

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

THOMAS (Tom) PORTER FARRELL

August 18, 2020

Interviewed by Paul Mathews in Charlestown

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Q: I am interviewing Tom Farrell. Can you give me your full name, your birthdate?

A: Yes. It's Thomas Porter Farrell, and my birthdate is November 30th, 1946.

Q: And we're at 18 Neptune Avenue, Quonnie Central Beach. I'm the interviewer. My name is Paul Matthews. It's August 18th, 2020, and we are having this interview at 18 Neptune Avenue. So, how did you find Quonnie? How did you get here? Was it you looking around, your family was here before you? I have no idea.

A: First, a story. When I was four and under, my parents lived with my grandparents. And my grandparents were Howard and Effie Porter. And one of my grandmother's friends was Mrs. Van Buren, who was from Ridgewood, which was New Jersey, which is where we lived. And she got invited out by Mrs. Van Buren when my grandfather was still working, and said to him, "How are you? You should come up for the weekend." And so, he did. He liked the place. The next thing that happened was we ended up renting Burcon over there. And then after that, he bought two lots from Howard Thorpe, and had this house built by Brad Fisher.

Q: What year was that?

A: 1950.

Q: In 1950, you had this house built here?

A: Yes.

Q: When did you rent Burcon?

A: It was only one year.

Q: One year before you built this, so '49?

A: Right.

Q: What was the year that you came up to visit the Van Burens?

A: I didn't. It was my grandmother. It would have been the year before, I think. It might have been 1948, but I'm not sure.

Q: The Van Burens lived right on the corner here, right?

A: No. It's over here on Central.

Q: At that time, where were you living?

A: I was living with my parents, but at my grandparents' house in Ridgewood, New Jersey.

Q: Who else was here from Ridgewood? Mike Craynacks was from Ridgewood.

A: Yes. Right.

Q: So, in 1950, you decided to build this house?

A: Well, my grandfather did.

Q: Your grandfather did. I think Brad Fisher built your sister's house, and Barry O'Brien's house right behind you.

A: My parents had that house built. That started out to be a garage to store my father's boat in.

Q: So, that was one of two lots that your parents bought?

A: No. This house is built on two lots. And my grandfather, at my suggestion, I'm told, bought the two lots behind him, because he didn't like that the Schaefer house next door was built too closely to us. This isn't even on the two lots. It was designed to be closer to what was then an empty lot due to the Skippers being on that side.

Q: So, you were about four years old?

A: Right.

Q: What was your life like here at four years old? What are your earliest remembrances?

- A: I don't remember. But the pattern that came about was that my grandparents would come here for the summer. My family and I would stay in New York doing whatever we were doing. My father, of course, was working. Back in those days, people got two weeks of vacation. So, the two weeks of vacation would come in August, and my grandparents would then drive back to Ridgewood and leave this house for my parents and their family.
- Q: So, you would come up, and there wouldn't be any overlap?
- A: As I got older, I would be invited by my grandparents. So, I would end up spending the whole summer here. But they weren't going to do that with a four-year-old.
- Q: That's interesting, because my grandparents were over on the side of what was Fogarty's house—the Crandalls. I came here at about four years old. The same thing. My parents stayed with my grandparents, and we'd come up. You had a luxury with two weeks. We got a week, and they wanted us out. We eventually purchased our own place. So, who were your earliest friends? What were your earliest activities?
- A: I've been trying to think about that. My longstanding friends were Paul Marra and Peter Smith. Paul was exactly my age, as I recall. Peter is a year younger. There was also Buzzy Conrad. That's another pal. We would do all sorts of things together, both at the beach and walking around in the evening, because we all had dinner early in those days. There was a lot of light in the evening available for doing things.
- Q: That's interesting, because I was here infrequently like you. I would come up occasionally with my grandparents, and even once we owned, I didn't come that often. But Buzz Conrad was one of the few people—he and Bill Carpenters, and a guy named George Arl, was it Pete Smith? I think they were the few people that I remember, but when I moved back here, we met so infrequently that we didn't remember much about the relationship.
- A: Right. Ron Henry is my age, but he went off with an older group because of the fact that he was with his older brother, Rob.
- Q: That's how things went in those days. It was amazing the way things got divided up. So, were you here for '50s and early '60s 4th of July celebrations?
- A: Some of them, yes. I had a very good friend from Ridgewood, a guy by the name of Dick Reid, and I remember in the 4th of July parade, we would have windbreakers on. One was blue, and one was gray, so one was Army and one was Navy. This is not my memory, but my mother's. She told the story of taking me to Cape Cod in my first year the following summer. There was only Route 1. They had lunch at the Wilcox Tavern and looked down at, what is now, West Beach Road, and said, "I wonder what's down there."
- Q: Did you ever head down with Buzz Conrad or any of your friends to the bowling alley?

A: Sure. There was something on Facebook about that recently, and my comment was that I would go there to buy candy, and later cigarettes.

Q: Did you ever bowl?

A: I don't remember doing that, but it's possible. It was a duck pin alley. It wasn't full-sized bowling. I'm sure at some point I must have, but I just don't remember it.

Q: Do you remember ever going up to Babcock's or Crompton's?

A: Generally not, because I wasn't supposed to go across Route 1.

Q: And there was no light back then.

A: No light back then.

Q: When you were down at the bowling alley and in that area, did you spend much time in the Breachway? Did you fish at all down there?

A: I've never been much of a fisherman, but I have. That was not an activity. When my parents retired here, my father became a fishing fanatic and fished all the time. But I never particularly enjoyed it.

Q: Did he have any fishing buddies?

A: Yes. But it was to the point where he gave up fishing and just went down there drinking beer.

Q: When did this become your residence?

A: What happened was that before they built that house, my parents sat down with Suzanne and me and said that because there was zoning coming in, the two pieces of property were separately owned: that one by my father, and this one by my mother. And they said to Suzanne and me, "Which do you want, the house or the lot?" and I said, "I'll take the house," and Suzanne said, "I'll take the lot."

Q: What year was that?

A: That would have been in the early '70s.

Q: Did you both stay here until that house was built? Were you and Suzanne here?

A: No. We would have been here. What happened is that at that end of the house, there was a single bedroom built for me, and next to it was a double bedroom for my grandparents and a double bedroom for my parents. When my sister was born, what that meant was

that she was moved into the single bedroom back there, and I was moved into the double bedroom. And then my grandparents built a second double bedroom back at this end of the house, which is where Nancy and I are now. There is a room outside of it, which was where our babies stayed initially. Of course, Tom is over 40 now, so that was a long time ago.

Q: Do you remember anything about the Seabreeze Inn?

A: Sure. It was there. I never stayed there. Of course, I remember how it disappeared.

Q: Do you mean the fire department?

A: Yes.

Q: That was a unique way to tear it down, to just burn it down. It was sort of a play place for a while. There was about a five-year period where it was abandoned, as I recall.

A: I believe that that was the case.

Q: We used to go through there, and it was like a haunted house. It was a lot of fun. Did you spend much time at the pond? You mentioned boating.

A: Not that much. It was my father that became interested in boating. We didn't have a boat when I was here with my grandparents. I was very much beach oriented.

Q: Did you have one of those canvas rafts that you would kneel on and ride the waves?

A: Right. They would last a year or two, and then you would need to get another one. They all came from a store in Westerly called Burdick's.

Q: I remember trying to patch them once. They didn't patch well. Nothing stuck to the canvas.

A: Right.

Q: I remember the times when I was at that age here with Buzz Conrad and Bill Carpenter, that was the big thing, rafting the waves then.

A: Right.

Q: It's sort of a lost art. It was a fun thing to do.

A: Right.

Q: Did you ever go up to East West Farm?

A: Sure.

Q: Do you remember how you purchased products there?

A: There was a small store, and they had milk and butter and maybe eggs. But I wasn't doing the purchasing. But I do remember going in there, because it was an honor store. There was nobody there.

Q: I remember that there was a shirt cardboard with the prices, and there was money all over the counter, and you made your change from that. You probably had quite a different experience with your day-to-day life when you were younger here. What about the '70s and the '80s as you started your own family, and this became more of your place?

A: We were working as well. It was a lot of driving from New York on weekends.

Q: So, you would come up on the weekends? Did you have a week or two that you were able to—

A: Yes. That usually happened towards the end of the summer in August.

Q: Were you going to the Adirondacks at that time?

A: No. We were invited to the Adirondacks for the first time somewhere in the '70s by a friend that I met at work.

Q: What did you do with your cottage here when you weren't here? Did you rent it?

A: It's never been rented. I look at what Suzanne goes through with hers. This has never been rented.

Q: Especially if you only have that two-week period and you don't have any time to pay attention to those little details of being a landlord. It can be a nightmare.

A: Right.

Q: At what age did your son, Tom, get his own key?

A: That really happened since he's had a family. Amelia is ten now, and Porter is eight. By the way, he is Thomas Porter Farrell the third, so the name goes on. Having three Toms would have been very confusing. It's bad enough with two.

Q: What was his nickname? What did you call your son, Tom?

A: Tom.

Q: When someone was yelling for you, who would answer?

- A: It would depend upon who was doing the asking.
- Q: I ask that, because I'm a third as well. But they nicknamed me Matt for Matthew because of the confusion of who is to answer.
- A: Right.
- Q: So, no college parties?
- A: The group of teenagers, we had lots of beach parties, but there weren't parties here. My son had a very memorable party here where there was a disco ball mounted from the ceiling in the living room, but you'll have to ask him about that.
- Q: A lot of people know here that you served the community most recently as a board member in charge of long-term planning. I don't know if you had served on any other boards before that.
- A: No, I had not.
- Q: I do remember you doing that. I think you served for three or four years.
- A: I did it for more years than I had intended to. This year, when I realized that I could not be here before August, I resigned that position in favor of Helen Frost. It just wasn't right for Sue to have someone serving in an advisory role that wasn't going to be here.
- Q: I know that you live in Park Avenue, New York. But you're sort of a mystery to me. I know you're in the business world. I believe you're in finance of some sort. But I have no idea. And I know you're successful.
- A: When Nancy and I were first married—
- Q: When was that?
- A: That was 1969. We lived in Brooklyn Heights. I was still an MBA student at NYU on Wall Street at that time. When I graduated from NYU, I was told to serve out my ROTC obligation, so we left New York, and I went to Petersburg, Virginia to Fort Lee, which is the home of the Quartermaster Corps. Most ROTC units require you to have a combat arms infantry or artillery, but we went to the University of Pennsylvania, which was special because of The Wharton School. As a result of that, they had the option to join the Quartermaster Corps. So, I took that option. I went on active duty in June of 1970 thinking that I was going to be on active duty for at least two years, but during that summer, the Army decided that they had too many lieutenants, and so, we were given an opportunity, if you wanted to, to volunteer to only be on active duty for three months. So, I took that opportunity gladly. I then was selling my soul to the Reserves for six years, but that's much better than going to Vietnam. And so, we ended up back in New

Jersey living in my parent's house, because we didn't know where we were going to be that autumn. And then I started out with my job search, which I hadn't done before, because I was going to be on active duty for two years. And so, I was late with it, but I ended up interviewing at banks, which is what I wanted to do, in New York, Boston and in Philadelphia. Of course, where most of the opportunities were was in New York. So, I ended up getting an offer from the Bank of New York, and an offer from Chase Manhattan, of which Chase Manhattan was by far the better place to be. I didn't start there, however, until February of the following year. Again, we were living with my parents, and I had been on temporary duty, because I was not at my permanent Army post, and so I had gotten a lot of temporary duty pay. So, after I got the job at Chase, and that was set to start in early 1971, Nancy and I went to Europe for about a month. We went to a bunch of different countries, and had a very nice time. We came home on New Year's Eve, because she was starting her new job in January, even though mine didn't start until February. I have sort of a funny story that takes place in that month, because one of the things that I had been doing was when you go into the service, there's something called your home of record, which was my parent's house in Ridgewood. And so, when I went into the service, I bought a new car, a 1970 850 Fiat Spider. It was sort of sleek looking, but it didn't go very fast. Fifty horsepower. And so, we found ourselves back living in Brooklyn Heights again. I went to register the car, and the people at the New York DMV told me that since it was a new car within the past year, that I would have to pay New York sales tax on it. And I said, "No I don't." So, I've never had a car registered in New York ever. Initially in New Jersey, and then in Rhode Island. I had already paid a state sales tax. If you are moving into a state, you don't have to normally do that, but New York being New York—

- Q: It's like California trying to charge all the basketball players who travel through the state for the games that they play there. So, you had a career with Chase?
- A: I was with Chase from '71 to '84. And then I was not particularly happy with the position I was in. Then I was approached by First Chicago. I knew the people who ran First Chicago's New York office very well. And so, I took a fine trip to Chicago and had three or four interviews, and started in a new career. I was there in successor organizations until I was retired in '99.
- Q: Did you have to go to Chicago?
- A: No. I was always in New York. I spent a lot of time in Chicago, but I didn't ever move there, because the New York office was by far the biggest non-Chicago office that they had, and so there were always enough challenges there for me to keep me progressing up the ladder.
- Q: So, you retired in '99?
- A: Right.
- Q: You're a consultant acting in an advisory capacity to businesses?

A: I'm not retired. But I was consulting in anti-money laundering investigations. That became, and still is, a very big business, because money laundering is a major concern.

Q: A big international business.

A: Yes. All dollar-denominated payments clear in New York. That's where they exchange. And so, there are a lot of international banks that set up operations in New York to do that business, but they didn't really appreciate the anti-money laundering aspect of it. My subsequent assignments were when they would have to hire Deloitte, or somebody like that, to clean up their mess. Deloitte would hire consultants to do the actual work. So, that's what I did in my final years. When Nancy retired, which was at the end of '14, I completed an assignment in the beginning of '15, and that's the last thing that I've done. She spent most of her career at Weill Cornell running the business operations of the faculty, which was a very large business, needless to say.

Q: I have a question about the dance hall. Did you ever attend anything there?

A: I don't remember doing it, but it's possible that I did. I don't remember it.

Q: Is there anything specific in your memories that I haven't covered, or that you're holding back?

A: I'm not holding anything back. It's just that Quonnie has been a very special place for my family for multiple generations now. We're so happy that our grandchildren are enjoying it as much as I did.

Q: I've observed your son, Tom. He's in the water all the time. One day I was on my boat, and he was with your grandchildren, Porter and Amelia. They swam out to Barry's sailboat, and there they were. Then they just jumped off and swam back. They didn't use a kayak. I don't know that many people that swim in the pond and take that extra jaunt out to a boat in that fashion.

A: The grandchildren have never known anything else. This is just part of their life. But sometimes they're with their parents, and sometimes they're with their grandparents.

Q: We don't have many interviews where we've been able to do brother and sister. We have a lot of husband and wife, but not brother and sister. This is part of what I think is going to be a very interesting continuum for the Historical Society.

A: Right. Barry was staying with his cousins.

Q: Yes. That's how he got here. Thank you.

A: My pleasure.