

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

DOUGLAS and MARGARET RONALSON

November 29, 2007

Interviewed by Leah Bradshaw

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Q: This is Leah Bradshaw at the Ronalson's home in Watch Hill, Rhode Island on October 29th, 2007. Would you state for the record, Mr. Ronalson, your full name and date of birth?

D: I'm Douglas W. Ronalson. Born in Springfield, Massachusetts April 22nd, 1919.

Q: And also, Mrs. Ronalson?

M: I'm Margaret Whitney Ronalson. I was born in Adams, Mass February 4th, 1920.

Q: Thank you. When did you first arrive in Quonochontaug?

D: In the summer of 1951, we were summering in Watch Hill, and we went to this place called Quonochontaug, Central Beach, because our neighbors across the street from us in Long Meadow, Massachusetts had rented a cottage right on the water. Brad Fisher built it for Dr. John Leary. So, one day we drove over, drove in the driveway, nobody seemed to be at home. We entered the house. They were neighbors across the street from us in Long Meadow, and we looked out the front windows and here they were on the beach at Quonochontaug. Margaret said, "This is the place?" and he showed us around. There were two lots available to the west of Leary's cottage. We made arrangements through the Thorp Agency to buy one of these two lots for \$1300 for the lot.

The following year we started to build on the lot. I was working for Margaret's father in the car business. It was six days a week every week, so all this work had to be done on Sundays. So, we drove down. I bought a lot of lumber and had it delivered to my garage in Long Meadow, and I would cut the studs to length and bundled them window number one, window number two and so forth.

At that time, I arranged for a builder Russo to come over and put a foundation in. I just got telephone core pilings, and we built a deck. When we were ready to load the truck in Long Meadow with all the window frames and all the work that I had done, the fellow came for it and I drove down with him in the truck. I think it was the first time he had

ever seen the ocean. He couldn't believe that it was practically in the water. We unloaded all of the lumber on a Thursday under the deck. Forty-four by 31 was the size of the deck. He left. My friend across the street, Dick Moran, brought me a rain coat, because it rained.

From Thursday through Sunday I was able to put up the four walls all the way around with pre-cut and pre-bundled studs. I had no power tools. And hand saw. All the work was done on a Sunday. My brother-in-law came down to help me put up the first rafter. The rafters were [inaudible 05:32] once you got one up. He helped me with the first one. He earned a free weekend at the cottage.

When the cottage was finally closed in, it was 1954, Labor Day weekend, and we had a major hurricane, Carol.

Underneath the house, we had stored the bundled hardwood flooring worth \$700 or \$800. When the hurricane came, it smashed in the sides and the vertical pilings kept in place, but they went back about a foot. So, they were all leaning [inaudible 06:42] for about a foot, and all the materials under the house floated up to the next street. So, I spent Labor Day weekend walking through the mud with a wheelbarrow bringing the materials back while all the Labor Day weekend people were walking by to the public beach.

The house itself stayed square, but the pilings that it rested on all leaned back, so the whole house was perfectly square and level, but back probably a foot from its original position. Later on, the builder had to come in and pull out each piling and make it vertical back in the mid position. But no damage to the upper part of it. There was no insurance money available, although I put a claim in. [inaudible 07:59] came from Springfield and we were playing golf with a representative of the Springfield Fire and Marine member. He said, "[inaudible 08:09] anything on your property?" I said, "No, they wouldn't pay a dime." He said, "Get on a call with your agent again and tell them that all of the companies are bending over backwards to help." So, I put a call into Lumberman's, I believe it was, and a man came up from somewhere on the east coast who was traveling the whole country waterside to make the collections. He said, "What do you think happened?" and I said, "I think the wind blew it over, and then the water came up," because of course they would not pay on water, but they would pay on wind. He gave me \$500, which was a lifesaver.

I bought a book at Sears Roebuck on how to wire a house. I think I paid \$2 for it. After studying it over, I wired the whole house. In those days, there was no such thing as, quote, do-it-yourself. And so, when the fire company came, they wanted to check it, and they said, "Did you do this work yourself?" and I said, "Yes," and they said, "I like to see that." It turns out I had two straight circuits just in the wall, which was corrected immediately. That was the extent of the electrical work.

When I dug the septic tank in the sand in the back yard, I used a shovel and it would all cave in on me, but eventually we filled it with timber block and we were in business. Since that time, we had a professional do the real job.

Q: Mrs. Ronalson, you were in Quonochontaug during the Hurricane of 1954.

M: We were renting the Donahue cottage down the street from where we were building Little Lemon. My father had just bought a home over in Watch Hill, so we went over and stayed there with them. The water was coming through between the houses, Guernsey's and the Donahue cottage. When we went back, the cushions from the sofa in the Donahue cottage were floating all around. It was hard to get into the beach. They wanted some sign of who you were so they wouldn't have looters coming in. I remember the boards had floated around too from the cottage from the ceiling. I remember saying to Doug, "Aren't you going to clean those boards before you put them back up?" and he said, "If I stop to do that, I'll never get the ceiling done." So, they were never cleaned, and they still show signs of where the muddy stuff was on the ceiling.

Q: Can you talk about what it was like to raise a family during summers in Quonochontaug, and what the experience of living by the ocean in living in that community and raising your daughters meant to you?

M: I had been going to the beach my whole life with my family, so the ocean was important and wonderful. We just loved it. I never went to the big beach much, because we could swim right in front of the cottage. I always went in two or three times every day through the years. I loved it. The girls had friends. We came to the beach the day after school got out, and we left the day after Labor Day to go back.

Whitney met her husband at Quonnie. Ross had been there longer than we had, going to the old inn as a family for many summers.

We had a few picnics on the beach with the neighbors that were fun. The Carpenters and the Brecks across the street, and the Morans. They used to come over and fish in front of the house with a rod.

Over the years, we had eight different couples spend their honeymoon at the cottage. I had one friend that came very fall for a week's vacation. Doug's parents came to visit. His mother would sleep in the back, because she didn't like to hear the waves, which we thought was one of the best parts of listening to the surf.

One couple that came that were friends of Laurie's for a few days, he went down to big beach and got in trouble and nearly didn't make it back. That was a frightening thing. We were there at the time.

We were fortunate that we had the cottage. The girls learned to love Rhode Island, and as a consequence, three of them have made it their home. One loves to come back and stay at the cottage.

