

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

ELAINE & RICHARD HENRY

Tuesday, October 21, 1997

Interviewer: Anne S. Doyle

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DOYLE: It's a beautiful day at Quonnie, and I am sitting here with Dick and Elaine Henry in their home WILDBRIAR, at 76 Ocean View Avenue in Quonochontaug. The purpose of this conversation is to record Dick and Elaine's Quonochontaug memories. We're gathering family histories of people that have lived at Quonochontaug for the past several years. This tape will be placed in the permanent records, the historical records here, at Central Beach.

Ok; I think, Elaine, the first thing I'd like to ask you is for you to just say your full name, and then names of members of your family, in the past, that have had connection here at Quonnie, whether it be Central Beach or East Beach.

ELAINE: OK; I'm Elaine Walcott Henry. The Walcotts and xxxxx the Parrots, who were my other set of grandparents, built houses down on the ocean front at East Beach before the turn of the century. And I spent my first summer here, at East Beach, when I was three months old; I was born in April of 1919, and I spent every summer after that up through 1938 over at East Beach.

DOYLE: Now where did your family come from, though, you know; where did they live? They were just here summers, is that right?

ELAINE: They were just here summers, but they both lived in Providence. I should say, the Parrots lived just over the town line in North Providence; but the two families were only two or three miles apart, their winter homes. And I don't honestly know what brought them to Quonochontaug, I really don't.

1
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But it was – they both came when my mother and father were little children; they sort of grew up together down here summers.

DOYLE: So they met down here. So you don't know if they came because another family from the Providence area was also here --?

ELAINE: No, I don't. I really don't. xxxxx Now they had the houses, that were built next to theirs on the ocean front there, before the turn of the century-- were people who were friends; but I'm not sure whether there was any one in particular who was the first one to come down. But there were five different couples who built houses at about that time.

DOYLE: Now approximately when did they start coming, do you have any idea? In terms of the dates, or the years –

ELAINE: No; I'm saying the turn of the century. My mother was born in [18]93 so she was just a little girl but I'm not sure between '93 and the turn of the century just what the year was. It was in that time period.

DOYLE: Yeah. You know that they came from Providence area, but how did they get here, physically?

ELAINE: They took the train, over to Bradford. And then they came over to the beach with a horse and buggy. Wagon, I guess, really, by wagon. And my mother always told the story about as soon as they got off the train and got in the wagon, off came the shoes, and they never put them on again until they went back the day after Labor Day.

DOYLE: [Laughter] Oh, I love that story! I absolutely love that story!

ELAINE: So I'm not just sure how many years it was that they had to do that. But my grandparents both owned automobiles fairly early in the century, around 1908 or 1910. And I don't remember hearing what year they started making the drive down here.

DOYLE: Well, when they came down, do you know if they stayed for the whole summer? Or did they just stay for a short period of time?

ELAINE: As far as I know they stayed for the whole summer. Because there were— my mother was an only child, but there were four children in my father's family. And so they stayed, and the fathers came on the weekends.

DOYLE: So can you tell us exactly where their houses were located, in relationship say to Blue Shutters? Where they built their house?

ELAINE: Their houses were west of Blue Shutters.

DOYLE: And they were right next to each other--?

ELAINE: They were close to one another, yes. And their land – their lots – went from the ocean front back to –well it was one of the fresh-water ponds. ‘Cause you know there are several fresh-water ponds around here. So their land went back to the fresh-water pond. So, the first -- they moved their houses twice. The first time that they were afraid of beach erosion, they moved their houses back as far as they could toward the small pond. And then the second time they moved their cottages, in 1918, they all moved on the shore of Ninigret Pond.

DOYLE: That’s the large pond, yeah?

ELAINE: Yeah.

DOYLE: Now, it was the ’38 Hurricane that actually destroyed the houses –is that correct?

ELAINE: That’s right. They were over on the Pond at that time. And they thought they were safe.

DOYLE: Did your mother ever relate any stories about xxxxx ?

ELAINE: Well, the things that stand out in my mind: one is that my mother loved the horseback riding, and she had her own horse. And I don’t know how many summers, but she brought the horse down here to Quonnie. And I have pictures of her out on the beach with her horse.

DOYLE: How did she get her horse down here?

ELAINE: Well, I suppose – by train? Or --I don’t know how they would transport the horses in those days. All I know is she had a horse named Kitty, and Kitty came to the beach!

[Technical problem with tape? Long silence, voices barely audible] --

DOYLE: OK; let’s see if the light’s going on here. Let’s go back and I’m going to ask the question again, about you say that you knew some of the things that your parents did when they were in Quonnie.

ELAINE: Well, besides enjoying the beach of course, they would get together every once in a while and walk up to Watchaug Pond, up where Burlingame is these days, and take a picnic lunch. And I suppose they went swimming up there, I don’t know. But they did go blue-berrying, if it was the right time of the summer; and then evenings, down here, they would walk over to West Beach, at Quonnie, to what we remember as the old bowling alley.

It was there way back – probably at the turn of the century. too. But they would walk over there, and they had bowling. And then, up at the Kenyon House --which more people down here know now as the Sea Breeze Inn, but then it was the Kenyon House, when it was built way back at the turn of the century—they used to have dances there. So we really had more going on, I think, maybe than we do now. Mother said you had to be very careful walking from their homes in East Beach over to West Beach, because Central Beach was just farmland and there were cows, and so you had to be very careful.

DOYLE: So they went right through the –

ELAINE: You went right through the farm. You know our farmhouse up here. Right through their farmland, and all of the --

DOYLE: Yeah. So there was their community over on East Beach, and then there was the community over on West Beach.

ELAINE: Yes, because they got together. They were young people in the Ashaway group over there, and probably, actually, most of their friends would be in that area, because I'm not aware of other houses down at East Beach.

DOYLE: So most of the houses on East Beach at the time were just those few houses that were on the waterfront or had been moved.

ELAINE: That's right; that's right. And the only other --well, up until -- that I can remember up through the time of the '38 Hurricane, the only home over at East Beach, other than the few along the front-- on the Pond there, was the old --- farmhouse --the old Buddington Farmhouse. And I used to walk with my grandfather through a lane from West [East?] Beach Road up to the farmhouse 'cause my grandfather knew Mr. Buddington. And we used to walk up there to the farmhouse. So that was the only building on East Beach, and East Beach as we know it now has about a hundred and some houses. Was just all uncultivated land --

DOYLE: Now, when did the other people start coming down? Do you remember that, when people started coming down building those other houses on East Beach or --?

ELAINE: Well, uh, there were -- it wasn't until after the war, I think.

DOYLE: Was it?

ELAINE: I don't think it was until after the war that any of these houses in here were built.

DICK: Oh, no, no, no.

DOYLE: I'm talking about East Beach now.

ELAINE: Oh.

DOYLE: You knew officials in Providence, and you knew that the MacLeods were from Providence; I don't know if you knew them.

ELAINE: I lived across the street from them for ten years!

DOYLE: Oh, you did? [Laughter] Well, um, Chet Fisher was saying that that was one of the reasons why they came down, was because people around them were coming here. So I don't know who came –

ELAINE: Well, I don't know,-- but I know the Walkers were acquainted with the Fishers before the Fishers came down. And, uh –

DOYLE: So those people started coming down --That's of course another family after your family was here.

ELAINE: Yes. The only place that I know of that the Fishers had was when they built their house down in front in the '30's.

DOYLE: Oh you're talking about Central Beach now–

ELAINE: Yes. I didn't--I mean I myself didn't know what they had and where they owned any property.

DOYLE: Oh, they didn't. I think they rented along the front.

ELAINE: Yeah.

DOYLE: [Gap in tape? Let's] talk about that. We were just talking about how people got transported back and forth from Providence to the beach area, and the fathers and what they did, and the mothers. So let's start with the fathers, that were working at the time, and how did they -- what time did they spend here at the beach, and so forth.

ELAINE: Well, my father was here just mainly weekends, and once in a while in the middle of the week, because he was a salesman. But my grandfathers lived the whole summer at the beach. And they along with two other friends, drove back and forth to Providence four days a week; they all took Wednesday off. And they'd go the other four days, and they would leave about 7:30 in the morning and they'd be in their office at 9:00.

DOYLE: That was a fast trip!

ELAINE: Yeah; that was pretty good. An hour and a half.

DOYLE: Do you remember the people that they were riding in the car with? Some of the names of the people?

ELAINE: Yes. One of the names, which is a familiar name here at Central Beach, was Mr. MacLeod. Danny and Ibby and Burnham's grandfather.

DOYLE: Oh, their grandfather --

ELAINE: Their grandfather; yes. And the other fourth one was a Mr. Thornton -- no relation to the Thorntons here at Central Beach.

DOYLE: Now, what about the women, the mothers, your mother particularly -- She was here most of the summer?

ELAINE: Yeah; she was here all summer. I lived at my grandmother and grandfather Parrot's house. And my mother enjoyed swimming; she'd usually go to the beach every day. And she xxx to drive because I can remember her when we did have a car and we'd drive into Westerly and do a few errands. And when I was real little, of course, I went to Watch Hill and rode on the xxx.

DOYLE: Oh you did!

ELAINE: Yes!

DOYLE: So that was an excursion to go into Watch Hill.

ELAINE: Oh, yeah. That was a special thing -- treat--

DOYLE: Did you get the brass ring? Did you go on the Carousel with the brass ring?

ELAINE: Oh yes. And then when we went into Westerly, we *always* went to Vars Drug Store, which was on the corner across from the Post Office, and got a --usually--frozen chocolate sundae.

DOYLE: Did you sit on the old stools?

ELAINE: Oh yeah.

DOYLE: Was it a big event to go into Westerly?

ELAINE: I guess you would say so, yes. But there was really no need to go too often for provisions. Of course, I remember there was one department store, if you needed anything in the way of linens or that sort of thing – was Opie’s. And Opie is an old name from Westerly. Opie’s was on the strip for a long time. I often wonder when the theatre opened in Westerly—I don’t remember that.

DOYLE: So, did you go anywhere else when you did have access to a car? Did you go to Narragansett or –

ELAINE: I don’t remember that I went anywhere, but my mother and one of my aunts in particular, because it was a big thing in the days of the late ‘20’s and early ‘30’s to go out for tea. In the afternoon. And there were a number of places not too far away, where one could go for tea.

DOYLE: Are any of those places still in existence?

ELAINE: I don’t know. One place they went was over in New London. But I can’t remember what it was. And there were two places up on Route One. One was small, on 1-A, over right across from the King Tom Farm. I think it was built at the same time; it was part of that complex. And that was a tea room. And then there was a—xxx

DOYLE: Did they –did you go in your bathing suits?

ELAINE: No; and of course, my aunt and mother -- they didn’t wear shorts in those days so --! And then there was another place on Route One, going toward, --well it was pretty near up to Matunuck. And it was kind of a xxx place. Long gone. But that was the big thing that the ladies did in those days.

DOYLE: That would be right in the middle of the week then-?

ELAINE: Yeah. Yes; it would be in the middle of the week.

DOYLE: Now that brings in—food is something I think we’d like to talk about, in terms of how, if you can remember, how the family got its food and--

ELAINE: That is actually very easy. Mr. Linton Brown had a store over in Carolina. And he would come down to the beach three times a week. And he would deliver the order on one trip and take the order for the next time. So we had Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday deliveries. And we had vegetable and fruit men all came around, and a baker’s truck at one point, and a fish man, and--

DOYLE: What about milk and that kind of thing?

ELAINE: And milk, yes. We had milk delivered. For quite a long time, it came from up on Route One, Monroe Hoxie's. And some people might know that name--there were a lot of Hoxie's around, but Monroe Hoxie had cows, and he delivered milk. It was a local dairy; of course, in those days it wasn't pasteurized milk. So really, one did not have to leave the beach at all to get provisions.

DOYLE: So let's just go back and talk about the way the families -- the associations that the families had, in your family in particular, when you were over on East Beach.

ELAINE: It was -- I would say they were all very close friends. And had quite a bit in common because several of the men were in the lumber business. But there weren't many children; we just had a small -- my sister and I had a small group of friends. But we always looked forward to our cousins coming up from Louisiana every summer. They would come for about two months, I guess, and stay with the grandparents. So we enjoyed that. And sometimes when I -- I don't know when because it was before I could even remember -- the MacLeod family joined this colony along the edge of the Pond. They built next to the Parrots and then a little later on -- I was probably ten or twelve--why a family by the name of Lansing came; and they had two children. So that was nice; that added to our little group. The only activity that everyone participated in was our fireworks on the fourth of July. And the families all chipped in and we had quite a fireworks display out over the Pond.

DOYLE: On the Pond.

ELAINE: On the Pond, yes. Not on the beach, no. On the Pond.

DOYLE: So, you mean the adults were in charge--

ELAINE: That's right; yeah.

DOYLE; And that was a tradition?

ELAINE: Right. And I think they uh-- they usually had them I think at the same house there. But whoever was the host for that always served some refreshments or something and made a party of it after the fireworks.

DOYLE: You also mentioned, Elaine, about this family that had the cabana; could you just mention --

ELAINE: Oh, yeah. Well, there was a family by the name of Moulton that built quite a large estate on East Beach Road, about halfway between the ocean and Route One. And they built a cabana on the beach, almost to the rocks that divide Central Beach from East Beach.

DOYLE: Was it their land?

ELAINE: Apparently; they bought a lot there and so built that cabana. So, I remember that it was very nice! Nobody in my lifetime has had a cabana except them. Of course, it went with the '38 Hurricane.

DOYLE: You mentioned going blueberry picking with your grandfather. If you could just tell us about that –

ELAINE: Well, Grandfather would take my two cousins, and my sister and me, and usually there were just the four of us, and we would go blueberrying frequently. And of course, we never made a blueberry trip that at least one of us didn't spill our whole pail of blueberries! So Grandfather, of course, was picking very fast and so he would have some extras so he could put them in our pail so we didn't go home with an empty pail. But, uh --

DOYLE: Where were the spots that you went?

ELAINE: Well, the best –the swamp blueberries that were just beautiful berries – were in an area as one goes down toward the ocean on East Beach Road; it would be on the right-hand side quite well down toward the ocean where it was a little bit swampy, and these were lovely swamp blueberries. And then in that same general area, there was a cranberry bog, too.

DOYLE: There was? Did you pick cranberries as well?

ELAINE: We didn't, because they didn't ripen until the fall. And so we missed them. But there was a bog there.

DOYLE: Now what did you do with the blueberries once you got them --? Was there baking involved?

ELAINE: Well, I had a mother and a grandmother who were wonderful cooks. So we had lots of blueberry pies and blueberry pancakes and blueberry muffins.

DOYLE: How about blackberries?

ELAINE: Yes, the blackberries were nice; but my big memory about blackberries is about Bill Schafer [Doyle's father], who went blackberrying all summer and just loved to go! Sometimes he would have some extra ones that we would be able to enjoy. [Reaction and laughter]

DOYLE: Tell me the story about your cousin and the Pond.

ELAINE: Well, I have a second cousin who was an aviator. And I'm not sure whether he had gotten this job with Eastern Airlines when we saw him landed over on the Pond or not. But anyway, he came into Ninigret Pond in a seaplane. He had told his mother ahead of time that he was coming in, so we were all watching for him. And several of us went out in boats to get him and to see the plane. It was quite exciting. It had to be in the late '20's, I would say. And then another exciting thing – I don't remember the year. But the day that the Hindenberg blew up, it went through the beach very, very low – we waved to the people in the –oh, you don't call it the cockpit, do you. But anyway—

DICK: The gondola –

ELAINE: The gondola, all right.

DOYLE: You could see the people --?

ELAINE: Oh yes. And it went so low, it almost seemed like it was between our house and the MacLeod house when they waved. And we found out later that was the last flight.

DOYLE: Where were the travelers from?

ELAINE: Oh, I don't know—I don't remember. But it went back to New Jersey. Wasn't it in New Jersey where the accident happened?

DICK: Yeah, but they came from all over the place. They were on tour; they stopped in several places.

DOYLE: Did you know it was coming? And everybody was out? Or was it just one of those things--

ELAINE: No; we didn't know. It was a surprise. We just heard something and looked – it was a surprise. No, we didn't know it was coming.

DOYLE: Now – the Hurricane. I know that that changed a lot in your family.

ELAINE: Changed our life considerably.

DOYLE: I'd like to know what happened, specifically, to your family and to your homes, and so forth.

ELAINE: Well, the grandparents had all passed away earlier in the '30s. So, sad as that was, we were all very glad when the Hurricane came that they didn't have to experience that. My grandfather Walcott's house was closer to the ocean than the – than my grandfather Parrott's. And the others were along the edge of the Pond; the Walcott house faced the ocean. And there was a large house, with gables; six bedrooms – a very large house, and it was just completely demolished. And that afternoon, of the Hurricane, my

aunt and uncle were still down there. And they began to get kind of uneasy; they could see these huge waves and so forth, and thought, I guess, they'd better get out of there. And if they had not left, just a matter of --within a few hours they would have gone with it --the storm. It was that close. And they went up, of course, to Providence and knocked on the door of my parents' home, about midnight, I guess, and said that everything had gone down at the beach. So the Parrott house, where I spent my summers, was a good-sized house too. And the lower--the first floor was completely demolished. But the second floor just sat down on a lot adjacent to the one where the house was, and nothing was disturbed! In the bedrooms, the mirrors were on the wall, and nothing was hurt; it was just in perfect condition. And the same thing happened to the MacLeod house. That was--the first floor was demolished as the tidal wave went through, and the second floor landed over on another lot. And both that house and my grandparent's house are cottages now, over on East Beach.

DOYLE: So that the second floor is now the first or the primary—

ELAINE: Yes; and in the case of my grandparents' house, there were five bedrooms; so it was very easy to convert to a cottage. But the MacLeod house, they made a two-story out of that, I think.

DOYLE: Where is your grandparents' house located?

ELAINE: Well, it's not right on the Pond, but it's on a road--Burdick Road, that you take. Off of East Beach Road. And you go through Burdick Road and the MacLeod house is on your right, just before a curve in the road.

DOYLE: The same road as --

ELAINE: Yes; And almost -- the first or second house down on the right is the cottage that was made out of my grandparents' house.

DOYLE: Do you remember your parents' going down and trying to gather any of their belongings?

ELAINE: I remember it very well because I was with them! They didn't get up and get dressed after my aunt and uncle had told them; they waited until daylight to start out. And they drove down and picked me up at college, in Kingston. I was walking with my friends to the main street in Kingston, and they came along; so I saw what it looked like right from the beginning.

DOYLE: Can you --describe it in any words, or is that difficult--

ELAINE: It was – I guess you just – couldn't believe it.

DOYLE: How did you get in?

ELAINE: There was no problem in those days. 'Course after that, they found out that so much looting was done and everything; and then following '38, when there was any bad storm, one had to have a deed or something to prove that they had property [there] to get back into the beach. But in '38 of course, none of those things had been provided for, so we just came down and drove in. At that point, there didn't seem --we didn't notice any strangers around or anything like that.

DOYLE: Did your parents end up buying the lot where your house ended up-- or what?

ELAINE: What they did – they gave it to the person who owned the land!

DOYLE: Oh, I see.

ELAINE: No; they decided that they weren't interested in trying to resurrect it. I guess the whole place was such a mess that they thought—you know, they couldn't envision it ever being pretty down there again. So they gave the house to this man whose lot it landed on. And then my mother kept the lot for a few years and thought possibly Dick and I might like to build there someday. But nothing happened right away and it was still just rubble, and the Charlestown Airport was very active, and it was very noisy –the planes coming over from there and all, and it just didn't appeal to her. So my mother sold the lot.

'Cause in the meantime, we had discovered Central Beach.

DOYLE: All right; why don't you tell us about your coming here.

ELAINE: The summer of '39 was the first summer that I did not spend the two months at the beach. And I guess it was probably the first summer for my mother; I just don't know for sure. But I just think she was at the beach every summer of her life, so we didn't enjoy it that much. So in 1940, the next summer, my mother and father decided to do something about renting a place for a short time. And they had been acquainted, ever since they were young people, with Arthur and Edith Fisher. So they knew that they had a house they had built at Central Beach, so they contacted them about renting it. And they rented it for two weeks in August. That was in 1940, and that was my introduction to Central Beach.

DOYLE: And you were not married yet, at the time, but you knew Dick --

ELAINE: Yes; xxxx [unintelligible conversation about and with Dick] he came --

DICK: I spent a couple of weeks there—

ELAINE: Yes; you came. But I don't know you spent the two weeks in '40; you did in '41.

DICK: In '41 I did. But I wasn't exactly the favorite xxxxxx [houseguest?]
[Laughter]

DOYLE: We all know how that feels! [More laughter]. So ever since 1940, then did your folks rent for a few years after that?

ELAINE: They rented for that one year, the next year, in '41; and that was all that they -- they didn't rent after that. But Dick and I did; we rented the Fisher house 'cause we were married at the end of '41. And we rented for several years during the '40s, before we bought land and built our house where we are now.

DOYLE: Now, I'd like to know about this house; when you built this house and –

ELAINE: Well, we of course loved the beach; and it was always very sad when our brief time here was up. And finally, in 1949, we had rented the Fisher house for a month, in July. And we just were so unhappy to have to go back to Connecticut. And so we had talked it over and decided guess we'd see about buying some land, buying a lot. So we did; we had a choice of three lots: where we are now, the lot where the Conrads are, and then there was a second lot beside us. And we chose the middle lot. And then decided well, we'd see if we could manage to do something about building a house. So Dick drew the plans that winter; and we came down -- I guess it was February or March-- and saw Brad Fisher and talked it over with him, to see if we could manage it. And he said he would build it for us. So we were in it late spring, 1950. So --.

DOYLE: So then, from then on –

ELAINE: I didn't miss a summer!

DOYLE: You didn't miss a summer!

ELAINE: And the boys, Rob and Ron, really loved it; and they've both told us, since they've been adults, how they just wouldn't have had it any other way than to be at Quonnie--the friends they made and the good times they had. After meeting other people and hearing other people's experiences, they think that they were very fortunate to have –

DOYLE: At the time I don't think that we realize what we have—xxxx

ELAINE: xxxx [agreeing]. And Rob, he said -- when we told him we were going to be talking to you-- he said he wished he'd have an opportunity to offer some information. Everything he remembers about growing up here.
[Laughter]

DOYLE: I do hope – this is what happens. If he wants to, I'd love to have him-- catch his voice on tape; that would be good. And Ron, too.

Um, well you've been at Quonnie for many years now, in your house here. I'd just like to know some of the things that you look back on, in the flow of your life here.

ELAINE: Well, according to some people, it might be monotonous, but not to me at all. I think I'm very much a beach person and spent most of my time on the beach. And we did start--I'm not sure just what year-- but shortly after we came here, a few of us decided that we could do something about earning some money to help out with some of the recreational activities. And I remember in particular, when we had a food sale—we wanted to post a notice but we didn't have any bulletin board, so we didn't get—So we just went from door to door and asked people for contributions. And it used to be a lot of fun, in the years we had a food sale at Dick Moran's. Because Dick was always very much into what was going on. And he'd put these ridiculous prices on the foods, and very often the customers would pay it!
But we had a lot of fun on the day of the food sale. So we did that for a good many years. And then the food sales went to – I don't know where they went, after that. Bea Wilbur in more recent years, had the food sales in her garage. But it was a real community endeavor. These days, the food sales – it's just a small group of people that participate. But back then, it was everybody. Enjoyed it.

DOYLE: Do you have the same feeling of community now that you did then?

ELAINE: No; not really--because of course there are many, many more people here. But my generation, my friends, are dwindling down now. But I still have a small group, which I'm very fortunate to have.

DOYLE: I know I see you out walking in the morning. Who do you enjoy your walks with?

ELAINE: Well, Edie Merkel and Jean Mace and Betsy Glasson—sometimes Jean Robson if she's not out on the golf course.

DOYLE: And do you try to go a certain distance?

ELAINE: Well, we used to always go the same route. But lately, we decided it was more interesting to up and down some of the inside roads. We were going the perimeter – West Beach Road to Sea Breeze and down into the whole perimeter of the beach. But then as I say, it was more interesting to go through one of the—Lucas or Neptune and then up Sea Breeze and down by the tennis courts and around—

DOYLE: I want to thank you very much for sharing some of your stories!

ELAINE: I have a lot of enthusiasm!

DOYLE: You surely do. And again, if it's OK with you, if there's something else you can think of that comes up, I would really like you to call me and we can share that on tape as well.

ELAINE: OK. I will.

DOYLE: Thanks a lot.

ELAINE: Thank you!

END OF SIDE ONE

DOYLE: Dick I'd like to start just by having you tell us your full name and when you were born, please.

DICK: My full name is Richard W. Henry, and I was born in 1916.

DOYLE: And where were you born?

DICK: In Providence, Rhode Island.

DOYLE: And what was your first connection with Quonochontaug?

DICK: Well, many years ago when I was perhaps three years old, --not perhaps -- it was xxx I was three years old --my folks came down to Mrs. Snow's over on West Beach, who ran a boarding house on the boardwalk. And I obviously don't remember any of it, but I remember my mother telling me, and the pictures that we had, of me on the beach at age three. And that is the only memory I ever had of Quonochontaug.

DOYLE: OK; so I know that the first connection you had with Quonochontaug was when you were three, as you just said. Then we're going to jump to the next time that you came to Quonochontaug and that was when you knew Elaine and went over to East Beach. Can you just mention that, please?

DICK: Well, when we came from college, she was a freshman and I was a senior. And I graduated from college in 1938, and we were here in August of 1938 at East Beach, at her parents' home. And September of '38 we had the Hurricane, and that ended my session with East Beach. And then we saw each other, and she finished college, of course, And then we got married. And after we were married, we took over some of the renting that her folks had done at Central Beach. By renting the Fisher house on Surfside Avenue, for two or three years during the '40s up until the end of the war, I guess, XXXX. And then in 1946—excuse me – in 1949, we bought the property that we now own, the first lot, that we now own. And in 1950 we built the first house that was livable. And later on-- we still have the history of the place – my folks bought the lot next to us, and after a few years they gave me the lot, and we finally ended up with two lots. And we had the house as it is today.

DOYLE: So your house is on two lots --?

DICK: Yes.

DOYLE: That's what I thought. . . . Now when you first – when you built your house, you were working at the time in Connecticut.

DICK: Yes.

DOYLE: What was your normal summer here? Did you just spend a couple of weeks? Or, how did you go back and forth?

DICK: Well, I came down every weekend and went back every Monday morning for twenty-five years, I guess. And I used to come down Wednesday nights when the boys were real young; as a matter of fact, there was one summer I not only came down I went back to Glastonbury to take Rob up to **live** with me and came back down here again. So, it was all by automobile. And I spent complete summers down here. And that's it.

DOYLE: OK. You had mentioned to me about your involvement with the sports end of Quonnie. Can you elaborate on that?

DICK: Yes. In 19xx Ham Schwarz, who was one of our foremost citizens, got together with me and said 'We ought to have some kind of a baseball team or softball team.' So, he got together with Howard Thorpe, and Thorpe said we could use some property that he had, which is up in the vicinity of where Randy Phillips' house is now. So, we started cleaning that land, all by private money; [there was] no tax money at all in building that field.

DOYLE: And individual people donated money for that?

DICK: It was all donated from them. There was no tax money that went into it at all. And we cleared the field and had our first ball game. It was a little rough and –That was in 19 ---xxxx

DOYLE: Probably early fifties?

DICK: It was before '54 and after '51. So –And then, as we played on it we had cleared the land a little bit more each year. And we'd finally made it buildable for Howard Thorpe; so he decided he was going to sell the property for houses. So then he said to us –“You (meaning the District) own property that you could put a ball field on,” which none of us knew about. And of course, that's the present location of the ball field today. When we first looked at it, it was all shrubs; xxx on lots as big as houses. And we spent the next year cleaning that land and weeding the lots. And I think, as I remember, the first time we played on that field, the outfield edge was just out beyond second base.

ELAINE: Lost a lot of balls!

DICK: Yes. And gradually year by year you ran into that. At that time, I was the tennis chairman and baseball chairman –

DOYLE: I'm sorry --Were the tennis courts there at the time

DICK: Yes. Oh -- clay courts.

DOYLE: And had that been there before the backfield there?

DICK: Yes; those clay courts had been put in some time just after the war, I'm told. I have no personal knowledge, but that's what I was told. And anyway, we also had a playground there, deeply into the middle, and some swings that we had. And we did all of this work again without any tax money. Private donations from the people of Central Beach. So I had the job at that time of tennis and baseball and the playground, and that got to be a little much, particularly while I was working. So I made a motion to split it up into tennis, baseball, and I wanted to get rid of the playground because it was a liability in a lawyer's mind. And I also said in order to get more money to continue this, we [needed to] form a special events committee. And that was made as a motion at one of the meetings and passed. And the first chairman of that committee was **Mrs. Lampheri**. And I don't really remember the year that was done, but it was probably after the '54 hurricane.

DOYLE: So, you were dependent on the Special Events money in order to improve the ball field and so forth.

DICK: Of course, we had improved the ball field, but to continue improving it, and for special things -- but the basic money was done just by asking people to donate. Xxx Yeah; that's the way it was done.

DOYLE: And how long did you stay involved with the sports end of things?

DICK: Well, it was a while, with baseball. I stopped playing when I was 50. My reflexes kind of got bad. And then I continued on till--I don't know what year it was-- when I umpired --

DOYLE: Oh, you were an umpire!

DICK: Yeah, I was an umpire before your dad; your dad took over for me.

DOYLE: Oh --[Laughter]

DICK: I don't remember what year that was. I was also on the public works department for 32 years. And when I retired in 1977, I asked to be chairman and held that job for eight years.

DOYLE: And what happened during that eight-year time?

DICK: During those eight years, we developed a new water system, a system of pipes and pumps. And we had two good wells and the old transit pipe that used to quite frequently break, and we'd have to shut the water system down which would mean that people had no water.

DOYLE: When you say "transit," what does that mean?

DICK: It's a type of material. Transit's a material, a cement based. --

DOYLE: And so you mean that pipe was all underground?

DICK: It was all underground. Only about two feet. Which of course meant we had to shut down every winter. So the new system that we spent some time -- starting in about, oh, 1980 I guess, making plans for it; and it was finally presented to the district and approved. And we got bids and started the construction on the thing in 1984 and finished it in 1985.

DOYLE: So these pipes are obviously deep; they have to dig way down --

DICK: We put the pipes down four feet, which is standard practice for communities in this area; and we used PVC pipe, which is a modern, very durable pipe. And we also put in the walls the pumps; instead of having the old piston pumps we used for years. Actually, the history of the water system goes back -- the first water was put in about **1946** or **7**, and we got the water from wells that were in the vicinity of where the ball field is today.

DOYLE: I remember we used to go pump the water.

DICK: Well, we had a pump there, a hand pump for drinking water. But there was also some water that went through iron pipe down – it was on East Street. And some along Surf Side and some along Ocean View Avenue. Where it started was Bill Barstow’s and all the houses along Surf Side after the ’38 Hurricane.

DOYLE: Was that the stuff that was on the ground, kind of lying --?

DICK: No; no – it was buried. But that water was brackish water. When we rented the Fisher house, we used to use it to wash dishes with; and I guess we took baths in it too. Yeah; we did take baths in it. But it was brackish; it was no good for drinking. So, we pumped the water out of the other well, which was a sweet well. That’s one of the things down in this area: you can move forty or fifty feet and get good water or bad water.

DOYLE: Now when you worked on this new system in the ’80s, did you change the pump house? Is that when the pump—

DICK: Oh yeah. We took -- We had a pump house there, and it was really a pump house in those days because it was three – we had a spare, but we used two big piston pumps and they were getting worn out by that time, also. So, we first went to use of pumps in the wells—the modern method of doing it. And about the same time that we did the re-piping, which then we still had to make the house different. You know, the old house was falling apart. And--

DOYLE: So, this was essentially your idea, and you got this whole thing going. Is that --?

DICK: Yeah, pretty much. And Brad Fisher and I used to talk about this. Brad was not as enthused as I was – I knew I was going to live down here sometime, and he already lived here and he thought the well was fine. And a lot of people thought the idea of year-round water was an excellent idea, Of course, there were a few who didn’t think it was so good.

DOYLE: You’re not going to mention any names, though!

DICK: And so anyway, we got it all done, finished.

DOYLE: And that’s an awesome project. Now did the pipe system-- had to go on every road?

DICK: Yeah. Well, the principle of this new system was that we were going to have a system that would be capable of getting water into everybody's house that was built. And by the property of everybody that owned land without houses.

DOYLE: For future –

DICK: For future development; that's right. And we also at that same time changed the system of paying for it – paying for the water. I don't mean paying for the system; I mean paying for the water. From a separate fee to including it in taxes. So that everybody that owns property in Central Beach contributes to the water system, whether they use the water or whether they don't. And uh—

DOYLE: Have you been pleased with how it was done?

DICK: Yes; yes. And there are still some changes that ought to be made; I just don't really want to get into it in this discussion.

DOYLE: Are you still on the committee?

DICK: Yeah. Yeah.

DOYLE: OK.

DICK: Since the DEM has gotten involved, there's more and more testing. For instance, we used to test the wells every couple of weeks, and we used to get it for free. And then there was the summer they stopped doing it for free, and we sent up to Rhode Island College. And we used to pay that \$5.00. And I'm told – I haven't reviewed the figures, but I'm told that now we spend over \$3,000 now for testing.

DOYLE: Every year?

DICK: Every year.

DOYLE: How often is it tested?

DICK: As far as I know, it's still tested in the summer time every two weeks.

DOYLE: Yeah.

DICK: And in the winter time –

DOYLE: Don't you think there should be a publication of the results of that?

DICK: Well, it would be nice if we could make it a publication that people could understand, but I've been in that business for all those years that I just said, and much of that report I couldn't understand. And I think it was purposely done that way, so –

DOYLE: Oh; well – that was certainly a major contribution that you've made to Central Beach, particularly. –Um, tennis is a big part of everybody's life down here, and I know that your family was involved.

ELAINE: Yes; and it was a big part of activity down here. And to my recollection it was Danny MacLeod that really got the young people interested in tennis; I know he was responsible for our boys starting to play tennis. And later on, Rob gave lessons, group lessons, and private lessons. And the yearly tennis tournament was a big thing, and I don't even know whether they have them now; I never hear about them. But they were a big thing, and most everybody was involved as a spectator if not a player. And that went on for a number of years. And I think it's unfortunate that it's one of the things that seem to have gone by the wayside.

DOYLE: I had forgotten all about that. So– was that when the tennis courts were also clay?

ELAINE: Yes, it was, at the time when Rob gave the lessons. Then of course the club [Quonochontaug Tennis Club] courts came along later. And they had the tournaments on them the latter years, at the club courts, because they were in better condition.

DICK: [Softly] We built new ones.

DOYLE: Do you want to tell --What was that?

DICK: We built new ones. After the clay courts, we had our own.

ELAINE: Oh yes; that's right. We did build new courts.

DOYLE: Did you want to add anything to that, Mr. Henry? About your involvement with the--

DICK: No, except that what happened was that after the advent of the club courts being built and some courts expanded a few years after the first ones, the tennis club people sort of took over the tournament. And it continued for quite a while, but then recently it was eliminated, for some reason. I don't know why.

DOYLE: Are you still on that committee?

DICK: No; I'm not involved at all.

DOYLE: Now who is -- you had mentioned the people involved at the beginning of that. Can you tell us --

DICK: Well, there was Joe Cavanaugh, Jerry Fogarty, Bud O'Brien—

DOYLE: This must have been quite a long time ago, with Jerry Fogarty -- 'cause they haven't been here for a long time.

DICK: Well, the club courts -- gee, I can't remember the year --we sold bonds for that, and the bonds have been paid off. So it's been a good many years --

DOYLE: Was that limited, in terms of membership? Was there a waiting list?

DICK: Yes; there was a waiting list. But I'm told that it isn't as big as it used to be for some reason or other. I'm just as xxx --I don't know. 'Course we built two courts first, and then two more. So it's an East Beach/Central Beach --

DOYLE: Association?

DICK: --Doing it.

DOYLE: So, the East Beach people can also -- the members of East Beach also can be members of the Tennis Club?

DICK: Yes. The Tennis Club is separate from the district [Central Beach Fire District]. They rent the property from the Fire District.

DOYLE: So that is public -- that is Fire District property!

DICK: Right. But the tennis courts are private tennis courts.

DOYLE: Is it subject to -- the Fire District using it for other purposes?

DICK: No.

DOYLE: I mean, can that be changed?

DICK: Yes. They have a lease. They rent it from us year by year, for -- I forget how much money now. I understand that in recent years, they have negotiated some kind of a lease. I don't really know how that financial arrangement works.

DOYLE: Now, were you connected with the establishment of having the boatyard --

DICK: No; I wasn't.

DOYLE: Oh; you didn't have anything to do with that. OK. Do you know who it was? Who should I speak to?

DICK: Well, of course the one to talk to is –

DOYLE: The present chairman?

DICK: Yeah. I don't even know who he is! But the one who knows the most about it is House – Bob House. He's done -- but he's not very well, but he would know a lot about it. And if you just wanted an opinion out of it, David Nordeng was XXXX. But he's not a member of the committee because he's not a property owner down here, I don't think. But he's – Bob House at one time said, “Without him, I couldn't do the job.” So – he would know a lot about it.

DOYLE: Now, is there anything else that you were involved with, in terms of committees – not that you -- what you did was certainly enough, but I just wanted to have you mention –

DICK: Did you ever hear about the dance hall we built? That we used to carry around from yard to yard?

DOYLE: [Laughing] No. Dance hall? What do you mean? No! Is this a joke?

DICK: No! It was 16 by 16 feet.

DOYLE: Tell me about this! [Laughing]

ELAINE: Ham Schwarz loved to dance --

DICK: Ham Schwarz loved to dance. So one day he said, “We ought to build a dance floor that we could take and put in Monahan's yard or your yard or put in anybody's yard and have a dance. “ So this was a personal XXXX. There were four of us that supposedly built it: Ham Schwarz, Tom Monahan, Jerry Fogarty, and Dick Henry. And we bought some plywood and some two-by-fours. And we built it in Ham Schwarz's garage – the day that Diane, the hurricane, came through.

DOYLE: Oh, my goodness!

DICK: And it was made in quarters so we could -- we'd put it on Brad's truck in quarters, and build it in a yard. We were a lot younger then, and we could lift things. And we put it together, and then we used to put cornstarch, I think it was, on the floor, so it would be slippery enough to dance on.

DOYLE: So, you really did use it!

DICK: Oh yeah!

DOYLE: Where – I don't ever remember this!

ELAINE: I remember it on Schwarz's driveway and –

DICK: We had it in Monahan's –

DOYLE: What played the music? To dance --?

DICK: Records.

DOYLE: This is the adults!

DICK: We were adults, I guess! [xxxxx All talking together] The kids – no the kids didn't use it. It was ours and they didn't have much interest. They'd just as soon settle for xxx ducks and bowling.

DOYLE: Now did this go on for more than one year?

DICK: No; it was available for two years, but after the first year, it sort of dwindled.

ELAINE: The interest waned!

DICK: And a man then wanted me to build it into his cellar floor, for his new addition that he put on. So that's where it is now.

DOYLE: [Laughing] Oh, that's a good story! I like that. Um, OK. We were just talking about the Quonnie parades and the old fire truck. Do you know something about that fire truck?

DICK: Well, Dick Moran bought that somewhere down near Lyme, Connecticut, as I remember, for two / three hundred dollars. And he and Brad Fisher went down to get it, and Brad drove it home from Lyme. It was a 19— somewhere like 1921 --some vintage of that nature. And Brad drove it up from Old Lyme to Quonochontaug. And of course, Dick was in his car. And Brad got through all the toll booths – because it was a fire engine, they didn't charge him anything!

DOYLE: They thought he was going to a fire!

DICK: And then it was housed – it was kept here at the beach for us and as you know, it was used for display purposes when they had parades. And then we took the kids out for a ride—

DOYLE: I think it was kept at Brad's house, wasn't it, in back?—

ELAINE: Yes.

DOYLE: What happened to it?

DICK: Well, it -- some people were worried, I suppose, kind of excited about the liability part of it, 'cause it was getting kind of old and the tires were getting kinda thin. So it was decided that we just couldn't keep it anymore. And Bob Frost bought it, and as far as I know, Bob Frost still has it.

DOYLE: Oh. Well, was the purpose of buying it, first of all --

DICK: Just for display purposes; it was never intended to be used.

ELAINE: Just for fun. [All talking together]

DOYLE: That's what I thought. Just for fun. Never used --

DICK: Just for fun. If a house had burned down --- XXXX. Just for fun. It was meant by Dick Moran to do it that way.

DOYLE: Yeah. Yeah, he was a character!

DICK: He was a character! He did a lot for this beach. Not so much financially, but he was a force to be reckoned with.

DOYLE: I only remember him being down on the corner there and, you know, every once in a while, he would come out and talk. But my memory isn't as strong --

ELAINE: If you would like to hear some Dick Moran, stories, Jack Young will give them to you. We were talking with him this morning, just briefly, and he said that he had quite a bit of information about things that Dick did and he'd be glad to tell somebody.

DICK: See Dick built his house just before this house was built. But for years he rented -- I guess he came near the xxxx -- I don't know.

DOYLE: Do you know where he was from?

DICK: No; no, I don't.

DOYLE: OK. All right; I'll do that.

And I want to thank you very much; you've added a lot, an awful lot, to Quonnie history.

END OF TAPE



Quonochontaug Historical Society



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