

QUONOHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

MARJORIE (Pendleton) CONGDON

July 22, 1999

Interviewed by Anne Doyle

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Q: Today is Thursday, July the 22nd, 1999. This is an interview with Marjorie Pendleton, who lives now on Klondike Road in Charlestown. I want you to say your full name and when you were born.

A: Marjorie Pendleton. I was born July 22nd, 1916.

Q: Happy birthday. My birthday was just a few days ago too. 1916?

A: Yes. I'm 83 today.

Q: This is wonderful. I would have brought you flowers if I had known. Where were you born?

A: Shinnecock Long Island. I think it's in the town of Southampton now.

Q: How long did you live there?

A: My father was in the Lighthouse Service. Two years, I think it was that he was there.

Q: So, you moved out when you were fairly small?

A: Yes.

Q: Where did you go after that?

A: I think my father went out of the service for two years. Then he went back in.

Q: When you say out of the service, do you mean out of—

A: We lived on Staten Island.

Q: What part of the service was that?

- A: Lighthouse Service. I think he went to Block Island. He was there for two years.
- Q: Did you move there too?
- A: Yes. The keeper died while he was out there, and so the first assistant went—the keeper, my father, was up on the second floor, and he moved down to the first floor. He was only there three weeks or so. Then he was transferred to Gardiners Island, N.Y.
- Q: Where is that?
- A: That's between Fishers Island and Plum Island. It's just on a heap of rocks.
- Q: Was there a lighthouse there?
- A: Yes. Three families. When I became school age, I went over on Shelter Island to my grandmother's and went to school over there.
- Q: Did you go by boat?
- A: My father had a little power boat. I would come back to the lighthouse during the summer.
- Q: So, you stayed with your grandmother?
- A: Yes. We went over there at Christmas to be with the youngsters—to play. And then I went back in September for the whole year. My father had moved to Watch Hill.
- Q: How old were you when they moved to Watch Hill? Did you move with them?
- A: I was almost eight that summer. In June, I went to Watch Hill.
- Q: So, most of your memories of growing up would be the Watch Hill area then.
- A: Yes.
- Q: Did you go to school then?
- A: Yes. I went to school in Westerly from second grade on.
- Q: When did you meet your husband?
- A: I met him in 1936.
- Q: So, you were around twenty?

A: Yes.

Q: I heard you were married in the lighthouse.

A: Yes. I got married in Watch Hill.

Q: With your family present?

A: Yes.

Q: Then where did you move to after you were married?

A: Right down here on the boardwalk in Quonnie. Do you know where Ray Eccleston moved? It's towards West Beach.

Q: I'm not positive, but I'm sure I can find it. So, you moved down to the West Beach area. Is the house still there?

A: No. It was washed out.

Q: I thought there was still a house that used to be owned by the Pendleton family that is still up. Maybe that's wrong. Are there any houses of the Pendleton family still?

A: No.

Q: So, you lived on the boardwalk that went around the breachway area?

A: It went to the breachway, but it came out—I don't know.

Q: I know where the Summit House (on the boardwalk) was and around where the hotels were.

A: It came around.

Q: Did you live on the ocean side?

A: The ocean side. Ray Eccleston built his house. His property was up that way. There's a driveway that goes down that road. It did come out if they had a fire or something down there. The road that comes out down near the corner there, that isn't there. That's done away with—Sunset.

Q: When I talked to Barbara (Ornberg) Hutchins (Coon), she talked about, she talked about coming across the breachway and going over and visiting over on that side. I think it was to the Pendleton family somewhere. I don't know exactly where it was, but she talked about that. Do you know Barbara pretty well?

A: Yes.

Q: What are some of your memories of when you lived there on the ocean side near the boardwalk? Was the boardwalk right in front of your house?

A: Yes. We stepped off my porch right onto the boardwalk. You right down on the sand, and then back up again where they could go get seaweed.

Q: You saw them go to get the seaweed and bring it back?

A: They didn't do it then. That's what they used to do.

Q: That's what they used to do before you moved there?

A: Yes. We married in April. Then in September there was the hurricane.

Q: So, you were married April of '38?

A: No. '37.

Q: So, you weren't there very long.

A: Yes. I wasn't there very long.

Q: What did you do after the hurricane?

A: After the hurricane, we came up and lived with my father-in-law.(Palmer Pendleton)

Q: On West Beach Road?

A: Yes.

Q: That's the house that I remember.

A: Yes. Now there are tennis courts in front of the house. They've redone it all.

Q: That must be hard for you to see that.

A: Yes. The one that Howard Thorp (? Bob Frost) got, they've redone that.

Q: There was a lot of rotting going on in the wood. They've been renovating a lot of the houses.

A: Yes. Now they've got great big glass storm windows and doors on the oceanfront. They get nice wind. It's going to come right in.

Q: Have you been in the house?

A: Yes. Bob (? Frost) told us to come down.

Q: I know you and Bob go to the same church, don't you?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you know anything about the history of that house? When did your father-in-law build it?

A: He built it in 1910, I believe.

Q: Did he do it all himself?

A: He did it all himself, because he was a carpenter.

Q: I've heard a lot about him. Was he born in—

A: He was born in the Sheffield place. (Stanton-Sheffield Farmhouse)

Q: Have you contacted the people who own the property where the cemetery is? (Dick and Cheri Stabnick)

A: I called them up. Then she called me, and she's going to help me come down and go in the cemetery, but I haven't heard more from her. They are doing something there.

Q: They really respect that piece of our history and your history. I'm really happy that they're taking care of it.

A: When you go in the gate of that cemetery, that first line have initials on the stones.

Q: I noticed that. There is an R and an S.

A: Yes. An R and S on one. I think there is an M and a P on another.

Q: Do you know who those people are—the R and S? Is S Sheffield?

A: There is no doubt that it could be a Sheffield. But the M and P I think is Ward Pendleton.

Q: Who was he?

A: I think there was an Amy Pendleton in there.

Q: Do you know anything about these Pendletons at all?

A: Frances Pendleton.

Q: Who is Ward?

A: He was a baby. My father-in-law's grandfather was a ship mariner. He ran ships. He had fourteen children. They had a pair of twins. One of them lived and the other one is buried there. I believe the twin that lived had some children that died at birth, and they're buried in there.

Q: I noticed that some of them are tiny. They must be young ones.

A: Yes.

Q: There were a lot of deaths at birth at that time.

A: Yes.

Q: So, it's partly the Sheffield family and the Pendleton.

A: Yes. The Stantons married into the Sheffields, so no doubt there are probably some of them there.

Q: Do you think the Stantons too?

A: Some of the Stantons married the Sheffields.

Q: So, S could stand for Stanton as well as Sheffield. But you think it's a Sheffield?

A: It could be a Sheffield. I don't know.

Q: Because of your lecture, I've been trying to notice some of the cemeteries in town. In passing coming up here, I want to stop on the way back on Klondike Road. What family is buried there?

A: That's the Crandall cemetery.

Q: It's nice when you can see the stones. You had mentioned also that [inaudible 14:41] was in the red house.

A: Yes. His first wife is buried in that cemetery. And some of his relatives.

Q: What are some of your memories living with your in-laws in the farmhouse on West Beach Road? Who lived there? There was your father-in-law, your husband and you.

A: Yes.

Q: Who else?

A: Two sons and a daughter.

Q: You had two sons and a daughter?

A: Yes. And my husband's brother was there too.

Q: Your husband's name was Clifford. What was his brother's name?

A: Albert.

Q: Was Albert ever married?

A: No. He was never married.

Q: So, he stayed in that house?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you do most of the cooking and the washing and all that?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you have crops around there?

A: No. Where the tennis court is, he had a garden out there. And then he had another one out in the back of the house towards the pond.

Q: Was that just for family food?

A: Yes.

Q: You didn't sell it?

A: No.

Q: Did that get you through the winter?

A: Yes.

Q: You must have had to can.

A: Yes. We canned a lot.

Q: Did you do that?

A: Yes.

Q: Was your mother-in-law living?

A: No. She died in 1924.

Q: Did he ever remarry?

A: No. He never remarried.

Q: You had a lot of men in the house.

A: Yes.

Q: What about the pond? Did you go Quahogging and clamming?

A: Yes. We went some. There wasn't too much down there, but we did go.

Q: So, you didn't have a lot of meals of fish from the pond?

A: No.

Q: Did you have chickens?

A: Yes. We had chickens.

Q: Did you raise those?

A: Yes. My father-in-law raised the chickens.

Q: What would you have for dinner at night?

A: Johnny cakes was one thing.

Q: Do you still makes those?

A: No. Not too often. I was never a good Johnny cake maker, but my husband was.

Q: They're very different than a regular pancake. I've done it before, but I don't know if I'm doing it right or not.

A: I always put too much water in it, and then they're flat.

Q: What else would you have for supper?

A: Potatoes. Probably some kind of meat.

Q: Lots of chicken I bet.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you have cows as well?

A: We had one cow. He used to have a horse, but that one died. Then he had a cow.

Q: Was the cow for milk?

A: Yes. For milk.

Q: Who milked it?

A: My husband did all the milking.

Q: So, you didn't milk the cow?

A: No.

Q: How old were your children? Did they stay there most of their lives?

A: Yes.

Q: Did they go to school in Charlestown?

A: Yes.

Q: What did your husband do?

A: He worked at Burlingame.

Q: What did he do at Burlingame?

A: He took care of the campsites. I think he helped to build some picnic tables. In the summertime, mostly he was stationed over here at the picnic area issuing permits and stuff.

Q: This is all Pendleton land here. (She's talking about the land on Klondike Rd. where Marjorie lives) Who bought this land? Was it your husband that bought all this land?

A: It goes right up to 216. There is a stonewall sections. His sister took the—

Q: Did the land belong to his father?

A: Yes. His sister (? Helen Bliven) took that section. (in Quonochontaug) And then we have this section.

Q: If you take this dirt road, does it keep going to 216? Does it go all the way through?

A: Yes. It goes all the way through. But it's not very good at the other end. Just a way up here, there is a house. My daughter sold her property. They're building a house up here.

Q: It's beautiful up here. It's nice and quiet. I love the woods. The woods and the ocean are my favorite places. Where is your daughter going to go?

A: She lives in Hope Valley right now. She works at the Westerly Library in the children's department.

Q: Do you have family right near you?

A: Yes.

Q: Does anybody live with you?

A: Yes. My two sons do. (Charlie and ?)

Q: When you were at the old farmhouse, did you spend much time walking down towards the ocean? Did you visit people?

A: No. Not too much.

Q: I was wondering how many people were around at that time, year-round right after the hurricane.

A: Not too many.

Q: There were the Hutchins.

A: Yes. That was just below Route 1.

Q: Did you know them?

A: Yes. I knew them. He's dead now.

Q: The father and one of the brothers.

A: [inaudible 23:19] is dead too.

Q: I didn't know them. I have talked to Dick as well. I'm learning a little bit about the farm and his life at the farm. There is an older home across the street with a little picket fence around it. I think it was across the street from your old farmhouse. Is it Hoxie? I don't know who used to live there.

A: Up this road?

Q: West Beach Road.

A: With the little white fence up near the house?

Q: Yes. Was that house there when you were—

A: That was an older house. (Asa Hoxsie Farmhouse)

Q: I thought somebody said Hoxie, but I don't know if that's right.

A: No. It used to be a Hoxie house years ago. A Hoxie used to live in there. (Asa Hoxsie)

Q: But the person—

A: I can't think of what it was.

Q: Was it also a farm?

A: Yes. It was a farm.

Q: Were there any people living in the West Beach area that were there year-round after the hurricane?

A: There was Irene—she was Irene DeMoranville, but she just passed away not too long ago.

Q: Is that the DeMoranville that lived on the corner of Route 1 and West Beach Road?

A: Yes. She died not too long ago. What was her name? He was in the Coast Guard.

Q: Who was, DeMoranville

A: No. Her first husband.

Q: Was Clifford in the Coast Guard? Maybe it was his father that was at the old Life Saving Station across the breachway.

A: Yes. He was in there for two or three years.

Q: Clifford?

A: Clifford.

Q: Did you know him then?

A: No. I didn't know him then.

Q: Did you meet in school?

A: No. I met him at a grange picnic.

Q: But he didn't go to the same school that you went to?

A: No.

Q: What was Irene's name?

A: Flori. F-L-O-R-I, or something like that.

Q: Was that her first husband's name?

A: Her first husband's name.

Q: Did you know the people over at the old farmhouse on East Beach? I think it was the Buddingtons.

A: No. I didn't know them.

Q: My family knew the Buddingtons. That's where they spent a lot of their life in the early 1900s over there. So, you didn't know that many people that were over there?

A: If I remember right, that's where Clifford's father lived when they were first married.

Q: In the Buddington house?

A: Somewhere around there, because I heard talk about that. Clifford was a small child. They had a dog. They got the dog, and then they moved right where he was over there. Somewhere over there.

Q: I'm trying to understand the history of all of Quonochontaug. People who live here now don't really know what the history is of Quonnie. I think it's important to do that. Let's talk about the hurricane. Where were you during the '38 Hurricane?

A: I was in the house down there. (the house on the breachway close to the ocean) I saw the water keep coming up. Clifford had gone to town to put a payment on the car. I grabbed

my son (Charlie), who was nine months old, and took him to the neighbors next door. (Mr. and Mrs. Crumb) They lived next door two doors away. They said to get in the car with them, "And then as the water comes in, we'll get in the car." This is the ocean, and here is the garage like this. Of course, the waves came and picked the garage door up. They went.

Q: Was somebody in the car?

A: I was in the car with my son. They would get in the car when the waves came in the garage. Here's the back of the garage, and the waves picked the garage right up.

Q: What happened?

A: They went. They drowned.

Q: Do you remember their names?

A: Lois (Crumb)

Q: So, what did you do?

A: I stayed right in the car.

Q: So, the car was out in the driveway or something?

A: Yes. The car was in the driveway. Someone came out and said, "There's somebody in the car." They came out. I got out, and they went in the house. I ran.

Q: Did it withstand the hurricane?

A: Yes. But mine went.

Q: Do you remember which house you stayed at? Is it still standing now?

A: Yes. It's still standing now.

Q: Is it right on West Beach Road?

A: Yes. It's off of West Beach Road just before you get to the sharp corner—the house on the corner. There are four houses [inaudible 32:14] that has a porch.

Q: Has it been renovated? Or is it still the way it was?

A: I don't know.

Q: So, you withstood the hurricane right in that house?

A: Yes.

Q: And Clifford was in Westerly. He didn't know what was going on.

A: No. He finally came back.

Q: Do you mean when the hurricane was all over?

A: I guess he parked the car at the end of the Old West Beach Road. He brought the car as far as they could get, and then they walked.

Q: Was everybody in the house all right?

A: Yes.

Q: You were very lucky. Had you seen the Crumbs that were in the—did you see that happening?

A: Yes. I saw that happen. I don't know whether I actually saw it, but I saw the wave come up. They went down, and that was it.

Q: That's a hard memory to talk about.

A: Yes. We stayed that night at the Sea Breeze Inn.

Q: I've heard other people say that. Some other people said they spent the night at the Sea Breeze Inn. There must have been several people there.

A: Yes.

Q: Was that when it was owned by—

A: Charles Downey. He wasn't there that night.

Q: You couldn't live in the house you were in when you were married, so did you move right away into the old farmhouse after that?

A: Yes.

Q: Was that damaged during the hurricane too?

A: No. The water came up around it.

Q: But there was no major damage?

A: No.

Q: Is there anything else that you would like to relay about the hurricane?

A: No.

Q: You must remember what the devastation looked like

A: Yes. They were never announcing the hurricane way back then.

Q: So, you lost everything.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you have photographs and things like that?

A: No.

Q: After the hurricane comes World War II. What are your memories of Quonochontaug during World War II? Do you remember the officers that were patrolling the beach or any of that?

A: No. I don't remember any of that.

Q: Do you remember the planes going over?

A: Oh, yes. They had the air field down here. They were just about going over the top of our house.

Q: In the night time?

A: Yes. You could hardly sleep.

Q: I remember those sounds. I was little at the time, but I remember that in the night time. And the engines would shut off, and then they would start up again.

A: Yes.

Q: Was anybody in your family in World War II?

A: My husband's brother was in World War II.

Q: Albert?

A: Yes. Albert.

Q: Did he actually go overseas?

A: Yes. He went over to Germany. I don't think he was ever in the front lines. He never fought. He was too old. I guess he helped build stuff—build bridges, I think it was.

Q: The Pendleton family were builders from way back.

A: Yes. During the war, Clifford was at a ship yard in Mystic.

Q: What did he do?

A: He was a carpenter building boats.

Q: After the war ended, did he—

A: He went to Burlingame.

Q: Do you remember how you felt during the war? Was it a nervous time?

A: No.

Q: Of course, Clifford was around, so you didn't have to worry about that.

A: Yes.

Q: I hear that many of the officers from the airfield (Charlestown Auxiliary Airbase) lived in houses around Quonochontaug. Do you know anything about that?

A: No.

Q: I think the old Buddington farmhouse on East Beach, I think that they had some soldiers. And there were a few others. I'm not sure where, but they were around the area. You were involved with trying to locate all the historic cemeteries in Charlestown.

A: I was looking up something the other day. I started this in 1971. Maybe I got it from my mother and father, because when they went shopping, they always drove through the cemetery on the way home.

Q: Maybe it started back then.

A: Yes. We would drive to Riverbend Cemetery. Especially if someone had been buried.

Q: Along the river?

A: Yes.

Q: It's a big cemetery.

A: Yes. (Tufts and Smiths.)???

Q: What is your maiden name?

A: Congdon.

Q: There was a Congdon family down in Quonochontaug at one time.

A: Yes. Years ago.

Q: Is that a relation?

A: Somewhere along the way.

Q: She was friends with Joan Thomsen and Vicky Rose. (Meaning Peggy Rase?)

A: Yes.

Q: I remember them talking about that.

A: She had a big book. I don't know if she ever did get it printed. She got down so far. Then her mom moved to Long Island.

Q: Is that—

A: Where we met.

Q: But you don't know if she had ever—

A: I know whether she ever printed it. I've written her sometimes, and she never answered my letters.

Q: She lives in Rhode Island somewhere, doesn't she?

A: Yes. In East Greenwich.

Q: Is she in a nursing home?

A: I don't think so, because she comes down to see Joan.

Q: Getting back to the cemeteries, your interest really began—

A: I often think that's where it might have been.

Q: So, this was something that both you and your husband were involved in.

A: Yes. Because he was interested in these old cemeteries too.

Q: How did you go about trying to find where these cemeteries were?

A: I was down where the town [inaudible 42:04] was. [inaudible 42:05] down there and asked them about something, and then Rhode Island put out a map listing the cemeteries. In back of where Henry Brightman used to live down here. Do you know where he used to live?

Q: I know Brightman's store that we used to go to. I don't know where he lived.

A: Right near the store. The big house in back of the store. There is one cemetery—the Stanton cemetery. Then one over across from Michael [inaudible 42:50]. On the hill all the way up was another one named—I forget what number it was. Sixty-seven or something. I went to Ed Thomley, who was the head of the Veteran's Affairs. I asked him, "Where are the numbers between 46 and 67? Where are the cemeteries?" I told him what cemeteries. They came down and they put 28, and that's the one that's up in back of what used to be Brightman's Store. Then he came down and [inaudible 43:38], because he knew what I was talking about. And so, they went down and they put the next number, 47.

Q: The cemetery that is by the Stanton Monument, you talked about that at the library a couple of months ago. I went over to look at it. I looked down to that little sunken one. I couldn't see any stones.

A: No. I haven't seen any stones, but they say it probably stopped building up.

Q: They were cutting down the bushes in the spring, and I thought that I would be able to see the stones. I went over, and I couldn't see any stones.

A: Here's another one. There's 38 here. At the head of East Beach Road, it goes right up there with the white fence. That's another cemetery. I've got pictures with the stone of Lieutenant Governor Edward Wilcox. Then they've got little field stones around it.

Q: Is that also marked with one of the signs?

A: Yes. They have a sign on it. I went up there once. I've always been a custodian of cemeteries in Charlestown. I still have that area [inaudible 45:26]. So, I went up there—my son and I. It was near the [inaudible 45:38]. A little kid came out with Christmas wrapping paper. It was a good day. She said to me, "What are you looking at?" I said, "The cemetery." "Who's buried there?" I said, "Lieutenant Edward Wilcox." "Is he related to you?" I said, "Yes. My husband's distant relative. And there are some field stones in there too—markers." "Where?" She looked down on the ground. "Where?" I said, "It's over there." I said, "There is a sign that number 33 is supposed to be here too."

I said, "I wish they cleaned that off." I don't know how long ago. This was in the fall. Then in the spring it looked like it wasn't. Charlie went over there. They hadn't cleaned it out too much, but there was a sign right down on the ground in there.

Q: You must have had to tromp through woods to find some of these places. They're not on main roads.

A: No. This Wilcox is one great big stone—actually a stone. He got it carved right on the stone.

Q: Is the one by East Beach?

A: West Beach Road.

Q: At the head of West Beach Road?

A: Yes. West Beach Road. You can't help but see it.

Q: You have made a big contribution to Charlestown by doing all of that work.

A: She put the sign down. But they never did set it up.

Q: Maybe you should go back. You're active in your church. Do you want to talk about that?

A: I'm one of the oldest members of the church down here. [inaudible 48:10] Hoxie is two or three months than I am. I think I would have been the oldest one, because I brought my mother down, and I was waiting for Abbie Crandall. She was supposed to be bringing her mother down. We were just waiting for her, and then both of us would get the Right Hand of Fellowship. We kept putting it off. And then one morning I didn't happen to be there, and sure enough she got the Right Hand of Fellowship. In between there, [inaudible 48:47] Hoxie was baptized along with several others. They joined ahead of me. That was by two or three months. All the rest have died since then.

Q: How long have you been part of the church? Is it since you were married?

A: '42. I was up in Westerly [inaudible 49:16] Church.

Q: What part of the church have you been active in?

A: A Sunday school teacher.

Q: How about the choir?

A: No. I never joined the choir. I see some of the youngsters now that I had in my class. When they were younger, the way we used to jump—

Q: Are you a teacher now?

A: No.

Q: Marjorie, what got you involved in the historical society?

A: The cemeteries. I was chairman of the Cemetery Committee.

Q: Did you help grow the historical society?

A: No. I missed the first meeting. My son and I went down to Indian Church one Sunday for service. That's a small church, but you would think it was a great big church to hear them sing.

Q: Is it open to anybody that wants to go? Do they still have services there?

A: Yes. They still have services there. The last two years they've had a community Thanksgiving service. They've had it grow in my church. I remember having to go one Sunday—I didn't know about, and my daughter never told me until she thought it would be [inaudible 51:32].

Q: Do you know many of the people of the Narragansetts at all?

A: Yes. But they used to sing—Tim was there—not the church, but down there—one of the halls there on Route 2. Before they built the senior center. We used to go there.

Q: So, you knew some of the people that belonged to the tribe?

A: Yes.

Q: I was thinking about going to the pow-wow that they have. Do you ever try to go?

A: Yes. The parking lots are always full.

Q: It's usually in August.

A: Yes.

Q: Have you done anything else with the Historical Society? I know you gave the lecture on cemeteries this year. Have there been any other projects?

A: I used to work on the tables there that the facility had in July, but now they don't have that anymore. They just have the antique show.

Q: That was moved this year.

A: Yes.

Q: Do you still cook and do all those things?

A: Not so much now.

Q: I bet you were a good cook. You probably don't do much canning or anything like that anymore.

A: No more.

