

QUONOHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

MARSHA WOLCOTT SMITH

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Interviewed by Anne S. Doyle

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Q: Today is Wednesday, November the 16th in the year 2005. Today I am interviewing Marsha Smith of Wakefield, Rhode Island. Marsha was born into Wolcott family in Providence, and spent many, many summers at Quonnie.

A: I'm Marsha Wolcott Smith, and I was born April 30th, 1923 in North Providence, Rhode Island.

Q: I was wondering who in your family came to Quonnie first.

A: I really couldn't tell you. I think they came very near the same time—it seems to me I remember one my parents saying that they had been to Quonnie ever since they were six months old, and the other said they'd been to Quonnie every summer since they were six years old. I don't know which was which, but that was all that I remember.

Q: Was it your grandparents?

A: Yes.

Q: Was it your grandparents that came here first?

A: My grandparents were Nelson Wolcott and his wife Neline Lincoln McCrossen. And my mother's parents were George Waldo Parrot and Lillian Parrot. The Wolcott family lived at 1008 Smith Street in Providence. The Parrots lived at 1612 Smith Street in North Providence.

Q: Did they know each other then?

A: They knew each other for a long time, because both grandfathers were in the lumber business. They go back to when my parents were very young. Of course, long before they were of marriageable age, it was kind of assumed by both families that eventually Howard and Lillian would get married.

Q: From what I remember when we talked before, they had neighbors or friends that also went to Quonnie. Is that correct?

A: Yes. I'm not sure of the names, but there was a family by the name of Howell. I think they had a fish market in Providence. Mr. Howell went to Quonnie to fish. I don't know whether he took my grandfathers along with him one time. I don't know anything about how it started that they got to the beach.

Q: How many children did your grandparents have? Can you give me their names?

A: Grandma and Grandpa Wolcott had five children: Chester, Willard, Howard, Alice and Ralph. Willard died at the age two. Ralph died very young at the age of 42. Chester was the oldest. My father was the second oldest. He was the one that was the responsible member of the family, because Chester moved to Arkansas and Louisiana, and my father stayed and was always there to help his folks.

Q: Was your father's name Ralph?

A: Howard. Ralph was the one who died. And Willard died.

Q: What about the Parrots?

A: Grandma and Grandpa Parrot had just one child, my mother, Lillian Robby Parrot.

Q: Tell me a little bit about how your grandparents got to Quonnie in the late 1800s.

A: All I remember is they took a train from Providence to Bradford. There they took a horse and wagon to get to the beach. Both grandfathers had automobiles early on. I only remember going down to the beach in my Grandpa's Cadillac.

Q: Tell me a little more about your grandparents and the cars that they had and so forth.

A: My own personal memory is only the fact that they each had a Cadillac—a big sedan with the fold-up seats in back that my sister and I would sit on. Because my Grandpa Wolcott never learned to drive, he had a chauffer who lived around the corner from his Smith Street home, and summers would come down to bring them down and stay a while. My mother had a car—not of her own, but she was written up in the high school yearbook for English High School with the caption, "Lillian and her Oldsmobile."

Q: Talk more about your grandfathers.

A: Both my grandfathers were in the lumber business. My Grandpa Wolcott was in the hard woods business, and Grandpa Parrot was in what you'd call commercial lumber to build houses. They had close ties as businessmen. Grandpa Wolcott was well known, because he was very affable. He loved people. It was his choice, even when he had a chauffer

available, to take the street car into work every day. And all of the women remembered Nelson Wolcott and how he tipped his hat always.

Q: Were your grandparents good friends as well?

A: Yes. My Grandpa Wolcott loved people. He was very social and had such a twinkle in his eye. He did have an eye for the ladies. Grandma Wolcott was very indulgent, and she would just laugh about it, because she knew that she didn't have to worry about her Nelson. He kidded her a lot. Every August we would go through a couple of weeks where he would say, "That old lady I'm married to," because Grandma Wolcott's birthday was August 1st, and his was August 14th, so for two weeks she was older.

Q: Where did your grandparents build their houses at Quonnie?

A: They built them right on the beach—the edge of the beach. It would be west of where the Blue Shutters eventually came to be. They built sea walls to protect them, but obviously they didn't give enough protection, so they had a couple of very bad storms. After each storm, their houses were moved back a little further from the beach until finally they decided enough of that, and they bought land from Hazard Burdick's farm and relocated their houses along Ninigret Pond.

Q: Was it your grandparent's parents that were right on the pond, and then your grandparents Wolcotts were right on East Beach Road?

A: East Beach Road. I ran back and forth all the time, because they were very close.

Q: Did they build their houses originally on the beach at the same time? Did they both decide to do that together?

A: I think they must have. It seemed to be the idea that one of my parents came when they were six, and the other maybe six months. It was within the space of a few years that they did build their homes.

Q: Talk about family stories at Quonnie right on the beach.

A: I always was intrigued by the escapades of my Uncle Ralph. Particularly the time that Grandma and Grandpa were sitting on their porch right on the beach at Quonnie, and they looked out and Ralph was rowing a boat along in the ocean and said, "I'm going to New York." Growing up at Quonochontaug, my Uncle Ralph and Chester Morris, whose family came down summers at Morris Point, were very friendly. When they were young men dating, at one point Chest Morris went out with a girl named Helen Cobb, and they double dated. My Uncle Ralph and Helen Cobb married. Years later, my Aunt Helen told me that she had been somewhere I think in Providence when Chester Morris was appearing in a play, and she went up to him, and he remembered her, so that was as close to Hollywood as anyone ever got.

Q: Was Helen from Providence as well?

A: Pawtucket. When I was growing up, I spent a lot of time on porches talking with old ladies, because I couldn't go out in the sun very much. My sister was there all the time on the beach, but I couldn't do it. So, I would go next door and spend time with Auntie May McCloud. And I would also go over to the Thorntons and visit Grace Thornton, who was the wife of Leenan Thornton, Grandpa Wolcott's bookkeeper.

Q: Tell me more about the Thorntons. Were they also on the pond? And did they move their house back?

A: I shouldn't swear to it. Maybe they originally were on the ocean, because I only know of them where their house was right next to Grandpa Wolcott's. We were right next door to the McClouds. This is Grandpa Parrot's house. On the other side, there was a house owned by the Darlings. They took in boarders. The boarders always enjoyed sitting on the porch where they could see my grandmother Parrot's parrot. The parrot always came to the beach. A big cage. And was kept out on the porch and talked very plainly. And so there would be conversations from the boarders to Grandma's house with the parrot.

Q: What about the other neighbors that you talked about?

A: As I said, I visited Auntie May McCloud and Mrs. Thornton, who was Grace. She was the second Mrs. Thornton. I'd go over to Grandma and Grandpa Wolcott's. I was very busy running around the neighborhood calling on all of the elderly people. But Grandpa Wolcott was everyone's playmate. On rainy days, he would set up a school room on the sun porch and teach us. When the sun was out, he would take us blueberrying, except we were not allowed to know where his special bushes were. He would never let us see that. And invariably, one of us would spill a bucket of berries and he'd have to replenish our berries from his. There would be quite a little group of us. There would be the Lancing children, Joan and Bill. And then some summers my cousins from Louisiana were there, so Martha and Betty would be there, and Elaine. And he'd have quite a little crew of us. He also would walk us up to the bating beach, which is now Central Beach. Probably I was always the one that was being carried home, because I'd get tired and he'd always end up carrying one of us home.

Q: Did your grandfather come down just weekends, or was he there also during the week?

A: No. The grandfathers were weekenders. I don't remember whether they got to come down more in the middle of the week or not. When I was visiting everybody, of course my mother stayed with Elaine and me with Grandma. And then the grandpas would come down weekends, and my father would come either with them or by himself. Sometimes my mother would go up in the middle of the weeks to take laundry and do things to help my father straighten out the house and all. It was one of these weekend times for the men. They would take time off. I'm sure both grandfathers did, since they were in business for themselves. But my father never took much vacation at all.

Q: What did your father do?

A: My father also was in the lumber business, but he did not work for either his father or father-in-law. He was a salesman for a lumber company located in Worcester. He was on the road every day driving around calling on people. It was still the lumber business, but a different kind.

Q: Where were you living in the wintertime? Were you living with your grandmother in Providence as well?

A: I was born in my Grandma Parrot's home. I lived there until I was two years old. Then my mother and father built their own home off of Smith Street—Capitol View Avenue, which was right at the Providence/North Providence line. And Auntie May and Uncle Dan McCloud were across the street from us on Capitol View Avenue.

Q: The house is still there, isn't it? Is your house still standing?

A: Yes. I guess I mentioned that one of the houses was the Whipple house. They were long-time friends of my Grandpa Parrot's. My mother grew up with the two Whipple boys. I have pictures of them riding their ponies. So, the Whipple house in the city was on the corner of Capitol View Avenue and Smith Street backing up to Auntie May and Uncle Dan's house on Capitol View Avenue, which is across from my house. So, we were all connected.

Q: Can you tell me where the Whipple house was down in Quonnie?

A: At Quonnie, the Whipple was right on Ninigret Pond, and it was the first coming up from the beach. It would be the first house that you'd come to on the pond side. Across the little road as the Thornton's house. Then my Grandfather Wolcott's house.

Q: I'd like to hear about what your Auntie May was like.

A: Auntie May was a wonderful woman. To me, she was just beautiful. She had beautiful white-white hair and the bluest eyes. She and Uncle Dan came from Nova Scotia. They were wonderful people. I don't imagine that Auntie May had a lot of formal education, because I understand that when they were in Nova Scotia, and when they first moved to the United States to Rhode Island, Auntie May was a cook, and Uncle Dan was a stable man. From there, he worked for a livery place in Providence. He became the owner of it. It became the Brook Street Garage on the East Side of Providence, which was a very profitable business. They raised two sons, one of whom graduated from Brown University at nineteen, and became a very wealthy investment broker. The other one loved music. He went to the [inaudible 22:00] and his career was head of the music department at the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri. Auntie Mae McCloud was a constant reader. I would go over to her house and look at the books. They had a little library of the usual beach books—all of the same gray books. But also, she belonged to the book-of-the-month club. She was very generous about loaning me some

of those books. Of course, I was eight, nine or ten. I tried to talk about them, because any book I read, I wanted to talk to someone about. She was very indulgent. She knew some of the books were way too adult for me, but she just smiled and let me have them.

Q: Talk to me about reading at the beach.

A: I had several places that I would pull up to read my books. Of course, I had a hammock and a glider on the porch. But I would get interrupted. People would be around. So, there was a lovely chair made of two great, big boulders at the edge of the pond by our boat house. I would sit there. Uncle Dan helped me build a roof over it, and we shingled it together. There was a wild grape vine next to it that grew over it. I could be in my little chair and no one could see me.

Q: Talk about your Grandmother Parrot.

A: Grandma Parrot was a wonderful woman. I adored her. She taught me everything about keeping house and handywork of any kind. I had a little electric stove. When Grandma was going to make pie crust, I would stand with her and she would give me my own little lump of dough to roll out, and I would make a little blueberry pie and bake it in my little electric oven. Then I would take it over to Uncle Dan to eat. Grandma Parrot also taught me all kinds of handywork. She taught me to sew. She got a special pattern for a patchwork quilt and helped me cut out the pieces. I sewed them all by hand. And then she would stitch the rows together. She taught me how to knit, and she taught me how to crochet.

Q: Have you enjoyed doing those things in your adult life?

A: I've enjoyed the cooking. I never did too well. When I was in college, I knitted sweaters for myself, but since then I haven't done any handywork to speak of. But I always have loved to cook. I always said, "That was my creativity." Crochet played a big part in our life at the beach. It was fun, because the children and adults would team up and play together. We had to put strips of white sheet on the wickets, because we would play until it got so dark that we couldn't see where the wickets were.

Q: Were there a lot of intergenerational games that you would play? Any card games?

A: On rainy days, we'd get together around the dining room table at Grandma Parrot's, and we'd play Hearts. That was mostly the card game. But also, my father would start a big jigsaw puzzle, and we'd all sit around and do the puzzle together. It was a wonderful growing-up period, because we were with grownups who could enjoy doing the same things. We had a lot of interaction. My Grandfather Parrot bought an inboard motorboat, which he never drove, but my father did and enjoyed. Every weekend my father would make the trip from our boat house across to Cross Mills to the spring. They had a wonderful spring of pure water there. Our well water was too brackish to drink, so we depended on that big bottle of spring water to see us through the week. The rest of the weekend my father would divide up between cutting the grass with Grandpa, and

polishing his boat and cleaning it up polishing every bit of brass. That was his pride and joy.

Q: Did your father go back to his parents' cottage as well during the summer and work around their house?

A: Not in the summer.

Q: What about any other experiences on the pond?

A: We had one exciting rescue. No, it was not a rescue. But one thrill was my father had a cousin who flew a plane. He landed on the pond in a sea plane, and my father went out in the motor boat to pick him up and bring him back. It was the most romantic thing in my life to see this man come down in his sea plane on the pond. Of course, Bay flew an airplane. He had his pilot's license. He would fly from Charlestown airport and buzz the houses and go all around. He'd take my Aunt Helen and Uncle Ralph with him.

Q: Did he have his own plane?

A: No, he didn't. He would hire one. But he had his pilot's license.

Q: What about fishing or anything like that?

A: I never was interested. I would go crabbing with my father on a Sunday evening. We'd go out in the rowboat and he would have the crab net. In no time at all he'd have a pale full of blue crabs.

Q: Right from the pond?

A: The pond.

Q: Do you remember clams or oysters?

A: Oysters. My memory of oysters is one winter day we went to go down to the beach, and Bay McCloud was with us, my mother and father, and I guess my sister and I. We went out to the end of the dock, and Bay fished up an oyster and stood there eating it—scooping it out of the dirty shell.

Q: So, there were a lot of oysters in the pond at that time?

A: We never ate them, though. Only Bay.

Q: I heard that there were eels.

A: Yes. But I never did anything with eels. Crabbing was what I remember, because Daddy was very good at catching them. I'd go out with him in the rowboat.

Q: Did you steam them?

A: We brought them back home, and Grandma would cook them. We'd pick out the meat and have Lobster salad. Vegetables—we could get those. But I don't remember how we got our milk.

Q: Some people that lived over in that same area talked to me about going across the pond, because the Hoxie Farm was across there.

A: It was.

Q: They used to get their milk over there.

A: We didn't get our regular milk there. But I remember going with my mother on a hot day into the cool part of the barn that was like the basement of the barn, and they had a big chest with ice. They'd bring out these bottles of cream that you had to spoon out.

Q: What barn are you talking about?

A: Hoxie Farm that was on the pond side of Route 1. There were other Hoxies across, but this was the one.

Q: So, you do have memories of going to the Hoxie Farm?

A: Yes. But not to get regular milk. I just remember getting the cream there.

Q: Tell me about getting your meats and supplies.

A: My memory is not too reliable.

Q: Did you have deliveries from a market in Providence with your meats?

A: Yes. Every year we looked forward to being visited by a band of gypsies. They came in a rattle-trap truck with handwoven baskets hanging from the sides. They would come in, and if you crossed their ponds with silver, they would tell your fortune. My Aunt Alice would always ask to have her fortune told. We never had ours told, but we were fascinated by the whole thing.

Q: Where were the gypsies from?

A: I don't know where the gypsies came from, but they made what they call sweet grass baskets. I still have some of them. They still have that sweet odor. They were beautiful.

Q: ...Watch Hill merchants?

A: I don't think at that time that there were stores at Watch Hill. I don't know. But we would be visited maybe once a summer by some merchants selling beautiful linens of all kinds, and suitcases full. They would come in and open up the suitcases. My Aunt Alice would encourage them and probably buy some from them, because she had a hope chest in those days. She never made use of it. In fact, I've got some of her beautiful hand-embroidered damask napkins embroidered by the nuns.

Q: Did they also go to other people's houses?

A: They must have.

Q: Did you ever go to Watch Hill? When you were there, did you travel around? Where did you go?

A: We didn't leave the beach very much. But we did go over to Watch Hill two or three times a summer. I don't think St. Clair's was there. But of course I remember riding on the merry-go-round. That was always there. So, I remember that. We would do that a couple times a year. One very eventful day we went to Narragansett Pier to a polo match.

Q: Where did they have the polo match?

A: You know where the Polo Ground Condos are?

Q: Right across from where the beach is?

A: No. I remember being at home at 1612 Smith Street in the pitch dark, because the power had gone off with the hurricane that had hit that afternoon. Around midnight or after, there was a banging on the door, and we went down to find my Uncle Ralph and Aunt Helen and Aunt Helen's mother standing there looking like they had seen a ghost. They had narrowly escaped the beach ahead of the water. They were in Grandpa Wolcott's house upstairs, and my Uncle Ralph, who was a big 6-foot-two 200-pound man had his hands against the walls and felt them give, and he said, "We've got to get out of here." Before they got out, they saw our garage have the doors just fold in and the whole garage sailed off. Then they drove up the road ahead of the tidal wave and made it to the Post Road and home. As soon as we could get down to the beach to see what damage had been done, we went. I think it might have been the day after. We got to what had been my Grandpa Parrot's house, and there was nothing there, except rubble and the cement slab where the garage had been. But up at Hazard Burdick's house in his back yard was what had been the top of our beach house. It was in perfect condition. We stepped through a window. The pictures were on the walls. The beds were still made up dry. We could have gotten in and gone to bed. No harm done. But we never found anything from the first floor, except silverware. And that was Grandma's set of silver plate, which ended up in the front yard and was being picked up by a couple of people as we pulled up. We were devastated by the loss of those homes at the beach. The first summer in 1939, we rented Bath House at Blue Shutters so that we could come down on a weekend and at least have a swim and sit on the beach. And then, because all four of my

grandparents had died before the hurricane—both my grandmothers died in the summer of 1933. Grandpa Parrot died in '35. Grandpa Wolcott in '36. None of us could spare the thought of cleaning up the rubble and building another house there. The beach as we knew it was gone. But it was a number of years after my mother decided she didn't want to pay taxes anymore, and the lot was sold. I don't remember which year it was, but one or two summers my folks rented the Fisher Cottage on the beach. I don't remember whether we rented it for as much as a month or maybe only two weeks, but we kept up our association with the beach. We had to. It meant too much to us all. And then when my sister married, after a few years she and her husband built the house at Central Beach. We had connections there. My husband and I lived in Ohio for 35 years, and our only chance to get to the beach was a precious two weeks in the summer. For a number of years, we rented a cottage owned by Robert Mace at West Beach. We called it the little white house. It was just a tiny, little house with access to West Beach and those beautiful rocks there, especially the big table rocks. That was my children's playground. We had four children, and they were on the beach on the rocks all the time. We have wonderful memories of those days.

Q: What was the timeframe in terms of having your own family down there? Was it in the '50s?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you and Elaine get together when you were down there?

A: Yes. We had four kids, a dog and we had to bring bedding, blankets—everything—all the clothes in a station wagon. So, anything we didn't have, we went to Elaine's. I was married to Aaron Smith in 1949. Because his first job was with Westinghouse Electric in Mansfield, Ohio, that's where we went to live. I didn't get back to Rhode Island for 35 years. Our four children were born in Mansfield. Howard, Andy, Laurie and Wendy. The only one of the four that really shares our love of the beach is my son Andy, who thinks the most beautiful spot in the world is between East Beach and West Beach. He would spend hours with his little spyglass on a rock looking out to sea. He lives in Hawaii now, which most people would think was paradise, but to him Quonochontaug will always be.

Q: What finally brought you back here?

A: My husband and I never really sat down and planned out what we would do with our lives or when he stopped working. It was just sort of a given. And so, one day we decided this is the time we should go. We put our house up for sale, and it sold immediately and we had no place to go. We spent our first winter at—Pat Farrell generously let us use her mother's house, which was not heated. It was a very, very cold winter, the winter of '84/'85. And she said we could stay there if we paid the electric bill, which was like \$600 or more. But that gave us a place to live until we could find a place in Wakefield. We had been very happy there ever since '85.

Q: Did your husband work in the school system?

A: Yes. One bonus to our coming back to Rhode Island was the fact that in his checkered career, my husband had picked up a teacher's certificate and had taught school somewhat in Ohio. So, when he came back and we lived in Wakefield, they just happened to desperately need substitute teachers. He ended up teaching just about any and every class and loving it. He earned the title of Super-Sub Smith.

