

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

THE REV. DAVID W. BROWN- Part I

Interviewed by Anne S. Doyle

January 19, 1999

- DOYLE:** The following is an interview with David Brown, of West Beach, Quonochontaug.
- All right, David, if you could just state your full name and your birth date.
- BROWN:** David Wooster Brown; the 23rd of August, 1926—in the Coolidge Administration.
- DOYLE:** And where were you born?
- BROWN:** Waterbury, Connecticut
- DOYLE:** Well, to begin with, I'd just like to know how your family came to Quonnie.
- BROWN:** My father was married to the daughter of Catherine and Herbert Holloway, who had a cottage which his father built somewhere around the turn of the century, though they'd been coming here for some time before then. Here in West Beach, they were right in back of Picnic Rock. The cottage has since been blown away in a storm. In fact, they had two other cottages next – in a row, behind the sea wall, they're, also blown away.
- DOYLE:** Is this the friends, now, that you're talking about or your family?
- BROWN:** These are my father's first wife's parents.
- DOYLE:** Oh, your father's first wife's parents.
- BROWN:** And that is how he came to Quonochontaug at first. His first wife died in 1918, in the famous influenza epidemic, and he remarried, my mother, in 1925, and I was born in 1926, and soon after, they began coming to Quonochontaug for at least part of the summer. I guess I began to become aware of where I was and what I was doing, in any

recognizable form today, I suppose around 1930. So, you could take it from there.

DOYLE: Now, when you came down, where did you stay?

BROWN: We stayed at with Holloways. And sometimes—mostly we stayed with the Holloways. I remember we stayed sometimes at the old Quonochontaug Inn, when Mr. Learned was the proprietor. We also stayed at the old Sea Breeze Inn. And then we also on occasion stayed up at the Morris Point Hotel, and after it was blown away, for part of one summer, we stayed in the garage cottage in back, which had survived the storm.

DOYLE: The Barnacle?

BROWN: I don't know what it was called, but it was called then the Garage Cottage, and we stayed there for part of one summer, I remember.

DOYLE: Now, the Holloways' cottages: Was it the '38 Hurricane that took them away, or was – I know that there were other storms before that–

BROWN: Yeah, the '38, yeah.

DOYLE: OK, it was the '38 Hurricane then. . . Now, your first memories of being here: How did you spend your day? What did you do?

BROWN: Oh, hanging around. On the beach—all of the beaches. There were other kids around, and of course there was the boardwalk; and we were able to walk all the way up to the Coast Guard Station which, of course, was on the other side. And as a great treat, we were allowed to go into the Coast Guard Station and look at the boats and things. And then once in a while, they would practice with the breeches buoy on the beach, and we would be “rescued,” which was considered a great thing for kids.

DOYLE: Oh, you mean they sent the kids out –so that they could--

BROWN: They did it up and down the beach; they didn't shoot it out into the water. And of course, the Coast Guard Station, and the people who were there, were great heroes to all the kids. And they used to take their hook boats out into the ocean on the roughest days, because they wanted to practice in any kind of weather so they'd be prepared; and that was very impressive, to see those great long boats with the ranks of men on either side, rowing them in the worst kind of seas.

DOYLE: So, when you said “hook boats,” that was—uh--

- BROWN:** They were double-pointed lapstrake boats. Sort of like what you'd think of as a lifeboat on an ocean liner today, except that these were more sleek.
- DOYLE:** How many men did it take to man a boat?
- BROWN:** Oh dear, they must have had seven men on a boat, one to steer and three on each side –something like that.
- DOYLE:** Now I've seen pictures of the old Life Saving Station, or Coast Guard Station –did the boats go out onto the breachway side and then around out into the ocean that way? Or --
- BROWN:** They just went straight out the breachway. The Coast Guard Station was *on* the breachway; they just went straight out into the ocean.
- DOYLE:** OK. That was -- Sandy and I took a walk there a few weeks ago, and we found the old foundation, to the old Life Saving Station. It's been exposed. But I was wondering how close it was to the ocean. I thought that there was access, both on the breachway side and on the ocean side. Is that not correct?
- BROWN:** Well, the boats were put into the breachway. And I guess from the top of the Coast Guard Station, you could see out to sea; it had a little tower on it. But I was never aware of them approaching the sea from the beach side. They'd always put a boat in [the water] in the breachway and go out the breachway.
- DOYLE:** But the breeches buoy – is that what you call it? – that was on the beach side, right?
- BROWN:** Well, these were mobile things that they could take and put wherever they wanted to, and then shoot it out across a ship. And then the line that was attached to the projectile they shot out would be fastened to a mast or something else on the ship; and then they would pull out a heavier rope, which they would in turn fasten and then be able to run the breeches buoy back and forth from the ship which was in the process of being xxxxx [dragged?].
- DOYLE:** Oh, I see. I wasn't sure how that worked. Um --do you remember— was there a separation in the dunes where the Life Saving Station was? In other words, if you were walking along the beach and you looked over, could you see the Life Saving Station from the --?
- BROWN:** The top of it.
- DOYLE:** The top of it -- It was hidden behind the dune then, is that right --?
- BROWN:** Yeah, but of course the dunes changed, over the years.

- DOYLE:** Yeah, so it's probably varied from year to year. Um –Now, did you get to talk to the men who worked there?
- BROWN:** Oh yes. They would patrol the beaches, you see. From here, the Coast Guardsman would walk up along the beach and meet somebody coming from the other side –
- DOYLE:** From West Beach – are you talking about –would they cross over and come down—
- BROWN:** Yes. There was a boat on the breachway, which they used as a ferryboat. It had a --it was on a pulley, like a clothesline, so they could get back and forth with great ease. So somebody would come across and walk up the beach and meet somebody coming from the other side. And they carried things, like a large clock, and each would punch the other one's, so they would be able to have an accountability system. And they patrolled the beaches in order to keep order. I remember one of them speaking to me and a friend once. We were horsing around and wrestling as kids, and we weren't supposed to be doing that on the beaches. So the Coast Guard asked us to stop. Which we did until he was out of sight!
- DOYLE:** [Laughing] Boys will be boys! And girls will be girls, too. ...Now how far down did they patrol? I mean, how far down did they walk?
- BROWN:** The entire Atlantic seacoast!
- DOYLE:** For instance, from this Life Saving Station they might go -- from this breachway did they go all the way down to the Charlestown breachway, or --?
- BROWN:** I figure so.
- DOYLE:** I haven't heard anything--any stories like this at all. I haven't talked to anybody that's had that experience. So this was all before -- obviously before the '38 Hurricane, because that's when it was demolished –I guess it was in such bad shape that they took the rest of it down. Is that correct?
- BROWN:** My impression is that any building that had sustained substantial damage was demolished. And I have no idea how much of the Coast Guard Station was left. But there wasn't anything but the sea wall left over there. The sea wall's still there, on the side of one of the twists of the old breachway.
- DOYLE:** Have you been over there in the last few years -- have you --?
- BROWN:** Yes, I usually canoe down though there once in a while—getting clams.

- DOYLE:** Oh you do? And where do you take—where do you put the canoe in the water?
- BROWN:** Well, either up in Babcock Cove or up at the boat landing here. The pond mouth –
- DOYLE:** Now, is there anything else that you can remember about the Life Saving Station that would be interesting?
- BROWN:** Well, there's a wonderful--there are a number of old, retired coastguardsmen who were rugged old people, wonderful people. There was a fellow by the name of Asa Larkin. Have you ever heard of him?
- DOYLE:** No, I haven't.
- BROWN:** Well, he was a very rugged old guy; retired coastguardsman, who had a hookboat of his own that he, would take out fishing. And he would take people once in a while. I never went -- I was too little, but he might take somebody who he knew. And he would bring in fish and sell them, right out of his boat. The people would go down to his boat and buy whatever he had and he usually had quite a few.
- DOYLE:** Did he live right around --?
- BROWN:** He lived up country somewhere. I'm not sure where. And he drove an old Model T Ford. He had a stroke out at sea and one whole side was paralyzed. So, he sculled with the other side; sculled his big hookboat, 17-18-foot boat—into the breachway, waited till the tide was right to bring it in, and brought his boat up to the dock, got out of his boat, got into his car, and went home. Quite a feat. I remember once he had come in and was selling fish - and somebody came up, some summer tourist and looked down at this wonderful boat and said to him, as he was sitting there dressing fish, "Can one man row that boat?" And Asa Larkin looked at him as if he were the most stupid person that ever came along and said, "Depends on the man."
- DOYLE:** [Laughing} You have a very good memory! My goodness—
- BROWN:** You should know all the things I've forgotten!
- DOYLE:** Well, if there's anything you think you'd like to tell me after I leave, that you'd like to add to it, I'll come right back, all right?
- BROWN:** I won't remember the things I've forgotten.
- DOYLE:** Now you mentioned the boardwalk. That's something I'd like to know more about. I've had pictures — I've got some old post cards but—

BROWN: Well, the boardwalk extended from up opposite the Coast Guard Station down along the breachway, and then it cut around over toward the bathing beach, in front of the cottages there. And it was a great institution. People would stroll on it, and of course it was right up against people's verandas. And people would sit; the pace of life was very quiet and gentle, and people would visit and move on to the next person. People would fly kites off of the boardwalk, and of course kids were interested in who was flying what kind of a kite. It was a social institution and a wonderful connector. Of course, that was all blown away in the '38 storm.

Of course, the community down here was much more contained in the summer, than it is now. I know my father came down for the weekends, but we had no car here in the summer. And we lived in a very simple cottage with kerosene stove and kerosene lights, lamps. And the iceman came around, and we had ice for the icebox. There was no telephone. The only telephone was at Mother Brindley's store, at the corners down here, and so if you wanted to make a call, you went down there. Or she would -- We as kids used to hang around sometimes. Because if a phone call came in, she would call out, "Say, David Brown," or whoever it was, "would you go and tell so and so to come." And if you did that, you had your choice out of the penny candy rack in her store. So that was a way to get something that way. But there was no going to Westerly or anyplace else. The various people came by—there was a fellow by the name of Sammy –

DOYLE: I remember Sammy!

BROWN: You do!

DOYLE: Yes, I do!

BROWN: He had a grocery store in his truck.

DOYLE: Oh—the truck!

BROWN: And he would come by, so you could walk right into it. It was just like a grocery store inside. And there were various people – there was a wonderful farmer, by the name of Gentle James as he was locally known. I don't know what his last name was. He had a horse and wagon, and he would just sort of appear. He would rise up like a vapor from the earth. Suddenly he was there. Xxxxx The most soft-sell man I've ever known in my life!

DOYLE: He lived up country, too?

BROWN: Somewhere, yes, he had a farm. And he would look through the doorway, and suddenly my mother would see he was there, and say,

“Well hello, James.” And he would say, “Good afternoon, Miz Brown.” And they would talk for a while and he would say, “You wouldn’t like a nice fresh chicken, would you?” And if she said yes, he would produce a chicken from somewhere. Of course, it had its head and its feet on it: it had just been slain that day – nice fresh chicken.

DOYLE: And your mother would have to pluck it and --?

BROWN: Well it was plucked. It still had its head and its feet you see, so you got rid of those some how and used them for crab bait maybe.

DOYLE: Well obviously you went crabbing, just like the kids do now! But was it for a purpose? Did you give the crabs to fishermen and that type of thing?

BROWN: Well, we *were* the fishermen! I fished off the rocks ever since I was very little. We used to swim out to some of the far rocks, and I remember we were standing on what we call Flat Rock, somewhat to the east of Picnic Rock out here once. My father was on the shore, casting out with a surfcasting rod, and I was just using a hand line. And there were a lot of fish, flat fish, and I remember I was stringing them on a rope around my waist. And we were catching them and lost track of the tide. And the tide came up and I had to swim in. So, I had all these fish around me, and I thought then that if they had functioned as a team, they could have pulled me out to Block Island! But we were xxx every which way, so I was easily able to swim to shore.

DOYLE: You did it with all of them tied around your waist?

BROWN: Sure! Strung them on a piece of clothesline.

DOYLE: Now Picnic Rock is that big rock in front of Quonochontaug Inn, isn’t it?

BROWN: No, it’s the last really big rock that goes out into the water before the West Beach bathing beach.

DOYLE: Oh.....

BROWN: The rocks up in front of the old Inn. The biggest one up there was called “Hole Back Rock.” And of course, there were little pools in the the rocks, which as very little kids we were taken up there; and we sat on them. The waves would come in, and we thought it was the most wonderful thing in the world.

DOYLE: So, to clarify, because I have family pictures of people on Picnic Rock, and I just thought it was right before Quonochontaug Inn. Is it to the east of Quonochontaug Inn or to the west?

- BROWN:** To the west.
- DOYLE:** To the west.
- BROWN:** It's the last big rock in that whole string there before the West Beach bathing beach.
- DOYLE:** Oh -OK.... All right, I think I know where that is, yes. And it's still—I mean I know the girls like to sit on it all the time. Yes, I think I know exactly where you mean. And Profile Rock is right in between that, am I right?
- BROWN:** I don't know what that is.
- DOYLE:** I have pictures of that as well. Um - I'd be interested to know the names of the people that were your friends or that you knew—
- BROWN:** Well my special friends were Frederick and Alex Blanton. And then there were various other kids around. My brother was considerably older - he was nine years older than I -his mother was my father's first wife, of whom I spoke before. He was a great friend of some boys called the Dotkins boys, and their family had a cottage out here in West Beach. But my chief friends were the Blanton boys. And the three of us, and then other people who came for longer or shorter periods of time, sort of joined us. But we were great friends—still are.
- DOYLE:** Now I know that there was a group of houses near the Inn called the Ashaway houses, and then there was the Midway group, and then there was the breachway. Can you give me any feel for that? I don't really understand exactly how the -
- BROWN:** Well along the breachway, there were some old hotels, old-fashioned late 19th century hotels. There was the Eldridge House, and the Wilson Hotel—I think that one was run by a fellow and his wife that - I think he was a former Coastguardsman, if I'm not mistaken. But I'm not entirely clear on that. The Eldridge family - I knew them very well. And old Mrs. Wilson - the house I think was built for her, and after her husband died—which is on the west side of the tennis court down there. It's been rebuilt and added onto, but there's sort of a little shoebox thing-- it's up on a fieldstone foundation; there's sort of a dooryard of fieldstone around it.
- DOYLE:** Well I have a picture of a -of the Wilson - was there a bowling alley there? And a place for horses?
- BROWN:** Well, yes; the Eldridges had a bowling alley, and the Wilsons may have too; I don't know. The Eldridges also had a garage. The Eldridge

bowling alley lasted for a long time, because every time it got blown away, they would find pieces of it out in the marshes and nail them all back together again. So, it was a somewhat irregular bowling alley!

DOYLE: Was that the Casino?

BROWN: That was called the Quonochontaug Casino in its allotted years. And it was kind of an eyesore—a great big aluminum painted building, which had been patched together. But that was after the Eldridge Hotel – I guess they called it the Eldridge House--had long since been blown away. But they came down and lived -- there were some rooms over the bowling alley; they lived there, and they had sort of a little store there—

DOYLE: Yes, I remember that.

BROWN: And you could buy a loaf of bread and a quart of milk if you wanted to. But most of my friends around Quonochontaug, if they wanted milk, they'd come across to the old Tom Clarke farm with a clean milk bottle and get fresh milk right out of the cow.

DOYLE: The Tom Clarke farm – where was that?

BROWN: Well, that's the last remnant of the old Babcock farm, which originally was all—everything from the old farmhouse up on the corner here everything down to the breachway, from the sea to the pond, all of that—there must have been 80 to 100 acres –something like that. And Tom Clarke had about –he and his predecessors over the years had sold off cottage lots to-- um—make what we now think of as West Beach. And there were about 40 acres left, which –Tom Clarke lived up on Route One. If you were to drive out West Beach Road and come to the intersection, right across the street, somewhat to the left, sitting back is a big old house with a barn with lots of lobster pots and things on it. You know the one I mean?

DOYLE: I think --Yes.

BROWN: That's Tom Clarke's house. And he used the pasture down here, and he would put some cows in it. And there was an old barn, which has since been made into a cottage where the Bemises live now. And the second little cottage, next to the barn in there, it's called Barnswallow. The other cottage – I don't know what they call that—was where the hired man lived. So, he had a hired –who was –the last one I knew was Earl Crandall, who after the – Tom Clarke was getting on in years and was in terrible health. So, in 1944, he sold his farm to my father; my father still owned -- of course it's all grown up now, so you couldn't possibly farm in there without tearing everything out. But it's a wildlife sanctuary now. But until the late '50's, that was still

open to farmers—I guess until the middle 1950's. My father would rent that pasture, lease it to farmers who put heifers and other stock in there they didn't have to worry about through the summer. But until 1944, Tom Clarke had cows in there and used the barn to milk them. There's still a milk shed over there. And of course, there was very substantial damage to everything in the '38 storm. He had a pigpen--You can still find remnants of it out in the middle of the pasture there. But all the pigs were drowned in the '38 storm. But if people around here wanted milk, they'd xxxxx [drive] over and get fresh milk from Tom Clarke, or his hired man, depending on who was there.

Tom Clarke also ran a water company. He had pipes of water to about a dozen cottages. And they ran under the road, and one thing and another. And they came out at an old well that he had over there, which actually I used for a while, years later. It was a hand-dug, but pretty deep well, with lots of water in it. And his water company lasted—well, my father kept it going and had George Wood, who you may remember, take care of the plumbing. But finally, when things began to wear out, my father decided that he really didn't want to bother with it. That must have been well into the early '60's, or so. So that was the end of the water company. But it provided – then people had to dig their own wells, or have them driven, whatever.

DOYLE: How far did the lines go?

BROWN: Well --oh dear. I could show you the houses, or house—

DOYLE: Would they be right along West Beach Road there?

BROWN: Yes –most of the houses along West Beach Road, down on the west side, down to Mother Brindley's corners, were on the water system-

DOYLE: That's a long way!

BROWN: -and then down over toward the sea—I'm not sure what they call that—Sandpiper Lane – going in there - The Marsh cottage, the Bxxx cottage, the Holloway cottage that they built after the storm, those were all on that system.

DOYLE: Do the Holloways still have a place?

BROWN: They built one after the storm.

DOYLE: Is it still in the family?

BROWN: No, it's been sold. Then the cottage, which, is now owned by the Walker family, was an old building somewhere that my father found and set on that site, and then built onto it. Most of that was done by

my father; the Pendleton family helped with the plumbing, the hard things. You probably have lots of things on the Pendleton family –

DOYLE: No, not yet; and I'm doing some reading and I've come across their name a lot.

BROWN: You want some stuff on that?

DOYLE: I'd love to! I just trying to think - xxxxxx

[Apparent gap in tape; something re Pendleton missing]

BROWN: Parts of the sea along here were carved out of it—had been by the time he'd bought it.

DOYLE: Now that then included Whistling Chimneys, is that right?

BROWN: Well, that was a separate thing. He bought that the same year, which of course is the second oldest house around, the oldest house being the old farmhouse up on the corner there.

DOYLE: I've heard that Whisling Chimneys was perhaps a trading post for Stanton?

BROWN: Well, yes. [It probably was] some kind of a trading post. It was built around 1700, give or take; and if you go out into the marsh, off of the point where the old breachway was, you can find a foundation of a wharf, a stone foundation for a wharf out there. It'd be very interesting to do an archeological study of it. Goodness knows what you might find in there.

DOYLE: Have you done any research in terms of the history, way back?

BROWN: [Very little.]

DOYLE: I've heard that, at one time, Quonochontaug Pond was really open to the sea. It was – people would come in and it was almost like a little port here. Is that—I don't know if that's true?

BROWN: Well, one of the mysteries I've tried to track down--It's hard to do, at least-- probably because I haven't tried hard enough—is that the breachway used to go through what is now the bathing beach. And sometime –probably in the 1870's, in the storm—it got filled in, and the sea broke through where we know, where it is now--Just as it breaks through down around Weekapaug once in a while in the winter.

DOYLE: M-hmn. Yes.

- BROWN:** So, what is referred to in the old deeds as “the old breachway” comes from the Pond on through, or came on through – the remnant of it is still out there –and moves through it, and goes through and through on in –it did then –goes through what is now the bathing beach out into the ocean. And I’d be interested to have more information about that, in case you pick some up.
- DOYLE:** Oh yeah.
- BROWN:** But what is thought is that ships would stand off and send their boats in through the breachway to supply trading goods at what is now Whistling Chimneys, the old inn there. And then I suppose the Indian people would bring furs and things to trade.
- DOYLE:** So, there is obviously some truth to that story. I just didn’t know what was—
- BROWN:** And the big old room there, with the huge old fireplace, in that old building, is probably the room in which that took place.
- DOYLE:** M-hmn.
- BROWN:** Then gradually the house was built around that center chimney, with the fireplaces going out in all directions. I’m sure my sister Fredericka would be glad to show you all about it some time.
- DOYLE:** Oh, if you think it would be all right to give her a call, I’d love to see it. Um—well, what about the Pendletons? You were going to tell me one thing about them.
- BROWN:** Well—xxx [*tape sounds muffle his words- too bad*] wonderful people I ever knew in my life. They were an old fashioned, patriarchal family, who lived in the old house about a mile from here down West Beach Road; it’s on the west side, in back of what are now tennis courts. That was the Pendleton family vegetable garden. It’s the old house directly back that has been substantially modified.
- Palmer Pendleton was born in – let’s see—1870 in the old farmhouse up here. And grew up in that house, and was one of these people that could do absolutely anything. And during his youth, he collected timbers from shipwrecks and things until he had enough to provide the timbers to build that house which is over there on the other side of that tennis court. And it’s an amazing construction inside. Although I haven’t been in it since it’s been renovated and added to; now it’s a great big house. And the original house was itself very substantial.

Well, he had two sons, Albert and Clifford, and a daughter. I don't remember the daughter very well, but I knew Albert and Clifford very well. Albert never married – I never knew Palmer Pendleton's wife; she was gone by the time I blew in.

DOYLE: So, you did know him—

BROWN: Oh, I knew him very well. Oh, a wonderful old man, who could do absolutely anything. On their farm, they had a blacksmith's shop; they had shops for woodworking—anything that needed to be done, they knew how to do it. They could do plumbing, carpentry—and if you got on the right side of the Pendleton family, they would build you a very nice house. Albert Pendleton built this fireplace, although they didn't like to build fireplaces because they thought they were impractical. They'd be happy to build you a stove, but not a fireplace. My father got along [with them] very well, and they conceded that if he put a heat-o-lator in it, they would be willing to have a fireplace built. So that's what happened. And this is the result, as you can see.

DOYLE: So, when was this house built, David?

BROWN: Well, this house was the officers' quarters up at the old Charlestown Air Base, and was brought down here in 1956 and set up. And Carol and I used this as a summer cottage for years and years and years. And then when I retired, I added on in back and built a barn and one thing and another, and so we're living here all year round now.

DOYLE: Where did you move from?

BROWN: Well, I was living in East Hartford before we moved down here. But we only lived there a very short time after I retired - while they were doing the renovation, building the barn and one thing and another, building the house in the back. And the house in the back is very similar to the old house in the front here.

DOYLE: I didn't even know there was a house in the back.

BROWN: Well, it's all connected; it's about the same footprint. The idea is that Carol and I live in the one in the back, and this is for the children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren and all that.

DOYLE: You have great-grandchildren?

BROWN: Well, we're supposed to get one in May!

DOYLE: How many children do you have?

BROWN: Six.

- DOYLE:** Are they all very near by, or what?
- BROWN:** No, they're all in the world. But that's a long, long story. We'll save that one.
- DOYLE:** We'll save that for another day... Now when did you come down to this -?
- BROWN:** Here?
- DOYLE:** Yes, year-round--
- BROWN:** 1991.
- DOYLE:** And how do you like it?
- BROWN:** Oh, it couldn't be nicer. It's ideal; climate's lovely. Lived in northern Vermont for 15 years, and the idea of having such a mild winter is quite something after six-month winters up there. This is ideal; couldn't be nicer.
- DOYLE:** Yeah. Now you said that you knew the two Pendleton brothers, Albert and Clifford. Now Clifford - did he continue to live at the -
- BROWN:** After his father died, he moved out to the country, I think over in Perryville, somewhere in the country there. I kind of lost track of him. Albert died -oh dear--oh - it must have been in the '60's or so. Albert was [by] far the more interesting of the two. He went off to the Second World War, and they immediately saw that he had enormous experience as a builder and put him in the Corps of Army Engineers. And he was made a colonel, field colonel. And he built a bridge across the Rhine. So, he had a lot of experience; came back with all sorts of wonderful stories. But he came back and came into the same relationship with his father that he had before, you know; he was just a member of the household. This great big old family that could do anything and did anything. —wonderful people. I remember the time that Albert Pendleton called my father and said in his soberest xxxxx voice, "Mr. Brown I should like to come and visit you." My father said, "Fine. When?" It was to be a Sunday afternoon at three o'clock. And so, Albert arrived, wearing a suit and necktie, sober as death itself, and sat down very formally. And they exchanged some politeness, and then my father said, "What would you like to say to me, Albert?" And Albert, with great seriousness said, "Mr. Brown, we've decided that we're going to have to raise our costs and charge not a dollar an hour but a dollar and a quarter an hour, and we wanted you to know about it." So -[slight laugh]—I mean these were some of the most —some of the finest craftsmen you could imagine and some of the most honest people you could possibly imagine—just wonderful people.

- DOYLE:** [Assenting] Did they build any of the homes that are still standing?
- BROWN:** Yeah, they built the Blanton house, what they call Albert House, after Albert Pendleton across the street, over here, the larger of the two Blanton houses. The little cottage, they call Mite Box, was another little building from the dismantled Charlestown Air Base, that was brought down and set up there, found out on the sea, but in back of it is the other house they call Albert House.
- DOYLE:** And that's still standing?
- BROWN:** Oh, indeed yes.
- DOYLE:** Is there a sign that says Albert House?
- BROWN:** Oh, there might be; I don't know. Let's see. Of course, they helped my father build the house that the Walkers have on the corner, Sandpiper Lane they call that driveway now. I guess they built the Holloway house, which is next door to it, toward the xxx house. Uh – oh, they built two barns up at Whistling Chimneys, the lower garage and then the workshop out on the -- and then, let's see. . . what comes to mind.
- DOYLE:** You were saying that Palmer was born over at the old farmhouse. So, the Pendleton family – that was their first home in the area here?
- BROWN:** I can't tell you the family history there, but I heard him say that he was born in that house.
- DOYLE:** I can remember my grandmother telling me about Mr. Pendleton --I know xxxx. But there's very little that I know.
- BROWN:** Wonderful person – very normal in sense, but if he really thought you were his kind of person, he'd do anything for you. —and—the wonderful fireplaces I told you about --
- DOYLE:** He must have liked you a lot!
- BROWN:** He liked my father a lot. But I was just a kid, of course.
- DOYLE:** Now, are there any Pendletons living now?
- BROWN:** I don't know. Albert died, and Clifford's son went off and [married and] had Palmer II, and he was killed in some kind of construction accident. And Claire – I don't know what's become of her—and Charlie -- I don't know what's become of him. I can't imagine that Clifford's still going—he would be very ancient by now; he'd be up in his hundreds. He was older than my father, and my father would be —oh, 108 by now if he were still going.

- DOYLE:** Do you have photographs of Quonnie when you were?
- BROWN:** Not here, but up at the other house—
- DOYLE:** Not here, but some time when you're --
- BROWN:** That's a big old house --and we have--t
- DOYLE:** At Whistling Chimneys, you mean?
- BROWN:** Yes; and we have an archive room up there--
- DOYLE:** I don't know...I'd love to--if you'd like to share them. . I'd love to see them some day.
- Um, I think I've mentioned something about—I know about the Ashaway Group, for instance. Did you -- were you aware—did these people all come from Ashaway, Rhode Island, that lived in that section?
- BROWN:** I don't know. I know that the Gilbert cottage, which is the first cottage west of the old Inn—oh dear, what was the name . . .
- DOYLE:** There was a Bartlett—but that was a -- [Bennett]
- BROWN:** I don't recall that name. And the Inn there, oh I can't remember the name of the family that owned that place. The last member of the family there that I knew was a woman who by now would probably be in her eighties, who used to work in the bank in Westerly, the Washington Trust. But I can't think --
- DOYLE:** You mentioned staying at the Quonochontaug Inn and the Sea Breeze Inn. Are there any special memories about being in either of those two places?
- BROWN:** Well, they were old-fashioned inns, where you got wonderful food. Very ordinary seaside food, but great quantities of it, and usually fresh hot breads of various kinds. All of it was homemade of course; and it was very good, and it was very informal. It had its own seaside xxx charm.
- DOYLE:** Did you stay there for a week, or a month, or—
- BROWN:** No, we never stayed at any of those places for all that long. When we stayed in the little cottage -- the garage cottage in the back of the Morris Point hotel, we had to stay there maybe for a month. But other places, we'd come for weekends. I remember we stayed at the Morris Point Inn once—
- DOYLE:** What was that like? I've heard about that --

- BROWN:** Oh, it was a grand old inn, great big old inn, huge verandas around it. Very stylish in its own kind of way, sort of a memory of the turn of the century. It was much fancier of course than either the Sea Breeze Inn or the Quonochontaug Inn.
- DOYLE:** Do you remember who that was run by?
- BROWN:** Let's see if I can dredge it up!
- DOYLE:** Yeah! I've heard it – I think Joann Thomsen mentioned a person who bought it just before the '38 Hurricane came along, and of course it was destroyed. Now, the Sea Breeze Inn – was that any different than the Quonochontaug Inn?
- BROWN:** Oh yeah; well, that was an old house, like Whistling Chimneys, an old house with big old fireplaces in it, and I thought it was a pity when they tore it down. I'm sure they had some – what they thought was a good reason to do it - but anyway it was done. And, uh, it was a big old farmhouse, is what it was. And then they built that dance hall, in back, which is still there. And that was just that; it was used as a dance hall. And people from all over Quonochontaug used to come up there for . . . and they would do Scandinavian line dancing in there. A Swedish family owned it at the time, and they were people that did that. And some people would rent it for receptions and --.
- DOYLE:** I think there was a sauna, too, somewhere--
- BROWN:** There was, there, yes. I never used the sauna, but I know there was one there. They may have been Finnish people—
- DOYLE:** Yes, and that's probably xxxx [tape sounds muffle talk]
- BROWN:** They may have been Finnish people, and they had these affairs, I mean dances. . . .
- DOYLE:** Now, you must have stayed in these inns before your father bought the property –
- BROWN:** Well, we stayed in the Holloway cottages; we had the use of one of those until it got blown away. And then we were at the garage cottage on Morris Point, before they built the so-called Wren House, which the Walkers have now. And then we were there until 1944, so --I think it was '41 that that got finished, '41, 2, 3, 4—so we were there four years. And then they bought the farm and Whistling Chimneys. And then we lived up there.
- DOYLE:** Now, you have brothers and sisters?

BROWN: Older brother, half brother, Sherman, his wife, Catherine, still living. And his daughter, Sherry Lockler, you may know--they live up in back of Windswept Farm, up in there; they have a house there. His other daughter lives in Cincinnati. And those two have children and grandchildren. The xxxx [Catherine?] lives over in Chester, Connecticut.

I have two sisters: one lives in Washington, D.C. She's a widow. Her husband –

DOYLE: What's her name?

BROWN: Elizabeth Gordon. Her husband was a research physician with the National Institute of Health. And he died oh 10 years ago, or so. And you know Fredericka, my other sister –

DOYLE: I don't know her, no I don't– oh, she's your sister! I wasn't sure what–

BROWN: Elizabeth and Fredericka, they're my sisters.

DOYLE: I see. Is Fredericka down here year-round?

BROWN: Yes. She's retired. She was in charge of Children's Services at the Providence Center, for many years.

[Tape sounds muffle talk]

BROWN: Nobody likes to see things change. One of the things about West Beach is that, since the breachway is there, there isn't a main road, which is a great advantage: it keeps West Beach kind of quiet, although people still drive too fast on the roads. Personally, I agree with the engineers and the wildlife people, who think that the building of the ["new"] breachway was a mistake. They should have left it the way it was, for various reasons.

DOYLE: Ecological reasons?

BROWN: For various ecological reasons, it appears to have done more harm than good. It probably looked like a good idea in the middle '50's when they did it—

DOYLE: In what way do you feel it's—

BROWN: Well, I-- this is – I'm not a pro, so I shouldn't talk on the subject. If you want facts and value, you might talk to the environmental people. Sea/pond people, David Monk or somebody like that, could probably give you more precise information. Well, that's one thing that crosses my mind. I'm absolutely delighted there isn't a store in West Beach,

except once in a while somebody runs a bait stand for a while in the summer. That's about as close to a store as we're apt to get.

DOYLE: 'Cause that would draw people to the—

BROWN: Well, no – Commercial is something that is just not a part of it, except for realtors and stuff like that. But it's a quiet residential community, and people that live out here kind of like it that way. So, anything, which moves against that, is somewhat suspicious. Of course, the soil -the quantity of soil is [only] so much, so that you really can't build too much more out in West Beach.

DOYLE: Is most of the land now, most of the buildable land, taken up?

BROWN: Well, pretty much, pretty much. You know, conceivably people can do things. But I think they would be discouraged by the Coastal Resources people, because as I say, there is only so much land to [absorb] only so much sewerage. And of course, the water is a big problem out here – always has been. When I was a kid, you used to have to bring in water, gallon jugs of drinking water.

DOYLE: Where was the pump? Did you go to a pumphouse somewhere?

BROWN: We used to go up to old Mr. Brightman's store. He had a—

[Tape Noise]

DOYLE: I remember Mr. Brightman. I just remember this man with white hair. I don't know. Is that who --?

BROWN: Well, he had only one leg, and an artificial leg. And he ran that store, there.

DOYLE: M-hmm.

BROWN: And I really don't know very much about him, other than that he was there. And we'd go up there and buy things we might want to have; either walk up or go by bicycle. We didn't have a car.

DOYLE: It was always a big event to go up there. That's how I remember it. It was like a journey in itself.

BROWN: Oh sure. And he was kind of a gruff old man.

DOYLE: Yeah, that's how I remember him.

BROWN: But on weekends, when my father was here with a car--he would arrive on Friday evening and go home first thing Monday morning – so he'd have two full days here, which—of course those were the days when people worked on Saturdays, and you only had one free day a

week -- So that was considered rather generous, to be able to come on Friday evening and leave at the crack of dawn on Monday morning --

DOYLE: What did your father do?

BROWN: Oh my! In Naugatuck, Connecticut he ran a business, which began as a fuel oil and coal -- I'd say it began as a coal business. Then it went into fuel oil. And then he started a xxx agency as part of it and had some gas stations. And I guess they got into certain aspects of building materials; and he was God's original Yankee. I mean he was involved with anything that would make a dollar!

BROWN: Now, we got drinking water, but there were wells in most of these -- most of the houses had dug wells, which you could use for washing clothes, or washing your face or one thing and another. And eventually people got flush toilets, when electricity came in, and they could have pumps and things like that.

DOYLE: Were you here before that? Before that time?

BROWN: Oh yes, oh yes -- heavens yes. There was no indoor plumbing until way into the '30's. xxxxx [or anything else that used] electricity.

DOYLE: Now I'd like to backtrack here. You started talking about Mother Brindley. Are there any other memories about her? I read about her, about a little cart that she used to pull around --

BROWN: I don't know anything about that. But she had a big old house with a plate glass window in the front. And you could get a few things in her little store, there. She was a little old lady who was just there. Sold penny candy and popsicles, and you could buy ice cream and milk and bread and maybe a few canned goods -- not very much. She was a very taciturn little old lady; she never said very much. I had a -- I had a picture of her --

DOYLE: I had an old post card that I've seen, with her picture.

BROWN: --in the collection up at the other house. I have I think at least one, maybe two pictures of Mother Brindley. So, she was a great old institution, but I never heard anything about her after the '38 storm.

DOYLE: Was she just a summer --person--or did she live here all the time?

BROWN: I don't know. I was just here in the summer, so I have no way of knowing.

DOYLE: Now, did you ever take walks, all the way up to Blue Shutters and--

BROWN: Oh, yes.

- DOYLE:** And do you ever go in the other direction?
- BROWN:** Oh yes, and we even had an occasional walk all the way to the Charlestown Breachway.
- DOYLE:** Oh you did--?
- BROWN:** Oh yes, that was one of the great horrors of the Second World War. — They used the beach up there – they shelled the beach from up in the Burlingame Reservation with field guns and used that as a target range. And they stationed a guard up at Blue Shutters so people wouldn't go past it and get into the area. So my sister Fredericka and her friend Holly Blanton (they were, oh ten or eleven, or something like that) decided they'd walk to the Charlestown Breachway. And the soldier on guard figured they were just going for a swim or something and paid no attention. And on they walked, right up into the area where all of a sudden, they started the shelling. Well, my mother and Holly's mother, Mrs. Blanton, heard the shelling, and realized that Fredericka and Holly weren't around. And they began to ask where they went. "Oh they went up to the Charlestown Breachway." Well, you can imagine the consternation. So, my mother – there was a soldier stationed over here in the little shack at the end of what is now called Sandpiper Lane-- She went rushing over there and immediately got -- I guess there there was an officer there with a jeep, who at that point all the color had drained out of him, you can better believe! And so, my mother and he went rushing off in the jeep and started up the beach, looking in all the shell holes for "the remains." And eventually in the distance they saw these two walking down along the edge of the
—
- DOYLE:** [Gasping] And they didn't even -- did they realize?
- BROWN:** They weren't even aware that there was anything going on! They continued strolling on back, having gone as far as they wanted to.

You asked about walking!
- DOYLE:** [Laughing] Now, do you remember the person that owned Blue Shutters?
- BROWN:** I don't remember who owned it, but I remember going to Blue Shutters, walking up there and buying ice cream and that sort of thing. It was a place to go, you know, once in a while, but I don't know who was the owner.
- DOYLE:** Now during the war, you were still coming down here—yes, obviously.

- BROWN:** Yes, yes; we had to have blackout shutters, blinds, you know. And if any light whatsoever showed, then the soldiers would come and tell you that you were in violation. And of course, they patrolled the beaches and the streets—
- DOYLE:** And the streets, too!
- BROWN:** And they had attack dogs –that they would have with them. And I remember one night as I was —oh I must have been thirteen or fourteen or something like that – as I was walking down out here, I could hear the soldiers coming along in the dark – it was pitch dark, of course, ‘cause there were no lights allowed—and all of a sudden this dog out of the blue came up and leaped on me! And of course I thought the worst: “ This is the end David!” But the dog was very friendly and xxx soon went by. So the mystique of the attack-dog you see, was –everybody knew about it-- but it didn’t amount to much in this instance. The big drama was when –xxxx [Charles and Ann Hershel] -- I’m talking about the War now. They came down one spring and discovered that an astronomical light bill had been run up in their cottage. So, they complained, and the authorities checked it all out, and all of that electricity had been used! Well, this made the government –the military—suspicious, so they came down and searched around and found buried in the sand out here a German inflatable boat. So, they surmised that this boat had been sent in by a submarine. And right in sight of the army station over here, these people had set up their radio operation—
- DOYLE:** Now where is that –Hershels’—where is that?
- BROWN:** Well, it’s right over here, on private land; the cottage is very prominent. And they were able to, from there, look out to sea and then send radio messages to the submarines so they could go and sink the ships that came down Long Island – came down Block Island Sound. So, they of course had long gone by then: they used it through the winter and then disappeared.
- DOYLE:** And that’s probably a true story! I mean that it --
- BROWN:** Xxxx! [You’re right!]
- DOYLE:** [Laughing] I’m sure they really knew -- I’ve heard that Redtop –over a ways to the east—there was some story going on that somebody in that house was sending signals out, too.
- BROWN:** I don’t know anything about this, but I heard this story told by the Hershels, and it was their house that ran up the astronomical bill. And they set off the whole investigation. I have no reason to believe that they would mix up on the xxxxx.

DOYLE: Uh-huh.

[END OF PART ONE]

QUONOC HONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

THE REV. DAVID W. BROWN—Part II

Interviewed by Anne S. Doyle

January 11, 2012

- DOYLE:** I last spoke to Reverend Brown –
- BROWN:** Oh don't call me Reverend—
- DOYLE:** Oh, I'm sorry: David, David Brown—
- BROWN:** Thank you --I hate honorifics! It's all part of the sincerity racket--
- DOYLE:** Well, you know, some people feel differently about that --
- BROWN:** I hate sincerity!
- DOYLE:** You hate sincerity? [Laughing] That's on the record --
- BROWN:** OK, that's a good introduction! That tells it all --[laughter in his voice]
- DOYLE:** I'm – uh- talking again with David Brown about his recollections of staying on West Beach. David, I'm wondering if we could start with your recollections about the Dowd family. I'm not sure where to begin but I know your parents, or your mother, was good friends with Emma—
- BROWN:** I suppose the memory, which I treasure most, is of Agnes and Florence Dowd, going over to their flat-bottomed rowboat, which they kept just west of my parents' property on Babcock Cove. And every spring they'd have somebody turn it over, scrape and paint it and put it in the water. And when they had a mind, they'd go over there, dressed in what you might expect a couple of ladies wishing to wander around in a Victorian strolling park to wear. One of them would carry a parasol, which was supposed to shield both of them at the same time, although there wasn't enough of it to shield one of them at the same time! And one would row, and the other would bear the parasol. They wore long sleeves, gathered at the wrist and gloves and were all perfectly attired to row around Babcock Cove. And they even ventured through the Narrows out into the bay of Quonochontaug Pond, from time to time, if there was very little wind. And they would row at a very diminutive pace and in a very sedate manner. And then they would come back and tie up their boat, and make their way over to my parents' house, the old Stanton-Babcock farmhouse, and have tea with my parents, which of course was always very formal. And I didn't hang out with this kind of gathering all that

much, so I couldn't tell you too much what they talked about. But it happened. And they also would come and play bridge. And sometimes my parents would go over to their wonderful cottage on the sea, and play bridge over there. I don't have much memory of their mother, Emma. She was—what little I remember— it was kind of shadowy and in the background. But I remember Florence and Agnes very well. They were tall, with craggy faces – strong women. They taught art in New York, where they stayed in the winter, and then they'd come up here first thing in the spring and stay until into the autumn. Later they stayed year-round, I believe. Well, that's a lick and a promise.

DOYLE: Did you ever go down to the pond when they got into the boat? Or did it just happen that you saw them do this? Did they need help?

BROWN: Oh, they didn't. They were very independent, in their antiquity, and didn't seem to need any help. I think they would have had trouble turning the boat over to scrape and paint it; that's why they had somebody do it for them. But other than that, they were able to tie and untie it and proceed in their adventure.

DOYLE: What do you remember about the inside of the Dowd house—cottage?

BROWN: Well, not all that much, you know. It was what I remember of cottages *like* that: these late-19th century A-frame kind of buildings, and ones that I've been in out on the east end of Long Island, and some of the islands off the shore and on the beaches there. There was a whole generation of people who had houses like that. And this was very typical of those. The interior wood had darkened over the ages, so you had the impression that, the wood being very dark and the furnishings being very late 19th-century, with lamps which – they may have been Tiffany; they certainly were in the style of Tiffany lamps, you know, with fringes around the shades—and that kind of thing--

DOYLE: So they were fairly well-to-do people.

BROWN: They were comfortable. I have no idea what they had; I know that they lived in Manhattan and had this place in the summer. So they were, as far as I know, not hurting all that much.

DOYLE: Now, I heard that they also had a tennis court, or played tennis?

BROWN: Well, that part I didn't get into.

DOYLE: Or flowers – is another thing that I've heard said--.

BROWN: Oh yes, they had gardens; and they may very well have had tennis. I didn't see—that probably would have been in the style of their boating.

- DOYLE:** [laughing] Yes –
- BROWN:** That’s just a surmise –
- DOYLE:** I wonder if they made war on the tennis court!
- BROWN:** I imagine it’s about the same thing. Uh, that’s conjecture, which one is not supposed to make, in high-powered objective science like this!
- DOYLE:** [laughing] OK. All right, let’s go on to what you remember about Tom Clarke.
- BROWN:** When I knew Tom Clarke, he was aged, and he kept on being aged, for thirty years after that. And he lived up in a great old house that’s still there, across the street at the intersection of Route One and West Beach Road. And he would come down – there was a small house near the barn, where the hired man stayed. And the hired man and he would come down, and they’d work together, doing the milking and whatever else had to have happen.
- DOYLE:** Now this was before the ’38 Hurricane –
- BROWN:** Oh yes, yes. He sort of kept on with the farm until, let’s see, I think it was 1945 that he sold the farm, to my father. And then he sort of faded into the background. And that’s all I know of the end of Tom Clarke. But while he was there, he would come down wheezing and staggering, and somehow or other he and his –the principal hired man I remember was Earl Crandall, who was a very strong lad and did most of the heavy work. But between the two of them, they’d do the milking. Tom Clarke ran this – what was left of the original Stanton-Babcock seaside farm, which took up all of what we now think of as Quonochontaug Neck. And gradually lots were sold off to summer people along the southeast fringe and along the breachway. But originally the whole thing was part of the Stanton-Babcock farm. And he –however he came by it, I don’t know; we’d have to go to the deeds. But he farmed that, including the sea-grass – the clam flat lots that runs about 44 acres that he farmed there.
- DOYLE:** Did he actually own it? Did he own that part--marsh?
- BROWN:** As far as I know—Well, a few acres you know. And it’s very difficult to make a survey of that property, without spending a fortune on it.
- BROWN:** And the base survey that’s used was made by a remarkable man by the name of Horace Emerson, who sort of speculated when things didn’t work out quite right. And in the trade he was known as “Old Rubber Rule.” And so the surveys, which take into account his findings, reflect that tradition. Well, Tom Clarke also had hooked a

number of cottages into his water system. He had a number of wells, most of which have utrified in the meantime; there's only one that I know of that is still operative, and that would have to have a lot of work done on it before it could be really used. And he pumped water to I think --oh twelve or fifteen houses along the beach, and the pipes were all above ground. And they were kept going by hook or by crook. And any kind of metal this close to the sea suffers, and so there was always something going wrong here or there or the other place. But he supplemented his income with his water system.

But other than that, it was a dairy farm. There weren't a great many cows in the herd – I don't remember—and he didn't try to hay anything out there; he bought his hay from people who had big flat fields somewhere. Before him, there were spines, ridges in that property, although in his time, it was all grazed over, except for the third that's wetland. And the cows wandered into the wetland and got what they could find in there.

But the other part at times had been used as potato field, on those ridges; and it's interesting that the old fertilizer, which had been used for the potato field, still had an effect. And naturalists, who've come in to examine the wildwood there and study it now that it's a wildlife preserve, are surprised that some of the things, like September weed, grow to the height that they do. And of course, the reason that they do is that they're still feasting on what's left of the fertilizer of those old potato fields! But Tom Clarke, as far as I know, never grew potatoes in there. Maybe he did, before I knew him, but when he was younger, he had enough to do to take care of his cows, which he kept in there with an electric fence that was always going fluey, getting shorted out; and then the cows would drift around West Beach. And a person pre-adolescent such as myself would have a great time leading cows into people's houses and things like that! Oh the stories are many!

DOYLE: Yeah, yeah.

BROWN: But he was gone by- at least not functioning— he had sold the farm to my father in-- I think it was '45—

DOYLE: Where did he keep his cows in the winter? Right in that little barn? Or did they go back up on post road?

BROWN: Sure. Sure, they had to milk them. And that's --

DOYLE: Did he have a barn up on the post road?

BROWN: He may have, but not for those cows. And the hired man was right there, you see; and Tom Clarke would come down and he and Earl

would do the milking, and morning and evening, just like any dairy farm. But they brought in bales of hay and filled up the haymow with them. And grain of course.

DOYLE: The barn itself, David, did that--am I right that it came from your property?

BROWN: Well, that barn, until sometime about the time of the Great War, I'm not sure of the date -- I think it was maybe --well, just before the Great War -- it stood up just to the west of my -- of the old Stanton-Babcock farmhouse. And for years, the foundation was still there. But when they put in roads to the cottages that got built along the edge of Babcock Cove, the foundation sort of flew by the wayside. But that barn I presume was taken apart and then put back together down there, so that they would have better access from West Beach Road. It goes in maybe a hundred and fifty feet, something like that from--. Uh, since then it's been made into a summer cottage.

DOYLE: Now the Bemises are there, right?

BROWN: Well, the Bemises--Gretchen Bemis was a Weiland, and the Weilands bought it from my father; my father had the old barn turned into a cottage and then sold it to the Weilands, who had rented it for some years. And it's been inherited by Gretchen Weiland Bemis and Kenneth Bemis -- is that his name?

DOYLE: Do you know anything about Mrs. Clarke?

BROWN: No, nothing.

DOYLE: Nothing-- OK. I've heard bits and pieces about her, and I was just wondering. Now the wells that you have just talked about: I had heard from somebody else about a Mr. Grill or Groll that had cottages that were supplied by a well across the street. Is that a--was that connected to Mr. Clarke's wells?

BROWN: Well, I think some of the Grill houses were serviced by his waterworks. I don't know any of the detail of that.

DOYLE: But that was his own waterworks --in other words, that had nothing to do with Tom Clarke's wells--?

BROWN: Well, I think it did; I think it hooked into them--

DOYLE: Oh, it did? Oh, OK.

BROWN: --'Cause that was the easy way to do it. Then Grill, Sammy Grill, didn't have to worry about taking care of the pipes! [Laughter]

- DOYLE:** Did you know him at all?
- BROWN:** Oh, sure. He ran a barbershop in Westerly for many years, and saved every penny he had and put it into real estate down here. Must have made a fortune!
- DOYLE:** I heard he tried to move some of the rocks in a little area on the shore-
- BROWN:** Well, he wanted to have his waterfront cottages have a beach. Well, they had the sand, but it was all rocky out there. So he had a crane come in and move a lot of the rocks out and form a barrier, which is still there; and there was a little lagoon on the land side, which could-[be]- and still is-- used as a swimming area, and it's nice and calm because the rock barrier quiets down the surf.
- DOYLE:** All right, let's move on to the original or the natural breach you knew about.
- BROWN:** Well, when you start talking about breachways, you have to remember that Quonochontaug Neck is a very fragile piece of real estate. And all the way from the Ashaway Cottages, which form the east, the southeast corner of West Beach, all the way from there to Weekapaug, the sea has broken through at different times and [in]different ways. The sea still breaks through up on the Weekapaug end sometimes. And who knows what it's done, over the years, between the ledge on which the Ashaway Cottages are built and on up toward Weekapaug.
- But the first breachway that I know anything about closed up --I think the correct date is the 19th of February, 1886—I think. But this could be confirmed with greater research than I've done. I've seen pictures, photographs, of the floods upcountry from the shore--the old mill towns being washed to pieces by the floods in that storm. But, until that date, the only breachway in Quonochontaug, [i.e.] West Beach, that I know about came through what is now the bathing beach at West Beach, which is about 100 yards wide, which marked the opening of the old breachway. And that came through, and you can still see remnants of it over in the marsh that leads out into the bay, the southeast bay of Quonochontaug Pond, which in turn leads into Babcock Cove. But the old breachway skirted Babcock Cove; I'm not sure whether it ever hooked into it --it may have. And in that storm, that got all filled up; and the breachway that we now know the position of it, opened up. I suspect that this kind of thing had happened many times over the millennia, since the glaciers. In different places in different ways.
- BROWN:** One of the interesting features of that old breachway was that at high tide, it flooded to the northeast and to the west, sort of wings, which

are still there. The one to the northwest has been pretty much utrified and full of phragmites; but when I was a boy, you could canoe in it, and there were swans and bullrushes and things. This was the days before the phragmites had come in. And it of course was rainwater and water that came over the dunes in the winter from the sea; and it would usually come close to drying up in the late summer.

The other one, the one that goes to the west and south, that one was apparently in some measure filled in from West Beach Road through to the sea. And that must have happened early on, when they were starting to sell off lots in there and build cottages. But there still is a substantial piece, on the corner of West Beach Road and –oh, I don't know—there's some new-fangled name for a street that goes through there; I don't know what it is—goes in to Harry Hathaway's cottage and some other cottages along the sea there –

DOYLE: Tern way?

BROWN: Could be. That sounds good; something invented by a committee. Um –and that I believe is fill, which cut off that old breachway. Now the Town of Charlestown still maintains a drain from the southwest pond area -- (or whatever you want to call it) through into the marsh, under the old West Beach Road. And there's likewise one, which drains the one to the northwest – uh northeast, excuse me—and that is very prominent, if you look for it, as I have recently. There's a great big pipe—I would say, oh, maybe fifteen-inch pipe-- very prominent in there if you know where to look. It's just across the street from the knoll is where you can find it. And that goes under the road and dumps into, once again, the marsh there. And I think these drains were put in there originally in the interests of mosquito control; they were probably done in the 1930's when a lot of drainage ditches were built by the CCC and other organizations like that, as part of the programs in the '30's. That shouldn't be too hard to research if anybody wanted to do it.

DOYLE: So there are actually two drainage areas, from what you described.

BROWN: Yes. There are two wings, from the—and at high tide, those were completely flooded, back in the old days. Nowadays, of course, they're completely cut off from the sea, unless it comes over the dunes in the winter, into the one to the northwest. And that doesn't happen to the other one at all. The other one, the southwest one, is pretty much utrified. And I think the owners are just waiting until they can get some kind of a perk test in there and say, "Oh, no; this isn't wetland." But there are many years to go before they can say that.

DOYLE: So somebody actually owns that –where that used to be.

- BROWN:** All of that property is owned, yes. None of it is pub--. The only public property is a lot, which I inherited and gave to the Conservancy, now called the Charlestown Trust, that runs from just west of the knoll, from West Beach Road through to the sea. And that's owned by the Charlestown Trust, Land Trust. All the rest is owned privately. There are scattered in there some town roads, which have never been activated. They're only on the map. And of course they enter into various controversies about rights of way and one thing and another, even though they have never been used as town roads; they're just theoretical.
- DOYLE:** You described to me too, about how the road from Ashaway Cottages came around that area.
- BROWN:** Oh; yes; there are still-- at the north end of the Ashaway Cottages--the road that goes out that's still the access to that ridge--on either side of it are some fieldstone pillars that go way, way, way, way, back. And that's what I remember as a boy, getting to the cottages that my family owned, in back of Picnic Rock. There were four of them there, four cottages; my family only owned three of the four. And that road went in there and then across parallel on the land side of the ridge of the Ashaway Cottages, and across to the cottages in back of Picnic Rock and passed those, and then curved back west and out onto West Beach Road. So there was sort of a bow shape to the whole thing. And the only thing that's left of that is an entry way to what used to be a right of way, a seaweed right through there. Seaweed rights have been declared by the Rhode Island courts to have no more operative force, legally. And that now is part of my sister Betsey's property there; but it comes out into her parking lot there. That's where the old road came out.
- DOYLE:** Now was there also an extension of the road towards the east? Through what is now Central Beach? Was that road extended the other direction?
- BROWN:** Not to my knowledge.
- DOYLE:** OK.
- BROWN:** The road—as it came in [from West Beach Road toward the Ashaway Cottages], the property to the north was owned by a man by the name of Learned, who owned and operated the Quonochontaug Inn, which—uh, if you just go in on that street, you run right into it, up on the ledge: a great big square building. It's now used as a rest home by some Roman Catholic nuns. And just to the northeast of the old Inn is a cottage, which used to be owned by a man by the name of Dr. Jolly a cottage which withstood the '38 storm and the storms since, still there.

Dr. lolly owned a monkey, so we kids used to love to hide behind the stone wall there and watch the monkey. It was a fierce creature, so if the monkey decided to chase you, you'd better get out of there fast because the monkey was known to bite people.

Oh, the stories are innumerable.

DOYLE: Is that the same monkey that appeared on the Dave Garroway Today Show?

BROWN: I have no idea! I don't even know what the Dave Garroway Show is!

DOYLE: That was the first show on TV--television, morning show; it's now the Today Show.

BROWN: Oh yes!

DOYLE: They had a monkey.

BROWN: Well, I could tell you more about the War Between the States than I could about that.

DOYLE: [LAUGHING] You said just a little while ago that you knew quite a bit about Great Island, which is also now called Bill's Island. Can you tell me what you do know about Great Island?

BROWN: Yes. It's always been a fascinating thing. It's about five and three quarters acres. And it always sort of loomed out there, a mysterious and wonderful thing, sort of like a treasure ship or something. And as I was growing up, it was called Blackberry Island in those days; it's been known by three different names. I have a map, a Geodetic Survey map that calls it Bill's Island; and then it became known as Great Island, and my family always spoke of it as Blackberry Island, as did a lot of other local people.

DOYLE: Who owned it?

BROWN: OK. I have to go backwards here. It's currently owned by the Weekapaug conservation group, who bought it three or four years ago; and their intent is that it be kept, into perpetuity, wild. Which is a great and wonderful thing, because it's the northern access to the Hathaway Preserve. And if it had been developed, that would have had a very negative impact. Just to the west of Blackberry Island is a heap of rocks that comes up there, which is owned by the Audubon Society, which are called the Gull Rocks. And you have to be careful when the terns are nesting or they'll swoop down and knock your hat off. But also it's a nesting—salt-water birds, sea birds, nest on Blackberry Island; and if there's going to be a severe storm, you can

see egrets and various others all coming up onto the trees in the center of Blackberry Island to roost out the storm.

DOYLE: Do they nest in the trees? Do they eat --?

BROWN: Well, I suppose it depends on the birds—I don't know --

DOYLE: --You don't know. . .

BROWN: I don't know enough about the birds to be able to answer those questions.

DOYLE: OK.

BROWN: But when I was a boy, I first knew it as this mysterious and wonderful thing that was full of briars and bullbriars and poison ivy and things. And then came along the '38 Storm, which washed it absolutely clear of any vegetation. It was just flat, like much of West Beach. It was absolutely flat. So here was a chance, for two teenagers, my friend Frederick Blanton and myself, to go over there and explore it! And we did! And we found some very interesting things. We found a small foundation, fieldstone foundation, on the height of land on the west end of that—west to the north end of that island, in the very center, and near it the foundations of an old well.

And so at that point, it was owned by Dick Curry, and he said that in the 19th Century (the latter part of it, which he could remember; he was on in years in those days: he must have been born around 1875-80—something like that), and he said that whoever owned it before him would, on a raft, bring oxen over there and plow it out and plant it in potatoes. But that really didn't explain the foundations and the well. Although I suppose they could have used the well to water the potatoes.

But then I came upon a remarkable book, the title of which is *Changes in the Land*, by William—I'm blocking on his name; I can look it up if you want-- which has a reference in it to 17th- and 18th-century practices along New England coasts, of townships' designating islands as "Pig Islands." And people would keep their pigs on an island and notch their ears, so everybody knew whose was whose. And my guess is that that foundation is the foundation of an old granary place for a swineherd to stay, and the well used to water. And that very likely was a pig island for this part of the world. And--

DOYLE: My goodness!

BROWN: --I think the different indications come together enough to suggest that's what it was.

- DOYLE:** Very interesting.
- BROWN:** So, of course, that was long gone by the end of the 18th – the end of the 19th century, when it was plowed up for potatoes. But after that, it was just left wild. And that's what it's always been, ever since. Now—
- DOYLE:** Did the Van Osts own it at one time?
- BROWN:** Well, I'm moving into that part of it.
- DOYLE:** OK; I'm sorry!
- BROWN:** I told you the story of who owns it now. Jack Van Ost bought it and named his real estate firm, offices in Chicago, The Great Island Real Estate, Incorporated. And he had, at least he circulated, notions that he wanted to build a causeway from the mainland, where he owned --he had bought up a piece of land on the mainland, on Sunset Drive, and his idea— or at least theoretically --was that he was going to build a causeway over onto there and build a resort hotel – or at least so the rumor had it --with a helicopter port, so that they would bring in near-eastern princes and celebrities from all parts of the world, to the resort hotel, who then, by helicopter, would go over to the gambling casino in North Stonington.
- Now there are a number of ways to read this. And Jack Van Ost died, as you know, and it went to his cousins, whose names I can't remember – I can look them up somewhere—but it went to them, and they went so far as to have a barge with a tractor on it go over there and run a--run a thing into there so they could have a perk test done, and it was declared buildable—if you can believe it or not. But nothing ever came of it. Of course it would have been fought, right down to the last minute, with the Zoning Board, and the Zoning Board was [opposed to it?]- because it was the last thing that ought to have happen there.
- BROWN:** My own theory is that these dreamy fantasies that were circulated had a lot to do with augmenting the value of the property, so that somebody would come along and buy it at a high price. I forget what the—goodness knows, the Weekapaug conservation group probably paid a great deal of money for it; but it had been inflated greatly by the means which I suggested to you.
- DOYLE:** So, the Weekapaug Conservation Foundation bought it from Mr. Van Ost, or that estate.
- BROWN:** From his heirs.

- DOYLE:** His heirs, yeah. I see.
- If I could get name of that book—*Changes in the Land*-- [*Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, by William Cronon, Pub. Hill and Wang; Revised edition (September 1, 2003)]
- BROWN:** Yes.
- DOYLE:** I will --well, if I just look that up, maybe I don't need the author's name.
- BROWN:** I'm sorry.
- DOYLE:** No, that's all right. I'm just interested in that.
- BROWN:** I have a copy – but I'm t not sure where it is. In the middle of my two thousand books, it's apt to be lost for quite a while. It's a wonderful book! Anybody who's at all interested in the history of the New England coast should have that book. It's very well done and very thoroughly researched, with excellent bibliography. I think it's Yale University Press, but I'm not certain.
- DOYLE:** Well, I have learned even more than I thought I would learn, on this visit. So, is there anything else you would like to add?
- BROWN:** Oh – I was just responding to questions!
- DOYLE:** OK. Well, I might be back again, if I can think of more questions.
- BROWN:** Risk it! Risk it!
- DOYLE:** But, I thank you so much, David, for allowing me into your home and spending time with me.
- BROWN:** It's been charming!
- DOYLE:** [Laughing] Charming! -- Thank you so much!