

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

Peter Rettig

Thursday,

November 13, 2021

Interviewed by Joan Lawlor in Charlestown

Q: This is Joan Lawlor, and today is November 13th. I'm here with Peter Rettig. We're doing an oral history about Peter's recollections of living in Quonochontaug.

A: My name is Peter Rettig. I was born September 18th, 1950 in Hartford, Connecticut.

Q: Who was the first person in your family to come to Quonnie?

A: I would probably credit my grandmother.

Q: Did she live here?

A: No. Actually, in the late '20s, early '30s, she had a place on Block Island. My grandfather had grown up in Nassau. His family was involved with the British government. He was into boats—sailing and what not. He had a couple of sailboats and a large pleasure boat.

Q: They had a house on Block Island?

A: Yes.

Q: Was that a summer house?

A: That was their summer place.

Q: Did they live in Hartford?

A: They lived in West Hartford, Connecticut. They subsequently got divorced in the late '30s. Prior to World War II, my grandmother nearly bought the Rose Cliff in Newport. That was the coastal thing.

Q: What decade would that have been?

A: That was the late '30s, early '40s. It had been let go. It was in a state of real disrepair, and she decided it was going to take too much to bring it back. She subsequently bought

a place in Lake Placid. What her attraction actually was, her cousin was Stanford White, the architect, and he had designed it.

Q: That was her cousin?

A: Yes. She kept the place. It was a Vanderbilt house that White had designed.

Q: And that was in Lake Placid?

A: Yes. She kept that through the war. But after the war, my parents started going to the beach, and she would come along for the holidays.

Q: So, they were in West Hartford and would come to Rhode Island?

A: Yes. They would come to Rhode Island. Initially, my parents rented in East Beach from the Sarcy cottages. I don't have a picture of them myself. I think it was a cluster of small cottages. I have one recollection of it that there was a whippoorwill in the tree outside. As a very young child, I was terrified that it was a person whistling—a Bobwhite kind of thing. Then they rented in West Beach from Sam Grills. He had developed West Beach.

Q: What decade would this have been?

A: That would be the early '50s. Then my grandmother decided that it was an attractive area to the family, and she purchased a house at 164 Central Beach on Surfside Avenue for the grandchildren. She purchased it from Hamilton Schwarz, who later built a house, Swan Song, right next to Fresh Pond. It was pretty primitive and strictly a seasonal situation. Some seasons, it didn't even get used. It sat idle. That was in 1956 that she purchased that.

Q: Were you about six then?

A: Yes. Six or seven.

Q: When would you come?

A: Holidays and a couple of weeks in the summer. I was here to open it up and to close it up. Actually, in 1957, which would have been the first season that they had it, there was a leak somewhere in the roof. My father and grandfather were upon the roof. And I was up on the roof, but I wasn't doing anything but enjoying the view. We heard shouts for help. It was an extremely foggy day. It was Memorial Day weekend. It was coming from the beach. It was somebody in trouble. We called the state police. They finally showed up hours later—I mean, many hours later. I don't think they had any idea where Quonochontaug was on the map. The sad part of the story is there were a couple of people skin diving. One of them was a former Mr. America. He was a beginner and swam in the wrong direction with the fog. It was right at Central Beach. That was an exciting thing.

Q: How long did they own the house?

A: My grandmother owned it until the late '80s, and then it went into a trust. My wife, Marilyn, and I bought my parents and sisters out of that trust and rebuilt the house from the ground up.

Q: Was that the house you were living in prior to this?

A: Yes.

Q: So, your grandmother was the first one to purchase the house?

A: Yes. I have the canceled checks here somewhere. For \$12,000.

Q: Was that 1980?

A: '56.

Q: Originally in '56?

A: Yes.

Q: Did it look the same?

A: Essentially the same proportions and shape. It was a cape with dormers and so forth. Just short of tearing it down, we started from the ground up.

Q: So, that was still a weekend house for you?

A: Yes, it was. Then we moved here permanently or full time. I would probably be corrected on this, since you were here, but about 2008. As a kid, my most vivid recollections or first recollections were the 4th of July. The 4th of July parade was always a big draw.

Q: Was that back in the '50s?

A: Yes.

Q: Here in Central Beach?

A: In Central Beach.

Q: I didn't know the 4th of July parade went back that far.

- A: The most thrilling part of it for a seven- or eight-year-old was there was a firetruck. If I'm not mistaken, it was a 1921 Maxim fire truck. The day or two before the 4th, it would get revived or reawakened, and driven around the neighborhood collecting scrap wood. Rides were given to kids in exchange for the labor. The scrap wood would get piled at the Central Beach parking lot, or on the beach for a bonfire. There was a 4th of July bonfire after the parade every year. That was big doings for me.
- Q: Which they still do today.
- A: I don't know that there's an organized bonfire. But that was a treat—riding on a fire truck and watching the bonfire.
- Q: Other than the fire truck, were there other people participating in the parade?
- A: It was a costume parade like it is today. The same thing. Somewhere I came across a picture that must have been about 1957 of myself and a neighbor dressed up for it. He lived at the corner by the beach parking lot in a house called Checkpoint. He was later killed in a car accident when he was fifteen or seventeen.
- Q: So, you spent the '60s here in the summer?
- A: '50s, '60s, '70s.
- Q: Did you have friends here?
- A: Some of my friends are still here. The house next door to us on Surfside was rented in the summertime. If you're a Red Sox fan, this makes an even more sensory impact. We were probably ten or eleven years old standing on the roof deck. Chances are it was Bill Carpenter and myself and one or two other people. In the neighboring house, it had reached capacity to overflow—
- Q: The rental?
- A: The rental. The son our age was sleeping in the station wagon in the driveway. We were taunting him from next door, "Come on out. We're out here. We know you're in there. Come on out." Finally, he opened the door and briefly jumped out of the car, and started running over. We started laughing so hard, he turned around and went back. He was in his yellow seersucker shorty pajamas. I hadn't thought of that until recently. Red Sox fans would know him as the interim manager, Bobby Valentine. There was a rumor that he had been injured in a diving accident and permanently disabled, which was obviously false. He played for the Mets and I think the Dodgers. I'm not sure.
- Q: What did you do with that group of friends in the '60s and '70s?

- A: There wasn't a lot to do in Quonochontaug ever. When we were younger, say in the '50s, we would haunt the vacant Seabreeze Inn. That was a great haunted house, and strictly off-limits, which made it that much more appealing.
- Q: Was the casino still around?
- A: Yes. Later on, in the early '60s, the casino was here, which had been a former bowling alley and had now degraded into a little lunch counter. I think it was frozen ice cream.
- Q: No more bowling alley?
- A: The bowling alley was there, but it had sagged and settled and wasn't operational in our time. There was a luncheonette counter and a series of pinball machines. It was big doings to ride our bicycles over the West Beach. Most of the pinball machines were 5 cents. A dollar would go a long way.
- Q: Did you have summer jobs around here?
- A: I never did. Some odd jobs maybe. Bill Carpenter set me up with a job that he was working on, which was picking crabgrass out of a front lawn. I had no idea what crabgrass was, but I was on my hands and knees. I wasn't asked to come back after my performance.
- Q: What about the ocean and the ponds? Did you take advantage of that?
- A: That was an everyday thing to the point that it was taken for granted by and large. We did a lot of water skiing when we could afford 6 gallons of gas.
- Q: Did you have a boat?
- A: A friend did. So, five or six of us would get into an overloaded boat that was underpowered and try to water ski in the pond. That took up our afternoons.
- Q: I remember hearing that you were involved in music.
- A: We had a garage band—a rock-and-roll cover band.
- Q: Who was in the band?
- A: Myself, Chris O'Brien, Peg O'Brien's eldest son, Bill Carpenter and Ira Anders. Ira is not here. Chris comes and rents in summertime. Bill is here.
- Q: Did you have a name to the band?
- A: Bill named it the Tide Runners. We spent a lot of afternoons practicing.

Q: What did you play?

A: I played the drums. We had the equipment set up in my living room at one point, and one of the neighbors came over to complain about the noise. I thought my father answered the question pretty well. He said, "I know. It's tough to listen to, but wouldn't you rather know where all these guys were?"

Q: Did you have gigs? Where did you play?

A: We were signed up to do a battle of the bands at some fair or something. I couldn't even tell you where it was. It was somewhere on the other side of Route 1. David Fisher, who was the son of Brad Fisher, the local carpenter and handyman, fancied himself quite a disc jockey. He was instrumental in setting us up for that fall.

Q: Were you competing against other local bands?

A: We were competing against some local band that had a higher skill level and a much bigger following locally. We were lucky to escape with our equipment. We did play at the Weekapaug Yacht Club.

Q: When was that?

A: That was about 1964 or '65. They had a yacht club ball at the end of each sailing period—one in July and one in August. We were the guest entertainment one year.

Q: What kind of music did you play?

A: We probably played some Beach Boys. We played some Beatles.

Q: When was the last time you played?

A: There was quite a gap. The last time I played might have been three or four years ago after a 30- or 40-year hiatus. I haven't been asked to do that again.

Q: Was that local in Quonnie?

A: Yes. Right here in this room before we owned this house. That's a funny story. As kids we played in the Seabreeze Inn, which stood right next door from my son's house.

Q: Was that when it was still in service?

A: It had been out of service, but a band played in it. The property was for sale for a number of years. I said to Marilyn, "We really should buy that. We're making a mistake not buying that property." She disagreed with me and we didn't. But here we are now in 2019, and we own the other side of the property where the dance hall is.

- Q: So, someone else bought the Seabreeze Inn and had it torn down?
- A: No. It just sort of went fallow. It was torn down and demolished or burned. By then, the property sat vacant for years and years. And then it was on the market for a number of years. It was bought by a developer. He built the house next door and renovated the dance hall, and built this house, which is the back house, and subdivided the property. We wound up buying it from him.
- Q: Now you own the dance hall.
- A: Yes.
- Q: Do you remember the dance hall when you were growing up? Tell me about what that was like.
- A: A lot of people do. There were dances in my time, but I never attended any of them.
- Q: So, your band wasn't asked to play in the dance hall?
- A: No. For the most part, it was boarded up and overgrown and abandoned. They did have a tag sale when the property was put on the market. There were some interesting artifacts in there. There was a chalkboard from the last event. It was either a birthday party or an anniversary for the Frosts. It still had some chalk inscription on it from twenty or thirty years prior.
- Q: Do you have that now?
- A: I don't. One of the Frosts bought it, or it was gifted at the tag sale. I do recall that in the early '50s there was an auction of contents from the Seabreeze Inn—brass and iron beds and the like. So, I imagine there are still a number of houses around here sporting artifacts from there.
- Q: How do you feel about being a custodian of the dance hall? Do you feel like you have a certain obligation?
- A: Yes. I guess I do feel an obligation there. I guess I've got a pretty strong sense of obligation or commitment to the community. We had purchased some land on West Beach Road from Tom and Jack Frost when the disposition of the Surfside house was up in the air. We bought the last three lots in the Central Beach subdivision. We bought that kind of as a hedge and sold it once other things clarified. But I guess I have a pretty good sense of obligation or historic commitment here. We've got a number of artifacts from the dance hall, and photos of the Nurmi's, Otto and Mimi, who were the owner/operators of the inn.
- Q: Why did you decide that this is where you wanted to retire?

- A: It really wasn't a decision. It was kind of a foregone conclusion.
- Q: Did you always know that?
- A: I always felt that. My family had no particular interest in the house here. I would hitch a ride before I could drive to get here. I just couldn't get enough of it. My kids are the same way. They both went away to boarding school and then college. The friendships and bonds that they made here were their longest-standing relationships.
- Q: And still today?
- A: To this day. They're friends with the offspring of friends of mine. They each have children of their own now. It's generational.
- Q: You were here during Sandy, right? Were you living here full time at that point?
- A: Yes, we were. That was quite a threat. It was forecasted to last about 36 hours, and fortunately, it didn't. But at high tide, it was sunset and the water was coming over the bluffs in front. I did get some pictures of that. It got dark, and there was no power, so I couldn't see until the next day what was really going on. I went upstairs and went to sleep. Marilyn took the cat and went back to the O'Brien's house to ride out the storm.
- Q: The most damage was on Surfside.
- A: It was.
- Q: I remember trying to come down here the next morning, and you couldn't get a car on Surfside.
- A: It was pretty much isolated to Surfside. We were quite fortunate. We didn't have any damage. We had water through the garage and in the basement, but that was the extent of it. That makes me appreciate where we are now on higher ground. I used to think that I wouldn't be as attracted to this place if I couldn't see the ocean from my bedroom. I used to spout that all the time. But I'm just as happy or happier here at this point.
- Q: Less things to worry about, right?
- A: Yes. A little more privacy and a little more security or peace of mind.
- Q: I've only been here since 1999. But in the last twenty years, the landscape has changed so much. I can't imagine thinking about it from the 1950s and '60s how much it has changed. Even when I came, I would say the vast majority of homes were still little cottages, and that was in 1999. Now one by one it's a completely different look.
- A: Yes. I used to think back when, twenty years would pass and nobody would paint their house, much less demolish it and start over. I don't know what year it was, whether it

was in the '80s perhaps when the Petes bought their house, which is on the corner of Surfside on the ocean side, sitting in my front yard at Surfside with Bill Carpenter and laughing and saying, "Can you imagine someone paid \$150,000 for that house?" Real estate has really changed. There are a lot of people here that are resistant to the change. I have witnessed it, but see it as an evolution. You can never return, or you can't go back.

Q: What is it that makes it so special for you?

A: A certain percentage of it is nostalgia, I'm sure, and kind of a coming-of-age thoughts and memories. But it's still a community. It's nice to pretty much know everybody and have them know you. Sometimes it gets a little too close. It's an interesting dynamic and an interesting combination of backgrounds and skillsets.

Q: It's just a beautiful place to live. I have to keep reminding myself that this is where I live. This is not just vacation.

A: When we moved here, that was a hard transition to transition from vacation to residence. The expectation was to be partying and playing and on recreation 365 days of the year. That was an adjustment.

Q: What about restaurants. From the time I've been here, restaurants have come and gone. In the '50s and '60s, were there restaurants that you could go to, or did you mostly eat at home?

A: There was the Wilcox Tavern, but that always struck us as being kind of dusty and musty. It had its ups and downs. The Shelter Harbor for a time was pretty predictable and consistent. From there, I don't know that there were that many other options.

Q: There weren't fast-food options.

A: There were if you were to venture into Westerly. Those were the big employment opportunities for teenagers back in the day.

Q: You probably got to know a lot of people on a temporary basis who came here to work.

A: You'd get to know people that came and rented. There were lots of serial renters that kind of fit into the group. Although it was a pretty tough group to break into, if you will. It helped if you were an attractive young female. That would open the door.

Q: Did you use the grange for anything in the '60s?

A: I didn't, and I don't recall that it was. A lot of people referred to the dance hall as the grange. It was boarded up. But I have mentioned that we own the property, and people familiar with Central Beach would say, "The Grange." It's a misnomer.

Q: You've had four generations of your family.

- A: Yes.
- Q: Your grandmother, your parents, you and now you have a young—there's five.
- A: Yes. Now there are five. We're getting to be natives.
- Q: Is there anything that stands out when you think about all of the years that you've spend here?
- A: Probably nothing I'd want on tape. There are a lot of fond memories. It's interesting to be able to share those with people that were making them because there are a lot of people still here.
- Q: Do you get together often?
- A: In the summertime, we're more apt to see each other. But it's kind of hit or miss. I guess the expectation is that either one of us will still be here because we always have been.
- Q: A lot of people still just want to be here in the summer. How do you feel about being here in the winter?
- A: I guess I'm getting to be old and crotchety. I look forward to Labor Day when everyone else has gone home.
- Q: I used to say that to my neighbors who would complain during the summer with all the activity. But it's really like living in two separate communities, but you don't have to move.
- A: Absolutely.
- Q: On Labor Day, it's like they're gone.
- A: The switch gets turned on Memorial Day and off on Labor Day. When we were living on Surfside, the first couple of winters, my wife would describe them as bleak and blustery. I thought it was great, peaceful, and serene. It was just us and the street light.
- Q: How about the animals? We see deer and coyotes and turkeys. Was that always true in the '50s and '60s?
- A: I don't think I was really paying attention. I was more focused on me and the party that was going on. On Surfside, when we were first there, the animal population was surprising. We had red fox up on our back deck. We put Christmas lights on our shrub one year, and the first night I turned them on I looked out and there was a fox examining the change. We had our share of deer.

Q: I haven't seen a fox in a long time.

A: I was told that some sort of blight got them—mange or something like that. It wouldn't surprise me if it was the coyotes. I see some very well-fed coyotes trotting around.

Q: I hear that you take care of the feral cats. How did you get involved in that?

A: That's getting out of hand.

Q: How many do you have right now?

A: Right now, there are six. There's a family of five, and there is an independent guy. But it all started ten years ago when a black tomcat showed up at our back door.

Q: Was this on Surfside?

A: On Surfside.

Q: Did they follow you here?

A: Yes. They have a sense for food. The tomcat had one ear and was pretty beaten up. It was awfully cold out, so I started feeding him. They haven't stopped coming since.

Q: It's amazing with the coyotes.

A: They're pretty agile, I guess. I'm afraid that I've detuned a couple of the latest kittens here that are a little too comfortable getting three meals a day and living in a heated little shelter. I guess once you start feeding them, you can't stop.

Q: Is there anything else that you can think of when you think about your years in Quonnie?

A: I don't stop to think that often because it has just been a continuum.

Q: Where did you go to the movies then?

A: There was a drive-in theater.

Q: Where was that?

A: Down where the Shelter Harbor Gold Course is. It doesn't seem to be the case so much anymore, but it seemed to be very foggy most nights in those days. Rather than a rain check, they would issue a fog check.

Q: There is a drive-in movie left in Misquamicut.

A: Is there?

Q: Yes. Someone pointed that out to me last year. I had passed it 1,000 times and never realized that it's right on Atlantic Avenue.

A: We snuck into the trunk of cars and this and that.

Q: We were debating why that was. I don't know if it was true, but you paid by the car.

A: They didn't always have that. As a matter of fact, we tried to walk in and sneak in one night, and that was pretty unsuccessful. We ended up chased down into a ravine that was a trash dump and finally climbed out on the other side. We were trying to get away from a dog. We came up the hill right opposite the ticket booth. I don't know what it cost per person. Not very much. I think it was more the thought of getting over to—it's exciting. Do you recall one year, and it must have been in the late '60s, that it rained virtually every day? We finally said, "Let's go into town," and we went into the movie theater. I think it's the United Movie Theater. We stayed to watch the feature twice. We were there all day. We opened the door to come out, and the sun was out. We missed what was probably one of two sunny days that summer.

Q: Was Westerly a big part of your life? Or was your life contained here?

A: For me, things were pretty much contained here, unless you needed something.

Q: Certainly, until you got a car.

A: Even to this day, I don't know my way around on the other side of Route 1. This was the destination. As long as you knew where the package store was and the grocery store and maybe a gas station, that was it. There was no reason to venture out. There were certainly some fun times. I guess what's nice is that for all it has changed, it still has the fundamental appeals that are enough for my kids to be attracted to, and hopefully their kids too. It's a pretty special slice of the universe here. It was a great place for my kids to grow up. It was safe and self-contained. You pretty much knew where to find them. They grew up with a great group of kids too. It just keeps on recycling. I'm probably not too illuminating, but it's just sort of matter of fact to me.