

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

JOAN THOMSEN

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Interviewed by Barbara Adams

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Q: ...1997, and I'm sitting in Joan Thomsen's home on West Beach Road in Quonnie. Peggy Wingate [inaudible 00:16] is with us. And this is Barbara Adams doing the interview. Joan, if you would tell us what brought you to Quonnie.

A: What brought me to Quonnie is I was the fourth generation to come down to the Quonnie area, because the family started in Hope Valley, and they came down. And then after their daughter got married to [inaudible 00:47], then they came down, and they built in 1925 [inaudible 00:53] Haven, which is on Surfside Avenue. That location is where Pete's first house was just east of the right-away for Central Beach. That was 1925. The right-away wasn't open at that point. Mr. Thorp used to have to come down and cut the bayberry bushes that were well above the height of any person. He would cut it through, and then put a wood boardwalk for people so they could get down to the beach. At that point, there was no wall in front of what is now Pete's second house. It only went as far as the property on Barnacle. I think that seawall was put in in the early '20s by the Congdon family when they owned Morris Point, which is the three-story house, but the garage from Morris Point was made into Barnacle after the '38 Hurricane. The little toolshed that was beside it went over to Amelia and [inaudible 02:15], and that's how her [inaudible 02:18] was made. Amelia had been a stock girl at that point for Lila at G. Fox & Company in Hartford. She came down before 1925. I came down as a baby. When I was two years old, Grandpa was building the house, or three years old, and Peggy and I started playing together then. We've known each other all that time. I don't remember you ever being down at Breakers. Were you?

A: No. We were at Trainor's house in 1923. That was down towards [inaudible 03:08].

A: That was the only house between Morris Point and the bathing beach where the little houses used to sit right on the sand where the bathing beaches are. We'd always come down every spring to see what house got damaged. I was down most of the time. Grandma and Grandpa did rent the house. I remember the [inaudible 03:43] rented it for a number of years, but they never bought. I don't remember anyone else renting it for

any long period. Two or three years later, Lila built Hobby House. It must have been the early '30s. Do you have any idea, Peggy?

A: I remember looking at that article they wrote on your family. Hobby House is now owned by the Glassmans, and they bought it 35 years ago.

A: Lila sold them a piece of property that the come-and-go was on, but that got moved in the '54 Hurricane over to Hobby House, and she decided she'd move it back. That's where it's located now in the back over near the wall where the well is. That's the Glassman's water. They couldn't build anything on that little front lot until I was 65 years old, and that was ten years ago. Certain dates you can keep track of that way. Lila built Treasure House, and that had to little apartment that had two bunkbeds for her, and then would rent the main house. I don't remember too many people, but one year when it didn't get rented, Lucille and Stanley used it and rented out rooms. Lucille did the cooking and served the meal. It was either Laurel or the other cousin. One of them was a little boy. The parents wanted Kyle's [inaudible 05:30] more than the parents did. We had some commercial business in Central Beach. So, I'm sure that shocked a few people. Mother had the lot next to Treasure House at the time. She and Lila bought the lots at the same time, but then Lila bought the lot for her. Mother was on West Beach Road. I don't know the name of the new people that bought Redwing, but [inaudible 06:10]. Lila also built Topsyie. I don't know what that's like inside or who owns it at this point. That hasn't been sold yet, has it?

Q: I believe the Finns own that. The same people that own [inaudible 06:35] Cottage. It's for sale.

A: It has been for a number of years. But I think they must have done quite a bit inside.

Q: Yes. I think so.

A: But I can remember laying the brick patio when I was about twelve. Lucille and I would lay the brick patio. I think Stanley went fishing. As far as a typical day, Peggy Wingate, Janet Congdon and myself would be playing in the rocks catching crabs. As we got older, when Stanley went fishing, we'd give him the crabs or we'd give Peggy's father the crabs, because they would go out and catch black fish. They were delicious. They existed down here at that time. Why we never killed ourselves jumping the rocks I'll never know.

A: Kids are still doing it.

A: I don't see them doing it as much, though. And there was one rock that we always loved, and we called it our automobile. This year is the first time that we have not been able to [inaudible 07:52]. It's covered with sand, so that really shows how some of the sand has come in [inaudible 07:59]. But we can still recognize the rock.

Q: Do you recall Picnic Rock?

A: Picnic Rock was down in front of the Ashaway Group.

Q: Or was it the big rock in front of the Quonochontaug Inn?

A: The Quonochontaug Inn is [inaudible 08:25] of the Ashaway Group. In 1939, I worked at the Quonochontaug Inn as a waitress.

Q: Who owned the inn then?

A: The Wardens. After they sold it, they moved over to Ninigret Pond.

Q: Did they sell it to the Lewises?

A: I think they must have. But we had a very good time. That was '39 when Peggy's grandmother died, so she wasn't around [inaudible 09:04]. Ken always had the car. Do you remember that? We had a good group. We were around then. Then there were the Jollys, which is Mary Jolly Spencer. She's still around. She has a house at the old beach. That must have been behind one of the hotels, wasn't it, Peggy? It must have been.

A: There are so many houses that look like what it might be.

A: Yes. And we know where Mother Brimley's was. They had two stories. That was where you'd go up into the Breakers. She's in the next lot. They were all close together.

A: Yes. The boardwalk over there, I don't think anyone complained about people walking over, under and around them all the time. I don't think anyone ever said, "Don't go through here."

A: [inaudible 10:23] in front of Cedar Haven, and Peggy's grandfather's or Red Top. There was a regular path worn where the Coast Guard men came, because it was up in front of the Burdick House. I don't know who owns that now. I think they sold it. It's behind their present house, and that was from the Burdick's. That's where one of the stations for the Coast Guard—they had to clock in. Every so often they had to go way up to Blue Shutters. They would walk right across the wall and all the cottages, and no one ever said a thing. They couldn't have been on the shore.

A: Joe had a boat. I don't know whether it was a Coast Guard boat, but they had a boat down at bathing beach. Remember? They used to put that wagon in there to pick up seaweed. They had a seaweed right-away there. Whoever owns that now wouldn't like that.

A: I think there was supposed to be a seaweed right-away between [inaudible 11:50] from coming up that way, because it was a right-away. I know the people that live down there don't feel that way now. And for a while after Mr. Murray had the Seabreeze Inn, they used to park down by where the [inaudible 12:20]. People got together I guess, and that's

when [inaudible 12:26] got permission, or bought the piece up where the East Beach right-away is—where their parking lot is.

A: Charlie Donny owned the lot there where David Burnett's house is.

A: [inaudible 12:42] owned it after his mom, and then she sold it to Burnett.

A: Yes.

A: They used to come down for the inn and park there.

A: Was it there, or was it on the other side?

A: They parked there some of the time.

Q: It wasn't part of the [inaudible 12:59] property?

A: I think it must have been sold to the Wallaces at that point. I know that the Gurneys built in there. I don't know when they built. They were a lot later. They built back where the tennis court was, because the Dire girls would come out with their white tennis outfits and play tennis.

A: I'm feeling very old.

A: We've been old for an awful long time. Central Beach has tennis courts too, but we got shooed off there when Dolly Saunders wanted to play tennis.

A: She was the first priority.

A: Do you remember her?

Q: Yes.

A: Did you ever go down to play tennis over there?

Q: No. I never played tennis until later on.

A: Dolly is related to the [inaudible 14:15]. He would also know a lot about this. But we played [inaudible 14:25] and we'd go bathing at little beach where we still go.

A: And we never had any suntan lotion.

A: No.

A: Just coco butter, as I recall. I remember putting on coco butter.

- A: When I was younger, I had severe sunburns.
- A: My mother would put me to bed with baking soda and vinegar on my shoulders, and I'd stay there for a day. We also had the ice cream man that used to come down, and invariably we'd be up at Morris Point and we'd hear that bell ringing, and we'd run down so we could get some money to get some—
- Q: That wasn't the Good Humor man.
- A: No. It was just an ice cream man.
- Q: Did you walk up to Mrs. Craig's for ice cream?
- A: Later on. Sure. Stanton [inaudible 15:22] that would come down from way up.
- Q: How about some of the other vendors who came so that you didn't have to go out of the community to go shopping?
- A: They'd come down and bring the things on Friday—vegetables. Giuseppe was [inaudible 15:44]. There were two of them at first, and then it got down to one. He'd get up and go in his truck and look to see what he had—things that you wanted—buy it and then he'd go on to the next person. Was it [inaudible 16:01]?
- Q: Where was that, Hope Valley?
- A: That was Charlestown. He'd come back with the groceries—come on Friday. And he'd come again Monday. [inaudible 16:17]. It was great. Wonderful lamb. People didn't have cars to stay during the week. The husband had the car [inaudible 16:34], unless they were on vacation. And if you needed a telephone call, you would go to Brightman's store or down at the bowling alley [inaudible 16:45]. They had a phone.
- A: I don't remember that we'd call from [inaudible 16:55]. That was just something you didn't do—take advantage of [inaudible 17:00]. Maybe if it was an emergency. It was because of her health that they had a phone.
- A: And then didn't [inaudible 17:10] come down from Hartford on a plane or something at one time?
- A: [inaudible 17:17]. Mrs. [inaudible 17:19] had two nieces, and one of them had a boyfriend [inaudible 17:24] on a farm. It's still there. I don't know if he could land on it. But this boyfriend would take the girls up and fly them over Quonnie [inaudible 17:42] a lemonade stand in the Hobby House in the summer. We used fresh melons. We squeezed them.
- Q: What year did the [inaudible 17:55] build that Red Top? Or did they build it?

A: Yes. They built it. I remember going over and finding a robin's nest in the cellar, and I was told under no uncertain terms, "You leave those eggs alone." It must have been '30. [inaudible 18:18], because I remember [inaudible 18:21], right? And he sold it to the girls. Mrs. Warren and Miss Glendenny. Then they sold it to [inaudible 18:38]. They've done a beautiful job inside. They just had it restored.

A: It's the same kind of house as it was. It's beautiful. [inaudible 18:58]. They put big windows in. That's about the only thing—they have a nice room in the cellar too.

A: Do you remember playing [inaudible 19:10]? He had a cigar in his mouth—the character did. I'm not mentioning names. He put the cigar quickly into his pocket so Mr. Congdon wouldn't see it. But Mr. Congdon must have known what he did, because he kept on talking. Who was that, Bob? We had a lot of fun. I thought they were playing sardines a few times in a bathtub.

Q: You mentioned some of your friends. Do you want to mention any names here?

A: We played Monopoly a lot. [inaudible 20:23] later on, and when you came, you rented [inaudible 20:37], which happens to be my [inaudible 20:43]. It was a logical place to come. [inaudible 20:57]. I can remember coming down to Hobby House coming into the Westerly station. I guess we took a cab down to Hobby House and stayed there. The soldier would come by and they'd see a little white thing. We'd go down and go across the breachway and we would take pictures, and they would [inaudible 21:24].

Q: You had to have the blackout curtains?

A: Yes. The blackout curtains.

Q: Do you remember the planes flying at night?

A: Oh, yes. And that lasted long after the war. They were doing training. [inaudible 21:40]. It was in the newspaper, but I don't they ever found the man, who it was or what he was doing. Do you remember how it rained down here every spring?

A: Oh, yes. It was [inaudible 22:13].

Q: So, you could see from the beach to the pond—just see all over the place.

A: Mother built her Redwing, and upstairs you could see both ways. Of course, that's a high point in Quonnie there that you can see. Now I don't think you could even get a glimpse of it with all the trees. We also spent a lot of time with our stamp collections. Janet had one. Of course, she had better ones, because her grandfather Congdon [inaudible 22:55]. We always figured that Janet had the best, but we didn't know enough about stamps. If one said one and the other said two, we'd have to give two ones for two or something like that. We had no idea what we were trading. But it was fun. It kept us busy, and it was [inaudible 23:17]. Peggy got up late. You went to bed late. Janet had to practice the

piano both where she lived at Morris Point and also when they owned Red Top. She was very good. She did a lot with her piano. She had an hour ever day. Then she also had to do more dishes than we ever had to. Peggy's grandmother took care of their dishes. She made blueberry pies and things like that.

Q: What about picking blueberries and grapes?

A: Peggy's father loved to go get blackberries.

A: [inaudible 24:19], but they're all gone now.

A: It was bitter sweet in those days.

A: I don't think we had any. I don't know when that was introduced, but I remember grape vines, blackberry bushes, blueberry bushes.

A: We used to make jelly out of the wild cherries too.

Q: And the beach plums.

A: There used to be a lot of those. They're all gone just about.

A: Some people used the rose hips to make jam. There are few of those now, but not like there used to be.

Q: [inaudible 24:58]?

A: Not many like there used to be.

Q: No. They rip up these indigenous plants and put in suburban stuff.

A: We used to go over on what we called Hospital Rock that somebody had a [inaudible 25:19]. It was torn down fairly recently [inaudible 25:34].

Q: What was torn down?

A: Whistle Blow.

Q: Yes. The Mace's little house.

A: [inaudible 25:49] from the Hartford area. They were in insurance in Hartford. We used to go there and count the whiskey bottles.

Q: I don't recall having a garbage collection the way we do now. I can't remember what we did. [inaudible 26:14].

- A: I can remember having to put it in—I think it was [inaudible 26:24].
- Q: What was that deep hole—that deep depression that’s behind [inaudible 26:32] and to the side of us now?
- A: I think that must have been to get gravel out for roads.
- Q: A gravel pit?
- A: And there is that one down by Carpenter’s.
- A: Yes. That was gravel. And I think when we played treasure hunt, we’d always hide something down in that gravel pit. [inaudible 26:57] there’s a big hole there. [inaudible 27:10]. It’s right in there. It’s a big hole.
- Q: Do you remember Whistling Chimneys?
- A: Yes. They used to have to cross Weekapaug by boat to go over there.
- Q: But that doesn’t date as far as back as the Sheffield farmhouse.
- A: I don’t think it’s as far back as that.
- Q: What year did they take over that?
- A: I don’t know, because they did stay down at Charlie [inaudible 28:18], because somewhere I’ve seen a picture of the two girls at Barnacles. It was later on.
- A: He must have owned that house [inaudible 28:34].
- Q: You’ve seen lots of changes.
- A: We saw the road going down past the farm cutting off the old West Beach Road get built too, because old West Beach used to go right into [inaudible 29:13] property and on into Morris Point.
- Q: You didn’t come through the stone pillars?
- A: No. The stone pillars—it was right there that you took your right on what’s called old [inaudible 29:28] Road, and then you’d come down to the stone pillars that go into where [inaudible 29:34] place was, and you’d go right on down to the beach. I can remember one time Howard was going to have a church—somebody was going to build a church down in that area where [inaudible 29:51] is. Not close to there.
- A: Was that because the cemetery was there?

A: I don't know, Peggy. But they did a beautiful job with it. [inaudible 30:03]. I think one of the changes today down here is we used to have fishermen go down on the beach. We didn't have so many motor boats. Some of the fishermen had rods and some, like Stanley Griffith, he would take his long line and just twirl it, and out it would go. [inaudible 30:57] very nicely. The young folks would always catch bass, and then when Stanley was down at the beach, he always had a chance to tell a lot of stories. They would gather around. He used to go to Central Beach some of the time, because he had [inaudible 31:23] that he could down, or he'd always go to Little Beach a little later. I think that's where he had the most fun. I think it was really people that made Quonnie a warm, loving, interesting place. It was people acting as families and a togetherness that I don't think we have now.

