

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

DELFINA (DeI) OLIVERIO HARMON

Thursday, August 11, 2019

Interviewed by Donna Jordan in Charlestown

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).

Q: Welcome to Quonochontaug, Rhode Island, otherwise known as Quonnie, which is located in Charlestown, Rhode Island. I'm Donna Jordan, and this interview is taking place on August the 11th, 2019. The address of the location is 26 West End Road. This oral history is being done to preserve the history of Quonochontaug. This video will be stored in the archives of the Quonochontaug Historical Society. Today, I will interview Del Harmon. I'd like to begin this interview by explaining to you how I met Del Harmon. I am a board member of the Quonochontaug Historical Society. And she and her husband, Tommy, came to a Quonochontaug event. The name of the event was How to do an Old-Fashioned Clam Bake. This was July 25th, 2018. And it was held at the Quonochontaug Grange. During the reception, I was talking to them, and Del told me that they had just celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary. Since that was a very special occasion, I asked if I could take their photo. They agreed, and then I asked for their email address so I could contact them. On the paper that Del wrote for the email, she also included that she had lived in the Quonochontaug Bowling Alley – Casino. I was so interested in that comment. I wrote her an email stating that I would like to speak to her about her life in Quonnie. She right away agreed to meet me at my home in Quonochontaug. And today you will hear her oral history of Quonnie.

Would you please, Del, tell us your full name, where you were born?

A: My full name is Delfina Oliverio Harmon and I was born in Pawcatuck, Connecticut at 121 Liberty Street, right up the street from the Catholic church, which we were members.

Q: How did you come to Quonochontaug?

A: Yes. I would be happy to tell you. My mother and father were Italian immigrants. They didn't have much and particularly with six children. But they were very thrifty. My mother was very careful. She cooked every meal. My father worked at the Bradford Dyeing Association in Bradford, Rhode Island. They saved. They had friends in Pawcatuck. My father had a friend who was called Sam Grills, and Sam Grills owned the bowling alley in Quonochontaug. He wanted to sell it. So, my father said, "I'll buy it, and we can run it."

Q: What year was that?

A: It was about '44/'45, because it was before my brothers came home from the Army. Mike was in the Navy. My brother Sam, the younger one, was in the Army. My mother and father bought the bowling alley and they called it the Casino. They ran it. We lived upstairs. I was the only one who came down to live with them because I was the youngest.

Q: Here is a vintage post card of the bowling alley. Does this look familiar? [insert photo of the bowling alley in the 1940's]

A: yes that is it.

Q: ...where you actually lived?

A: We lived upstairs. There were several bedrooms in front with the kitchen, living area. And in the back, there were five or six rooms which they could rent out to people who wanted to stay overnight. They didn't publish that very much, but they rented it sometimes. Not very much, though, because they didn't advertise it. My father ran the store. My mother kept our house running upstairs. Every summer we'd come down in May and leave late September. We lived in Pawcatuck. By then, my brothers had come home from the military. The war was over. My brother Sam—not the older one, Mike, but Sam was very good to help my father with the store, and my brother Danny. They had a small store with a small amount of groceries. If you came in for a hotdog, they would cook it for you, or a hamburger. That was the extent of it. I was ten, and I didn't have much to do but play around. I couldn't work in the bowling alley, because I wasn't old enough. I wasn't big enough. My brother Danny did the setting up of pins for bowling. It was not really a very, very busy store, because we didn't have a big selection. But it was there if somebody ran out of something.

Q: Do you remember how many bowling lanes there were in that bowling alley?

A: Yes. As I remember it, I think there were three. Let me ask my husband ,Tommy if he remembers me telling him about the bowling lanes. How many lanes were there?

A: I don't remember.

A: Three or four.

Q: Was it busy from morning till evening? What were the hours that the bowling alley or Casino was open?

A: I think my father opened it about 9:00 and closed it about 8:00 in the evening. He worked during the day at Bradford Dyeing Association and got home around 4:00. So, my mother and brother, and then when my brother Sam came home, he worked there and kept it going until he got his job.

Q: Was it profitable for your parents?

A: I don't think it was very profitable. After five years, my father said, "I'm going to sell it." It was just too much with him working and working at the bowling alley. He mentioned it to his friend that he had bought it from, Sam Grills. My father had tried to sell it, but no one was interested. Mr. Grills bought it back from him for the same price that he paid, and we were happy. My father was happy. My mother was happy. The whole family was happy. But we were down in quonochontaug about five years.

Q: I also have in my photo collection a picture of what was known as a slot machine. We have the actual slot machine in our archive center. It was donated by a Quonnie resident. This slot machine is called the "One-Eyed Bandit". There was another name given to the slot machine "The Puritan Baby Vendor" and also a gum-ball machine. Did you ever see that slot machine in the casino?



A: I don't know that I did, but I'm sure it was there. I don't remember it.

Q: Why did they call it a casino? Because of that slot machine? There weren't any other gambling or games going on?

A: No. Not at all.

Q: I didn't think so.

A: But I had a wonderful time down in Quonnie with having friends and going to the ocean. I was lucky. I was the lucky one in the family. I wasn't working.

Q: Did you swim in the ocean?

A: Yes. I swam in the ocean.

Q: Did you do anything in the pond?

A: No.

Q: People went into the pond to clam.

A: I didn't do that, but I had wonderful friends. Even after we moved, after five summers, I still kept my friends for many years right here on the point. There were two special friends.

Q: I was going to ask you if there are any relatives or good friends that still return to Quonnie.

A: Yes. For years. I can't remember their names now. But we used to correspond for years. I was ten. And now I'm 85. That was 75 years ago.

Q: You really enjoyed your time living here.

A: Oh, I loved it.

Q: And experiencing all that Quonnie offers.

A: Who wouldn't? The second floor of the casino had a big porch, so I could come out there and see it all from where we lived.

Q: Right. Because a lot of these houses weren't built yet, or if they were, I think they were small little cottages.

A: This was here a cottage at 26 West End Road.

Q: Yes. A small cottage that was here in the '40s and the '50s. Were you ever here when there was a bad storm? Maybe not a hurricane, but just a bad storm that you might remember.

A: I don't remember any bad storms.

Q: Did you tell us that you also have returned to Quonnie, and you live now on Nutmeg Avenue in Charlestown?

A: Yes.

Q: So, you have returned because of your love of the area right?

A: We love these beaches. Who wouldn't? And we would have bought here—we looked here, but we couldn't afford it. Tommy was an Army officer. He retired after 24 years. Even with his retirement, we couldn't afford it. Quonochontaug was more expensive than Charlestown, so we bought a little place in Charlestown. But it's nothing like this.

Q: The whole area is magnetic.

A: It is.

Q: It calls you back. We want to make sure, Tommy, you get in the picture too. Continue your story about how you got married in the same church that was right down the street from where you were born.

A: That was my second year of teaching. I applied with the Federal Government, and they sent me to Boston. I said to them, "What else can I do?" "You could be a recreation leader," so I took the job and they sent me to Germany. I worked in the recreation department. I had been there about three months, and my girlfriend, Melissa, said, "We're going out tonight. Will you join us?" "Yes." And who was driving but Tommy Harmon. We were going to a wine fest in the fall. That's what the Germans do. It was wonderful. So, I didn't drink, but everybody did a little bit. About a week later the phone rang at work, and my supervisor answered it and she came up to me and she said, "Del, they thought that call was for me, but it wasn't. It was for you." So, I went and it was Tommy Harmon asking me to go out for a movie, and I said, "I'd love to." I'd already seen it, but I didn't tell him that. We started dating—we started dating immediately after that movie. Three months after we were dating, he gave me an engagement ring. It was Christmas. Six months later we flew back to Connecticut for the wedding. The wedding was at the same church on my street—my family's house on the street. The same church that I was baptized in, first communion, confirmation. And we were married on June 14th, 1958. Then we had to go back to Germany because he had to go back to work. He bought tickets. I didn't have any money, but he bought tickets to go back. On our first anniversary, I'm in an Army hospital in Germany—

A: The Air Force hospital.

A: The Air Force hospital, and Nancy, our daughter, was born. Three months later the Army had sent him to Pueblo, Colorado. Three years later our daughter, Mary, was born. We had various locations with [his] job. Nine years later, after Mary was born, he was sent back to Germany. Our son, Tom, was born in Germany. So, we have two German babies, but American citizens, and one Colorado girl. Here we are. We've just celebrated our 61st wedding anniversary.

Q: Congratulations, Del.

A: We are so grateful and so blessed.

Q: Tommy, could you come over and stand behind Del? Let's get a picture of the two of you. When did you first come to Charlestown?

A: We decided that we liked the beach so much, and every year we would come back and visit relatives—

A: And friends.

A: ...and friends. We thought it's not the same visiting them. If we had our own place, it would be much better. So, we worked with a real estate agent, Millie Godden from the local Charlestown office. She found this place. The husband had died a year before. His wife wanted to sell the place. It didn't mean anything to her anymore. So, Millie took us around and said, "There just isn't much for sale, because it goes from generation to generation, and it's always kept within the family." But the next morning she called and said, "I found a place that you might like. It's available and it's empty, and you might like it, but it's in bad shape." We did a lot of work. I said, "Show it to us." She did, and we liked it. My bachelor's degree is as an industrial arts teacher, so I had one carpentry work and helped build houses. So, I knew that it would be fun. But it was work.

Q: What year was that, Tommy, when you bought that house?

A: We ended up making an offer, and she accepted it. We had a settlement on Labor Day 1971.

Q: And the address is 24 Nutmeg?

A: No. This cottage we bought was right off of Charlestown Beach Road.

Q: Okay. This is a different one.

A: That was the first one.

Q: Okay.

A: It did need a lot of work. So, every year we would come back from the Army for maybe a week, and we'd come back and—

A: Work.

A: ...work. Our oldest daughter was old enough that she could take the other two kids down to the beach and play. That's how we did it.

A: Yes. We worked. But that was not on the water. Then we found one behind us on the pond. They call it ponds, right? But they're really huge salt lakes. We found one on the pond. He said, "I think we ought to look into this one." We did, and that's where we are.

Q: And that's where you are now?

A: On the water.

Q: On Nutmeg?

A: Nutmeg.

A: Let me back track and tell you a little anecdote. Del had been living in an area with sailors. She would be dating Navy officers. She wanted to meet a soldier.

A: He always teases me about that. I wanted to meet a soldier.

A: And she did. I went over with a foot locker and a car. I came back with a wife, a baby, a set of dishes—a set of China and crystal. All these things you had to have.

A: That's the truth.

A: That is the truth.

A: And you know what? Now the kids don't want the crystal. They don't want the China. They want to go get it in town at some other store.

A: They want to go buy their furniture at Ikea.

Q: It sounds to me like you have a wonderful marriage and children.

A: We do.

Q: There is one more thing that I would like to show. This is another postcard of the beach and the bowling alley in the 1900's .



A: I don't know that I've ever seen that.

Q: I have one also that's very similar.

A: This is the bowling alley?

Q: Yes. It says here Wilson's Bowling Alley, Quonochontaug, Rhode Island. It looks a little different than when you lived there. I don't know the real history, if the original was destroyed in the '38 Hurricane. I may be assuming that. And then when it was rebuilt, it looked like this, which is where Del lived for those five or six years. This is a photograph that a friend sent to another friend. This is in the 1970s. These young people were at the casino. It says right here, "The old Bowling Alley with a rather motley collection of people," and there are three young boys sitting outside, which I think is something to add to the story that years later, after Del moved, it still became a social gathering point. It was an attraction for many.

A: And there's the upstairs that we all enjoyed.

Q: Yes.

A: We looked at the ocean.

Q: I wish to thank Del very much for giving us her oral history. As I introduced her and said, this will be preserved in the archive center for all other generations to enjoy her story about living in the Bowling Alley.

