

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

PIETER W. SCHIPPER

12 Neptune Avenue
Central Beach, Quonochontaug, R.I.

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Interviewer: Anne Doyle

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DOYLE: An interview with Pieter Schipper in his home, called “The Point of Return”

The first thing I’d like you to do, Pete, is just state your full name and the year that you were born.

SCHIPPER: My name is – ‘cause I was born in Holland, at the ocean, in a little fisher village—and my full name is Pieter Walter Schipper. I was born on August 8, 1907. Well, I –

DOYLE: That’s all right; go ahead and –

SCHIPPER: I worked at Pratt & Whitney Aircraft in East Hartford, and I looked for a good beach, because I was born on a beach. And I wanted to – you know, I love the ocean. And looked at the Connecticut beaches, and they were not what I was looking for. So I asked somebody that I did business with— it was Dave Waitt. And I asked Dave Waitt, “Where is here a good beach?” And he said, “In Quonochontaug.” And I said, “Quonochontaug – I never heard of anything like that.” So he explained to me how they go – how to get to Quonochontaug. Now this was in 1942, in the middle of the War. And Lena and I, we gave our children away. We had three children; we distributed them among friends. We lived in Manchester, Connecticut, and we took a bus, two buses, to go to Westerly. We rented a cottage, and then we took a cab to the cottage we had rented. Now in those days we had no idea what West Beach Road looked like. Maybe you do, but it was a single track, just gravel.

DOYLE: This was in ‘42?

SCHIPPER: In ‘42. The trees and shrubs hung over the road; I don’t know how you could pass anybody. But luckily we didn’t pass anybody. And the reason

we had to take buses and cabs was gas rationing, and I had no way of getting all the way to Quonnie on my ration. Now, the funny thing about it was – of course we checked with Thorpe about this – they came to the house—the guy that sold fish, there was somebody that brought milk and bread; and there was another truck with vegetables. So for two weeks we were taken care of.

DOYLE: You didn't have your children with you?

SCHIPPER: No, no, no. We left those in Manchester--

DOYLE: Oh.

SCHIPPER: Because we had no idea what we were up against, see. And there was hardly anybody on the beach; you can imagine that in those days. And then the next year, I told the kids, "Now we've got to go on seeing America." But we voted on where we would go—in my house we always voted Indian fashion, the youngest one first. But by the time the three kids had voted, it was Quonnie! See, and we have been to Quonnie every year! Kersti was three years old; I threw her in the water when she was two to baptize her! And in fact now that she is expecting, she told me. "Grandfather, or Schipper (she always calls me Schipper) I'll take the kid to Quonnie as soon as possible, and you have to baptize it too, like you did me."

And so we were completely enamored by Quonnie. Then we decided – I decided in '51 to build a cottage. Or rather, Lena decided! We had no money and my salary at Pratt and Whitney was very, very--I think I got – uh-\$35 a week. And that wasn't much, you know. I started at Pratt & Whitney at forty cents an hour, so I'd come up quite considerably. But anyhow, we lived in a rental home; and to build a cottage, to me was absolutely ridiculous. But she insisted on it, and it was the best thing we ever did. I didn't realize it at the time, but I borrowed some money against my life insurance and had them build the cottage—at least the shell, because I did all the finishing myself, on subsequent vacations. I'd never done that. So I bought a rake and I bought a router, actually. I didn't even know what a router was, but—so I worked my head off for three years—

DOYLE: How did you live here and then build at the same time? Were you renting for a while and then you would come over?

SCHIPPER: No, as soon as the shell was up, we lived in it. See there was nothing in it, no partitions; the kids loved it. We had a wonderful time. The problem was that I worked at Pratt & Whitney and I was living in the tight. So Lena used to call for me in the car. And as soon as I had my two weeks vacation, I took a plane down and started building. I'd build from six o'clock in the morning until nine o'clock at night.

DOYLE: I never knew that you built your house!

SCHIPPER: Oh yes! All the woodwork, except for the floor, I did myself.

DOYLE: Now do I have a memory of you being, though, in Ho Home or some other cottage – weren't you with the kids –?

SCHIPPER: No; Yeah—we lived in all kinds of cottages I don't remember anymore— but we were in Ho Home.

DOYLE: Oh you were; that's what I remember.

SCHIPPER: Yeah; I remember that. The kids sleeping up in the attic; it got kind of warm.

DOYLE: So you did rent for a couple of years –

SCHIPPER: Oh yes, --until '51; we rented for nine years--

DOYLE: Oh, I see. For nine years-

SCHIPPER: From 1942 to '51. So -- Well, that was the way we started.

DOYLE: Oh, OK. Now, I'd just like to ask you, Pete, about your involvement in Quonnie and all the different committees, and some of the projects that you've been involved with.

SCHIPPER: It's basically –of course they started with the beach. They put me in charge of the beach. And I knew, just like Stu Pomeroy knew: don't build a steep wall. The fact that the ocean doesn't stand it. And here is a sample of a difficult Dutch sea dyke, close to where I lived. The dunes were interrupted. And that's the profile that I can follow. See, here: that is paved, and the waves run up there and run back. They cannot attack it.

DOYLE: I see what you --

SCHIPPER: See if you make it steep, the ocean destroys anything if you make it steep. But this it cannot handle; see it loses its energy running up the slow slope. Look at the slope.

DOYLE: Now did you um work with Stu on this?

SCHIPPER: No no no. Stu never did anything because I was the only one

DOYLE: So you researched this.

SCHIPPER: Oh well yes, but of course I knew; that was the kind of thing I knew. And then what you want to remember, and what people objected to, and I got a lot of criticism after I did it –I don't want to tell you the words that people used for me, but they were not very complimentary –See, I cut the parking

lot in half. The parking lot went all the way to this wall. And there was about a two-foot – and people felt good about that.

DOYLE: Yes, I remember.

SCHIPPER: They said if you paved the parking lot down, like you want to do, the ocean will run into the pond and that will destroy the water supply. Well, I'd gone to the University, URI, and talked to the people there that knew, and they checked and said, "Look your water comes from wells, comes not from the pond. So even if salt water runs into it, forget about it." In fact salt water ran into it almost every year. Because east of the parking lot, before I put my snow fence in, and the dunes built up, there was a low spot there. And in a storm, the water ran right into the pond. Practically every year. So we always got salt water in it, and it never fouled our drinking water. So that was a lot of nonsense.

Well, then what they did, subsequently, I designed a boardwalk and put that in and put the *rosa rugosa* around the boardwalk because I wanted people to stay on the boardwalk and not walk through the beach grass. And every year except the last two years, I planted between one or two hundred plugs of beach grass in the bare spots. Now it is completely covered. But there are all kinds of spots. And once the ocean has a piece of sand, in a storm it blows everything out, you know. It keeps digging it out and destroying the beach grass. So now we are stabilized.

DOYLE: Are we going to have to be vigilant about watching to see what happens?

SCHIPPER: Yes. Although it's pretty well stabilized. And of course as long as I'm around, I'll watch it. Now the only problem we have with the snow fence of course is that the kids use it for their fires. Now you're not allowed to have fires in Charlestown. But we always felt it was much better if they had their beach fires and they stayed on our beach. Then they don't go to a place like Misquamicut where they get into trouble with drugs and drinking. But we have always trouble with it –it's easier for them apparently to break down the snow fence instead of to look for driftwood.

DOYLE: So what I'm hearing is that once Stu Pomeroy made this proposal, then they put you in charge of –

SCHIPPER: Yeah. Yeah, because I'm the one that lived here, see. That is an advantage.

DOYLE: When did you start living here year-round?

SCHIPPER: When I retired, in – let me see now – 1972.

DOYLE: Oh, so you were here year-round –

SCHIPPER: I was here, see, so that was an advantage I had. They had to have somebody who was here the year round. So --

DOYLE: Did you bring in other people who knew about the plants and -

SCHIPPER: No; I knew about that. I knew about beach grass, the same as you have in Holland. You know; it's tough, it's the same material. What we did one year, which was interesting, we thought --after a Saturday ball game, we got a lot of kids to see whether they could repair the snow fence. I had the material. Because we thought that if they did the work, they'd be a little bit more --

DOYLE: Wonderful!

SCHIPPER: And these are the pictures of the kids doing the snow fence!

DOYLE: What did they do?

SCHIPPER: Well, they put new slats in, new sections. I had the material for them. And they did that.

DOYLE: I see! And when was this done? After '77 was it?

SCHIPPER: No; what happened then: I ran into Jim Coogan after they'd done it, after they'd repaired the fence; and they asked me to give a little talk because the kids couldn't understand why we needed a snow fence. Well it isn't really a snow fence, it's a sand fence. And I gave a talk to them, see, to explain to them why you had to do this. And why the dunes are important, because they feed the beach. And so without dunes you don't have a beach. But Jim Coogan, he heard me say that, that story to the kids. And I didn't know him, and he didn't know me. And he introduced himself and said to me, "Look, why don't you write that up and I'll duplicate it and I'll see that every cottage gets it." And that's what they did.

DOYLE: Oh, I see.

SCHIPPER: You can have that.

DOYLE: Oh, thank you.

SCHIPPER: I want it back, because it's the only copy I have left. So we did that. And that's about all I have to say about the snow fence and the beach.

DOYLE: How long did it take you --once you decided that this was going to be done, and the removal of the stones, how long did that take?

SCHIPPER: Took a year. Because you had to work with Coastal Resources who are very, very difficult about a thing like that. And the Corps of Engineers, believe it or not, because I was not allowed. They say you can't use anything that touches the mean high-water mark, because that may change

the navigation in the ocean-- which of course is absolute nonsense. Moving a few rocks on the beach -- how could it possibly affect the navigation in the Sound? But that's the way they were.

DOYLE: In terms of, you mean, removal of those rocks.

SCHIPPER: Yeah; even removal.

DOYLE: Because if they were artificially put there –

SCHIPPER: Yeah; you'd think you could just move them too. But no, I had quite a time with the Corps of Engineers. It took me over a year to get the permission xxxx here.

DOYLE: I see.

SCHIPPER: And when I got permission, there were a few stipulations; one is a silly one: that we have to repair the boardwalk and have a boardwalk for fifty years. Otherwise, the permission is voided again. Silly things like that.

DOYLE: Yeah, yeah.

SCHIPPER: But that's the way they are. And I was not allowed to extend the parking lot in the pond because, they said, that will influence the fish in the pond. Which of course is nonsense, because these rocks that we have are the same rocks that are in the pond. You know there are thousands of rocks in the pond. So for me to dump a few more rocks in the pond to widen the parking lot in that direction—I was not allowed to.

DOYLE: So you couldn't do that.

SCHIPPER: No. So that's why we xxxxx and we ended up with half the parking lot. But we told people—I had this slogan: I said, "Look, why do you come to Quonnie? For a beautiful parking lot or the beach?" And they all admitted that they come for the beach. So we put bicycle racks in and said, "Look; let the people who have little children use their cars, but everybody else capable should be walk or bike." And, that's what we have now.

DOYLE: But now people don't even question it, I don't think.

SCHIPPER: Oh no; they don't; now I'm popular. Everybody knows me.

DOYLE: Everybody loves you!

SCHIPPER: Yeah, now. But it wasn't in the beginning!

DOYLE: Well that's what change does.

SCHIPPER: We had results see, because the next year, this was the beach. And don't forget, I did a lot of praying during that year, that we could go out, that the beach would be [better] next year.

DOYLE: And isn't that beautiful.

SCHIPPER: It isn't back where it was.

DOYLE: Yeah, and what a difference.

SCHIPPER: Well, that's the difference.

DOYLE: This must have made you – I mean the contribution to Quonnie has been phenomenal, when you change something like that.

SCHIPPER: There was nothing to it. I let the ocean do it. As I say, you have to understand the ocean and play WITH it. You cannot fight the ocean. That I know. That's ingrained in me, being a Dutchman. You know, they've been fighting the ocean for thousands of years.

DOYLE: Do you think that where there are other rocks along the coastline there that eventually they'll be –

SCHIPPER: Oh yes; those houses we have there now they'll have to fight the ocean forever. And one day, in a good storm, they'll go, because –

DOYLE: Yeah; just right along Surfside there –

SCHIPPER: Yeah; it'll go. There's no way to stop it.

DOYLE: Inevitable.

SCHIPPER: Inevitable. I always tell people, when I gave talks, I said "Look; when I'm gone be sure you never put a rock wall in. I can guarantee you a beach – but not where you want it." See, because people don't realize how much erosion there is. If you look in front of these houses and rocks, the rest of our beach, you can see there is one pyramid rock; the tallest rock is like a pyramid. When you go to the beach, watch it. When we came here in '42, the only rock you could see is a little top of that rock. The rest-- we didn't have more rocks then. But we lost –And the thing does go back. See, people have no point of reference. I'll give you my example: my boardwalk consisted of nine sections of ten feet. And now we start at the same spot, at the beginning, where the rocks are along the road; you know I put the rocks along the road to keep the beach buggies off the grass, because they kill it. Beach grass is not like ordinary grass; you walk on it you kill it. I had nine sections out, and that was about – that was where the snow fence was. Well, one year, about four years ago, we lost twenty feet of beach, including the snow fence. So that now I can only put seven sections out. But nobody knows that, see. I had a reference point. The people said, "Well, we had a good winter, didn't we." I used to say, "Yes,

but we lost twenty feet.” Ah, they said, “You’re joking.” I said “No,” because I have a fixed reference point.

DOYLE: But that doesn’t vary from year to year.

SCHIPPER: No, but that one year we lost twenty feet. Just like that rock there, in the fifty years that I’ve been here. All those rocks have been exposed that used to be completely under the sand. So we go – you know, the ocean level is rising. And that means, because of the slope of the beach, if it rises three inches, it goes in thirty feet horizontally. And that’s why a little rise in the ocean --people said oh what’s that. That translates, horizontally, in quite a distance. And so I say, again, we’ll always have a beach, if you don’t insist on having it here, where it is now. That you cannot [have].

DOYLE: Eventually, the dunes will be pushed even further back.

SCHIPPER: Oh yes; another forty years they’ll be way back. Sure, sure. But we have of course some natural protection in these rocks that are there on either side of our beach. That’s why we have to xxx up to a point.

DOYLE: Maybe it’s a slower process because of that?

SCHIPPER: Yes, definitely. It does help us.

DOYLE: Now, is it the same –have you noticed, even further up on the beaches, that the beach is also being eroded – East Beach and up in there--

SCHIPPER: Oh yes. Sure; the beach goes back.

DOYLE: Well thank you for telling us about all that.

SCHIPPER: That’s about it?

DOYLE: Well there’s another thing I want you to try –if you don’t mind describing to me. When I was little, I remember you taking us across the breachway.

SCHIPPER: [Laughing] Yeah.

DOYLE: Would you mind just talking a little bit about that whole process?

SCHIPPER: Well, of course, the breachway was very shallow. And in the breachway, in the Pond, we had a lot of oysters. And we had a lot of quahogs. I could go in there, and in no time flat used to get a bucketful of quahogs. But then the Corps of Engineers, under pressure from the boat people on Quonnie Pond, who could only get out into the ocean at high tide, they decided to deepen up the breachway. Well the result of that is – you can see it in the Pond now— ‘cause now you can’t walk through it anymore like I used to do with the kids—

DOYLE: Yeah – that’s what I want you to talk about –

SCHIPPER: Oh we used to go – I used to carry you guys across, and we had a lovely time. I once camped over there with Pete for three days; we didn't see anybody. That was the end of the world. People didn't come in from the rest, and there were no beach buggies. There was no road behind them – nothing behind the dunes. So once you went there, you were by yourself –

DOYLE: Didn't we have to wait until the next low tide though, to come across? Did you always --

SCHIPPER: No; no. I could go very easily across on the high tide.

DOYLE: And the current wasn't --?

SCHIPPER: No; there was hardly any current. See, because now there is a tremendous current. The first thing that was done, south of the Pond, killed the oysters. Oysters cannot propagate in salt water. They can live in salt water, but they got to propagate in – in between, you know.

SCHIPPER: No; they can't propagate in salt water. Then because of this current – you can see it now – the Pond is sanding in.

DOYLE: Yes.

SCHIPPER: That is because of the current, that brings the sand in. Before, the current was so weak that it couldn't carry the sand in all the way. But now the current can go all the way in –

DOYLE: And they have also, artificially, changed the breachway. Back before the Hurricane, the big Hurricane, it was different. The whole picture, the whole thing was different.

SCHIPPER: Sure. Oh yes, sure; the whole thing was different. So it means that every time man does something, generally in good faith, something happens that they didn't foresee. So see, they ruined the oysters and they are sanding up the Pond.

DOYLE: Yeah.

SCHIPPER: More sand has come in since they did that than in the last ten thousand years.

DOYLE: Did you hear they are now talking about dredging that and getting that sand out of there now? That's what they're talking about.

SCHIPPER: But the trouble is, see, once you start with a process like that, against Nature, you've got to keep doing it and you've got to keep spending money.

DOYLE: Yeah.

SCHIPPER: It's the same in Charlestown Pond. That thing is sanding up. They cleaned it, but they have the same problem we have. You can hardly get out there anymore, at times.

DOYLE: When you were down here with your family, did you have any other places around the area that you used to travel to? I mean did you go ... up to Point Judith or down to Watch Hill?

SCHIPPER: A little bit. The kids were so annoyed you couldn't get them to go anywhere, you know. That was hard.

DOYLE: So your main —everything was done here.

SCHIPPER: That's the same with the grandchildren, you know. They come all the way from Paris to spend a few weeks here at the beach. They say "There's nothing like Quonnie."

DOYLE: Yeah.

SCHIPPER: If you talk to, especially Laurent and Natasha. [But] Nicolas is not that keen on — was never that keen on the beach—he's a soccer player and was much more interested in that than swimming. But the other two, they say Quonnie is just the --it's Paradise to them.

DOYLE: Oh it is! I can understand that.

SCHIPPER: [Abrupt Change of Topic] beach. I can give you a few sketches of Grant Sclater.

DOYLE: Oh, you knew him?

SCHIPPER: Oh, my God, I knew him well. I'll tell you two stories

DOYLE: All right; tell me —

SCHIPPER: I'll tell you two stories about Grant Sclater that I think are absolutely unbelievable. You know, he was very tall; I'm six feet two and shrinking a bit now. He was taller than I was, and always immaculately dressed. He was definitely the best dressed man in Quonnie. Well, one day, Kersti and he —who were both—Denis studied at MIT and Kersti was in Harvard — When they decided to go to France, unbeknownst to me, they brought a lot of their stuff down and put it [in] the attic here. That was in November one year. Well, Grant Sclater saw this U-Haul in front of my house, and he said, "Burglars!" So he came out with a hotgun!

DOYLE: [Gaspings]

SCHIPPER: And Kers had quite a time convincing him that she was my daughter and that she was bringing a lot of stuff in and not taking stuff out.

DOYLE: [Laughing] That's a wonderful story!

SCHIPPER: And another story that I like: I can't remember who he worked for, but when I tell you the story, you may come up with the name. He was caught, somewhere in South Carolina, you know in a little hick town full of souvenirs for tourists. He went there for lunch, and when he came back, there was a cop giving him a ticket, for 25 bucks. And he said, "That's ridiculous; everybody parks here. There's nothing about a no parking sign." But of course he had an out-of-state license, and that's what they do.

So, he said, "I want to talk to the —who's your boss?" And he said, "Well, he's right here." And he went there, and the cop, the top dog, said, "No sir; the law's the law; and we can't make any exceptions." Grant said, "I want to talk to the mayor." So they told him where the mayor was—lived right next door, practically.

So he saw the mayor. And the mayor said, "No sir; there is nothing I can do about it; you've paid your fine and that's it." So Grant said, "You know, I have a friend; his name is Billy." And he works for (and that is what I can't think of — the map makers, in America; they used to make all the maps) But anyhow, he said, "When I go home, I'm going to take Billy out for dinner. And I'll give him a few drinks.

And you know what Billy does, "he said, " He makes all —if you go to his office, on the wall is a huge map of America. And he puts in all the new roads. And all the maps in all the gas stations are copies of this map that Billy makes. And when I go to Billy—and he'll do this for me, because he's a good friend of mine—I'll tell him: "Take this route #634 that your xxx is on and take it off the map." And nobody will come here, because they look at the map and you don't exist anymore." And the mayor says, "Wait sir, wait sir." He went [out] and he came back with twenty-five bucks, and he gave Grant his twenty-five bucks ! And I can't think of the name of the map-makers.

DOYLE: [Laughing hard] That's good! , See I didn't know Mr. Sclater very well.

SCHIPPER: Oh God, he was a character; he was a real character. I think that's such a funny story. And only Sclater would think of that, see.

DOYLE: Yeah.

SCHIPPER: [Laughing] The whole thing wasn't -- It was probably true that this guy existed, because he worked for the same outfit. So that part of it is true. But that Billy would have done that is something else!

DOYLE: Something else—yeah!

END OF RECORDING

