

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

Ted Balcezak

November 2, 2016

Interviewed by Peter Mogielnicki in Charlestown

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Q: It's November the 2nd. I'm on Midland Road. I'm talking with Ted Balcezak, who is my uncle. I'm Peter Mogielnicki, his nephew. Both of us have been around the corner for a while. So, we will try to think about what Quonnie was like starting back in the '40s and '50s, and then whatever else comes to mind. You'll have to sort it out. Tom Doyle is going to edit this. We don't exactly know where to start. I'm going to ask my uncle what Quonnie was like when he first came here, and see what he says.

A: My name is Ted Balcezak. I'm 85 years old. I've been coming here since I was ten. My nephew, Peter, was born when I was ten. You can do the math and find out he's ten years younger than me. What I remember is my mother, back years ago—my sister had a little guy, and his name was Peter, and my mother didn't want her down here during those years that the war was going on without one of us there, because I have four brothers. So, I and one of my brothers, Stanley, would take turns coming down here when she came her for the summer.

Q: To babysit the little fart?

A: Exactly. We had no phone. We had no car. Phones were sparse down here. Because of the war, we had blackout shades on our doors and windows. We had a device when we shut the door, the light off, and reopen the door so that we wouldn't have any visible lighting.

Q: What would happen if you didn't do that?

A: There were patrols that would stop us.

Q: So, the patrols would come down?

A: Yes. We took turns coming down here, because it was the war, and my mother was concerned and didn't want my nephew here by himself. During that time, we had some interesting things happen. The headlights on the cars were blacked out halfway to keep the light from reflecting off the ocean. There was a big house on the beach in front of my sister's house. The Dowds lived there. They stayed here during the whole time that I had been coming down here until they were all deceased. In front of their house—I guess they called it Little Beach—we used to have a patrol coming. There were two policemen coming down—Army people. Sometimes they were the Army, and sometimes they were Marines. I used to meet with them and talk with them many times. They would come from Quonset by truck. They would leave them there at the Blue Shutters. They would patrol the beach—two of them together. They were armed with live ammunition. They would walk from there to the Breachway. When they got to the Breachway, they would be picked up by some other military personnel. They would leave two others. The other two would go back—would walk from there back looking for submarines—looking for submarine people coming ashore, or whatever. But on several occasions, I used to meet with them. We used to sit on the front porch of the old hotel that was vacant at the time. In fact, my brother-in-law, Peter's dad, he told me that the place was for sale, and that it was for sale for \$11,000, and they had no takers. Today it just blows my mind to think about that. However, he said one of the main reasons nobody wanted it was that it had an old wiring system, and in order to buy it, you would have to rewire the entire place. So, the nuns bought it. I can't remember the year. That was years ago. What else can I tell you? My mother got very mad at my sister at one point. She sent me up West Beach Road to the farm on the left on the corner of West Beach and Route 1. We used to go up there. They had a chicken farm. I went up there to get a dozen eggs. They had a cigar box there. You just went in and picked your eggs out of the refrigerator, and you put your money in the cigar box and you left, and you never saw a person. That's how things have changed. I walked up and walked back. When my mother found out about it, she was furious. That was too far for me to go.

Q: You were eleven years old then?

A: I was eleven, maybe twelve. My brother-in-law used to come down to the beach on weekends. The way he did it was I would meet my brother-in-law, and he would give me a ride on a Friday night, and I'd stay that week, and at the end of the week he would bring my brother down and I would go home with him early on a Sunday morning. That's the way it worked. We did that quite often. I had a lot of fun there.

Q: I didn't realize that when I was that little, you used to always be here. When I started to have a memory, you would come down when you weren't working. I was like five or six. You would come down—

A: When I was fifteen or sixteen. When I was seventeen, I had a car, and I drove down. I had a Model A Ford Roadster, the same as I've got now.

Q: I came down with you once. I remember the railroad tracks. I think we were six feet off the ground. That was great. I still remember that. And when Dad would come down West Beach Road, there were those two humps, and on the '41 Ford—

A: You would go fast.

Q: ...we would speed up.

A: Did you tell the Society about your house landing on Lila's property?

Q: No.

A: You didn't say anything about that?

Q: I haven't told them yet.

A: That's why I started coming down here, because that house was washed up on Lila Crapo's property.

Q: The way I heard the story was that Morris Point was Boston Blacky, the actor. He had a big house on the point, which Lila's mother had owned after he did. There was a shed attached to one of the out buildings, and that got smacked by the hurricane and moved. It was her building, but it got all crushed. Lila said to my mother, "If you get it off the property, you can have it." That was the beginning of Patches. One thing I vaguely remember, and I don't know if you remember it as well, was the warships out here.

A: Yes.

Q: I remember warships out here.

A: I was too young to know where they were coming from, but I was all excited about it, because we used to sit and watch them put together a convoy, or whatever. We used to watch for the submarines to surface, and then disappear again. We used to sit on the beach and watch that. I guess those were maneuvers for them at the time. I guess they figured it was safe water at that time. The other thing was the gas station. There was a gas station across Route 1 at the corner: Windstall Gas Station. That was the only telephone available. Many times, I walked up to use that phone. That was a day's work going there and back.

WIFE: I walked up there with three kids one day. I guess we were building a house in September. I stayed down with the kids, and Ted went home.

Q: You were building this house?

WIFE: Yes. I guess we had a gas refrigerator. Something happened to the refrigerator. I had no car. I had no phone. I took the three kids. We walked all the way to the corner.

Q: We used to go up to meet my dad sometimes on Friday nights. We used to sit on the guardrail where the farm was by Route 1. We would wait for my dad to come down Route 1. We were sitting on the guardrail, and all of a sudden, my mother said, “Oh, did you just pinch me?” I said, “No. I’m just sitting here waiting for Dad.” Then she goes, “Oh, something got me.” It was the electric fence right behind the guardrail. She would bump the electric fence. Now, I’ve heard that they dynamited Fresh Pond Rock. I heard that story, but is that true?

A: I’ll tell you what I know about it. That’s the story that I heard, too, that it was blown up because it was a focal point for navigation. That’s what I heard. And they wanted to destroy that. But I remember that when it was full size before that happened. Your dad used to love to go surfcasting. He used to drive over here to East Beach, and he would park there on the side, and we’d walk down. The reason that I remember it so well is he’d come down in the fall when it was cold, because that’s when the Bass are running, and the wind would be coming up the beach. I used to sit behind that to stay warm, because it was so cold.

Q: So that you weren’t in the wind?

A: Yes. I got out of the breeze.

Q: So, it was big enough?

A: It has huge.

Q: So, it probably was blown up.

A: Yes. They destroyed it. I guess that’s what happened. It’s all broken up now, and it didn’t break up by itself.

Q: Was it right down at the edge of the water?

A: No. There was some sand in front of it. I guess in high tides it did get wet. But I can remember sitting there and being perfectly warm and comfortable.

Q: There was one storm down here—I think it was Irene—when it washed out a bunch of sand, and there were a lot of big chunks. That’s where it was?

A: That’s where it was.

Q: And somewhere down by Blue Shutters there was that installation—the concrete bunker.

A: Yes. That’s now a beautiful home. Have you been over there lately?

Q: Yes. But what did it used to be?

A: They said they had ammunition in there. It was a bunker. They didn't use it for anything else. They had stored ammunition there. Another thing that I remember, that I used to listen to all night long, were the airplanes going in and out of the airport that they had built just for training for landing and taking off of aircraft carriers.

Q: Down in Ninigret?

A: Yes. The planes used to constantly do it all night long. They would come land, and they would take off, circle over our houses and come back. They would do it again, and they would do it again. It went on and on and on. It was pretty boring after a while.

Q: I remember them coming by the beach. We would all wave, and they tipped their wings.

A: Yes. There was one that crashed. I remember that. That was a big deal. I don't know what year it was.

Q: To the pond, or in the ocean?

A: It went into the pond.

Q: The other thing I just thought of is they used to tow targets.

A: Right.

Q: I hadn't thought of that for years.

A: Yes. The ships used to come out, and they used to tow targets. They had ammunition that was not explosive, but it would make marks and powder stains on them. They used to tow those.

Q: Are you talking about the ships?

A: Yes.

Q: I remember that planes would tow targets also. They'd have dog fights around the targets. I hadn't thought of that for years. What about blimps?

A: Yes. We had some blimps. You would see blimps once in a while.

Q: I guess they used those for submarines.

A: Yes. I don't remember anything about that submarine that got sunk out there. For some reason, it was never publicized. I don't remember that. I didn't hear that until years later. We were very happy when the war was over.

Q: Lenny was in the service. He was up to his ears in the Pacific, wasn't he?

A: Yes. I had three brothers in the service.

Q: Ray and Dimpy?

A: And Lenny.

Q: And then you joined the Navy a little after the war was over.

A: Yes. That was in the '50s.

Q: How would you describe Quonochontaug when you started to come down here? What was it like?

A: When we used to come down to the beach—we weren't at East Beach; we were at Little Beach in front of the cottage. Sometimes there would be no one on the beach. On the 4th of July, if there were more than three people on the beach, it was a happening. Now, of course it's another story. I don't know what East Beach looked like, because I never swam on East Beach. I always swam right in front of the cottage. We stayed there. We lived there when the Gurneys built the house in front of us. I remember that construction.

Q: Do you remember the Dodd's goat?

A: Yes. I remember their garden and their well—their old pitcher pump that they had there. We used to go over and get water at times from there when our well was—

Q: When the pump didn't work, which was half the time.

A: Exactly.

Q: And there were no other houses. There is what's now the nuns. And then there is a house next to the nuns.

A: There were a couple of houses there.

Q: And there was the big Dowd house, which was the big gabled thing.

A: Right. They had a huge house, and then they had a smaller house.

Q: Yes. And they would move back and forth. They would live in the little house in the winter, and vice versa.

A: I'll never forget the day that I came down here. This has nothing to do with the history. The Dowds were very colorful people. I came down here one day in the wintertime just to check Patches. This was probably the late '50s in the wintertime. I took a ride. I saw

the Dowds getting into their car. They had a '36 Buick that had been through the flood in the hurricane. They got dressed. They were in there. They all wore these beautiful hats. So, I stopped and talked to them for a little while. I said, "Where are you going?" It was Florence and Agnes. Agnes was not driving; Florence was driving. Florence said, "We're going to the mailbox. We do this every day."

Q: And the mailbox was 100 yards up the road.

A: Yes. It was just on the other side of their house. It was funny.

Q: They got dressed and they took a ride.

A: That was a happening. I don't know how many nights when I was a little kid that we would go over to the Dowd's house, and we would play Monopoly. The Monopoly game would last three to five weeks.

Q: Did they play?

A: Yes.

Q: The Dowd sisters?

A: Yes. Florence and Agnes. That was a big thing. We kept it going on their table in the dining room. It would take three weeks before we'd get through a game. Of course, there was no television. We didn't even have a radio.

Q: When I was about five or six, I remember the radio. The thing I remember about the radio was the Morse Code coming across—"Beep-beep-beep-beep."

A: I don't remember the radio at all. We didn't do much of that. We didn't do much of anything.

Q: But you had a good time. You loved it.

A: It was very entertaining. Everybody sat and talked.

Q: You used to play Canasta and Setback.

A: Yes. When you were tiny, we would play on the beach for hours and hours making castles.

Q: And catching crabs. You taught me how to make airplanes and boats in the sand. I remember that.

A: That was fun.

Q: When did you build this house?

A: 1961.

Q: How many other houses were there on the street?

A: Midland Road ended at my driveway. There was no more road after this. That's why I bought this lot. I bought this lot because of that tree. It was my choice of lots. The only other house was here. It's gone now. It's been replaced with a bigger home. But there was the house on the corner, which was—I can't think of their names now. They passed on. Then there was Tucker's house. That's all that was here.

Q: Was Thorpe still selling the lots then?

A: Yes. Papa Thorpe.

Q: Yes. Howard.

A: Yes. He was a great guy.

Q: He was a big guy, wasn't he?

A: He was. Yes.

Q: I vaguely remember him.

A: He was a wonderful guy. I had three kids at the time. I came down here and wanted to buy a lot. My mother was on me to buy a house down here and do something down here, because she loved it so much. To go back to Mom, my mother and I used to come down here before the '50s—'49, '48. We'd come down here, and we used to go clamming in the Breachway. There was a bowling alley down there. To go back to the bowling alley, when I was a little kid coming down here, at night there was not much to do. I would walk down to the bowling alley, and I used to set pins in the crooked alleys. It was a busy place. There was a tiny store. They had a few necessities that they would carry. I used to get ten cents a string for setting pins up. The tips were pretty scarce. I used to go down and do that at night, and walk home in the dark and be scared to death all the way home.

Q: Of skunks?

A: Anything. I remember being panic-stricken sometimes. I'd run most of the way. So, we'd come down and we would go clamming. The Breachway wasn't dredged at the time. There was a rowboat there that somebody used. It was sparse. No one was here. We would walk all the way out in the swamp on low tide. But on high tide, one time we had the bright idea to take the rowboat. Well, we took the rowboat—we didn't ride in it. We just pulled it behind us, because we picked a bushel basket. Not a peach basket; a

full bushel basket—my mother and I. She loved to do that. We'd pick them in the pond. It was easy picking. Not like today. Very easy. They were very plentiful. We put the basket in the boat, and we had to drag that boat back. That was more work. My mother and I did that.

Q: Were they steamers or quahogs?

A: They were quahogs. We got tons of them. She canned them. We had them in the winter.

Q: Would she steam them up?

A: Yes. She took them out and chopped them up. She made chowder or whatever. It was a great time. It was so much different. A lot of people today are coming down here. They come from the big cities. They come down here, and they want to change it. I've had a tussle with a few. I worked on the water thing down here for the water system. They come down, and I tell them, "Why do you want to change everything?" "We should have this. We should have that." I said, "Let's leave it the way it is. You came here because you love. Now you want to change it. Let's leave it alone. Why do we want to modernize everything?" It's very restful and very peaceful to be here. If we change it too much, it's not going to be peaceful for my kids. That's what I think.

Q: The thing I remember is the trucks that used to come by and sell food.

A: Vegetables. Yes. We used to look forward to that, because we had no transportation. We would go once every three weeks—I remember this very clearly. The Dodds had this '36 Buick, and they would go around and ask anybody what they needed from the stores. I went with them on two or three occasions. They have lists from each house. We would go to Westerly. It was an all-day trip to go to Westerly. I guess we went about ten miles an hour. It was a little, stinky road. Route 1 was just a tiny road. It's the same road that runs in front of Henry's now.

Q: Yes. The Post Road.

A: That little thing. That's the way the whole road was. That's the only transportation.

Q: And you would go into Westerly and buy food for everybody, and bring it all back?

A: We would fill the car up with bags. We did everything we had to do, and then we would come back. It was an all-day happening.

Q: And there also used to be a fish guy that would come by selling fish from his truck.

A: Yes. I remember that he would come by. The vegetable truck would come down. He came right into the driveway. He had a bell. Dingle-lingle-ling. You would go out and buy what you needed. He had a lot of vegetables. He had some regular household items,

which we would buy. But we didn't have much else. Of course, the bowling alley had a few things.

Q: You built this in '61.

A: I bought the property from Mr. Thorpe. Before I looked here, I looked at Green Hill. We went all over. You mother took us all over looking at places. But we didn't want anyplace else but here. So, I came back, and I called up Mr. Thorpe. I talked to him. He came over and met with me one day, and he said, "I'm putting in new streets. I have lots available." I said, "Fine." He brought us up here to East Beach. We came up the street, and there was one house right on the street on the corner. The road stopped right here at the end of my driveway. I looked at the lot. You couldn't even get in here. It was brush. I said, "How much is this?" And he said, "It's \$800." I said, "Okay. That's fine. I'll buy it." And he said, "All right. How about the one next door to you?" I said, "Mr. Thorpe, I've got three kids. I work for a living. I can't afford it." He said, "What I want to do is I want to give you an option on that lot. I'll give you a two-year option." I said, "Fine." I said, "I don't think I'll ever pick it up, because I have to build a house now. I have a house at home, and I've got all these things going on. I can't afford it." So, he said, "Don't worry about that." I said, "Mr. Thorpe, when can I start building here?" He said, "You can start tomorrow. Don't worry about it. I don't want you to pay me until next year." That was in September.

Q: You're kidding?

A: Honest to God. I said, "I want to do some work. I want to clear the spot and put in some pilings." I built this house on pilings in the beginning. I said, "I want to start promptly." He said, "Yes. Do anything you want."

Q: He might have known that if you didn't come up with the money that he would have a house started here.

A: Possibly. But he was so nice to me. I couldn't believe it. I said, "I'm going to come down next weekend with some axes and start clearing the lot." He said, "Fine. I'll put some pins in for you." So, he put in the pins on the four corners of my lot. I came here and I started building the house. I had the whole lot cleared. I had the pilings in. I put a driveway in. I put two loads of gravel in so I could get off the street, because the street was higher than the lot. As soon as I got the work down, I got a call.

Q: And you did this yourself? You didn't hire people?

A: I did it all myself. I got a telephone call. Mr. Thorpe wanted to talk to me. So, I called him up. This was December.

Q: Just a couple of months after you got started?

A: Yes. A couple of months later. I had this cleared, and I had pilings. I put the cement blocks underneath the pilings. I dug and holes and foundation. I was young and crazy. So, I called him up and said, "What's the matter?" Mr. Thorpe said, "I'm sorry, but we made a mistake here somewhere." I said, "What's the mistake?" I didn't have it surveyed or anything. He said, "It seems as though your driveway that you put in is on the house next door's property." I said, "Mr. Thorpe, I put the pin where you told me."

Q: You put the driveway where he put the pin?

A: Yes. I said, "I'll come down Saturday and we'll talk about it." So, I came down Saturday, and I looked at it. Boobian was here. Mr. Boobian bought the house next door. He has also passed. He said, "You're on my property." I said, "Not to my knowledge. I wasn't on your property when I started." I had to move everything twelve feet off the line. We were twelve feet where we shouldn't be. So, I had to move twelve feet towards the beach. I said to Peggy, "I worked so damned hard." I hadn't paid for the property yet, so I said, "Forget it. I'm just going to let Thorpe have it the way it is, and I'm going to leave it."

Q: I didn't know that.

A: Oh, yeah. I was really, really upset. Really upset.

Q: I don't blame you, because he put the pins in.

A: He put the pins in.

Q: And you put the driveway in.

A: Yes. I put the driveway in where he told me. In fact, I bought the gravel from the guy up here.

Q: Roland D. Moranville?

A: Right. He brought me loads of soil.

Q: The trashman?

A: The trashman. He was a real Rhode Islander.

Q: So, Roland came down and dumped the gravel on Boobian's land?

A: Yes. I shoveled it out and made a driveway for myself. That was just me and my wife. That's all we were doing when my kids were little. They were with me. I said, "Forget it. I'm going fishing." So, my wife got upset. Peggy got really, really upset. "You can just throw this away. I want a place at the beach." I said, "I'm going home. We're going home. Forget about this." She said to me, "No, I'm not going to do that. I want to stay

at Meely's house." I couldn't get ahold of Mr. Thorpe. I guess it was Sunday, because Thorpe wasn't there, but he would be there tomorrow. So, I took the car and went home. I left her here with the kids with bare necessities at Meely's house. There was nobody here. It was cold. It was wintertime. She said, "I'll stay." She got up Monday morning and went to talk to Mr. Thorpe. He said, "Whatever the problem is, I'll just put the driveway where it belongs. I'll move the pins and you'll be all set." She said, "I don't know. My husband is upset." He said, "Tell him not to get upset. Don't worry about it. Everything is fine." So, I came down that next week, and she said, "This is what happened." I went down the next week. I got a better driveway than I had before, and they were continuing making the road. They were making the road at the time, so the guy just swung in and made me a driveway. I figured, "Wow, this is pretty good. I'm all set now."

Q: I did not know that.

A: Then January came, and I sent him a check for the property for \$800. Everything was fine. I got all the papers. I did everything I had to do. I built the house with no building permit. Nobody was even thinking about permits down there. The only stipulation was that if you built a garage, you had to attach it to your house, at that time. That's what they told me when I went down to get a building permit. So, I built the house. Three years later, I got a call. Mr. Thorpe wanted to talk to me. "Hey, I have some people that are interested in that lot that I gave you an option on. Are you interested in it?" I said, "Yes." At that time, I said, "I'm interested." He said, "Okay. That's all I want to know. Pay me when you can." That was it. And he hung up the phone. He was a fantastic guy.

Q: Just a handshake.

A: Yes.

Q: I remember now about the path from our house. When the Dowds sold us the property that we put Sewell's little shed on, the Dowds put in the deed the right-of-way to the ocean.

A: It was by her house.

Q: It could not be passed onto heirs or assigns. Then they sold the lot. There were a lot of hard feelings. By that time, they had started After Thought. Thorpe had the right-of-way that used to go down to the beach from our lot, but by that time, nobody else could use it, because it had been to the Rhode Island Supreme Court, because everybody wanted to use it. Dowds said no. It went to the Rhode Island Supreme Court. The Rhode Island Supreme Court said, "You, Thorpe, own this path, but Dowds own the way to get to the path, so nobody else can get to the path." But our lot was right up against the path. So, Mom went to Howard Thorpe and she said, "We just lost our right-of-way to the ocean. Is there any way we can buy the right to go down your path?" He said, "Yes." And she said, "How much?" He said, "One dollar." He sold that right-of-way to my mother for \$1.

A: The use of it was a right-of-way. He didn't sell the property.

Q: Subsequently, we bought it from him.

A: Yes. Later on.

Q: Mom always thought that the reason he did that was that when they bought the piece of property on Central Beach, that she paid him two days early on every—he held the mortgage. She made sure that he always got his money. So, she was in his good graces. There are a lot of stories like that. That's not Quonochontaug history; that's family history.

A: I was very sad when they took the hotel that was on West Beach Road.

Q: The Seabreeze Inn?

A: I remember that one very clearly. The only thing I don't remember was it ever being occupied. That was in the '40s. I probably wasn't interested in it. But I was here the day they burned it down. Me and kids and my wife sat there in the car and watched them burn it. That was a shame. Now there's a beautiful home there. They kept that little outbuilding. The outbuilding was a dancehall. They had dances in there.

Q: I never went to those. I remember Danny and Peggy Race used to stay there sometimes.

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