

QUONOHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

LINDA SCHAFMEISTER HEIMBURG

September 3, 2014

Interviewed by Anne Doyle

This is an unedited transcript of an oral history that is available in the QHS Archive Center. The policy for the use of this copywritten material can be obtained by contacting the Quonochontaug Historical Society (archivist@quonniehistory.org).

Q: Today is Wednesday, September the 3rd in the year 2014. I am sitting with Linda Schafmeister Heimburg, who has some stories about Quonnie that she can share with us. I will ask Linda to state her name and when she was born.

A: I am Linda Schafmeister—let me spell that, S-C-H-A-F-M-E-I-S-T-E-R—Heimburg. Born in Westerly, March 6th, 1951. After I was born, we moved down into one of the farmhouses off of West Beach Road just past where the old Pendleton Farm was. There used to be just one street. Now I think there are two that go back in there. I don't know what house it was.

Q: Was it a little farmhouse?

A: I think so.

Q: Taylor?

A: I wouldn't know the name. I gave Charlotte a picture of my brother and my mother in front of one of the houses when he was very little. He's four years older than I am—my brother Vincent. They lived there shortly after he was born. Shortly after I was born, we moved up to the Old Post Road to the house in Westerly on the town line. My grandparents, Howard Sweet and Grace Adams Brightman Sweet, lived in the house on the town line in Charlestown.

Q: I'd like to see it sometime.

A: Of course.

Q: Maybe we can take a little ride.

A: Sure. I don't own the salt box. That's the house in Westerly further down on the town line. That's the house I grew up in. That's in Westerly.

Q: Was this when you were about two?

A: I don't know. It was shortly after we were born, because from what I gather, the house was very small. I still have the old wicker laundry basket that my mother kept me in instead of a crib. The cats would get in there and sleep with me. So, they needed more room for my brother and I. That's when we moved up to the house on the Old Post Road in Westerly on the town line. My grandparents' house had been finished being built. My grandmother Grace was a Brightman, and her brother was Henry Brightman, who lived on the corner of Hoxie and whatever that—as you come down from Route 1. I don't know street names. You come down Route 1 and make that first right. He lived right there. He and his sons, Henry and Kenneth, and I think there was another one—Charles—built the house that I currently live in now for my grandmother and grandfather. Her father was Charles Brightman, who owned Brightman's Store on Route 1, which then came Crompton's and Babcock's and the Quonnie Forum after that. I don't know how we got here in the first place, but the Brightman family has been here for quite some time. As I understand it, my grandfather, Howard Sweet, and his family would summer here. At one point they either owned or rented the house as you're coming up from the East Beach in Quonnie right up at the top before you make the left on whatever that street is. It was one of those two houses there. There's the dirt path that goes down over that way to East Beach Road. It was one of those two houses that they lived in. I should have brought a map. I could have pointed that out to you. But when my mother graduated from high school—my grandfather worked in New York City, but she was and some of her girlfriends were given a week at the Tunxis as a graduation present. I thought to myself, "If I had only known that graduating from high school, where is my week at the beach with my girlfriends?"

Q: Was that her first introduction?

A: No. Because they would summer here. My grandfather also owned property—

Q: Which grandfather?

A: Howard C. Sweet. When you come down East Beach Road all the way—before you get to Blue Shutters, if you make that right-hand turn and then you come around and down to go to the beach, he owned some vacant lots in there back when the Quonochontaug East Beach Association was just being formed. He was one of the principals to help start that organization. I don't know how long we owned the lots, but that's how we've been able to be members of the beach for so long. And because we live out of the confines—out of the boundaries—as long as a bloodline to Howard Sweet or Grace owned the house, we get to take advantages of being members here and enjoy this wonderful community. The lots have since been sold and developed. That was in the '60s. I have no stake to any property here anymore.

Howard Sweet was a charter member of the Quonochontaug East Beach Association. He purchased a Membership Bond in the late 1950s. He was the first Treasurer of QEBA. He also purchased two vacant lots on what is now Overlook in the 1960s. This is his legacy for his family, and I am lucky enough to be able to continue the traditions. I hope my daughter and granddaughters will be able to enjoy Quonnie for years to come.

Q: Did your mother grow up in New York?

A: Right. The house that I'm in now on Charlestown on the town line was being built in the 1951. It was ready to be moved into in 1951. They had an apartment in New Rochelle, New York. By 1951 my parents had been married for several years. My brother had been born. I had been born. They were living here, and my grandfather was working in New York. He would commute on the train. Sometimes my grandmother would be in the apartment in New York as well. They divided their time between there and here. Of course, mostly here in the summertime.

Q: When did mother get married?

A: My mother got married in 1946 and lived in Pennsylvania for no more than three years. Then they came here.

Q: What brought them here?

A: A better job opportunity for my father. He worked for WERI Radio. In the start, he had a radio show there called The King, The Count and The Duke playing songs from Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Nat King Cole. Then he went to work for the Westerly Sun with his byline "Vin Collie". He was the sports editor there for many years.

Q: Did your mother work as well?

A: She didn't. She spent her time raising my brother and I. she was very involved with the First Baptist Church of Quonochontaug up on Route 1. She did some volunteer work for the Westerly Hospital. And she was involved with our activities at school. She was involved with Scouts with my brother.

Q: What are your first memories?

A: I have a vivid memory of Hurricane Carol in 1954. I remember being in my room. I was on the second floor in the house in Westerly. The winds and huge trees falling down in our front yard and all over. The wind and being without power. My most vivid memory is my grandfather, Howard Sweet, bringing us for a ride down onto the beach to see the damage. That stuck with me all these years to see the houses in the middle of the road, and the houses in the pond, and roofs blown off, and foundations blown all over. As much as I would like a house down here, that comes back to me every time I think about buying a house closer to the water. I said, "Stay up on Route 1." I remember Hurricane Carol vividly, and some other hurricanes too.

Q: You weren't that old.

A: I was two-and-a-half or three. It was a vivid memory.

Q: You must have been taken down West Beach Road.

A: We came down West Beach Road, and that road that takes us down to the beach where you have to show your pass at East Beach.

Q: Highland?

A: Highland. That must be it. One of those houses was right in the middle of the road.

Q: We have a lot of photos of Hurricane Carol down in that area. I was here during Hurricane Carol. We were allowed to go upstairs some time during the storm to look out at the water coming through. I don't have a whole lot of memories. We didn't investigate what was going on in other parts of Quonnie. I don't know why. Your memory is excellent.

A: Growing up, we'd come to the beach in the summer, and at low tide there used to be some old stone foundations in the water that we could play on. I remember them. I don't know what happened to them—if they're still there and covered with sand or if they only show themselves on a winter tide.

Q: Would you go down Highland Road—

A: This would be near Fresh Pond Rocks out in the water. There were two sets of stone foundations or stone walls that were out there. I don't know what they were to, whether that was one of the houses on the beach.

Q: We have all kinds of photos of all the storms and what it did to some of the houses along the coast. In Hurricane Sandy those rocks were exposed again, but I can't remember any stone walls. A lot of posts as you go down Highland and go onto the beach to the right, that's where my family started coming here at that time. They lived right on the sand.

A: There used to be houses right there.

Q: There chimneys and things like that. There were storms before that as well. I think with bigger storms maybe more things got swept out, because you don't see everything that you did years ago. So, you remember going to the beach. Did you go with your family?

A: My mother and brother. We made all kinds of summer friends down here. I remember my brother's friends more than mine, although Debbie Richmond was a dear friend growing up. They lived on Sunset. She was the closest friend that I recall.

Q: Was she just a summer person?

A: No. She lived here year-round. Her father Freddie and my grandfather were quite good friends.

Q: Who else do you remember?

A: Charlie Wharton. He's my brother's age too—67 or 68. Bobby Bantle. Ron Henry.

Q: Ron is my sister's age. He lived on the next street over. We knew the Henrys very well.

A: I just reconnected last year with Tom Sanford. Do you know him?

Q: Yes.

A: He was friendly with my brother. I was just young enough in those days that I was that pesky little kid when everybody wanted to go play and do stuff that teenagers do. I was just enough in the way. But I was very tall, so if I kept my mouth shut, I could have fit in with them. Nobody would have known that I was only twelve instead of sixteen. My brother didn't want anything to do with that, but I knew these kids. We hung around every day on the beach.

Q: Do you know any of the escapades that your brother got into?

A: I'll leave that for him to tell you.

Q: Is he living?

A: He's in France with his family. His memories are different than mine.

Q: Do you remember the Sheas' over at West Beach?

A: Tom Shea, right?

Q: I knew Martha.

A: Phil Shea; I'm sorry. Phil. There was a Phil Shea, who worked at Henry's Fruit Stand, and Charlie Warton worked at Henry's Fruit Stand. I would walk down there every day and get a soda and whatever vegetables or fruit we were having for dinner, and walk back home. I had a terrible crush on Charlie Wharton. Phil Shea and Betsy Zabel—she is a little older than I am, but not much.

Q: Peggy?

A: Betsy.

Q: I knew Peggy Zabel. She was older than I was. I was born in '43.

A: I see her every now and then on the beach.

Q: Is she still living?

A: Yes. They have the house in East Beach Road.

Q: Is it the family house?

A: Yes.

Q: You're talking about Nancy, Gene Zabel's wife. Do you know Gene?

A: I know Gene. I remember Gene. I remember everybody helping him in the water when he would come down towards his end, because the water was so healing. He could be out there and just enjoy it. Betsy is one of his children.

Q: Did she marry?

A: I don't know. My family moved away when I was in the seventh grade to Pennsylvania for five years because of a job opportunity for my father. That put a big cramp in my growing up, because I had just started junior high school at Westerly. My brother had to do his senior year in a brand-new school. But we were lucky enough to be able to come back again for the summers, because we kept the house. We were able to stay there. My brother got jobs. I was too young to work. We'd go down to the beach and make those connections and enjoy it.

Q: Life was so much simpler back then.

A: It was.

Q: Did you ever work in the summer?

A: I did. I worked for Kreb's Gift Store on Route 1 for a couple of summers. Then I worked for Ray Thorpe at his hotel in Misquamicut. I was one of the waitresses there. I can't think of the name of it anymore. It was next to the Pleasant View.

Q: Was this Mr. Thorpe's brother?

A: There were a couple of Thorpes.

Q: Howard Thorpe was the one that had all the land.

A: Yes. He had the real estate. There was Ray and there was another brother. They also owned the hotel up on Route 1 next to the Penguin—whatever that motel is.

Q: There is Ocean View up there, too.

A: Right across from the Hitching Post. I worked for him. I worked at the Shelter Harbor Inn in the kitchen as a waitress for one summer. After that, when the Gift Barn opened up—I think Kreb's might have gone out of business. Maybe Dorothy died. I don't remember.

Q: What was her name?

A: Dorothy. Her brother's name was Walter. They had the gift store and they had the mail order business. Walter had passed away.

Q: Was their last name Krebs?

A: Krebs. Albert Reynolds worked there too in the back. I remembered him from junior high. We got caught up again when I would work there in the summers. He now owns Simple Pleasures where the Gift Barn is on Route 1. I walked in there a couple of years ago, and he said, "I know you," and I said, "No you don't, I'm in the witness protection program," and he said, "Your name is Linda, isn't it?" I said, "Yes." Then he told me who he was. I see him periodically, because I spend money every time I go in there. You can't help yourself.

Q: Did you ever work at the Willows?

A: No. I know the Duhamel. They were friendly with the elder Duhamel. I can't remember the name now. They were friendly with my grandfather. My brother and I went to the camp, which was on the pond behind the Willows in that low red building.

Q: What kind of camp was that?

A: It was just a day camp. They'd have the horses. We'd ride the horses. We'd do the arts and crafts. I don't think we swam, because there were jelly fish in the pond. Fishing and other kinds of camp things.

Q: Was it for a whole day at a time?

A: It might have been. Or half a day. Something like that.

Q: Did the Duhamels run it?

A: Yes.

Q: What about the Brightman family?

A: Charles was the father—my grandmother's father. My great grandfather. He had the general store. His son, Henry, and his other son, Charles—I didn't really know him. He would drift in once or twice. This is where I'd have to talk with my cousin Shirley, who married Kenneth Brightman. Kenneth is my grandmother's brother. He might have been the youngest one. He married Shirley Perkins, and they lived on Route 1 back up behind where my grandfather's store was. If you take Michael's Texaco, which it's not Texaco anymore, as you're looking across the street, come down to the left a little bit and there is a reddish house there that's elongated. That was Henny Brightman's house. He was the builder. Next to him was Kenneth. At some point, Kenneth moved down to the first house on Hoxie Avenue as you're coming in off Route 1. They built that house, and he and Shirley and their family lived there.

Q: I was told that if you're going on Hoxie towards Route 1 to the left onto Peabody, there is a Brightman home right there.

A: That could be. I don't know what that street is. That was a flat ranch.

Q: I think it's pretty much the same.

A: That's where my mother's brother lived. It was that Henry who had the sons Kenneth and Henry, and Virginia, who is Ginny Colter. She was the organist at the Baptist Church for many years.

Q: A lot of people living here did go over to that church.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you know Monroe Hoxie?

A: Yes. He was more contemporary with my parents. I just knew the name of Monroe Hoxie. He was friendly with my father, who also owned the Sportsman's Corner, which used to be at the top of West Beach Road.

Q: On the top of West Beach Road?

A: Yes. That's where it started. Then it moved down onto the pond just before where the Hitching Post is now, and where the driving range is.

Q: I got to know Monroe before he died. I went to his house on Route 1. He was brought up by his grandfather. His memories go way back. He talks about the church and bringing firewood up to the church to make sure it was well heated for everyone on Sunday morning.

A: I remember it being cold. I remember having to use the outhouse back in the church.

Q: Your mother wasn't here when she was going to school, right?

A: They did spend some time in Providence. They grew up in New Rochelle, New York. She had two younger brothers.

Q: Was she school age when she was in New York?

A: New York or Providence.

Q: I remember that your mother came to the door once. This was quite a long time ago. She had heard about the work that I'm doing. She was interested. She was very tall.

A: Yes.

Q: I know she could have told me a lot.

A: She could.

Q: I don't like pushing myself on people.

A: She was very interested in genealogy and history, and did our family history way back on the Adams side. She wanted to be a member of the Daughter's of the American Revolution. We would trapse through graveyards and look for headstones and proof of any evidence.

Q: Did she ever get there?

A: No. She didn't, for whatever reason. I don't know. I'm not sure.

Q: You must have known the people that owned the Shelter Harbor Inn as well. Who was the owner when you worked there?

A: Jackie and Pete Delude when I was there. They really brought it around to quite a place. It was packed. When we worked, we worked. I thank Dorothy Krebs for teaching me how to work. I say that to Albert too that these kids don't know how to work anymore. But Dorothy taught us how to work.

Q: You did what you were told to do.

A: Exactly. No question. You were working all the time. There was none of this sitting around texting and calling or any of that. You were working. Good times.

Q: Do you know the Hutchins?

A: Dick Hutchins. I know who they are. He would be more contemporary with my parents. Maybe not. He was younger. They had some children. At the time, he lived on the last house on the right going up West Beach Road across from the pond.

Q: Dick and his family managed the East West Farm. They lived in that little house. Is that what you're thinking of?

A: I must be thinking of somebody else who moved across the street at one point. Maybe that was after the farm.

Q: Dick now lives on West Beach Road up a little way towards the beach. He lives here year-round. He has a sister that's still living. His other brothers have died of ALS. He worked for Dr. Watson. He's the one that owned the land and managed the farm for him. He also owned where Shelter Harbor was—did doctor.

A: I can't shed any light on that one.

Q: Is there anything that you would like to talk about in terms of what went on around here?

A: We were at a disadvantage, because we weren't here. We were up on Route 1. When we left the beach, that was it for the most part. The few times I did get to come down at night and play with Debby Richmond or any of the others, it was good, clean fun mostly running up and down the beach and just dodging the waves and hanging out at the Blue Shutters in the booths there. It was good, clean fun. We never broke street lights. I was younger. I can't speak for the older kids. I'm sure that they were sneaking the beers out of the coolers, and the gin and cigarettes and carrying on down at the beach. That wasn't a part of my growing up, because I was too young.

Q: What about any of the other Brightmans? I don't have a clear picture of who belongs to who. Charles had three boys.

A: He had Henry, Charles and Grace that come immediately to mind.

Q: Do you remember going into that store?

A: I don't remember going into the store. I remember going to his house. He lived in that little green house right next to where the store was.

Q: By the time you were old enough to roam around a little bit, maybe that wasn't even there.

A: The store was still there, but he probably didn't own it. He was probably retired. He had to be in his 80s by then.

Q: I remember going in there when we got off the dirt roads here and went to Brightman's Store. It was like an event. I do remember Mr. Brightman vaguely.

A: Do you remember his wooden leg?

Q: I do remember that. And you gave us a picture.

A: He was standing there with the leg.

Q: Who took that picture?

A: I have no idea.

Q: That was something. He must have had some kind of a sense of humor.

A: Like all the other swamp Yankees, a very dry sense of humor. I've told a couple of people that when my brother and I were horsing around too much when we would visit him—back in the day, you went to visit, and you had to sit there while the grownups talked, and enough of that after five minutes when you're only eight and twelve or even younger—six and ten. We'd get horsing around, and he'd pull his pant leg up and wag that wooden leg at us to get us to sit there and smarten up. He loved us all, of course, like all great grandparents do, and grandparents. My grandmother would go visit several times. My mother always drove her, because my grandmother didn't drive. He wasn't around very long for me. I remember not being allowed to go to his funeral. I was too young for that.

