

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

MARY ELLEN ROMNEY

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Interviewed by Barbara Autumn

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Q: Saturday, August 9th, 1997. This is Barbara Autumn speaking. I'm going to be interviewing Mary Ellen Romney Balby. Mary Ellen, what first brought you to Quonochontaug?

A: Before I answer that question, I want to say first that today, August 9th, is the seventeenth anniversary of my father's death. He's the one who brought me to Quonnie to begin with. And he died here. He had been sick for a long time, but it was his dearest wish to come back here. And he didn't expect to die here, but he did not too long before he was sitting on the beach. We all feel wonderful about the same way about it as he does. My father knew Quonnie as a child. His parents came here to the West Beach area. He moved to Cincinnati shortly after he graduated from college and worked there his whole career, but he always wanted to come back here. The first trip that I know of that he made back here for vacation was I believe in 1938. It may have been '37, but I was a little girl. My sister Emilie was still in diapers. I think that his parents had a family reunion in the West Beach area that is between where the Quonnie inlet is now, the breachway that you showed me in the picture. I remember a little bit about that. There were a lot of cousins around. It was quite primitive. Mother was drying diapers on the fireplace screen, and there wasn't much sun. It was very difficult living with everybody jammed in the house together and everything like that. That was my first remembrance of Quonnie.

Q: Do you remember the name of the cottage?

A: No.

Q: Did the Romney family built it?

A: It was my grandparents who rented at least two, but maybe more cottages, for all of their children. My father was the fourth of five children. They grew up in Naugatuck, Connecticut. His two brothers and two sisters were there also. One brother and one sister also came with family. Everybody was there with kids. I don't remember the

names of them. I just can vaguely remember how they looked, which was simple. That was my first introduction to Quonnie. If that was '38 in July or August, there wasn't much to come back to after that. My next recollection was sometime after the war. I don't think we came to Quonnie during the war because of gas rationing. We did go to Weekapaug one summer and stayed at the inn, but that never satisfied my father. He never wanted to do it again. I was a teenager when I came back again. We rented Hobby House and Fox Hole. Before my parents built a house in 1960, they also rented the Carpenter's house and the Thorp house on the front.

Q: That would have been Spray Rock.

A: Spray Rock. Correct. One year they rented Red Top I believe, and another year they rented Red Top. I think in '62 there was another hurricane. We ended up staying in the Peddington farm house at East Beach. In the summer of '59 my parents bought two lots. That fall Brad Fisher began to build the house. It's on Niantic Street just north of the first house facing Niantic Street. North of Neptune on the east side. Sixty-six Niantic Street. The house was occupied for the first time the summer of 1960. My parents used it a few times. My father retired in 1966, and they used it then all summer and into the fall. It has never been winterized. It's a summer cottage. They both used it together up until 1980, and then my mother continued to come through 1984. Since then my sisters, Mickie Brady and Linda Morano used it on a rotating basis during the summer and sometimes in the off season. They made some changes, but not a lot on the inside. I have three children. They've been coming since they were babies. They're now adults and married. They really want to come too. We have three grandchildren.

Q: When you were growing up, do you remember the names of some of your friends?

A: I remember coming when I was twelve. That would have been during the war. I was incorrect about that. We must have come on a train. Maybe there were people who delivered food at that time. Carol Roderman and Tony Randall and [inaudible 08:11], who I think was a friend of Carol's, and George Roderman and Bill Saunders, Mr. Brown, James Sutherland. Those are the names that come back to me. That's all that I remember. I think I first got acquainted with them when I was about eleven or twelve. We continued whenever we would come up, which wasn't every year after that. They were gracious [inaudible 08:58].

Q: How did you amuse yourself in those days?

A: Everybody had a bicycle, just the way everyone does now. We had our special place on the beach, just the way they do. We seemed to go from morning until 10:00 or 11:00 at night just the way I observe these children nowadays. We would usually end up at somebody's house after dark and play cards or just continue to talk or whatever we would do in the day. We went to the bowling alley. That was certainly a gathering spot for people of our ages. We bowled. There was a juke box. And we could buy hamburgers and hotdogs and things to drink. It was dingy and dark, but everybody went there. It was perfectly safe for kids to be there.

Q: Did you ever go up to Mrs. [inaudible 10:18] at Blue Shutters at all?

A: Oh, yes. For dinner. They had wonderful clam chowder and blue-plate specials as I recall. And I remember also what is now the Chinese restaurant that is going to be demolished. There was a whole series of grocery stores. Brightmans at one time owned it. I'm not sure whether the Crandalls ever owned some.

Q: Crompton?

A: That was it. I believe he's the one that had the gas pumps. And Ann Brightman maybe. I don't think [inaudible 11:08]. Then I guess it was out of business for a while and the Cook brothers bought it. That was where we got our staples every day. They were the ones who had the newspapers. You could buy some cold cuts there.

Q: Did you go for [inaudible 11:41]?

A: I just remember just driving up and doing things. Where else did we buy food? It seems to me you'd have to go into Westerly otherwise. In the early days, I think that's where Mother would go. It seems to me there was a fish market. I don't know if there was ever one down by the beach or not. I can't remember.

Q: Did you ever walk across the Weekapaug side to the lifesaving station?

A: I don't recall doing that. I can't believe we didn't. I remember the Chickadee Market—that little store that they had at Dunns Corner where the credit union is now. That was probably the closest place. Mother would go all the way into Westerly to the A&P or some place like that. We went to Pawcatuck to a bakery to buy baked goods. That was a big deal.

Q: When you were here, did your family have a car?

A: I don't remember what we did when we came on the train, which I guess is what we did during the war. The landing place wasn't something [inaudible 13:44] Fridays, so I'm not sure.

Q: When you had your license, did you and your friends go places? Where did you go?

A: When I was a teenager, I had one summer here that was absolutely wonderful. We really had long dresses. Somebody would ship them to me from home. The Rodmans had some friends who worked in Weekapaug who belonged to the Narragansett Club—whatever the name of that beach club was. We went up there to dances once a twice a week. I didn't drive. They drove. But by then we were sixteen or seventeen, and tearing around those roads at night. That was really a very social summer and a lot of fun. You asked what we did here. I remember playing tennis on the grass courts having tennis rackets, and everybody had to take turns rolling them, because they were grass courts. It

was grass growing in the sand, and they would get torn up, and it was up to the kids. We all took turns with the job of rolling them.

Q: Was the ball field here then?

A: I always think of the ball field as being there, but not having brothers, and I never was interested in—

Q: [inaudible 15:34] when you were rolling the tennis courts.

A: I always thought of that field as being open. But whether it was a ball field then or not, I don't know. That would have been in the late '40s. I guess I've always thought about the ball field, because at one time—

Q: [inaudible 15:58].

A: We played tennis. We went to the beach. We went to the bowling alley. I remember George and somebody else, we went to Westerly with a few friends, and we took a bus back and forth. It must have been along Route 1. There was a bus station. We missed the bus back. The only thing we could do was walk. We started to walk. It got tedious after a while. Somebody had the idea to hitchhike, which being a good girl, it was not something that I really wanted to do, but we did. Somebody let us off at the end of the road.

Q: You were a group together, though.

A: We also did different things. I think we were [inaudible 17:35] to begin with. Whether somebody got somebody to put the [inaudible 17:41] in Westerly, and the rest of us decided we could walk it and then decided [inaudible 17:47]. But I do remember that as being a very daring thing to do.

Q: Do you remember going to the movies?

A: Yes. On High Street. I can remember going to that. And the drive-in movie.

Q: Did you go to Watch Hill?

A: I'm sure we did. I think of that more as something that I've done as an adult. I'm sure that we went to the merry go round as a child. Going to Watch Hill was always something we did. When I was a young adult there was a wonderful yarn shop over there. My family are all knitters. My mother was very acquainted with the woman who ran it. We used to spend a lot of time in the summertime always going there. She had beautiful things. The Olympia Tea Room. We went there for dinner. I liked that. I always thought the shops where they had imported table linens and things from Spain and Italy, they were always interesting. I don't go there much anymore. I don't know if the shops are there or not. But I always felt that there was a market for that kind of thing in

Watch Hill with those beautiful homes and the servants to take care of them. They were always beautiful things to see. I was remembering the other day talking with my daughter-in-law what we always did was to go to the outlet mills up in Peace Dale, Hope Valley and Wakefield and up that way. Some of them produced the most beautiful cotton material. My mother would buy it. We still have a quilt dover in the cottage that was made from some of that. It was almost as nice as [inaudible 20:28]. I made dresses for my little girl. I made dresses for [inaudible 20:35]. That was something we did every year. We would go to auctions.

Q: Where did you go to auctions?

A: They were in back in that same area—

Q: Ashaway?

A: Yes. When my parents built the cottage, it was my mother's job to find the decorations. She was very good at that. She [inaudible 21:13] in 1959, but afterwards they would go down to a lot of antique shops and auctions to buy things for the house. Many of them are still there. But they were a lot of fun. They were often old farms or houses that the state [inaudible 21:34], but that's what they were. The auction was very entertaining. That was fun. We got some good bargains. But it was just fun to see the people who were there. We'd always go home with something. I don't know whether they still have those or not. We did not have a television set in the house until—I'm not sure when, but it was a long time. We all played games and read in the evening. We did puzzles. And the reception was terrible for a long time until we got our own antenna on the house, and then got cable. Now, of course, it's no problem.

Q: Do you remember your mom and dad being part of the group that got dressed up?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: And had their cocktail parties with long dresses and so forth.

A: I don't remember that they ever had long dresses. My father always brought a sport jacket and shirts and ties, and sometimes a suit. When we went out for dinner, the men all dressed that way, and the women all had nice dresses and lots of jewelry just as if you were in the city. How much that has changed. The same is true with the cocktail parties up here. Certainly not my generation, but my parents, it was sort of a ritual the way they did it. Everybody took a turn. My mother came with a wardrobe with very nice summer dresses, and my father with his jackets and so forth. They would all get together and were dressed up after the beach. Then they would come home and put on their comfortable clothes. It was a nice traditional ceremony. I don't think anybody does that anymore.

Q: What are your thoughts on what has taken place in Quonnie?

A: I guess my sense is that it changes, but it doesn't change. I feel that for the most part people who have bought property and torn things down and built new things. But the few exceptions are people who love the place and do their best to try to keep it in taste with the rest of it. So, I have not been offended personally by anything that I can think of that's been done. It's bound to change. I think the people's sense about the character of the place is why they come here. If they come here and buy, and it doesn't turn out to be the way they want it, they end up selling it. So, I feel that the real estate may change, but what makes Quonochontaug what has always been the best. Seeing the freedom that everybody seems to have here, and the lack of the need to lock the doors, trusting one another and respecting each other's lives, and when I see the children on their bicycles, nobody steals other people's bicycles. If they ride them around at night, that's perfectly safe. The road people come up here, within a few days they relax into it. That's what I think is the character. I can't say that I've seen a change. I would hate to think of that happening, because it happens everywhere else. People seem to [inaudible 27:22] of what is here. If they get here and get bored with their life, they sell their place and go somewhere else. I'm certainly conscious of more people, and the traffic on West Beach Road and Route 1. I went to the Westerly information center this week [inaudible 27:55], and I was a little put off by that, because I thought I just wish they weren't promoting this area for everybody in the world to come. But when I'm in Charlestown, it's just much more low key. But this one is [inaudible 28:15] the area for anybody who wants to come to the beach. I guess that was the first time I've felt very provincial about this. I wish they would go away.

Q: Keep them up in Westerly.

A: Westerly needs to prosper too. Somebody told me to take a back road into Westerly this week. I'm always surprised and delighted when I get a half a mile or a mile inland from the shore on a back road, and you can be a million miles away from civilization. That's still here.

Q: I think we've covered quite a bit here. Is there anything else you would like to add? Do you have a fondest memory that stands out?

A: It's hard to put my finger on that. I can't think of anything. To me, it's just the whole group of experiences that started as a little girl and is still going on for me. I'm here for two weeks in the springtime, usually towards the end of May to spend by myself.

Q: Do you drive here?

A: No. I fly from Cincinnati and I rent a car. I work in the garden and walk on the beach and just shake off the winter. I get here towards the end of May, the first part of June and then back for three weeks in the summer. Occasionally I'll come back in the fall, which I would love to do. I usually get back in the swing of things, and it's hard to break that.

Q: Who puts your garden together for you?

A: Usually Emily and George do that, or he just does it himself. They live two hours away. They used to come down on Columbus Day weekend. They have also come more than once to have Thanksgiving here, and the family from out of town comes so they can all be together. I've never done that. It always makes John [inaudible 31:44] nervous, because he's afraid that the pipes will freeze to keep them going that long. But in the summer, they loved it. But they usually close down the garden. I could never own this cottage from this distance without John [inaudible 32:06]. He gets everything going in the spring, and then closes everything down.

Q: Have you considered winterizing and lowering the pipes?

A: We have talked about it once in a while, but the whole house would need to be insulated. My parents put in electric baseboard heating on the first floor. We did winterize the bedroom over the garage. We have three bedrooms and a bath on the second floor, and the bedroom over the garage. We did insulate that and winterize it. As long as the water is safe to use, we can use the house and be comfortable. We would just close up the external. That's what I often have to do when I'm here in now, because it gets very chilly. That has extended the time we can comfortably use the house. We have never seriously considered winterizing it, because nobody has any interest or affinity to live here full time. It's been rented only at the very beginning. My parents did that. For the first two or three year they would never come. But since then, [inaudible 34:04] or occasionally their friends. I can't think of anything else, unless you have questions. I really love to stay at Quonnie. I don't have interest in taking [inaudible 34:25], but if you talk to the former neighbor, they would give you a different answer to that. I love to garden and just outside. Compared to summers in Cincinnati, this is real outdoor living. It's very rejuvenating.

Q: Thank you. I've enjoyed talking with you with all those memories, and adding to our history of Quonnie.

A: You're welcome. Thank you for asking me.