

QUONOCHTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

JEAN SUTHERLAND GERRISH

Interviewed by Anne S. Doyle

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DOYLE: This afternoon I am talking to Jean Gerrish of Quonnie; she's had many years here and will talk about her stories.

GERRISH: My name is Jean Sutherland Gerrish. I was born in August of 1930 and have been coming to the beach since I was five years old. I was born in Naugatuck, Connecticut; and my parents discovered this area through a friend who had a cottage down at Old Quonnie. Matter of fact it was the cottage next to the old chimney that survived the Hurricane [of 1938].

The cottage we visited on Memorial Day, for picnics, was destroyed in the '38 Hurricane. We used to drive down on Memorial Day and had a picnic at the daytime and then drive back. If I remember correctly, it was about four, four and a half or five hours in the car, both ways. We previously had gone to Madison, Connecticut during the summer, usually for the month of July.

And then we decided – they decided that they would come here. And we rented a cottage on the beach front; and I don't remember – Buntz was, I believe, the owner of the cottage. And we first came when I was five years old. And my brothers, who are five and a half and seven years older than I, came as well. The cottage was right on the water, and my only recollection is, when you came off the front porch you stepped into sand, and those horrible little grass spikes went right into your bare feet. The other memory that I have is that there was a bathroom, but it was out on the porch. And I do remember my parents arguing as to whose turn it was to take me down during the middle of the night.

DOYLE: I'd just like to ask you about the family that you visited when you came down for Memorial weekend. Would you tell me about that?

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GERRISH: My mother and father had very dear friends, Harry and Margaret Carter. And Mr. Carter's father was to me Grandpa Carter; I don't know that he ever had a first name. But he and I – I believe he must have been up in his 80-'s at the time—but he and I were fast friends because we were the only ones who would eat the pickled pigs' feet.

DOYLE: Now where did these pickled pigs' feet come from? From the pig farm nearby? – 'cause there were pig farms here.

GERRISH: No; I believe he bought them.

DOYLE: All right. Now, if you could tell me a little bit more about your initial memories of being here when you were at the Buntz's with your brothers.

GERRISH: Well since I was so very young, I don't have very many memories, except my brothers, who were five and seven years older, had a lot more freedom than I did. But one of the things that they did was to go out on the dock into Fresh Pond and go fishing. And at one point they caught an eel, which of course was very scary. Except my mother, amazingly enough, knew how to skin it and cook it! And we ate it for lunch. I don't remember that my brothers were too enthusiastic about that, and I remember not being at all enthusiastic –but we all had to taste it – one bite for me and one bite for you – [laughing]

DOYLE: XXXX there are a couple of stories about the Big Rock, between Central and East Beach –

GERRISH: When I was very little that, of course, was a walk that my mother would take me on. I presume she walked me so that I would take a good nap in the afternoon. and she could have a quiet time. But we did walk up to the Big Rock, and it was HUGE in those days! And of course it remained huge until wartime, when the top of it was blasted off. I think the kids in the area were upset about that, because it was always such a landmark. And the reason for blowing off the top of it -supposedly -- was to --so that none of the Germans could hide behind it when they came on shore in the submarines. But that was certainly one of the landmarks that I do remember.

DOYLE: So after the Hurricane, the Buntz's cottage that you rented was destroyed. And so the following summers—can you tell me about how you spent those summers?

GERRISH: The following summer we drove to Maine, to a town called New Harbor and stayed in a big old hotel. And one of the things I remember was learning how to play croquet. But my mother and father decided that the water was too cold – it was too cold for them, and it was

definitely too cold for me. Although my brothers – it didn't seem to bother my brothers. I do remember feeding the seagulls on the big rocks in the harbor. And then there was an island off the coast, which I don't remember the name of; but anyway we did take a trip out there, and that was great fun.

But finally, which would have been the summer of '40, we rented this cottage. It belonged to the Beckwiths, and we wanted it for the month of July. The people who were going to come for the first week in August couldn't, so we stayed that extra week. And then in the fall, the Beckwiths contacted my mother and father and said that they were planning to put the house on the market and were we the least bit interested? I remember driving up to Bristol, Connecticut, with my parents; at that point I think both boys were in college. And so I went up with them, and I remember being with Jane Beckwith. We were sent to her bedroom while the parents talked about the price of the house and the conditions and so on and so forth. And that was probably September, October, or early November. And when we drove home, I was told that we now owned the cottage.

One of the fond memories that I've had, of that first summer renting the cottage, was the ability to be independent enough to go down on the beach all by myself. At that time I was nine years old. I was allowed to go down, and I could wade, but I couldn't go swimming. And one day, I was down and the tide was out, and I was playing on MY big rock, the big slanty rock. And there, swimming around the bottom of it was a **muskkrat!** Which I managed to catch in my hands and proceeded to walk back up to the cottage, showed it to my mother, who promptly cleaned it and cooked it for my lunch. That's one of my best memories – which my grandchildren have only heard about 35 times!

One of the occasions that I remember: the upper circle of older women, my mother, had various friends in for tea in the afternoon—a more formal occasion than we have now. And one time she had Mrs. Van Ost come. Mrs. Van Ost [earlier] had a cottage on the waterfront. So when Mrs. Van Ost came in, she looked at the breakfront and said, "That's my breakfront!" And it turned out to be also her dining room table, and I think that there was maybe one chair that was also hers. And apparently, the Beckwiths, after the Hurricane, had gone out and found these pieces of furniture and brought them in and incorporated them into their household. My mother, of course, was mortified at this occasion and offered to give them back to Mrs. Van Ost, but Mrs. Van Ost very nicely said, "Oh no; I've replaced it with new stuff."

Another recollection: When we bought the cottage—I guess it wasn't very apparent to all of us when we rented, but when we bought the cottage, we found that the Beckwiths had very different color decorating ideas: almost all of the furniture was black and orange and

green. Anything that was painted was painted those colors. It did take a while to get all of those colors removed from the household.

Another recollection that is a more recent one: I was planning to recover some pillows. And when I took off the old covers, I found that there were two pillows that had been very nicely needlepointed; and I knew that they were not from my family, so they had to be from the Beckwiths'. So I took them over to Jane Beckwith, who at that time had married Jack Van Ost, and she was thrilled because her grandmother had done the needlepoint. And that was a fine thing, to pass that back to the original family.

DOYLE: We're going to continue our conversation, Jean and I; and this now is **October the 15th, 2003**. And Jean will be talking a little bit about her teenage years at Quonnie.

GERRISH: One of the fun parts of going to the beach in the summertime was the fact that there were so many young people. We usually had what we called "gangs" of about thirty kids. And they were probably within a three-year age span. And we did everything together. We sat on the beach together; we played cards on the beach; we went swimming together; we lay in the hot sand to get warm again; we had lunch together. Very often, in the evenings, we would have dinner with our parents, and then we would all go down to the Bowling Alley –together. We all had the same time restrictions; if one of us had to be home at 10:00, all of us had to be home at 10:00. And we were together all the time. Then at the end of July, when the July renters were getting ready to leave the cottages, and make way for an August group, then we'd have parties. Just about every person had a party to say goodbye to everybody who was leaving. And that was great fun. Sometimes they were dances, sometimes they were picnics, sometimes they were just movie parties or something like that.

And then, on the first of August, in would come the August group. And there was another new gang. The people who were regulars, who stayed on for the whole summer were the core of it, and then all of the new renters. And if any young person was new to the area, they were immediately brought into the group. And again, at the end of August, we had parties for everybody who was leaving. So that was most of our time.

One of the fond memories that we had, the girls—and this would be probably age thirteen, fourteen or maybe fifteen – we had what we called a sunshine and hat group club – And we would make great, elaborate plans to walk, to take a walk on a sunny morning; around 10:00 we would leave, and we would walk up [the beach] to Charlestown breachway. But we would make sure that Mrs. Waterman would tell Chick (or George as he was called later)-- make sure that he

found out where we girls had all gone. And so trailing us by about half an hour, three-quarters of an hour, would be – The Boys. And we would get up to a certain point and then we would strip – and we would go skinny dipping! And it was great, great fun! But we were always out of the water and back dressed by the time we could see the boys coming up the beach.

The boys would join us, we would continue our way up to Charlestown Breachway, we would have our picnic—we all carried our sandwiches, our water, our juice or soft drinks, what have you; we would have our picnic and then we would all walk back. Now, we always said that it was four miles, and the four miles up was a lot of fun and very easy. But four miles back was not as easy. And by the time we hit ---oh, say the two--two and a half mile mark – we would be singing in order to keep walking. But that was one of our fun,, fun times. And we did that every year, I think, for four or five years. And the boys never caught on! But thanks to Mrs. Waterman, they were always in attendance.

Another fond memory: if we woke up on any particular day and it was pouring rain, we would all get into our slickers, and gather in somebody's house; and we would make plans for the day. And we would have lunch, and then we would walk, from the cottages up to the main road and to Brightman's. And at that point they had buses going from Charlestown Naval Air Station into Westerly. And they were of course for the most part filled with sailors, but there was always room for the 15 of us, or the 18 or us that had decided we would go to the movies.

So we would take the bus into Westerly, we would go to the movies; and by the time we came out, of course the sun was shining! And it was a gorgeous day—and there we were in our slickers, our boots or whatever we had. And then we would go down to Vars, the drugstore on the corner; and we would have a soda or an ice cream or what have you. And we would catch the bus.

And when we would get home, immediately when the bus dropped us off at West Beach Road, we would walk that mile—it's about a mile—back to the cottages, get into our bathing suits, and go swimming. So even though it was a rainy day, which was a so-called lost day, we made the most of it. And there was always a big group of kids going together so there was never any question of safety. Nowadays, I don't think any parent would be willing to let a group of kids at a young age take the bus and go into Westerly on their own.

One of our great memories was our so-called Christmas reunions. There were quite a few families who lived in the New Jersey area around Tenafly and Englewood and so on. So the parents would include us for a reunion. And they would make plans for us to do special things like ice skating and whatever the occasion was. So we

would all gather. I know that Bill Saunders would come, from Toledo, Ohio; Nancy Bray would come from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; George and Carol Waterman and some of their friends would come from Providence; Hennie would come from New Rochelle; I would come from Naugatuck, and we would all gather. And there would be maybe 20, 25-odd kids.

And they would plan different occasions. One of the things that I remember was that it was the first time I'd ever had lasagna. And HUGE platters of lasagna. But if you can imagine feeding 25 kids with great appetites --! But that is one of the fond memories. We did that, I

think, once in New Jersey, then once in Providence at the Watermans', and then I think maybe another year or two in New Jersey. But that seemed to be the local area with the most kids, and each family had maybe three, four or five kids staying.

But that was how close we were; we kept in touch with each other all year long. And I would say even after I was married I was in touch with probably 10 or 12 of the kids. We formed very, very close friendships; Carol -- Carol Waterman-- and I are still very close friends and corresponding, even though she lives in Basel, Switzerland. Hennie Brown Claypool and I were bestest friends, and she was my maid of honor in my wedding. Nancy Bray and I still correspond, particularly at Christmas time. But a lot of kids have drifted away. And Mary Lou Welsh is still living in New Jersey. I used to see her brother at the beach; I keep in touch with her that way. So that was part of it: the friendships were not just summer friendships. They were all year long, and we all knew what was happening with each one of us.

How can I begin this? Uh-- I was not a good breakfast eater, and my mother insisted that I have juice, to begin with, and then she really didn't like the idea of my having coffee. But she allowed my kind of coffee because it was mostly cream: it was probably the palest beige coffee you've ever seen! But into the coffee I dipped eight to ten pieces of toast. And ate them with the coffee flavor on them. I don't think I ever drank the coffee; I just dipped! So since I was a late riser, and I had chores to do, usually the kids would come to our cottage and wait while I either did the chore or finished my eight to ten pieces of toast dipped in coffee. And that was one of the things that Carol remembered, about having to wait for me while I either did my chore or finished my breakfast.

We all had chores to do before we were allowed to go to the beach. I remember one that I had to do was sweep down the stairs from the second floor to the first floor. And that was just a big bother with dust pan and brush, sweeping all the sand that my brothers (of course) had brought in --I didn't bring any sand in. But things like that: you had to do dishes and set the table—simple chores, but they were things that

you had to do before you could do anything else. And that was part of our life in those days.

One of my concerns, nowadays, is the thought of organized recreation for the kids. I like the idea of tennis lessons, and I love the idea of the baseball; but to organize kids so that they are busy all day long—I just can't find myself approving that, having grown up there with a gang of 25 to 30 kids in July and another gang in August, and we planned our own recreation. We had things that we liked to do—we did a lot at the pond, we did a lot at the beach, we played tennis, we did a lot of different things. And my recollection is that we only did one, mean, nasty, horrible thing.

There was a family who lived on the corner of Ocean View and Spray Street. They had a front porch, but they were very – they did not understand teenagers, and they did not want us walking on their grass. And so one night when they were not at home, we took their porch furniture and we ran it up their flagpole. And that was the only mean, nasty thing that I can remember. Of course they knew who had done it, and of course they called the parents. And we all had to go back, and we all had to take the furniture down from the flagpole and put it back on the porch. And that was the end of that.

One of our recreation things was to – a lot of the kids had sailboats, of all sizes and shapes. And one young man who lived in Topsy, whose family owned Topsy, was known as Ed Gately; and he owned a boat which was called a Beatle, which was a flat-bottomed centerboard with a gaff-rigged sail. He had asked me if I would crew for him, and then we entered the Weekapaug Yacht Club races. So on Wednesdays and on Saturdays, we would race from 1:00. And we would race from the Weekapaug Yacht Club all the way to the end of Quonnie Pond and then back again. And in the morning, his father would take us over to the Quonnie landing, and we would sail the boat down to the Yacht Club, and then we would clean the bottom, scrape the bottom of barnacles, and then oil the bottom so we would go faster! Then we would go back and race from 1:00 until say 3:00—3:30, depending upon the weather and the wind. And after the race was over, we would sail the boat back.

So one day, we were headed back after the race, and a storm came up. So we gaff-rigged the sail and made it smaller, so that there would be less of an air pocket. But in spite of all our precautions, we tipped over! And we were able to tow the boat to the Shelter Harbor dock. And somebody took pity on us and called his father, who came over to get us and realized that we would still have to get the boat back to the Quonnie landing. So at any rate we waited for the storm to pass by, and then we sailed the boat back to the Quonnie landing. And it was one of the most exciting times, to have had the experience of changing the sail and tipping over and doing all the right things. We clung to the

boat, we towed the boat, and we were still very safe. So that was a wonderful experience. My mother didn't think it was that much of a wonderful experience, because she was so worried and so concerned. But for the two of us, it was a great day.

Later on in the summer, about the first of August, Mary Ann Romney and her family came to the beach; they had rented a cottage. And she was this darling -xxxx she's darling---darling little blonde with bright blue eyes, and Ed Gately just fell madly in love with her. So he asked her to crew for him, leaving me out in the cold! But the first race came on; and she did not want to scrape the bottom, and she did not want to oil the bottom. So he took care of that, and then they lost the race! They didn't win! That was perhaps a Wednesday, and on Saturday it happened again. So the following Wednesday, I was back as main crew. And we won; we won for the entire summer. We were the fastest boat on the pond, in that size. So that was a fun thing. I sill like Mary Ann but I still tease her about taking Skip Gately away from me!

END OF RECORDING



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