

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

WILLIAM MEYER

February 17, 2023

Interviewed by Steve Young in Charlestown

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Q: It's February 17th, 2023. It's my pleasure to do an oral history of Bill Meyer. Let's get started. Bill, I think I've told you that we're recording this. This will also get transcribed, and it will get posted on the Quonochontaug Historical Society website. I want to make sure that's all right with you.

A: Okay.

Q: And you know you're being recorded, correct?

A: Right.

Q: Bill, when were you born? What's your birth date and birth year?

A: August 12th, 1934.

Q: Where did you grow up?

A: I started out in Jamaica. Then we moved to Forest Hills, which is the tennis capital of the world in New York.

Q: What was the first place that you mentioned?

A: Jamaica, Long Island. The Queens.

Q: Did you go to high school there?

A: I went to high school at Xavier downtown New York.

Q: After high school what happened?

A: I went to Villanova in Pennsylvania.

Q: What years were you at Villanova?

A: 1952 to 1956 when I graduated as a mechanical engineer.

Q: With a BS degree?

A: A BS in mechanical engineering.

Q: What was your first job?

A: I went in to the Navy. I was a naval aviator. I was in there for four years. And then I got off active duty. Then I went to work for Hamilton Standard in Windsor Locks, Connecticut.

Q: Let me ask you about your military service. You graduated from college. You entered the Navy. Were you trained as a pilot?

A: That's correct.

Q: Where was your training?

A: My training was in Pensacola, Florida and Gainesville, Texas.

Q: Did you serve four years?

A: Four years active duty.

Q: What kind of planes were you flying?

A: An S2. A twin engine carrier-based, anti-submarine plane.

Q: So, you were landing and taking off of carriers?

A: Correct.

Q: Did you have some training in Rhode Island at Quonset?

A: Yes, I did. That's where I was stationed.

Q: Was that your home base for two or your years?

A: Yes. I was there for two years.

Q: What kind of tasks were you doing out of Quonset?

A: I was a pilot. I was an aviation officer.

Q: Was an S2 an anti-submarine plane?

A: Correct.

Q: So, you had lots of touch and goes at Quonset?

A: We did. And we did down at Charlestown, or Charlie Town.

Q: What year did you get out of the Navy?

A: Actually, I stayed in the reserves. I retired as a captain in 1987.

Q: How many years was that total in the Navy?

A: Thirty-one. I was lucky to be able to fly for twenty years.

Q: Did you achieve the rank of captain when you retired?

A: Yes.

Q: Tell me about meeting Liz and getting married.

A: I met Liz in college. She was at Rosebud. We got married on February 15th, 65 years and two days ago.

Q: And you had three daughters?

A: Three daughters and one son.

Q: What are their names?

A: The oldest one is Nancy, Margaret, Susan and Michael.

Q: I take it they all spent some quality time at Quonochontaug.

A: They all grew up here.

Q: Where did you raise your family?

A: In Suffield, Connecticut and Newtown, Connecticut.

Q: Coming out of college and the Navy, you went to work for Hamilton Standard?

A: Hamilton Standard. And I went to graduate school at night.

Q: What did you study in graduate school?

A: Business.

Q: Did you obtain a master's degree?

A: Yes, I did.

Q: Was your whole career at Hamilton Standard?

A: No. I moved down to Newtown. I became a manufacturing manager for a company called Heli-Coil, or GarKenyon.

Q: What were you manufacturing?

A: Valves for the military aircrafts. Shuttle vales. Hydraulics.

Q: How many years did you do that?

A: I did that for about four years, and then I went to Electrolux in Old Greenwich, where I was in charge of manufacturing.

Q: Was Electrolux manufacturing vacuum cleaners and that kind of product?

A: That's correct. Only vacuum cleaners.

Q: At the peak, how many people were under you?

A: I had maybe 250.

Q: Were many of them involved in the manufacturing of the product?

A: Yes. Right. We made all the parts that go into the vacuum.

Q: Did you have anything to do with the sales end of Electrolux?

A: No.

Q: How many years were you at Electrolux?

A: Eight years.

Q: Then did you retire?

A: No. I went to New England Die Casting in West Haven, Connecticut.

Q: How many years did you do that?

A: Five.

Q: Then did you retire from there?

A: No. I decided to go into my own business, and I became a manufacturer. I started a business and sold mechanical components with a lot of different companies. I think I retired at about 2005 or 2004.

Q: What were you manufacturing when you had your own business?

A: We were selling components from different manufacturers. Sheet metal. Plastics. Mostly sheet metal, plastics and die casting. Like you go into Walmart and you see the checkout signs. We made those. Street lights. Parts of the street lights. What other things? I made parts for medical companies. Manufacturing parts.

Q: How many years did you live in your home in Newtown?

A: Thirty-eight.

Q: All in the same house?

A: All in the same house.

Q: Is that where you raised your family?

A: Right.

Q: Tell us about your first contact with Quonochontaug, Rhode Island.

A: In 1964, a classmate of mine asked me to come down. He found a great place down at the beach in Rhode Island. When I saw the pictures of the water, when I was in the Navy here, I didn't think too much of the beaches, because there weren't any waves. So, he invited us to come down and share a couple of weeks where there were like three kids. And we were in the Skippers Cottage.

Q: Did you say the Skipper's cottage?

A: Yes. Across the street from where we are now. Peter Skipper's house. It was well known.

Q: So, you rented for two weeks or so to begin with?

A: They were renting for five or six weeks, and we came in and shared it with them for two weeks.

Q: I take it you fell in love with Quonochontaug and came back.

A: We did. Yes.

Q: Did you continue to rent for a few years?

A: In 1966, we came back to the friend's cottage, and we came back for six weeks. Finally, Grant Slater, who was giving out tickets to go to the beach, he said, "You ought to buy a place," and I said, "I don't know if we can afford it." So, he sold us a lot next to him finally. That was in 1972.

Q: Did Grant Slater and his wife own part of the Sheffield Farm?

A: Yes.

Q: Did they sell part of the Sheffield Farm to you?

A: One lot.

Q: I know for a long time you've had two homes in Quonochontaug, right?

A: Yes.

Q: What are the names of the two houses?

A: Fort Meyers is the one we built. And the one we have now is Sandibel, S-A-N-D-I-B-E-L. It's across from Fort Meyer.

Q: How do you use the two homes?

A: My daughter has a home across the street, the original home, Fort Meyer. And the other house where we are at Sandibel, we live there year-round.

Q: Was Fort Meyer already built and you bought it?

A: No. We bought the Carp house owned by the Van Pelts. The Van Pelts owned it, and we bought it from them in 1972.

Q: Are you talking about Fort Meyer, or are you talking about Sandibel? When did you buy from the Van Pelts?

A: Probably about 1990 and 1992. In that area.

- Q: Did you build two houses? First you built Fort Meyer, and then you built Sandibel?
- A: Yes. We built Fort Meyer from scratch. I was working at Electrolux at the time. I'd get the materials and get the van, drive down here at night with supplies. Leave them in the garage at Slater's house, and drive back to Newtown, and then drive back to work in the morning. So, I kind of built it. Then we got a prefab house. Henry Brightman built the house. He built some of the houses. And another guy up in Coventry finished it. I'll think of his name in a minute.
- Q: So, Henry Brightman helped you build Fort Meyer?
- A: Yes.
- Q: Who was your builder for Sandibel?
- A: I'll think of it in a minute. Peter. He's still around. His son was going to build our house, and he did some work for us before with a kitchen. And he built Doyle's house. Actually, his father came in, Peter. Gosh, I should know his name. But he built the house and he did a good job.
- Q: You and Liz have had a lot of years at Quonochontaug, and your four kids have had years at Quonochontaug. How many grandchildren do you have?
- A: Nine.
- Q: Have they all had some Quonochontaug experiences?
- A: They all come. Yes. And they all bring their friends. And two of them met their husbands here.
- Q: Have you had boats over your years at Quonochontaug?
- A: Yes. We have.
- Q: Tell us the series of boats that you owned, bought and sold.
- A: We had a Proline. We kept that at the Ocean House Marina. Then we had two other boats, which we kept most of the time at the marina. And then we brought it over to our pond, and some friends of ours let us use their dock, because they weren't using them.
- Q: So, these are like 20-foot cabin cruiser boats?
- A: Twenty-three-foot center consoles.
- Q: Did you use them for fishing? How did you use them?

A: We used them mainly for fishing. Then we used to take the kids, especially the grandchildren with rafts out behind us and pull them around where they'd bump into one another. They had a good time with pulling them around on the rafts. They had a great time.

Q: Would you go out to Block Island to fish with your boats?

A: Oh, sure. All the time. And Liz and I would go out to visit some neighbors of ours from Newtown who had a place out there.

Q: Did you ever have any close calls?

A: I think if you're a pilot and a boat guy, you do have close calls. Yes.

Q: So, in the Navy when you were flying, it didn't always go perfectly?

A: We had some close calls, but nothing serious.

Q: You never had to eject?

A: N

Q: What were your close calls with your boats? Was it due to bad weather?

A: Due to real choppy weather. Some of the weather we should never be out in. One time we took our whole public works committee on one crummy day over to Block Island to look at the public works system over there, and it was really bad. We should have never done it. The guys still ride me about it.

Q: If you look back at your fishing career, does one particular day stand out? What was the best day you ever had fishing?

A: I think one day I had my nephew and his wife out. We were south of Block Island, and we caught four stripers at once. Four keeper stripers.

Q: So, over 28 inches?

A: Yes. Right. That's the best day that I've had on my boat.

Q: When you say you caught them all at once, did you have four lines out?

A: No. We had one line out with four hooks on it. It's called an umbrella rig.

Q: That's over 100 pounds of fish.

A: I don't know if it was 100 pounds. I don't know how much it was. And the builder's name was Peter Peloquin.

Q: How do you spell that?

A: P-E-L-L-I-Q-U-I-N.

Q: I take it when you were working, you were just using Quonochontaug for weekends and summer vacations?

A: That's true. I tried to get down on Wednesday afternoons or Wednesday night for a swim, and then I'd get up in the morning early and go back to work.

Q: And then back to Quonochontaug Friday night?

A: Yes.

Q: I know you've been really active in the community, and have lots and lots of friends, and have been a good leader. Tell us about the committees you've been on the and the public service that you've done for Quonochontaug over the years.

A: I was on the tennis committee for a long, long time. We built the two courts. We built them twice to where they are now. One year I was the chairman of the nominating committee. That was a good deal, because you can't get stuck with anything on the nominating committee. And then I was on the public works. We rebuilt the system that's in there now. I'm back on the public works.

Q: So, you were on the tennis committee for decades?

A: Yes. For about ten years.

Q: And you built two of the tennis courts?

A: The courts. We built them twice. We rebuilt them.

Q: And upgraded them each time?

A: That's the right word. Yes.

Q: I remember interviewing Neal Thorpe, and he was saying that in the very early tennis days of Quonnie, there would be a big boulder sticking out that would throw the tennis balls away. I know the courts now are pretty high grade.

A: They are. We're very fortunate to have the two courts.

Q: Tell me about your public works service.

A: When I took over in 2007 or '08, we were always having an emergency not getting enough water. My first job was hydraulics, and I know a little bit about the water system. So, we hired an outside consultant, who is still there now, and we decided to rebuild it and update it. I had the design, and then we got this guy, Bob Ferrari, from Northeast Water solutions, and he kind of modified it for the bigger holding tanks. We built the system. But before that, some nights these guys, Danny McCloud and those guys were having a hell of a time keeping the water system going. Over the 4th of July and other times, there wasn't enough storage for peak demands in the evening. So, the new system seems to have met it.

Q: Are there two wells back there?

A: Two wells.

Q: Did you ever have to dig them deeper or redo them?

A: No. They've both about 19, 20 feet.

Q: And they both touch the aquifer and you don't typically run out of water?

A: No. We haven't run out of water. Although one well, number two, has a lot of iron. We really don't use that too much. We're in the process now of addressing that. We're going to put green sand filters in. That should be done within the next eight or nine months.

Q: Will that take care of the iron problem?

A: Yes. Then we'll put a chlorine system in to meet the state's requirements. We have a chlorine system for bacteria.

Q: Are there two storage tanks, or one storage tank?

A: We're going to keep the same storage tank. It's 8,000 gallons.

Q: It's 8,000 gallons?

A: That's what it is now.

Q: Someone told me the east Quonochontaug wells are pretty close to the Central Beach wells. Is that true?

A: That's true.

Q: Is that tapping into the same aquifer?

A: Yes.

Q: When you were on public works, were there any calamities at Quonochontaug during Hurricane Carol or Sandy?

A: We had some near calamities of who was going to pump one 4th of July night, but the guy at Northeast never takes care of that. We had hurricane Sandy on my watch, and that required cleaning up the debris afterwards, and we got some pretty good help from Washburn and some other guy. We cleaned it up. There wasn't too much damage, except a lot of water.

Q: Were some houses lost in Sandy?

A: I wasn't here when we lost any houses.

Q: Have you done any other committees or public works for Quonochontaug?

A: No. That's the only committee that I've been on. I was on a golf committee. I ran that for about four years. I still help out with it for the Quonnie Open. You ought to come in the summertime so you can enjoy it.

Q: Are you the creator of a social night once a month for couples?

A: Yes. We have a Quonnie Night Out. We get people to come out. I pick different restaurants. We have two rules: you don't sit next to your honey, mix it up and get separate checks. It goes along pretty well. It works out fine.

Q: How many years have you been doing it?

A: Six. You came to one of them.

Q: Yes. Sometimes you get 50 or 60 people, don't you?

A: I think we've had about 42 or 43 at the most. That's about it. But people seem to enjoy it. They like mixing it up to see other people that you don't know.

Q: What months of the year do you do it?

A: Usually October through April. Except I'm not there now. There's going to be no February or March. We'll get it back in April. I pick the restaurant. I don't get too much outside guidance.

Q: What other Quonnie events do you participate in?

A: The parade every year. We were fortunate. The last couple of years we've gotten prizes with our great grandchildren. That Quonnie parade—it's tough to tell people what a

unique thing it is, and how many people show up at the ball field, and what a home-spun event it is.

Q: Do you know anything about the Quonnie fire engine?

A: No.

Q: For years and years it was in the parade, was it not?

A: Well, there's always been a fire engine. Where it came from when we were first came here in '64, '65 and '66, I really don't know.

Q: I'm going to do a talk in October about the Quonnie fire engine, so come to that at the Quonochontaug Historical Society, and you'll learn all about it. The original Quonochontaug fire engine gave out. Did we then go to the public fire department and they would drive a fire engine for the parade?

A: That came from Dunns Corner. But who owned the original engine?

Q: In 1954, my grandfather, Dick Moran, bought the fire engine for \$350 from either East Lyme or Old Lyme. Then a bunch of men, like Brad Fisher and Bill Carpenter would keep it going every year. I don't think it ever was used for anything other than the 4th of July parade. I don't think it ever put out any fires. It lasted for decades before it gave out.

A: Do you remember all those guys walking around every day kind of controlling the place and making comments? I think it was Dick Moran who came up to our house. There was a rock wall in the front here, and wondered if it had a name. He said, "Fort Myer." That's how I got the name of the house.

Q: He would be pleased. He was born in 1898, so he would be 125.

A: That's my father's age.

Q: Do you remember the Runny Nose Club? Five or six of the older fellows would walk with their shillelaghs around Quonochontaug.

A: I remember them walking around. Grant and Slater—those are the guys I'm talking about that walked around the place. They kind of ran the place too. Monahan.

Q: Dave Waite, Al Randall and those guys?

A: I don't remember them. I think your father was part of that either.

Q: No. Just my grandfather.

A: He's before my time.

Q: You've been a big beach user over the years, have you not? I see you swimming a lot.

A: Yes. I take a swim every day. That's what we're here for. That's what we're there for.

Q: When was the earliest that you've been in?

A: We used to go in April to Columbus Day. Wally Headman used to say, "If you take the total number of months you go skiing divided by the total cost, it's not so expensive." I also have to tell you about walking back and forth. Your father would be sitting out there with all these lovely ladies, and he'd say, "How about this weather today?" We named him the commissioner of weather. He did a superb job.

Q: And, as I recall, you blamed him for the cloudy weather.

A: No. It was a lot of fun going back and forth. He'd be sitting there with the dog saying, "How do you like this?"

Q: You're a skier too, correct?

A: Yes.

Q: Tell us about your skiing experience.

A: I have been skiing all my life. I've been all over Europe, all over the United States. I went up to New England a lot. I just enjoy it. But I haven't skied for two years because of my knee. I think my ski days are over.

Q: Recently did you have your knee fixed?

A: I had my knee fixed. Then I fell and tore a quadricep, and I'm paying for it now. I'm on the road to recovery. I'm hoping to get back on the golf course within two or three weeks.

Q: So, a boater, a swimmer, a skier and a golfer?

A: Yes. And tennis and pickleball.

Q: You've always been an avid tennis player.

A: Yes. Tennis is really what made it for me here. We used to play tennis morning and in the evening, and go to the beach. We had a good group of people too.

Q: Do you have any fond memories of Quonochontaug, or special events that you will never forget?

A: I was thinking about. One year early on, we used to have a summer dinner. We had the Swiss Chalet. Dan McClain ran the thing. We were up there in the back of the Swiss Chalet, which is now the Haversham, and it was hot as hell. We all had ties and jackets on. Then we came back and we all went swimming. Some went skinny dipping, if you can believe that. Another one was the older people used to have cocktail parties, and we got invited over to Ernie Gee's one night for a cocktail party, and I had what I thought was a really neat outfit on. A pair of red stretch pants and a red polka-dot shirt on. Everybody showed up at 5:00 and left at 7:00. Everybody had a tie and jacket on, so I was kind of out of it, do I learned my lesson. They were great people.

Q: So, your Swiss Chalet skinny dipping, I would guess that some alcohol might be involved in that.

A: It was warm that night.

Q: Is there anything else that you'd like to tell me about with your days at Quonochontaug that we haven't covered?

A: I found it a really nice place, because all the people are so neat. I can walk to tennis, walk to the beach, go clamming in the pond. We were always aware of where the kids were. It was just a great group of friendly people. We all got together. No one was really a pain in the neck, that I can recall. Well, there was one or two. But it fit my needs. I can walk every place. I love the ocean. I love to play tennis. The kids all loved it. You could kind of keep track of them.

Q: One thing I'm always amazed by is how many smart, interesting people live in Quonochontaug.

A: There are a lot of really smart people. The percentage of people that participate and help out is really high, and they're really qualified people.

Q: Thank you for all you've done for Quonochontaug over the years. It's a different place because you've been there for 60 years. You've really left an imprint on the community. Quonochontaug should be grateful for all that you and Liz and your family has done. And I want to thank you.

A: Okay. See you in May.