

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

ELIZABETH (Betsy) COE

September 11, 2020

Interviewed by Leah Bradshaw

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Q: Today is August 11th. This is the oral history interview of Betsy Coe. And present are Betsy [A], Leah Bradshaw [Q] and Ritchie Thompson [R]. We're doing this in the Barnacle in Quonochontaug, Rhode Island, which is Ritchie Thompson's property where Betsy's family used to rent. When and where were you born, Betsy?

A: I was born in Huntington, Long Island. I have never visited it since becoming [inaudible 00:50], because after that, we lived in Troy, New York, and eventually made our way to New Jersey. That's pretty much where I grew up.

Q: In New Jersey?

A: Yes. But Huntington, Long Island.

Q: When did you family start coming to Quonochontaug?

A: I can't actually give you a year. I know that my grandparents, John and Mary Coe, somehow became aware of Quonnie through—I don't know what source. But they began to come here. They would rent the place for three months and share it with their son and daughter. Their son and daughter were Betsy Glasson and Bill Coe and their families, and so we would all get to be here for about a month. I can remember when we would come, our grandparents would exit, because I adored my grandparents, I would just cry for an entire day. I just wanted my grandparents to be here so badly, but I didn't quite understand how it was working out and the arrangements that they had made. But a whole month. Can you imagine what a blessing that was? Emily and I were talking—my daughter's name is Emily, and she's been here a handful of times. We would say it's a blessing and a curse—both. It's a blessing, because you are so fortunate to spend time here. In every imaginable way you could enjoy life. You can enjoy it here, but, at the same time, you go home and you want to come back, and sometimes that's not possible. It gets in your blood. And now it's going to be in Emily's blood and the blood of her children, which is why I wanted to bring them. I wanted to share the magic of

Quonochontaug, Rhode Island with them. There's just something about this place that is so reassuring and so constant and forever. You set aside the frantic pace of life, and settle in after a day or two. It takes a day or two. You settle into the rhythm.

R: You start sleeping really well at night from the salt air.

A: That's true. And the cares of the world and the frantic pace that we tend to live just melts away, and you get into this rhythm of Rhode Island and Quonochontaug. It's just my idea of heaven. Now my daughter and my grandchildren—I also have brought my son here in years past. He was about fourteen or fifteen when he came, and he's just not a beach person. When I told him that we were coming, I said, "I really wish I could bring you all," and he was like, "That's okay, Mom." He's not a beach person. Beach person a phrase that my cousin, Mary Glasson, acquainted me with. You either are or are not a beach person. I really enjoy beach people.

Q: You first came here when you were about six.

A: I think so. Something like six. I might have been a little younger. The reason that I know it was something like that is that there are photographs of us as a family, and I look to be about five or six years old. Also, right here in Barnacle, my grandparents commissioned an artist by the name of Ernie Luttwig—I believe was his name—to create portraits of the Glasson kids—all three in one portrait—and all four of us Coe kids. I think he also did portraits of my grandmother and my grandfather. He started the ball rolling by coming here and having us pose. He took pictures, and he did rough sketches. That's how he started the process of creating these portraits right here in Barnacle. We have that portrait. My age looked to be something like six or seven.

Q: What are your early recollections from that age at Quonnie?

A: I just remember driving up from New Jersey. It was something like a three-and-a-half-hour drive. It seemed like three days when you're somebody inclined to be car sick. My poor parents. They would put us in the car, as well as the stuff that we were going to need when we were here. They had to put up with me being car sick, my little brother being car sick and our dog being car sick. It was just a lovely trip for them. I even remember coming up here in the midst of a hurricane, because I can remember the roads being flooded. I don't know why we did that, but I remember it was kind of exciting and a little bit intimidating all at the same time. But we would come up here annually. When we started to get close, somebody would say, "Can you smell the ocean yet? Can you smell the ocean yet?" I'm sure we were probably driving down West Beach Road when the subject came up, because that's when you begin to really get that aroma. It was so thrilling. And then to pull in here and finally be here—we didn't waste five seconds before we went out and romped on the beach, jumped off the wall, which you could do then. Of course, things looked different at that point. We had the Burnetts next door. I don't know much of what became of them, but I do know that Deke Burnett, one of their sons, was good friends with my older brothers.

R: They live up in Maine now.

A: Are they all living?

R: Yes. Dave and his significant other—his boyfriend, husband or whatever you want to call them—they live up in Maine. It's funny how the Quonnie license plate that I consider the great license plate, the Burnetts, when they left to go move to Maine, they literally signed that over to my mother, and we had the state representative walk it through motor vehicles to make sure we got it. That was an interesting side story.

A: Mrs. Burnett was the most gracious host. Sometimes we'd get—when I say we, I'm talking about the Glasson kids and David and myself—David is my younger brother—but we would go over there and they had bunk beds somewhere in their front room. We'd climb up there and we'd listen to musicals. They were big on musicals. I was raised on musical theater. We'd listen to their records. Mrs. Burnett used to sit with me, and she would hand sew doll clothes for my little baby doll. We'd sit right by the wall, and she would hand sew little doll clothes for me and taught me a little bit about sewing. Likewise, the Grells, when they were around, taught me how to knit. I learned how to knit on the beach. If I have any needlepoint skills, it all began here. Mrs. Burnett would let us make pie crust cookies with brown sugar in them and things like that.

Q: So, left-over pie crust that she had rolled out?

A: Yes. We'd put brown sugar in it and we'd cook them. Just precious little memories like that. If we were the July people that were here as opposed to my uncle and cousins, we got to enjoy the 4th of July complete with bonfires on the beach and sparklers. We used to have cookouts beyond the wall. There were those bigger events. Basically, there was a rhythm to the day. You woke up. When you woke up, you kind of schlepped around until you finally made it down to the beach where you stayed pretty much the whole day. I remember swimming with my family. What I like to say about Quonnie is that every significant family member in my life—both sets of grandparents, a number of my aunts and uncles from both my mother's and father's side, good friends of the family—everyone has trodden this beach. That's what I always think about when I'm here is that all the people that have trod the beach before me, and will trod the beach after me. I have shared time with the most wonderful people.

R: The other day you mentioned that you had chickenpox in this house.

A: I did. Both my little brother and I had chickenpox. We were quarantined upstairs. I remember being up there. I'm not sure if I felt very badly, but I feel like we were stuck up there for a while having chickenpox. I remember back then you could get lots of beautiful weathered glass. You can barely find any now. The prize of all was if you could find a piece of red glass. That was the prize. I remember finding the tiniest little piece of red glass and presenting it to my parents and earning a quarter for having found a piece of red glass. I have a feeling it might not have been glass, and they were just humoring me, because that's the only piece I ever saw. The beachcombing and

communing with the gulls, crabbing. My dad had a boat, so we also got to go in the boat. My brothers were action oriented, so they liked to waterski out there. My brother, Alan, was a scuba driver and he would spear fish. I remember he caught a really big something. Maybe it was a black fish. There were some people by the name of Love. The Loves were along Surfside Avenue in a tiny little place, that's probably not there anymore.

R: The Sears Roebuck houses.

A: I remember him bringing it and presenting to them for some reason. I don't know who they were. Maybe my parents were friendly with them. I'm not sure. But he was keen on showing the Love family his beautiful fish. I'm sure we ate it that very night. Deke and my brother, John and Alan, I'm sure they would just be horrified these days, but they managed to run some kind of speaker system out there and had music on the beach. I don't remember what the music was—what genre it was. They were always trying to invent things like that. My brother John used to go down the road, and there used to be a bowling alley down there. The bowling alley had a piano. My brother has spent his life in music and the arts, and he would go down there and play this rinky-tink piano at the bowling alley.

Q: Was that down on Old West Beach Road?

A: Yes. The bowling alley bar. It was probably kind of a rough place, but John would go down there and play the piano. Sometimes he would play the piano at the Grange. Somebody would inevitably bring a ukulele and we'd have ukulele singalongs out there. It was a magical way to spend your childhood. For some reason, I want to say somewhere around my twelfth or thirteenth birthday, the Coe family started instead of coming to Quonnie, we began to go to Lake George, New York. I can't even tell you why. It's no doubt some contact that my parents had. They got interested in Lake George for some reason, and we began to go there. That was the end of Quonnie for us, except intermittently, particularly only me, I would come up and visit my aunt and uncle, who eventually settled here. I would bring my children. I have beautiful pictures of Uncle Ted having taken my little boy fishing, and he's holding a beautiful fish.

R: Ted loved to fish.

A: Yes. Emily was just a young a teenager, and I have a beautiful picture of her holding a fish. We would spend time with the Glassons. They took us to Mystic. It was just wonderful. Then life got a little more serious. I don't believe I came for quite some time. For one thing, we all moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, so it became financially a little bit of a hardship to come all the way out here, particularly with a group. But as the years went by, and the Glassons exited their home here in Quonnie and settled into the independent living at Stoneridge, everybody was aging, everybody was grown up with raised children and raised families. That whole time the Glasson kids never—I don't think there has been a year that they haven't been here renting something from somebody.

R: They are a fixture. That's for sure.

A: Yes. After both my aunt and uncle passed away, my aunt about ten years ago and Uncle Ted just this spring, I once said to Peter or Michale, "Do you think you ever seen the day when you no longer come?" because Michael is in Utah, and Peter now owns a camp cottage on Lake Winnepesaukee. I said, "Do you ever imagine you're not coming?" and Michale said, "I will come here until the day I die." But they hadn't bargained on how the rental situation was going to change. They have to be a little more creative now in order to be here. They were so profoundly grateful for their friendship with you, Rich, because it enables them to continue to access Quonnie beach just because they can park here and all that. I see that you're doing that for other friends and other acquaintances. You're just the best and kindest of human beings. But you make it possible for the Glassons to carry on their legacy of communion with this beach and with this town.

Q: Rich is all about access. He wants people to love the beach and love the pond.

R: Yes. I was very surprised to hear the story about my grant aunt when she had Ted literally come down here in the middle of a storm in the winter, because she wanted him to buy the house that he ended up in, which was Hobby House. She made him a deal that he couldn't refuse. That was two weeks before she passed. But she wanted him to have that house, because she had liked both the Coes and Ted.

A: Is that the same house that they would rent year after year for a long time before they bought it? Was that where they would stay, or was it something else?

R: I don't know about that.

A: I can't figure it out. When Mary got married, I remember we came—no; that wasn't when Mary got married. It was before that. They had a very unwinterized little place.

R: That house was a very unwinterized little place before it came to be year-round. Back then, there were only six houses down here that were year-round, because they had to have their own wells and stuff like that. Originally for the first half of Central Beach's existence, it was seasonal water, period. There was no year-round water.

A: Whatever cottage they stayed in, in my mind's eye, it doesn't resemble what it became. What else could it have been?

R: Most likely it was.

A: And they came along and winterized it. I think they put a second story on.

R: Yes. And the wing going towards this side towards the ocean, that was the grandmother's.

A: A lovely British woman. She was from England. Apparently she got to be a handful. She tried to start a fire. They tried to keep her there. I think they finally had to put her in Stoneridge.

R: She was gone way before Stoneridge even existed.

A: I was fascinated by Granma Glasson. She had this strong British accent. She seemed so exotic and fascinating. We'd walk on the beach together. I just loved her. Not to mention the nuns. That's a fabulous memory on my part, because back when I was a kid, they still dressed in full black habits.

R: And their black bathing suits with their white bathing caps.

A: Yes. I didn't understand who these people were, and I was a little scared, because they were all in black. Nobody explained to me who they were. As the summer would go on, I'd clamber up on the rocks. I remember one day I was sitting up there, and a nun came out and sat and talked with me about God and faith. She was wonderful. It's an angelical memory. It was a while before I understood about nuns. It's just another shady memory now. It's behind some screens. But that's how I remember that. I have a million memories. I learned to jitterbug right here with my big brother. Somebody put on big band music, and we were jitterbugging. There's the kitty. That kitty comes to visit us. Is that a Quonnie kitty? Does it belong to somebody? Are there kitties that roam around?

R: There are wild cats that have been left for generations.

Q: What did your family do in the evenings? Did you play cards?

A: Yes. We surely did. We played things like Monopoly and Sorry and Candy Land, and definitely cards. I'm sure my mother and father played bridge. They would have people over and play bridge.

R: That was the game of choice.

A: Years later, my mother tried to teach me bridge, and I couldn't seem to grasp it. But I wish I had learned, and I wish I had learned here. But Parchesi, Chinese checkers—all these vintage games. I think they were often right in that cabinet.

R: They still are.

A: We did a lot of reading. I've always been a reader, even when I was a little girl. To go upstairs and just gaze out the window and read a book and things like that. I don't know that we stayed up particularly late, because the day would start early and the day would end early for us kids. I remember going to the drive-in once with my brother and Ruthie Grill, who he had a thing for. Alan had a thing for Ruthie Grill.

Q: That's probably why you got sent along with them.

- A: Maybe. We saw the original Parent Trap. I remember doing that one time. I think my parents played golf once in a while, but I'm not sure. That was definitely something that they did at Lake George. We loved our Quonnie corn. We got the most wonderful corn and had shucking contests. We used to love to go crabbing. I bought some string today, because I want to take the kids crabbing. I said, "You just catch them, and then you throw them right back."
- R: It's not as easy to get the mussels, but there is nothing simpler than some string and a mussel to attract the crabs.
- A: We had leftover fish, and I said, "Maybe we can pack a mussel with a little bit of fish and that might do the trick." Last night they had the most fun, because we had a little bit of leftover fish that we grilled, and I said, "Take a little bit of this out there and see if you can interest the gulls." Emmie was thrilled, because he got pretty close to a gull. He tossed the fish, and the gull was very happy to take it off his hands. Tonight we still had a little bit left over, and I said, "Toss it in the air and see if they might take wind and catch it in the air." We're going to try. We're also going to take a magnet and get a lot of iron—the black sand. I think for Christmas I'm going to collect enough to fill those little bottles with the stoppers in them.
- R: Fill it with Quonnie sand?
- A: Yes. These are the memories I have. Obviously, sandcastle building.
- R: You mentioned the Burnetts. Dave Burnett, who is the son, was known a lot for making ball castles on the breach. He used to make these huge ball castles and have the little rubber ball that would go through all the different tunnels and come out in different areas. He had the patience of a saint.
- A: Yes. As a matter of fact, a couple visits ago, Peter did the same. He created a gigantic mound. He started a path at the top, and he stuck some kind of PVC pipe or something through it. Then it came out, and he made more of a path.
- R: He must have learned how to do that from Dave.
- A: Quite possibly. One of the beauties of being here is you slow down. You don't have to have something to do every minute. It's just all here. All you have to do is look out at the ocean. That's a wonder itself. You see something different every time you look. Sometimes there are white caps. Sometimes there are ospreys diving in and catching the fish. Sometimes you can see Block Island, and sometimes now. That's all you need. I think I even felt that way when I was a kid. I was terrified by dragon flies until one day I sat on a rock and actually observed one. I have loved dragon flies ever since.
- Q: They do so much good. They eat so many insects and mosquitos.

R: Lightning bugs were always fun to try to catch in a jar. Then you'd have a little bit of light.

A: I imagine that you did that probably earlier in the season.

R: The simple things are the best things that you can remember.

Q: And the things that the kids remember.

A: It's interesting. Emily packed a ton of stuff for the kids to do, and she really didn't need to. I wish she hadn't brought their electronics, but she's limiting how much they are plugged in. We're not watching any TV. Mostly Scotland is drawing and enjoying just sitting there drawing. The other guys love to go out amongst the rocks and see what they can see and find. Emily and I like just sitting on the beach and then swimming eventually. What more could you ask for?

Q: What memories are you sharing with your children and grandchildren?

A: Just about everything. All the little anecdotes that I've mentioned. What I think is helpful is they need to see places, be it Quonnie or other places, where there is constancy and simplicity, if you consider multimillion-dollar properties simplicity. What you do with your time is simple. No matter what structures go up around here, no matter what gets bought and sold and changed, that's not going to change. I like the idea of constancy.

R: There is a lot of community stuff down here at Central Beach—the tennis courts, the ball field, and the traditions of the 4th of July parade haven't changed.

A: I understand you were grand marshal.

R: I lead it with the fire trucks. It's quite special for me to have been riding my bike in it as a kid to now leading the parade in the fire truck.

A: As grand marshal.

R: No. A grand marshal is different. A grand marshal is the person behind the fire truck. I get to lead the parade, though.

A: That's amazing. I hear you're sort of an unofficial mayor.

Q: He pretty much knows everybody.

R: I know a lot of what I call the old guard. I've been involved with the soft ball for the kids for close to 55 years. I think a lot of the people at Central Beach know me from that. I don't necessarily know people by name.

- A: I wanted to get some t-shirts with Quonnie on it.
- R: Sundays from 10:00 to 12:00 down at the ball field.
- A: I wonder if I could leave you some money.
- R: You can call and make an appointment on Wednesday.
- Q: Right. She can get an appointment Wednesday 9:00 to 11:00 with Deedee. Before I go, I'll give you the phone number.
- R: They'll open up the shed and you can pick up some stuff.
- A: That would be wonderful. It's all for a good cause. It's for the social events.
- Q: They are hugely inflated prices.
- A: That's okay. I looked it up online, because that's what Peter told me: "Go to the ball park and see if we can find Quonnie shirts." That's been on my to-do list. I'd love to surprise them with Quonnie t-shirts. I'll just say I have to go to the grocery store. Where is the ball park? Is it that way?
- R: Yes. If you follow Surfside to the second left, and you go up the hill there, you'll go right by the ball field.
- A: We're probably going to go to Block Island on Thursday. I want them to see lighthouses and such.
- R: Be careful. Make sure you bring your masks. I hear the ferries are quite crowded and people aren't necessarily following the procedures.
- A: Yes. We have sea sickness too. I have to sit up top. Last time I went it was raining. It was still a super-fun day. I took my other grandson, my son's son. We had the best time. We went to the submarine museum, Mystic, Block Island and we had time on the beach. That time we stayed with Todd. That was the year that we interred Mary on the edge of the wall. We had a good time. That's what I had in mind this time, but I'm not going into Connecticut. I'm not welcome there. I could get a fine.
- Q: When you enter Connecticut?
- A: Yes. New Mexicans are not welcome in Connecticut. If anybody checked our IDs, they'd see we're from New Mexico. Nobody might stop us, but somebody might.
- Q: Can you enter and come out the same day?

R: That's what it is in a lot of places. They just don't want you staying overnight without quarantining for fourteen days.

A: That's where my daughter is so sensible. She said, "Mom, we don't need to go many places. We've got the beach." And I said, "You're right. That's all we need." If we go anywhere, I think it should be Block Island. Then they get to take a ferry ride.

R: I've also heard that if you're going to do that, just make sure you go on the slow ferry. Don't go on the fast ferry, because there's less room on the ferry, so it's more crowded. Those are little tidbits that I pick up.

A: We may get so lazy that we might not even do that. We might just stay here the whole time, and that is perfectly okay. That's the magic of Quonnie.

Q: What meaning has Quonnie had for you throughout your life? You sort of answered it by saying the constancy.

A: The constancy. The fundamental key people in my life have all been here and have walked on this beach with me. It's five generations now.

Q: Your grandparents, your parents, you, your children and your grandchildren.

R: Wow.

A: I've talked and talked and talked about Quonnie. Emily had a sense of it. But I've talked about it to lots of people. I can't quite put it into words. My brother wrote a poem about Quonochontaug. If you like, I'll make a copy and send it to you. It captures a lot of it. He did a pretty good job. I've got it hanging on my wall. But when I go home to New Mexico, I try to be in the here and now there. You can't live successfully wherever you live without—you have to let go a little. It can't be all about Quonnie. Quonnie has its place. It's precious and few in our lives. But when we get to be here, it's magic. I always say maybe this is the last time I'll be able to come. There will be a last time that I will be able to come with or without others. I don't know when that will be. I'm 70 now. I don't know.

Q: Let's hope you have a few more visits.

A: I hope so. But I don't think I'm going to get away with coming alone anymore. Everybody has fallen in love. I said to Emily yesterday, "You know what would be really nifty is if you and your husband came. Just you and Steve." And she said, "I could never come here without my kids." And she's using this as quite the little laboratory and schoolhouse. I took a wonderful picture of her reading about marine biology right on the porch. She was reading to them about the creatures of the sea. Every night she reads to them from James Herriot—a story from James Herriot, *All Creatures Great and Small*. Then they listen to twenty minutes of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. They get to play and do whatever they want, but she's such a teacher that she's taking advantage of this.

R: I thought it was quite cool, when I had you guys up at the dock on the pond with the horseshoe crabs, blue shell crabs, oysters, mussels and clams. They just seemed to interested in it.

Q: Maybe they had already read about them.

A: Yes. She began before we ever left. They learned about tides. They now know what the intertidal phase is, and why there are low and high tides. I needed a refresher course myself. I would sit and listen to it. They came here having some idea of what they were looking at. The thing about home school that's kind of neat is that you've got a teenager, an eleven-year-old and a nine-year-old, and they all are taught similar stuff, but at the level they need to be at so that it conforms with the Albuquerque Public School System's curriculum. If they get up in the morning and it's a snowy morning, or it's raining and they don't want to get out of their jammies just yet, they have their morning class with their jammies on. Home school is pretty neat. But Emily doesn't let them get away with anything. School is school. When it's school time, it's school time. It's just that they can do it in a different way. It's very individualized and very wonderful. She's very good at it. Here is another classroom. If the picture came out, I want to frame it and call it Quonnie classroom. Quonnie school.

R: There are a lot of people this year, because of the COVID, that came here early from either New York or Boston, and they were doing home schooling here, which was kind of interesting.

A: True. It's quite an exotic concept.

R: Necessity is the mother of invention.

A: Emily always had to be a little bit afraid of people judging her—not just her, but every home school family. “Oh, you just keep them secluded. You could be doing anything with them, or teaching them wrong stuff, or abusing them or neglecting them and nobody would ever know.” That does happen. People don't want their kids going to public school, because they don't want the public school to detect the crummy parenting that's going on in their homes, so they say that they're home schooling, and in effect they don't really get much of an education. That's definitely not the case with Emily. Her oldest son and his wife happen to have seven children, and three of them are adopted. One of them is profoundly disabled. She home schools them as well. They're wonderful children.

Q: That's a huge commitment.

A: It is. Emily has grown into it through the years. She started with her older kids. For a little while they went to public school, but she didn't like the influence—the kind of things they were exposed to. She made up her mind. She started going to conventions

and began to learn. As the years have gone on, she's become very proficient at it. I'm very proud of her.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add about Quonnie that we haven't asked you?

A: I don't think so. Things flip through my mind. I'll see something, and it will remind me. I have a million memories, and they're all positive. Even in terms of the continuum of life, I started to say to you that as the years have gone by, we've aged, and my aunt and uncle are now gone, but I was able to come here and participate in my Aunt Betsy's funeral at Dunn's Corners Church. I stayed at the Aqua Star at that time. But much to my amazement, I didn't my cousins. I've gotten to know them a lot better since then. They said, "Come on down to the beach. We'll go swimming." I had brought my bathing suit, but I was actually taken aback. I was like, "Really? I really get to go?"

R: You should mention about the surprise that you found as you walked through this place the other day. Something that you made.

A: Yes. I only made it two years ago.

R: I thought that was when you were younger that you did that?

A: No. I did that when I got to stay here the last time I was here. This was the full monte. This was the complete experience of my childhood harkening back to my childhood sleeping here. I had to write and scribe that piece of driftwood with my feelings, and I set it up there. But in case this particular home morphs into something else, I was persuaded to take it out. I've now got it in a planter where it will now stay. I always cry when I leave here. I cry buckets. When I drive away, tears. I'm not a crier, but I always cry when I leave.

Q: But you'll be back.

A: I hope so. After the longest time, I had a little cartoon on my refrigerator. It was a little character dragging beach stuff along the beach. It looked like he was packing up to go from his day at the beach. He looked a little glum. The caption read, "Don't cry because it's over; smile because it happened." That's something that I try to remember about all the wonderful things that happen in life. Don't weep because it's over; smile—grin because it happened and you got to experience it. It's like a kneejerk thing. How do you say goodbye? I get a knot, and I have to let it go. That's very unlike me, but this place does that to me. I wish you could hear other voices of mine: my six-year-old voice. But in a way, to be able to be here, and to come back again when Mary passed away for that little memorial ceremony, and I think I may try to come back next year by myself. I'll stay at a motel if I have to, to honor my uncle. That's all pretty precious stuff. Thank you for putting up with my ramblings.

Q: Thank you, Betsy. We enjoyed it.