

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

RICHARD THOMSEN

AUGUST 8, 2019

Interviewed by Leah Bradshaw in Charlestown

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Q: This is August 8th, 2019. This is Leah Bradshaw and Richard Thomsen in Quonochontaug at 283 West Beach Road, Charlestown. We're talking about Rich's time here and his family's time here. Rich, when did you first come to Quonnie?

A: I would say probably the month after I was born. I recall as a kid, from the time I started going to school, from the day school went out to the day before school started, we were here for the summer. My father would come down on weekends. But we would be here for the summer.

Q: Where was your other home?

A: West Hartford, Connecticut. The house that I just recently sold, I was the third generation.

Q: When did your family arrive in Quonnie?

A: My mother grew up down here. I don't know my grandmother built Redwing. But my mother grew up down here.

Q: From the time she was a child?

A: Yes.

Q: Where was Redwing located?

A: Right across from the hotel on West Beach Road.

Q: The Seabreeze Inn?

A: The Seabreeze Inn. Until we divided it and sold it half and half, it was the largest lot on Central Beach.

Q: Did it have one house on it, or more?

A: One house.

Q: Now how many houses?

A: First we sold my grandmother's house without the lot. That has been added onto, but it's still only one house. The basic design of it has still been kept to this day, which is kind of cool.

Q: Is that the old farmhouse?

A: No. It's not a farmhouse. I wish I could remember the designer's name, but it was a well-known designer that designed that house.

Q: So, the house still stands?

A: The house still stands. It's had some renovations done to it. I think it's on the third owner now since we sold it. But my grandmother built it.

Q: What was the address?

A: I want to say 504 West Beach Road. It's right next to Jack Frost's house.

Q: So, if you're facing Jack Frost's house—

A: It's to the right side. The other half of the lot is what we sold to—he was in real estate.

Q: McAndrew?

A: No. He passed away about four years ago. Now the new people have that house.

Q: Tom Dupatty?

A: Tom Dupatty. He sold it to Tom Dupatty. Ironically the lot sold for more than the other lot and the house four years after.

Q: After Redwing, what was the next property acquired by your family?

A: My great aunt and my great grandmother, who died in the '38 hurricane, she was on what is now Seabreeze where Steve Pete's smaller house is. That was Cedar Haven.

Q: And the other one was Morris Point?

A: She bought the Morris Point right after the '38 hurricane. You told me your family saw her and her nurse walking trying to get away a wave.

Q: My mother did. What was your great grandmother's name?

A: It was a Crepo. I don't know what her first name was. It was kind of a weird name.

Q: What was your great aunt's name?

A: Which great aunt? I had three great aunts. I had Lucille, who she and my great uncle Stanley Griffin built the house we're in right now, which went through three different stages. Originally it was their summer place. It had a two-car garage and a summer apartment over it. Half of this room was their summer place. When they retired—he was a physical ed teacher at East Orange High School, and she was an English teacher until she stopped teaching—this was built in the '50s—the first one. The house that my sister now owns, that my mother lived in, was built in the '70s. Then I just added on in the 2000s my wing incorporating the first part.

Q: So, the first house was not that house?

A: It was the two-car garage, and then this part of the porch was a screened-in porch. Upstairs was just four beds on either end, a galley-type kitchen in the middle and a bathroom across from the kitchen.

Q: That was your great aunt Lucille's?

A: Yes. After they retired down here, that's where we would summer up in there. Before that, we would summer at my grandmother's house.

Q: We being you and your sister and your parents?

A: Yes. My grandmother's house had three areas that you could sleep in. She had like an attic area that had some space in it. The garage was like another apartment with a little room off it. It was kind of a neat setup.

Q: That was Redwing?

A: That was Redwing.

Q: Did this house have a name?

A: This is Round Meadow. It always was. They called it Round Meadow because it was part of the farm across the street. The walls went around the whole property. In other words, it was farm land, and the farmers back in the day would move all the rocks and make walls around the perimeter of their property.

Q: Is the house where your sister is now your mother's?

A: It was my great aunt and uncle's when they retired in the '70s.

Q: But not Lucille?

A: Lucille and Stanley Griffin lived here. When we were here, I never went upstairs in that house as a child. The only place I ever really went, and the only time I ever saw a TV during the summer was if Uncle Stanley would have me in to watch a Red Socks game. But other than that, we never were in that house.

Q: You were always outside?

A: We weren't allowed in the house. It's like today when kids run ram shot and take over everything. We never had a TV in any other places that we had down here during the summer. We played cards to our riding our bikes.

Q: In the water?

A: Yes. My Great Aunt Lila, the family joked that when she got too much furniture, she'd build another house. She built Topsy. She built the one that's right next to Randy Thornton, Treasure House. There were seven houses at one time. Barnacle and Come and Go. Barnacle was the carriage house for the Morris Point house.

Q: Are you including Morris Point in this and Cedar Haven?

A: Yes. I think there were more. She owned Hobby House at one point too, which is the one that was sold to Blassens. Come and Go wasn't built until the '50s, because during the '54 hurricane that was on the wall where Steve Petes bought the lot from Blassens. It was there, and the '54 hurricane moved it back into the Blassen house, and then she moved it to where it is today.

Q: So, she still owned all that property?

A: She owned behind the Morris Point house and Barnacle. Originally when she bought that property, it was all one piece.

Q: When Lila bought it?

A: Yes.

Q: It was Morris Point, Barnacle and Come and Go was a shed?

A: Come and Go was a house that was built on the sea wall. In the '54 hurricane, it was moved back and literally went into Hobby House. She moved it back. Come and Go was

a separate lot. She put Come and Go back there. Our family always had great respect for the ocean. I think that's what saved us on Sandy is we were about the only beachfront property that had a dune in front of it at the time.

Q: Others have copied that now.

A: Steve Pete has put a lot of dune in front of both of his houses. When I rebuilt after Sandy, because Sandy literally took it down to the dirt from before the '38 hurricane, I left a path between the wall and put the dune back a little bit farther so that I could access that. It made a buffer to so that we were able to allow other people—if anybody rents Hobby House, I made a deal with Mr. Pete that they could walk down through. At least it was keeping people off the lawn of our house that was being rented. It created a buffer. That's the way it is now. Who knows what will happen to it in the future?

Q: So, Lila built Topsy, Treasure House, Barnacle, Come and Go, Hobby House. That's five. And then Cedar haven?

A: Cedar Haven was before the '38 hurricane. That's the one that my great grandmother perished in. My great aunts and grandmother, their father owned a cedar lot. That's why Cedar Haven was built with a lot of the cedar.

Q: And that house was taken away in the '38 hurricane?

A: Yes. It was destroyed in the '38 hurricane.

Q: Was Morris Point totally destroyed?

A: No, it wasn't. There are pictures that the Historical Society has. The first floor had a big hole in it—big. Lila had it dismantled after the '38 hurricane. She had no need. It was a hotel at one time. It was a huge house.

Q: So, she rebuilt a smaller house?

A: She transformed the carriage house, which was more like a barn. The first transformation was she added a garage. That garage was turned into a downstairs bedroom. Then another garage was added onto it, the way it is right now. It's a three-bedroom house with one on the first floor, which is kind of novelty around here, except for the old houses.

Q: People want to be up for the view.

A: Yes. But nowadays you have to be up for the tides.

Q: And the breakaway panels.

A: Yes.

Q: So, you had three great aunts. One was Lucille.

A: Lucille, Lila and Blanch. My grandmother was Gladys. They were all Crepos.

Q: Did Blanch have a presence here? Did she have property here?

A: I never met my Aunt Blanch. I think she had passed before I was born. I never knew that much about her.

Q: What was your grandmother's name?

A: Gladys Best Thomsen.

Q: What did your grandmother own?

A: My grandmother built Redwing at the same time that her sister built Topsy. They each had one of those lots. I think what my grandmother did is traded that lot for building the house that she wanted.

Q: What brought them to Quonnie?

A: The family was Arnold and Crepo. I've been told that I was related to Benedict Arnold. I don't know if that's good, bad or indifferent.

Q: What brought the Arnold and Crepo family here?

A: I don't really know the history behind that. That's something that might have been in my mother's history that she might have mentioned. I was lucky enough to hear some of the stories from my mother about some of the stuff that went on. I surprise my sister sometimes when I tell her things. She says, "How you do know this stuff?" I said, "Because I listened to our mother."

Q: Did you mother come here as a child?

A: Yes. She grew up down here. During the '38 hurricane, she was up in Northfield and Mount Hermon. I think that Mount Hermon was the girl's side—a boarding school in New Hampshire or Vermont. I know that some of the students up there all took shelter in the cafeteria. The big chimney was knocked in, and a few people were killed. A lot of them hid underneath the big tables.

Q: By that time, her mother and her aunts were here?

A: Yes. My grandmother was quite a unique individual. She was an artist. She raised African violets. She raised corgi dogs. At one, I believe she owned a dress store in Westerly.

Q: Was she here year-round then?

A: Yes. She was down here, as long as I remember, until towards the end of her life. She was up in West Hartford—in the Hartford area in a facility up there.

Q: What happened to these houses? Did they get sold one by one?

A: Yes. My mother was the only offspring from all four of the sisters. For that time, all four of the sisters went to Brown. For ladies at that time to go to college was something. But for four sisters to all go to—

Q: Where did your mom go?

A: Good question. Where did my mother go to college? I know she didn't go to Brown. Before she got married and had Nancy and I, she worked for G. Fox for quite a few years. One of my great aunts worked for G. Fox. That's how we got to know the Mobil Nicky family, because they worked up there.

Q: That was the premier clothing store in those days.

A: Yes. Up in Hartford. The starting of Patches, which was the Mobil Nicky's house, was the toolshed that was on Barnacle from the Morris Point house that my great aunt gave to Mr. Mobil Nicky. If he moved it, it was his. That's how he started Patches.

Q: And that was Peter's father, who was the carpenter?

A: Yes.

Q: Getting back to the Thomsen family, did it happen that one by one the properties were sold, and then your mom inherited Round Meadow?

A: My mother inherited Round Meadow, Barnacle, Come and Go. The two beach houses were always by the four sisters. As they dropped of, it ended up my mother being the only next generation. My mother first sold her mother's house to generate some funds, which was Redwing. And then a few years later she sold the other property next to it—the other half. We were lucky enough that being the fact that she was down here, she knew about the town's big coo when they were conjoining lots if it was in the same name. They had the foresight to put one in her name and one in my father's name so the town couldn't conjoin them. There were a lot of people around here that lost their multiple lots. A lot of them were really hurt, because that was their plan when they retired to be able to sell off the lots. But the town stopped it.

Q: Your mother was wise and smart.

A: We were here, too, because back in the day, all that type of stuff was always done in the winter, so the people that would be down here during the summer didn't have the same mass media and stuff, so it was all done closed doors—quietly, and then all of a sudden you come back. There was a very short time that the nonresidents had a vote on financial matters with the Town of Charlestown, but that didn't last very long. Now the majority of the people that make up the budget for the Town of Charlestown have no say in what happens.

Q: You mom worked in Hartford, and brought you and Nancy here every summer?

A: Yes. Me all the way through high school. My sister became a lifeguard at some of the town pools up in West Hartford, so she didn't come down as much. She wasn't as into it as I was.

Q: What are your earliest memories of being here?

A: Having our own little beach down where we have it—Little Beach or Nuns Beach or Big Beach. Whatever you want to call it. It has many names. Going out fishing. My Uncle Stanley had a 13-foot Whaler, like the 120th Whaler built. We'd go out fishing back then. The flat fish in this pond were phenomenal until they allowed dredging for scallops. They tore up all the eel grass, so the little flounder had no place to hide.

Q: Did they migrate?

A: They were wiped out by the birds, because that's what they used to do was hide in the eel grass so the birds wouldn't eat them.

Q: What was a typical summer like for you when you were very young?

A: I was lucky that my mother had a good friend, Peggy Race. Peggy and Danny had two adopted children. Their son was the same age as I was. Their daughter was a little bit younger. We had our one group. We spent a lot of time together. The aggravation was Jerry didn't like to wake up in the morning, so a lot of times I'd be waiting for him to wake up. Other than that, we would spend time on the beach or out on the pond. I can remember that if Jerry and I ever had a spat—they had a house on Sunset, which was their own house, and then the family divided out the Merrill cottage, which was on Surfside, so the Races would have that for the month of August and September, and the other side, which was the Merrills, would have it for June and July. They would be in their pond house for June and July, which they still have to this day, and then they would be on the ocean for August and September. If Jerry and I would ever have a spat, back in the day we'd walk down the walls, but if I was mad at him, I'd make him get off the wall when we hit Barnacle. So, he had to go down on the hot sand. Little things like that are fun to remember.

Q: Did you quahog in the pond or clam?

A: Yes. Uncle Stanley and I would go down. We would usually be down in the flats in front of the Weekapaug Inn. That's where we usually would do it. We never took the smaller clams out of the water completely, but we might transplant them down this end of the pond.

Q: So that they might migrate?

A: With a little help.

Q: Did you boat?

A: I still have my first boat. I bought a Sears Gamefisher when I was thirteen years old. I had a little 6-horse on it. We had fun. How I ever went out in the ocean as much as I did, I only had one incident, and there was no harm with that.

Q: Did you leave the boat right here?

A: Yes. This property was always the access to the pond.

Q: And Barnacle and Come and Go are the access to the ocean?

A: Yes. People like to tease me that I get the sunrises down at the beach, and then I get the sunsets here.

Q: Did you go berry picking?

A: There was a lot more stuff like that—everything from rose hips to blueberries to black raspberries and stuff like that.

Q: Did you live off the land?

A: If Uncle Stanley and I went out flat fishing, in less than a half an hour, you would be able to have dinner from fishing. Back in the day, there were a lot more fish in the pond.

Q: Was that before dredging and the creation of the new breachway?

A: No. It was after that. I don't recall not having the current breachway. That one is the third or fourth breachway technically. The first one was the hand-dug one that went out through where the houses are now on—past Ashaway Colony. The next row down.

Q: Sandpiper?

A: Sandpiper Lane. But that was a hand-dug one that the farmers would dig.

Q: I think there are markers on the road there.

A: Yes. And then there was the one that went straight out where the Coast Guard station was.

Q: Did you go blue crabbing in the pond?

A: I don't recall ever eating blue crabs. We a lot of green crabbing for bait for fishing. For quite a while, there were very few blue crabs. Now they're coming back.

Q: Did you do ocean fishing?

A: A limited amount with Uncle Stanley in the Whaler. We would go out. Sometimes we wouldn't make it out there in time, but you'd be down on the beach and you'd see the fish come in. You'd run back and try to get into the boat, and there was no guarantee they'd still be there. In the fall we did a lot of surfcasting with Uncle Stanley. He had the Land Rover, and we would go down on the beach and surf cast in September and October. Danny Race was into that too. We had fun doing that.

Q: As you became a teenager, what did you enjoy doing?

A: We would ride our bikes at night. Once we had cars, we would spend hours out together. It was a very small circle of friends. Back in the day, there was like an imaginary line. We very rarely went over to East Beach, because that was where the imaginary railroad tracks were. Most of them were from Massachusetts. This side was from Connecticut. It was kind of funny.

Q: As you grew up, did you ever have a job here? Did you decide early on that you were going to live here?

A: I always wanted to live here, but my mother always told me, "You can't afford to work and live where we are." The cost of living down here it too expensive for what you could earn. That's when I ended up working for the Town of West Hartford up where we lived. When I was working as an adult, I would spend my vacation down here. That's why I have a fleet of boats that I have today, because I never had to spend money to go on vacation. I would add to my flotilla.

Q: How many do you have now?

A: Somewhere around fifteen watercrafts. Everything from sailboards to paddle boards to kayaks to canoes.

Q: Do you paddle board?

A: I've tried it. I was a little old, and my balance wasn't as good. I have successfully at least once gone from my dock out to one of my boats without falling.

Q: You were born in '58, so that was after Hurricane Carol and the hurricane of '38. Do you remember storms here?

A: I remember sometimes that we would have to leave the area. There was one big storm that we ended up at my cousin's, who was born the same day and the same year as me. He lived up in Westerly. We had to leave this area, and we went up and stayed with him. They evacuated this area. There have been a couple of storms that this house would have to gone. With Carol the cutoff was at Sunset. We were allowed to stay here, but we were in an island, because the marsh on one side and the marsh on the other side were flooded, and the only thing that could get through was the police Humvee. We were on our own island.

Q: Did you have power?

A: Yes. We had power. The power lines were up. I remember hearing that Bob Frost was at his brother's house on Sunset, and he was going to come home, but he couldn't get home to this side, because he couldn't get there. He ended up going back to his brother's house.

Q: When did you move here full time?

A: It's hard to believe, but I moved down here full time nine years ago.

Q: Did you build your house first?

A: Yes. Most of it was built. I built my house first. It was at the stage where I was lucky enough to be able to retire after 30 years of service. My mother needed somebody to be here. She wanted to be here. She didn't want to be anywhere else. I was lucky enough to come down here and do that.

Q: So, you and Emily Cumming facilitated Joanne being able to stay in her house?

A: Definitely to stay in her house. My sister likes to tell me, "If you didn't do that, I would have brought her up to Enfield." I don't say anything, but I know that that's not what Mom wanted.

Q: She wanted to be here with her friends.

A: Yes.

Q: She was the most resourceful woman. She was on top of things at whatever age she was.

A: I know. I know she was on the budget committee for the Town of Charlestown for over twenty years, which is probably a record.

Q: Maybe that's how she stayed on top of knowing what the Town of Charlestown was up to.

A: I'm sure that had a lot to do with it. I took a play book from her, because that's why I'm on the pond commission for the Town of Charlestown.

Q: And you're also a volunteer with Dunn's Corners Fire Department.

A: Yes. I get involved in things that I enjoy.

Q: What do you enjoy now as a retired adult?

A: I wish I had more time. I have no idea how I used to do everything that I did when I was working. I have a harder time doing it now. I guess I choose to use my time in a different way. I used to plow snow for the town too, and when I first came down here, people would say, "How do you like the snow down here?" A, we don't get as much snow. But it's a lot nicer to do the snow when I want to do it instead of when I have to do it, because I used to have to spend hours and hours. It's a little bit different. The same idea with the volunteer fire department. I do a lot, and probably more than most people, but I still have the option of saying no.

Q: Can I ask you about the books you've brought?

A: These were some of the notes that I did when I did the talk on Barnacle. I couldn't find it, and I know I have a couple of copies of the Tidings that describe the Crepo dynasty, as they call it. Peggy wrote that story.

Q: I think we have almost all the Tidings at the archives unit. I can speak to Ann about that.

A: That whole article about the Crepo dynasty was about all the different houses. It amazes me how the majority of the houses—my grandmother's house, Topsy—yes, it's twice the house it was, but they're carbon copies of each other. Even the other one down the street, that one is basically the same too—Treasure House. They really haven't changed them a lot. I guess that's a testament.

Q: They're both beautiful houses. They so well built.

A: They had the land to do it. It's tastefully done.

Q: Those two houses are right next door to each other.

A: Right now, this house is a legal two-family house, which is unheard of around here.

Q: Is it a two-family house?

A: They don't allow two living structures on one piece of property in this area.

Q: But you've got the property for it.

A: The only reason is because it was here before the zoning regulations.

Q: How old is Round Meadow?

A: The summer place was built in the '50s. The salt box-style house was built in the '70s when they retired. Originally, I thought I was going to up over the garage, but luckily, I hooked up with a good architect, and she told me that the bones weren't good enough to do that, and you'd be better off going this way. Then you've got a view down the pond. As smart as I am sometimes, I listened.

Q: What does this all mean to, besides a place to retire and a place for your family to come?

A: It's just always been a big part of my life. That picture over there is the only portrait my grandmother painted. That was a portrait of my mother.

Q: This is a picture of your mother and father.

A: That's Uncle Stanley and Aunt Lucille.

Q: She looks like your mother.

A: Stanley Griffin was quite the character, and well known around here back in the day. My mother never really liked that picture. Even when we had it home in West Hartford, she said, "I don't care if you put it up in the attic." That's a drawing of this house before the last addition was put on it.

Q: So, that's the front house, and this is the back house?

A: Yes. It goes farther to the right now with my addition.

Q: Do you have lots of old things from this house?

A: What do you mean old things?

Q: There looks to be an antique Folgers jar.

A: There is some stuff around. We have some of the old glass buoys and lobster pots.

Q: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you'd like to add?

A: This room that we're sitting in, my mother used to always call this the expensive door to the pond. That's the original outside of this porch. Where this arch is, there used to be three arches. They were fixed screen, and in the winter you'd take them out and put them

in a—it was a uniquely designed shed on the end of the house. You would put them in there. You used to have to walk around the house to go down to the pond. We eventually did this. You can tell that that was weathered at one time, because that was the outside. My mother always called this the very expensive door to the pond.

Q: Is that because you did a cut-through?

A: Yes. We made another room.

Q: This is a great room, because you can store stuff or have parties.

A: We have had a few family parties here.

Q: Is there anything else that I haven't asked you?

A: I was lucky enough to maintain the two-family status here. It's owned both by my sister and I, but technically we have our own space.

Q: And this is a joint point?

A: Yes. We call this the common area. I sort of monopolize it because I'm here. That used to be a fireplace, but I put a propane insert in there.

Q: This must be nice and warm in the winter.

A: You can make it doable. It's not really insulated. You can probably find out a heck of a lot more about the Crepo and the Arnold family at the archives than I can possibly remember.