

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

LEA YLONEN MANNING

April 19, 2011

Interviewed by Anne Doyle

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Q: Today is Tuesday, April the 19th in the year 2011. This is part of the Quonochontaug Historical Society Oral History Project. Today I am talking with Lea Ylonen Manning. She lives at 40 Burdickville Road in Hopkinton. Lea worked at one point in her life at the Seabreeze Inn in Quonochontaug, but we're going to learn a little bit about her family before that time, and then what type of job she did at the Seabreeze Inn and so forth. Lea, if you could state your full name, when you were born and where you were born.

A: I was born in Finland, November 19th, 1936. I was given the name of Lea Elisa Ylonen, which has translated into Lea Y. Manning, because it's been a lot easier.

Q: What was your name given to you?

A: Lea, pronounced in Finnish Lea.

Q: Spell that.

A: L-E-A.

Q: Could you talk about your family coming to the United States? Because they did return at one point, didn't they?

A: Right. My parents originally came—actually, my father came first as a sailor for Finland, and returned within a couple of years, because he had met my mother. They married in Finland. Then they returned to the United States and they worked near New York City—the outskirts—for a family for a couple of years.

Q: What did they do?

A: My mom took care of the children. She did a lot of the cooking. Dad was a chauffer. I don't know what all he did besides that. I think he helped my mom with household stuff too.

Q: Landscaping our outdoor work?

A: I don't think outdoor so much as interior stuff, and keeping track of stuff. Then in 1932 mom was pregnant with my brother, and she wanted to be with family when the child arrived, so they returned to Finland. My brother was born in '32 August. Whatever circumstances, they remained. There was a pregnancy in between myself and my brother, which they lost. The little girl died shortly after being born. Then I was born in '36, and we were still in Finland. Then wars got in between things, and there was no way to leave Finland at that point. My father was in all kinds of wars, including World War II. As soon as the war was over, they were able to leave, assuming they could get someone to vouch for their livelihood in the United States. Someone had to guarantee their welfare here for two years. He was able to do that by writing to the gentleman that had employed him a number of years ago. He did all the paperwork, and guaranteed our welfare in the States. That's how we ended up in New York in 1946, December.

Q: Did you father go back to work for this gentleman?

A: No. He did not. He was a carpenter by trade. As a matter of fact, he was capable of doing a lot of things. For a gentleman who never went to school, he had a lot of abilities, which worked out well, because he was talented enough to build his own home, which is where I now live.

Q: Tell us the process of going from New York up to Rhode Island.

A: We lived in Manhattan for a few weeks, and then my dad got a job as a superintendent, which is basically a janitor, in a large apartment building in the Bronx. So, we moved to the Bronx, and both of us—my brother and I both went to school there. My mother worked at a restaurant, which was a Finnish restaurant in Harlem. She used the transportation in the city to go back and forth. We were there until 1948, spring when we moved to Rhode Island.

Q: How did you know where you wanted to go?

A: My father was acquainted with a gentleman that lived on Chase Hill here in Rhode Island. They had been childhood neighbors in Finland, so the connection was still there. This gentleman helped him find a situation that my father was interested in, which my dad wanted a little bit of land. He wanted a place where he could build a new house, if he so desired. And this is what we found. The old building has long been torn down. He did build a house in 1951, I believe. The summer of '51. That's where are.

Q: What did he do at that point? Did he have a job?

A: Yes. He was a carpenter.

Q: Was he on his own, or did he work for somebody?

A: He worked for various contractors. One of them was Nardone in Westerly. Then later on he got a job as a maintenance carpenter at the BDA, which was Bradford Dyeing Association at the time. That's where he retired from.

Q: You said that when you moved to this piece of land, which is on a lovely stretch of the Pawcatuck River, you moved into a building that was already there.

A: Right. It was an old mill building that had been a mill at the falls, which is below our house here. It was one of the older buildings.

Q: And then eventually parts of it were torn down, and he built this house?

A: He built the house first and then tore it down. Part of that building today is the garage, because the foundation of it is there, which is stone foundation.

Q: You went to school here. Can you talk about your first school days in this area?

A: I started school in Ashaway in the fifth grade. I went through Ashaway School.

Q: You did not know any English?

A: By the time I got to Ashaway, I knew quite a bit, because within a year I was able to beat most of the kids in spelling bees. I remember that, which was a good thing, because I had a few drawbacks there. We went through Ashaway through the ninth grade, and then into Westerly High School.

Q: And you graduated from high school in '55?

A: Yes.

Q: Lea has shared some of her photos. The photos include some of her friends. You had a very good friend in high school.

A: Caroline Lundgren. She was Caroline Kenyon.

Q: I need to go over some of the names in the photos that you gave me. The friend that was waitressing with you.

A: That was Ayla Force Waggren.

Q: And your brother's name?

A: My brother's name is Oiva.

Q: Did they call him that?

A: Yes. Sometimes shortened, like all names: Oiv.

Q: At what point did you find the job at Seabreeze Inn?

A: The summer that I was fourteen, because of family friendships or whatever, I think they were looking for somebody more like my brother, who was eighteen at the time, and capable of not just being a waiter; he could also manage the restaurant. Plus, he got very involved in reservations and all that good stuff. I was tossed in because I was there and capable of doing waitress work. I was only fourteen, but back then you could get working papers supposedly, and your hours were supposed to be limited. But because we worked such strange hours, no one ever complained about it. I probably looked a little bit older than fourteen. We worked seven days a week. Served breakfast. Then had a break. Then served lunch. Then had a break. Then served supper. And we were done by 7:00 PM usually.

Q: Was your job to bring the food to the people in the Inn, or did you actually help out in the kitchen?

A: We did very little helping in the kitchen. Most of our job was to set up the tables. We served family style. So, the food was brought out in bowls to each table. We were there to see that the food was there all the time so that no one ran out. Then if somebody wanted condiments or anything like that, we were there for that purpose. We wore uniforms. We looked like we were—

Q: You were professional looking. In your photos, you looked very professional with your apron and everything.

A: The only thing I remember about the whole thing was we were never treated as help. We were treated as family.

Q: By the Normys?

A: By the Normys, and by the people that came. Nobody ever said waitress to us, or never said hey you or any of that stuff. For some reason it always remained that way. And we felt like we were family.

Q: Which added to you enjoying being there. Otherwise it would have been a terrible experience.

A: Right.

Q: To get into particulars, what did they serve for breakfast?

A: Eggs. French toast. Pancakes. She was a terrific cook. She did all this all on her own.

Q: Could you ask for anything each morning?

A: Within limits. There were specific things that came. But a lot of times if children didn't like eggs, they could get something else. Sometimes maybe a cereal or whatever. They were very accommodating. The meals were established each day. Like at lunchtime, the meal could be—I remember Saturdays was hotdogs and beans at night with a salad or coleslaw or whatever. But that was standard. She served some really nice meals.

Q: Would she make the beans? Would they be homemade?

A: Yes. She did a lot of stuff that was truly homemade.

Q: Baking as well?

A: Baking most of it.

Q: So, she spent probably the full day in that kitchen.

A: She spent her whole summer in the kitchen. It was well planned, though. She knew what was needed and what had to be. And there were some things that were purchased. Like Friday night was a picnic-type situation. We always prayed for sun and no rain. It was evening, so it was not really night. They had lobsters and clams, corn on the cob. I can't remember what else. Watermelon.

Q: That was very Friday night?

A: Every single Friday night. It was outdoors. Everything was served outdoors. Everybody could scatter wherever. There was seating around. It worked very well.

Q: They must have purchased the lobsters from a fisherman.

A: They were delivered. I don't know where they came from. We never got into that end of it, because we really weren't expected to help much in the kitchen.

Q: What kind of a person was she?

A: She was—I don't know how best to describe her. She was motherly in many ways with us, because we were young. She treated us like adults, however. And we were expected to act like adults, which we were capable of doing. She was rather stern in some ways, but we never objected to her being stern.

Q: She was kind?

A: Very kind. Absolutely.

Q: Did they have any children?

- A: Yes. There was a son that I remember. And I think there might have been a daughter, but I never met them.
- Q: So, they didn't work there?
- A: No. They didn't even live in Rhode Island, if I remember right. I don't remember much about the family, except the two of them, because I never met them.
- Q: From what I've heard, Mr. and Mrs. Normy lived in Westerly. Is that correct?
- A: I think they lived right there, as far as I know. Now, I'm not sure. I am not positive at all, but I know they lived in that house during the summer.
- Q: In describing the house, there was an inn, and then there was a recreation hall.
- A: They called it a dance hall, because that's basically all it was.
- Q: And then there was the home next to that where the Normys lived.
- A: Right. I always assumed that they lived there year-round, but I don't know that for a fact.
- Q: What might have been served for lunches? Did she make soups and things like that?
- A: She made soups. There were certain kinds of sandwiches. It seemed to me that the meals were not sandwich-based most of the time. They were more of a meal than a sandwich would be. But I don't remember specifics. I was fourteen years old.
- Q: Did you get to nibble on any food while you were there?
- A: We ate with the family after we served the meals. We ate at this huge kitchen table where she prepared food during the meals.
- Q: And Mr. Normy was there too?
- A: Always. Yes.
- Q: What was Mr. Normy's role in all of this?
- A: I'm not sure I want this on tape. I don't know exactly how much of delivery or anything like that he did, but there were periods in the summer where his job was basically to stay out of the way.
- Q: Did Mrs. Normy get after him?

A: She had what we used to call the evil eye. She never said much to him, but she would look at him, and she would wait until he looked at her. That was the message.

Q: And he understood it?

A: He understood it. Yes.

Q: And he would go away?

A: Go away.

Q: Did you ever have to be careful around him?

A: No. He was a very gentle man. He liked the young people that he worked with. He understood a look better than anyone I've ever met. Once in a while he would say something that maybe I didn't approve of to be funny, but I had a fine line even at age fourteen what was funny and what was not, to me. All I'd do is look at him, and he would not say anymore.

Q: That's interesting that you picked up the fact that that's what he needed to see from you. Suppers, other than Friday and Saturday, there was a full meal at the end of the day?

A: There were three meals every single day.

Q: But I mean a full dinner, like potatoes and whatever.

A: Right. I would say by today's standards, a very balanced meal. There were vegetables and the whole thing.

Q: Did they have the vegetables all delivered?

A: Right. A lot of it was local. Most of the stuff was delivered. He did on occasion go pick stuff up.

Q: Those of us that lived there in the summer, there were vegetable men that would come around because we didn't have a car. Do you remember a person that used to deliver?

A: No. I do not. I don't know how all this stuff got there, because that wasn't part of the job.

Q: During break time, where did you all go?

A: If the sun was shining, we went to the beach. We'd pack into my brother's car usually, which was a [inaudible 22:11], but we could put a lot of kids in there. And we would go to the beach for an hour or an hour and a half, depending on how much time we had. We were never late. I don't know we were never late, because we would occasionally do

runs into town. But most of the time it was to the beach. We never got sunburned, because we never were there long enough. It worked out great. We had nice tans in September, but we were never sunburned.

Q: Were there others there that did other jobs, like doing dishes and all that kind of thing?

A: I don't remember a dish washer.

Q: Did you wash the dishes?

A: No. We did no dishes. Whether she did them all, I have no idea. This lady worked hard. I know she did, but I don't remember about dishes.

Q: They didn't use throw-away stuff at that point. It was all china dishes.

A: The only one I remember that was help was a lady that did the cleaning as far as the rooms were concerned, getting them ready for the next—most of the people stayed a week or two. I think her name was Mrs. Lind.

Q: Was there a laundry service for the people that stayed there? If they wanted new towels or whatever, did they—

A: I don't remember how the towel situation went. I don't remember that, but I thought about that the other day. I don't remember what the deal was. I know that beds and things like that were up to the customer to keep during the week. They were made fresh when they started out, and then they were on their own with that. But I think she did go from room to room and clean whatever needed cleaning on a daily basis.

Q: Can you describe the atmosphere of the dining hall? There was a little community space there.

A: There was a big space. That was like an open area downstairs where the stairs went up to the rooms and stuff. It was a good-sized room. If you see the pictures, it was as long as the outside porch area. There was an inside room that was a good-sized room.

Q: And that included the dining area and the other?

A: No. The dining room was separate from that. A completely separate area, which was used just for meals. There was nobody around in those areas.

Q: Could people come and go with meals? When they got up in the morning, they could go downstairs? Or certain hours?

A: Certain hours. That's it. I think we served at 7:30, and we were usually out of there by 10:00, or even earlier sometimes. Cleaned up and ready to go for the next thing, which would be lunch.

Q: So, besides your brother and yourself, who would go to the beach with you? I noticed in the photographs that there were more just the three of you.

A: Sometimes customers' kids. It just depended on who was around. Sometimes in the afternoon some of our friends would stop by and we'd go to the beach for an hour or whatever.

Q: Friends from here?

A: Yes. My brother's friends.

Q: And he had the car, so you just all got in the car?

A: Yes.

Q: Which beach did you use? You said East Beach?

A: I can't really describe what it was called. It was strictly Seabreeze Beach. What section of that beach it was, I don't know. There was a parking lot, and it was specifically labeled Seabreeze customers only. That's where we went. There was no one on that beach except the customers.

Q: You were saying last week that it was very family oriented. Do you remember anything in relationship to doing something with the family?

A: There was very, very little in the way of any activities at the inn. Most of the people took off to the beach, or they went to whatever attraction they wanted to go to for the day. The only thing there really was the dance hall at night. The jukebox went every night. And it depended on the week. Some weeks there would be a whole bunch of young people from toddlers to teenagers. Older teenagers sometimes would come with their families.

Q: Let's talk about the dance hall. Is it every Friday or Saturday night that there would be a gathering for dancing?

A: It was every night. Some group would get together, and they'd go over and they'd hit the jukebox, and they would play. People would dance. If we were around, we'd go over there and we'd dance with the customers or whoever. We had a good time. It was fun. It didn't seem like working at the time.

Q: When you like to do something, it isn't work. People think of work as something that is drudgery.

A: Very people oriented. To me, it's amazing now looking back on it how we were never considered help, and we were. But we were never treated as such.

Q: Obviously the rooms weren't well insulated. Were kids crying in the night? Was that ever a problem?

A: No. There was always a breeze it seemed like. They cranked the windows open. I never heard a complaint from anybody. And people came back all the time. Sometimes they came back twice in the season, and sometimes the following year, and brought their friends and family.

Q: I know you were there for two summers. Was it closed down after that time?

A: Yes. They no longer ran it after that. I don't know whether it was because of health issues, because they weren't young anymore. Or if it was because of fire codes. I have no idea.

Q: Did they have fire codes back then?

A: I think they were thinking about it, because it was a wooden building, and narrow stairways. No fire escapes of any kind.

Q: Were there two stories of rooms, or just one above the living room?

A: I think there were two in the main building. It seems to me that it was two above that, because down in the lower level, there really weren't any customer rooms, I don't think. There was the office, which was kind of a multipurpose room. And the big open area.

Q: You said that you stayed in the old part of the inn.

A: I think so, if I remember right, because we went up from the kitchen area—straight up very narrow stairs, which I'm thinking were probably originally built.

Q: What was downstairs in that part of the inn—the older section?

A: The kitchen.

Q: The kitchen was front to back?

A: The dining room was on the side where the pictures are, or the porch area. And there was a room there that they would go in to rest for a little while. He spent a lot of time there.

Q: Did you have tablecloths?

A: Yes.

Q: So, that all had to be taken care of as well.

A: Right. Mrs. Normy worked very, very hard. Unbelievably hard. Looking back on it, even harder, because I now understand better just what she did do.

Q: I don't have a picture of Mrs. Normy. Maybe your brother has some pictures.

A: Yes. I'll have to give him a call.

Q: I would like to have a picture of her and him too.

A: That would be good. I was trying to think who might have a picture. I wonder if Ayla would have any pictures.

Q: Do you know where she is?

A: Yes. She's in Texas. We keep in touch.

Q: When people gathered in the living space, did they play games?

A: Sometimes. Kids would have their games. Card playing was happening sometimes in the evenings and stuff. For some reason, those people managed to stay so busy doing stuff that they weren't around that much as far as looking for stuff to do.

Q: There probably was no television.

A: No.

Q: People entertained themselves.

A: That's why the jukebox was kind of nice, because that was music. For the younger generation, especially, it gave them something to do.

Q: What kind of music was in the jukebox?

A: There was some dance music in there, like the polkas and the [inaudible 33:30] and all that stuff. There were just songs from that era—population songs.

Q: That the kids would be familiar with?

A: Right.

Q: We talked about the sauna. It was down near the pond. Can you say anything about what the sauna is all about?

A: A sauna is a very Finnish tradition. It usually is a separate building, and it has two separate rooms. One is the dressing area, or undressing area. The other area is usually a

couple of benches at two different levels. It is heated by—the old-fashioned one by a wood stove that was covered with rocks.

Q: When you say a wood stove, would there actually be wood logs underneath the stones?

A: Yes. But not in the room. It was fed from outside. The smoke went up the chimney, so there was no danger of—

Q: But how did that heat the rocks?

A: I don't know if I have a picture. The fire was in a compartment, and then the rocks were on top of the fire box. The rocks were actually hot.

Q: So, the rocks were brought into the sauna after they heated up?

A: No. They lived there. I'll have show you. I'm not very good at describing. I do know what is it, because I lived with one. The idea was the steam came from the fact that you'd toss water onto these warm rocks, and that created the steam. Of course, it evaporated, so the water didn't collect anywhere, except in the air. Then the tradition was for the birch bunches that you hit yourself with. That's part of the sauna.

Q: You would hit yourself with the birch twigs?

A: I don't know whether it's supposed to stimulate your skin or what it was supposed to do, but that's part of the traditional sauna.

Q: Then if it was winter would you go out to the pond? People would probably jump into the water.

A: Yes. The river. We did that when we were kids here. In Finland, if you lived on a pond or a lake, that was part of the tradition, which created a lot of interesting stories. There was no TV. It was entertainment.

Q: Is there anything else that you can think of that we haven't covered?

A: For me, it was a great learning experience. I learned a lot about people. It came in very handy in my chosen profession.

Q: What did you choose to do when you graduated from high school?

A: I actually have to go back to when I was nine. I decided what I wanted to do in life when I was nine years old, and I never changed. I had an occasion to see my grandfather when he was ill, and said, "If I live long enough, God willing, I was going to be a nurse." That is what I did after high school. I went to nursing school at Children's Hospital in Boston. After graduating from there, I worked at Lawrence Memorial for about 23 years.

Q: In what area of the hospital?

A: Working in newborn nursery and obstetrics.

Q: How did you like it once you were actually doing your nursing?

A: I enjoyed going to work. I enjoyed the people. I enjoyed teaching the moms. I enjoyed the babies. They don't argue at all. They were fun. I really did enjoy it. I've always enjoyed kids. I started out with my cousins when I was about two being mother hen, and it probably hasn't changed much.

