

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

SUSAN DUKSTA HOWE

42 Highland Road, Quonochontaug

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Interviewed by Anne Schafer Doyle

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DOYLE: Susan Duksta Howe is going to tell us her memories of her years spent at Quonnie. Just tell me your name –

HOWE: Susan Duksta (D-U-K-S-T-A) Howe; born August 29, 1944 in Westerly, Rhode Island. What else do you need?

DOYLE: That's all. .. Sue, if you could just tell me how your family first came to Quonnie.

HOWE: All I know is that they were looking in many beach communities, for a place to come for the summer, even though we lived in Westerly. And to come for the summers, to make my mother's life a little easier, having three young children. And she was ill and one of my brothers was ill. And they found Quonnie. And I really don't know how, other than that they had looked a lot of places. And they found Quonnie, and they found this house. And the house was considerably smaller than it is today, with three bedrooms, one bath with no shower, no bathtub—no bathing facilities in the house. And a living-room/dining room combination, a small kitchen that I now know from reading something that in order to open the oven, you had to close the door to the kitchen to the porch-- so you could open the oven. And then you could close the oven and open the door. It was very small, and a small porch. And I remember this as a child, being herein this house from-- we moved down some time in May, because even though we went to school, we got to go to school; they'd drop us off at school, and somebody would pick us up and bring us back. And so we were here until --in some years until mid-October and then moved back to Westerly.

DOYLE: So you went to school from here!

HOWE: I went to school in Westerly, from here. My father would take us in in the morning and drop us off, at school. And then my mother would pick us up in the afternoon, and we'd come back.

DOYLE: Now when did your folks buy this house?

HOWE: They bought the house in-- sometime in the fall of 1944, which was the year that I was born; so I spent my first birthday, my first summer here. 1945 was the first summer they spent here, but I know that they bought it some time in late 1944.

DOYLE: You said that your folks knew some of the other families that were here?

HOWE: And I don't know whether they were here before my folks moved here. Because there were other Westerly people who had houses; one of them was Alice and By Hiscox. And I think one of them was—I always knew him as Curly Saunders and Winnie Saunders, but I can't tell you what his right name was.

DOYLE: We were just talking about him the other day; somebody mentioned it; he did -- and who was the -- there were some daughters, right?

HOWE: Yeah; Sally, Margaret and – I think there were three daughters; one of them was Margaret and she still lives in Westerly. That I do know, but I don't know what her married name is, so I can't help you. But I can find out.

DOYLE: Now, if you could just talk a little bit about your first memories at Quonnie.

HOWE: My first memories, basically, are just –spending the day on the beach, and getting sunburned *badly*, at the beginning of the season, always, as I think all of us did, Anne. And spending the day on the beach, in the water, my mother having a hard time getting us out of the water, to come up for lunch or whatever, 'cause we didn't want to be out of the water. And to see who could run up the dirt road, **from** the beach to the house, without giving in to the pain on the bottom of your feet, barefoot. We used to run up the middle of the road, because it was more gravelly in the middle, and that's where it would hurt more, and see how tough we could get our feet.

DOYLE: And by the end of the summer—

HOWE: Oh, we could do it all the time! You didn't feel it at all. At the beginning of the summer, you did. Oh, and the black sand –of course now we have the board walks, and there's not as much black sand, but you'd start from the very beginning walking onto the beach, and you'd have to run and drop a towel and step on it, because your feet burned. (Isn't that -- that's funny – how these things come back.) And then you'd run down so that you could get back into the white sand on the beach. And all that sand has sort of disappeared; there's not as much of it. I think it's down, if you dig down, it's down – if you dig down – and we do need the dunes, you know. That's not a derogatory on that; but those are some of my real memories; and walking up and going up for shells, on shell beach.

DOYLE: Did you spend any time on the ponds?

HOWE: We did. Actually, my brothers built a raft; they put it in Garden Pond, which was—there was no fragmite-. And we paddled around, pushing it with a stick, like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, standing on this floating piece of wood that they created – I don't know how they kept it afloat. And we'd push ourselves all around the pond—and then learning --

DOYLE: Did you go –

HOWE: And then learning --yeah; right from the house, right from the back yard, because it was all open; you just could go right in there. And there was a little sandy beach across the other side of Garden Pond, on the other side. But you could go over there and you could sit and it was sand, and we'd go over there and play and then come back across on this silly raft!

DOYLE: And your parents allowed you to do this --?

HOWE: Absolutely! Absolutely. The pond's not deep. Of course what we learned afterward was that there were snapping turtles in there, which we never knew when we were kids; but you know – and then we also had a boat over in Quonnie Pond. So we had a Beetle, and then we had a little motor boat at one point. So we were always either out on Quonnie Pond or on this one. Or at the beach.

DOYLE: So was that a sailing –

HOWE: The Beetle's a sailboat. And we had a little motorboat after that.

Anne just asked me to give all of our family names. My father was John Duksta; my mother was Helen Duksta. My oldest brother was Jack – John Duksta—we called him Jack, and Charles is my second brother. And that was the family. And a few, sundry dogs. But that's it.

DOYLE: What did your parents do for a living?

HOWE: When we first came to Quonnie, my father worked for George C. Moore Company in Westerly. And then he left there and started his own business probably someplace around 1946. '46-47, he started his own business in New London.

DOYLE: What was the business?

HOWE: He made ladies' garters and bra backs until he closed the business someplace around 1975.

DOYLE: Now the Moore Company – that was also some kind of fabric company, wasn't it?

HOWE: Same thing that he did—

DOYLE: Oh I see; that was where he got his experience. OK. Now, how about your mother: did she --?

HOWE: My mother was a stay-home mom.

DOYLE: Most of our moms –that’s the way it was.
Just – I’d like to hear about some of your friends and neighbors, that you played with.

HOWE: The neighbors that I played with –would be the Van Osts. Susan Van Ost Was real young when I was, so we did a lot together. There weren’t a lot of kids on this street, as I remember. Some of the houses were rental houses. And the kids would come and go, you know be here for a week or two weeks or a month, basically. But the Van Osts were here all summer, and the Hiscoxes were here all summer, in Central Beach. And the rest of the kids were later on when I was a teenager; there were a lot of teenage kids when we were in our teens. There were several kids. But for the most part it was the Van Osts; of course, there were eight of them. But that was basically my recollection. And whoever else was on the beach; we made friends on the beach when we went to the beach. And I really don’t remember others. That’s funny.

DOYLE: As teenagers, did you have a group?

HOWE: We had a group, a large group. The Shea – Martha Shea Capaldi– was one of them and her brothers; my next oldest brother. The Dolls – the three Doll boys – the twins and Jeff- –Joan Lane, who lives up the street, still. Who else was in that group? Jane Roseman, Diane Calendar and her brother – I can’t remember his name. You know, there was a bunch of kids from all over, as teenagers.

Hurricane Carol: August 31, 1954: My mother and I were in New York City, because it had been my birthday. And my folks gave me a trip to New York City so she and I went to New York City. And we had no idea that there was a hurricane. We went to the top of the – not the Empire State but the next one – I can’t remember—

DOYLE: The Chrysler Building maybe?

HOWE:

It had to be the Chrysler Building. And it was the most clear – they said you could see further than anybody had seen for a long time. And this was mid-morning. We went back to the hotel, and there was a message for us not to take the train home, because you wouldn't be able to get home; and to call my father's office and there would be somebody there that would tell us what had happened. So my mom called –to find out that there'd been a hurricane and that we were now the last house on the street. And the Van Osts' were the last house on the street. And there had been seven houses in front of us, between the two sides of the road. But all the houses were gone, but my father and my two brothers were OK.

So we called Dr. Van Ost and explained to him that his house was fine. He said, "Of course my house is fine!" Nobody knew that there'd been a hurricane that had hit there; even by noontime, 3 o'clock in the afternoon, nobody knew.

And so Dr. Van Ost very kindly picked us up bright and early the next morning and drove us up. And we would drive along, and of course this was before Route 95, and we were driving along Route One, and trees would be down. And then there wouldn't be any trees: it would be fine, like nothing had happened. We kept saying nothing happened here, and then all of a sudden there'd be a mess.

And we drove up and we couldn't get down West Beach Road, because the National Guard was there. So he had to prove that he had a house, which he did; and they finally let us down. And to drive down and see what an incredible mess Highland Road was—I can still see it; I can still see it. And-- interesting – I mean houses in the middle of the street – Our house was standing, but it had had wooden boards from the first floor to the foundation all the way around it; and we had the garage underneath, towards the pond side. And all the wooden slatting was gone, so that all you saw was the cinder-block pilings that the house was actually on the foundation. And you could see right straight through.

There were two cars in the garage, relatively new. And my father said that he and my brothers—my brother Jack had an army jeep, and for the first time in the year that he had had it, it started-- as the water was coming up the street. And they went down to the end of the road and got people out of their houses and took them up to dry land. And then my brother sat with my father, at the farmhouse, and watched what was happening. They sat there and watched it. And the cars in our cellar went from the cellar through, out to the edge of the pond. As [after?] the wave would recede, the wave would come back in, and it would push the cars all the way through the garage to the foundation on the street side of the house and smash them, and then they would come back out again as the wave

HOWE: receded. And then they went back and forth, and they finally just got together in the middle, and they were totally lost.

Everybody got out of the houses; that was not an issue. There was not, you know, any life threatened. There were three houses at the corner of Midland and Highland in the road, clustered together, that had been down on the beach. Right here at the end of the driveway; there were three of them. All three of them were re-located in the neighborhood; it took until March, April or May of 1955 for them to finally get everything moved out of here.

There was a house across Garden Pond that had been down on the beach. One of them got totally --I think Daddy found pieces --

DOYLE: These were all houses that --

HOWE: They were all houses that were, from our house, 32 Highland, going straight toward the beach, there were three houses and then one in the access road to the parking lot. And then there were three other houses on the other side, in front of the Van Osts' house, going down to the beach. And they all were gone.

DOYLE: Do you know who had those houses?

HOWE: Yeah. I know who owned them all, and I know where they all are. I have—I can give you some information on that, Anne. And, one of our stories: In our cellar we had a bait refrigerator, as my father and mother and brothers were all fishing people. And the refrigerator made it up to the empty lot one lot up from us. And nobody thought anything about it for about four or five days. And then, all of a sudden, my father said, “I think there’s bait in that refrigerator.” And then it was: Who was going to go open it up to find it out? I think one of my brothers got elected to that job. And yes, there was bait in the refrigerator. Hey --it was potent! [Laughter] You know, funny stories come out of things that happen in a tragedy. There were several other funny stories, but you know, you just have to laugh. And you have to see the humor in things like that.

But, there was no loss of life; we didn’t lose the house. The water was within one inch of the first floor of this house; there’s a piece of newspaper up in the rafters, and you could see the water line on the newspaper. Everything in this cellar was strewn all over the

neighborhood. All-- you know—gardening tools, --anything-- shutters that we’d put on the windows during the winter and everything-- was just all over the neighborhood. It was a matter of going to find the stuff.

DOYLE: Where are some of the houses that used to be --

HOWE: OK; one of the houses that used to be –the one that was directly in front of us is now on Midland Road, between Sea Breeze and Overlook. It’s about half way up. Belonged to the Connors. Another house, which belonged to the Sylvestris, which was the one down on the access road to the East Beach parking lot is at the corner of Midland and Overlook, facing Midland. It’s like one lot up; if you’re going up Midland, it’s on the lefthand side That’s that house. The house that was directly in front of Van Osts’, that belonged to the Douglasses, has just been torn down, to be redone. But from ’54 to 2007, that house was the third house up from the one that we’re currently sitting in, Anne, on our side. There’s a little cot—next to the Ogles’, going north from the Ogles’—next door to the Ogle’--that was the Douglasses’ house—had been there. The house that went across Garden Pond, that belonged to the Williamses, is behind, is on Midland Road, on this lower end of Midland Road; actually they put it on their lot that butted up to their land. The Cavanaugh house, that’s across the street from here, belonged to the Williamses; it was called Tunxis. It was a boarding house.

DOYLE: My uncle owned that at one time – my grandparents knew the Williams family.

HOWE: OK; so it belonged to the Williamses, and behind it, there is a house that now belongs to the Calamaris, and that house is the one that was down on the beach that belonged to the Williamses that went across the Pond, but that’s the one that’s over on Midland Road and belongs to the Calamaris.

DOYLE: Just tell me a little bit about the [fish] stories in your family.

HOWE: We all fished: my mother, my father, my two brothers and myself. And I didn’t start to fish until I had my first child in 1971. And I would go down to the beach with my daughter in a baby carriage, an old-fashioned baby carriage; and my mother would be fishing. And we would drag that baby carriage up the beach, and we would fish, and we would carry fish back, dragging that baby carriage across the sand. And my daughter slept the whole time and naturally she was outside. And we didn’t think anything about this—beach buggies are going by and here’s this kid in a baby carriage, sittin’ on the beach and we’re fishing.

But there’s a story about my mother fishing. She – in 1970 – was down on the beach catching fish, and came home because she had 13 fish on the beach, blue fish, and called my father at work. And said, “John, you have to come home; the fish are funning.” He said, “I have a business to run; I can’t do that. And besides, you caught 13 fish and that’s not a good number...” ‘cause he was superstitious: “Either throw one back or catch another one.” So she went to the beach, with her wheelbarrow,

HOWE: and caught another one and got all 14 fish back up in her wheelbarrow. And we have pictures to document this. She also-- sometime in the early --mid-sixties some time around 1964, my father and mother were down on the beach fishing. And I was in college and my brothers were gone. And she walked up towards Blue Shutters, and she caught a 40-pound striped bass. Which is mounted on the wall here. And she dragged it down -- now she had two crushed vertebrae in her back, 'cause she'd fallen off a ladder and she was in a steel brace --and she could not bend over. So she's lugging this fish down the beach, pulling it along behind her, not bending over but bending at the knees. And she gets all the way back down to Fresh Pond Rock, which is where my father was fishing, going "John, John, you've got to see this!" "I can't look; the fish are running. I can't turn--" And he wouldn't look. And finally the other fishermen said, "John you've got to look." [Laughing] And she had this huge striped bass that she had caught, up toward Blue Shutters, and dragged down.

DOYLE: Oh, that's great! **[Laughter and muted conversation in the background.]**

END OF RECORDING

