

## QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

### Oral History

# MIRIAM J. SPENCER

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Interviewed by Leah Bradshaw

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**BRADSHAW:** [I am with] Miriam Jalley Spencer at her cottage in West Beach, Quonochontaug. Could you state your full name, your date of birth, and your place of birth for the record?

**SPENCER:** My name is Miriam Jalley Spencer. I was born January 18<sup>th</sup> 1922 in Ashaway, Rhode Island.

**BRADSHAW:** And you said that there was no hospital there; you were born on a farm?

**SPENCER:** Yeah; there was no hospital in Ashaway, and I was born at home.

**BRADSHAW:** And did you have a midwife? Your mom have a midwife?

**SPENCER:** No; Dr. Johnston—

**BRADSHAW:** Dr. Johnston came to the house. When did your family come to Quonochontaug?

**SPENCER:** Oh, back around 1910, my mother heard about how nice it was down here, because a friend of hers had visited people down here. So she got her father to come down here and see what the place looked like. After that they started coming down, and later they rented a house down here from the Langworthy's. Which house they were occupying at the time of the fire was from the Ashaway Group. It burnt several houses, and my grandfather said the house they were staying in burnt up in twenty minutes.

**BRADSHAW:** Did the fire start in the Bennett cottage?

**SPENCER:** Yes; the fire started in the Bennett cottage, which they had done work making it larger, were doing some work. I have no idea how it really started.

**BRADSHAW:** And the Langworthy cottage your grandfather was staying in caught fire and burned to the ground.

**SPENCER:** Yes; because of blowing: the wind was in that direction.

**BRADSHAW:** And did your grandfather buy land xxx?

**SPENCER:** Yeah, after a while he bought about 50 feet from Langworthy, which was the lot next to where the house was that he was renting, and wanted more land, so he bought 30 more feet from the Dowds.

**BRADSHAW:** And he built a cottage that was where, exactly, on Dowd beach.

**SPENCER:** On the first part of Dowds' beach.

**BRADSHAW:** Somewhat close to the Quonochontaug Inn –

**SPENCER:** Yes; close to Quonochontaug Inn.

**BRADSHAW:** And, were you in Quonochontaug during the 1938 Hurricane?

**SPENCER:** No, I was not. I was in Harrisville.

**BRADSHAW:** And then did you come down shortly after to look at the damage --?

**SPENCER:** I came down that weekend after, to see what – to see if my family was still around. Because my sister had gone down to the beach, and she was going to pick up my grandmother and they were going to go to Florida. But we didn't know exactly what day they were leaving, and they didn't have any telephone. So we had to come down and see what had happened.

**BRADSHAW:** And they had safely gone down to Florida and they got xxxxx from here.

**SPENCER:** They had gone down, and my grandfather was in Providence at the time of the Hurricane.

**BRADSHAW:** What happened to the cottage?

**SPENCER:** Well, not too much happened to the cottage. It was more to the land – it was washed away, up to about 15 feet in front of the cottage. But the garage doors were old-fashioned barn doors that run on a track, so the water lifted them up, and everything in the garage was swept clean. It couldn't have been cleaner.

**BRADSHAW:** So where did the doors turn up?

**SPENCER:** The doors turned up – my grandfather found them on the other side of Quonochontaug Pond-- to the highway.

**BRADSHAW:** Amazing! Amazing! And were you here for Hurricane Carol, in 1954?

**SPENCER:** Oh yes, I was down here with my mother and Ron, my nephew, and my little girl Louise. And my nephew Philip decided after looking out at the waves that it was just the time to go out and go swimming and ride the waves. And at that time, my husband comes in the back door and said, "We'd better get out; a hurricane's coming." [Laughter] So we packed up in a hurry and out we went.

**BRADSHAW:** But you made it in time?

**SPENCER:** Yes, we made it in time; but all the way home, there were trees down that we had to dodge.

**BRADSHAW:** And then did you come back to check the damage?

**SPENCER:** In a couple of days, we came back down; we wanted to wait to make sure we could get back down the highway, after what we saw on the way home. And there were a few shingles missing from the house, and the railing to the balcony. And the side of the yard had washed out. And there was a lot of sand and small rocks in the backyard.

**BRADSHAW:** So everything had been swirled around and torn off—and relocated.

**SPENCER:** So it wasn't that bad for us. But it was for other people.

**BRADSHAW:** A lot of people lost cottages then?

**SPENCER:** Well, some people did, yes; and a lot of them were taken off their foundations. And Birch's cottage ended up across West Beach Road. So you couldn't get down beyond the cottage; it blocked the whole street.

**BRADSHAW:** The house was on the road, so people parked on the other side and walked around?

**SPENCER:** That's what you had to do if you wanted to get down to the breachway and –

**BRADSHAW:** Now, how long have you owned this cottage?

**SPENCER:** Since September of 1966.

**BRADSHAW:** And how did you come to be here?

**SPENCER:** Well, when my mother died, my brother inherited my grandfather's house. And in the spring of '66, I found out from the people that were buying it that my brother was selling it. And I started looking for a place, and Mr. Finlayson was selling this. So we put a down payment on it and took care of the rest of it when we got back from Mexico, because I had planned to visit my sister, who lived in Mexico for the summer, with the children.

**BRADSHAW:** Ah, so you went down and then came back and bought this in '66.

**SPENCER:** In September, when we got back.

**BRADSHAW:** What do you remember about the hotels and boarding houses on the breachway?

**SPENCER:** Oh, not too much. I haven't lived down this way. But I used to go down to the life-saving beach [near the old Coast Guard Life Saving Station], and to do that, we would take a path up by Mother Brindley's that took you through the Breakers and out on the other side, down the steps to the breachway. And walked across the breachway to the beach. And nobody ever said anything to us for doing that.

**BRADSHAW:** In the summer, would your grandfather give you money for ice cream and –

**SPENCER:** Ah, he gave me money for ice cream! My place to buy it was Mother Brindley's because she sold a sugar cone for five cents! And if you went to xxx's for the same sugar cone, it would cost you a dime!

**BRADSHAW:** You would go to Mother Brindley's and buy ice cream and come back on the boardwalk and eat it?

**SPENCER:** Oh yes; I met several friendly people around the boardwalk. After saying hello, they'd ask you where you were from and who you were staying with. And when they found out who my grandfather was, they would say that they worked for him in Ashaway. So they would invite me to come sit on the porch and have lemonade and cookies with them. So it was a very friendly atmosphere.

**BRADSHAW:** And who was your grandfather?

**SPENCER:** Ernest Tlnkham.

**BRADSHAW:** And you said he owned a mill in Ashaway?

**SPENCER:** He owned the Wolf Mill in Ashaway.

**BRADSHAW:** The Wolf Mill –

**SPENCER:** And they made woolen goods – I don't know what particular type.

**BRADSHAW:** And, did you ever get to go to the Bowling Alley?

**SPENCER:** I used to walk down with my grandfather and my brother, who would stay to bowl. I would just watch them till it was almost eight o'clock; and then I had to get home, because that's when my grandmother said I had to be back. [Laughter]

**BRADSHAW:** How about the Casino? Did you ever go there?

**SPENCER:** Not too much. By the time the Casino was built, after the '38 Hurricane, I did go bowling occasionally. I was old enough so I could stay out after eight o'clock. [Laughter] But mostly we got together as a group, at Janet Congdon's house and played ping pong or something in the basement. There was Peggy Rase, who was Peggy Wingay; Joan Ross; Joanne Thomsen; xxxx and some others that I can't remember right now. So it was a friendly group, so we really didn't go down to the bowling alley that often.

**BRADSHAW:** So you were more at people's houses. And were there actually ladies of the night that came here?

**SPENCER:** That I heard from my friends, but I knew nothing about it.

**BRADSHAW:** Do you remember how people arrived at the hotels and boarding houses?

**SPENCER:** At one time, you could get on a boat from over on the other side of Weekapaug—on the Weekapaug side of Quonochontaug Pond, come across to the landing that was at the chimney place that was a boarding house that Mrs Baxter ran. And whether there was something—somebody that met them at the train that brought them there I really have no idea. But most people after I was born came down in cars.

**BRADSHAW:** Cars.

**SPENCER:** And it was a one-lane street, West Beach Road. And it was dirt. And there were two turn-offs that I can

**SPENCER:** I remember; and the person that was closest to the turn-off when they met somebody, they backed up to it, and let the one—the other person go ahead.

**BRADSHAW:** What did your family do for enjoyment here?

**SPENCER:** More or less just relax. My grandmother read a lot of books. My grandfather had a garden that he spent the time on when he was down, and my mother used to rest out on the walks when she wasn't gone swimming. And us kids used to go swimming twice a day and run around and play.

**BRADSHAW:** You went in the morning and the afternoon?

**SPENCER:** Oh yes.

**BRADSHAW:** And you said you sometimes walked across the breachway at low tide?

**SPENCER:** Yes, and that was the only time you could walk across; otherwise it might be up to your neck!

**BRADSHAW:** Was the life-saving station intact when you were here?

**SPENCER:** Oh yes, up until the Hurricane of '38.

**BRADSHAW:** And before '38?

**SPENCER:** Oh yes.

**BRADSHAW:** Anything else you can think of to add about what you did? Or what you enjoyed or what was meaningful to you here?

**SPENCER:** Just to be down and smell the salt air and take it easy.

**BRADSHAW:** Pretty special place. And thank you very much.

**SPENCER:** You're very welcome.

END OF RECORDING

