

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

SUSI GERRISH BRODIE

March 2, 2023

Interviewed by Steve Young in Charlestown

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Q: It is March 2nd, 2023. I am Steve Young, a member of the Quonochontaug Historical Society. And it's my great pleasure to take the oral history of Susi Brodie, who knows a lot about Quonochontaug, and goes back many, many years. Susi, before we start, two housekeeping matters. One is you know that we're on Zoom, and this is recorded.

A: Correct.

Q: And it's okay with you?

A: I give my permission.

Q: Okay. And secondly, we are trying to make our oral histories available to the public on the Quonochontaug Historical Society website. We now have 100 that are up and available, and I want to get your permission to make yours available on the website.

A: Correct. And I would request that it be under Susi Gerrish Brodie.

Q: Susi Gerrish Brodie. And for the transcriber, would you spell those so we don't misspell it throughout the transcript?

A: Gerrish is G-E-R-R-I-S-H. And Brodie is B-R-O-D-I-E.

Q: And Susi is S-U-S-I?

A: Correct.

Q: Okay. Got it. Well, let's get started. Why don't you tell us about the first contact that anyone in your family had with Quonochontaug? Do you know how far back that goes, and who that was?

A: Yes. My mother, Jean Gerrish, who also has been recorded, came here when she was a very young child prior to the '38 Hurricane.

Q: And Jean is J-E-A-N?

A: Correct.

Q: Okay.

A: And she came prior to the '38 Hurricane. And then I believe in 1938 or 1939 they weren't able to have a cottage here, so they went to Maine. And her parents decided that it was much too chilly, so they returned to Quonochontaug and rented for a bit, and then were able to acquire a cottage.

Q: Wow. So, what were some of their early rentals, if you know?

A: Prior to the '38 Hurricane, my grandparents rented on East Beach. I don't recall with any specifics exactly the homes that they rented otherwise, but I know they didn't rent for long before my grandmother was pretty insistent that they buy a place. So, they bought the Beckwith cottage, which they renamed Jaboge, which stands for Jack, Bob, Jean. And so, my mother and her two brothers were the namesakes of the cottage. And my grandfather bought three lots, one for each one of the kids.

Q: And those are interesting lots. Describe those lots.

A: One was an oceanfront lot. And then the next lot was on Surfside. And then the next lot back, there's a home there now, but it was in between the Carpenter and the Breck house. And then our house, which was built in the '20s, was all the way back in between Ellen Frost and the Carpenter house.

Q: Was that an Ocean View address, because the house opened on Ocean View?

A: Correct.

Q: But you owned the two lots that were closest to the ocean, one on each side of Surfside?

A: Correct.

Q: And when do you think those were purchased?

A: I can't remember the exact date. I believe it was in the late '30s. It was after the '38 Hurricane, because our house had gone through and survived the '38 Hurricane. It was built up on stanchions. During the '38 Hurricane, where the Breck House is now was a large pit next to your house. But many people felt that that really helped deflect the water, or reduce the speed and amplitude of the water coming across the yard.

Q: And you said that they bought from the Beckwiths?

A: Yes. They bought it from the Beckwiths.

Q: And do you know how old the place was when they bought it?

A: I've heard 1923, and I've heard 1928. I would venture to say early '20s rather than later '20s, but I could be wrong. I've never gone back into the records. It might be something that I should do just to see if they have the records of when that was built. But in all the years that we owned it, it remained pretty much exactly the same. No dishwasher. The kids had responsibilities to do all of the dish washing. It was part of community living. My mother would always say, "It's not a vacation; it's community living."

Q: And it was two stories?

A: It was two stories. There was a bedroom or a puzzle room downstairs with a gathering room and a large fireplace. And a kitchen that had a washer and dryer. Upstairs there was a small bedroom on the right-hand side, and then what we called the bunk room, which had two bunkbeds and another trundle bed. And then in the next room, we called that the pink room, and that was next to Carpenters. That had two twin beds and a crib so that we could fit everyone there.

Q: And when did you first set foot in that house?

A: 1955. The year I was born, I was able to attend. I haven't missed a summer yet.

Q: We're supposed to ask for the person who's giving the oral history's birthdate. Do you mind giving me that?

A: No. I'm 7/11/55.

Q: Okay. What were your grandparents' names? Was the house originally bought by the grandparents?

A: Yes. By my mother's parents. And it was John and Belle, B-E-L-L-E, Sutherland, S-U-T-H-E-R-L-A-N-D.

Q: And when you said your family first arrived in Quonochontaug just before the '38 Hurricane, you're talking about the Sutherland family arriving in Quonochontaug?

A: Correct.

Q: Where was their permanent home?

A: My grandparents lived on 56 Walnut Street in Naugatuck, Connecticut. And there was quite a Naugatuck contingency here, believe it or not. The Glassons, the Browns—quite a few people. My grandmother knew quite a few people. In the early days when my mother would come down with my grandmother, my grandfather would drop her off and go back to work, and they would stay without any driving. My grandmother didn't drive, and they didn't really need a car, because they had the fish cart and vegetable cart and the milk cart that all came by. Or they could walk up to the farm and get what they needed. So, they would be here for the week without him, and then he would come down on the weekends.

Q: Before I get into the carts, because I do want to ask you about that, because I have heard about that before, was the house winterized, or was it a summer cottage?

A: No. It was just a summer cottage.

Q: So, it didn't have insulation in the walls?

A: No. In the wintertime, when I was able to actually come in the winter, I would say it was colder in the house than it was outside. I think the first time I ever came to the beach when it wasn't summertime, I want to say it was in the '70s. I came to visit my cousin in Boston, and we drove down to the beach. It was the first time that I had the epiphany of, "Oh, my gosh, this place has other seasons besides summer." It was like a glacial park. The rocks were all covered with ice. It was just magnificent. It was a really spectacular sight.

Q: Was the house ever added onto?

A: No. Not to the best of my knowledge. It was in its original condition until my mother and her brother sold it.

Q: When did your grandparents pass away? Did they pass it on to Jean, Bob and Jack?

A: I believe 1967 is when John Sutherland passed away, my grandfather. I could be wrong, but I'm pretty sure that that's when he passed away. And that was when the cottage became owned by the three parents. And because Jack was from Worcester, Massachusetts, and Bob was from Naugatuck, Connecticut, and my family was from Maryland, whenever my family came to the beach, we would always have a family reunion when all of the aunts, uncles and cousins would all come together for a day of celebration. So, we continued to make it the glue that held the family together. It was a lot of fun.

Q: How did you manage who had the place when? Did you each get four weeks? How did it work?

A: There were eleven weeks in the summertime from the time school got out until the time started. So, the first session was four weeks, the middle session was three weeks and the

last session was four weeks. And whoever got the last session would close the cottage, and then rotate into the first session the following year.

Q: And that worked for years and years and years?

A: As long as I can remember. No one liked the middle session, because it was short. And later on in life everybody said they didn't like the first session, because the water was always the coldest.

Q: I remember Steve Long telling me, in his oral history, about how you really didn't need a car in Quonochontaug, because there were all these vendors that would come around and service the houses.

A: The community. Yes.

Q: Tell me what you remember about the early days where there were vendors that would ring a bell?

A: My mother would be the one to really respond to that, because that was the lifestyle that she lived. She went through the war and those periods of time. It was my grandmother who didn't drive. But when we were here, we would go to Rickadons if we needed something, or one of the old stores. It wasn't a summer unless we all went to Bennie's and got our rubber rafts or our canvass rafts. But I don't remember any food trucks per se. I remember arriving at the beach, no matter what time we were, and my dad would pull the car over and we would smell to see if we could determine what the level of the pond was, whether it was low tide or high tide. And then we would call the cows to see if they would come to the side. And then we would drive down to the house. I think there was maybe a dairy truck. But I don't remember any other delivery trucks per se.

Q: What did you hear from your grandparents as to what vendors would call?

A: It's interesting, because my grandfather died when I was sixteen or seventeen. We didn't spend a lot of time with him at the beach. We would come down as a family and drive to see him. So, unfortunately, I don't have a lot of those memories. I have my mother's memories of talking about her parents and how they would come down. I know she talked about Stu Pomeroy lived in the house next door, and they would try to plan their dinner times together. And Stu Pomeroy would wait to see my mother doing the dishes after dinner and come over and help her so they could go out to play after dinner. But I don't remember any delivery trucks or that kind of thing while I was here.

Q: I think Steve had memories of a bakery truck and a fish and meat truck.

A: Yes.

Q: And a vegetable vendor. There was an icehouse, and they would go get ice for the ice box.

A: Yes.

Q: One thing that you said, that caught my ear, because I have the same memory, is of the pond smelling. The pond doesn't really smell like it did in the '60s. It used to really smell.

A: Oh, yes. That was some of our first memories. In the beginning, it was an eleven-hour drive for us to drive from Kensington, Maryland to Quonnie. And my father would come home from work, we would pack the car and then we would drive. We would come to a complete standstill in Baltimore. And then I can remember my parents debating, "Do we want to take the GW or the Lincoln GW? Where are we going to hit less traffic?" We would get to Quonnie in the middle of the night. Back in the day, we would have a dog and a cat and the four kids. We would all be awakened, "We're here. We're here." And we would go out and smell, and you could smell if it was low tide.

Q: I think when they redid the breachway in the '60s, where now there's billions of gallons that flow in twice a day and out twice a day, the pond is much healthier, cleaner and fresher. The water is clearer. There's not the eutrophication that smelled so bad before the breachway was enhanced.

A: I think my dad always told us he could smell the clams were happy.

Q: Were you a clamming family?

A: Oh, yes. We were clamming. And we used to go fishing. I can remember my dad would take my older sister and I in a little boat, drop the anchor and swim back and say, "Get a couple of fish," and everything would go along smoothly with the flounder until one of us snagged an eel. Once the eel hit the boat, it was over. We were done.

Q: Nobody wanted to take that off the hook, right?

A: Nobody wanted to take that off the hook. And then we would get back to the house and my mother said, "The rule is for every fish you catch, you clean." So, there was a little cement break point at the bottom of the stairs, and she would teach us how to clean the fish, and we would have it for dinner.

Q: What was your clamming technique?

A: I'm a groveler, and I'm a groveler to this day. I go with somebody who's a necker, and I go with somebody who's a dancer. So, one of them goes and feels the edge of the clam with her feet. The other one looks for the little keyhole. I remember doing a rake as a child. My dad would give us the little yard rakes, and we would do that. And I do remember using a plunger at one point in time for steamers. But now I'm a groveler.

Q: Grovel with your fingers in the mud?

A: Yes. I like to feel the clams talking to me.

Q: You mentioned the pit that was next to you where the Breck cottage now stands at 140 Surfside.

A: Correct.

Q: Do you have any knowledge about the pit and how it became a pit?

A: I've heard two different stories. One story was that they dug it out for construction after a period of time. And then somebody else said that it was the beginning of a foundation for a house that they changed their mind and decided not to move forward with. I would venture to say that the soil was used for some type of a purpose. I remember my mom played in that pit, and all of us kids would play hide and go seek in that pit. And so, we were pretty devastated when the pit became a house.

Q: It had a huge granite boulder. Maybe I'm enhancing it, but it was 10-feet high.

A: Yes. And we used to be able to climb the back wall. It was huge. It was huge. It was the beginning of a foundation of a house. It looked like it could have been. But all the rocks were pushed up in the back end of it, because my parents would always yell at us, "Stop climbing those rocks," waiting for us to fall.

Q: When there was Hurricane Carol, or one of the bigger hurricanes, the pit would fill.

A: Yes. My sister, Meg, in 1954 was here in the hurricane. And Mr. Henry told my mother that she had to leave the house with my daughter, because my dad wasn't home. I remember my mom saying that she was surprised at how much damage there was during Hurricane Carol.

Q: Water damage, or wind damage?

A: I think both. I think they were surprised that the pit filled. It's hard to conceptualize what the water damage can do. Now that I've lived here for so long, I have a better understanding of what the water can do, and what the wind can do. I've become much better educated about the impacts of the wind. I've seen the water do its thing and take control.

Q: In Sandy?

A: All of the different hurricanes. There was one in the '80s as well that brought down a lot of trees. Then there was one that unearthed the cars in Misquamicut that had been put there during Hurricane Carol. They brought in automobiles and covered them with sand. And in one of the hurricanes, it unearthed all of those cars. You can begin to conceptualize just how many years of sand. That's why when superstorm Sandy came,

and they said, "Bring back the dunes," I tried to remember they're not dunes; they're piles of sand. Dunes are developed and nurtured by nature, and compounded by the wind and the rain and the storms and things like that. So, I am always sad to think that when the next storm comes, they'll wash those sand piles into the Winnapaug Pond. So, as much as we think we're doing the right thing, you just can't mess with Mother Nature. I was going to ask you a question. Did you ever hear stories about the Runny Nose Club?

Q: I know a little bit about the Runny Nose Club. I have a very treasured picture of them in front of our house. Tell me what you remember about the Runny Nose Club.

A: Growing up, because my grandparents were there, we called a lot of people grampa. It was Grampa Moran, your family, and Grampa Brown. My parents were very, very close to the Browns. There was Grampa George Saunders. And we were very close to their family. There was Grampa McCloud and Grampa Wait. We never really knew them, except for people would say, "Wow, you're related to a lot of people," and I said, "No, they're not related, but that's what we've always done is called them grandparents." But I do remember that I would watch Grampa Moran, Grampa McCloud, Grampa Wait, I believe it was, and I don't know who else. Who owned the little red house? Mr. Lockwood. I don't know if he was part of that group. But they would walk around. I can remember Grampa Moran the best, because if you were out riding your bike, and you went a little too close to him, he would get uncomfortable and he would take his spiked cane and say, "Now, move along. Move along." And he would kind of scoot you out of the way, or let you know that you were a little too close for comfort.

Q: I think he had an applewood cane that had lots and lots of little branches cut off, so it was pretty spikey.

A: Yes.

Q: I think Al Randall was one of the walkers too.

A: Yes. And growing up, I knew Dr. Waterman, who was Grampa Dr. Waterman. As a matter of fact, when I started to play tennis, it was Mrs. Headman, Mrs. Rubin, Mrs. this or that. And they would say, "Call me my name," and I said, "I don't think I can do that."

Q: How old were you in those days?

A: My parents were charter members of the Quonnie Tennis Club. Whenever that started is probably when I started to play tennis. I would play with my dad when he was here for short times. I don't remember how old the club is. Another great memory is when we were allowed to ride our bikes, we had more freedom here than we ever did at home. We were allowed to go out and ride our bikes. Now I know where I was, but I didn't know at that time. I had come down Surfside, and I had scratched my foot on the fender. I got off, and I must have walked back in where the Atwoods are, and through the thicket back in there, and I couldn't find my way home. I remember not being able to see the ocean,

because I was so short that I couldn't see over the thicket. I remember walking towards the water and saying, "I've got to be close." I ended up getting home, and my parents said, "Where is your bike?" I said, "I have no idea. It's somewhere on the road somewhere. I laid it down. I'm not going back."

Q: Were you seven, eight or nine?

A: Probably seven or eight. I remember when my boys were little, so many kids learned how to ride their bike here. My cousin said to me, "Let your kids ride the bike." And I said, "I don't know." And she said, "They'll be fine. They'll just do the short block." And I watched the four boys, my two boys and their two matching-age cousins ride down, blow right past the first left-hand corner and ride into freedom. We ran through the house, and got to Surfside and waited and anticipated, and finally here they go just racing by the front. They were so free. It was such an exhilarating feeling to see them have such freedom, because at home it wasn't anything we would do.

Q: I think you're right. That is a feeling I think everyone shared, because there was way more traffic and faster traffic, or you lived on a busy road, or it wasn't safe to ride your bike. When you got to Quonnie, you were entering freedomville and you could be turned loose.

A: Yes. Another interesting story is that my parents decided that in order for any of us to be able to go to the beach and swim independently, or what we perceived to be independently without adults watching us, we had to take a swim test. So, we went down to the rocks in front of Berks or down right there, and we had to go out. My dad would get on a raft, and we would go out over our heads, and we had to swim to the other rocks on East Beach and back. If we could do that out over our heads, then we would be allowed to swim. It took me three summers to do it. I was so deathly afraid of the fish around the rocks. But when I finally did it, I thought, "I can come to the beach anytime I want." Little did I realize that the community all had that same kind of arrangement. There were always parents watching us. That's what the sense of community was. And I do it now when I'm on the beach. I'm always watching the water to see who's swimming, who's going out farther than you're really thinking they are, or who might be in trouble. It was just the sense of community that we were raised in. I always had parents watching me, even though I didn't know it.

Q: Do you remember, what I think is an old wives' tale, where our parents would say, "You can't go in the water until an hour after you ate," because you would get cramps or something?

A: Yes. I also remember that we were not allowed to say the B word, bored. We did not have a TV. Finally, when we did have a TV, we had the little aluminum foil attachments to the antenna. We would want to watch TV, and my father would say, "No, we're not watching TV." And somebody would say, "I'm bored," and he would say, "Out of the house. Go find somewhere to be." And we did. That was a great time to explore the pond or the breachway or so many wonderful places.

Q: Was the Dingle off limits?

A: Yes. Originally. But I think my mother probably did the same thing when she was a child. This was a great place to explore. I had a very large group of friends that I would go exploring with. We always walked on Old West Beach Road, which was the road with no lights. It would be the scary road. We could walk it by ourselves. We had friends on West Beach Road and friends at the end of it, and you'd have to walk all by yourself. I think everybody made adventures. The Dingle was definitely off limits for a period of time. So was the pumphouse. There were a lot of places that were off limits. But as soon as they were off limits, then the intrigue would set in and off we went.

Q: Was the pumphouse the water system back by the tennis courts?

A: Yes. We used to go there. I don't ever remember the casino being off limits. But we went there every night. There would be a large group of us that would walk down, and then we would run back, because we would be late for our curfew.

Q: What do you remember about West Beach and the casino area?

A: I have great memories. We knew a lot of the kids down on West Beach. At night we used to go and watch the bioluminescence in the breachway. It was a magical place. You changed every night. I can remember a game. It had an old phone booth outside of it, and we tried to see how many kids we could pack in the phone booth. I remember a lot of the boys who worked there. In my mom's day, it was a bowling alley. When I was very young it had a bowling alley, but then they moved it to the pinball machines. And they put in a little restaurant. You could get what was called a Wally Bugger. You could go down and bring your quarters and things like that and buy little snacks while we played the pinballs. It was a place go to where you knew everybody would be there. Then we'd talk about our curfews, and whose mother was the strictest. And then, all of a sudden, somebody would yell, "It's time."

Q: I've heard stories about the bowling alley. A lot of people worked setting up the duck pins. You would get ten cents every time you set them up.

A: Yes.

Q: I also heard stories of how crooked it was.

A: Warped.

Q: Warped. Yes.

A: Yes. Very, very warped. I remember bowling as a younger child, and having the warped lanes. But then I remember when they finally put in the pinballs, I was old enough, but

they would get milk crates and you'd stand on top of the crate so that you could actually reach the buttons.

Q: The casino that you're talking about, how would you describe where it was?

A: Across the street from Grandma Brinley's on the left-hand side where the tennis courts are now. It was in that little area. When we were teenagers, a young man from Port Washington, New York brought adjudicated kids there to work in the summertime. We girls all thought that was pretty special, because they were not our typical boys. We didn't know they had any prior history or anything like that. We just knew that they weren't the boys on the beach that we knew.

Q: There's always an attraction for the bad boy.

A: Yes. And there were plenty of those. As a matter of fact, I would say it was sometime in the late '80s that I had a reunion for all of the Quonnie kids, and there were 72 in total people that came. I would say 50 of them were Quonnie kids. We had a cocktail party Friday night at our house. Saturday during the day we went to East Beach, because anybody that had kids could bring food. Saturday night we had a catered dinner dance at the Grange. We showed a movie. The movie was there was a young boy named John Peray, and he was a renter. He rented in Pat and Jack Frost's house. He wanted to go to film school, the University of Southern California Film School. He wrote a play, and then they made this love story movie. He submitted it and was accepted to school. Nobody had really seen that movie since he tried to put it together. Then all of a sudden, we showed it at the gathering. It was a sight for sore eyes. The next day, we took the boats out and we went to Picnic Rock. People who hadn't been slalom skiing or skiing in eighteen years, popped right up and went around the pond. It was just like old times. Everybody jumped off Lovers Rock. It made us all kind of pause and say, "What was the glue that kept us all together?" I think it was just a place where you could experiment and be adventurous, check your boundaries and have a sense of community that was behind you, engage in a lot of fun activities with a lot of fun families.

Q: Rattle off some of the family names of that gang.

A: That came?

Q: Yes.

A: Another little aside, when we were older teenagers, we did the Quonnie Gazette. We did a newspaper. I have given several of my copies to the archives. We had cotillions where we would have dinner dances and we would gather. There were the Sutherlands, the Pinellas, the Claypools, the Pomeroy's, the VanOsts, the Headmens, the Wilsons, John Ferriter, Meryl O'Brien, Ann Farley, Carol Luther, a lot of East Beach kids, a couple of kids from West Beach. I'm trying to think. We had three different sets of families coming through our house, so we made a lot of friends. The Lavery girls were always a lot of fun. They had a boat, which was a lot of fun. Jack Sutherland and my brother and

my sister were also part of that group. There were tons of fun kids. Dave Lee was another one. Tom Kinney was another one. Tom lived back on the pond. I could go on and on.

Q: How did you publish the Quonnie Gazette? Would somebody type it?

A: We wanted to sell it. That was our original thing. And then finally, I think it was Mr. VanOst that decided that they would print it for us. John Ferriter wrote about the sports news or the local political scene in Central Beach. I was in charge of Jet-Set Gibberish. Somebody else was in charge of the parade. I think we did it for three years. I think I gave six of the sessions of it to Ann to archive. It was really pretty funny.

Q: Was this like 1970?

A: It must have been late teenage years, because I think John Ferriter wrote for the Westerly Sun as well. I think he did the Old Goats versus the Kids description after the games. I think he might have submitted that to the Westerly Sun. I'd have to ask him.

Q: Did your family participate in the Quonnie baseball games?

A: Yes. As a matter of fact, Janet Wilson and I talk frequently about being the first girls. One of the men, the man who was on first base, did not want girls to play. Mr. Wilson, having three daughters, said, "The girls will play." So, we were able to actively participate. I think everybody wanted to be here for July 4th. I still have a large box of all of the awards that we received. From the time we would drive away from the beach, we would spend the year thinking about what our costumes would be, whether we would win a prize or not. And so, that's something that I did. People say, "Why do you hold onto them?" and I say, "Because they're treasured memories." I'm trying to think of the last time we participated. It was probably five years ago.

Q: When you talk about treasured memories, you were saying as kids you were free and you could explore. Were you a collector?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: What were your prizes?

A: Collecting here, I have polished bricks. I also have coal. I don't have a piece of coal as big as your piece of coal, but I do have a coal collection. I'm going to do my garden when I move in white stones and coal and brick as borders. Do some mosaic pieces in that. I have a sea glass collection. I have a driftwood collection. I made a lot of nautical art for a couple of years. I collect memories too.

Q: When you say polished brick, what do you mean?

- A: I mean weathered brick. I mean, the old brick that was made with shells and things like that that's really historic and has been washed. I have a lot of those bricks that at some point in time I'll figure out how to do something. A border or something.
- Q: I think at one time there were houses in front of your 140 Surfside and 120 Surfside and 150 Surfside. And all those houses washed away in 1912. I'm not sure exactly when. But I think they left some brick foundations.
- A: Yes. Every once in a while there's a foundation kind of in front of Brecks house that you can see gets unearthed a little bit. But I've been picking up bricks on that beach forever. As a matter of fact, one of the things that the pandemic really helped me do was I walked this beach for almost 68 years, and I saw things that I hadn't seen before. It really reminded me of the glacial impact. I saw a Portuguese Man o' War that I hadn't seen before. I realized how much of the beach has changed. There was a time when you could go into the tidal pools and see starfish every day, and now it's hard to see those. The variety of shells—we used to get urchins and mussels and things like that. And now, you get a plethora of slipper shells, and that's pretty much it. So, the beach has really changed, but it helped me remember those times and treasure them.
- Q: Was your family accomplished crabbers?
- A: Oh, yes.
- Q: What was your technique?
- A: I think some people did chicken wings or chicken legs. We did just smashed mussels on a string. And then we would have crab races. When we were little, we could bring the crabs home. But I think that wore its welcome out with the smell of the dying crabs. And so, then we had to have crab races on the beach and empty the pails out to return them to the sea for the next time we came back to go crabbing. Oh, yes. Crabbing, crabbing, crabbing.
- Q: All of that seems like it's changed. The crabs and the mussels are gone.
- A: Yes. My boys, one is '90 and one is '93, when they were younger, they would take a Hawaiian cling out and go for blacks right out in front. You could go out and see the spider crabs mating in late periods of time. You could go out and we could grab mussels for dinner. And now, I very rarely see the mussels mature. You can see them developing, and then all of a sudden they just don't mature. So, it's all changed significantly. As a matter of fact, part of my collection is my son Jonathan found a Pipefish and a Seahorse. I have those in my collection, because you can't find those anymore here.
- Q: What do you think has caused the mussels to grow onto a quarter inch or a half inch, and they seem like they stop growing, where it used to be easy to find two-inch mussels and

one-and-a-half-inch mussels, crack them and tie a string around them and you would catch twenty crabs pretty easily?

A: So true. You'd fill a bucket pretty quickly.

Q: Yes. What do you think happened?

A: I think there are lots of variables that impact that. The shoreline has changed. The water has changed. You and I will talk at another time, because I go to the URI graduate students' presentations. I'm really fortunate to live in an area where I can go and listen to cutting-edge research and explore the data about the changing seas, and why things are changing. Because one of my questions is why are there so many billions of slipper shells? But living here, Mother Nature does a lot of things to remind us. There was that one year we had the three feet deep of seaweed. We had mussels. There were billions of mussels that came up. I remember a summer of sea stars when there were just tons of them. So, I think the sea awakens us in different ways in a different schedule for us to pay attention to.

Q: Do you think it's global warming or pollution or sea level rise? What's doing it?

A: I think all of those are variables. I don't think there's one thing. I think there's a combination of elements and variables that are impacting each other. Clearly the shoreline has changed. And being able to watch it every day, every day is different. It's a lot of variables. From year to year, I harvest seaweed in the spring. I noticed from year to year, the past three or four years, the sugar kelp has changed significantly, and the sea lettuce has grown exponentially stronger in the past two years. I wonder if that is directly related to water temperature. I can see it in the pond. I won't harvest it from the pond, because I'm concerned about bacteria levels. But out here, the dolce is really growing, and the sea lettuce is growing. So, I'm a happy camper.

Q: And do you put it in salads, or do you cook it?

A: I do a lot of different things with it. The sea lettuce happens to be my favorite right now. I do dolce as well. And I do the sugar kelp. It put in all of my soups. It counteracts the beans' gas production. And I put it in my scrambled eggs. I put it on my avocado toast. I can do a million things with it.

Q: You mentioned the 4th of July. Tell us about the 4th of Julys that you remember.

A: I can remember the old fire truck. I can remember Grampa Burns putting up the flags and leading the parade with his banjo. I can remember gathering in the parking lot with so much excitement watching everybody's costumes and trying to register. I can remember trying to figure out whether I was going to go on a bike or not. If they had bikes, would I be sure to get a prize? I can remember all of the excitement the days before as we'd finally come together and figure out what our costume would be. Even now. Every 4th of July, I'm always amazed at which families can pull together. Mert

Blackhall's family always does an amazing job. It's always fun to watch. I have great memories of that. The planning and the excitement and the executing, and waiting in the field to see if your name was called. I remember so many of the costumes. None of the themes, but the costumes.

Q: All hand made?

A: Yes. Running to Big Wheel. Do you remember where Big Wheel was?

Q: No.

A: Big Wheel was the big supermarket that was down by where Pier 1 was. We would run to Big Wheel and to Benny's to get all of our materials, and rush to get things organized. I remember Mr. Carpenter always blew off the cannon. The little cannon as you drive by his house. I have great memories.

Q: And the fire engine was in lots of years of parades.

A: Yes. That's true. And I love watching Neil Simon bring the horses and the ponies. I think that's always exciting for people.

Q: Was there music?

A: Yes. I can remember speakers falling off the car. Actually, my son, Jonathan, was the youngest fourth-generation, and Mr. Henry drove him. He went with Keliedke, who was the oldest person in the community. I think she might have been 100 or close to 100. And they rode in the back of Mr. Henry's convertible, silver Mustang.

Q: How do you spell

A: It was L-I-E-D-K—she was very, very close friends with Peter Skipper. She lived across the street from Peter Skipper. Kind of down a little bit. I'm not sure. It's K-E-L-I-E-D-K-E maybe. She was lovely. I remember lots of moments.

Q: At the ball field when they were awarding prizes, did the Quonnie Band show up with Mr. Batista?

A: No. Early on, June Wilson, and they'd have their fun little hats. The women would sing. I can remember those women in the t-shirts with the little bathing suits, or whatever. I think Ann Doyle might have been one of them. Peg O'Brien was one of them. They rode around in the back of a truck. I can remember singing. We always sang the Start Spangled Banner, or something patriotic. I can remember there were times when we could barely fit on the field there would be so many people participating. But the Quonnie Band didn't show up until much later.

Q: Tell me a little bit about yourself. You were born in 1955, and raised in Naugatuck, Connecticut.

A: No. I was raised in Kensington, Maryland. My father worked for IBM. Every year we would come. My father's family was from Maine. My mother's family was from Naugatuck. So, we would come to the beach, and then we would drive to Maine to see his relatives, and we would drive to Naugatuck to see my grandfather, who was going on in years. I went to college. I did my undergraduate at Mount Vernon, which is now under the auspices of GW. So, I stayed in the District of Columbia for my undergraduate, and then got a job and taught for five years. Then I did my master's at Johns Hopkins. Then I got married and moved here.

Q: What was your undergraduate degree?

A: My undergraduate was in early childhood and elementary education.

Q: Was there a break before graduate school?

A: Yes. I taught for five years. And then I did my master's in educational technology and communicative disorders. Special education.

Q: Did you go back teaching?

A: I moved here, and I taught in Rhode Island for a very short period of time. Then I got a job in Connecticut. I worked in the Groton Public Schools, which is primarily military. It's the sub base in Groton, Connecticut. The majority of my students were submariners' children.

Q: And special needs, or just matriculating kids?

A: My job was to do the unique learners. Special education. I did gifted-and-talented as well as those that struggled.

Q: You and I share an interest in horseshoe crabs, which Quonochontaug is long on horseshoe crabs, particularly in May when they're spawning.

A: Yes. The first full moon in May. One of my favorite times. I actually did some tagging in Napatree years ago. And I've been to the Delmarva Peninsula. I've seen hundreds of them coming to do their magic.

Q: Is that in Delaware?

A: Yes. I try to take kids to the pond every year to help them understand not to pick up the horseshoe crabs by their tails, and teach them a little bit about how specialized they are. They're living treasures. Pretty special.

Q: Quonnie's oldest residents, 450 million years without changing much.

A: Yes. You did a fabulous presentation on that. That was exciting. Hopefully the Quonochontaug Conservation Group will be able to continue to educate kids about how unique our environment is, and how we need to protect it and be ambassadors.

Q: There is a fear that the horseshoe crab population is crashing again. It could be, because they're taken for medical purposes, because they have a certain blue blood that's integral to medical uses. But when the horseshoe crabs crash, the red knot population crashes too. Do you know about red knots?

A: I thought I read an article that said that they are trying to do some farming of horseshoe crabs, that they're trying to develop the farming specifically because the medical need is so great. So, that will be interesting to see if they can find a balance.

Q: Did you raise two kids?

A: Yes.

Q: Tell us about your children.

A: I have two sons. One is 29, and lived in this Charlestown area for many years and was the head chef with the Breachway Grill. He is now working in North Providence. My other son is 32. They're both spring babies. I was fortunate teaching. I was able to have spring babies, and then take some childrearing leave. Then my older son met his wife at the Coast Guard Academy. They have traveled around. They were in Alaska for a period of time, Oregon for a period of time, Florida and now they're in New York City. She's finishing up school in May, and they'll be returning to do her pay-back tour at the Coast Guard Academy for three years. So, they'll be in close proximity back in New England. They're very happy to be back in New England.

Q: And no grandchildren yet?

A: No. I'm still tutoring. I keep very busy with kids primarily in the summertime. I did some tutoring during the pandemic, but I do a lot of tutoring in the summertime, which I love. I really adore the kids.

Q: Have you joined the conservation group?

A: Of course. Yes. I already have several ideas. As a matter of fact, I did not know Peter Mogielnicki growing up. I knew his mother, Mrs. Mogielnicki. And I remember watching her swim—go down for her afternoon swims in the afternoon with her heart-shaped glasses. But I have met Peter. We've had several conversations. I'm going to do some workshops hopefully on composting and doing a better job of understanding recycling on what is actually recycled and what needs to be upcycled and what needs to be reused. I'm working on that. I've also been going to Audubon presentations. I'm a

member of the Westerly College Club. I'm also a member of the Westerly Land Trust. I'm a member of the Westerly Historic Group and the Charlestown Historic Group. I'm trying to figure out how to bring some of those pieces together, which will be interesting. I think composting could be a very big hit in this community. I'm looking forward to doing that. I'm hoping I can find someone to help me design. I can access the plans for bird boxes. I just went to a presentation on the Audubon, and Rhode Island is in deep trouble, as is the world. But one third of our population has fallen aside because we're just not being mindful about the things that we can be doing. So, it will be interesting. The director from the Audubon Society gave a fabulous presentation, and maybe he'd be able to come and speak to our group. He was phenomenal.

Q: Are these Purple Martin houses?

A: I think they said eight species that they know that they can have direct impact on. It's not a Barn Swallow, but it's something similar to that. He explained that 40 to 50 years ago that Rhode Island was an agricultural state, and it is no longer. And so, the breeding, the nesting, the mating, the feeding grounds have all changed dramatically. So, these houses can be put up. I'm wondering if something at the ball field, or something like that, or maybe even the pump house. Who knows? But somewhere in a private environment we could construct something that would help have them have a new habitat or a place that they could attach.

Q: Before I close, I wanted to ask you about your swimming. You seem like you're the first one in and the last one out in the year.

A: Well, I am fortunate. My son and daughter-in-law came, and I swam on Thanksgiving. I swam in December. I did go in on January 1st. I waited for Bill and Betty Wilson. I called a couple of people and said, "Can someone just watch me?" They took a picture. Actually, in January there was one warm morning, and I couldn't get anybody to watch me, so I called Rich Thompson and I said, "You would have 911 dialed." So, we went down onto Nun's Beach. It was stunning. I put my feet in, and I got up to about my knees four different times, and I said, "I can't feel my feet anymore," and he goes, "That's what it would do to your heart." My mind kept saying to me, "I don't think it's safe. Have you read about heart attacks?" So, I'll let it rest. I know the spring is a hard time to get in, but I'll keep track of the water temperature and see what I can do.

Q: Susi, this has been terrific. You are gem, and Quonochontaug is so lucky to have you. Thank you for your time. We will get this transcribed and posted on the Quonochontaug Historical Society website for all to enjoy.

A: Thank you very, very much. I await the time when you can be interviewed, because your history is also a fabulous one. I do consider the privilege that I have, and I'm very grateful for being able to live in such a beautiful place, and with so many special people. It's really a treasured history.

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Q: You painted such a nice picture for people to remember. That's why these oral histories are so important.

A: So true.

Q: Thank you, Susi.

A: Thank you, Steve. Take good care.

