

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

MARGARETT KULKE

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Interviewed by Anne Doyle

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Q: Today is Thursday, July the 11th in the year 2019. I'm sitting with Margaret Kulke of Neptune Avenue in Quonnie. She is going to relate her memories of being in Quonochontaug. If you could give me your name.

A: Margaret Christine Liedke Kulke.

Q: Could you spell Liedke.

A: L-I-E-D-K-E.

Q: When were you born?

A: I was born on March 9th, 1936 in New York City.

Q: Who was the first person in your family to come to Quonnie? And how did they find out about Quonnie?

A: My mother and father came with me to Quonnie in the early 1940s. My mother was working in New York City at Flower-Fifth Avenue Hospital, and one of her colleagues was Dr. Mary B. Stark. Dr. Stark had a house on Ninigret Pond. She knew the Larson sisters. I think that's probably how Dr. Stark came to Quonnie. The house was off East Beach Road directly on the pond. It was between the home of the Osterheuses and Mr. and Mrs. Speed. It was a typical summer cottage that had a loft with bedrooms above the living room, a screen porch that looked out to the pond and a beautiful pine-paneled living room. We sometimes swam in the pond off the dock, but I do remember having to put on bathing shoes because of all the rocks and shells. It wasn't very comfortable to swim there.

Q: How old were you?

A: I was about seven. This would have been about 1943. I was about seven. We came several different summers. It was during World War II. I remember oil on the beach that was the result of oil being spilled by the tankers. Here in Quonnie, I don't remember that much evidence about World War II. There was evidence of the hurricane. We would walk down a path to the beach. I think this path now is where Poagett [phonetic] Road is. At the time it was just a path. I remember many blueberries growing on the land between East Beach Road and the path, and sometimes we would pick the blueberries. It was all open land with the bushes and brush. There was a driveway. For me, at that age, it seemed like a long driveway going from East Beach Road to Mary B. Stark's house. We went to the beach almost every day and enjoyed walking in the beach. There were some foundations still on the beach as you walked east along the beach. These were foundations left from the hurricane of 1938. They always intrigued us. It was a lot of fun to walk to the foundation. I just remember the foundation. We also went to events at Seabreeze Inn, and sometimes friends of my parents came from New Jersey—that was where our permanent house was—for weekend fun at Seabreeze Inn. I remember going to Brightman's for ice cream and other groceries. I especially remember driving from New Jersey along the Merritt Parkway through Connecticut and really looking forward to getting to Westerly and stopping at Varrs [phonetic] Brothers Pharmacy—not for pharmacy items, but for coffee ice cream. That was my favorite. I have wonderful memories of Blue Shutters and Mrs. Craig.

Q: Did you know Mrs. Craig?

A: I think we probably did, because we would stop in. I think she had ice cream. We always changed our clothes at Dr. Stark's house. I don't remember whether or not there were changing facilities there or not. But I do remember snacks. I also remember the bunker that was built not far from the Blue Shutters. I think that's now at the end of East Beach Road and the cement walls have been painted and it's been converted into a house. I have fond, fond memories. We went most summers up to about 1950, and then in 1951 I spent the summer working at the Tunxis that was owned and managed at that time by Mr. and Mrs. Williams. I was there with a high school friend. We had just finished tenth grade. Our responsibilities were to clean the rooms in the morning and make the beds, and help with meals. Then we would have some time in the afternoon to go to the beach. It was a good summer job. My friend actually got sick halfway through the summer. I had to finish all of this on my own. It was a little bit more responsibility during the second half of the summer. I was glad to have a job, and I was glad to be in Quonnie. The guests usually came for a week at a time. I don't remember what Mr. and Mrs. Williams paid us. We had our own room and board. But I do remember that the guests often gave us a \$5 tip, which wasn't quite enough for help cleaning their rooms and serving meals for a whole week, but that's the way it was.

Q: Was your room in the inn?

A: Yes. We had one of the rooms—maybe a downstairs room. The guest rooms were all upstairs. We had a room in the house. After 1951, Dr. Stark must have sold her house, or somehow that connection was lost, and we didn't come to Quonnie anymore for a long

time. I was married in 1962. My husband and I moved to Wellesley in 1967. My parents were close to retirement age, and started to look for a retirement home, which would be close to us in Wellesley. They found that a house was for sale here in Central Beach. They bought the house about 1970. It had belonged to Mr. and Mrs. Hartzell, and was at 29 Neptune Avenue. The house was next to the house owned by the Peg and Bud O'Brien, and we heard from Peg the story that Mr. and Mrs. Hartzell wanted the house that we now have finished for her daughter's honeymoon. It got done quite quickly, and also was done with some insulation. I believe it was one of the first houses that was winterized. That's the story that I heard.

Q: Had it been built before that they just redid it?

A: I think they bought the land. They planned and built the house. Brad Fisher built the house. My parents bought this house from the Hartzels in 1970. They did some work on it. I do remember at that time we had a pretty good view of the ocean, because the houses on Ocean View and Surfside were lower, and trees were not so high. Mainly we had some shade trees in the back, but they had not grown that high yet. I think at the time there was also a code that trees were not supposed to grow to obstruct your view. That's how we came to this house in Central Beach.

Q: Did you parents go back and forth to New Jersey?

A: They were still living in New Jersey. They didn't retire here permanently until 1975. It was about a five-year period where they were here just in the summer. We would come. At that point, we had Matthew and Christine. Matthew was about kindergarten age, and Christine about three to four. Christine was born in 1967, and Matthew in 1965. After my parents bought the house in 1970, we came for the summer. But then my husband, Bernard, found another job in California, and in 1974 we moved to California just a year before my parents retired here in Quonnie. But we would come often for Christmas or in the summer to be with them. At that point, they spent all year here in Quonnie, even in the winter, with the exception of times when they would come to California for Christmas and spend a little bit of extra time in Southern California. But they had good friends with Bud and Peggy O'Brien, Kate Waterman, Bill Shaefer, George and Beth King and the Lena and Pete Skipper. Lena and Pete Skipper were exceptionally close to my parents. I think they both had a common European heritage, and that just gave them a lot in common.

Q: Talk about your heritage.

A: My parents were both born in Germany. My mother came over in 1920 to this country. She immigrated to this county in 1920. My father in 1930. They met in New York City and were married in 1931—quite soon after my father had come to this country. They met at Internal House in New York City.

Q: Were they content living here year-round?

A: I think so. They were used to a fairly busy life in New Jersey, because both of them had worked in New York City. They would go back to visit friends in between, but within a couple of years after they had moved here permanently—that would have been around 1977 or 1978—after they had been here two or three years, my father developed Alzheimer's. They couldn't travel much anymore. My father died in 1981. After that, my mother continued to live here alone. Fortunately, she had good friends—the Skippers—and they did many things together. Also, with Joe Schultz, who lived next to the Skippers. There was that commonality between the Dutch heritage and the German heritage. When Yo Schilt's husband was alive, she lived in Leonia, which was very close to Teaneck where my parents had lived. They had that in common. I think the winters were probably long.

Q: Did you mother have any other interests?

A: My mother was quite active with the College Club. She gave a talk once in a while to the College Club, because she had been a research biologist. Once in a while, she would talk about some of the current DNA research. She went to URI with Kate Waterman. Kate took some art classes, and my mother took some English literature classes and was expected to write papers. I read one of those papers once. By that time, I think she was more competent as a scientist than as a literary writer. But she had a strong appreciation for literature and poetry.

Q: She had the desire to keep on learning.

A: Yes. In the 1980s her two sisters from Germany came over. Her sister Trudy came over several different times. They would not only go to the beach, but they would discuss a lot of the German literature and some philosophy. There are a number of German books in our home, because my father had taught German literature at City University of New York. We still have parts of his library in the house.

Q: That explains a lot about you and your sharing of literature with Bernard.

A: Yes. That's true. My father enjoyed opera. When I was a college student, I would come home on weekends and he and I would go to the opera. He was very fond of certain operas.

Q: Was that in New York City?

A: In New York City. The old Metropolitan Opera. My mother enjoyed gardening. In fact, they kept the back yard much better than Bernard and I do. I'm amazed how well they kept it up. They also enjoyed the help of John Pappadia, Sr. John Pappadia, Sr. would bring them vegetables quite often from his own garden.

Q: Your dad had someone taking care of him, right?

A: Yes. Dennis Clinton. Dennis took care of my dad. He came just about every day. Dennis and his friend, Ralph, also helped out in the garden, especially when there was cleanup in the fall raking and that type of thing.

Q: What about Mr. King? Did your parents see him very often?

A: Yes. When my father was ill, and after my father had died, the neighbors here got together at least once a week. That included Peggy O'Brien and Bud, while he was still alive, and the Kings, the Skippers and Yo Schilt and Bill Schaefer. They would have supper—not a fancy supper. I think it was often maybe pea soup and a salad. But they certainly got together on a regular basis once a week.

Q: And a few drinks in between?

A: Yes. And on Friday afternoons, when the windows were open in the summer, we would hear the ice cubes from Peggy O'Brien's kitchen. She and her bridge friends all had ice cube parties.

Q: Did Mr. King bring any fish to you?

A: Yes. He would bring fish. There was a friend of the Skippers who would bring smoked fish. What was her name?

Q: From East Beach?

A: Yes. It will come to me. Matthew took sailing lessons at Weekapaug. Christine did too, but Matthew became a better sailor. One summer—this was when he was in eleventh grade—he spent the summer at Weekapaug Inn and lived in the facilities that they had there for help, but would come and visit my mother about once a week. There was an especially close tie between my mother and Matthew. This would have been right around 1979 or 1980.

Q: Were you still living in California?

A: We were still living in California. We didn't move from California until 2007. We came directly here from California, until we found a home in Wellesley where we spend the winter. Meanwhile, the house has been somewhat expanded and has become a wonderful place for family gatherings.

Q: Even Christmas?

A: Even Christmas, birthdays, graduations, anniversaries. It's always a celebration in Quonnie.

Q: I remember the celebration you had for Peg O'Brien's 80th birthday.

A: It was her 90th birthday. Wasn't it?

Q: You might have had the 90th too. But I think I remember the 80th.

A: Maybe it was the 80th. We were all at the table. Her son Jonathon had sent flowers. It was a great neighborhood party in January for everyone who was here over the winter.

Q: Neptune Avenue was a very active place during your parents' time here.

A: Yes. All year-round. It's was an all-year community here on Neptune Avenue, which made it so nice for those who stayed. I think the Skippers stayed all winter. As far as I know, Yo Schilt did. Yo Schilt was very active in the historical society. And the O'Briens were also here, Kate Waterman, of course and Bill. For my mother being alone, it was so important. I think it would be harder for her now since there aren't quite so many people here in the winter. It would be harder to be alone on Neptune Avenue.

Q: What about Matthew and Christine and their times that they had down here when they were younger? You were saying that Matthew sailed.

A: Yes. We inquired about sailing lessons when Matthew was in ninth grade around 1977 or 1978 at Weekapaug. At that time, there was a little bit of a hesitation to grant permission to come and sail, because we were not Weekapaug residents. But Michelle Ripuchi was very active over there. There was more and more a tie between Central Beach and the Weekapaug Yacht Club. He did take sailing lessons. He enjoyed it. When he was working there that one summer, which I think would have been around 1980, he even took the Sunfish out through the breachway out into the ocean. I'm glad I didn't know about it. Since we were in California, I didn't know about it. That was the summer he was here all summer. I think he was glad to get back into the pond after he had been in the ocean on that Sunfish. Christine was never that much of a sailor. But Matthew really did enjoy his sailing. He continued to sail with us on the pond. I never became much of a sailor either.

Q: I saw a photo of you on the boat.

A: Yes. Those were the good-old days. Then we got kayaks, and we did a few things with the kayaks. Now our kayaks are being used by friends and by Matthew and his family when they come.

Q: Have your grandchildren been enjoying Quonnie?

A: Yes. The grandchildren, Mattie and Katherine, love coming. Our daughter has two children, Penelope and Alexandra, who still come in the summer. Katherine and Mattie can only come for special celebrations. They finished college and are both working in California, of all places. Christine's daughters, Penelope and Alexandra, are younger. They are now nine and eleven. They are coming with friends. I know that they love the beach. They participated in two different Quonnie musicals. Penelope sang the song

about the Quonnie rocks. I was amazed that she got through it, because she was only about six or seven at the time. I think that will always be a memory. Those musicals, that were led by Edith Castile, were a lot of fun for all the participants and for the viewers.

Q: You're living in Wellesley now, so you're going back and forth.

A: We're going back and forth. But Matthew's family uses the house a lot in the summer. Christine and her family are enjoying the house. We still come in the winter once in a while to check on the house. I am enjoying the flowers in the garden. I don't go in the water that much anymore. One of the last times I went into the waves was with Peg O'Brien, and a big wave came and knocked us both down. Somebody from the beach ran down and helped us both up. Peg was much stronger in the water than I am, and I know she continued swimming probably until she moved from Quonnie. But I now love walking on the beach and being in the garden when it's not too hot and humid. Bernard does barbeques, reads a lot and walks. He enjoys walking on the beach. He was never much of a beach person. He grew up on southern Germany and wasn't that used to the ocean. But he does enjoy walking on the beach. Matthew goes out and swims. Christine is in the water with Penelope and Alexandra. She's not that much of a swimmer. She runs on the beach every morning when she is here. She runs on the beach towards East Beach and beyond. I think she gets quite far. She's on that beach running for about an hour every morning. It's amazing. She loves doing that.

Q: You mentioned going to Brightman's when you were younger. Do you remember Mr. Brightman?

A: Yes. But I don't remember his well.

Q: I was wondering if you knew any of the people that lived here year-round at that point.

A: I remember Mrs. Osterhouse and her son Herman. Nice house.

Q: Did they live here year-round?

A: I don't know that they lived here year-round.

Q: You'll have to point that out to me. I know you've talked about it before. I've been over there and I can't remember what you said about them.

A: It was much more a permanent-looking house than the cottages that Mary B. Stark had or Mr. Speed had. It was brick. I wonder if it still stands. How do we get over there? Is it on Poagett?

Q: I don't know. Either Poagett or off of East Beach Road.

A: We walked through woods close to the pond to get to their house. As I recall, there was an open lot between Dr. Stark's house and the Osterhouse's house. I don't think they lived here all year-round, but they seemed very knowledgeable. And then there were the Moultons, the next house.

Q: Did you ever meet them?

A: No.

