

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

JOAN GURNEY

Friday, October 13, 2017

Interviewed by Paul Leah Bradshaw

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Q: This is October 13th, 2017. We're at 25 Dowd Drive. This is Leah Bradshaw, and I'm here with Joan Gurney. Joan, what is your full name?

A: Joan Beryl Gurney.

Q: And when and where were you born?

A: Hartford Hospital, 1953. January 7th, 1953.

Q: And when did your family come to Quonnie?

A: They spent several summers renting the Dowd's house, Neptune. And then they liked this piece of land—the vacant land next to them, and they wanted to buy it, but a lot of people wanted to buy this land, so the chances were kind of slim. My dad took the Dowds to dinner. He brought it up over dinner. They decided to sell it to him. That's what happened.

Q: So, he bought the lot from the Dowds?

A: He bought the lot from the Dowds.

Q: And this was in the mid-1940s?

A: I'd say it was some time in the '40s. I don't know exactly. My sister might know, but I wasn't even born yet. I don't know exactly. Sometime in the '40s.

Q: When did he build it?

A: I believe they worked on it for a couple of years, and then it was completed in 1947.

Q: What is the history of it being built? Your dad was an engineer,

A: Yes.

Q: And his cousin was—

A: His cousin was an architect. He started with his cousin, the architect, John McAndrew, and he was pretty good. But they also got ideas from several places. They also got ideas from Yale Architecture School. They went there. And then they also went to another architecture firm, and it had a Coolidge in it. I remember that part. They had a Coolidge in it. They got ideas from everybody, and they decided what they wanted. They figured out what they wanted.

Q: It's so modernistic. It's so different.

A: Yes. And for 1947 especially.

Q: Very different.

A: Yes. Now everybody has a kitchen island. There are a lot of those, with barstools too. Now, the companies make chairs or barstools for your kitchen island. They do that now. But these are actually from a diner.

Q: So, they're the original stools?

A: Yes. We painted them up a little bit. We changed the color on the top. The original ones were gray. We had the gray ones for years and years. Then my mother said she wanted some color, so she did that. I think they're a little tacky, but she wanted color, so she got color.

Q: Orange.

A: Yes. It's high, too, because we're all tall. We like to cook. It needs to be cleaned up, but it is taller. Plus, it's supposed to hide the kitchen by being taller. The kitchen counters are much lower. It's supposed to hide the kitchen. It's all shelves on either side where you keep your stuff for the kitchen.

Q: So, your parents were a little bit ahead of their time.

A: Or the architects. They deserve the credit.

Q: But it was your parents who had the vision.

A: Right. The original kitchen was supposed to be in the back. My mother said, "I don't want to be stuck in the back over a hot stove while everybody else is out front having a good time, so you're going to have to put the kitchen in the front." So, they said, "How are we going to do that?" They said, "We'll have a bar. We'll make it a bar and a kitchen set up so you can be cooking and still not miss anything."

Q: So, she can see the ocean. She can see her dining room. She can interact with her guests.

A: Right. When we were kids, we used to sit on those stools and have lunch.

Q: Did you spin around on them?

A: Yes. We used to sit down there on the footrest and pretend we were driving cars with the stool tops.

Q: So, for the '40s, it's incredibly modernistic.

A: Yes. I would say the Japanese style was the inspiration, and that inspired both Frank Lloyd Wright and also this style, which is called Bauhaus which is German. This is the German interpretation of that. Frank Lloyd Wright got inspired by the Japanese style, and then he took it from there. He was ultra-modern too. A lot of office buildings have this kind of style. It just took off from there.

Q: It's not unusual nowadays.

A: No. It's not unusual nowadays. But in the '40s it was. In fact, some people didn't like it. I remember when they were building it, there were some builders over here, and they were saying, "What are you building a chicken coop?" Richie's (Thomsen's) mother didn't like it at all. I think that's one reason she sold her land here for the Burnett house so that their house would block ours. She thought it was too modern.

Q: Too severe?

A: Yes. Hers is a saltbox colonial. She's pretty traditional.

Q: What were your parents' backgrounds? Where were they from?

A: Jamestown, New York. My mother went to Wellesley. My dad went to Dartmouth. Her father had a department store. Her father started the department store, and his father had a ball-bearing factory in Jamestown, New York.

Q: How did your parents meet?

A: I think they met pretty young. They were like thirteen years old. I think they met in town. They probably went to the same school. Then they went to separate schools. He went to Dartmouth. She went to Wellesley. They got married after college.

Q: The house was built over a couple of years and was finished in 1947. When did your family start coming for the summers?

A: They used to rent the Dowd's house, and then they bought this. We came just about every summer. In fact, every summer.

Q: So, most of your summers you remember being here.

A: Yes.

Q: Your siblings are older, right?

A: You.

Q: You had a brother and a sister, but they were both older?

A: They're both older.

Q: Are they also attached here? Do they still love it?

A: Yes. They come occasionally. Not super attached. But they do come occasionally. My brother wanted to come this year, but it was too early. It was May, and it was cold and rainy. He wanted to be here for the good weather. He'll be back.

Q: When did you come to live in Quonnie full time?

A: I moved in with my mother when she was 92. I looked after her. My dad had died. She was pretty old and frail. She needed some help.

Q: It's hard to live in such an isolated area unless you have somebody to help you.

A: Yes. She was pretty sharp, but she was frail. She was getting frail. She needed help. She had stopped driving.

Q: You can't live here very easily without driving.

A: You really can't. That's true. By the way, she said, "I am not living in assisted living." She said, "You're going to have to figure something out, because I'm not living in assisted living." My sister said, "You're the only one that can really move in with her. Why don't you move in with her?" So, that's what happened.

Q: Was that in 2000?

A: About 2002.

Q: So, you've been here for about fifteen years.

A: Yes.

Q: What kinds of things did your family enjoy in the summer?

A: Swimming. Boating. Fishing. All that. Clamming.

Q: Did you have boats?

A: We went with the Dowds. When you go clamming with the Dowds, by the end of the trip, they have your new rake and they give you their old rusty ones.

Q: They were older ladies. They were entitled to the new rake.

A: We used to go blueberry picking. We used to have a lot of wild grapes here. Unfortunately, that was done in with when Mr. Holmes started using Chem Lawn. That killed the grapes. Chem Lawn has a lot of chemicals. One of them is a weed seed inhibitor. I guess that includes grapevines. So, we didn't get grapes after they used Chem Lawn. Isn't that awful?

Q: Or if you had grapes, you were probably afraid to eat them.

A: We don't even get the grapes anymore. We used to get tons of them. We used to save jars and fill them all up every year. We used to get a ton of grapes.

Q: Did you make your own jam?

A: Yes. Unfortunately, Chem Lawn did us in.

Q: So, did Mr. Holmes?

A: Yes.

Q: What did you do with the berries you picked?

A: Blueberry jam. Blueberry pies. Blueberry pancakes. Good stuff.

Q: And you caught fish and ate them [for] dinner?

A: Yes. My dad used to have fishing poles right in here, and when he saw the fish were jumping out there, he'd run down there and try to catch some. Sometimes we were lucky. Sometimes we filled up our freezer with fish for the winter. It depended. Sometimes you would score big, and other times you didn't catch anything.

Q: What kind of fish did he get?

A: Bluefish and stripers mostly. Sometimes we would get blackfish, but you have weights. We would use crabs and then weights. We used to get some of those in front of the inn. Sometimes David Burnett used to spearfish and get them.

Q: So, they're around the rocks?

A: Around the rocks in front of the nuns.

Q: How did you spend your time? Did you garden?

A: Yes. We always had a garden. My mother always had a garden.

Q: Vegetable or flower?

A: Vegetables and flowers.

Q: Did you eat her homegrown produce?

A: Yes. She made her own bread too. In her old age, she wasn't sleeping that great at night, so she used to get up and set her bread in the night. Then in the morning, she'd make bread or she'd make pancakes from it.

Q: From the dough?

A: Yes. It was good. My dad got into that too.

Q: Do you ever do that yourself?

A: I should. It's a lot of work the way she did it, but it was so delicious. She just used flour, water, salt, and yeast. That's it. They were fantastic.

Q: Did she have a bread maker, or did she do that all by herself?

A: She did it all. She kneaded it and everything. She pounded it down.

Q: How did you spend your evenings in this house? Was it around the table card playing?

A: We talked a lot about things. They told me about the good-old days back in Jamestown, New York. It was an interesting town. It was a Swedish community—a Swedish colony. A lot of them worked at my grandfather's ball bearing factory. They used to speak Swedish around town. Her grandmother came to live with them, and she spoke mostly Swedish.

Q: Your mom was Swedish. Was your dad also Swedish?

A: No. My dad was a Yankee going back to the Mayflower, I think. I guess I'm DAR. We found a Gurney on the Mayflower. Her grandmother could find a lot of people to talk Swedish within that town. But she spoke English too. She was half and half.

Q: Is that also where you grew up?

A: No. I think they left for college. They went to college. My dad went to MIT and got his engineering degree. That was 1929 in the bottom of the Depression. It was really hard to find a job. It took him six months to find a job. It was bad in 1929. He said he sent all these letters off, and nobody would answer them. Finally, he got a nibble from Pratt & Whitney, and he went over there. That's where he really wanted to work anyway, so that worked out. He went here. A guy said, "Is that a Phi Beta Kappa key you're wearing around your neck?" and he said, "Yes." They said, "That's good enough for me. You've got the job."

Q: Your dad must have been very bright.

A: Yes. He was pretty smart. I guess he really liked it. He was there for twenty years. When you get a good job, you don't want to lose it and have to spend six months looking for another one.

Q: That was a different era.

A: Yes.

Q: What did your family do for recreation when you were all together?

A: A lot of swimming. We did go places on his boat. We used to go to Block Island on his boat. We went to Maine one time. The whole family went to Maine on the last boat he had. He kept working his way up to better boats. The last one was one of the early fiberglass ones. It had two bunk beds and a head in it. It had a big deck. I had to sleep out on the deck.

Q: Did you like that as kids?

A: Yes. It was fun.

Q: Sleeping out and looking at the stars.

A: Yes. And going up to Maine. Those little islands around Maine are fun, because they've got the Indian shell mounds up there. The Indians have been having clam bakes on these little islands. They take their canoes and they go out to these little islands off the coast of Maine. They're not that far off the coast of Maine. They have their clam bakes every year for like thousands of years, and they get these clamshells that build up into these huge mounds. They're still there. You can see them. It's fascinating. There is nothing in there but shells, because people have dug there looking for treasures, but there is nothing. That's where they had their clam bakes. It's kind of cool. Spruce Island was one of them with the shell mounds.

Q: Did you have good weather going up and back?

A: Yes. We lucked out pretty well. I remember one time we had a storm in the Elizabeth Islands. We spent the night in Cuttyhunk. I remember that. That was a bit of a nor'easter kind of a thing. My dad was worried about the anchor dragging, but I don't think it did. That was a bit of storm there. And one time we had fog. We went through the Cape Cod Canal, and we had fog. That was a little scary. But otherwise, we had pretty good weather, as far as I remember. It's always rough when you go past Buzzards Bay. For some reason, the wind and the water—it's always rough there.

Q: Why is it rough?

A: I think it's the currents and the wind. It makes it very choppy there. It's always like that. It was a lot of fun. You see things. We saw sharks occasionally or porpoises. It was fun.

Q: So, that was one of your family recreations—boating?

A: Yes. Boating. We caught a lot of fish off the boat too.

Q: Were you able to eat them while you were on the boat?

A: No. We usually brought them home. We used to fill up our freezer. I think there were more fish in those days than there are now. I think they're sort of getting fished out. I think we need hatcheries.

Q: What hurricanes do you remember while you were living here in your childhood?

A: I remember the '54 hurricane. That was the worst. I was very young, but I do remember we fled in the Buick. We evacuated in the Buick. When we came back, there was water all over the floor with sand and a big rock in front of the window. The barstools were flipped up on the table. I forgot to say yesterday that a neighbor's kid was going through our drawers taking fishing lures out of my dad's drawer.

Q: Did your dad have a chat with him?

A: Yes. He didn't turn out so well. I think he had problems later. That kid didn't turn out too good. He was looting in that hurricane.

Q: So, he got ordered to return the fishing lures?

A: Yes. I think we got the fishing lures away from him.

Q: What else do you remember about Hurricane Carol?

A: I remember the cleanup, because we had to get the water off the floor and have it dry out. It had rusted every little nail. We had to paint it. I wanted to paint, and they wouldn't let me, because I was too little. It needs another paint job, and probably a new floor eventually. It was a big deal. We had a watermark on the ceiling. I guess we did have waves in here because it broke the lock on the door. We had water in here. I think the people over there—was it the Murrays.

Q: Billie Murray and Mary Murray.

A: Yes. I think they were the ones that said they saw waves breaking over the top of our house. We were gone, thank goodness. I don't know where they went. I have to ask my sister about that. She might know.

Q: Where did your family go?

A: I don't really know.

Q: Did you spend the night here?

A: I don't think so. We went someplace. I don't know where. I'll have to ask her. I wonder if we just went to the other house. They might have just gone to the other house in Glastonbury. They might have just gone there. I'll ask my sister. She might know. She's old enough to remember. Then after the hurricane, we found a lot of stuff on the beach. He built me a little house out of driftwood down there. We found things—like little plastic bits of things that washed up from somewhere. All kinds of treasures. Hurricanes are devastating. I feel bad for Puerto Rico.

Q: And Florida.

A: And Texas.

Q: What other hurricanes do you remember?

A: That was definitely the worst. Sandy was pretty bad. Sandy—that tree—it's right on the line between us and Atwoods. That one fell over. My tree caught it, thank heavens. Otherwise it would have hit my roof. That would have been bad. We were pretty lucky, because John Pruitt, my yard guy, showed up with a tree truck the next day. He came right over the next day ready to save me. He just took it away, which was great. That would have been bad. The water damaged my wall. I had to rebuild my wall.

Q: Your wall upfront?

A: Yes. The sea wall.

Q: What did it do to the sea wall?

- A: The wave action pulled the rocks away from the backfill from the gravel. Eventually, I think I'm going to have to put a layer of flat rocks on top, the way they have over here. That's so that the waves can't grab it and tug it away. If I had just a layer of rocks, that would be better. I've already talked about it. It's about 3,000 bucks to redo it. I think we're pretty good for this year. But eventually, I'm going to have to do it, because we may get another one. That's probably what I'll have to do.
- Q: You're sure close to the water.
- A: I got new steps out of it. That was good. The old ones my dad and Steven put in. Sandy completely wrecked it. There was a huge rock from the wall down on the beach too
- Q: And you got handrails.
- A: Yes.
- Q: And you got a flat rock sofa for sitting.
- A: Yes. Pete Dijackabo did a pretty good job. I guess it's an improvement overall, but it was a pain in the neck.
- Q: What else did Sandy do to this house?
- A: It didn't do anything to the house. I don't even think the waves reached the house. There was a line of seaweed and seashells in the grass. That's probably as far as it got. It went over the top, and back a few feet. There was a line of seashells. We got that off.
- Q: Were you able to spend the night here?
- A: No. That was too scary. When the waves started hitting the wall and going up in that big plume of spray, we cleared out. Plus, the power got knocked out. That was kind of scary. We got out of here.
- Q: Did you go north?
- A: Yes. We went north. The power was completely gone miles around here. We didn't find any power until we got to Warwick. We stayed by the airport.
- Q: How long were you away?

A: We stayed there a couple of nights. When we left, there were downed power lines and trees and everything going out West Beach Road. There was a cop at the intersection of West Beach Road and the highway. He was keeping people from coming in, which was good. He kept out the looters. They also didn't let anybody in. They wouldn't let the people that lived here in either. We called the police department and found out when they'd let us back in. Then we came back, but we still didn't have power.

Q: So, you came back a day or so later?

A: I think we were up there a couple of nights. Then we came back. We still didn't have power. I would have stayed here, but Eric didn't like not having power, so we stayed at the Aquastar for a couple of nights. I think it was five days all together. On the fifth day it came on.

Q: It came on, on Friday.

A: Yes. So, we stayed there a couple of nights, and then we came back here. We hung out here, and then the power came on thank heavens. But the Red Cross had come to Charlestown. One more day of that and I would have taken them up on the hot meals and the shower truck.

Q: Did you lose everything from your refrigerator and freezer?

A: Yes. We didn't have a generator then. We do now. We have a Honda generator now. It was a real mess.

Q: A lot of cleanup.

A: Yes. You probably had that too. Do you have a generator now?

Q: I don't have a generator, because I'm not here in the winter. But I did have friends with generators, so I was able to spend some time with them. I remember going into the Haversham, because Westerly had power even though Charlestown didn't.

A: Yes. They got hooked up sooner. And we went over to the McDonald's. A lot of people were there. We went out for pizza one night too, because they had power and we could get a hot meal there. That was crazy. I don't know how Puerto Rico can do it. They're going to have to be without power for so long. I actually blame Trump for that. I think he should send in the electricians and the National Guard. They are Americans. They serve in our armed forces. I think they earn the right to—if we're going to call them our territory and everything, and they serve in our military, I think we have to have the responsibility of helping them restore their power. It goes both ways.

Q: What are your favorite activities in Quonnie?

A: Swimming.

Q: And in the wintertime?

A: I have a wood stove in the wintertime. It's like a pet. We ski. Occasionally we take a trip and go somewhere warm. We've been to a couple of different places. We went to Ireland about five years ago. That was very nice. We stayed in Dublin, and then we rented a car and drove on the left. I don't think we'll ever do that again. It's a disaster. Have you ever driven on the left?

Q: No. And I'm not going to.

A: It's no fun. You feel like a sixteen-year-old learning how to drive. You have to do it all over again. I'm driving in the left lane, and I'll be daydreaming or something, and I'll look at the road and go, "Oh, my God, I'm in the left lane. I'm going to get hit. Wait a minute; I'm driving on the left." It's awful. It only takes like two hours to go from Dublin to the west coast of Ireland. It's small. It's a small place.

Q: We didn't go to the west coast, but we did go south and did some exploring there.

A: Did you go to that place where they make the glass? Is it Waterford?

Q: No.

A: What's nice about the west coast is it's more Irish. They speak Gaelic there. You'll hear Gaelic on the street.

Q: Street signs are in Gaelic.

A: Yes. And you'll hear them speak it. I was in a bar, and there were two guys speaking Gaelic next to me. It sort of sounds like Swedish. It's got that singsong to it.

Q: Back to Quonnie. So, you travel and ski, and you swim in the summer. What are some of your favorite memories about being here?

A: All kinds of summer stuff. Let's see. Do you mean kid stuff?

Q: Kid stuff. Adult stuff. Anything you really enjoy here.

A: You know what makes it nice here? I've lived in cities and stuff. I was always a bundle of nerves in cities. What's nice about here is it's peaceful. That's the nicest thing about this place.

Q: The winter is very peaceful.

A: Yes. Maybe too peaceful. But in cities, I'm just a bundle of nerves. Do you like cities?

Q: I like them to explore.

A: I like them to visit. That's fun. Especially European cities, because it doesn't seem real to me. It seems like a toy town, because they're so cute and old. Amsterdam is like a toy town. It doesn't look real with those cute, little houses and cute, little canals. The tulips are everywhere. It's like a child's dream town. It's so cute. I like that. It's not too big. You can walk around. I didn't worry about crime there, but that was a while ago. I heard it has changed. I heard it's not as nice as it was.

Q: Do you walk a lot here in the winter? Do you walk on the beach?

A: Yes. Especially with the dog.

Q: Do you get chilled when you do that?

A: I dress for it. I have nylon pants and nylon shell jackets—wind breakers and long johns. Layers. You've got to do that. But I guess that's what makes it nice and peaceful. I have tried to live in cities. I lived in Denver, and it was fun for a while, but after a while you just get exhausted. It's stressful. It's kind of stressful. You don't get the peace of being by the ocean. I couldn't live in New York. Boston is more livable I guess, but I couldn't live in New York.

Q: Do you visit?

A: No. I don't think I could live in New York. I think I'd go nuts. It's so stressful.

Q: In the winter, it's nice to go south to New York or north to Boston.

A: There's more to do there. There is more employment. There is more of good theater and everything. Museums. It has that going for it. I've lived here too long.

Q: Is there anything else that you want to add? Do you want to talk about your relationship with the Dowd sisters?

A: The Dowds were fun. The Dowds had a car they called Betsy. It was really old. My dad used to talk to them about that. I think they must have had someone look after it for them, because they said, "We never put any oil in Betsy." I don't really believe that it ran without any oil. I think someone else must have looked after it for them. They were funny. They never went over 25 miles an hour whenever they drove. I guess they came from the horse-and-buggy era. They died at 100 quite a number of years ago. They probably do remember horses when they were young. They never drove a car over 25 miles an hour. They would come up to see us in Glastonbury one time. It takes us an hour and a half, and it took them half a day to get there. I think they went 25 miles an hour the whole way. It took them quite a while. They were hilarious. One time my dad got up at 5:00 to go fishing in his boat that he kept over in Avondale, and he went out there. My parents and Agnes used to fertilize her garden, and they used to go in with a load of cow manure. They'd get the real stuff. They went to one of the local farms, and they had a guy come out here to deliver a big truckload of cow manure. It was stinky. The Dowds would get half, and we would get half. We'd leave it out there until it stopped stinking, and then you can put it your garden. If you put it on too early, you will burn all your plants. It was awful. But anyway, they were still the New York ladies. They still used to dress up. It was cold. It must have been in the fall. No, it wasn't in the fall. It was early spring, so it was still cold. She was out here in a mink coat, and a little piece of cow manure had fallen into the driveway, and she was gingerly picking it up with a little shovel in her mink coat. She was hilarious. They were hilarious. But she had a wonderful garden. Her soil was black. I think they had a little black sand in it too. They grew wonderful things. It was good. We used to exchange vegetables back and forth with them. Mildred over here had a garden too. Jolly had a garden. So, we used to exchange vegetables all around. We had a farmer's market trading.

Q: Who was Mildred?

A: Mildred Reynolds. She rented Barnacle for a lot of years. He used to say he was a dentist, but I think he made false teeth. He made a lot of money making false teeth. Maybe she was a receptionist. She could have been. I bet she was. She was probably the receptionist. They lived there. She had a beautiful garden. She knew nothing about gardening, so she went to the library and got books and read up on it. She became the best gardener here. She had the latest stuff. Not one weed in her garden either. She did a lot of work on it. She was a very good gardener. Mildred.

Q: Is there anything else you want to add that you can think of?

A: Not really, unless you want me to tell you about the Seabreeze Inn. The Seabreeze Inn—when was that up and going? Quite a long time ago, because it was ruined when we were kids. It was abandoned, vacant and kind of spooky looking. One night we decided to go there after dark and explore it and scare ourselves. It was a bunch of kids. About five kids got together. We were going to go over there. We got as far as the driveway. There was a big harvest moon. The trees were there, and it was shining through the trees. Then there was the haunted hotel. It was like a Halloween movie. We got so spooked we just turned around and ran all the way home. I think what started it was the Dowds said it was in the underground railroad, or something. That was slaves, right?

Q: The Seabreeze or the Wilcox?

A: I think they said the Seabreeze. I think that's one reason we wanted to go take a look at it. We didn't really know what an underground railroad was, but we wanted to go take a look. I think it was smuggling slaves up to Canada.

Q: To freedom?

A: No. The Wilcox had slaves back in the day, because they still have chains in their basement, according to Arthur Dolly, who did the remodeling over there. They found chains in the basement. Then when the slaves had gotten emancipated or whatever, they lived in little houses where the apartments are now by the parking lot. Around the side of the house was the parking lot. I think there are apartments in there. Or there used to be. I think they're still there. That's where the slave houses were. They had 40 horses and 40 slaves. They grew tobacco, corn, and other vegetables. General Stanton was in the Continental Congress. He was under an obelisk. I think because he was buried under an obelisk, I think he might be a Freemason. I'd like to look into that to see if he was. I know around New York, the people are buried under obelisks are Freemasons. There was a show on that with Scott Walter called America Unearthed. He tracked down all these obelisks around New York that were all Freemasons. His theory was that they did everything for a purpose. He thinks that they all lined up pointing to the Statue of Liberty. That was his theory.

Q: I wonder if that's true.

A: It could be. They're into designs, especially Washington, D.C. is all Freemason designs. The streets will be navigated by compass and square. There are kinds of symbols and stuff. They're into symbols and stuff like that. It could be.