

# QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Oral History

# DENISE MULCAHY

August 4, 2016

Interviewed by Donna Jordan

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: Welcome to Quonochontaug, Charlestown, Rhode Island. Quonochontaug is better known as Quonnie. And today my name is Donna Jordan, and I am a board member of the Quonochontaug Historical Society. And this interview is taking place on Sunday, August the 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019. The location of the interview is 26 West End Road in Quonochontaug. This oral history is being done to preserve the history of Quonochontaug residents. This video will be stored in the archives of the Quonochontaug Historical Society. Today I'm interviewing Denise, who is my friend, and will have a lot of Quonnie history to share with us. Denise, would you please share with us your name, your place of birth?
- A: Yes. My name is Denise Mulcahy. My maiden name was Denise Hatch. And my place of birth was Worchester, Massachusetts.
- Q: And what was the first person in your family to come to Quonochontaug?
- A: It was my grandfather, William Hatch, and my grandmother, Edith. They lived in Longmeadow, Massachusetts. And my grandfather was city editor for the paper, and the cartoonist, Mr. Low, was good friends with the gentleman who owned the inn, Mr. Lerner. And he was an avid fisherman, as was my grandfather. So, my grandparents started coming, and they would stay at one of the inns or the hotels on the breachway in the 1920s.
- Q: As you said, they came from Longmeadow, Massachusetts.
- A: Yes.
- Q: How did they find out about Quonnie? Through that fisherman friend?

A: Yes. Through the cartoonist for the paper that my grandfather was the editor, Mr. Low. And he was an avid fisherman, and so he told my grandfather about Quonnie and how beautiful it was, and how wonderful the fishing was.

Q: How old were you when you first came to Quonnie?

A: I was nine months old.

Q: Any siblings in your family?

A: Yes. I have a sister, Wendy, and she was two when she first started coming.

Q: Where did you stay, or where did you live?

A: We started our stay—our time in Quonnie at 717 West Beach Road. My grandparents bought and built right after the 1938 Hurricane. They bought from the Ross family, and the original piece of property was a vegetable and flower garden, however, there's an interesting bit of history here. The well house on the back of the property survived the 1938 Hurricane, and Mr. Finlayson broke the glass and got up into the rafters of the well house, and he wrote in pencil up on the rafters saying that he would fix the glass, and that it had saved his life from drowning in the 1938 Hurricane.

Q: Who was that?

A: Mr. Finlayson, a neighbor down the street before we built our house. They already had a property here.

Q: Is that well house still there?

A: It is. And sadly, when the roof was replaced—I'm going to say back in the 1980s—they didn't save that piece of wood that had the writing on it that he would repair. But that was the history—the story that was told to us.

Q: That's a wonderful historical part to have.

A: Interesting.

Q: What is your first memory of Quonnie?

A: We would spend the summers from June till September here. And when we were young, we used to spend quite a bit of time at what we called the little beach, which is West Beach. And Holly Schroeder's parents, the Blantons, had their little cottage, and as a child they had a cuckoo clock from Germany that they would wind up and let my sister and I come in to hear the cuckoo clock. That's one of my funny little stories of being a child. And I remember Miss Patty, who owned the house where the Hughs are now. She was a good friend of my grandmother's. And the Wilans, the Beamis' parents, I

remember them as a child when they were alive. And the Browns. They taught us a lot about the beauty and nature of Quonnie. They would take us for walks, and they would point out the wild flowers and the sunsets and the migrating birds and the monarch butterflies and things I think I took for granted as a child, but now I realize how special they were.

Q: You mentioned the Brown family. Could you elaborate a little bit, because David Brown has been in several of our videos? Tell a little bit more about David Brown.

A: When my grandparents built in 1938, there was a farm that started I believe from West Beach that came all the way down. I believe the gentleman's name was Healey, but don't hold me to that. So, our little cottage was surrounded by pastureland and fences. My aunt and my father, when they were children, would go into the cow pastures to get what they would call cow pies to soak in water for fertilization for the flowers. And there was what they thought a bull that would chase them out, but in fact, it was a cow named Betsy, that I guess was quite a fearful bull. But the reason I bring up this story is Mr. Healey had offered to my grandfather to buy the farm at \$100 an acre, but, as my grandparents would say to me, back in the day, that was a lot of money. And he was a very prudent man. So, he opted not to, and that's when the Browns bought the property. Harold and his first wife. They had their first son, Sherman, and then sadly his first wife passed, and he married Ruth, and then they had—I believe Betsy was next, and then Fredericka and David. And they became our good friends and neighbors for many, many years.

Q: Fredericka owned the home known as Whistling Chimneys in Quonnie. That house has a lot of history. Again, stored in the archives are recollections from Fredericka and David Brown. It's quite a family with a lot of roots in this area.

A: May I elaborate a little bit? I wanted to say one of my fond memories of being a child, when we were in our cottage, there were two title marshes or ponds across the street from us that when the property was filled in back in the 1960s, no longer exists, however, when I was a child, they would ebb and flow with the tides. There would be swans. There were no Phragmites. You would have a clear view across to the beach on either side. And also, from behind in our little cottage, you could see the pond, and you could see the sailboat races from the little Weekapaug Club. So, things have changed. The ponds are filled in with Phragmites now, and they no longer have the ebb and flow, so we no longer have the view of the wild life that used to exist there.

Q: What else did you enjoy doing down here as a teenager?

A: We used to go to the bowling alley that was down here around the corner. And you could get soda and candy, which we thought was pretty neat when we were kids. And then down around the corner, there used to be a little bait shop where you could get bait for fishing on the breachway. I think it's where the Washburns are now, or next door. There was a gentleman that owned Henry's Fruit Stand on Route 1, and it was a relative of his—I don't believe it was Henry, because he wouldn't have been old enough, but he

would come in a truck, and he would come down the street with this open truck in the back, and he had built-in shelves, and he would have fruits and vegetables, and he would stop at the end of the driveway and beep his horn. That's how we would go out and get our fruits and vegetables when I was young. And we also had milk delivered to the house, which we loved, because it would have the cream on top. These are silly memories. When I was young, I was raised Catholic, and I knew Mrs. Lewis, who owned the inn, and she sold it to the Sisters of Notre Dame, who, when I was a child, would be in full habit. And we would go there for mass on Sundays. Every once in a while, they would have a priest that would come, but most times it was the sisters. They had a little chapel in the back that we would go to, but mostly it would be up at the inn itself. One of the sisters would play guitar. That's one of my memories. I had a whole group of wonderful friends who spent the summer. We would go to Nun's Beach, because that's where the majority of their cottages were. We would play cards on the beach and swim and surf. We had a great summer life here.

Q: Did you go into the pond and do any clamming?

A: Occasionally. Crabbing, clamming, fishing—things like that. Yes. Into the pond.

Q: Are any of your relatives still coming to Quonnie?

A: I'm the only one left. Sadly, both my grandparents passed, and my aunt, who I was very dear and close to—Priscilla Hatch, who absolutely adored Quonnie. If I may share some memories from Priscilla—has passed. When Priscilla was a teenager, she used to go to Nun's Beach, because Mr. Lerner gave our family permission to use that beach. Mr. Jolly, Miriam Spencer's father, owned the big house right there on the beach, and he had a pet monkey. Everybody was afraid of this pet monkey, because it would bite. The reason I bring up the story of the monkey is my aunt told me she was about sixteen, and she was sitting on the beach with one of her friends, and Mr. Jolly came down and he asked if she would watch the monkey while he went in for a swim, and he would have it on a leash. And she didn't want to be impolite, so she said yes, but she was secretly terrified of this monkey. Well, as soon as Mr. Jolly went into the water, the monkey proceeded to climb up onto my aunt's head, sit on top and pee. I know it's a silly story, but it's kind of eclectic and crazy that there would be a monkey here in Quonnie, but that's a true story.

Q: Could you tell us about your Aunt Priscilla's dog? I remember that dog. I forget the name.

A: Laddie.

Q: Often you would see Laddie running around, and Priscilla, who at the time, was getting older, couldn't always catch Laddie.

A: This is true.

Q: So, many neighbors and friends would take this beautiful Collie dog back to Priscilla's house.

A: Yes. When my grandparents built the little cottage, their first Collie was called Champ, and we had many, many Collies in the family thereafter. My aunt was one of the first ones in this area to retire and live here full time. That was back in the late '70s, early '80s. It was pretty desolate during the winter, but she always had the companionship of her dog. And now there are quite a few families that live here year-round.

Q: Right. That is something to note that it wasn't a year-round community for quite a while.

A: No. It was not.

Q: I know you and your husband, Richard, have been coming to Quonnie and living in different residents in Quonnie, so I'd like Denise to tell us where these homes are located. And they each have a special name, so you can start with the first one that you and Rich owned.

A: That would be over here on Sandpiper—56 Sandpiper. That's how Donna and Steve and Richard and I became good friends. A beautiful spot right here at Crescent Beach. A little history of Crescent Beach. When I was a child growing up, Mr. Grill owned this property, and he had a number of little cottages that he would rent. Rumor had it—I don't know if this is fact—that he was the one that placed the rocks out here, because he didn't want the beach to wash away. So, I remember Mr. Grill's cottages. We sold Sandpiper to buy a house on the pond. My husband really loved the pond. We bought Pat Gamwell's property called Pondside—we named it Pondside.

Q: Tell me again who's house it was.

A: It was Pat Gamwell.

Q: She has history here.

A: she has history. That was at 419 West Beach Road. It was a lovely almost—well, it was three acres plus of land on the pond. It was lovely. We did the house over. Every house that we've done we did over. We did not add. We did not take down. We did not make larger. We did it over. We really loved the home very much, but we have a large family and they weren't coming. So, then we bought a cottage in Central, the Gray Lady, which we really loved—a very old cottage. I believe it was built in 1915. We did that over, kept the charm. Now we're up at 14 Ashaway Colony Lane by the inn, a place my grandfather always loved.

Q: And if I can add, each house that Denise and Rich have owned have turned into a showcase.

A: You're too kind, Donna Jordan.

Q: Very, very beautiful.

A: Where we are now was one of my grandfather's favorite places to fish off the rocks. He had an opportunity to buy that property after the '38, but he wouldn't, because he saw what happened down here. So, I often think I don't know how pleased he would be. But to go back to the '38—the hurricane that affected our family was 1954, Hurricane Carol. At the time, my father had gotten back from the Korean War, and he had a battery-operated radio. It was he and my grandmother and grandfather in the little cottage, 717 West Beach Road, they had been saying that it was a gale; not a hurricane. My grandfather watched the barometer, and it kept going down, going down. Then they lost power. My father had this battery-operated radio, and when he was able to get it up and running, it said it was a hurricane and it was off of Montauk Point. By the time they got in the car to leave, the water was all the way up to the top of the tires in the car. My grandfather was an amateur, but an avid artist as well, and he had painting and sketches and pastels throughout the cottage. The water came right through the cottage back to the pond, and you could see the line in the house by all the paintings how high up the water had come.

Q: So, they were able to leave?

A: They were able to leave. Everyone thought our cottage was in the middle of West Beach Road. It was actually Mary Birch's cottage in the middle of West Beach Road.

Q: Where was her home?

A: Her home was up by near where the chimney is.

Q: And that home—

A: Got washed into West Beach Road, and everybody kept telling my grandparents—here is a funny story. Maybe we should edit this after. We'll see. But my father had gotten back from the Korean conflict, and they had a National Guard at the top of the road. They weren't letting anybody down. Of course, our family was heartsick that they thought our little place was in the middle of the road. So, my father, on his own, went in a car to the top of the road and started a conversation with this nice, young guy. Told him he had just gotten out of the conflict. "What kind of gun do you have? Can I see your gun?" The young man showed him the gun. He took the gun. He took the ammunition out. He gave him back the gun and he broke through the barrier and he came down the road. This probably isn't a good story. He came down the road and was able to get down far enough to discover it wasn't our cottage; it was Mary Birch's. I guess they were looking for him. I don't think he ever got in trouble for it. So, it was Mary Birch's house. She then bought a place over on Sunset Drive. She did not rebuild on the ocean front.

Q: There was a lot of destruction down here in 1954.

A: Yes. Not the loss of life, like '38. But a lot of destruction.

Q: I was going to ask you about the hurricanes and so on. Denise wasn't even born when Hurricane Carol hit this area. Is there anything else that you would like to share with us, Denise?

A: I have memories of my aunt. These are the ones that were passed down to me. She and Holly Schroeder would go no double dates to the dances at the Seabreeze Inn. That was a big thing when they were young here. Let's see what else I wrote down. At the top of the street, it was old East West Farm. Mr. Babcock owned that farm. You could stop there and get fresh eggs. But across on Route 1, he had Babcock's Store, and as a child we would go there. It was like a general store, but almost like a hardware, but you could get also get canned food and supplies and things like that. What other memories can I share? Quonnie has always been very special to our family. It's still a beautiful area, but was far different. When we grew up, it was much smaller homes. We didn't have a dishwasher or a washing machine. You would go to the laundry mat, or hang everything out to dry. Central Beach was mostly little ranch homes. There weren't many large homes. Whistling Chimneys was probably the biggest home in Quonnie at the time. Seabreeze Inn was really in disrepair when I was a child growing up, and finally they tore it down. Of course, the bowling alley they tore down. I can't think of too much more to add.

Q: Did your Aunt Priscilla ever talk about going to the candy store, Mother Brimley's?

A: Yes. I think she did, now that you bring that up, Donna, especially because when they were staying at the hotel, that was a very popular place for people to go. I also remember them talking about, which I have no recollection of, because it got wiped out in '38, the boardwalk that went along all the way across down—I don't know if it went all the way to Central. But they would walk that boardwalk—my grandparents—and you would stop and see your neighbors and visit and say hello to the people that they got to know in the community. Up at Ashaway, I know a good friend of ours from my youth, Mr. Aycrigg, his family owned the house next to inn where his aunt accidentally started the fire. It burned all those cottages. They tried to get a fire going with newspaper, he told me. It caused a major fire, and all those homes burned, I believe.

Q: And that was in Ashaway?

A: Ashaway Colony. There were very large homes there. I guess it was named after a group of people that owned mills in Ashaway, and they would come and summer here. So, far different from how it stands today.

Q: When that fire occurred, it was started because of the newspaper?

A: Yes. It was his aunt, and I believe a cousin. They were there. Two women alone, he told me. They were trying to get a fire going. I guess they didn't do it the proper way, or

something wasn't right. And it was newspaper, and it caught the whole place ablaze and just went right down the road. But I believe the inn was not touched by that.

Q: She's referring to the Quonochontaug Inn that is now owned by the Roman Catholic sisters. I have postcards that show that area before the fire. Then after the fire and other cottages were built and so on.

A: I have one more memory. May I?

Q: Yes.

A: When my aunt was a teenager, once again, she and Holly were friends, and a group of young people from both beaches, before the Army Corps of Engineers dredged the breachway to be much deeper—and I think that was after the '54 Hurricane—they used to be able to walk across at low tide. They would go over to Coast Guard Beach, because they were young teenage girls, and they would like to see the nice, young Coast Guard men that were stationed across the way. Or sometimes they'd take a little boat over. But I thought that was kind of neat, because I've always been not fearful of the breachway. You have to be careful of the currents and everything else in that breachway.

Q: Absolutely.

A: I think a number of people, since I've been a child, have lost their lives in that breachway sadly. So, a very different time. And I think because of the '54 Hurricane—I believe where was in '44 too—they dredged the breachway.

Q: What she spoke of, is the U.S. Coast Guard Station. She mentioned that they called it the Coast Guard Beach. Like Denise was saying, they patrolled the beaches, and the water. Many times, they would have their drills to anticipate if there was a disaster. Many of the people liked to go over there and watch the Coast Guard officers conducting these drills. It was kind of a social thing to do. Also, mentioning the boardwalk, I was told that that was probably the most social thing to do in Quonochontaug walking in front of the hotels, and then coming around this way. So, there are a lot of memories and very special places in Quonnie.

A: I have one more that I just thought of when you brought up doing the drills. When my grandparents and my aunt were here, and I guess my dad would have been very little at that time, during World War II, they had to have black-out shades. There would be submarines that would be off the coast. They purposefully blew up a large rock on East Beach, because they were afraid—or dynamited it. I'm sure you know the history. They were afraid the Germans could use that as a point of where the land was, and the properties—whatever. But my aunt said they'd have to pull down the black-out shades at night to make sure there was no light, and that it was reported there were a number of German subs that would be off the coast here. That's another memory. Now that you said drills, it brought it up. Some more recollections. I'll start with our little cottage was not winterized, but our family loved it so, we'd come early in the spring, and even after



the water was turned off, we had an old pot-bellied stove that would heat up the little place, and we'd put coal in it at night to keep the cottage warm. Then down on Nun's Beach, when I was a child growing up, the Dowd sisters, who I guess back in the day would be considered spinsters—I know it's not a very kind term—but neither of them married, and they both were well to do. They had a lovely old cottage that sadly has been taken down. They used to travel and go on all kinds of trips, which I thought was so fascinating as a little girl. Then my friend Joanne Thompson, who owned Barnacle, her aunt bought Morris Point, Barnacle was the carriage house for Morris Point. Morris Point was owned by the Morris family, and he played—I know this is not politically correct, but he was a famous actor. He would paint his face black. I can't think of name. Do you know what I'm talking about, Bob? I'm sure other people have spoken about it. That's how he became famous. His family owned that property. In '38, it got wiped out. But Barnacle, Mrs. Thompson's cottage, the carriage house got pushed back to where it sits today.

Q: You know that almost every house in Quonochontaug has a name. So, when Denise is mentioning one was Morris Point, another was Barnacle, did you cottage—the Hatch family—have a name?

A: We did not have a name. But we did have an old horse shoe that hung in the cottage that my dad had found in the pasture before the Browns bought it. When we bought Mase's property up here, it was Mase's Oasis, we kept Oasis out of respect for their family, and we put the old horse shoe up that was from our little cottage. I thought that was good luck.

Q: And that's where she is living now.

A: Yes. Oasis.

Q: Oasis is the name of the home, and where this horse shoe now hangs for good luck.

A: Too much. I could go on and on and on, Donna.

Q: Tell us a little bit about the Barret boys. We want to keep going here, Bob, because I remember that there was a family called the Barrets. There are four sons. I'd like Denise to tell us her relationship with these four boys.

A: When my grandparents first built their little place, for many years they tried to acquire the property across the way that my good friend, Deb Anderson's family ended up buying. But it was in litigation. And then next door to us, there was a piece of property. On the other side was Mrs. Miriam Green. She was also an educator, like my grandmother, and a librarian, and became a very dear friend. Her daughter and her husband, Shirley, and we called him the Colonel, ended up buying the property next to us—the Barret's family. They also became very dear friends. Colonel Barret was a pilot in the military, and he was a prisoner of war twice, once in, I believe—I don't know if it was World War II or Korea and then Vietnam, but twice. The boys could tell you what

wars he was in. They used to travel all around the world because of his job. The one place they really felt was like their home was Quonnie. Now, sadly, the Colonel and Shirley have both left us, but the boys still come and use the house. They really love it here. They're old timers here too.

Q: What are their names?

A: Steven, Phillip, Kevin and Joel Barret.

Q: Did you do things with them as a youngster?

A: Yes. They were my good friends. As well as up at the Nun's Beach where Mr. Jolly was who had the monkey, the Bobellas family owned two properties up there, and they were my very close friends. They were from Lithuania. Sagetha and Victor were my good friends, as well as the Mase family and the Perkins girls were my good friends as well. So, we all had a lot of fun during the summers. We all would have summer jobs, but we got to spend a lot of time on the beach playing cards, swimming in the ocean and just really enjoying Quonnie. Those are my fondest memories.

Q: Whenever I see the Barret boys, they all say to me, "You should have known Denise when she was a teenager. She was lots of fun." I think you can tell by her personality that she also enjoyed having good friends.

A: Yes. The Colonel was an interesting gentleman. He really was. Steven flew in the Air Force as well. He went to Dartmouth, but he flew in the Air Force because of his dad. A very interesting gentleman, Mr. Barret. We always called him the Colonel.

Q: As young as Denise is, she has many, many memories of families here in Quonnie.

A: Yes. My grandmother was an educator, like Donna, and a teacher. And she loved to collect shells. She used to find occasionally on, what I call the little beach, flint arrowheads from the Narragansett Indians. She always told me, and I actually had this discussion with David Brown, my neighbor, that on Little West Beach Road, or we called it Little Winding Road, there was an Indian Burial Ground on the side that they now have the sign that says Holmes' property. David said he had heard that as well, but there was no proof that it existed. But that was what she always felt to be true.

Q: I think in the cemetery that Stantons owned, there are headstones that aren't marked, and I've heard that that could be Native Americans in that particular cemetery, which is on the corner of West Beach and—I forget the name of that little road.

A: Old West Beach Road.

Q: So, there are historical artifacts found in this area. I hate to conclude it, because it's been so good.

A: Thank you, Donna.

Q: I wish to thank Denise for telling us all of her recollections here in Quonochontaug. I also want to thank Bob Petrone, who is filming this interview.

A: Thank you, Bob.

Q: It will be placed in the archive center for future generations to enjoy and hear the history of our beautiful area known as Quonochontaug. Thank you.

A: Thank you.

