

Oral Interview of Randy Thornton by Steve Young  
July 16, 2020

Q: Tell me how far back your family goes back at Quonochontaug, and how you connected with Quonochontaug originally.

A: My dad was born and raised in Hackensack, New Jersey. After I was born in 1945—I was the younger brother of a sister, Betsy, who was born in '39. She passed away in 1977, but she also had a house in Central Beach. She was married to Marshall Rice on Boulder Avenue. Both of us had homes here as time went on. But going back to 1945, when I was born, our next-door neighbors in Hackensack were John and Kitty VanOst. Their son Jack had a house that he built in the early '50s. He built a very modern house, Interview, which is right on the West Pond, or whatever that is. It has had several names. But the VanOsts brought us to Quonnie. I guess it was September of '46. My first birthday, the family had gone to Gloucester. It wasn't completely happy from a lot of perspectives. I got my finger caught in a top, and they spent most of the day trying to find a tinsmith who could cut the top and free my hand. We did rent a house in 1947—we rented the Buddington farm house on East Beach. You probably know the house. It's had a very significant renovation ten to twenty years ago from what it had been. I remember it very clearly. I was looking at the Historical Society book that came out in 1985 or '90. They had a picture of the old Buddington farm house. I remember seeing it, and the outside pump—a big box where the old-fashioned—like a Goulds pump. We were there for the month of September. My dad entertained Bill Sanford. Bill was a fraternity brother at Columbia College in 1928. I think Bill was '29. My dad was a year younger. They had a couple of cocktails and decided, on one of the evenings that they were together there, that they would go out the next day and look at real estate together. They hailed down Howard Thorp, who was the man to see, in 1937. He had the exclusive book in Quonochontaug. He was the original designer of it all. He was very seldom seen without a tie on and a suit. Sometimes he even wore a top hat. Howard greeted them happily. I don't know whether it was his notion that he could sell them each a house or a lot, but he was very discouraging to them when they told him that they wanted to buy a house together. He said, "That's the quickest way I know to end your friendship." Nevertheless, they bought a house on East Beach Road. At that point the number was 52, but they changed the numbering system. I'm not sure I know what it is right now. It was a house that was originally down on the ocean. The '38 Hurricane dislodged it from its foundation. It was subsequently relocated back about halfway up from the beach to Route 1. That is the house that my father and Bill Sanford bought in 1947. I had my second birthday in Quonochontaug. They bought this house approximately at the same time. I don't know when it closed. Each family had approximately a month of the summer, and it would vary which month each family would have. Over time, I spent at least a month in Quonochontaug.

Q: Do you have any of the paperwork from the purchase?

A: No. I was two years old. I might be able to find it. The house changed hands finally after my parents retired and moved to Florida. They came every now and then. Every summer they came for a period of time. But as we grew older, I had a home here, and my sister had a home here. I was working in New York, so I was interested in renting the house or having somebody else use it. My mom and dad were in the house for many summers for a period of time when they weren't over on East Beach Road.

Q: Did you ever hear any stories about negotiating with Thorp? One thing that I've gotten a kick out of about our house at 150 Surfside is my grandfather bought the lot from Howard for \$1,500, with \$100 down and Howard gave him monthly payments of \$100. We had fourteen months to pay it off. I don't know what it's worth now, but it's fun to tell some of the old figures. I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't buy that house for \$20,000.

A: I think it was a lot less than that. When I bought this house, I know that arithmetic. My parents—I think it was \$6,500 in 1947. That's the best I can recall.

Q: Do you think that was each?

A: No. I think that's the total. I think they each paid half of \$6,500.

Q: Howard Thorp deeds have restrictive covenants in them.

A: I knew that they did. I don't recall ever seeing the deed to that house. I was pretty young. They ended up buying the house together much against Howard's advice and counsel. They never really had a cross word in the—it was roughly 1980, so that would have been almost 40 years that they had the house together. They never had a cross word. He was my godfather. He was a very good pal of my dad's from college. Then they decided to put the house on the market. My parents were the primary movers to do that. But the Sanfords went along with it. It didn't sell. My mother was in real estate. She was a real estate broker in New Jersey. She was the more skilled person in real estate to interact with the broker. At that point, I can't remember who was involved. It must have been the Thorp office in Westerly. They set the price at an unreasonable number, or it was just a bad market. Either way, it was mismanaged. There were no takers. Finally, somebody came along with a very low offer. They were sitting around trying to decided what to do. My parents said we would sell at that, and the Sanfords said, "If you want to sell, that's great, but we'll pay that number," which would have been a very logical thing to do, except my mom decided that she was going to put on her real estate hat and say, "That would be great, but you really ought to pay the broker a fee." That was the issue that separated them. They

really didn't spend a lot of time together after all those years. It was very sad. Bill came to Katie's and my wedding. I remember that, but that was the extent of their relationship. So, Howard Thorp was right.

Q: Was that about 1980?

A: Yes. That's about right. But he was long gone by that time. Neil was very much involved. They sold. By that time, both Betsy and I had houses here in Quonnie. Betsy's was built when I was in the Army in the late '60s. That would have been '68 or '69. I bought this house in 1972 right after I finished business school and got my first job. That was a little frame house that we put three different significant additions on, and then tore it all down in 1994 with the exception of a kitchen that I had added about ten years previous to that. That was probably in '85 that I did that addition. I couldn't part with the kitchen, because I thought my parents would absolutely have a coronary to think that they raised someone who had that little disregard for money that you would just destroy something that you had built a few years earlier.

Q: Was it named Keywaydin then?

A: It was. I bought the house as Keywaydin. There's no change. Clifford McGuire bought it from the Barstows, who, at the point when I bought it, lived across the street. They were both very much still alive, as was their son.

Q: I remember David.

A: Yes. He died coming back from the mailbox in the snow in the middle of the winter.

Q: David did?

A: No. Bill.

Q: What year did you tear it down?

A: '94.

Q: Except the kitchen.

A: Except the kitchen. We had a crane come in. They cut with chainsaws around it, wrapped it in cable and lifted it on a crane and put it on a low bed trailer and moved it off site, and then brought it back eight months later and placed it right back in place. The only thing that was damaged were three or four tiles were cracked. We never replaced. They're cracked as they sit there as sort of a historical note or punctuation.

Q: What year were you married?

A: I was married to Kate in 1974, but I had an earlier marriage in 1967, the year I graduated from college, to Carol Stedler. We were married for a couple of years. While I was in Vietnam, I came home and she decided that that was not what she wanted to do, so we parted ways in 1969. Then Katie and I started dating in '72 and were married in '74.

Q: Did you have two houses then?

A: Then we had two houses. Katie had built a house in West Chop in Martha's Vineyard where her family had been going for many, many years. She built that house while we were dating. She started it about '71 or '72. And her brother had a place there right nearby her in West Chop. When we first started dating, we were both renting apartments in New York, and both had summer homes. It was a little redundant and silly. She was kind enough to make the sacrifice to sell her home in the Vineyard, and then we consolidated here shortly after we were married.

Q: How did you make a living in New York?

A: After getting out of Columbia Business School in May of 1971, I started at Citibank as a—actually, in the summer '70, I was a summer intern there for three months, and went back full time after I finished up business school and spent my whole career there. I spent 34 years there where I met Kate. She spent 25 years there. My dad also spent a little time there. He spent 43 years there. So, the aggregate of the three of us was 101 years at Citibank. In today's world, that doesn't translate. I still have a fondness for it, but with the Traveler's acquisition and everything, it changed its culture pretty significantly.

Q: That must have been quite a shock.

A: Yes, it was. It chased me out of there. I left in '04. The merger was in '99. I stayed around for a few more years, but I was very anxious to move on. My career did nothing but to improve significantly after retirement from Citi. I was very lucky to have made that move when I did.

Q: You didn't retire? You moved to another bank?

A: No. I was a restructuring banker. We did a lot of bankruptcy and out-of-bankruptcy reorganization. One of the things that I was doing at that time for Citi was the reorganization of Comdisco, which was a computer leasing company in Chicago. They had three-and-a-half billion dollars' worth of debt that we had to deal with. It was something that I was intimately involved with. Citi had been the principal bank, and Solomon had been the principal underwriter. Citi was all over it.

Q: So, you went to Comdisco eventually?

A: Yes. I didn't become an employee. I guess I was. I was the CEO and chairman of the board. It was a part-time assignment. I went on the board, and then subsequent to my retirement I became the chief executive.

Q: What year did you retire?

A: 2004. I had been working with Comdisco since 2002, so it was a continuation of what I had been doing at Citi. We spent the next seventeen years unwinding a lot of private equity investments. We ended up getting all of the debt holders 100 cents plus accrued interest. It was an unusual bankruptcy. The reason was that they had a big portfolio that cost about 750 million dollars, but there were 400 private equity investments, and of those, half of them were absolutely worthless, or nearly worthless, and half of them were worth tenfold of what had been invested. That was the basis to repay all the bond debt.

Q: Did Quonochontaug become your primary residence?

A: For a year or two it became our legal residence. It was in between Connecticut and Florida. We were here for a year and realized—I don't know if I want to say this on tape, but Rhode Island was just a very hostile place to live from a tax perspective. Since we had a residence in Florida as well, we quickly made that our residence. At that point we were living on a boat in Florida. That was in 2005 or '06. It was one of those years that we were in Rhode Island. It might have been the very first year, 2004, because the boat wasn't built until that summer. We bought a Viking sport fishing boat and lived on it for three years. We did a lot of the Bahamas and went back and forth on it from here to Florida a couple of times.

Q: What is your schedule now in Quonochontaug? Are you here for five months or so?

A: Yes. We come up in May and leave in October. This year may prove to be the exception depending on what happens COVID-wise in Florida. But we enjoy our time in both places very, very much. It's a very nice bit of anticipation that I personally have to go back to Florida and enjoy summer for twelve months. If Rhode Island had a twelve-month summer, I might never leave. November comes early.

Q: My father spent a winter in Quonochontaug, and one was enough. It's so dark and so lonely.

A: Yes. No lights on anywhere. We did that. We still come back at Christmas some years, and the kids like to be here. Our children were both in the New York

Metropolitan area a lot of those years. We had a home in Darien, Connecticut for seventeen years that we bought in '84 and sold around '04 when retired. And there were four years when we were in New York City. In 2001 we moved back into the city a couple of months before 9/11.

Q: Was that an easy schlep from Darien to Quonnie?

A: One hundred miles on 95. You could generally do it in two hours, although I'm sure there were Sunday nights when it took four or five.

Q: What do you enjoy about Quonochontaug? It sounds like you might be a fisherman.

A: Yes. The next fish I catch at Fresh Pond rocks will be my first. I have been there for hours—not too many hours. But I remember as a kid I went, “Boy, this is not very productive.” I'd see the boats out of my casting range pulling in blue fish. Back then, there were no striped bass. I had a 14-foot aluminum boat that my parents had with this other family, and we each had our own engine. They had a 10-horsepower, and I had a 7 1/2-horsepower. A little Johnson that I mowed lawns to buy. I used to take it around through the Charlestown Breachway. We were on East Beach, so it was sort of Charlestown Pond centric. I would take my boat around, and we'd do a lot of clamming in Charlestown Pond. I'd do a lot of snorkeling and skin diving off of the Charlestown Breachway and off Fresh Pond rocks—up and down the Quonnie Breachway. Occasionally we'd go down to Weekapaug. There were usually plenty of black fish and flounder, which were our principal quarry. We used to go clamming and snorkeling and skin diving when we ran out of gas. Or water skiing. We would have to go back to work and buy some gas. It was a very happy cycle.

Q: Did you do water skiing on Quonnie Pond?

A: Charlestown Pond. I've done both. My friends were more East Beach centric back in those days. All of the friends that I had in that point of my life are gone now. George Zable and Bob Bantol are two of my people I spent the most amount of time with. We also had some good friends: Ann Moulton and her husband Bob Lee were very good friends of ours as well. We got to know them a lot better when Citibank asked me to go to Rochester, New York. I said, “How about London or Paris?” and they said, “No. We were thinking more about Rochester.” So, I went up to Rochester for four long years. One of the highlights of that was getting to know Bob Lee and Ann Moulton. We spent a lot of time together. We did a lot of tuna fishing. It has really only been in the last ten or fifteen years that the striped bass have come back to Rhode Island.

Q: Did you do spear fishing with snorkeling?

- A: Sure. I'd sell clams and sell flounder and black fish. We would spear them out there. I very seldom saw blue fish out there, and when you did, they were very quick. The black fish are sort of lumbering like striped bass are. They're pretty easy targets if you can find them.
- Q: Have you spent time every year since you were born at Quonnie?
- A: Yes, indeed. The only time when it was an open issue was when I was in the service. I was in Vietnam for nine months, but I came back in August of 1969 and managed to get a couple of weeks or maybe a week before business school started.
- Q: Was it the same for Katie?
- A: I think she spent every summer here since we started dating in 1972.
- Q: Are you a golfer?
- A: Yes. I started golf late in life. I didn't play golf until I was in my late 50s. When Shelter Harbor Gold Club opened, we became charter members. Not because I was a golfer as much as my wife had just started to play. I was interested in playing, but I had never really had the time between working and playing tennis and offshore fishing. Offshore fishing would start at 4:00 in the morning and you'd get home at 7:00 or 8:00 in the evening. We'd go out to the canyons in a 23-foot outboard.
- Q: So, 99.9% off shore on a boat rather than surf casting?
- A: Yes. I watched all these boats catching fish, and I said, "This isn't for me." One day before I die, I'm going to—maybe this September. I have a surf rod. I'm going to go down there and see if I can catch a striped bass.
- Q: When the blue fish run, it's pretty easy.
- A: Easier. But I've never done it. I might not have been persistent enough.
- Q: And you raised kids in Quonnie?
- A: We did. We have two daughters. Becky was born in '77. Jamie was born in '81. They both view Quonnie as a sacred place. If we told them that we were selling our house, I think they would be very cross.
- Q: Are they in Metropolitan New York?
- A: Becky is. Jamie has been over time, but she has moved around a little bit. She's out in Wyoming for ten years. She's back east now, but she's very smitten with a

guy that she has gotten to know, who was originally from Westerly. So, their base is here, although they're both living together in Nashville. They don't have children. They're also not married. Those are not derivative thoughts any more. Our older daughter, Becky, is married and has two children eight and five. A boy, eight, Cameron, and Caroline is a five-year-old. Becky is married to Alex Leach.

Q: Is he a Quonnie person?

A: No. Alex was a Jersey Shore-oriented guy from Philadelphia. They went to Colby College together. My mom is from Ridgewood, and her brother and his wife stayed in Ridgewood most of their lives. We would go to see my cousins in Ridgewood most every holiday—Christmas or Easter. I was always around Ridgewood. My sister lived in Ridgewood. Marshall Rice, her husband, was rector of Christ Church in Ridgewood.

Q: We bought our house in Ridgewood in 1957 for \$30,000 and lived in it for seven years and sold it for \$30,000. Now there aren't too many houses in Ridgewood in that price range.

A: That's too bad, because there was an amazing amount of appreciation. The one that impacted our lives in a very big way was Katie and I were first married, and we bought a co-op on 82<sup>nd</sup> Street in New York between Park and Lex for \$68,000 in 1976, and five years later it was worth \$350,000. We were very lucky. That's when we moved to Rochester, New York, which made commuting to Quonnie a little more complicated. So, instead of 150 miles from New York City, it became 400.

Q: Are you both interested in gardening?

A: Katie used to be. I'm still very interested in gardening. We have flowers all around the house. We spend time out there, but we also have help. We have more help than we used to. Years ago, I don't think we thought we could afford help, but now we can't afford not to have the help.

Q: What else can you tell me about Quonnie or your involvement?

A: We told you about the economics of this house. We bought for \$50,000 from Cliff McGuire. I was 26, and it was the first time I had ever been involved in the purchase of anything, other than a car. It had been on the market for \$50,000, and I was quite interested in it. I said, "I've got to find a way to negotiate this. I'm not going to pay full retail." So, I said, "How about \$45,000?" and he said, "No. It's 50." I came back a couple days later and said, "Okay, I've thought about it a lot and I'm interested, but I can only pay your \$46,000." It was so painful. A couple of weeks later I came back and said 48. "I might even jump to 49, but I'm not going to pay 50." I paid 50. He knew what he wanted, and he was determined to get it. I was willing to pay it.



Q: Was that in 1972?

A: That was in 1972. We put several additions on it, and started all over again. Bob Green was the architect. DNM construction built the house. They had both been back in the house over the years, and have remained very reliable professionals to help us with some of the stuff that we added on.

KATE: Do you know that Randy was a moderator?

Q: I didn't know that.

A: I was moderator for the three-year term. That expired by its term at the last annual meeting. That would have been from 2016 to 2019.

Q: Did you avoid some of the water crisis?

A: I did. I was quite fortunate to have avoided that.

KATE: The boil water started last August.

A: I had a little bit, but I was only my way out. Vinny Repucci is the public works manager. He was the one who had talked me into being moderator. He was always a good partner in working through any issues we had. He really carried the ball. The water itself is somewhat technical. You need a pretty good understanding of the system and how it all flows. Not the water, but the system. We're in a tough way. The system had deferred maintenance forever. Nobody has ever really wanted to do it the right way, which would have been a huge number. But if we had done it right twenty years ago, that number would have been a very small fraction of what it's going to be today.

Q: Do you think there will be a major redo of the system?

A: I cannot predict it, but I think more and more people who have more and more wells in Quonnie are saying, "Get it fixed. We've got a big investment. We've got a three-million-dollar home here." There is a house now that's on the water that's on the market for 7 ½ million. Not even Central Beach.

Q: You may not rent your house out, but we rent ours out, because we're in California, and my sister is in Texas. It's hard to say to renters to pay us a big sum of money every week, but you can't drink the water.

A: You've got to boil your water.

Q: It's like living in Peru.

A: Exactly. Nobody has wanted to do it. It's going to take a lot of leadership to get that done. Each year there are more voices that are demanding it.

Q: What would you say was the biggest issue during your term as moderator?

KATE: Garbage.

A: We had a garbage contract that came up.

Q: He died, right?

A: Yes.

KATE: He died in the middle of the season.

A: He was an acquired taste. People have these expectations. If they're not close to it, they just think that there's a silver bullet for everything. The garbage contract that we now have is fully functioning. They raised the price on us quite a bit.

KATE: But it's all year-round now. You don't have to subcontract in the winter. And the annexation of a piece of property. That's kind of complicated.

A: Yes. I don't want to get into that one.

KATE: We had a piece of property that dated back to the very beginning of the fire district—even before the fire district that was granted water rights, but was not within the boundaries of the district. It became a big thing. They were able to negotiate and get the community to approve annexing that property into the boundaries of Central Beach.

A: We redrew the boundaries to put them inside our boundary so that that eliminated the conflict.

Q: Did that cost money, or was that a paper transaction?

A: It wasn't particularly expensive, other than the litigation. I think we spent a fair amount of money on lawyers. I can't remember exactly.

KATE: But there was really no litigation.

A: We had lawyers on.

KATE: Yes. They were drafting stuff.

A: I think it was an extra line item that required explanation at the annual meeting. Litigation in your terms, not. But it was probably a \$15,000 line item that was a footnote.

Q: I can remember as a kid that pond behind Big Beach being a real pond, and then the weeds took over and it got shallower and shallower.

A: Yes. The reeds were phragmites. They wanted to use something—

KATE: Glyphosate.

A: Yes. Glyphosate. That wasn't a very popular thing with mothers here. Nothing really got done. The reeds have only further overtaken the amount of water there. The parking lot was an issue. They finally put a gate on it. You'll notice that they close that at the end of the day.

KATE: Now it's closed all the time because of COVID.

A: But I think that will change. The parking lot capacity has been significantly reduced. I think they were trying to put twenty cars in there. Just recently they increased it from 20 to 30. There is someone down there to open the gate when a car comes or leaves. Nobody is permitted into the parking lot after 6:00. As a kid, we used to go down there all the time and go swimming at night.

Q: What have you seen get better or worse in Quonnie?

A: The principal thing that has changed is the scale of the homes. What was standing on this lot was literally built with 2 by 4s, a 1929 prefab. It's a little different today. There were always cottages here. Bercon Cottage as you first come in off West Beach Road, I was looking through the Historical Society book, and that hasn't changed since they put that together. And there are a couple of other homes that are the same category. Especially as you go down towards the Quonnie Breachway there are a few homes that haven't changed, but there are many, many more that are way-way built up from what they had been. I would tell you that the value of the real estate—it's not just taking the inflation rate and indexing it and saying that the value in Quonnie is much greater than it had been; I'm making a different point. I'm saying that the relative value is maybe four or five times what it was when Howard Thorp drew up the different plots. I like that. I think people have more of an interest in it. They have an economic interest.

Q: It drives everybody's prices up the more mansionization that occurs.

A: Yes. And the more pressure on the water system. For most people that irrigate their lawns, that has always been an issue of contention, as it should be. I don't believe there is anyone now that is watering their lawn with our Central Beach

water. They have constructed dug wells. You don't have to go down 20 feet. They are dug wells.

KATE: Some of them only go about 8 feet.

A: Yes. You don't have to go very far to get water. There are a lot of water Nazis that are very focused on that. I haven't heard much, but all you need is a good drought to start that chatter again. I don't know of any contentious issues in Quonnie today. We're not plugged in like we were. I think we would know if there was anything. Now, about 20% are here year-round. That's a pretty good number. While it is dark in November, December, January and February in terms of lights on in homes, there are still some people here who conduct the business of the community.

Q: It seems like Bill Meyer gets people out to dinner once a month in the winter.

A: Yes. Bill is Mr. Quonnie. We call him the mayor. We see Bill a fair amount. I play bridge with him once a week.

Q: He always amazes me how much energy he has for a man his age.

A: He's getting into his mid-80s. We think he's 82. He goes from tennis to the beach to clamming to mowing his lawn.

Q: Golf?

A: Yes. He plays golf regularly. Have you had an interview with him?

Q: I know Bill pretty well. I spoke to him a few days ago. We're friends.

A: You didn't do an interview with him?

Q: No.

A: You should.

Q: I don't think he goes back as far.

A: No.

KATE: I can remember when he built the house.

Q: That probably goes back 30 years.

A: Bill was a good friend of my brother-in-law's, Marshall Rice. He and Liz and Betsey and Marshall used to do a lot of—they'd take a sail boat to Block Island. There are a couple of stories about that.

Q: Are you a sailor?

A: I love to be on the water. I love to sail. I love to fish. I love to take a kayak out. I am very much at peace on the ocean or on the ponds.

Q: One thing that has made Quonnie better is the striped bass have come back. Right?

A: Yes. For sure.

KATE: And the skunks have left.

A: Yes. We haven't seen a skunk in many years. But the rabbits are back. Holy smokes. I don't know what they're going to do about these rabbits, but they're everywhere.

Q: I think the fox take care of everything and keep things in balance.

A: We used to see a lot of fox down here in the wintertime. I haven't seen one in a while. Every now and then I see one crossing West Beach Road. There is a lot of great food for them. These rabbits have gotten prolific.

Q: It used to be so easy to climb on the rocks, get a string, crack a mussel and catch crabs. Now the mussels have gone.

A: Yes. I can't imagine what did that, other than overharvesting.

Q: It seems like they come back as a little, tiny ones and they never get big. I don't know whether it's pollution or global warming.

A: I can't imagine what it is. We used to harvest mussels with some regularity in the '70s.

KATE: I remember when thousands of mussels washed up on the beach.

A: In a big storm.

KATE: The first day, people would go down there and fill up buckets.

A: Buckets and buckets full of them. Nobody harvested them, and for a week they smelled to high heavens. It's just the worst. That was before they had any equipment down to carry things. They just couldn't dig holes sufficient to

accommodate all the mussels. There were so many. That was a long time ago. That was 25 or 30 years ago.

Q: Have you come into possession of any Quonnie memorabilia?

A: Somebody has the old Quonochontaug Inn sign. Is that Frost?

KATE: That's probably Frost.

A: Tommy Frost has the most of that stuff. My sister was a maid at the Quonochontaug Inn. Do you remember the building? It's still there. They call it the nun's—I guess the Catholic church bought it. The nuns would have retreats there. It became Nun's Beach. Prior to that in the early '50s, a number of inns were down there. If you look back in the history, there were four or five. I'm sure they're in the book. Mother Brindley's was one of them.

KATE: Brightman's.

A: Brightman's was the store out on the highway, which became Crompton's and the Quonnie Forum. Then the building actually gave out before the business did.

KATE: It became a Chinese restaurant.

A: That's right. Mike Pelham opened his little convenience market there and did pretty well with it. He sold it to Jim Marra.

Q: I didn't know the nun's house had been the Quonochontaug Inn.

A: Yes, indeed.

Q: I've seen historical pictures from the 1880s and the 1890s and the turn of the century where there was a boardwalk and a row of hotels.

A: Yes.

Q: The big hurricane in 1912 got some of them, and then the 1938 Hurricane finished them off.

A: I know the Quonochontaug Inn was operating into the '50s. My sister was born in '39. She had to have been at least fourteen to work there, so it would have been '53 or '54. Before the hurricane—I don't know if it was '54 or '56 hurricane that maybe finished that place off.

KATE: It's still standing.

A: The building is still standing, but the hotel. They sold it to the Catholic church. I don't know what the predicate for that transaction was.

Q: Do you remember the bowling alley?

A: Sure. I remember that well. I used to bowl there.

KATE: And there was the Nurmi Dance Hall.

A: Yes. We had square dancing there. Did you do that as a child?

Q: I did not.

A: That was on West Beach Road. It's now a home, the property of Taylor—

Q: I think Taylor Rettig bought it. What was it called?

KATE: Nurmi.

A: It was the Nurmi Cottage that I believe Taylor bought.

KATE: But it wasn't owned by the Nurmis when he bought it. It was owned by a guy named Larry Leblanc.

A: I don't know who owned it back then. I wouldn't have been surprised if it was one of the hotels. We had square dancing lessons there. That would have been 1954 or '55.

Q: Do you have any photos of either of you as very young children in Quonochontaug?

A: Yes.

KATE: Of our children being here.

A: Our children or me.

KATE: I have some of Randy's somewhere on the beach with his sister.

A: Pictures of my mother and dad and my sister. We also have plenty of pictures of our kids growing up here. They wouldn't be as historical. Not yet.

Q: Do you think you could let us scan a few of those from the late '40s and '50s?

KATE: They are in a pile in Florida. I'll look for them.

A: I'm sure Katie will find some either here, but it may be three or four months before we get them to you.

Q: Some people took pictures of the 1938 Hurricane or the 1954 Hurricane. We are also collecting those.

A: One story of the '54 Hurricane Carol, we were living in Hackensack, New Jersey. Katie VanOst's husband had died, and she had just built what she called the Little Red House that Nancy Matthews lives in now. She and her husband, John, had been in the house across the street. They had named that Botantic. They bought that in 1929. He was on the floor of the New York Exchange. He had made a trade that helped him buy that house. I'm sure he was happy that he got rid of that stock and bought the house. We brought Katie up here. We stopped on Route 80 in Connecticut. This was before 95. We stopped at a place called Robbie's, which was a little luncheonette. We had a cup of coffee and lunch. We started chatting it up with the guy behind the counter, and he said, "Where are you going?" and we said, "We're going to Quonochontaug." He said, "You're wasting your time. There's nothing left there." You should have seen Katie's face. It turned ashen. Our family's home was back halfway to Route 1 on East Beach Road, but she had just built this house a couple years before right by the parking lot. We got down here. It was after dark, and it was tough to see. She had water throughout the house. There was substantial damage with restoration.

KATE: Is that when she bought the house on Ninigret?

A: That's the punchline of the story. It got all cleaned out, but she said, "That's enough. I'm out of here." She built a house back behind the Central Beach tennis court that she styled as Dunn Moving. Remember that house? She built that in 1956. She sold the house. I don't remember who bought it from her. She was not to be taken in by the hurricane. All of that had a very clear impression on me when I was buying a home, because I wanted to get it far enough away from the ocean so I didn't concern myself with the repercussions from the '54 or '56 Hurricane. But when we raised the house and tore it down completely in '94, we raised the ground level about 3 feet. I can't remember who was advising us to do that. Maybe it was our insurer. Maybe it was just the building. But in any case, we did. Then when the next big storm came, which was Sandy, the water came up and just parted around our house. I probably shouldn't say this on tape, but it caused our neighbors some damage.

KATE: Our house is higher.

A: It would have all dissipated a little bit more, but because we had raised ours, the water was pooling more significantly. They had a lot of water in their crawlspaces or their basements. There was a lot of water right at the corner of Spray and Ocean View. It may have been 3 or 4 feet of water.



Q: Our house at 150 Surfside has had water to our door in 1954 and then with Sandy. But it never did any damage.

KATE: A drain was put in there, because it was puddling so badly.

Q: We had a pump in our garage. Jerry and my father and I don't know who else had a pipe put in that goes to the rocks of Little Beach.

A: It seems to me that it went out on the beach. Didn't it? There are some pretty obvious environmental issues that got overlooked, but that was a long time ago.

Q: Pray that that pump keeps working, because if it ever has to be replaced, they've got to come up with a different system.

A: I can understand how you might feel that way.

Q: One mystery that I'm trying to solve—do you know where the Brecks live next door to 150? They must be 140. There used to be a big pit there.

A: I remember that well. It was filled with water after the '54 Hurricane. We were visiting the Tetlos, who were right next door. I remember that was filled with water.

Q: I'm trying to find somebody who has some knowledge of the history of the pit. I have a theory as to the origin of the pit, but I don't know that it's right. I'm going to interview Neil Thorp. Maybe he will know or have some records. My theory is that those houses that are raised on the coastline, they took the fill out of the pit and raised their property line and built a rock barrier. When the Brecks bought it, they filled in the pit, or made it their basement. Not many people remember the pit. The kids had a blast in the pit.

A: That sounds very logical. It was very irregular. It didn't look as if they had machinery in there digging a hole. But it would have been quite a while since all of that earth moving had transpired. It could have easily eroded over time. I can't tell you, other than I remember it distinctly in 1954. It was filled with water.

Q: I have pictures of us as little kids climbing one huge rock that was in the pit. The pit had been there for some time. Thorp used to own the house on the left, as you're looking out at the ocean. Whether that was built up, or when that was built up, I just don't know. It has given those houses a chance in a hurricane.

A: Nelson Thorp owned that house.

Q: Howard did once.

A: I remember Howard owning the house down on the pond.

- Q: Yes. I've been told that Howard was in the state assembly in the 1930s, and in the '38 Hurricane there was a house there that had washed back off of its foundation, and there was a pole, and the pole stopped the house. Howard bought it and either moved it back onto its foundation or rebuilt the house. I'm not sure. I know about the one on Sunset that he built and lived in.
- A: Boulder Lodge, right?
- Q: Yes.
- A: Some good friends of ours, who we've known for at least twenty years, their son just bought that last year. He's got some big plans to redo it. I'm not privy to the plans, but I'm pretty sure that there is a lot of dough there. Becky wants to leave it in the condition that it's in now.
- Q: I'm going to do some research about the Thorp family and do a talk next season about the Thorps.
- A: That would be fascinating. I hope I'm able to hear it. I knew Neil and his dad Nelson very well. I only remember Howard as a—we always rented our house for the first twenty years or so that we had it, so I was always talking to them with regularity about the market and to go about renting it.
- Q: Howard owned all of Quonochontaug in 1938 to the end of the war when he started subdividing it and selling lots.
- A: He could have been a little more patient and made some more money. It's all relative. I would love to shake your hand. I don't know that we've ever done that.
- Q: I don't think we have, but I look forward to it. We have a lot in common. I'm 1948 and you're 1947.
- A: I was born in '45. I came to Quonnie in '47 on my second birthday.
- Q: I have pictures of myself as an infant in Quonnie in a rental until my grandfather built the 150 Surfside house, which was finished in 1950. I've been there every summer of my life. We were hoping to be there for the month of June, but with COVID we cancelled that plan and stayed in California. Hopefully we'll be there for the month of late September or October.
- A: I hope that you would knock on the door and say hello, or give us a call. When you're putting your plans together, let's get that scheduled as soon as is reasonable.

Q: I will stay in touch. I don't know if you would be interested, but a week or so ago by Zoom we had a presentation by somebody from Mystic who knew a lot about the Quonnie Lifesaving Station that was over by the old breachway. It was manned by seven people. It was there 1887 to 1915 when it became a Coast Guard Station. The Coast Guard took over the 275 lifesaving stations that were up and down the coast and around the Great Lakes. That was the founding of the Coast Guard. Then that building washed away in 1938 and was never rebuilt. A lot of people don't know that history, and it's an interesting history.

A: Where was that building? Right at the breachway?

Q: I don't know if you've ever sailed up the old breachway, which is a little west of the new breachway and doesn't connect to the ocean anymore. There is a sandy beach there at Weekapaug. It's only a couple hundred yards west.

A: West of the Quonnie Breachway?

Q: Yes. There is only a stone wall there now, because there is no building there, but that's where it was. I was going to suggest that we put the talk that she gave on YouTube so I could flip you the YouTube if you have any interest in it.

A: I would love to see it. I never knew that there was a Coast Guard or lifesaving station.

Q: In that period of time, there weren't airplanes, there weren't trains or freeways. There was a lot of traffic between New York and Boston or New York and Providence that went by, and there were wrecks. These guys were trained to save boaters that were in trouble. I think their main season was the winter, because that's when the big storms were and the big wrecks were. There were some relatively big wrecks, and she's got pictures of some of them. It's an interesting history. They could rally and row their dory out pretty fast.