

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

GREYCHEN (O'BRIEN) JAPHET

Date ?

Interviewed by Leah Bradshaw

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Q: This is Leah Bradshaw in Quonochontaug, Rhode Island with Gretchen Japhet, who used to be Gretchen O'Brien.

A: Yes. I still am.

Q: Today is August 13th. Gretchen, where were you born, and when?

A: I was born in New York City, August 1st, 1947.

Q: Happy belated birthday.

A: Thank you.

Q: When did you family arrive in Quonnie?

A: It was between 1951 and 1953. I'm not sure which date. I think it's probably '53, because we had rented initially in Misquamicut, and then they found a house here. But my father had summered in Watch Hill since he was a child, because his parents had a house there.

Q: So, your family already knew about this area.

A: Yes.

Q: Your house was built?

A: It was already built.

Q: Was it already built for someone else?

A: Yes.

Q: Had anybody else lived there?

A: Yes.

Q: And then your family bought it in or about 1953?

A: Yes.

Q: From there, what do you remember about spending your summers in Quonochontaug?

A: I remember the house had a very primitive washer. No dryer. I remember we didn't have any heat. It wasn't insulated. We only had a master bedroom for my parents, a room across the hall for whomever. I guess my brothers were in there. And Mary and I were in a built-in wooden bunk bed. It was right off the kitchen. And it was pretty cool. It was all built in. It was not for big people. The bunks were very tiny.

Q: For kids?

A: Yes.

Q: And there were six of you total?

A: When they bought it in '53, there would have been three of us.

Q: You and Mary?

A: And Chris. And then the twins came. They simply had to add on.

Q: So, that's when they added the bunk room?

A: They added the bunk room, another bedroom in the back and a bathroom. That's when they enclosed the porch. It was a concrete slab. This house was very, very primitive when they bought it. They made it more livable so that you could spend a whole summer there. Mind you, before they added on, my mother's mother was also there, and a babysitter that came and stayed with us. There were ten people in essentially two-and-a-half bedrooms. My poor grandmother. The kitchen was enclosed at that point. There was a cot right as you walked in the front door on the right. That's where my poor grandmother slept. She was elderly at that point.

Q: Was that your mom's mother?

A: My mother's mother. Yes. My dad's parents were already gone.

Q: What kinds of things did you family enjoy doing in Quonnie?

A: We loved to play board games. We had millions of board games. Every night was board game night, because we didn't have a TV. We didn't have a radio. So, there was nothing else to do but play board games. We loved it. Charades. We rode our bikes back and forth to the beach, down to the breachway. We spent the day on the beach.

Q: Was the salt pond part of your life, or were you primarily at the beach?

A: No. We had two boats on the pond—two Blue Jays. My brothers and Mary raced them. I was less interested. We all took sailing lessons from Martha—I can't think of her last name.

Q: Smith?

A: Martha Smith's older sister. She gave sailing lessons to all of us. She was a good sailor. Martha was a very good sailor. I crewed. I never skippered. I didn't have enough interest. But my brothers won tons of trophies. If you remember coming into our kitchen, on the shelf on the top I had all the trophies up there from all the sailing races that they had won. There was tennis. We had tennis courts, so we all played tennis. And we played softball.

Q: I remember Mary was an excellent tennis player.

A: She was much better than me. Mary was a very good all-around athlete. She was good at all that stuff. And she loved to sail. She was a good sailor. I was bored. I didn't have a good time. I wanted to find a boyfriend.

Q: So, you spent most of the days at the beach, or you sailed on the pond. Did you ever go berry picking here?

A: Yes. We used to go out to Picnic Rock all the time. For that, we would take our row boat, which was up at the dock. We would just put the row boat in the water and take the row boat to the sail boat, but then row out to Picnic Rock and spent hours out there. We'd take our lunch and dive off the rock and have fun. Berry picking? Yes. I remember that Quonnie was wonderful for being able to get blueberries, wild raspberries. We could go down to the end of the street to the farm and get corn and tomatoes. The only thing you had to go and get then was meat—a steak or something. And you had dinner. And going down to the rocks and collecting mussels. They were copious. It was delicious. There are no mussels anymore. We used to take bathroom plungers, hopefully clean ones, and go over to the pond at semi low tide and go quahogging. We'd get wonderful quahogs.

Q: Did you make chowder, or did you eat them on the half shell?

A: We ate them on the half shell and steamed them. We just dipped them in butter. Since my birthday was in August, I got lobster. My father loved lobsters. My mother liked lobsters. My brothers didn't really like them. Mary loves lobster. I got a lobster every summer for my birthday. I was living large.

Q: There were six of you and two parents?

A: Yes. And a babysitter and my grandmother. Then once the put the addition on, then my mother's sister would come. Then Father Toner could come and spend a weekend. We always had somebody. Even though our house in Yonkers—I don't think my parents ever locked the door, because that's the kind of neighborhood we grew up in in the '50s and early '60s. The door was always open. You would walk in and yell, "Hello. Is anybody home?" I'm sure your house was like that.

Q: What are your early memories of Quonnie?

A: I remember that bunk room. I used to like to sleep on the top bunk. It had a little knot that Mary and I knocked out. So, we would go up there when my parents had cocktail parties and spy on everybody. What else do I remember? I remember going into Westerly. We went in once a week to the Westerly Library. We all had library cards. We all got our books for the week. What else did we do? We would go to Misquamicut, because my father's sister, Denise Shay, and her husband Frank had a house right on the beach. My cousin Tim was my age. And then Brian, the next boy, was Mary's age. Then Justin was Merrill's age. So, we would go over there very frequently and have a barbeque on the beach and go in the water and stuff.

Q: At night?

A: No. During the day just for a change in scenery. My parents also liked to get in the car and go see stuff and do stuff. I remember going to Peter Potts. Did you ever go to Peter Potts?

Q: Yes.

A: And the Umbrella Factory. I don't think that was here when I was young, but I took my son there when he was little. He loved it.

Q: Did your family go to Watch Hill for ice cream?

A: Yes. We went to go on the merry-go-round. But with six kids, we rarely went out to dinner. It was expensive. We didn't really do that. We would go for ice cream. I remember we liked the—I think it was a Dairy Queen in Westerly. You could get—it was either a 5- or a 10-cent cone—a little teeny cone. I think it was 5 cents. And if you got the dip on it—they had chocolate, strawberry and butterscotch dip. So, I think you got a dipped cone that was about this big. It cost you like 10 or 15 cents. It was wonderful. Once a week we would go into whatever that grocery store was. ShopRite

maybe, or Stop & Shop. You would get Green Stamps. It was a big deal, because part of my birthday present was I got Green Stamp books, and then I could go pick out a present, not that they had very much. I think I got a transistor radio once. That was a big deal. They didn't have a lot of kid's stuff. It was dishes and pots and pans and dish towels and stuff. But it was fun. It was like, "Go pick out your present. Here are 25 Green Stamp books." So, Mary and my mother and I would sit there and put the Green Stamps in the booklets. My brothers helped when they got older. That was a Saturday morning job before she went grocery shopping.

Q: Did you have to take care of your younger brothers here, or was that the babysitter's responsibility?

A: When I was little, it was the babysitter. But I think after the age of ten or eleven, it was my job. I did do babysitting here. I can't remember who for, but I'm sure I did some babysitting to make some money.

Q: What happened when you became a teenager?

A: I got my working papers in New York at sixteen, so I stayed home during the week with my father and worked. And then we drove up on Friday night, and then drove back on Sunday back to Yonkers. So, from that point on, it was just weekends. But I think I came up every single weekend. This is just like heaven up here. There was nothing to do in Yonkers on the weekend. It was hot. I didn't have a car. What was I going to do home alone?

Q: Did you work in Yonkers?

A: Yes.

Q: What did you do?

A: The first summer I think I worked at a bakery for a couple of weeks. And I worked cleaning in a motel. That was the job from hell. What else did I do? I don't remember what else I did. It was a long time ago. But those are two jobs that stand out that I haven't forgotten.

Q: So, your dad was in Yonkers during the week, and your mom and the kids were up here. Did you mom and the kids have a car at their disposal?

A: They must have had a car. Yes. They had a car. At that point, we had two cars I think because we had to have two cars. Up to that point, we only had one. I can't imagine that my mother was without a car. I know we had one of those station wagons that had the fake wood on the side. I remember going down to the beach with my parents driving. You know how it would open on the back? The top would open like this, and the bottom would open down. You sat on that. You drove to the beach, and every so often you would hit a bump and a kid would fall off.

Q: And your feet would drag.

A: Yes. And fumes were coming up from the tail pipe. Lovely. At that point, I'm sure we had two cars. I think the station wagon stayed here, and my dad had a smaller car just to go back and forth.

Q: Was it hard to face going back to school in the fall after your idyllic summer here?

A: For sure it was. Definitely. My brothers would walk down the hill. My sister walked down the hill. I went all the way up to North Yonkers, because they found a school. It was an all-girls Catholic school. The nuns were cloistered. My parents never actually saw my teachers. They were behind a screen. It was so ridiculous. I had to walk down the hill and take a bus to North Yonkers, but that prepared me for high school, because I went to high school in Manhattan. I had to walk down the hill and take a bus to the subway, and then get on the subway and then walk. I went to high school at Inwood, so it prepared me for that. I wanted to go to Yonkers High School, and my parents were like, "There are boys there. It's not Catholic. There's no uniform. What are you going to where?"

Q: So, you commuted into the city to Inwood?

A: Yes. Which is northern Manhattan. It's parallel to the Bronx, but it's actually Manhattan. It's right below Riverdale. It was all Italian. There was a big Stella D'Oro bakery. You'd get off the subway. This was like 7:30 or 8:00 in the morning. Everything smelled like Stella D'Oro cookies. It was very nice.

Q: Do you have any more memories of Quonnie?

A: We used to go over to the breachway. We would go fishing at the breachway. None of us were very good at that, but it was fun to do that. I just remember always being able to walk down to the breachway on the beach. My cousin Susan would come up. Her parents rented. We would always go down by the witch's house. That was what's-his-face's house. He was a moderator maybe two years ago—the moderator here.

Q: Randy Thornton?

A: No. Not Thornton. I think it was before him. He owned both houses. One has the walkway that takes you to steps right down to the rocks.

Q: Steve Long?

A: Steve Long. That's Steve Long's house. You'd go down there, and they had the best shells down there. Because there were these big, huge boulders, we'd go down with Mary and Chris, and we'd play pirates. That was a lot of fun to do that. Then we'd collect mussels off of the rocks, because there were good mussels down there. Then

we'd walk down to the nun's house. We'd spread the blanket on the big rock and have a picnic. We used to go over to East Beach. I had a friend, Betsey. Betsey Saber or something like that. Her parents had a big house and owned quite a lot of property over there. I recognize where the house used to be, unless it's still the same house. It was a very cool house that had apple orchards and everything. We'd ride our bikes over there and hang out and play. She liked board games too. Maybe we would go down to East Beach and go for a swim. What else? Square dancing. Do you remember square dancing at the grange? That was awesome. Every Saturday we would square dance. And there was another good family—a big family. Five or six kids. The Trangiolis that would come up. Remember the hotel? There used to be a hotel.

Q: The Seabreeze Inn?

A: The Seabreeze Inn, but the nun's house used to be a hotel. They would go there. When the nuns bought that, there was a little B&B right where they used to have the square dancing. That used to be a little B&B. They had community meals. There was a big, long table with a bench, and you all ate together. The Trangiolis would stay there. I remember that that used to be a tiny little hotel.

Q: Was that the Seabreeze Inn?

A: There was a Seabreeze Inn. I thought maybe the Seabreeze Inn was where the nuns are.

Q: No. That was the Quonochontaug Inn.

A: Then it was the Seabreeze Inn. And Mary and I used to go for my birthday down to West Beach. Before the tennis courts, there used to be a little restaurant or café that had a bowling alley. She would take me bowling, and then we would have a hotdog for my birthday. We had to reset the pins manually. I do remember that. There was only one lane. Do you remember that too?

Q: Yes. Clearly. We used to walk over and buy candy there, and it was pretty stale.

A: Yes. I remember it was pretty seedy. There was a bar in the back, and they had all the drinkers back there. You'd be bowling and having your hotdog and buy the candy. Right at the end of West Beach Road on the other side of Route 1 was a store—Crompton's. Do you remember that?

Q: Yes.

A: They had a deli diner. You'd walk down there, and with whatever money you had, you'd cross Route 1 at your risk, because there were no lights or anything, you bought your candy, you got your comic books.

Q: Yes. They had those stands of comic books.

A: Yes.

Q: It was necessary to look at all of them before you made a selection.

A: All of them. Absolutely. You had to be very selective about your candy. If you had enough money, you'd go and buy lunch.

Q: There was a little luncheon.

A: Right. Just a little tiny thing where you could actually sit and buy lunch. We always got bread and milk down there.

Q: We did too.

A: That was an ideal spot for that, because when people came, families came for the whole summer. The husband went back and forth, but the mother was stuck here with kids, and they didn't want to drive all the way into Westerly more than once a week. Even Charlestown was a trek. Remember Route 1 with no U-turns? Before the lights, it was the U-turns. Before the U-turns, there was nothing. You got off and turned around in someone's driveway and came back. Your life was in your hands. It was really hard. To get to the other side of Route 1, you had to make a right and go all the way up to East Beach, get in the left lane, cross over and try to do a U-turn. It was deadly, but there wasn't that much traffic.

Q: There wasn't that much traffic, and it always seemed to be going slower then.

A: Yes. Until my mother got here. She had a heavy foot. Oh, my God.

Q: She was wonderful, and I think she loved Quonnie in her later years. She loved being here.

A: Yes. She did. She really did. It was very painful to have to bring her down to New Jersey. That was a painful decision. But I couldn't keep driving up here. That was four-and-a-half hours for me. Sometimes longer. And Mary three-and-a-half to four hours back and forth. My brothers never did. We were the only ones that ever came to see her. We had to. I had to see what was going on with her medications and her doctors. She had lifelong, severe depression, and nobody knew it.

Q: I did not know that.

A: Nobody knew.

Q: She was so upbeat.

A: Nobody knew until she was in her 70s. She was on a very low dose of Paxil for twenty years. Maybe it kind of made her a little steady. But when she got into her 80s was when

we really noticed that she was having some severe depression. She got on some decent medication at that point. My mother loved her Canadian Club too. She was mixing the two of them.

Q: Was she self-medicating?

A: She self-medicated for about 30 years. That's exactly what she was doing.

Q: Is there anything you want to teach your children or grandchildren about Quonnie?

A: My son loves it here and would love to come. I wish we had kept the house. But at that point, the house needed so much work, because there was so much deferred maintenance. I think Merrill was still paying off student loans. Mary and I weren't in a position to buy out my brothers and then renovate the place. At that point, she had the house in the Poconos. It was a long trip, unless I came up and spent the summer. In the middle of summer, it could be six hours for me to go home. So, coming up for a weekend was just not feasible. However, I'm still sorry we lost the house. But it paid for my mother's care. It paid for all of her care. Thank God. But I love it here. Thank God for Linda. I can still come. I can come not just to Rhode Island, but to Quonnie and to Central Beach. My brother Chris' daughter lives outside of Hartford. They rent every summer, but they rent on East Beach, because it's affordable. I think they definitely walk over to Quonnie Beach. But they still come, and they still love it. Linda, John's ex, still comes down. She drives through and sees the place and still loves it. John never liked it here at all, so he doesn't come. Jerry is in North Carolina, so he doesn't come. His kids don't come. Chris will come up to visit his daughter. I think he might have come to Quonnie a couple of times. Merrill doesn't come. That's too bad. Merrill is busy. He's still working full time. He has his own law practice, so he's very busy.

Q: So, it was really a meaningful experience for most all of you?

A: Vacations have changed dramatically. My son loves to go to the Poconos for a week or so. But I think he's more interested in taking his kids on very different vacations. We went to Colorado with them. We went to Florida with them. They were supposed to go to Japan this summer, but they cancelled. They were supposed to go to California. That got cancelled. So, that's what he's doing with his kids. He's doing the world vision instead. People don't come and stay in one place. It's a global economy. It's a global world today. The kids want different adventures. They want to get out and about. We had the golden time where you went and you just stayed. You got to know everybody. You had an endless summer. It wasn't like, "I'm here. Now I have to get in the car tomorrow, because I'm going here. And then I'm going down here. The hotel is booked for down there." It was just like you came and you stayed. There were days that I didn't take a shower, because we were in the ocean. We were clean. We couldn't get a comb through our hair, but who cared? My father would shave my brothers' heads—really give them a buzzcut on the driveway, so you didn't have to worry about them. He cut our hair. It was bangs and cut. You didn't have to worry about your hair. The laundry went out on the line. When they bought our house, the whole front of the house was all hedges

and brambles, so you couldn't see the house. We had concrete steps going up to the front door. Do you remember the Barwa chairs? Those were those green chairs that went like this that had the metal frame that you got in and rocked. They always had beach towels on them. You didn't necessarily want to see the front of our house. It wasn't all that attractive. My mother bought plastic flowers to put in a little flower pot that was in front of the front window by the kitchen. We would come up in the summer and she spray painted them. They were always red with green petals all summer. Dead as a doornail. They were plastic. I'll never forget after they winterized the house in 1981 when my parents were living here, she had an old umbrella that was getting faded, because it was always open. It was in the sun. It was fading. She painted the top of the umbrella blue. This has been fun.

Q: We're going to resume a moment so that we can talk about hurricanes.

A: I know that we were here for Hurricane Carol in '55. I think we were here. My parents had gone home, and Mrs. Crowder—remember right next door to us? Mrs. Crowder and her daughter Joanne. They owned a school for the deaf in Providence. They were babysitting for us. Hurricane Carol was coming, so she piled us all into the car and drove us up to the School for the Deaf where we spent two days when the hurricane came through. But I also remember there was another hurricane. I think it was a category 1, so it wasn't a really bad hurricane. We had near misses that had come through. Because we were sailing, we had the all-weather gear. So, you had the yellow hat, like a seaman, and you had the top and you had the pants. We would go down to the beach in the hurricane. We'd walk down to the beach. We'd watch the hurricane. I do remember the first street always flooded. We went, "Why would you ever build there?"

Q: Surfside?

A: Surfside—always. And then there would be no beach for about a week. I remember one time there was no beach. The water was right up to the parking lot. But within two weeks, we had the beach back. It always came back. If you remember coming here in the winter, there is very, very little beach in the winter. You probably have about this much beach, and that's about it. By spring, it's all back again, and better than ever. I know we weathered other hurricanes, because we had wells. You had well water, so you could stay here. And you had a leaching field, so you really didn't need anything. That's all I can remember about hurricanes. But I do remember being here for hurricanes. Because our house was like this, you opened a window at that end and the window at that end so the air could go through. Windows weren't blown out. And I guess when the eye comes over you, and we did see a few eyes of hurricanes come over us, it was dead calm. Something happened to the barometric pressure, and then it would build up again. Hurricanes are interesting. They swirl one way, and after the eye comes, they reverse it and swirl the other way. It's really cool. We used to go over to the Weekapaug Yacht Club. The Weekapaug Yacht Club was like the Quonnie Yacht Club. There was no club. It was a house down on the water where you had to register your sailboat. Did you ever sail?

Q: We did. Primarily my brother.

A: My brother sailed a lot. By the time I was sixteen, I wasn't sailing at all. I went over to Misquamicut. That's where my cousin was.

