

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

MARGARET ZABEL ROY

May 30, 2017

Interviewed by Anne Doyle

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Q: Today is Tuesday, May the 30th, 2017. I'm talking with Peggy Zabel Roy in her home on East Beach Road in Quonochontaug. Peggy is going to tell us a little bit about her memories of Quonnie. The first thing is your fully name and your birth date.

A: My full name is Margaret Zabel Roy. My birth date is 9/2/38. I was born in Oswego, New York. We came down here I believe in 1942.

Q: And your parents' names?

A: George W. Zabel and Margaret B. Zabel.

Q: At that time, were they living in New York?

A: No. My mother grew up in New York State. She didn't like the doctors in Hartford. They lived in Hartford at that time. And so, she went home and had her first two children up in northern New York on Lake Ontario.

Q: What are your first memories of being in Quonnie?

A: Running down to the pond, and all the freedom that we had. We ran into the Moulton children next door. She's the same age as I am. He was a year older.

Q: What were their names?

A: Ann Moulton Lee and David McCloud Moulton. She wouldn't talk to us at first, because she wasn't allowed to talk to strangers. But my brother was kind of aggressive, and he got her to talk to us.

Q: How old were your brothers and sisters?

A: My brother, Ross Eugene Zabel, was the first-born. He was born two years and nine months before I was born. His birthday was January 6th. I don't know the exact date.

My other brother, George, was born in 1941. He was four-and-a-half years younger than me. My sister, Elizabeth Ann Zabel Grife, was ten years younger than myself.

Q: Did you spend most of the time on the pond when you were here?

A: Yes, we did. There was a boat that we rode. We caught crabs.

Q: In the mornings, did you always go to the pond, and the beaches in the afternoon, or anything like that?

A: No. My parents didn't go to the beach that often. She was busy renting her cottages and getting them prepared. He didn't care for the beach that much. He would run down, take a quick swim, and get in the car.

Q: Was that your dad?

A: Yes.

Q: So, there were other cottages on your property at the time they bought?

A: They weren't cottages at the time. My mother made them into cottages. In total, she rented three. This one was rented down here. Many people came back year after year after year. A lot of people bought down here. Do you know the Sandwells?

Q: Yes.

A: They bought down here. They rented.

Q: Were they from West Hartford too?

A: Yes.

Q: How did she let it be known?

A: It was mostly by word of mouth. She had a sign outside, "Cottage for rent." And then a lot of word by mouth.

Q: Tell me more about the Sandwells.

A: They had five children.

Q: I wanted to talk to her. She would be sitting on the porch, and then she died. I didn't get a chance.

A: Margaret Sandwell is here. I think she's in that house.

Q: Is that Meg?

A: Yes.

Q: I know who Meg is. I don't know her well. Then there is a brother.

A: There is a brother on East Beach Road up towards the main road. I never noticed a mailbox that said Sandwell on it. He's a psychiatrist. Family psychiatry. I see him on the beach once in a while. But I never see the younger brother. I think they were in every one of the cottages as the years went on. And then the family got bigger. There were five kids.

Q: Is there another family that you remember that your mother rented to?

A: The Riches, which were their best friends. They were from West Hartford. I just can't think of any.

Q: When you got down here after school let out, would you just stay?

A: They were backing out of the driveway, and we were coming from school, and we'd get in the back door with our school clothes. We didn't wear uniforms.

Q: And down you came?

A: Yes. We didn't go home for the dentist. We didn't go home for anything the whole summer. It was a strange world for me to go back to West Hartford. You probably know the feeling.

Q: Yes. I do. Once your parents bought the property—

A: My father was an only child. His father died and left him \$12,000 in twelve different banks. His sister was down here.

Q: Amelia?

A: Yes. And they were neighbors in Hartford. It was Amelia that made my mother want to come down here. So, they went around looking at houses. They saw the Prior cottage. Do you know the Prior cottage?

Q: Yes. That was after the hurricane, because the Prior cottage used to be on the ocean front.

A: But they stopped here, because Thorp had to check the main house over, because they had things out from the cleaners, and they wanted to make sure that nobody had broken in. Amelia and my mother sat on the sun porch and pretended they were ritzy, and they would ring a little bell calling for the maid. My father went around the property with

Thorp. My father said, “Just for laughs, what do they want for this place?” and Thorp said, “I don’t believe it’s for sale.” But Thorp said, “I will ask them.” So, he asked them. I think they were from New York. They said, “Twelve thousand dollars in cash in two weeks.” My mother’s uncle was a big-shot lawyer in New York City. Grandpa Zabel was within that area. They got to all the banks, and they got the money all out, and got the money to my father, and my father bought the place for \$12,000. It said more than 6 acres, less than 7 acres. That’s the property.

Q: Are you talking about your Grandpa Zabel?

A: My father’s father.

Q: But he’s the one that left the money.

A: Yes.

Q: Was he still living?

A: No. He died.

Q: It sounded like he went to the banks.

A: No. That was my great uncle, Uncle Emit. There were people living in the main house. It was rented to them. They were military Navy people. That was before we moved in. But we had bought the place, and my mother said, “She’s got a young baby. Let them stay.” So, in July we moved in. We became friends with the kids next door. I’m thinking that I went to the beach mostly with the people next door, the Moultons, because my parents didn’t go to the beach that often.

Q: Did you walk down East Beach Road? How did you get to the beach when you were younger?

A: I think they drove. But when I was fourteen or fifteen, I walked there. I would walk to the beach every day. That’s where I met your brother. I would walk over to Central Beach.

Q: How did you get into that group?

A: There were no kids our age, except the Moultons, to hang out with. I walked the beaches. I saw the group of kids out there. I think Max Hiscox was one of the first ones that I remember meeting there, and his sister Ruthie.

Q: There is a Hiscox that used to work down at the Hallmark Store. Her name was Miriam.

A: I don’t know.

Q: I vaguely remember Max.

A: They were across the street on Central Beach. As a matter of fact, the night before the '54 hurricane, we partied there.

Q: What do you remember about the '54 hurricane?

A: It was very exciting to me, because I was sixteen years old. Something exciting is happening on the beach. I stayed in the main house. About six or seven families came from the beach area into my parents' house. One kid was hysterical. They brought him right upstairs so he wouldn't make everybody else hysterical. I remember my brother went out by car to wake some families up.

Q: Was that Gene?

A: Gene. My younger brother, George, had a paper route, and he delivered papers down by Blue Shutters area. People that my parents knew had five or six kids, and one of the kids came out the door when they were delivering the papers, and they didn't know that there was a hurricane that was going to happen, and he almost blew off the porch—the kid. My brother grabbed him before he blew off the porch. After that hurricane seemed to be over, Ann Moulton and I walked up East Beach Road, and then up Overlook, and the water was deep. I think we swam. And then the road is higher, and Prescott's house is the one that has the blue car that says, "Try a case," that was Prescott's.

Q: I want to try and understand that. Is that on East Beach Road?

A: No. We're going up to Overlook, and then Highland. On the left side, there's a big house. I believe they have a swimming pool too. On his license it says, "Try a case." He's a lawyer. We went into that house.

Q: Was this the day after?

A: The day of after it the wind had died down. It was around 3:00 or 4:00. We went on further, and we were in—I can't remember the name.

Q: Did you know the Bapps at that point?

A: Yes. But the big house before him was rented.

Q: Do you mean the farmhouse?

A: Yes.

Q: The Beaches did rent. There were a lot of people that rented.

A: Stephanie Muslim? The one who married Max Hiscox.

Q: You were in a different group, so I don't know the names.

A: We were in that house.

Q: The farmhouse?

A: Yes.

Q: The Buddington farmhouse?

A: There were wires down, and we climbed stonewall fences away from the wires to get to Buddington's farmhouse. We stayed there, and heard that Duxtas had brand-new cars, and they were banging against each other below the house in the garage. They were all worried about Mrs. Duxta, because she had an aneurysm in her head, but she lived for a long time.

Q: Sam Bapp has given me some photos of the '54 hurricane on Highland. We've got that piece right on Highland there.

A: Coming back, the water was knee-deep where we lived.

Q: That was quite a change.

A: Yes. It really receded. Back when we first bought the place, we had ice boxes. We used to go down the road—halfway down towards Blue Shutters. On the right, there was a man named Sarcy.

Q: I've heard of him.

A: He had an ice house. He had ice in a building. So, we would go down there to get our big cube of ice to put in the refrigerator.

Q: Was the ice house right on his property?

A: Yes. He didn't have a huge ice house.

Q: Did you ever go inside it?

A: No. We probably stayed in the car. My mother didn't drive. Then our telephone, there were 23 people on our line. We could listen.

Q: And you did listen?

A: Sometimes.

Q: Do you remember getting any good information?

A: No. Because I was so scared listening that someone was going to catch me. The phone was at the foot of the stairs.

Q: There were only a few places that had phones at that point.

A: Twenty-three people.

Q: Before that, phones were rare. Everybody had to go up to Brightman's.

A: We had a two-piece phone. We had to crank one crank for the operator. Next door could call me without the operator, because my phone was five short rings and one long ring. So, she would do that. And I could call her.

Q: Was that the Moultons?

A: Yes. That was five short rings.

Q: You were here as a teenager. That's when I remember you.

A: Everything I did was walking. I did not get my license until after I was married and had my third child.

Q: That was repeating what your mother had done.

A: Yes. When we were here, before any viruses hit the shellfish, my father could take the wheelbarrow and go down to the pond and get a wheelbarrow full of oysters in a half hour. We went clamming across the pond.

Q: Clamming for the steamers?

A: The hard-shell ones.

Q: The quahogs?

A: Yes.

Q: Were the oysters right here?

A: Attached to the rocks.

Q: Right down on your property?

A: Yes.

Q: And then the disease hit them, right?

A: Yes. And now the water has too much fertilizer stuff in it. I buy a dozen oysters every year and just throw in the pond hoping.

Q: Salt Ponds Coalition—I hope they dump the small ones in. In Quonnie Pond, there is a spawning area. You can't do any shell fishing. It will allow the little ones to swim back and develop in other parts of the pond.

A: I don't eat fish myself.

Q: Was your dad a fisherman?

A: No. My brother, Gene, was. Poor Gene. He saved for three or four years so he could get a Boston Whaler so he could go out to Block Island fishing, and he got enough money, and he had the Boston Whaler about a year when he developed Lou Gehrig's disease. He tried to give it to his boys, and his son-in-law and nobody wanted it, so he had to put it out in front on the lawn and had it for sale. I felt very bad about that. Gene and Danny McCleod were best buddies. And Evie McCleod.

Q: Did you know Evie well?

A: Yes. I don't know if she comes down anymore.

Q: In September she stays over at the Skipper's old house.

A: Did they sell their house?

Q: They sold their family house. What's happening is the families that end up owning—brothers and sisters can't figure out what to do, so they just sold it. That's what happened. Schwarzes—

A: I went steady with him.

Q: With Tracy?

A: Yes.

Q: I remember that.

A: His father didn't like that too much. I went to his Portsmouth priory school for a weekend. He needed dates for all the guys, so I brought three or four other girls. We took the bus to Portsmouth priory.

Q: In Portsmouth, Rhode Island?

A: Yes.

Q: My brother saw Tracy once in a while.

A: I saw his brother, Phil. He's a professor.

Q: He retired. Then they came up after they sold their house. They would come up in September for the last few years, and they would stay on the street right near us. They would always come over at that time. But Phil was developing memory difficulty.

A: That's what his mom had. She had Alzheimer's.

Q: I didn't realize that. Janet, who was his wife—did you ever meet Janet?

A: No.

Q: She just wrote me a short note saying that she finally had to find a place for him to live.

A: That's very sad.

Q: That was a hard time for them to give up the house. It's like how you feel about being in Quonnie. It's like you want to stay here forever.

A: They can bring help in to me. When my daughter comes, that's what it is. She does all the cooking, the shopping. When I was feeling better, I said, "I can make meals for you and the boys," but they don't like what I make. I make roasts and potatoes. They're rice and noodle people. She said, "Fine. I'll be glad to do it all."

Q: Does she come down and stay for a week at a time?

A: She works Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday. So, she's here Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. Then she takes a week or two off in the summer.

Q: Does she still do that during the winter?

A: No. She got married here last year.

Q: What is her name?

A: Jennifer. She's my ticket. I have to give her some money. They've been living together for fifteen years. They got married on the porch.

Q: When did they get married?

A: Last August. She didn't hold back. He was holding back. But he agreed to it, and he's very happy now.

Q: Do they have children?

A: They had the two boys. They lived as husband and wife for years.

Q: It sounds like my daughter. She and her husband were together for seven years before they decided.

A: I understand. I've been there.

Q: Is there anything else that you can think of?

A: When the planes flew over from the naval base, that path showed up of where we went back and forth to the pond. But there was a windmill. They never could see that, but they saw the path.

Q: Why is that? I don't understand.

A: The windmill was probably up between trees.

Q: How did you know about that? Did officers stay at your property?

A: Before we bought. That couple was there with their baby. I don't know who told my mother that. Old man Bush flew out of there. They used to fly so low.

Q: I was born in '43. We were over in Sea Biscuit, which is right near the water on Central Beach. I can remember going to sleep at night with that droning of the planes. It was part of going to sleep.

A: Every fifteen minutes they would take off. But they would go so low on the beach that they could have clipped beach umbrellas. We used to lie flat. That was during the war.

Q: The war really got going in the early '40s, so you were old enough to remember that first part of it.

A: Butter was rationed. Something about red coins—you'd get so many red coins. I don't know where. Someplace at stores or whatever. And you had to have so many red coins before you could get a pound of butter. We got it at a place called Kennedy's. They had a big thing of butter, and they'd just chop off a pound of butter.

Q: Was that local?

A: Yes. In Westerly.

Q: Once you were here, were you here? You didn't go back and forth to Connecticut at that point?

A: No. We went to Westerly.

Q: What was Westerly like? Do you have any memories of that? Did you go to the United Theater?

A: Yes. As teens.

Q: Do you know what was happening down there now with it? They're doing a lot of renovations. They're starting to have fundraisers. It's going to be making that part of Westerly really nice. They're using the old theater. They're renovating it, and they're putting in other smaller theater sections. They bought the building next door. Do you know Mr. Royce who redid the Ocean House? He's got a lot of money.

A: No.

Q: He has devoted his life to bringing back the community.

A: Good.

Q: He's involved with the United Theater.

A: There was another teenage group. The group was the Varrs. N

Q: Ruth? Did you know Charlie and Ruth?

A: Yes. Charlie was my age.

Q: Ruth was just here a couple of weeks ago.

A: Does she still have the house?

Q: No. She doesn't. They ended up going to Colorado. They've been living in Colorado for a number of years. That's where her daughter lived.

A: You go where your kids are.

Q: Ruth gave the Historical Society a brick that was part of the foundation of the house when it was on the beach front, and then in the 1938 hurricane, it was washed up. That's why it's where it is now. But they have completely done it over. It doesn't even look like it used to.

A: Ramone's house has been sold a few times.

Q: Is that going to be changed? Is somebody going to tear that down?

A: Not that I know of.

Q: Is there anybody that you're still connected to down here from the past?

A: What's strange is she was my best friend. She never came to this house to see it when it was built. When she moved away—

Q: Who was this?

A: Annie.

Q: I never knew her.

A: She got married to Robert E. Lee.

Q: How come she didn't keep the house?

A: She couldn't afford it. I pay \$18,000 a year. I have 2.3 acres.

Q: Does that include the main house?

A: No. A lot of this is wetlands. I can't do a thing with it, but yet they tax me really good with it. I've gone into my annuity so I can keep going.

Q: Those are big decisions to make.

A: I saw Danny McCleod the other day.

Q: Where did you see him?

A: Walmart. We were at the deli. He came up to me and said hello. He was my brother Gene's best friend.

Q: So, you really did see a lot of Danny.

A: Yes. He spent most of his time at my house.

Q: Did you know his grandparents had a place down here on the pond?

A: No. I didn't know that. Then they went over to Central Beach.

Q: Part of the house is now on Burdick Street. There was a group of people that came from North Providence. The McCleods, the Henrys—I don't know if you knew Elaine Henry. Wolcott was her last name. And there was another family. I can't remember. The Fishers. They are my relatives. They all lived within that area. I'm always interested to know how people are connected, and how they got here.

A: It was the Bazelzack brought us here. Amelia.

Q: We've been recording Bob Patron. He's a videographer. He has volunteered his talent when we have a talk or whatever to videotapes it. Now we have saved all these. Do you use the computer at all?

A: No.

Q: We just had a program with Peter Mogielnicki, Amelia's son.

A: He may be three or four years younger than me. He's in his 70s.

Q: Yes. He's a little older than I am. It's wonderful. He tells about Amelia coming down here.

A: And nobody knew where she was. This is what happened.

Q: What do you mean nobody knew where she was?

A: Her parents did not know where she was.

Q: I don't know what you mean.

A: On West Beach. Her parents were in Hartford next door to my parents. Her parents asked my parents where Amelia was. My parents came down here, because my mother was friends with Amelia. My mother knew where Amelia was, but her parents didn't know where she was. She wanted it to be private.

Q: I'm not sure what that situation was.

A: I know Peter was a severe asthmatic as a child. That's about all I remember about him.

Q: His Uncle Bazelzack lives on East Beach.

A: Yes. Ted and Peg.

Q: I think you would really enjoy hearing Peter and seeing him. He did such a nice job explaining about the little house that his father put together from a shed. We'll see what we can do.