

# QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

## MARY PHILLIPS

March 11, 1998

Interviewed by Anne S. Doyle

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Q: Today is Wednesday, March the 11<sup>th</sup>, 1998. This interview is with Mary Phillips of Central Street, Quonochontaug. And the purpose of this interview is to talk about Quonnie memories that Mary has through the years that she has lived here. The interviewer is Ann Schafer Doyle. Mary, I think the first thing I'd like you do [recording skips] were born.

A: My name is Mary Underwood Phillips. I was born March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1908.

Q: Where were you born?

A: In Stow, Massachusetts.

Q: I'd like to ask you about how it was that you first came to Quonnie.

A: It was really quite by accident. My father was out looking for a place to rent for the summer, and he tried some beaches in Massachusetts, and it fell through. So, he just happened to come to Quonochontaug. And after riding around and so forth, he talked with the owners of Spray Rock, and they were ready to rent it to him. He rented it for the whole summer. As I remember, I think it was \$500 for the summer.

Q: Do you know what year that was?

A: This was 1936.

Q: That was the same year that that picture you showed me was taken.

A: Yes. That's right.

Q: At that time, you were living in Massachusetts?

A: No. I was living in Providence.

Q: Did you happen to know anybody else from Providence that came down?

A: No. We had never heard of it before. He just happened to drive in and liked it.

Q: How old were you then?

A: I was 28.

Q: Do you remember that first summer here? Did you spend the whole summer here?

A: Yes. I spent most of my time on the beach. That was a great summer.

Q: Do you remember anybody that you got to know that summer?

A: Yes. The Saunders next door. Of course, the neighbors too were around. And the Gusteaders came in 1938. I became very friendly with Adelaide Gusteader.

Q: Did they stay right down where you were?

A: They built a house. I think it was in '38. That house is still standing there. It was a few down from Spray Rock. My friend Adelaide died in the early '40s of cancer. That was a shock.

Q: Adelaide was—

A: Gusteader.

Q: Is was their daughter?

A: Yes.

Q: You had become very good friends with her?

A: Yes.

Q: The hurricane hit in '38. How did that change your going down?

A: That is when my father bought Spray Rock.

Q: Your father bought Spray Rock?

A: My father bought Spray Rock. A couple had been living in Spray Rock. It was brand new at the time. I don't think they'd been married very long. As I understand it, she was in the house alone when the hurricane struck, and she didn't want any part of that house again, so they sold it. My father bought it.

Q: That wasn't the Thorps at the time? Were the Thorps the original owners?

A: No. I'm not sure, but it seems to me their name was White, but I may be wrong. They got out right after the hurricane, and we got it.

Q: So, the house had to be moved back?

A: No. It was all right. I had a few minor things. But she was in it when it happened. That was enough. I don't blame her. So, we got it after the '38 Hurricane. In 1954, we had another hurricane.

Q: Hurricane Carol.

A: Yes. And my mother and I were in the house. I wasn't thinking anything about it. I was lying in bed listening to the radio, and the storm was going on outside.

Q: You were down in Spray Rock?

A: No. The Anchorage.

Q: How did you get to the Anchorage?

A: That was the house at the foot of the hill where [inaudible 05:37] lives now. And my father bought that house in '38.

Q: I thought you meant that he bought Spray Rock.

A: No. He bought the Anchorage in 1938, because that woman couldn't wait to get out of there. We had it until 1954 when we had another hurricane. My father had died then, so my mother and I were there alone. We got out.

Q: You didn't stay during the hurricane?

A: No. Then we sold the house.

Q: Right after?

A: As soon as we could get somebody to buy it.

Q: Was it because of the hurricane?

A: Yes. We thought that was enough. It was too close to the water.

Q: So, you were there from '38 until '54?

A: Yes. But I was working at the time. It wasn't an all-year-round house. We'd come down for vacations and weekends, and then spend the summer down there.

Q: During that time period, did you develop certain friendships with other people? Did my family know you well?

A: Not at that time, because we were living on the water front. It was away from everybody.

Q: Can you remember any particular family that you knew well?

A: The Windgates had a house diagonally across from us.

Q: That's Peggy Ray.

A: Yes. That's right. They were friends of mine.

Q: Was Joanne Thompson there then?

A: Yes. I knew her. She didn't live near us, but I knew her. She was a great friend of Peggy's.

Q: I know that they were good friends.

A: Yes. Then there was another family that lived a couple houses down. I think they all died too. Actually, there weren't too many people that we got palsy-walsy with. I used to be on the beach all the time.

Q: You were a beach person.

A: I was then.

Q: Which beach did you go to?

A: When we lived in the Anchorage, we went to the little one up here.

Q: To West Beach?

A: Yes.

Q: We called it the Nun's Beach.

A: Yes. That's right. I'd see the same people on the beach there, and we'd talk and so forth.

Q: Was your mother alive at that time?

A: Yes, she was. In '54 we decided to sell it.

Q: Did you both move up to here?

A: No. I hadn't built this house then. I built this house in '55. After it was built and being an all-year-round house, we'd come down weekends if we wanted to, or spring vacation or something like that. I was a teacher, so I had the summer off, so we'd be here all summer.

Q: And your mother would also be here with you at that time?

A: Yes.

Q: You talk about your nieces. Did they live close to you up in Providence when you were teaching?

A: No, they didn't. They lived in Norton, Massachusetts, which wasn't too far. The other side of Attleboro. When the kids were small, they used to come over for visits often. But now they're scattered. One lives in Providence. She teaches there.

Q: You must have a lot in common.

A: One lives in Foxboro. She's the one that came down today and did some cleaning. One lives in Portland, Maine, and the other lives in Colorado.

Q: So, you have four nieces?

A: I have four nieces. So, that's nice.

Q: When did you finally retire and come down here all the time?

A: I retired in 1968. That's when I moved down. I've been here ever since.

Q: What was the decision about being at Quonnie after you retired? Was that a difficult decision?

A: No. That's what I built the house for. I had that in mind, because in Providence and Cranston, I didn't own any property there. I just rented. So, then it was easy to come down here.

Q: This used to be where the old ball field was. When we built our house in '52, we had pictures of this lot with the ball field.

A: Yes. I can imagine how mad those kids were that I bought the property. I could have had some other down farther, but this was all cleared and everything, so I bought it. They were furious with me.

Q: I think it worked out for the best, because having the ball field and the tennis courts all together, that's all right. We forgive you. But I remember my father coming over and umpiring games over here.

A: Yes.

Q: Now that you've been hear year-round, what kinds of things have you been doing with your day?

A: For 25 years, I was a volunteer at the hospital. I belonged to a couple of organizations.

Q: What were those organizations?

A: The King's Daughters.

Q: Elaine Henry told me about that.

A: Yes. In fact, they're meeting tomorrow. You can join if you want.

Q: I didn't know about that. My Aunt Edith Fisher—she was my great aunt, and she was a part of that as well.

A: Yes. I know. In fact, they're meeting tomorrow.

Q: What kinds of things does the King's Daughters do?

A: They'll have their meeting, and then after that they might have some craft work. For instance, Rose [inaudible 13:47]. You know her.

Q: She's in a nursing home.

A: She's in a nursing home.

Q: I don't know her, but I know of her.

A: She was the treasurer of the organization for years and years. She was a very smart woman. Then she had a stroke. It's difficult for her to talk. She's over there. I was so amazed. She has a brother that lives on the Cape, and her sister lives in Dunn's Corner. She was always there for Rose, which was great. I imagine she retired. She usually goes to Florida for a certain time in the winter. She and her husband went recently. Rose was down on the Cape with her brother. I guess she was going to be there for several weeks, and he made preparations for people to come in and take care of her. To my amazement, the other day I heard she was back at the health center, because she wanted to come home. So, that's where she is.

Q: So, you knew Rose pretty well. Somebody said that she had a stroke, and it would be hard for me to talk to her. Do you know anything about her history down here? It was just she and her husband, right?

A: Yes.

Q: They both were here together?

A: Yes.

Q: Where did they originally come from?

A: Westerly.

Q: So, this is really home for her.

A: Yes. And of course, her husband died quite a while ago. It was too bad. The strange thing about it is a friend of hers had a birthday, and Rose wanted to take her out to dinner. She asked Phyllis [inaudible 16:13], a friend of hers down here, who has since died, to go along too. So, they went. The very next day Rose had her first stroke. So, supposing she had been driving—I think she's had two strokes since then.

Q: Does she get to your King's Daughters meetings?

A: We had a meeting over there at the health center so she could be there.

Q: What's the purpose of that organization? Is it to raise money for different scholarships and that type of thing?

A: No. It isn't to raise money. We do things for different organizations.

Q: Do you have to be connected with the king? How do you get to be in the King's Daughters organization? Is there a requirement that you are an ancestor?

A: I guess that you believe in Christ.

Q: I thought maybe it went back to the King of England or something like that.

A: No.

Q: Do you meet once a month?

A: Yes. Except July. We don't meet in July. And August we usually go out to dinner somewhere. We meet the second Thursday in the month.

Q: So, you've made a lot of friends through that organization.

A: I know a lot of people, but they're scattered. Some live in Westerly. I don't see them as pals, but I know them and enjoy talking to them and so forth.

Q: What was the other organization? You said you volunteer.

A: I volunteered at the hospital for 25 years.

Q: What did you do there?

A: The mail and the flowers. I used to sort the mail, and put the room numbers on it and deliver it. When the flowers came, I kept a record and delivered them.

Q: Did you stay the whole doing this?

A: No. I stayed from 9:00 to 12:00. I was there for 25 years.

Q: Not every day.

A: No. Tuesdays. It was fun.

Q: That's quite a volunteer organization over there.

A: It is. While I was working there, this woman, Rose—Charlotte Broker. Do you know her?

Q: I have met her.

A: She was the head of volunteers at that time. Rose needed a place to sit for her job that she was doing. She was doing some hand work, so Charlotte brought her out to where I was sitting. At that time, it was a very small place, but Rose was there and we became good friends. Then finally I left. Rose is still there, and she's well into her 80s, and she hadn't been too well. But she's working there. Quite often on a Tuesday I go over there and have coffee with her.

Q: Why did you give it up?

A: I had done it for 25 years, and I wasn't getting any younger. Also, they were making renovations in the hospital, and you were moved around. You couldn't be in your regular place. You would get into a little hole about that big to do your mail and so forth. But I miss it. I enjoyed it very much.

Q: You said you were in one other organization.

A: I don't remember now. Well, those two were the most important ones.



Q: I always think of you having birds around. Every time I go by your house, there are all kinds of birds. Now I realize that you're feeding them behind the bushes here, and that's why they're all around your house.

A: Every once in a while, I see a cat out here.

Q: Down at the [inaudible 21:31], there are a whole lot of cats.

A: They have nine cats, I think.

Q: Yes. That's what he said.

A: And a precious dog. I was down there yesterday, and the [inaudible 21:41] are always so glad to see me, but I can't get over how different she looks, because she's lost weight, and I don't think she gets much exercise. They're home all day. She sleeps a lot. It isn't the same life that she was living before. They haven't had that dog very long. About three years or so. The dog they had died. They always had sheepdogs. It died, and I think he was planning to get another sheepdog, and then he learned about this dog, so he ended up taking it.

Q: You were good friends with Phyllis too. You must miss her.

A: Yes. I do.

Q: Would she come over every day, or would you see her a lot?

A: She would come up quite often. We used to watch the same soap operas, so it was interesting to be able to discuss them with somebody. She was sick for a long time. She had various things, and it was awful. I remember just a few days before she died, she walked up here one day, and I was so surprised to see her, because she hadn't been for a long time. And she sat over there on the couch. She was kind of depressed. I think she had the feeling that she was a nuisance, that she required care, and it was awful. That was the impression she gave me. She had a cane with her. She walked. She had decided to walk home. She started out, and I went out to get my paper out of the box, and I watched her walk down the road for a little while, and that was the last time I saw her. It's too bad. She's gone.

Q: Do you have other people that you see every once in a while?

A: I have a friend, Maureen Somerfield. She lives up behind the Baptist Church up here. That big red building up on the hill.

Q: On Route 1?

A: Yes. It's on the side road, like 1A. That was a fort at one time. She and her husband bought it, and he has since died. Maureen goes to the Baptist Church.

Q: Are there two Baptist churches? There's one out on Route 1.

A: That's the one.

Q: Not the one down near the library?

A: No. It's this one.

Q: But that was a fort at that point?

A: Maureen's house; not the church. The red house up on the hill.

Q: I'll have to look. Can you see it from the main road?

A: Yes. If the trees aren't out too much, I think so.

Q: Do you know anything about this fort?

A: I don't know. I'll have to ask her.

Q: Is part of the structure still there?

A: Yes. I think it is. Of course, if you're up on the third floor, you can look out and see Block Island. You could keep track of the water.

Q: Even from that distance?

A: Yes. But since then, the trees have grown a lot.

Q: Are there any other pieces of history like that, or anything that strikes you in terms of your memory of anything happening down here of significance?

A: Not at the moment.

Q: You never went over to the West Beach area before the hurricane when there were hotels over there? Did you ever do that when you were first down here?

A: Not to stay there, but of course I was down there a lot. Down at the end of the road, they had a bowling alley and a store.

Q: Did you go there?

A: Oh, yes. Everybody did. It was a very busy place. I think it's too bad that they didn't keep it. Even today, if they had it, there would be a lot of people that would walk down there.

Q: It would be a place to congregate. When we were here growing up, it was that place. We would go down and we would set up our own pins.

A: The pins. Yes.

Q: Not having that is too bad. So, you do remember going down. I have heard about Mother Brindley. Were you aware of her?

A: Yes. Did she have that little store where you get tea and cookies?

Q: Yes. It was supposed to be right down at the very end of where the road goes towards the breachway.

A: Yes. I think at one time Rose and her sister were waitresses in there.

Q: I heard somebody say that Rose—did Rose do something like that for a summer? Did she make the tea and serve it?

A: I never went in there when she was doing it, so I don't know. But I understand that she worked there. She was young. This was years ago.

Q: That was before the '38 Hurricane.

A: Yes.

Q: Once the '38 Hurricane came, all that went. Did you know anything about Mr. King? His family had a house down there too. We had him as our neighbor.

A: I knew the two of them, but I didn't know anything about them.

Q: I want to ask you about how you might have spent your evenings when you were down at the Anchorage.

A: Sometimes we'd walk down to the bowling alley and meet people there and have fun. Most of the evenings were spent at people's houses.

Q: What would you do if you went to somebody's house?

A: Talk most of the time. Maybe have something to eat. Dessert or something.

Q: No TV. Was there radio? Do you remember?

A: Yes. But we certainly didn't have one that Spray Rock.

Q: So, you really made your own entertainment.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you play cards or games?

A: I played cards, but how often, I don't remember. But we enjoyed things. We used to like to take walks on the beach.

Q: At night?

A: We could. Yes.

Q: Thinking back to World War II, especially since you were right on the shore, what do you remember about that time?

A: The thing that I remember mainly was that everything had to be black. Your house couldn't be lit up. I suppose we drew the curtains, but it had to be dark out there.

Q: So, at a certain time of the day, all the curtains were—

A: This was at night. It had to be black.

Q: I've heard stories of Red Top. Were there some signals being sent from Red Top?

A: I don't know. Red Top was the next house to our house. I don't remember that.

Q: That might not be a true story.

A: I don't understand it, because at that time, there were two older women living there.

Q: Do you know their names?

A: I did, but I have forgotten them now.

Q: Do you remember the Coast Guard men patrolling the beaches?

A: I know they were around, but I really didn't have anything to do with them. I just knew that it had to be black outside at night.

Q: So, they weren't patrolling during the day as well? You didn't notice that?

A: They may have, but I don't recall it.

Q: What about any memories of the planes training over at the Naval Air Base?

A: I knew they were there. Of course, they'd be flying over all the time. But we were supposed to keep out of there.

Q: I have a distinct memory at night going to sleep and hearing the planes. They'd circle, because they were practicing. And then they'd turn their engines off, and then you'd hear them putting the engines back on again. That is a very big memory that I have. That was just a part of Quonnie—that noise.

A: Did you grow up here as a child in the summer?

Q: Yes. In the summer starting in '43.

A: Where did you live?

Q: We rented Sea Biscuit, which is where the Schwartzs are now. That's where we would go for all of August.

A: But where was your home town?

Q: We first lived in the Boston area—Wellesley. And then we moved to Connecticut—West Hartford. We just continued to come down for summers. Let's talk about how you ate and got your food. You said it was wonderful back in those days.

A: Yes, it was. This truck would come in. It had all kinds of vegetables. The fish man would come. The laundry man would come. You name it, they were here.

Q: Even the laundry man?

A: Yes. A laundry man used to come.

Q: Would you give them things like your sheets?

A: Yes. And then they'd bring it back. It was great.

Q: Do you remember having to go up to Brightman's to get anything? That was a big event.

A: Yes.

Q: Do you remember him?

A: Yes.

Q: Can you describe him?

A: He was a big man. He was an invalid, I think. He had a beard.

- Q: I think somebody said he had an amputated leg.
- A: Yes. I think that was it. I know he was laid up. But he was a very nice man. Eventually the store was sold and somebody else took it over.
- Q: Crompton's?
- A: Yes. Crompton's. And built a new section on the right-hand side. I miss that store.
- Q: What it turned into when it was sold was so terrible for so long. It's kind of nice that it's not there anymore now.
- A: Yes. But when you come down West Beach Road and see the land for sale, some day it's going to be built up more than it is now.
- Q: I'm worried about that. I was hoping that maybe people would get together and form a foundation where we could start buying up land that wouldn't be built on.
- A: Look where that—what do you call that building? It isn't a house. It's where they have parties and things over here on the left on West Beach Road.
- Q: Where the Seabreeze Inn was? In that little room where they used to have square dancing?
- A: Yes. That's the place. That's for sale. Still for sale.
- Q: It says sale pending.
- A: Now, what does that mean? Are they going to build a house there?
- Q: I have a feeling it's going to be a private house. Do you remember Sammy, the man that brought vegetables? Does that ring a bell? Sammy, the little Italian man that used to come around?
- A: In the truck?
- Q: Yes. An old truck.
- A: I had forgotten his name.
- Q: There was a milk truck.
- A: Yes. Wasn't there somebody with eggs too? Everything was here.
- Q: Did you have a car here? Did you take trips down to Watch Hill or Point Judith or anything like that?

A: Occasionally. I was on the beach most of the time.

Q: Did you like swimming a lot?

A: Yes. I would swim.

Q: I bet you're a reader as well.

A: More so now than I was then.

Q: We didn't get it on tape that you were a sixth-grade teacher. For how many years?

A: Thirty-eight. The strange thing is a few years ago three of my former pupils looked me up, and they were in their 60s. One of them lives in Ashaway. Her name is Joanne Herberton. She was a teacher in Charlestown. And another was Alice Avadesian. She came from Cranston. I think she was a teacher too. Then the third one—I have forgotten where she lived, but she has since died. There were there former pupils coming to visit me.

Q: Did they call you first before they came?

A: Yes. I think Joanne did the telephoning. Somebody picked me up, and we went to dinner at her house a couple of times. As I recall, I think she sent me a birthday card. I got 25 cards.

Q: You should have them displayed all over.

A: I did have them, but I thought it was time to pick them up.

Q: It looks like you've been very busy around here. What do you enjoy doing now? You've got a lot going on here.

A: I sure have. You can see this bag here. I've been throwing stuff out. You saw my mail that I got today. I haven't looked at that yet. Last night I looked at yesterday's mail. It took me at least an hour and a half to get through it. Some of it I throw out without even looking at it. But I'm afraid to take that chance, because sometimes I open something up and I think, "Oh, my gosh, am I glad I didn't throw that out."

Q: Do you correspond with people?

A: All my closest friends have died. There is one friend that I have been writing to every week. She lives in Warwick. Now she's in the hospital. I guess she's going to be there several weeks.

Q: Is this connected with your teaching days?

A: No. It's somebody I knew when I lived up in Cranston. She lived in West Warwick. Her husband died, and so she's been alone for some time. She gave up here place where she was living, and she was in one of those retirement homes. Then her cousin called me one day and told me that Elizabeth was in this nursing home. I guess she had broken a bone or something, and she was going to be there several weeks. It's a mess. All my closets friends that I taught with have died. It's hard. It's very tough to get old, because one by one everybody is dropping off.

Q: It really changes your life dramatically.

A: Yes. It does. My mother and father both died. I lost my brother. He got cancer, and he died. Hope was always a very busy woman and very smart. Low and behold, she got cancer and she died. They had this big home in Norton, Mass. It was an old home built in something like 1790 or something like that. A very interesting place. So, after they both died, the girls decided to sell the house. I used to always go there for Christmas and Thanksgiving. It's all so different.

Q: But you seem to be motivated to get up in the morning. You seem to be a very upbeat person.

A: I don't sit and brood. I like to do things in the morning, and then in the afternoon—I mean outside. I go to the market or go out to the hospital to visit Rose and so forth.

Q: So, you're driving?

A: Yes. Then in the afternoon I watch my soap operas at 3:00. People kid me so much about it.

Q: I worry about the influence of those soap operas on our young children.

A: The ones I watch are really tame. But it's like reading a book. You want to know what happens next. I won't see it tomorrow, because I've got to go to that King's Daughters meeting, so I won't know.

Q: Do you know how to tape it?

A: No. I don't tape it. Phyllis used to watch it, so if I missed it, she'd tell me.

Q: It was really nice talking with you.

A: It was nice talking with your too.

Q: If you can think of anything else, I have the tape. This is your tape. I can come back if you think of a story that you didn't tell me. Just give me a call.



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A: Okay.

