to Los Angeles? Santa Fe Limited, or something?

DOYLE: I don't know --

GAGER: All the artistry traffic between the two coasts --would ride the trains.

DOYLE: Did he bring in some stars into Quonnie?

GAGER: No.

DOYLE: Oh, I didn't know whether he introduced any-

GAGER: No; he was a business --well, the only star or one that became one--was Chester Morris.

DOYLE: Yeah; I've heard of him.

GAGER: But Frank was a -- he was more of a financial wizard.

GAGER: 'Cause he lived on the boardwalk!

DOYLE: And how did you know him?

GAGER: xxxxxx

DOYLE: Oh; OK!

GAGER: Where's that picture? How he got to Quonnie he never told me. But I used to talk with him all the time after he retired and was living in Central Beach. Third house in on the left, as you make the turn.I've got to find that picture; now where was it?

DOYLE: Actually, I might have it –

GAGER: The one with the boardwalk.

DOYLE: Yeah; I know. I'm going to find it. [Obviously searching]

GAGER: Franklin Purdy's house is right there.

DOYLE: OK; so it was—

GAGER: Right there. And then the Houstons', and then the Mount Pleasant, where my uncle rented every year for his family from Cranston.

DOYLE: Now the son that was –was he from—yes, because I remember Janet saying her parents bought that from, I think, the Houstons.

GAGER: Yeah.

DOYLE: OK. And that's –

GAGER: Seems to me the Finlaysons are right in there.

DOYLE: Well, it was the Houstons' cottage.

GAGER: Yeah.

DOYLE: So that's the Summit.

GAGER: Yeah.

DOYLE: Did Mr. Lamperti own that house? On the – or did he.....

GAGER: I think his wife's family owned it. He didn't own it. No; he came because his wife came down.

DOYLE: See, now here's another one Bob; this is taken from where the Kings' cottage I think used to be.

GAGER: Yeah; you're right. That's an old one. Anything that shows the Eldridge House without the three stories is old.

DOYLE: OK. Do you remember it mostly with the three stories?

GAGER: Yeah.

DOYLE: Because that was XXXX

GAGER: I can remember listening to the first All-Star Game, from Chicago on the radio and we were all gathered on the front porch of the Eldridge House. 1932 or three –

DOYLE: See, now here is one --Is that the [Moffits'] ?

GAGER: Yeah; that's the [Moffits'] house.

DOYLE: And that's the end —is this the end of the boardwalk?

GAGER: The boardwalk; yeah. We all used to come down and walk that far. And right here, now, would be where xxx – the big house that sold for a million the other day –that the guy that owned Bess Eaton bought.

DOYLE: Oh.

GAGER: And sold.

DOYLE: I vaguely—

GAGER: Well, you know where the Ecclestons —you went down to the Ecclestons'--

DOYLE: Yes --right --

GAGER: Right there!

DOYLE: Oh, oh – they call it the million-dollar home.

GAGER: That's right! Yeah, yeah.

DOYLE: Yes, I know.
Now—do you know anything about this? We’ve had nobody that’s been able to identify where this was, at the xxx or at Quonochontaug, Rhode Island. Nobody has been able to—you don’t have any idea?

GAGER: I have no idea. We got our mail at the Eldridge Casino!

DOYLE: Oh you did?

GAGER: Yeah. That’s where we got our mail. And he dropped it off at the Eldridge Casino. Not that when we were nine or ten that many people were writin’ to us!

DOYLE: Who’s that?

GAGER: Gretchen’s friend.

DOYLE: Hmm --Oh that’s Orrie!

GAGER: Yeah. xxxxx. He had quite a career in academics in Westerly. And he was a reporter for the *Westerly Sun* for years.

DOYLE: Now where is he now?

GAGER: Boynton Beach, Florida. And grumpy as always.

DOYLE: [Laughing] Can I quote you on that?

GAGER: Yeah; you can quote me on that; I tell him that! Jackie, he lives over in Narragansett. When he was the superintendent of schools on the Island, he called me up one day. I was living in Brookfield, Connecticut, I think. He said, “ I need a --The graduating class is a big one this year: three. Three kids are graduating,” he says. “But I’m having a ceremony for all the classes, and I need a speaker.” I said, “What are you calling me for?” He said, “Well, do you know anybody who might come over to Block Island and speak before maybe forty people and three graduates? “

DOYLE: Did you do it?

GAGER: I said, “Well, let me think about it.” I knew he was quite athletically minded, so I said “Yeah; an old friend of mine who you were brought up with and played ball with in Niagara Falls” –name was Stan Ward, Stanley Ward –he was a – he taught at Moses Brown, but he was also head basketball coach at Brown University.

DOYLE: So you got him?

GAGER: Yeah; I figured what the heck; Stanley would remember us. I called him up one day. “Hey Stan, you want to go to Block Island?” He says, “Why?” I said, I want you as a speaker. “That’s for something new,” he said, “Sure.” So we went over on the ferry, stayed over a night.

DOYLE: Big trip to Block Island, huh!

GAGER: Yeah; they had a great graduation.

DOYLE: That’s wonderful!

GAGER: Stan was a great baseball pitcher; and his closest buddy—one of the closest buddies with Stan was a great pitcher named Sal Magli; pitched for the Giants, the Yankees, and the Dodgers. Came out of Niagara Falls.

DOYLE: Sounds like you’re a big sports fan, right now!

GAGER: I am!

DOYLE: Who do you –

GAGER: Buffalo Bills.

DOYLE: Oh, Buffalo Bills.

GAGER: Yeah; I’m far out in bad territory down here, but I hold my own.
Xxxx [Tape skipping, unintelligible comment.]

DOYLE: Did you--did you go down there after the hurricane?

GAGER: No; my father did.

DOYLE: Oh, and he’s the one who took some of these—

GAGER: These were all taken by my father!

DOYLE: Oh, are you sure your family doesn't—they don't want these?

GAGER: What family?

DOYLE: I don't know; you just said you sent some things to—

GAGER: Just to my daughter's ---

DOYLE: All right – I was just wondering--Well, would you tell her that, if she ever wants them, to come to me?

GAGER: Oh no; that won't [happen].

DOYLE: 'Cause I will –

GAGER: Here, I'll show you some of them –Here's the hurricane – Here's after the hurricane. Know what that is? [pause] – the Weekapaug Inn.

DOYLE: The Weekapaug Inn – yeah. Is that after? I don't think that's after, is it? - because it used to be —

GAGER: This was before the hurricane . I've got a picture – OK; here: Now you know where you were when you were at Jesse's –

DOYLE: Yeah;

GAGER: OK; lookin' east now, toward Central Beach. Everything got wiped out. But that house is still there.

DOYLE: OK –

GAGER: That's an aerator, right in there.

DOYLE: Yup, yup. [Whispering] Oh my goodness.

GAGER: OK; that's what it did to the big sand hill. Oh; OK – here we are; looking at it: Coming down West Beach Road, OK, we're gonna make a right turn by the – there's the road, down towards--

DOYLE: Going towards what now is –like the -- towards the pond.

GAGER: I call it the causeway. Belongs to the Burlingame State Park.

DOYLE: Now do you know whose – is this Wilsons’?

GAGER: That’s Wilsons’, my dear! You’re right.

DOYLE: Mm hmm. So that was –

GAGER: That was Mother Brindley’s, and I think if you look close—come around here; look at the sand they put –

DOYLE: My golly –

GAGER: But that’s Wilsons’ -- that’s the xxx– and that’s the little house that I think was over here that moved a little bit.

DOYLE: But did they just tear it down then, afterwards? Xxxx Did you anything about the people that survived the hurricane in Mother Brindley’s --?

GAGER: Nope – I don’t think they --

DOYLE: They gathered in there.

GAGER: I thought they gathered --

DOYLE: And also at the Sea Breeze—at Kenyon House.

GAGER: I thought they gathered in the yellow house. And brought the xxx [keys?] out.

DOYLE: Well, I guess I’ll have to find that out.

GAGER: And in the Worcester House; they sat up in the back– and Bob Finlayson had a place across the pond.

DOYLE: Bob Finlayson, yeah; yeah; that’s what Janice was telling me.

GAGER: And here’s the breachway later on; nothin’ there. And here’s some more along the road. There’s a good picture of this house, right here see? And the Worcester House and the Eldridge House is right there.

DOYLE: Oh my goodness.

GAGER: That’s the Eldridge House; that cement wall is still there. That’s another picture taken from the Eldridge House, and the ocean view – and there’s nothing!

DOYLE: Nothing.

GAGER: God only knows where the Kings' cottage went.

DOYLE: Yeah; I was wondering about that. See Mr. King lived across the street from us, here.

GAGER: I knew George real well.

DOYLE: Did you?

GAGER: Yeah; great guy!

DOYLE: Growing up, we used to go get him bait for all his fishing trips and so --

GAGER: He and Frank Lamperti went fishing every single day – and argued every single day! That was like the Odd Couple!

DOYLE: [Laughing] But they still got together! Maybe that was the purpose of their relationship.

GAGER: George had the old double-ender, which was everywhere, and is now at Mystic Seaport Museum . . .

DOYLE: Oh it is? I didn't know that.

GAGER: Because it was one of a kind. It's a Coast Guard surfboat, reduced in size.

DOYLE: Did he get it from the Coast Guard?

GAGER: No; Pendleton built it for him. A guy named Pendleton.

DOYLE: XXXX?

GAGER: I don't know which Pendleton it was; it may have been Thomas. He built that for him. He got the plans for the Coast Guard, I guess, for their surfboats, and he scaled it down. And it's the only one of its kind. And now it's at the Mystic Seaport.

DOYLE: I guess I'll have to head over there!

GAGER: And George and Frank would go out every single day, whenever the weather was --!

DOYLE: You know, as long as I knew him, I never knew about his life here at Quonnie. He never told us.

GAGER: He was a schoolteacher; taught Latin.

DOYLE: Latin, yes. In terms of his mother having the King Cottage---

GAGER: There was a good article in the *Tidings* Magazine. I have that if you want it.

DOYLE: Peggy Rase did that.

GAGER: You've got it?

DOYLE: Yeah, yeah.

GAGER: OK. It's a good article, and it's true. And I had my boat tied up in the breachway, too. And George and Frank – well they shared the boat. the big argument one day between them was – and it went on for weeks – “You gotta buy a new motor.” But they couldn't agree as to what kind of a motor to buy, who was gonna pay what, and do this –and it was just like the Odd Couple! You'd think they were Tony Randall and Walter Matthieu.

DOYLE: So you brought your own boat over and kept it down here –

GAGER: Well, we lived -- June and I bought a cottage in '64.

DOYLE: Oh, I didn't know that. What cottage did you have?

GAGER: Right now it's the one that's right down – you know the little cabana down there, the weird lookin' place? OK; you go past the tennis courts. The next on is what I call the Silo (that was built by Charlie Glew [?] and his brother; he was an executive with Atlantic Records) and they built it and called it the Silo, and afterwards bought by a dentist – Kane—I call him killin' Kane--

DOYLE: That's quite a story!

GAGER: And that's the Silo. And there's an empty lot; then the next cottage is ours. We bought –

DOYLE: Has it got a name on it?

GAGER: No. We bought it in '64. It was built by a real estate agency in Watch Hill. And guess who –we were down one time, and saw it; and I found out who built it and wrote to him and got a reply – from Ernie Eldridge! He was workin' for this real estate outfit in Watch Hill. He said, "Sure you can buy it!"

DOYLE: So how long did you have that cottage?

GAGER: 'Til 1989. Cost all of four thousand dollars, I think. [Laughing hard] It was right across from the Pulaskis – Sis Pulaski was one of the famous characters down there.

DOYLE: Now, you mentioned somebody named Grill. Tell me about him.

GAGER: Sam Grills!

DOYLE: I might have to turn this over [the tape].

GAGER: I'll give you a little history of that area, that Goman and Sherman took over and developed it in the late '70's. All that property was owned by my aunt.

DOYLE: And your aunt was –

GAGER: Her name was Jaques. She was an old maid.

DOYLE: What was her name?

GAGER: Jaques: J-A-Q-U-E-S. That was my mother's family, from Cranston. And Aunt Bertha died and somehow Aunt Slim, my Aunt Slim ended up marrying Lou [Moulthrop?] and she came in –she became part owner of all that land, including that house up on the point.

DOYLE: I see. All connections here, aren't there --

GAGER: Yeah; but she – I'm trying to think: it was a late marriage for her. She was an old maid. I think she and Lou had something going earlier. But anyway, they got married, and she must have been in her late '60's. So now we're talking about 1946. Oh, she paid—the house on the point got damaged again in the 1944 hurricane. There was a hurricane in '44, and my father rebuilt the wall for her. And Aunt Slim was getting really along by then, and she wanted to sell the entire property to my father-- \$7,000!

DOYLE: Ouch!

GAGER: Yeah! And he said-- well, there wasn't any problem getting' the \$7,000. The problem was that no one was around, in the family. My older brother was a practicing dentist in Beverly Hills, California; my younger brother was teaching school—

DOYLE: Where were you?

GAGER: -- and I was working for DuPont out in Niagara Falls. So, you know, the family had gone—like families do. And there would be no one to stay around and really look after it . So he said --

DOYLE: Was it just property, or were there cottages on the property?

GAGER: No; just the one cottage. And that was all open land. My uncle used to have a little farm plot down there. Oh, then my dear friend and cousin, Jimmie Jaques, who later went on and became an executive in Nichols &

GAGER: Sala—He came home from the war, with a few bucks in his pocket. And he went to Aunt Slim, and he said, "I'll buy it." She said, "No; I won't sell it to you. You married a Catholic girl."

DOYLE: Oh, wow.

GAGER: Ever New England: Discrimination.

DOYLE: Yup. Yup. Hmmm--

GAGER: Bias. Well, that kinda created a little rift in the family. Because that was Jimmie's aunt. So well – and then, another old family down there, the Moseleys – maybe that will strike a note; you'll see it in Bertha King's write-up –Bill Moseley – he wanted to buy the property. He told Aunt Slim "I'll take care of it in the wintertime for you," because she went back to Cranston in the winter.

DOYLE: And he was down – he was nearby—

GAGER: He said, "I'll take care of it for you" knowing he wanted to buy it. Well, she xxxxx, but she wouldn't even talk to him. So that was out. So the next thing we heard was that a guy from Westerly had come down one Sunday afternoon and looked around. A little Italian guy from Westerly, Sam Grills he was, he had a little electrical shop, in Westerly. Next thing she told my father was: "I'm gonna sell it. I've got a buyer. Somebody wants to buy it. I'm gonna sell it." My father said, "Who?" She said, "Sam Grills." "Who's Sam Grills?" "An Italian from Westerly." [Laughing]

DOYLE: [Laughing] And he was Catholic! Of course!

GAGER: [Laughing still] The irony of it!

DOYLE: Oh my goodness!

GAGER: She sold it to him! So Sam – he’s a con artist and a promoter. Nice little guy, he and his wife; they lived in Mother Brindley’s.

DOYLE: They lived there? !

GAGER: Yeah; that was his office, and house.

DOYLE: Oh.

GAGER: So he immediately brought over from New London Sub Base, like you said, a whole pile of little houses that the Navy was getting rid of! All you had to do was pay for the moving of them! He brought them all over and put them there and –

DOYLE: All over the property.

GAGER: Thirteen! --And built a well. You can see the well right now—

DOYLE: You can? Where is that well?

GAGER: That well is right by the tennis court.

DOYLE: Oh, is it!

GAGER: And it services thirteen—well Sherwood and Goldman [later] made it into thirteen parcels. Sam had I guess maybe ten cottages – shacks—they didn’t pay any attention to septic requirements, permits or anything; they just did anything they wanted to. They never even came down. And Sam ran it for -- oh – good heavens, I’m gonna say thirty years! They had part of that land as a parking lot, right on the corner. And Mrs. Grills used to run out and make sure that anybody that came down the beach road and parked there paid the parking fee!

DOYLE: And they came from all directions!

GAGER: That's right. So then, in the late '70's I think, --Sherwood and Goldman -- Goldman was a real estate man from New London I think, and Sherwood was from Connecticut, and he was a real estate lawyer. So they put this package together, and they parceled it all into thirteen lots and sold it off.

END OF SIDE ONE

DOYLE: Early 70's.

GAGER: Late '70's.

DOYLE: Oh, late 70's—

GAGER: Yeah.

DOYLE: OK. Well, I heard --somebody mentioned this Mr. Grill--Sam Grill, you said--He moved all the rocks in the front of the beach area or something?

GAGER: Don't tell the Coast Guard!

DOYLE: Don't tell the Coast Guard —

GAGER: It was completely illegal. You're not allowed to move rocks!

DOYLE: So what was that all about? I don't understand --what do you do about --

GAGER: He built that little—he built a little breakwater type of thing 'side of the cottage on the point--

DOYLE: Yeah . . .

GAGER: OK; And then he made -- he even made a geodetic marker, a rock that has a brass—the Coast Guard, the Geodetic Survey (the government), had markers in the rocks, like xxxx had. Well, he moved all the land from this place.

DOYLE: You know I thought the original old breachway went through there at one point. Do you know anything about that?

GAGER: Yes. At one time, they tell me, long before-- I would say it would have to be in the 1800's--there was a breachway that ran right—well approximately through where Ray and Gypsy live—on that road--

DOYLE: Yeah—xxxx [at the end of the pond ?]

GAGER: At the end of the pond; there was another breachway there. You're right. I never knew it but on the—

DOYLE: See, when I've taken walks on the beach, where Sam Grill moved all those rocks, I thought that's where the original breachway was.

GAGER: No. No. It was down just a little bit.

DOYLE: Down—which-- East? West?

GAGER: Do we have a picture of my Aunt Bertha's house? It would have been –you remember where the boardwalk came way down?

DOYLE: Yeah, yeah.

GAGER: I think the breachway went in between where the boardwalk and then there was a little section where sometimes you had to walk across the sand to get to the next little cottage—

DOYLE: Yeah –

GAGER: I think that's where the breachway –the breachway ran through there, to the pond.

DOYLE: Yeah; OK. You're probably --

GAGER: You're right! I'd forgotten about that, but that's true. And uh –

DOYLE: See, I talked to um– Hoxie over there – Munroe; I talked to Munroe Hoxie. Do you know Munroe? And he was saying that his grandfather used to talk about that old breachway. That's how I found out about it.

GAGER: The Hoxies would know. That was an old name.

DOYLE: Yeah. . . . That's how I found out about it.

GAGER: . . . These are great pictures.

DOYLE: Oh they are! They're wonderful pictures. Thank you so much; you're really kind to do that. I really appreciate that. Do you want to show me your slides? Or . . . do you still have time?

GAGER: I found them. I have time on my hands! That's a xxxxxx in the key of B-flat!

DOYLE: [Laughing] – You should go on the talking circuits. Lecture circuit! You are –
[More laughter by both]xxxx [voices fading out]

END OF CONVERSATION



