

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

LINDA LOW GRIFFITH

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Interviewed by Leah Bradshaw

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Q: This is August 3rd. I'm with Linda Low Griffith. I'm Leah Bradshaw and Linda Low Griffith. Linda, when did your family come to Quonnie, and how did they get here?

A: My family came to Quonnie via Misquamicut and Watch Hill. My grandparents built a house in Misquamicut on the water right near the bridge to Weekapaug in 1925 when my father was three. They stayed in that house until the 1938 Hurricane, at which point the house was lifted up across Atlantic Avenue and into that pond in Misquamicut. Regrettably, the people they had rented it to all drowned. My grandmother was so upset, she said to my grandfather, "We will not rebuild here on the water in Misquamicut. I want to go to the Ocean House instead," because the Ocean House in the 1938 Hurricane, all that happened to them was a few shutters fell off and few windows broke. So, from 1939 until she passed away in 1968, my grandmother and my grandfather, me and my father or somebody else would drive them from Scarsdale to Watch Hill in July, and plop them on the porch—that lovely round porch with the rocking chairs, and they'd spend all of July and all of August there. I can show you a picture of me age one walking down the front steps of the Ocean House. When I was first born, that's where I went two weeks each summer with my grandparents and my parents. Then when my next sister was born, Sara, we did the same thing. They'd put us up in an extra room or two and a bath. When it got to be three children, my grandfather aid to my father, "This is getting to be quite expensive having you at the Ocean House for a couple of weeks. Why don't we look for an actual house for you to rent?" So, they looked for a place, and found one in Quonochontaug. In 1954 we rented our first house, which was Key Waden.

Q: Where the Thorntons live?

A: Correct. Where the Thorntons live now. We were there for three years. That's what brought us here.

Q: We used to play croquette on that Pond. Now there's no room, because it's covered with a house. Whose house was that?

A: I don't know. All I know is my father asked for a place two years of the three that we were there, and he thought they were too high. After that, we went to Four Castle, which is on Surfside Avenue just as you make the turn. They had a black porch that they used to oil, so we'd all come in—all three of us—in our bare feet with little black feet and make a mess in the house. My mother said, "We're not coming here anymore."

Q: Four Castle was the Graham's.

A: Yes. That was the Graham's house. After one year there, we settled in the house we stayed in for almost twenty years. That was the Gray Lady. Basically, I grew up at the Gray Lady here. Then once I was out of college—actually, the year before I married my husband, Graham, so it was '72, my parents bought 38 Lupus Avenue, because they were thinking about retiring, and that had two lots, which meant they could expand the house, add a family room, add a two-car garage and have something that would be suitable for year-round living.

Q: So, it was your grandparents that bought?

A: Correct. My paternal grandparents.

Q: What is your earliest memory of Quonnie?

A: My earliest memory is probably baseball, because we weren't that far away from the playground. I remember going there and discovering that I could play on a team. I was seven. I met Gretchen O'Brien there. We started becoming very close friends. I really liked the baseball, which was something I didn't have at home in Connecticut. I really liked that, on top of going to the beach. I took tennis lessons that year from Bernham McCloud. He taught me how to play tennis. My first memory, baseball was the thing that really hit me as a great thing to be able to do in addition. There is swimming and beaches in Darien, Connecticut, but it can't compare with here. But they're there. So, the baseball was a cool thing.

Q: Did you enjoy tennis?

A: I loved tennis. Loved it, loved it, loved it. My sisters and I adored it. They were better than I was. We had these annual tournaments, and you got this nice statue that was tin or something. They were six inches high. My sisters would get one every year. I would usually get beaten by either Margaret Fogarty, who was three or four years older than I was. When she left, the one who beat everybody was Mary O'Brien all the time. So, I might get to the semi-finals, and then Mary would squash me. Pam Nording was pretty good too, but Mary was unbeatable.

Q: She became a golfer.

A: I didn't do that until I was in my 40s. I didn't like it.

Q: So, you enjoyed baseball and tennis. What about swimming in the ocean? Did you do it every day?

A: Every day. A couple times a day. When we got to the Gray Lady, I fortunately had the mother-in-law room, which was detached from the house in the back. I had my own entrance, my own bedroom, my own bath. So, I could come and go as I pleased. Gretchen, my best friend, her family's house was only four houses away.

Q: So, you could walk.

A: Yes. You could walk across the back yard. She'd come a lot just to get some peace and quiet, because being one of six kids at her house—the oldest, and one of six—there were always guests there. Usually there were ten guests, ten kids and twelve to fourteen people for dinner. It was not exactly a place you went for quiet and rest. So, as we grew to be good friends, Gretchen would come stay with me a lot. We'd get up at sunrise and go swimming then. As we got older, we'd go moonlight swimming, which is also something my parents liked to do. And skinny dipping once or twice. We were a little shy about that. It was sort of skinny dipping.

Q: Would you go swimming before breakfast, in the afternoon and the evening?

A: Yes. All of it. You would just eat it up. The water is everything here. You can hear it. It puts you to sleep. Even here, back at my own house here on Bayview Road, at night you can hear the waves, if there is any activity. It kind of lulls you to sleep. It's wonderful.

Q: What were your family traditions related to Quonnie?

A: We came here in August usually until we bought a house. We rented in August. You couldn't eat food on the beach, which is still true. About once a week, during the fourweek vacation, my father would check the weather report, and we would decide which day, and we'd make little sandwiches and stuff, put them in a picnic basket and stick them in the back of the car, because you couldn't eat at the beach. And then the three of us, my sisters and I, would go sit on the tailgate and have a tailgate lunch. That was a big treat.

Q: At the beach?

A: At the beach in the parking lot. Not on the beach. In the parking lot. The other tradition that was how my parents named their house when they bought their home on Lupus Avenue—their cottage—was sun dances. When we were young, and he'd be here on vacation from his arduous job in New York, he'd know if a nor'easter was coming, and once you know weather, you know that a nor-easter comes in for three days. We, as children, were clueless about what a nor-easter was. The first day it rained, he's be like, "It's nice to have a day without the sun. We'll do some fun things. Maybe we'll go to one of the museums. Maybe we'll do this. Maybe we'll go to Westerly and check out the stores or see a movie." So, he'd plan something to take his three daughters to do. And then the second day he'd go, "Uh-oh, it's still raining. I don't like this. This is going to ruin my three-week vacation. I don't like it. We've got to get ready to do a sun dance." And we'd go, "Do we do it today?" And he said, "I don't know. I'll let you know later today." So, in the afternoon he went, "No. We're not going to do it today. Tomorrow morning we will do the sun dance," on the third day. We all had these pots and pans, and we'd get out in the front yard and hit the pots and pans with wooden spoons, dance around the house, calling to the sun goddesses and gods to please stop the rain and bring the sun. Low and behold, later that day, or the next day the sun always came out. So, when my parents had their own house here, after renting for twelve or fifteen years—my father was too parsimonious to believe the prices here, but he finally relented and bought a house—they named it Sun Dance. That was in '72. In '98, when my husband and I, Graham, decided we'd like a place of our own rather than renting or waiting for vacancies at my parent's house, we named our Moon Dance to create a family Sun Dance and Moon Dance. It happened to be a few years after the lovely son Moon Dance had been recorded, so it was a song that we liked as well. It was a double meaning.

Q: Did you play cards?

A: Yes. We did play cards. I'm trying to think. You can have four spades. There was a card game that we played a lot, and I can't remember what it was.

Q: Gin Rummy?

A: No. It wasn't Gin Rummy. We played Hearts a lot. We also played Monopoly on cloudy days. Hearts was the card game, and Monopoly was the board game. Occasionally Parcheesi.

Q: Did you pick berries here?

A: No. I don't know why.

Q: Did you fish?

A: My father taught us how to get crabs off the rocks here at the beach. We'd go down with a piece of bacon, a string and get some mussels. We'd smash the mussels. We'd tie the string around the mussel with the bacon, and we'd go out a little bit, tiptoeing on the rocks and being careful not to slip. The water was up to your waist. You were on this big rock, and you'd put the string down. You can see the little crabs coming out from all the crevices, and we'd take them up and catch them. Then we'd take them home, and we'd show them off. Then my parents would say, "Take them back and set them free."

Q: Did you fish or go clamming?

A: My father went fishing regularly off of the wharf at Watch Hill with my grandfather and with friends of his after my grandfather passed in '72. When I was eight, I had the privilege of going fishing with my father and his friends into the ocean off Watch Hill. We went out at some ungodly hour, like 6:00 in the morning. We went out into the ocean to fish. We came back at lunch. It was a day where there were huge groundswells, so I got very sick. I did catch the first fish, so I won a prize. But I got deathly ill, and that was the end of my sea fishing. Off the shore sitting on a boat, that's it. But as far as sea fishing, not happening ever.

Q: What kinds of activities did you enjoy here, individually and as a family?

A: Individually it's kind of just keeping in touch with the beach and the water, which may sound silly. But one of the first things I arrive here, before I even unpack—I'd unpack the food—is I drive right down to the beach, get out of the car, walk to the end of the boardwalk and just spend a few minutes communing with the beach. Just getting the air and everything and being like, "I'm here, and this is great." I do the same thing before I leave. I say goodbye for a little bit. We used to do that as kids. When we left, we'd go down there and cry. My father would let us sit on the tailgate of this wooden-paneled station wagon—a woody. The three of us would sit in the back together, bumpety-bumpbump, until we got to the main road. Of course, then we had to pull over and put it up before somebody would fall out. Waving to everybody as we went. I've got to say that the ocean and the beach are really it. They're the things that call you. The people as well, but more just the sheer beauty of the place.

Q: Did you primarily swim, boat or play tennis? What was your primary activity?

A: The primary would have been swimming.

Q: How did summers in Quonnie evolve as you grew up? How did your interests change?

A: I definitely outgrew playing softball on the baseball field. That one changed. There was more bicycling as I got older. The bicycle became more my mode of transportation here rather than walking after a while. Going to the pond more often at night and seeing the sunsets there in addition to the beach. That was pretty much it. Got to the beach, have good food—have great grinders. We would start the summer, every summer, with a gut buster, and end it with a gut buster. We would hardly eat any in between, but we do have one to begin and end the season.

Q: What does this place mean to your children?

A: To my children, it's really a refuge. It's a quiet, serene place to come to and connect. Not just with yourself; with family and now with their own children. In fact, I have a great picture that I'll show you. In February, we came here, and my grandson came. "Can I go to your beach, Nanny?" He calls it my beach, because as far as he's concerned, I own it. I've told him several times that I share it with a lot of people, but he thinks it's my beach. He went down there, and he got some driftwood and he put these markers into a big square. Then in the middle, he put Z-A-C-H in stones. I said, "What does that mean?" and he said, "It's my beach too." I said, "Yes, it is." There is just a really strong connection to the beach and what life at the beach is all about. Even in the winter, the casual, the friendly, not needing TV or radios blaring and that kind of stuff. Just relaxing and enjoying life and where you are. It becomes an addiction. It really is. One of my sisters can no longer come. I talk to her periodically, so I can help her envision it. It just means a lot to them. I'm hopeful that my grandson, who is fourth generation, will hand down Quonnie to a fifth generation when he grows up. I hope he will.

Q: What does it mean to your grandson?

A: He really likes the beach. He's an only child. He likes the playground as well. Stopping at the playground, and then going to the beach. He also likes the fact that there are lots of other children right there, because where he lives, the neighborhood is such that the houses are really far apart, so you can't walk to where you may have a playmate. You have to drive. It's too far. So, having kids around that he can chat with at the pond, he just loves it. He really does. My grandmother's name is Nan, because my husband was English, and currently in England rather than nana, they use nan instead, so I'm a nan. When we went to the beach in June, he turned to me and said, "Nan?" I said, "Yes, Zachery?" and he said, "As we're walking down the beach, I want to put our towels with whatever families have the most kids." I said, "Sure." And we did. We found two families together. There were five or six kids. He immediately had a group of children younger and older. That's the other thing: people play with each other. You don't have to be a first grader or a second grader. You can be a first grader playing with a fifth grader. Kids play with older kids, younger kids—all of them. Other than the teenagers, they're not age specific. They just play with whoever is there at the beach, and have fun. That is a wonderful thing to see and to be part of.

Q: What would you like to share about your Quonnie memories and what it means to you?

A: The essence of my happiness is here in Quonnie. It really is. Coming here is like my soul. That's why my license plate says Quonnie. It's because every day when it's ugly up in Massachusetts and it's snowing and it's winter, I go out to my car, I click the thing and I look at the Quonnie license plate—by the way, three times this winter I stopped into a grocery store and another time our regional hospital to pick somebody up, and people came up to me and said, "Is that the Quonnie?" I said, "What do you mean by the Quonnie?" They said, "The beach. The one in Rhode Island. Is that what it is?" I said, "Yes. Do you know it?" Immediately—the minute people see that Quonnie, if they know it, they light up. Their faces become radiant. They become immediately happy. They go, "Isn't it great? I love Quonnie." That's what Quonnie is. It's something you love. It becomes part of your essence, your soul and your happiness. You family and other members, it works that way with them as well. I haven't seen anybody in my family ever go, "I don't want to go to Quonnie." Of course they do. They love it. In fact, my daughter, although I've stopped her swimming now, because she's 41, but she loves to come down here in April and throw herself in the ocean. Two years ago, she got out. She was shivering so badly. We brought her back here. We put her in blankets. I thought she had hyperthermia. She was okay, but I said, "Look, you've got to cool this April swim. You and Zachery can roll up your pants and stick your toes in, but forget the swim." The only time I did that was my sophomore year in college. I was dating a guy that my father couldn't stand, that Gretchen O'Brien actually introduced me to who lived next door to her cousins in Misquamicut. There was a break in college in February, so he came down to Misquamicut. I was down in Quonnie, so we met on the beach. It was

February. We looked at each other and said, "Should we do it?" "Yeah, let's do it." So, we put on our bathing suits. We ran into the water, and ran right back." We practically turned around as quick as we got in. We came out, hugged, kissed a little and said, "We'll never do that again." I said, "No. Never. We've done it, and that's it."

