

# QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Oral History

# CHRIS GORHAM

November 18, 2021

Interviewed by Paul Mathews

This is an unedited transcript of an oral history that is available in the QHS Archive Center. The policy for the use of this copywritten material can be obtained by contacting the Quonochontaug Historical Society ([archivist@quonniehistory.org](mailto:archivist@quonniehistory.org)).

Q: My name is Paul Mathews. Today is November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2021. We're at 27 Surfside Avenue, and I'm interviewing Chris Gorham. So, you need to state your full name, your birth date and where you currently live.

A: All right. Chris Gorham, 5/11/1960, and I live at 1 Bay Street right off West Beach Road. Right on the corner of Bay Street and West Beach Road.

Q: Who was the first member of your family to arrive in Quonnie?

A: It would have been my great uncle in the '30s.

Q: Do you remember his name?

A: It was Phillips. The last name was Phillips. His daughter is Nancy Phillips, who still comes down here. They are married. They were related to Mary Phillips, who had a place right on West Beach Road and Central Street there. She had that place. I can't think of his name. But they basically had what's now the Pete's cottage. That's where they stayed.

Q: So, they rented?

A: Yes. They rented. Then there was the Lockwoods, who had the little red house down by the beach, and their winter place up on West Beach Road. There is some relation there—distant. My father knew them. We had been coming down based on his knowing them. I think we rented for a week or two one summer before they bought the cottage.

Q: What are your father's and mother's full names? Where was that cottage that they bought?

A: It was Bradford and Diane Gorham. It was at 84 Oceanview Av. The name of it is Bayberry Lodge. It's still in its original condition. The way the house came to be on Oceanview Av. was in the '38 Hurricane, like so many of these homes, the top floor ended up floating back to where the lot was that it's currently on. So, they lifted up the upstairs, and built the downstairs. The upstairs had the beautiful beadboard paneling that had that nice patina to it. It was gorgeous.

Q: Do you know which lot it floated from, or whose it might have been?

A: It was down where the existing row of houses were. I don't know the exact location. But it was on the shore. George Saunders had it for many years—the Saunders family. I'm one of five children. We lived in Foster, Rhode Island on a farm up there. It was brutally hot in the summer. My mother had a tough time with five kids—three boys and two girls—on the farm, and keeping everyone okay. So, they decided that they were going to take a vacation up to Lake Champlain for a couple of weeks. So, we all piled into the station wagon and headed up there. I don't remember the trip, but apparently it was the most awful trip. All the kids were fighting. My father was trying to drive, and angry as hell. So, they decided not to try and do that anymore. Then in 1972, my mother's grandfather passed and left her \$5,000. That was enough for a down payment on the Bayberry Lodge. She loved the beach, and she wasn't going to do anymore traveling with the kids. They bought it for \$35,000 back then with the \$5,000 down payment. The cottage remained in its original condition for probably ten or fifteen years before they did anything to it. The existing house is still there. My brothers and sisters all own it. It was a great spot, because it had a nice big back yard, it had four bedrooms upstairs. So, it worked for us. The cottage now has been renovated some. It's a nice place.

Q: So, at '72, you and your brothers and sisters, and your mom and dad were down here for most of the summer?

A: All of the summer. June, July and August. As soon as we got out of school, we came down. It was different back then, because you had a lot more renters in Quonnie. You had this influx of families coming in with kids, and the place was just full of kids. There were kids biking all around much more so than now. A lot of the same people rented every year, so you'd see your friends. It was a nice mix of renters and owners and a lot of stuff to do. Ball games. The tennis courts were always full.

Q: Tell us about your brothers and sisters.

A: I have a brother Nick, another brother Josh, a sister Nancy and Jane. They're all younger than I am. They had similar experiences. What would you like to know about them?

- Q: Just their age. You know how it was. In Quonnie, if you were two years older, you probably hung with a different group.
- A: Right. We're all two years apart. Nick is 59, Josh is 57, Jane is 55 and Nancy is 53. We all hung with different groups. You're right.
- Q: Who were your closest friends?
- A: It was Kyle Collins, who has the place on Oceanview Avenue and Ninigret—the corner there. That house has been torn down to make room for the Occums' new house. The Collins had four kids too. It was right next to our house. We had a lot of interchange there. And then there were also some renters. The Corcorans from Buffalo, New York came every year. There was Jim Atwood. He was one of my good friends down here. They were renters. Bill Dowd was another one. There were all the girlfriends. It was a good group of us. There was Margaret Myer. There were the Crossen kids. John was my age. I kind of hung with John. John and Diane were my age. Actually, Carrie was my age. So, we hung around with them a lot. There were others. I can't remember their names. That was the crew.
- Q: In terms of your activities, I know you've been a sailor. You're on the water a lot. What were your days like?
- A: We spent a lot of time when I was younger out on the pond. The beach and the pond were basically where we'd hang out. When I was fifteen, my father got me a skiff. I wanted a skiff, and I wanted to be a lobsterman. I'm not sure where that came from, but it did. We went down to Stonington to a guy who built skiffs. It wasn't a marina. In his yard, there were skiffs all over his yard. In the woods. Everywhere. We went and bought a used skiff. My father got a new 40-horsepower Mercury engine. It was an 18foot flat-bottom skiff. He didn't know anything about boats, and I didn't know anything. We didn't have a trailer, so he decided that we were going to drive the boat down from Pawcatuck—the Stonington area—to Quonochontaug. It was a windy day with pretty good-sized waves. It was quite an adventure for us, but we made it into the breachway. I had the boat tied up to one of the lines. I made my own lobster pots out of wood slats. In the wintertime, my grandfather had a table saw, and in Foster there is lots of lumberyards. We'd get these oak planks, and we'd rip the one-inch slats for the lobster pots. There was another guy in town who made lobster pots. One of the tough things to do on a lobster pot is the frame has the doweled sticks. The pieces of wood have doweled ends, so it all fits in very tightly together. I got those from him. But we made 25 lobster pots.
- Every winter I'd lose a fair number, so we'd do that every winter as a fun thing to do.
- Q: Where did you place yours?
- A: Mine were out front anywhere from Fresh Pond Rock all the way down to Weekapaug.
- Q: When you were lobstering, I think you followed Bill Wilson's career as a lobster guy.

A: Yes.

Q: I can't remember who he did it with all the time.

A: Robert Eaves.

Q: Were they still doing it when you were doing it?

A: No.

Q: They had moved on?

A: I think Bill might have been in his last years of doing it. He was one of the inspirations. At the time, Bill Wilson was the lobster god. We tried to talk to him. I don't remember what happened. I really didn't know much. We made our own pots. We made horrible pots. The heads were all wrong how they'd come into the lobster thing. They were too long. But it did catch lobsters. I'd bring them in. I'd go out every day and sell them out of the garage.

Q: Did you have a refrigerator there?

A: Yes. A refrigerator and a scale that was an old-old scale that was very inaccurate. I think I probably shorted myself. You never know what you're going to get. But I'd have these orders from people. I remember one time there was a family from New York who ordered a bunch of lobsters. They had people coming down. I only got a couple that day. They were furious. They said, "We ordered twelve, and you've only got two. What are you going to do about it?" And I said, "That's all I caught." They didn't quite understand the concept. Those were good years. I did that right up through senior year of high school. I had all sorts of people who used to come out with me. All my friends would go out with me. Mike Myer would go out with me. I was dating his sister at the time, so we were kind of close. We'd just go out and see all sorts of neat things. Just being on the water was great.

Q: What years would that have been?

A: That would have been 1975 to '78.

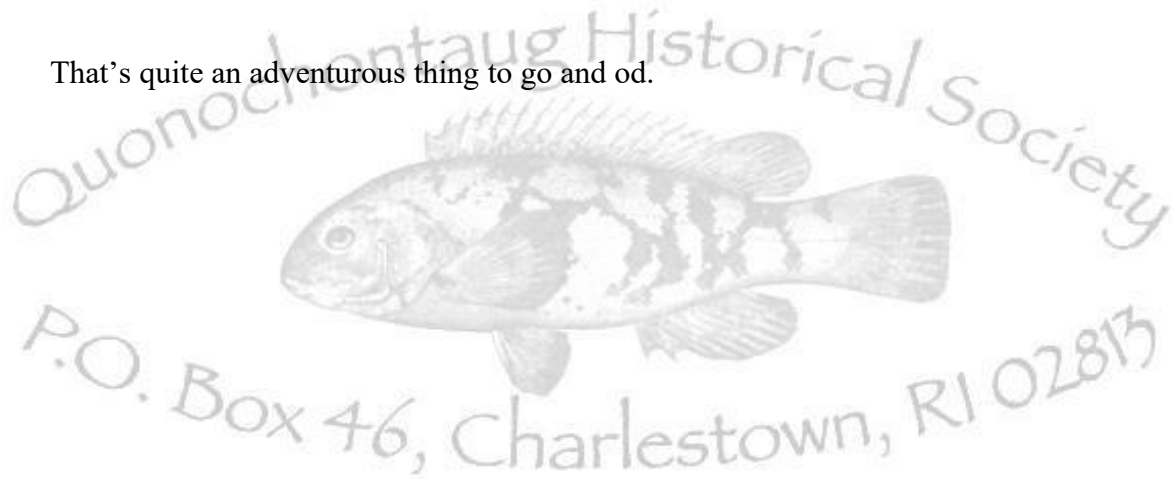
Q: What is your recollection of any bad storms or hurricanes down here that may have occurred?

A: There was Hurricane Bob. I'm not sure when Bob came through. I think that was the biggest one. I don't ever remember it being a problem. Actually, I do remember there was one storm where I lost a lot of my pots. They just got washed up on shore, and I couldn't find them. So, there was one year where there an early hurricane that came through. A lot of my gear was gone.

Q: Back then, we didn't have warning systems that we do today. Usually everybody can get out now and pull their pots.

A: Right. That's how I got into lobstering. I continued with lobstering when I'd come home. My first two summers of college, I worked at Rhode Island Marine Services. They build boats down in Point Judith. I worked in that. They had a lot of Coast Guard contracts that we'd do. We'd pain the bottoms, clean out the tanks and all that sort of stuff. It was awful work. It was very toxic paint, and there was not a lot of safety stuff going on. That gave me good knowledge of boats and all. The two last years of college, I went up to Alaska and worked on fishing boats up there. I went up and said, "I have a little bit of experience," and I just walked the docks until I found a job.

Q: That's quite an adventurous thing to go and od.



A: Yes, it was. It was more out of naivete than anything else. I didn't know what I was getting into. But I knew I wanted to go up there and see it and do it. Luckily, I did get on a boat that first day, because I only had a little bit of money. I got off the ferry. We had a nice ferry ride up from Seattle. A beautiful ride up through the inside passes of British Columbia. But I only had like \$40. I got off the boat, and a pancake was \$5.00. In Alaska, the prices were through the roof for everything, so I was really concerned. The first job I got on was a long liner that we'd go out and catch huge red snappers, black cod and halibut. We didn't get salmon. Sort of ground fish. That was quite an adventure. We didn't make any money, but we went all through southeast Alaska setting these lines. It's such a gorgeous place. There are all these islands that are non-inhabited. It's all wild. You'd see bears and bald eagles and whales and all sorts of wild life. So, I left that boat after a few weeks just because we weren't making any money. The guy said, "I've got to go back to Seattle. I can't afford to keep going." Then I walked the docks again, and got on a salmon seining boat. The owner was a Haida Indian. He was a native Alaskan. He had a nice wooden boat. The Patsy Ann. Sein nets are where you have the main vessel, and you have a net that goes out from that with a buoy line and a lead line. The skiff takes it to shore and holds it against the shore, and it creates this big half-moon net. Then the salmon come down, and they don't know what to do, because they want to travel along the shore. They end up circling around in the net, and then I'd get a call from the captain to say, "Close up." So, I'd take the end of the net with the skiff. It had this big diesel engine. It was only about a 16-foot skiff, but it was powerful as hell. We would go as quick as we could out to the ship in sort of an arc, and then drop the lead line and drop the end-to-end onto the boat, and they would haul in the lead line through the purse rings. There is a rope going through all these rings at the bottom of the net along the lead line. You would purse those up, bring that ashore, and then you'd have all the fish in the belly. My job, once I handed off the net, was to go on the opposite side of the boat and just keep the boat from getting sucked into the net. That was a wonderful adventure. It really was. Of course, the captain—his name was Elgee Frisbee—he knew the south east. He had grown up and lived there, so we went to places that no other boats went. At that time, the Indians all had villages still on the shore. You'd go into a spot, and they would be drying the salmon on the wooden racks. We had this big black guy. He was from Seattle. He was a taxi driver. He was down on his luck. He was going through a divorce. He just decided to come up to Alaska and fish. He was a huge bear of a man. When we'd go into this Haida villages, I don't know if they had seen many black men, but the children would just surround him. It was wonderful to watch. I think his name was Bill. He was wonderful with kids, because he had a pocketful of candy. The captain had a nephew who was on the boat. He was an Aleut Eskimo. It was a real cultural education as well. I loved it. It was just so gorgeous up there. And some of the spots that we'd go through, there was just barely enough room for the boat to fit through, and the tides are 18, 20 feet up there. So, you'd have these huge currents going everywhere. It was kind of a wild place. But it was so rich in wild life and fish. We'd pull into a spot for the night. You'd basically take a salmon head on a big hook, drop it over the side on a little bit of a leader, but then there would be a rope and you'd tie it off. In the morning, we'd have a halibut on that. So, you'd have halibut for lunch and dinner

that day. We shot deer from the boat and go dress them out and eat that. That introduction in Quonnie to lobstering and fishing really set me off. After college, I went up to Alaska again as a marine fisheries observer observing the Japanese fishing boats up in the Bering Sea. They had quotas. We would sample the catch, and send our results back to Seattle each week. That way they could get an idea of what the fleet was catching, and how close they were getting to quotas, and when to shut them down. That was interesting too. That was another cultural shock, because most of them didn't speak English. I got a good introduction to Japanese culture—their food.

Q: Did you live on the ships?

A: Yes. I was out there for three months from September through December. It was pretty wild, because it was getting really rough. We saw some big seas out there. They'd fish year-round. We'd pull into Dutch Harbor, which is on the Aleutian Island chain, which is an interesting place too, because the king crab boats were centered out of there as well. The bars were very rough and rowdy. There was a huge base during World War II. You'd climb up on the mountains overlooking the entrance to the bay, and there would be all these tunnels and their machine gun batteries and all of that. There was an abandoned section of town that had all of the old barracks. They had machine gun nests in the middle of the street with cement covers on them. It was really interesting to walk through there and think about what they were, because they were sure that the Japanese were going to invade the Aleutian Islands and take those, and that would be their way into the U.S. via Canada. And then from there, I came back to Rhode Island and worked on lobster boats. I walked the docks in Point Judith, got on a boat and went lobstering offshore. This was a little different. It wasn't single pots. We were hauling up 50 pots at a time all set out in intervals along the main ground line, and then there two buoy lines. We'd haul 2,000 pots or so at least once a week. That was year-round too, so winters were kind of tough too.

Q: How far offshore were you?

A: We were out on the Continental Shelf, so it was about 100 miles out. If you got stuck, you had to weather the storm. A few times we came in and we'd have a situation where there was ice building up on the rigging from the ocean spray. The ocean spray would go up and form ice on the metal. In those situations, if it gets bad, you have to go out and hammer the ice off, because the ship gets very top heavy and really starts to swing back and forth and roll. If you're heading home into port, you're going northwest, north, northwest, and that's where the wind was coming out of the north, northwest. It was a very cold wind. You're riding into the teeth of it, and spray is constantly coming over pounding the boat. That was also very exciting.

Q: What kind of garb did you wear when you banking the ice off of the rigging?

A: We had regular work boots to our knees that were rubber work boots. And we had rubber overalls and a jacket.

Q: Was it like a slicker setup?

A: Yes.

Q: And underneath that, were you wearing wool?

A: Yes. It was tough, because when you're hauling, it's hard work and get all sweaty. And then set everything back in, and you might have to steam for fifteen, twenty minutes, an hour, and you'd get cold again. Out there, the winds were cold, but the ocean was still relatively 40 or 50 degrees. It wasn't terribly freezing like it is on shore. That was during the height of the lobster industry in Point Judith. There were times when we had to stop lobstering, because we couldn't fit anymore in the boat. We'd have them in the barrels. The hole would be full. Then you'd have them in empty bait barrels that you'd stick the deck hose in and give them water. It was good money. It was high times for Point Judith.

Q: How long were your out there?

A: We'd go about four days. We had a smaller boat. It was only about a 40-footer. We had to pay close attention to the weather. If we knew bad weather was coming, we'd just have to haul straight through, because you'd want to get all the gear, as much as it hauled, and rebaited, and get the lobsters out as much as possible. In order to do that with 2,000 pots, if a storm was coming in two days, you'd have to just work straight through the night and day and sleep as you could—get little catnaps. That was pretty rough too, because you'd get pretty tired. You're hauling all that gear, 2,000 pots, handling them, baiting them, setting them out. You'd have this big table where you'd throw all the lobsters as they'd come out of the pot, and you're there banding them. The table would get overflowed with lobsters, because you just couldn't keep up.

Q: What is banding them like? Did you have one glove that was impervious to lobster claws?

A: I'm not sure why, but we had these cloth gloves. We never had rubber gloves. I guess it was because you needed to feel. Once you got the hang of it, you knew how to pick a lobster up, squeeze the arms together and band them. You could do it really quick. For the greenhorns—the new guys—they had a terrible time, because you've got to first the elastic onto the banding tool, which is a pain in the ass in itself, and then you've got to band the lobsters.

Q: So, you decided that you wanted to do something other than that?



A: There is one other sea story. I had an uncle, who was had a dream of sailing around the world. Finally, he got everything together so that he could do it. I told him, “If you ever need crew, call me.” He had three sons, and they all headed out of Newport. By the time they got to the Panama Canal, two of his sons said, “I’m going back. I’ve had enough.” So, my uncle called me. I had five days to get down to Panama.

Q: What time of year was this?

A: This was in the fall—late summer, early fall.

Q: Was this the year following Point Judith?

A: Yes. I lobstered down there for five years. Then when my uncle called, obviously I joined him in Panama on the sailboat and sailed all throughout the South Pacific, down to New Zealand—all through the South Pacific Islands—Galapagos, Marquesas, Tahiti, Bora Bora, French Polynesia, Tuamotus—the small island chain—Solomon Islands, Fiji, Tonga, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and then all through the Indonesian Island Chain—Bali. There are a ton of them. I can’t remember all the names. Bali is one of them. Then into Singapore, where we hauled the boat out to work on the engine. That was about two years. I kind of had enough. I had run out of money. It was time to get home and get on with my life and career. So, I came home and stayed at the beach house during the winter. I went fishing again. It was Halloween, and my wife came by. She was living down here. She had divorced her husband, and was living down here with her two boys. She brought them by at Halloween. We had a wonderful time. I was playing with the boys.

Q: Is this Gemma?

A: Yes. This is Gemma Lana, who also grew up down here. Her parents have a place down here. So, we met down here. One thing led to another. We got married. We moved back to Foster, but were still coming down here every summer either to stay at my parent’s house, which was tough, because we had four kids. When we came, we took things over. With all of my brothers and sisters, it was a lot. So, we ended up renting often down here.

Q: Where did you rent?

A: There is a small cottage on Bay Street that we rented. We rented a chalet-style—not really chalet, but a house on Seabreeze next to where Wally Kelly lives. Right next to him. There were a couple other places that we rented. When my parents passed—

Q: What year are we at?

A: My father passed in 2015.

Q: In the meantime, you had a few children?

A: Yes. We've got four kids. Two were by Gemma's previous marriage. Two girls are our own. They all loved it down here too. They had a great time. They all grew up down here. At that time, my father left the beach house to all five children. Gemma and I—I'm the oldest, so our kids were more grown. They were off in college or whatever, so we would come down and stay at the Bayberry Lodge, which was really nice. As things go, it was clear that being part of a family of five, and trying to share the place, and everyone wanting to do different things with the place, and some people wanted to rent it out. So, there was back and forth. So, I approached my sister about getting bought out, and she agreed to buy me out. That helped. Along with other savings that we had, we were able to buy the—

Q: Jean and Bill Wilson, Sr.'s old house?

A: Yes. That's right. That was huge, because we had been trying to find a place down here that was somewhat affordable, because we couldn't afford these million-dollar places. There is a place down on West Beach Road, a small cottage that was \$600,000. Gemma really wanted that. She wanted more than anything to be down here. But I said, "No, we can't afford that. It's just not going to work." She was very sad about that, because she felt like \$600,000 was about as low as you're going to get. And then when the Wilson's place came up, they were asking \$575,000. We negotiated a lower price. The Wilsons were very good about working with us so that we could buy it. They recognized us as a family that—Gemma had known the Wilsons. She was friendly with Cindy Wilson, who was the oldest daughter. And Bill as well. And so, basically, we worked out a deal that we could afford. That's how it happened. We're forever grateful to them and the fact that that all worked, because otherwise, we wouldn't be able to be here. I don't think there is another place like that that's come up in our price range. The place was in rough shape. Not terrible. So, we proceeded to fix it up.

Q: You've done wonders with that place. The whole new layout with your barn, and the house itself. It's quite an amazing thing that you've done.

A: Yes. It was great, because the place had a lot of potential. It was a big lot. There are actually two lots combined that were substandard, but it did create a nice configuration where the barn worked.

Q: And then you got a boat, and you've got more lobster pots.

A: That's right. I've come full circle. The boat is a lot of fun. I never thought my wife Gemma would take to fishing the way she has, but she's a fanatic. She loves it.

Q: She's always been a big clammer.

A: Right. Our kids and our grandkids all do the same things we used to do: go down to the pond and spend a lot of time there, the beach and all. Quonnie has changed a bit since back then, but it's still a wonderful place to be.

Q: Were there any major events down here, like the 4<sup>th</sup> of July or tennis tournaments or anything that you remember?

A: Yes. When they started the 4<sup>th</sup> of July running race, that was a big thing. My father was a big runner. I didn't enjoy running that much, but I think I did it a couple of times. So, that was a big event to go out and see everyone come in. Then the ball games every Saturday and Sunday were big as a kid. The 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade. My father was the moderator for a number of years. He was active with that. Those were the main ones.

Q: When you moved in '72, I don't think there was a water system in place. Or if there was, there was a well right up on the side of the ball field.

A: I do remember turning that water on and off, but that might have been in later years. I'm not sure. I'm trying to think if we had a well. I don't think there is a well there. If it was, it was decommissioned. There may have been water at that time.

Q: How about roads? Had the roads been paved?

A: Yes. The roads were paved.

