

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

EDITH LARKIN RICHARDS

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Interviewed by Donna Jordan

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Q: This is Donna Jordan speaking. Also here is Ann Doyle with me. We are going to record you in your oral history. Can you please tell me your father's full name and his job with the Coast Guard station?

A: He was Arthur Earl Larkin. When he first went to Quonnie, he was a Chief Petty Officer, but he was in charge of the Coast Guard station. That was the second time that my father had been assigned there. He also was there when he was quite young, but that was before I was born or before he was married.

Q: What was his responsibilities being the Chief Petty Office and then later the Chief Warrant Officer?

A: He became Warrant Officer when I was about seven years old. That's when I was at Quonnie. I lived there from the time he got transferred from Martha's Vineyard to Quonochontaug Coast Guard station. That was my two brothers, John and Henry Everett Larkin and myself.

I was three years old. I can remember the day we arrived there. I was there then until I started first grade at the age of six. Then through the years, from the time I started school, my one brother and I—because he was five years older than me, and my other brother was thirteen years older. He had to go up to the Dunn's Corner school—John did. Henry Everett and I, we went to Pawcatuck Valley School in Charlestown. We used to take from the Coast Guard station—would go across with his boat—a skippy—on a pulley. We used to have to pull it across from the station to a dock across, and then get out and leave the boat. They would pull it back if somebody wanted to get over to the other side where we came from. But we walked from there to Mother Grimley's Store. We waited there at 7:00 in the morning. It was maybe a quarter of a mile. Not quite. But we waited there. And then the bus came down and picked my brother and I up. I

went to first grade, and he was five years my elder, so he was a little older. So, then we went on the bus all the way up to Brightman's Store. I used to know old Mr. Brightman, and I knew Henry, his son. We would take a left there on Route 30. Then we'd go up and pick students up and come back, and then go no to Charlestown and go down by the library, turn around and go shoot down to the school. Then at the school, we waited, and we never got cold until around 5:00 a night. By the time it was wintertime, it was dark. That's what we had to do to get to school when we were at Quonnie.

Then as time went on, we certainly enjoyed it, because I learned how to swim. My father instructed me. And I swam the breachway when I was six years old, and no one would ever believe it unless they saw it. But my eldest brother swam aside of me when I went across. We had a little shepherd dog, Sheppy, and he swam with me on the other side. As time went on, the growing experience at Quonnie was nice, because we met a lot of nice people. It was summertime. We had people come to Quonochontaug Hotel, and then the other hotel aside of it. They had a boardwalk that went out. In the summertime, a lot of people would come there and spend their vacation. It was beautiful. As I grew, I learned a lot from Dad being in the Coast Guard. I had seen him a good many times—people would go out on the beach, and he would tell them, "Please stay away from the surf today, because it's bad," but people are all alike. I've seen him bring in quite a number of people and revive them due to weather. They didn't listen.

Where the Coast Guard station was, it was a beautiful spot. Down from that, there was a boardwalk that went down to my mother and dad's cottage, and that's where we lived. Of course, in the station my father had his office there and his crew. Then on the other side of the Coast Guard station, going north where you went into the station, on the driveway we had a house right next to there. At the time I was six, Harold Blivens owned and Ruthie. There was another house, and a man by the name of Peddington. There were two nice homes there. There was another one, but I don't remember who it was. I was little at the time.

What my father's crew had to do was very interesting, because we were at the point where the breachway was right by us that went into Quonochontaug salt water pond. On the other side of us was the ocean. You could go out there on a good day and look across, and you could see the outline of Block Island.

There were other things that they had to do. They protected the whole area. They had to go no watches at night. There was always someone in the tower observing boats or ships that were in distress with lights. My father instructed me in the Morse Code. They wouldn't probably know it today, but it was the [inaudible 15:16] that called it with the flags. That's how they sent messages way back.

When I came there, I was three. From 1920 going on to 1930, we had a few years there. So, as time went on, I was going to be seven. My dad got transferred to Watch Hill Coast Guard station. In fact, today I just learned that they named the road after my father that went down to the station and the light house. I believe the light house is still standing, but they took the Coast Guard station down.

So, as time went on, then we were there not too long, and he got transferred to Old Harbor Coast Guard station at Chatham, Massachusetts. We were there until I was in eighth grade. But guess what? We were transferred back to Quonnie. My life there was just wonderful as a child. And not only that; as I grew, I was ten years old going on eleven when my father got transferred again. So, it was a very interesting time for my brother and I that were home—my youngest brother. My oldest brother was in school in Westerly. They had to go to school there after the eighth grade. They went to Dunn's Corner until the ninth, and then on to Westerly, Rhode Island to be freshmen in high school.

My brother and I, on the weekend, we used to get up and go out the back door. Over by our house, there was a [inaudible 18:41]. It was so big. It was just like it was a protection from the rest of the property from where it went down into the pond.

As far as people go, there was Mr. and Mrs. Eldridge. They had the bowling alley. They had three sons. I can't remember the middle boy, but I took care of Jack or John. And then the oldest boy was the secretary at one time when my mother passed on to the governor of Rhode Island. His name was Charles. After they moved from there, they went to Bradford to live. Then the little one, he went on, and I was young when I babysat him.

We really had a very good time at Quonnie, because you take Memorial Day, we used to have a picnic out on the beach. I can remember Mother—she used to make the homemade root beer. We used to stick it in the ocean up where the waves come in to keep it cold. We put up the umbrella. We would be there. As the evening came, my dad sometimes would have fireworks for us. We had hotdogs and hamburgers and watermelon.

When I left Quonnie, I was ten. Mother and Dad decided to buy property at Dunn's Corner, because he got transferred to Point Judith, and Point Judith station was down very close to where he went into the Coast Guard in the beginning.

Then I had to go to school in Westerly. It was in 1938. If you remember the 1938 Hurricane, my father notified the coast line that we're going to get a bad storm. At that time, Paul McCarthy, who lived down the street from us, he was chief of police in Westerly. He was a nice man. He stopped and he told us that my father had called to notify the people in our area, because it was going to be really bad, and to evacuate. So, some of us did. Some of us didn't. This was down at Weekapaug, because you went down Langworthy Road to Weekapaug, and down to the road that would bring you down to Quonnie. It was a dirt road at that time.

We got the hurricane, and it was bad, because at Quonnie it took some of the homes out. It really did a terrible job on the whole coast line. It was bad. We lost over 200 lives at Weekapaug and Misquamicut. I can remember I was going on twelve or thirteen. They

had to open our school to keep the people that got killed. They opened it for a morgue. It was sad.

After that, they built a new Quonochontaug Hotel. Where did they build it? You would go down to Weekapaug, go down to the road that led back to the original Coast Guard station on this side; not on the other side of the breachway where the other hotel was. They built a beautiful hotel. I can remember that I said to my dad and my mother—I said, “Mom, they have built another hotel for Quonnie,” and she said, “Yes,” and she said, “That’s nuts.”

As time went on, I spent a good many days—one of my elementary school teachers liked mussels, and she said to me one day, “Edith, do you know how to get mussels?” I said, “I do. Why?” She said, “Would you get me some?” She was from Maine. I said, “Yes.” I said, “As long as the weather is good.” She said, “Why?” I said, “I have to go out on the rocks and get them.” She said, “Oh, I didn’t know that.” I said, “That’s where you get your mussels.”

There were a lot of different things that I learned at Quonnie. Going back to my father, I was about seven, so it had to be in the ‘30s. He said to me, “That was the first time we’ve ever seen the Quonochontaug breachway freeze,” because that went right out to the ocean. But that was the one year—I can’t remember if it was 1937 or ‘36. But that was before he got transferred. That breachway froze. I remember Dad saying to me, “Edith, would you like to take your sled and come up with me? You can ride on the sled.” We went up. You’d never believe that, but the breachway froze. So, we did.

Mr. and Mrs. Crandall had a small cottage on the breachway. That was Coby Crandall. They had a small cottage they used to use to come down and go fishing.

In the summertime you would see the umbrellas. They’d be out on the beach. The other side of the breachway—not on the Coast Guard station side—my dad wouldn’t let me go over there, because I was little, and it was too far away. You would have to go all the way over by Mother Grimley’s, and down, and then go across and hit the other beach, which was very nice too. It was amazing how the people just loved it there. I can understand. My son said to me some years ago, “Mom, don’t you miss that?” I said, “Yes, I do.” I said, “If your father didn’t have the job he had with the electric company, we would have stayed there.” But we had to have a living.

Most of the people there—there was Neal Phillips. He was the real estate agent. I knew Neal after I got married, because he took care of our property for me. I believe it was his grandfather that had property, or lived there. And I never knew that until I knew Neal. And I knew his father. The Phillips family was very close to the Larkin family in Westerly.

That’s about all I can give you, unless you want me to go into the Coast Guard and what they did in life saving. It was really an education in itself. My father became an officer.

I was so happy for him, because he really did work hard. He worked very hard. It was a life, just like it is now, where you get transferred all over.

During the second world war, I worked in Charlestown Naval station. There were three of us young ladies that got sworn into the United States Navy. I put three years in, and the other girls—one got transferred, and the other girl—I don't know where she went on the base. It was a good base. It had two runways. It was very close to Quonnie. Charlestown Pond was another salt pond. The other side of Quonnie was Winnipeg Misquamicut Pond. They were all three salt ponds practically in a row.

I spent a good many hours during the second world war in that area. I got married in 1946 just when Ike Eisenhower, in 1943—when I went to work for the Navy, he was getting ready for the invasion into Normandy. It was a very crucial time. But the history in this area is beautiful once you stop and think about it. OF course, Westerly was a naval base too.

After I was married—quite a number of years—the young woman that stood up for me, her name was Crawley, her brother became editor of *The Westerly Sun*. They found out somehow—I don't know, because Margaret has passed on—that I was involved in Quonset Naval Air station in Charlestown, and they called that Charlie Town. They sent me the aeronautical picture of the base. I hold that very dear, because it shows the whole area. When you're flying and you look down, you don't have to be too far up. You can see Quonnie. You can see all of this. So, it was very nice of them to remember me. It's something that I think people should know in our statehood in Rhode Island. It's a beautiful little state. Beautiful.

My father during the war was instructing two Ensigns in boarding officer duty. That was going out the twelve-mile limit. He used to have to do this at Quonnie. You had to out to the twelve-mile limit to get in, or let anyone in the area. That's what he did. During the second world war, he was on a PT boat with the two young men. He'd go out to the vessels that were going in the Providence River. They had to be escorted, because we were at war. The whole coast line had mines from there right straight down to Florida. The whole coast line was mined, because we had invaders coming in.

My one cousin from Westerly, young Daniel Larkin, he was captain of a ship off of North Carolina, and he wanted to get married, so the Navy gave him permission for two days. His executive officer took over. When he was gone, guess what happened? His ship got blown. It was a tragedy. What I'm saying here is it was all related. Rhode Island is the Ocean State.

There was another person I should mention. He eventually was captain of a Coast Guard station out by New York, and Dad used to have to go out there from Watch Hill. His name was Mr. Peckham. My mother and father's deal little daughter—what she did—I went down where I knew Dad was going to see Mr. Peckham. I wanted to go. So, I went down. I got in the boat. The boat was like a lifeboat. It had a Picket boat—they called them. They had two lifeboats. The Picket boat was smaller. It had bunks. It had a place

for cooking. So, I got down there early, went in the boat, crawled underneath one of the bunks. My father came down, and he checked everything out with his machinist mate, and he said, "Okay. Let's go, because Peckham is waiting for us." We got halfway over there, and the machinist mate came downstairs to where they had a bathroom, a little stove and the two beds. He saw me. My legs were hanging out from underneath. He went upstairs, and I heard him say, "Captain, we have a stowaway." My father said, "What?" He said, "Your daughter." "How in the world did she get here? Oh, Jesus, her mother is going to have a fit." He said, "I can't turn around now. We've got to go see Captain Peckham." Captain Peckham could still tell you, if he was living, he laughed. He got a big bang out of that. But it wasn't so funny either. I wanted to go in the boat for a ride. That was the thing. So, I went and I saw my friend. I got disciplines. Believe me.

As far as Quonnie goes, when we lived there, we had a shepherd dog. He was the one that swam with me when I was six years old across the breachway at Quonnie. When we left there, Dad forgot to take him in the truck. I was upset. But guess what? In the morning, guess who was at the door at the station? Sheppy, the dog. That's how smart he was.

It was a fun life for me. My brother and I used to stop at the pond on the way down to Mrs. Brimley's store. We used to call it turtle [inaudible 43:20], because he kept a turtle and he brought it home. We would have races with them. Then he put his initials on the back and put him back in the pond after. There were things that we did. When we got a little bit older, he made boards so we could go surfing. Dad always said to me, "Be very careful, because when the surf is high, it's powerful." Of course, we said, "We know, Dad. We won't go in when it's bad. We'll hit the low tide."

We had just a wonderful time. If my brothers were living today, they would tell you also that it was very, very happy for them living in Quonnie, because they did everything that children like to do. They liked to go swimming, liked to build castles in the sand, go out and pick up seashells and pick up the hermit crabs, and then watch the fishermen bring in all kinds of fish. For children to see this, it was very educational, because they had to sort the fish out. They'd get everything in there. Even flounder, which is a flat-water fish. They'd get flounder. They'd get cod. They got all kinds. And the fishermen lived on this. That's just something else we learned.

We really learned what we had to do to protect the sea life. That was the fellows at the Coast Guard. They had this clock that they carried. It was a leather clock. They had to go on watches. They had to walk the beach to the [inaudible 46:22] posts. They used the key when they got there, and then they turned around and walked back. It was things like this. The beach drills and rifle practices. It was just wonderful to see young men take the dory and go out and row. It was really, really something.

There may be something else I missed. But I do know that I was not the only one that liked Quonnie. We had people after the '38 hurricane that moved out, and always wished they could have been back. That's just about all I can tell you.

There were the Crandalls. These people were born and brought up there. Very, very wonderful and inspiring. We had to be very careful because of the water. We had to have knowledge of not going swimming when we were young if the tide was too high, because we were young. But as we got older, then we learned more that when the surf would break, it would break in different areas. So, if you were out with your board, that wave would be breaking, and when it breaks, it would bring you into the shore, or very close to the shoreline. It wouldn't be too deep. That's about it.

I am going to make sure that when I get home that I will copy these pictures for you and send you—I have some nice pictures of the original hotel, and our cottage, which the hurricane did a job on in '38, and the Coast Guard station. When they redid it, it was really beautiful. And the tower that they had been practicing on. It was really inspiring. There were so many people that loved it. They could go fishing. It was a lot of fun for them.

At Quonochontaug, we had a special fish in the pond. The name of it was Quotog [phonetic 50:34] after Quonnie. It was a black fish. They named it Quotog. When it was cleaned, it was absolutely delicious. Now, today, I don't know if it's still there. But I do know, we had it. It was just gorgeous. A beautiful fish.

Charlestown was known for their Blue Point Oysters and scallops very much so.

Winnapaug was known for their blue shell crabs. The other ones had crabs too, but for some reason, they had more there. They were known for that. Definitely. I don't know if they know about it now, but that fish was really delicious. We have fish today—the red snapper, flounder and sea bass where they cast off the beach. That's something else that was very interesting for a child to see them cast off the beach and bring in the fish on the line. That's about it for now.

But when I go home, and I've got to be back there for income tax time, I am going to get these pictures for you. I will send them. I have a copier. I have some nice ones. I have a picture of my father when he was an officer with his crew. And some of his crew, I can remember their names. One was Sampson. The other two I knew were sweet boys. He had quite a crew. I have a picture of them with my father in dress uniform in the basement of Quonnie station. It's a lovely picture. I think that would be nice to have, because the fellows worked very hard.

As far as the whole state of Rhode Island, those were my people on my father's side, and my mother's too. My great uncle was in the Indian War. He moved his children and family to where Westerly is today. The Larkins, Charles Crandall and Mr. Armstrong were the ones that started the charter for Westerly. They were all involved in the statehood. Quonnie was a big part of it.

I'll get you the pictures, but you won't get them until it gets a little warmer in the spring.

If I find anything that would be interesting for you—I was thinking about the Coast Guard station there—if there was a relic. I don't think so. But Dad had one from one of the lighthouses during the '38 Hurricane. He was at Point Judith. He was not at Quonnie.

Some of the names you gave me I didn't recognize. The ones I told you, definitely, because we were very close to them. There used to be winter residents there.

I thank you for the book. I love it. I will make sure you get this, because I know it's nice.

My husband and I bought property in New York. One day I was out, and this gentleman came to the antique shop that I ran for 30 years. Of course, nursing on the side. He said to me and my husband, "Do you mind if I take a Geiger counter and go over your property?" I said, "What for?" He said, "The Revolutionary War." I said, "I'm sorry; that's right." Well, do you know something? He took the Geiger counter and he went over the property. Do you know he picked up the old bullets that they used during the revolution? Our area there during the revolution and the war with the Mohawk Indians, the one church at the village—it's a very quaint village. It would remind you of New England. Especially Quonnie. The church has a balcony in it. When this church was built during this time. That's how old it is. They still have church there.

In our country, we really do have some beautiful places. If people would only stop and go.

Q: If we wrote you a letter and asked some specific questions from some of the things you said, can you write back?

A: Sure. Definitely.

Q: Did you go to Westerly High School, or not?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you know Hope Green Andrews?

A: No. I knew Oliver Crandall.

Q: Phyllis Burdick?

A: Yes.

Q: Phyllis is still living here.

A: Is she?

Q: Yes.

A: How is she doing?

Q: She's doing okay.

A: Good. Don Harmon. There was Margaret Peckery. There was Oliver Crandall. He became a Rhode Island supreme court judge.

I got through and went into the Navy, and then after went back and got my high school, two years in college, plus I went to Saint Mary's Nursing School and got my diploma to be a nurse. I did this after the Navy career. It was a good career.

Q: I didn't know about your nursing career.

A: I was working the second shift. Then my supervisor said to me, "Edith, somebody was asking about you. They like you." It was one of the manufacturing companies. He was quite well to do. He wanted me to take care of his mother. She said, "Would you mind?" I said, "If she needs me, yes." So, I went and I took care of her. In fact, he was the one that made the first litter bags that they used in cars to put junk in if you were driving. Then after that, there were others. One doctor was an old cowboy. He was a heart specialist. I heard that Dr. London just retired. He worked in Albany.

I've had some life. I took care of my father up until he passed on. And I took care of my husband. We lived to be married 60 years. We celebrated our 60th anniversary. I've got a nice family. The boys are all doing good. My daughter is a school teacher. She's instructing teachers in the autistic program in Virginia. It's quite an ordeal. Theresa is 58. I am very proud of the boys in my family. The only thing is when I was taking care of my husband, I kept him home. He was home with me. I had to take him to the hospital for about a week. I didn't expect my husband to live the week. I'll be truthful with you. But he did, and he passed on. My son that lives in back of me with his wife, he said, "Mom, why don't you go down with Theresa and visit a while? I'll look after the house for you." My other boy, he's the elder—Paul is going to be 66. He works for the [inaudible 01:05:54] company out in Maryland. He should be retiring pretty soon. I hope so.

I was very interested in our election. I don't agree with how they acted on television, but what are you going to do?

If there is anything you think I missed here—and I've been thinking about it too, because my postmaster said to me, "Edith, when are you going to write your book?" and I said to him, "At my age?" he said, "Definitely." It would be for the children to reach about the second world war, and how you youngsters went without. I said, "I know." I said, "I'll give it some thought."

Q: We will send you a CD of your conversation with us.

A: Okay.

Q: Your children will have that too.

A: That would be wonderful. Do you have a committee working with this about Quonnie?

Q: Yes. We have a board with ten people on the board. We all have different jobs to do.

A: Good. Because my son just said to my daughter—he called here—he wants to take a trip down. That's why I asked you. If I can take a trip back home, I will go.

Q: We want to meet you.

A: Okay. If there are any questions or anything, don't hesitate.

Q: Thank you. Your oral history has been wonderful. We will treasure it.

A: I felt so bad, but it was something I couldn't help. The governor there in [inaudible 01:09:16], it was Charles that probably said something to him to notify me, because I worked at Charlestown Naval Air Station. He wanted to know more about the station and what was going on. They closed. They put up a beautiful sign with all the fellows, most of them that lost their lives there. My husband had gone to the hospital, had surgery and so I couldn't make it. I felt so bad. They asked my brother right before he transferred over to the United States Air Force from the Army as a pilot to run for governor or for state senator. He called me and said, "They asked me to run for state senator or maybe governor." I said, "What are you going to do?" He said, "I can't, Edith. I am right up to my neck in work." And that's right, because he was a major in the Air Force. I said, "I do understand." Then one year they had him as a guest speaker in Westerly for the 4th of July. It was nice. They were all good kids.

I'm going to let you go. Thank you. If there is anything else you can think of—if I think of anything, I've got your address and I'll send it to you.

Q: Thank. We will treasure this oral history.

A: Quonochontaug is an Indian name. So is Narragansett. Watch Hill has quite a lot of history there about the Indians looking out. If there is anything I can send to you, I'll send it to you.

Q: That would be wonderful. Thank you, again.

A: You're doing some great work, because there are some people that are kind of laid back. But keep after them.