

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

MICHAEL GLASSON

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Interviewed by Peter Mogielnicki in Charlestown

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A: My name is Michael Glasson. I was born May 17th, 1954. So, I had my 67th birthday here a week or so ago.

Q: To get started, Mike, can you go back to the stories that you heard about how your family first discovered Quonochontaug and how it all got started?

A: Yes. Sure. Actually, it started out with my grandparents on my mother's side. Their last name was Coe, C-O-E. And they were good friends with a local lady of this area, and from Charlestown named Lila Sewell. She owned a few houses around here. Since my grandparents were friends, they learned about the possibility of renting a place during the summertime and enjoying the beach and so on. So, the first place that my grandfather and grandmother rented actually was this house right here, known as the Barnacle. A beautiful, old, three-bedroom house that my grandfather would rent. He would let his son and his family have it for the month of July, and then his daughter, who was my mother, have it, and her family obviously, for the month of August. And so, that's my rendition of how we got down here in the first place. I have seen pictures of myself on the beach down here in diapers. I was pretty young when we first came down here.

Q: Back at that time, and probably not when you were in diapers, but a little later, what about the early recollections and early memories?

A: Gosh, there are so many. Some of them are a little bit vague. But I do remember my dad and my uncle, his brother-in-law, owning a little wooden boat with a motor on it. We used to take it over to Ninigret Pond when I was a little boy with my brother and sister, late sister, that is, and go looking for winter flounder, flat fish, as we used to call them. That, for sure, is one of my earliest memories as a little boy, is fishing off the side of this boat catching these delicious, little flat fish.

Q: Which are no longer around.

A: Aren't they?

Q: They're gone.

A: That's too bad. I didn't know that.

Q: The winter flounder is no longer a fishery in Rhode Island.

A: They're absolutely history, huh?

Q: I don't know if they're absolutely gone, but there's not even a season.

A: That's too bad. I'm sorry to hear that.

Q: It's good to have your recollection.

A: It's kind of a wonderful thing we used to do. In fact, as we got a little bit older, Dad actually got himself a little 14-foot Boston Whaler, and he moored it over in the Quonnie Pond. Of course, we'd take that out as kids and catch them over there as well, the flat fish, that is. Once in a while a little blue fish too. So, I've been fishing down here as long as I can remember, both fishing with rod and reel and also spearfishing. I had a really good friend down here, who is still one of my best friends of all times, whose family rented a house right here on the beach that was initially owned by the Dowd sisters, called the Neptune Cottage. Actually, they owned three houses right down this dirt road here. So, Rick and I became good friends as little boys, and we have remained—in fact, I just came from his place in Florida a couple of weeks ago where we were tarpon fishing. He and I used to go spearfishing right out here off these rocks, and look for black fish or even stripers once in a while. We were doing that since we were pretty young. Probably young teenagers would be my guess. I don't think my folks would have let me have a spear gun any time before that perhaps. My life down here has been pretty much summertime oriented, although my parents did buy a house right behind us over here that at one time was called the Hobby House. And to some of us, it still is. Dad and Mom actually bought that from the same woman, that is Lila Sewell, one winter day when she called up Dad on the phone and said, "I'm going to pass away tomorrow, so you have to come down today and buy this house." She was very serious about it. That didn't exactly happen, but what did happen is that Dad bought the house in 1962. And so, we came down usually around Easter for the first time, and unbuttoned the house, took the shutters off the windows and doors and so on. We'd come down most weekends. And then in the summertime we'd spend—at least the kids. Dad was still working. But we'd spend most of the summer down here enjoying what we've always called Dowd Beach, after the Dowd sisters. It goes by different names, but that's the one that I've always used. So, Hobby House actually became a permanent residence for my mother and dad in 1984, when Dad and Mom retired. And a couple of years before they retired, they had worked on making the house, which originally was just a seasonal cottage—there was no insulation in it to speak of and so forth, like a lot of the old, little

cottages, which are quickly disappearing around here. And they fixed it up to make it a year-round home. They moved there in '84 from Upstate New York, where I was originally from. We all were, obviously. And so, Mom and Dad lived there until fifteen years ago when they took up residence at assisted living over in Mystic at StoneRidge Assisted Living over there. They're both gone now. Dad just passed away last year at almost exactly a year ago now, May the 27th of last year. He was 98 years old.

Q: Michael, I think somebody—maybe it was you, maybe it was your brother—told me that your dad was an engineer for nuclear subs, and was a submariner for a while, as I understand it.

A: He was in the Navy.

Q: He was in the Navy?

A: In World War II. But never was stationed on a submarine.

Q: But Peter, your brother, told me that there was a bed in a window up in Barnacle that was important to him.

A: Yes. And that's a pretty interesting story. When World War II ended, Dad was ordered to come back to the States. He was skippering a landing craft during the war for about a year and a half, and he's got several, what we always called, near-miss stories. When he was coming back from Japan, they stopped over in Hawaii. Shortly after they left, on their way back to San Francisco, they lost all of their directional and compass capabilities on the ship. And so, Dad skippered that ship home all the way into San Francisco by way of the North Star using just the night sky as his guide. In the Barnacle, where we used to stay, the upstairs window there, which is the bedroom that they would stay in usually, he always liked to position his bed such that he could look out at night and see the North Star, because it meant an awful lot to him.

Q: It sounds like it means a lot to you too. That's quite a story.

A: Yes.

[pause in audio]

A: The house, Come and Go, that ended up in the '54 Hurricane, was Ted Glasson's house. And that came to be, because my great aunt, who had a cottage there, really liked Ted's in-laws and Ted, and actually a few days before she passed away in the winter, she literally had Ted come down and made him a deal he couldn't refuse to buy that house, because she wanted him to have that house. And to this day, Ted is still with us. And now that he's sold that house, when he can, he comes down and rents Barnacle. Which brings to mind another interesting story. We've had to accommodate him specifically, because in World War II, he was a Navy officer, and he ended up having to bring the ship back from over in Asia—over there—because the captain took ill. And he followed a star

back. So, whenever he's up in Barnacle, he has us turn the bed around, so when he wakes up at night, he can see that star, because that star just means so much to him, because it got them safely back.

Q: That's a beautiful story.

A: He got all of his shipmates home safely. Not that there was really any real modernistic GPS, like there is nowadays, on board the ship in 1945, but he had to just use the night sky to get all of his shipmates home.

Q: That's a wonderful story.

A: Which he did. And many of them actually stayed good friends up until ten years ago or so when Dad really wasn't capable of getting around much anymore. So, since 1945, several of his shipmates and Mom and Dad and their wives would get together. They came down here a couple of times. Mom and Dad went out to Ohio and places like that where his shipmates lived. That was really quite touching.

Q: I bet when they got together, there were some amazing stories that got swapped.

A: Yes. Some I probably can't repeat.

Q: So, from here, you can see the house that your mother and dad bought.

A: Yes. Right behind us here, this small, gray house is what I still call the Hobby House. It started out a little bit smaller than it is now, but not very much smaller. Mom and Dad had a little bit of work done on the upstairs to make it a little bit more convenient to have their kids come and visit. Also, my dad's mother, my grandma, lived with Mom and Dad. Dad's father passed away at an early age, but Dad's mom lived into her 90s. And for most of that, she lived in this piece on the end of the house, which everyone down here knew as Grandma's house.

Q: Yes. I remember her there. They put that addition on just for her.

A: Yes. It actually used to be the garage for Hobby House. Dad turned it into a self-sufficient, little apartment with a little stove and a little bedroom and its own little bathroom and so forth. Grandma lived there for many, many years until she couldn't get around anymore, and then moved on into Watch Hill Manor, which she really didn't like very much. So, that's the Hobby House where we used to come for 40 years, or something like that. Well, longer than that. Fifty years. I beg your pardon. And then before that, we were here at the Barnacle for most of the early years renting it with our families. So, this is our little corner. This is the Glasson corner from Hobby House over to Barnacle. Of course, as kids, the very first people that we met down here, and became instant friends with, was Peter's family, and brothers and sisters. Peter had twin brothers and sisters, Jack and Janey. And sadly, Janey is not with us anymore. But my sister, my

brother and I all became great friends with Jack and Janice. Peter is a little bit older than us, but we were friends anyways. Fishing buddies, for sure.

Q: I remember a lot of tears when September would roll around and everybody would have to part.

A: Everyone would go their separate ways back to wintertime in Connecticut or in New York state. We had to go back. It was very sad. It was always very joyful when springtime came around. We would come to the Hobby House. Before we even unlocked the door, we'd run around on the path and up here to the Mogielnicki's cottage, which was called Patches—it still is, the piece that's there—and see if the Mogielnickis were here yet, because that was the most important thing was to find out if Peter and Jack and Janice were here yet.

Q: After getting your feet wet in the ocean, for sure.

A: Right. We had to put our feet in at least. Of course, that would be around Easter time, and the water temp might be around 50-ish. Chilly.

Q: Here's where you used to get your feet wet. Do you want to tell us any spots down there?

A: There's a few pretty special spots down here in these rocks. As a young boy, there's nothing quite like a bunch of rocks that are full of crabs and seaweed and snails and everything under the sun to go look around in. It's kind of like one, giant tidal pool out there just full of life. It's where I hung out, was in the rocks, at least until I got old enough to surf.

Q: They haven't changed much.

A: No.

Q: They've changed a little, but they haven't changed much compared to this side of the beach.

A: I've actually seen some changes, which I can detect.

Q: Really? Well, as a geologist, I'm sure that caught your attention.

A: Perhaps it was my careful observation of the New England granite. But some of the little pools that I used to play around in have boulders where there didn't used to be boulders, and that sort of thing. This is kind of where we lived from about September on, at least my dad and I and Peter and other folks who we knew down here, because this is where the striped bass would migrate right past here. There would usually be a blue fish or two in the mix with them. So, my dad was a great fisherman. He was taught by a fellow named Wally Gabbit, when we first started coming down here. We were watching these fellows fishing off the rocks right over here catching striped bass after striped bass, and

so Dad went and talked to them. “How do you do this? I want to learn this. This looks like fun. It’s also pretty good table fare.” Wally and his friend, Bill, took Dad down to Misquamicut early one morning to teach them a little bit about fishing off the beach. After the fishing, by about 8:00 in the morning, Wally said, “Come on, Ted, let’s go get some breakfast.” So, they went up to the back of the station wagon that they were in, and pulled out a six-pack of Budweiser and a lemon meringue pie, and proceeded to have breakfast. That’s some kind of breakfast, I’m sure. So, in the fall—September, October and sometimes into November—we’d be camped on these rocks every morning and every evening and sometimes in between, and tried to catch fish. As I got a little bit older, as a teenager, sometimes I didn’t get up at the crack of dawn, but one morning I came down about 8:30 or 9:00, and of course Dad was out in the rocks, as usual. He was not in a very good mood. So, I said, “What’s up, Dad,” and he said, “The watch, which Mom gave me for our anniversary present a few years ago, I slipped and fell on a rock, and it busted the band and it’s gone. It’s somewhere in these rocks. I’ve been looking and looking, and I can’t find it anywhere.” So, I said, “Okay. Let me look around.” It must have been low tide. I used to be the kid who would find stuff. I’d always find old lures on the beach, or whatever. So, after about five minutes, I said, “Oh, there it is, Dad, right there.” It was down halfway underneath a rock and getting washed over by the waves. I made Dad pretty happy that day.

Q: I bet you still have that watch.

A: We do. Yes. Actually, my son, Michael, now wears it.

Q: It still works?

A: Yes. We had it fixed up a little bit for Christmas a couple of years ago, and gave it to my son. It’s still in our family. As I was saying, these rocks were a very special place to us kids. We spent an awful lot of time down in here. My sister, Mary, especially had some favorite rocks down here. She had her own little kitchen, as she called it. She had a stove rock, and it had a kitchen sink rock. We always called these the crabbing rocks. We would come down with an old steel pale and some crunched up mussels and catch green crabs for Dad to use for black fish bait. Dad would go fishing either out front here, or else he’d go down in front of the old hotel down there on what we always called the big rocks. He’d get out on one of them, that also had a name. It was whale rock. It was kind of a long, thin one down there on the left side closest to the water. He was brought up using a hand line to fish for black fish. He would use an old tarred fishing line that was common back in England, which is my heritage. My grandfather and grandmother came over from England when they were about 21 years old. My dad was actually a first-generation American. He would fish. He would wind up and throw those heavy weights out there as far as he could. There was always a rock out there that he tried to get right next to. That big one sticking out of the water. And he would always bring home a black fish or two, which were sure good to eat. But he did it all by hand, until he got broken into by Bill and Wally to actually use fishing rods.

Q: Are there any other areas that you think ought to be covered? You've got a lot of history here.

A: Indeed. Jack and Janice would remember this, I'm sure, and maybe you do to, Peter. But this rock down here, which has kind of a sloped back to it, was really our favorite rock of all. It was known as the jumping rock. The sand shifts all the time down here. If the rocks in front of jumping rock were covered with sand, then we would run up the back and see who could jump the farthest off of there.

Q: Did you ever used to jump off this seawall?

A: All the time. We tried to beat our own records and see how far. We'd take a big, long running start and just see how far we could come out here. Also, these rocks out in front of these couple of houses, these houses, except for Gurneys, weren't here back in those days, but some smaller places were, except for the Neptune. That was a pretty big house. Anyways, those rocks out in front of those houses, which are used for a sea break for hurricanes and so on, were a lot of fun for us to play in too. There were lots of hidden caves and places to jump from as kids, places to hide and seek. You name it. Another thing we used to love to do down here too was, you can see the darker color in the sand down there on the beach, that's an iron mineral—I'm a geologist, by the way. It's an iron mineral that is magnetic, as you would expect. And so, we used to collect black sand. It was kind of a special, fun thing to do with magnets as kids. Kids, especially boys, love magnets. This beach has got a million memories. There are just so many. The more I talk, the more I think of more memories.

Q: I hope it brings you good dreams tonight, Michael.

A: It always brings me good dreams. I've had such good fortune to have a place like this that I could come with my family, and made lifelong friends down here, like Peter and Nancy and all of the Mogielnickis. Peter's mother was incredibly special to all of us down here. Mrs. M, as she was often called, loved kids. And she always treated kids with humor and dignity. We all loved her to death. Honestly, a wonderful lady.

Q: That's nice of you to say that.

A: She was a woman of the beach, for sure.

Q: That's for sure. Lila Sewell played a bit part in her life, too, which is on another tape elsewhere.

A: Good. I was going to say that since we were little, a lot of things have changed around here. A lot of the people have changed. And over time, we've seen a lot of new building down here, some absolutely magnificent homes being built down here. We made a lot of great, new friends by the new people coming in. Things change. Sometimes it's a little bit sad. Other times it's just fine, because that's the way the world works. Along with the change usually comes good, new friends. And so, that's how I think about it.