

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

WILLIAM T. SCHAFER

March 19, 2004

Interviewed by Anne Doyle

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Q: This is Friday, March the 19th in the year 2004. And I am going to interview my brother, Will Schafer, at his home in Florence, Massachusetts. And if you could just give your name and where you were born, when you were born.

A: Name, William T. Schafer. I was born on May 23rd, 1940 in the Boston area. I believe it was still Boston. I lived in that area in Wellesley for the first fourteen years of my life.

Q: Could you tell me your first connections with Quonnie?

A: My first connections with Quonnie go beyond my memory. The family had been going to Quonnie since the 1800s, and it includes my mother and father after I was born. My first memories are in the war years when we rented a house. It's down near the shore. I want to say the Goodale house [phonetic 01:31]. I'm not sure that's correct, but it's a house right on the corner down near the shore. And these long steps going up and down to a porch. I think the porch was raised at a high level because of the frequency of storms, which water would come over the dunes and flood the area beneath it. And that's what was very susceptible as was shown in the 1938 hurricane of severe damage. My memories of that are because there were some problems getting to Quonnie in the war years because of the rationing of gas. And it was quite a big deal to save enough coupons to get tickets in order that we would stay there for just a few days. And I say we; it was my mother and I. I don't believe my father was there. He was working. So, that's my earliest memory. Shortly after that, we started to rent the house, Seabiscuit, probably named after the horse—I don't know that for sure—near the pond, which is now owned by the Swarzes [phonetic 02:42], and it had been expanded considerably—a beautiful place overlooking the West Pond and the ocean. That I remember. I don't know how far you want to get into that, but that I remember almost year by year. So, I'll drop it there and you can ask another question specifically if you wish.

Q: I would just expand on that. Tell me whatever your memories are of staying at Seabiscuit.

A: My memories were always very positive. We usually rented a house for a month. I believe that my parents couldn't afford a full month, as cheap as it would seem to us today. And my grandmother and grandfather Siemens [phonetic 03:35] would kick in for another two weeks, so we had a full month there. I liked it for many reasons. One, it was fully a cottage. No insulation. The cellar was dirt floors. It had a particular odor that's characteristic to the cellars down there that aren't paved. The rooms were divided, but the walls were not right to the ceiling. I always had the room closest to the ocean, which I liked, because I remember every year we went down there, I'd lie in bed at night and listen to the waves crash against the shore. Unfortunately, in the early days, there was a great deal of noise, because the pilots were training from the Charlestown Air Force Base. We used to call it the Hellcats. I think that may be an improper name, but they were fighter planes. I think President Bush, the first president, trained there at one time also. There was, of course, the unfortunate circumstances of these planes crashing and submarines sinking merchant ships out in the ocean resulting in tar and oil washing up on the beach. One outstanding memory, it was absolutely common during the war, and, for that matter, I think it was probably two or three years after the war, where every cottage had a can of kerosene out by the door, and a rag. You needed to wipe your feet before you went in, because you'd be covered with tar. I remember also to get the potable water that you had to go up to the pump, which is now around the second base spot in the ball field. I would go up there with a can with my grandmother with two handles. It said a five-gallon can, but I think that would have been impossible for me at that age, so whatever size. She knew how to prime the pump—taught me how. Fill up the can full of water and back we went. The roads weren't paved. At least the kids never had shoes. Our feet got very tough every year from running up and down the roads that were unpaved. Let's see; what else do I remember? I'm sure there are many other things. We were normally outside a lot; not in the cottage. I can't speak for my sisters, but I had a lot of freedom at a relatively young age to wander around Central Beach, in which case friends were made and activities done not just in our house in Seabiscuit, but in a number of friends' houses. We would make model airplanes in bad weather. We would rig up things like underwater cameras. We tried to do that. And diving equipment, which was primitive, as you can imagine.

Q: Explain the underwater cameras.

A: We thought that the underwater cameras would work. I think each one was destroyed by water before we actually got the picture taken, but we had the compartment for the camera. I don't remember all the details of it. We probably got the idea from one of the magazines—*Popular Mechanics* or something like that, I'm sure. I think if we ever did use it, you would have a hard time dragging the thing up from the bottom of the ocean. It was pretty heavy. But the big activity was riding the waves both with a mattress and without—a rubber mattress, which virtually everybody had. Most everybody learned how to ride waves without the mattress, and exactly what part to start, how to judge when you started swimming to catch it. The advantage of the mattress was you could go out to the big waves when the storms came that you wouldn't dare do without the mattress. Of course, you might fall off the mattress and have a lot of problems. But most of us had a

lot of freedom. I think if Mother had been watching us closely, she would have had a heart attack sometimes. Most of the kids got very proficient on this. I don't know how much time we spent in the water, but I would have to say it was a large chunk of time every day until the years came when it was time for me to start working. I'll stop again and we can explore what I'm missing, or what you want to do at this point. You asked me to say who I knew in these younger years. Of course, the friends I made, and cherish, three of these are still in existence today. At this point, I'm 63 years old. To be corresponding and talking with friends that many times some of whom I can't remember not knowing. So, these are very cherished friends and memories. Of course, I knew them and their parents, their brothers and sisters. Most of the people I had contact with was within our family—the Fisher [phonetic 10:05] side of the family. They had a big cottage near the first road by the ocean that had been moved across our street in the '38 hurricane. I remember everything with Uncle Arthur seemed to be keyed around making ice cream and having the children do the work making the ice cream. This, again, was in one of those cellars that had dirt floors and rusty rakes and whatever else you had down there. Aunt Edith seemed to spend a lot of time in the kitchen and had us picking blackberries and blueberries. Eventually my mother cleaned them, the ones that we picked. My sisters made some wonderful blackberry jelly that we used over the course of the winter. Also, I was beginning to get into the stage where I was interested in money. Pete Skipper [phonetic 11:13] and I would go out picking, and then sell these to various people. What was her name? Mrs. Swule [phonetic 11:27]? I can't remember her first name. Auntie something. I've forgotten.

Q: Ruler [phonetic 11:34]?

A: Yes. It was Ruler, I think. Ruler was a cousin of hers, I think. Most of the people were either the parents or grandparents of the kids that I knew—relatives. Brad Fisher and Buddy are another two. Brad built many of the houses there. And it was hard to be friendly with Brad, but I guess we had to manage. He was part of the family. He did his work during the various clam bakes that we had, so you can't complain too much, I guess.

Q: Who were your friends?

A: Let's see. I'm not good at names. Pete Skippost [phonetic 12:27] was right down the street. He had two sisters, Kirsty and Nicky. I didn't have much contact with either one, but Pete and I used to do a lot of athletics together. We played tennis. We explored the pond and things like that. We had a pretty good time together. Unfortunately, Pete acquired—I think it was manic depressiveness. I haven't really had any contact with him since. He has tried to initiate it with me. He's been involved with a fundamentalist religion—I think Jehovah's Witnesses. When he knew that I wasn't interested, he cut the friendship. It was fun during those years. Let's see; Isabelle McClara [phonetic 13:28]. We called her Ibby. And her brothers. I wasn't as close to her brothers, Demi and Bern. The Swarze boys, Tracy and Phillip—those two. And David Courtner [phonetic 13:48]. I went across country in my '49 Ford when we graduated from high school in 1958. I fixed it up. The parents blessed it and sent us off. We toured several thousand miles.

We had Tracy's guitar, banjo, violins somehow stuck in that little Ford between our legs. We'd make camp, and Tracy would drag out one of the instruments and kind of draw people in. We had a pretty good time. We stopped in a motel once a week to wash up and clean up. This is when we had just graduated from high school. I think Tracy was a year older than us. I was eighteen. Phillip, I think was, and David also. I mentioned before, I had contact with Tracy and Phillip with some gaps, but we managed to stay in contact. David is a lost soul. We have speculated his demise in New York City, as we believe he probably was experimenting with drugs and things, and just had those kinds of contacts in New York. We haven't heard from him at all. Going back further. Again, I'm bad with names. Ruth Boss [phonetic 15:17]. Ruth was a good friend of Isabelle's—Ibby. And sometimes the three of us on rainy days would get together and play cards all day long. That just jogged my memory. I probably have several more in mind.

Q: Micky Romney [phonetic 15:40]?

A: Yes. Micky Romney. We never were too close, but she was part of the gang. Bodie Brown [phonetic 15:49] was the busy body of the crowd. She's had an interesting life since, which I probably won't put on this tape—a very interesting life. Jeff Long [phonetic 16:11] and—what's Jeff's brother's name, who has a house down there.

Q: Steve?

A: Steve Long. Yes. Jeff and Steve. We did a lot of athletic stuff together—a lot of softball. Jeff took the Sunday softball game deadly serious. He played the role. He chewed tobacco and did his appropriate spitting so everybody would know he was a tobacco chewer. I think he kept batting averages and whatever. The Sunday ball games for him was the highlight of the week. He kind of made it that way for many of us, too. It was originally a son and father's game. Eventually it became more competitive with the ages closer. I guess, now they have it as married and unmarried, or something like that. It started in the field in back of our house. I believe it was 1954. The Thorps donated the land, and then changed the donation of land to near the tennis courts, which was very nice of them. I'm sure it's very expensive land. As I said, originally, the ball game was father and son. And literally, many of the positions were exactly the same. In other words, if I played third base, my father would be playing third base. The same thing with pitcher. I think one of the McCloud [phonetic 17:57] boys pitched and their father pitched on the other team. Jerry Fogarty [phonetic 18:03] and Mr. Fogarty—Mr. Fogarty was a hell of an athlete. He played short stop in college—he played for Holy Cross—and he made that game interesting. He had outstanding athletic ability. Who else played in that? Charlie Boss [phonetic 18:25] played with us, Ruth's brother.

Q: Do you have any memories of Charlie?

A: Charlie was a couple years older than me. They kind of had their own group of boys. They didn't exclude us, but they had their own interests, which were more—I don't know how to say—just different than many of us that were two or three years younger. There was no animosity. And there was no exclusion. We sat together on the beach a lot. I

knew Charlie mainly through those ball games, and sometimes sitting with him on the beach. Ruth was my age, and so I knew her much better. I know Charlie was smart. I guess he ended up as a professor out on the west coast someplace. I didn't have a lot of day-to-day contact with him. Until 1954, we were only there for a month, and a month goes by very, very quickly, so you tend to have a fairly narrow focus with friends. But when we built our cottage, which I believe costed a grand total of something on the order of \$4,500—no; it was more than that. I think it was \$6,000. The house in Wellesley was around \$4,000. But for \$6,000 we had our own cottage, and we were there more. But that was the year when I started working, too. Again, the friendships were good, but they were somewhat limited in number.

Q: You mentioned exploring the pond with Peter Skipper. Did you actually do things like sailing and that type of thing?

A: I should confess. Exploring the pond wasn't done just with legs through all the swamps. We liberated a few boats here and there and did our share of rowing and a little bit of sailing. We tried to [inaudible 20:59] them when the owners weren't around. We were quite successful at that, except for one time. I think it was a boat we had no intentions of destroying or anything, but we were just kids, and we were just using it for the afternoon or for a few hours. One kid in the group—what was his name? Neil Donovan [phonetic 21:24]—tended to be destructive. I'll go into that in a minute. But as long as he wasn't present, we had no qualms about rowing in a boat that we were going to return. The owner was quite upset and corralled us. He hid our bikes, took us back home to each mother and complained. The mothers weren't particularly upset about that, because they knew we weren't going to steal it or harm it or anything. They basically shrugged their shoulders. I think he thought that they were going to put us in our rooms for the rest of our lives or something. But I remember looking for lobster buoys—the markers—and anything that was of interest, particularly after the '54 hurricane, Carol. It was a treasure house of destruction of things that we found that were of absolutely no use to anybody but us.

Q: Like what?

A: I remember parts of boats, and parts of the [inaudible 22:45] and God only knows what else. I remember our neighbor lost—apparently it was a boat worth some money. It was a particular kind of—it wasn't a rowboat, but kind of like what the old whalers used. I forget exactly the name of it. We told them we found an old boat hidden away in the marshes. What was his name across the street?

Q: Mr. King?

A: Yes. Mr. King. That's right. So, we took him out on a long trip of wading through marsh. It was quite strenuous. It was not his boat. He just turned around and left; never said thank you or anything. That was the kind of guy he was. I think it was Pete Skipper and I. We both resolved that if we found another boat, we weren't going to mention it to

him. For all the years I was there, I never once went inside their house—never. Not one time. It shows a strange attitude.

Q: And they never bought any blackberries.

A: They didn't buy blackberries or gladiolas. Yes. The gladiolas were an interesting business. I was just fourteen. Myron Carpenter [phonetic 24:16]—you'd never guess that he grew prize gladiolas. I struck up a deal with him where I'd sell them. He'd deliver them in the morning in a big pail, as many dozen as he could, which happened to bloom that day, or that morning. So, I talked him into it saying, "Why waste them? I'll sell them for a buck and a quarter. I'll keep a quarter and give you a dollar." He was quite excited about that. We did that as long as the gladiolas were in bloom. And it wasn't much of a sales job, because once the word got out, people were coming to me for them. I didn't have to knock on many doors. I think I could have booked the whole month. I didn't know how long they'd last, or how many we would be able to deliver in a given day. Some people tried to give me little bribes so they'd be on the top of the list, but I didn't do that. I just did it to my favorite people and gave them the first chance. I would take a few dozen, and then make them take the pick of what they wanted. I mentioned about blueberry picking and the blackberry picking. I preferred blackberry picking, because you could fill the quart box very quickly. Blueberries—it took forever. Forever. One time I went—I forget how this developed, but I was in my bathing suit, and Aunt Edith was going to go blackberry picking, and asked if I wanted to go along. I had some slippers on or something and a bathing suit, and that was it, and went blackberry picking. Little did I know that those little briars were pricking at my body—not really enough to hurt, but it made little indents in the skin. So, after picking, I headed for the shore and dove into the ocean, and a few minutes later I came out and I could barely move, because the salt got into all those little places that were pricked by the briars. I walked home like I was some kind of a ghost. My arms were extended out, and I told my father what happened. He laughed and said, "Come here with me." He took me down to the basement of Seabiscuit. There was a shower with fresh water. It wasn't potable water, but it was fresh. He tossed me in the shower, and sure enough it got all the salt off and I felt like a new human being a couple of minutes later. We had enjoyed picking and selling them for money. I think I mentioned before, I got blueberries by the bushels. Everybody contributed. I think the whole family and our father was particularly interested in picking, picking, picking. It was like he could have spent his life doing that. It was meditative. Then we would put them in some kind of a cloth bag with a certain amount of water. I guess you would boil them and put them in a cloth bag and squeeze the juice—pure juice. That was good blackberry jelly. It lasted most of the winter for toast. You couldn't get any better. One of my memories is when Mother first did it, she squeezed with her bare hands, and I think it took her—I don't know how many weeks to get rid of the purple stain that she had acquired by not using rubber gloves of some kind. Let's see if you want to go in another direction.

Q: If you could, tell me a few stories about going quahogging.

A: In back of the pond—Quonochontaug Pond. West Pond is on the other side of the beach. Quonochontaug Pond was bigger, and it extends over as far as Weekapaug, where the houses were bigger and more expensive, up until recent years where trophy houses began to [inaudible 29:17]. We always liked to hunt for the blue shell crabs on our own. Many times, without being told, we would come home with certain numbers of blue shell crabs. What I would do is I would go over to the Fisher's garage and help myself—they didn't mind—to the nets to catch them, and also the clam rakes, which you scrape the sand under the water until you hear that noise of the rake hitting the shell. You pull up the clam using some common sense if it's a quahog, and tossing them back if they were too small. There were no restrictions about licenses or anything required in those days. I remember when it became a necessity to have that license. It's certainly a good thing to limit the amount of productivity that comes out of there every year. The environment has changed a lot in the pond, from my knowledge. When I was young, it was before the civil engineers from the Army Corps of Engineers came in and made the channel bigger and more permanent. When I was small, if you were sailing out of the pond, you had to know the time of when the tides were, because at low tide you weren't going to get back in with any boat. For some reason, I guess part of it being money, we never took up sailing. I don't know of too many kids, if any, that did. That was pleasurable. I remember one time one of the few pleasurable things with Brad Fisher, he had a rowboat and we went out there. A rather comical thing happened. I was small. They asked me to push off the dock. I had hold of a pole, and I didn't let go of the pole fast enough. I ended up being stretched out by the boat and the pole. He and Eddie frantically rowed back in quickly. Of course, it was not any serious thing. The worst thing that could have happened is I would have fallen in the water. Sometimes we went out doing this, because we had a family clambake scheduled, which meant everybody was coming from every place, and they all had their own chores. I was one of the ones that volunteered to go quahogging and blue shell crabbing. Brad had the construction business, so he had the wooden barrels. Apparently, at least he thought he knew—I guess he did—he and his father seemed to know everything about this. They would gather seaweed and construct some sort of smoldering fire under the barrel, lower the seaweed on top of various things that were being cooked in the right sequence. I don't know what the sequence is, but the lobsters and the quahogs—the quahogs that Aunt Edith would make fritters—those were also in there. Another load of seaweed and I don't know what else they had in there. I don't know what else. I guess it must have been about two barrels at least. Plenty of food. Plenty of people. Uncle Arthur sat on a little bench in the garage enticing people to turn the handle on the—what do you call it—the ice cream maker that had salt and ice in it. He made peach ice cream. We actually made it. Chocolate, peach and vanilla I think were the three things he used to make. There was nothing destructive intentionally about the quahogging and blue shell crabbing. I think the environment was severely affected by the Corps of Engineers when they let in non-salt water. It obviously changed the salinity and the environmental atmosphere. I was missing from Quonochontaug for many years after that. I got older and had jobs, went in the service and so forth, so I can't exactly know how much it was affected, but I'm sure it was severely affected. The kids formed little cliques. It was usually by age. It was usually about a three-year span on age when they would gather on the beach with towels. The younger kids had their group. We had a group. The older kids were not so active, and many of them were working and

doing other things. There were a few in the group that were practical jokers, I guess you would call it. We would gather at night, as we did every night, at someone's house to do something—play cards or run around. We'd play practical jokes. One destructive person from the group—we tried to disassociate ourselves if things got out of hand. The intention was not to destroy property, but just to have some fun. The things that we did were one guy had a Confederate flag that he flew on the front, and we lowered the flag pole. Somebody else was causing a problem, and we put a dead rabbit in the mailbox. I'm trying to think of some other things.

Q: Do you remember [inaudible 36:38]?

A: No, I don't actually.

Q: Did you have a vendetta?

A: I don't think there was anything that bad. Maybe we did it to see the reaction of whoever it was. At least it wasn't a live snake or something like that. One time Neil Thorp, who was another one of the group, and this Neil Donovan and I decided to camp out all night on the beach. The two Neils were a bit on the destructive side, and I held my breath. I don't know what the hell we did—little things here and there. We were running around and woke up Jerry Fogarty, whose mother wouldn't let him participate in this. We woke him up whispering in his bedroom window. We kept up going, and wound up in front of Howie Randall's [phonetic 37:39] house. Howie was an older fellow—older than us. His parents were there. In his front yard there were those ducks that you buy for ornaments—a mother duck and the little ones. Neil Donovan decided we were going to put the ducks up on the roof of the house. I said, "My God, if you get caught up there, what are you going to do?" There was a convenient back porch over the garage with stairs. The roof was slanted so you could tiptoe over the roof. All the ducks wound up on the peak of the roof. Just as we got through, they woke up. We got down from there and we took off down the road. I think we set records for 200-yard dashes in our bare feet. We disappeared, and we never heard anything more about it, except the next morning we went to look, and sure enough the ducks were still there. Hopefully it gave somebody a laugh. I think the reason they ended up on the roof is Neil Donovan wanted to break them in the road, and I said, "No. We're not going to break these. We're not here for destructive things. We're just here to have some fun." It didn't harm anybody. Someone put a garden hose and turned the water on in somebody's cellar, which was really just a garage. That's when it stopped for me. I would not participate in that kind of thing. I just didn't respect that. Other times that it happened, they wouldn't tell anybody who it was. You could only suspect who it was. Nobody could squeal. I alluded a while ago about renting this place—the Goodale house, I believe it was—for a short period of time during the war, and saving up gas rations to get down there. My memories of the war years are not vivid, because I was only five when the war ended. What I do remember is the drone of the planes and the pilots training. It was constant. It was a rhythmic sound. And then there would be a space, and then another noise coming over, because the second one had launched. It got so you could sleep over the noise. One of the memories I do have is one day in August 1945, I was five, and all of a sudden

it became quiet. I noticed the quiet immediately, and I asked my parents why was it suddenly so quiet. It was like it wasn't right; that things should be noisy. They said the war had stopped. I guess they grounded all the pilots. There was no sense in risking anybody's life when the war was over. In later years, they did use it again for a while, but I don't remember why. Probably the Korean War started up again at some point. I do remember taking rocks—I guess it was with my grandmother. Everything was pitch black. I guess people must have ordered the lights out. It was documented in many stories about what happened at the beach during the war. I won't reiterate those, because it's all second- or thirdhand. I don't think there is anything else of any significance. I could just repeat what I've learned from other people. I think that probably covers it.

