

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

NEIL THORP

August 16, 2020

Interviewed by Steve Young

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Q: Today is August 6th, 2020. I'm Steve Young, a board member of the Quonochontaug Historical Society. It's my pleasure today to take the oral history from Neil Thorp, who is 80 years old. Neil is the son of Nelson Thorp, and the grandson of Howard Thorp. His family has been coming to Quonochontaug for almost 100 years. Neil?

A: My grandfather, Howard E. Thorp was in the state senate back in the late '20s, early '30s, and he met some people up there and they had this land down in the Quonochontaug area, and they really weren't doing anything with it. They didn't figure it was worth anything to them. He was in the real estate business. They asked him if he'd be interested. I guess they had some mortgages on it. They asked him if he'd be interested in taking over the mortgages, and they would deed the land to him, which I'm not sure exactly which plat that was, but it was either the East Beach, the Quonnie Highlands plat or Central Beach or Central Beach Extension Plat. It was one of those. So, he did. That was back in the early '30s.

He enjoyed it down there. He went down and started building roads and selling some lots down there. Subsequently he put in a seasonal water system, which I worked on as a youngster with him during the time I was in high school, college and even after college a little bit.

Then my father, who was in the USO during the war—

Q: Let me go back and ask you some more questions about Howard, and then we'll get to Nelson and Neil. I saw a historical picture of the old farmhouse with a sign out in front that said circa 1710. I'm not sure if that was known as the Sheffield Farmhouse. But I understood that Howard bought that in the 1920s.

A: That's correct. I didn't know too much about that. He had sold that long before I came on the scene. I guess way back he told me that at one time that whaling

ships occasionally would stop off shore, and they would use the inn. But that was way back. The building that's there now probably was built around 1710. I'm not really sure. But he did own that for a period of time. I don't know how long it was, but I remember that he had many relatives from the Philadelphia area—cousins, nephews and nieces. They would come up and stay there way back. That was really before my time, but that's my understanding of it. I'm not even sure how long he owned it, but I know he did own it for a period of time.

Q: I saw a record that indicated that he bought it in 1924. I know that's before your time, but I wondered if he had any stories about it or whether that was the family's first contact at Quonochontaug.

A: That was probably the family's first contact in Quonochontaug. If he bought it in 1924, that was probably before he had too much—I don't know whether he had much stake in Quonochontaug at that point. I do remember that one thing he took out of there was an old cannonball. When he built that log cabin over on the pond, which became the Sunset Lodge, he built that in 1939, and it had a big granite fireplace there. That cannonball sat next to the fireplace. I remember as a kid trying to lift it, and I was amazed at the weight of it. My son, Howard Thorp, which would be his great grandson, now has that cannonball in his house. He lives in Westerly.

Q: When you were talking about your grandfather, Howard, being in the state senate, I read that he was in the state senate for something like 35 years and never lost an election.

A: You know more than I do on that. I didn't realize he was there for 35 years. But I know he had pictures at one time when Wendell Wilkie was running for president coming through Westerly, and the train would stop and he was up there on the platform—the caboose, you might say—with Wendell Wilkie meeting everyone. I don't even know when that was. That was quite a while ago.

Q: The United States was in a severe depression in the 1930s. Nobody had any money. It was hard to sell anything, because nobody had any money, and your grandfather was in the state senate. I think you told me he met some gentlemen who had financial problems and had mortgages on Quonochontaug. Flesh that out for me.

A: They wanted to get out from under the mortgages. My grandfather loved the area. His vision was to build a nice community down there for summer folks. That gave him the opportunity. I know that he did a lot of banking with the Washington Trust Company. He told me a story one day that he went to see Arthur Perry, who at that time was president of the bank. I'm not sure exactly when it was, but that

was back probably in the '20s or early '30s—maybe mid-'30s. Arthur said, “Howard, I don’t know why I should give you that loan. I understand things aren’t going too well, particularly in the real estate business. We’re pretty much under water on that stuff down there.” And my grandfather said, “Arthur, things are looking up. When you have your back in the ground, there’s only one way to walk, and that’s up.” I guess they had a chuckle over that. I know he sold a lot of those lots at the time way below market back in those days.

Q: What else do you remember about your grandfather’s early days in Quonochontaug? Are there any stories or memories that you have?

A: I was born in '39. Any memories I have are after that. But I do know that he had that stone boat over in his yard where he built the log cabin. He built that the year I was born—the log cabin. Subsequent years—I was probably in high school at that time, so probably in the mid-'52s or early '50s. I was working down there. He would always grab me to do some shovel work for him down there. So, we went down. I remember I was looking around, and I saw this rock that was in the shape of a boat. They were putting in the temporary seasonal water system in that 4-inch transite pipe. They were doing excavating, and Paul Kind lived on Ninigret Avenue—he had a house on Ninigret Avenue next to George—I can’t think of his last name.

Q: George Prior?

A: No. I’ll think of it in a minute. That was a rock that came out of a hole. I went by it, and I said, “That looks like a boat.” That was in the morning. Later on in the afternoon I went by it and it was not there anymore. It was gone. Come to find out, he picked it up with a crane and they put it on a flatbed and they took it over to his land on the pond. They set it up. Subsequently he made a birdhouse out of it—a bird bath or a birdhouse in the shape of a three-masted ship, which I have pictures of right here in its heyday. It was quite a feat. My wife made some braided wire over the years and made the rigging for the masts. That was there for years. Then one night when my son was in high school, they were down at the house—a few of them—and they saw some Quahoggers coming through the yard. It was late in the day. Then the next morning they got up and, for whatever reason, they vandalized the boat. It was too bad.

Q: You mentioned 1939. Was that when your grandfather built Sunset Lodge on Sunset?

A: He built the log cabin in 1939 after the '38 Hurricane. Over the years he used it the summers. He had a winter home up in Potter Hill, which was right next to the old Swift River Woolen Company. That was an old colonial house. He owned

that for years. He'd be up there in the winter, and then down in the log cabin in the summertime. One thing I remember, when I was a youngster there really wasn't any fire protection, so every second or third house in Central Beach, on the side of the house there would be this little red fire box. It stood about two-and-a-half or three-feet high and maybe a foot-and-a-half wide. He had in a shed, which was up by the tennis courts—they burned down many years ago—that was his toolshed. He kept a big 50-gallon drum of kerosene in there for cleaning tools and this and that. I think that was what did that shed in. I think that's how it probably caught fire. But in that shed, they kept these little metal pump water cans. I guess it was the form of a fire extinguisher back in those days. You'd have to fill them with water. So, one job I had, when I was in high school, was to go down and take those out of the shed about the second or third week in April and fill them with water. This was just after they turned the water system on for the summer. We'd go around and we'd fill them up and put them in these little red boxes next to the houses. I forget how many there were, but there must have been 40 or so. As I say, every second or third house had one. And then in the fall, hopefully they weren't used, and we'd go around and take them out and store them back in the shed. That was one thing we did. No matter how hot it was, he would always have his three-piece suit on with his long johns, and his panama hat. Someone would say to him, "Gee, Howard, you look like you're from the south," and he said, "Yes, I'm from southern Rhode Island."

Q: Did those fire boxes have a barrel and you would put water in those barrels during the summer season?

A: No. The pump sprayers that fit inside the boxes—they were little metal pump sprayers—they were full of water. But I don't recall any sort of a barrel or anything like that.

Q: When you say pump sprayers, were they hooked to the water system so that if there was a fire—

A: No. They were freestanding. They were maybe two-and-a-half feet high. They were round with a pump on top and a hose. With a flip on top of the cans, we would fill them water. We would put them in those boxes. It was a job. It kept me in pretty good shape for a while. Another thing about my grandfather, I remember many of those roads—again, in my high school years, and even my college years, so I would say back in the mid-'50s to late '50s and maybe early '60s—I graduated from high school in '57 and from college in '61. But most of those roads in the Quonochontaug area, with the possible exception of Seabreeze going in from West Beach Road, they were all gravel roads back in those days. Every late spring, Roland Dimorando, who for years picked up the trash in Central Beach—he had a dump truck, and he and his wife would go around once or twice

a week and they'd pick up the trash. But he had this old Dodge dump truck. My grandfather hired him to do things in subsequent years when we had asphalt roads, he'd put in coal patch and stuff like that. But one of the things we did every spring for a few years was to spread calcium chloride on these dirt roads. He would buy these 100-pound bags of calcium chloride. Roland Dimorando would pick them up, and on a given day we would go down, and a friend of my grandfather's from Potter Hill, Sid Johnson, who was a Navy veteran—he had since retired from the Navy—Sid, myself and my grandfather and Roland—I think they had built a little spreader and hooked it on the back of his dump truck. It had two metal wheels on the end, which as it moved along it had the little grinders in the center that would—I forget what you call them—with holes on the bottom, it would spread the calcium chloride. So, we'd go along and we'd spread it, and then when we were out of calcium chloride, which was stocked in the back of the truck—we'd pick it up in the back of the truck, and we take a bag and we'd drop it in the spreader. It held about four bags. Then we would continue on for a while. It left these little dribbles of calcium chloride to keep the dust down. It worked pretty well all summer, I guess.

Q: So, that was to keep the dust down?

A: Exactly. I guess it was sometime in May when we did that. There are a couple more things that I remember about my grandfather. I don't recall how old I was. But over in the Sunset Drive area—there were just a handful of houses in there, and this was back in the '50s—he would burn the field every year. He'd get permission from the town. We'd go there and he'd have a fire truck stand by. We'd have these little water cans—the water cans that I told you about. He'd have those, and we'd stand by to make sure that the fire didn't get out of control. It was just like burning the field. We did that every spring just to get all the high grass down. That was from about where his log cabin was all the way down to the other end of Sunset Drive. That was pretty much all fields. The only other building that I recall at that time that was there was the old farmhouse right on the pond. The last little duty for me when I was young was the Central Beach tennis courts in those days were clay courts. He built a framework with chicken wire. That surrounded the tennis courts. Every spring I would go in with little pieces of wire—me and Sid Johnson, for example—and we'd have to get up on ladders. Over the winter a lot of the chicken wire would be deteriorated, and we'd have to tie it together. We did that for a day or two. We'd have to put the tapes down on the clay courts. I forget how we measured that, but we did that. We tapped them in. There were a couple of big boulders that were too big to get out of there when they built the tennis courts. They just showed above the surface of the tennis courts in two or three places. So, every once in a while, if you were playing tennis, which I played a lot when I was young, you'd hit that rock and the ball would go off in a direction that you didn't figure it was going to go off in. We had

that set up so that it would count or not count, or something like that. I forget how it worked. Those courts were very nice right next to the ball field. We used those. That's about the extent of my memories of him. I remember we had a little outboard motor boat with a 4- or 5-horse old Johnson outboard motor. He'd go out once in a while around the pond. He really enjoyed it. He always had his panama hat on and his three-piece suit and his long johns. He was quite a guy. He had a lot of feeling for the people down there. He wanted to make a really nice community out of it, and it turned out that way.

Q: You graduated from high school in '57. Do you remember the roads being gravel then, right?

A: Yes. Most of them were gravel at that point.

Q: When did they begin to pave them? Was that in the '60s?

A: My guess would be mid- to late '60s—a lot of them. I also remember Niantic Avenue that goes down and runs parallel with Ninigret, back in the '50s that wasn't built through. That was about halfway through. I remember that at that point. He always figured that you could turn the water on, on that seasonal system, because you had the hydrants and all, not before the end of the first seven days in April. I always remember that. I remember one year; Easter fell really early. It was in March. A lot of people were calling up. They didn't have wells, and they wanted the water system turned on. They'd call up and plead with my grandfather, "Please turn the water on so we can go down there for the weekend." So, he finally relented this one year. It was the 2nd or 3rd of April when we turned the water on, and the 4th or 5th of April we had a hard freeze and we lost about four or five hydrants and had an awful mess down there. So, ever since then, he always said, "Never before the 7th of April. I always counted on that in my mind that you're never going to have a hard freeze up here after April 7th."

Q: Going back to what you said about the Depression and taking over the mortgages, was that for the Quonochontaug plat? I think you told me that at the beginning there were only three streets: Surfside, Ocean View and Neptune.

A: Right.

Q: Were they built by your grandfather, or were they already there when he acquired it?

A: That's a good question. I really don't know. My guess is that maybe Surfside was there, but I don't think the others were.

Q: When he took over the mortgages in the late 1930s, Quonochontaug was pretty undeveloped and there wasn't much infrastructure, right?

A: Yes. That's correct. It was probably the late '20s, early '30s when he ended up buying those mortgages out. There wasn't much down there. I wasn't born until '39, so I wasn't involved in that. My dad, his son Nelson, graduated from MIT in '35 right in the middle of the Depression. He went to Panama. He stayed there during the war. He didn't come back and get involved in it until after the war—'45 or '46.

Q: Let's talk a little more about Howard in the early days. Was he the architect of laying Central Beach out? I remember you talking about working on the roads.

A: I think he was. My father probably could have spoken to that a lot better than I could. Whatever roads weren't there—for example, Niantic is one. Kenyon Avenue was in. Seabreeze—I don't know if it had been there or not. The one that goes right over to East Beach. That might have been there as a gravel road. He had a lot of it platted himself. He worked closely with Horace Emerson at the time, as a surveyor. Leon Howland I think was the other surveyor that they worked with a lot. Howland did a lot over on the East Beach area. Emerson was more of my father's generation. I think he did most of it down there—Central and East Beach.

Q: I think you told me that they called East Beach the Highlands plat.

A: It was called the Quonochontaug Highlands plat. That pretty much encompasses all of East Beach, along the East Beach Road up to where you get into the Sunrise Acres. Sunrise Acres was another plat. But it pretty much encompassed both sides of East Beach Road and the community of East Beach.

Q: There was a time after Howard took over these mortgages where he basically owned all of the open land of Central Beach, East Beach and West Beach?

A: Not too much in West Beach. There wasn't much down there in West Beach that he was involved in. Most of Central Beach plat, Central Beach Extension plat and the Quonochontaug Highlands plat, and the Sunset Drive area also. I'm not sure how we got that. I'd just be guessing if I said anymore about that.

Q: Is that where he chose to build his house on Sunset, and that was called Sunset Lodge?

A: Yes. That's correct. There were three 60-foot lots that went down to the water. He kept those lots with the idea of building something on them. He built that log cabin in 1939.

Q: I saw in the records that Howard was married to Hattie-Mae. Hattie-Mae was your grandmother, correct?

A: Yes. Harriet. She passed away in 1937 at age 49. My grandfather subsequently remarried the divorced wife of his cousin, Mary Elizabeth. Mary married General Elliot Thorp. That's a long story. I won't get into that. They got divorced—I'm not even sure when that was. After my real grandmother—her maiden name was Hepworth. One of her great granddaughters works here at Thorp & Trainer with us. She had two boys with General Elliot Thorp. My grandfather just had my father, Nelson. He was an only child. There were like two sides of the family, but they were kind of related by marriage before they even got married.

Q: I saw that Mary Elizabeth and Howard married November 19th, 1938. Does that sound right?

A: I didn't know the date, but that could work very nicely. It's sad in a way. I was born in September of '39. My sister was born in April or '37. Hattie-Mae died two months before my sister was born. She died in February of '37. It would have been a year or so later that my grandfather remarried. That sounds right.

Q: I thought Nelson was an only child.

A: He is an only child. That's correct.

Q: When you say your sister, was this—

A: Mary Elizabeth had two boys with General Elliot Thorp, but my grandfather just had my father with Hattie-Mae Hepworth.

Q: Then Howard and Mary Elizabeth had a couple of children, right?

A: No. They never had any children.

Q: Have you heard stories of the 1938 Hurricane?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: What would your father say about that event?

A: My grandfather had taken some pictures with a 16-milimeter camera at the time. I had them up until twenty years ago. They were in a cannister and they just got so brittle. I tried to have them made into video tape, but they just kept breaking, so that never happened. There were a couple of stories. One was Sid Johnson had retired from the Navy. He worked with my grandfather a lot in the beach area. Sid had been through a few typhoons in the South Pacific. The morning of the '38 Hurricane—I forget whether this came from Sid, because he has passed away too, or my grandfather. They were running down the beach. It was September 21st. They ran down to the beach to do some work, and the sky was yellow. There was sulfur in the air. Sid said to my grandfather, “I’ve been through a few typhoons. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear we’ve got a real hurricane coming in there.” He kind of chuckled about it. They went down in the morning, and then all of a sudden the wind started picking up and picking up, and they realized what was happening, so they got out of there. That was that. They obviously didn’t do much more that day.

Q: I guess that hurricane was a big surprise when it came, because people in Napatree died because there was no early warning and no time to get out. Nobody knew what was going on.

A: That’s right. There was no warning at all. The thing about the '38 Hurricane was that it hit on the equinox, the 21st of September, which is high water anyway. At the same time, it happened to be a full moon, and at the time of the hurricane there happened to be an incoming almost high tide, two things that probably would never happen together again. That’s what made that hurricane so damaging. There was a woman by the name of Helen Glenbenning, who owned the Red Top cottage right on Surfside Avenue. We always called it Red Top, because they had red shingles on the roof. I remember my grandfather saying that when they realized the hurricane was coming along, he went down to try to get her out of there, because she lived alone, and she said, “Howard, I am not leaving. I’m going to stay right here and I’ll take my chances.” He couldn’t get her out of there. So, she stayed there and she made out fine. But there weren’t too many houses. There were a lot of houses—I can’t remember the names right now—on the second street back, which would be Ocean View Avenue. There were two, three or four houses there, yet before the hurricane with the second floor of some houses along the ocean front on Surfside. It just got blown down. People bought them or they gave them away. They moved them onto a lot and bought a lot and built a house right there. It was a real mess from what I understand and from the pictures that I had seen. Of course, there are a lot of books on it with photographs now.

Q: I remember when we spoke in January that you told me about Spray Rock. Was it your father or your grandfather from the 1938 Hurricane, which was the first house by Big Beach on Surfside—

A: At that time, that was the first house on the ocean front closest to the swimming beach—Central Beach—before Jim Duckworth built a house next door. They call it Spray Rock Cottage. I remember my father saying that he bought that. That's when my father got involved in Quonochontaug. He bought that. The house had been moved back by the storm, and it knocked over a telephone pole. It was kind of sitting on the knocked-over telephone pole. He bought it for a very nice price—not too expensive. He moved it back onto the lot. That was his introduction into Quonochontaug. I can remember a couple of things from the '54 Hurricane vaguely. I can remember snippets. I was probably five years old at the time. My sister and I were down there every summer for all our lives growing up until my father sold it in 1983.

Q: So, your father acquired Spray Rock in 1938 and he kept it until 1983?

A: That's correct.

Q: You estimated that he paid \$400, because the house had been knocked of its foundation, was up against a telephone pole and he kind of took it as is?

A: Yes. It was kind of a liability at that point. That's the figure that I remember him mentioning—\$400.

Q: Did he build a new house on the property, or did he bring the old house back onto the foundation?

A: He brought the old house back on the foundation.

Q: Is that the house that you spent some summers in?

A: Yes. That house wasn't rebuilt at all until the late '80s.

Q: The five or six houses that are out front seem like they're elevated. Did your grandfather do that, or was that natural?

A: I think that was that way. That was the way it was. It's a very rocky coastline, and a lot of the sand just stayed right there. The beach grass grew up and just kind of formed the dunes over the years.

Q: We live at 150 Surfside. Next door to us are the Brecks. I remember as a kid there was a pit there before the Brecks built their house. We used to play in the pit. It had the most enormous granite boulder I've ever seen. I always wondered what the history of the pit was.

A: We played there as kids too. I never knew the history of that either.

Q: I have speculated that they took dirt from that pit and brought it out front to elevate those houses before they built them, but I'm just guessing.

A: That could very well be. That could be an excavation pit. The Breck house was built up quite a bit. But I don't have any firsthand knowledge of that.

Q: You told me that your father was born in 1912, and he died in 1987.

A: Yes. He passed away in '87.

Q: You mentioned that he went to MIT for some years.

A: Yes. He went to the University of Rhode Island for three years, and then he wanted to take a business engineering course, which they didn't offer there, so he transferred up to MIT for two years. He graduated from MIT. I think he was three years at URI. He tacked an extra year on with engineering. He did a lot of the surveys down there. Not the official surveys, but when people wanted to know what the boundaries were. My father could redo that. I was the one who would hold the pole and he did the surveying. I cut the brush and stuff like that. He got out in '35. A lot of MIT engineers up there in Boston were selling apples on the street corners back in 1935. He got a job as a long shoreman down in Panama. He went down there. He was there in '36 or '37 until the war broke out. Then he joined the USO. He spent a lot of years in Panama. My older sister, Sandra, is alive and well living in Charleston, South Carolina. I would have had a sister a year or so older than her when she was born in Panama, and she was still born. An inexperienced doctor. The cord got wrapped around the baby's neck. That really did a number on my mother. She wanted to get back home. My grandfather tried to talk my father into coming back and helping out with the beach, which he did finally. He came back in the late '30s for a couple of years. When the war broke out, he went back to Panama again.

Q: Did he have to go into the service? Did the service send him back to Panama?

A: It was voluntary—the United Service Organizations. He used to arrange for entertainment for the troops and things like that. I don't know whether it was something he joined. I guess he had to put in two, three or four years down there. He got to like Panama, but my mother wanted to come back.

Q: When were they married?

A: They got married in '35 when he graduated from school.

Q: What was your mother's name?

A: Merle was her first—Merle Baxter. She was from Pennsylvania—north of Philadelphia. How they met was my father—most of the relatives on my father's side came from the same community that my mother came from. So, I ended up having a lot of relatives down in that Rockledge, Fox Chase area.

Q: After the war ended in '45, what did your father do then?

A: He went into the real estate business with my grandfather.

Q: Was that a prime time for selling off some of the lots that your grandfather had acquired years before?

A: That's right. I think that's when the market started to pick up a little bit down there. Even at that, they were selling for a fraction of the cost today. My grandfather and my father also got involved in—they bought a lot of farm land in Pawcatuck and up near Westerly High School—Bellevue Avenue, Linden Street and Highland Avenue. They bought quite a bit of land there, which my father with his engineering degree did a lot of the engineering along with Horace Emerson. They set those things up. This was back in the mid to late '40s and early '50s.

Q: I saw a list of the houses in Quonochontaug and the year they were built. You see a big upswing after the war and into the '50s. There was a lot of building going on at Quonochontaug in those years. Does that sound right?

A: Yes. That does sound right.

Q: My grandfather bought the 150 Surfside lot from Howard for \$1,500, and Howard let him put \$100 down and gave him some time to pay the \$1,400. Then my grandfather built the house that was ready in 1950.

A: They did that. Both my father and grandfather did a lot of that. I remember one or two cases over on the Sunrise Acres area that a fellow from Boston wanted to buy a lot at the time, and something happened—an illness in the family or something, "I can't finish paying for it right now," so they said, "Forget it." They charged him interest and he paid for it over a five- or six-year period. He was happy. He worked for a company in Boston called Lolly Springs. They had four seats for the Boston Red Sox at the time. After that, once a year he'd always give us those four seats for one game. That was kind of nice. But that's the way they operated. My

grandfather said to me, "It's too bad. People can't do business on a handshake." The one thing about him, you could trust him. If he agreed to something orally, it was ironclad. That was it. My father was the same way. I respected them as people very much.

Q: Did they share a similar vision of what Central Beach was going to be?

A: I think it was more my grandfather's vision. It was more his baby, so to speak. My father got involved in it, but my father also got involved in other areas of Westerly, like down here on Airport Road across from the Westerly Yacht Club and places like that. But he did help my grandfather quite a bit down there. It was more my grandfather's pet.

Q: Was the Spray Rock house or Sunset that Nelson rebuilt the summer home, or your year-round home?

A: That was on Surfside. That was strictly a summer home.

Q: Where did you grow up?

A: I was born in Pennsylvania. Most all of my life I grew up in Westerly or Charlestown. In Quonochontaug I would have a paper route every summer when I was really young. I worked at Babcock Store up on the highway pumping gas and stocking the shelves and sweeping the floors and stuff like that. I did that quite a few years. I ended up lifeguarding at the town beach in Misquamicut through most of my college years seven days a week. I enjoyed it in the summer. I met a lot of very nice people. My folks had a house on Summer Street in Westerly. In my really early years, they owned a house on Newton Avenue in Westerly. They sold that and moved up the Summer Street. In 1957, the year I graduated from high school, and my sister had already graduated and was in college, my mother and father built a house down on Westerly Drive off Cedar Crest Drive across from the Yacht Club up on the hill. That was an area that he had built and he had subdivided and developed. My father was involved in that stuff. He was the engineer of it.

Q: And this was the Westerly Yacht Club?

A: That's correct.

Q: Do you have any memories of the bowling alley that used to exist?

A: Yes. I remember that well. This had to be in the late '40s, early '50s, that would be a treat for us to walk from the house. Four or five of us would get together.

We'd go over to West Beach Road to the bowling alley. That had gone through the '38 Hurricane, and they resurrected it. The alleys were just a little crooked. It was a challenge. It was those duck pins. We'd go down and do some bowling there. You would buy a couple of candy bars and a soda. We did that a lot as kids.

Q: Do you know who that was operated by or owned by?

A: I think it was Sam Grills from Westerly. I may be wrong. I know Sam owned a bunch of cottages down there. That was Sam senior. Sam's son was a year or two older than me. They owned a lot of cottages down by West Beach. They rented them out. I don't know how he came by them, but I'm pretty sure he owned that bowling alley.

Q: Do you know who Mother Brinley was?

A: No.

Q: She had something to do with that area, but I'm not sure when. One of the cottages was Mother Brinley's down where the bowling alley used to be.

A: We never got involved too much down there. The furthest down that we got involved with, or my grandfather did, was where the Quonochontaug Inn was on the ocean front. Just as you turned that corner to go down towards the bowling alley to go down towards West Beach, on the left-hand side it was the Quonochontaug Inn. The Seabreeze Inn was another one that was up between West Beach Road and Sunset Drive. There was a little colony, and still to this day there's a little colony of a bunch of houses in there, and they called that the Ashaway Colony. I'm not sure if they still call that the Ashaway Colony. My grandfather lived up in Potter Hill, which was right next to Ashaway. He had a lot of friends up there. I guess a lot of them ended up buying places down there and that's how it got the name.

Q: What happened to those two inns?

A: The Quonochontaug Inn, which is the one on the ocean front, that is now owned by the sisters of something. It was purchased by a monastery. The nuns would come down. I don't know if they still own it, but the last I knew they did. They would come down from these different places for a vacation in the summertime. You saw them walking around here and there.

Q: What year did that happen? It was a commercial inn at one point where people could rent a room for a couple of weeks.

A: That's right. My guess is it was probably back in the early '50s. Probably early to mid '50s that that was still operating as an inn, and then that changed. The Seabreeze Inn between West Beach Road and Sunset Drive was owned by a fellow by the name of Otto Nurmi. He was Finnish. He and my grandfather became pretty good friends. He bought that, and bought the lot across from that, which is now the Central Beach boating ramp area where they store boats. I think that was next to it. That was owned by Nurmi. Back in the '40s, he had a steam bath right down on the pond, and the guests would come in. They would stay at the Seabreeze and they'd wander down—in the winter too—and they would take a steam bath. They would jump in the pond. I remember that. But he passed away. His son, Eugene Nurmi, ended up with it. They have the little dance hall—recreation hall next to the inn. But that stayed for years. I think it was probably in the '70s or '80s that that was finally torn down. Lolly LeBlanc bought it. I don't know whether he was the one that tore it down. That's where he built his house over there. Then he turned that little recreation hall into another cottage—another home.

Q: You mentioned a fellow by the name of Al Wilson, who urged your grandfather to set aside some land.

A: I don't recall that I said that. Al Wilson bought one of the Jack Van Ost lots along West Beach Road. He might have bought two of them. I'm not sure. There were two farms: Pendleton Farm, and I can't think of the name of the other one. The one that bordered on Sunset Drive—they named it Pendleton Farm, which was the next down. Those two Jack Van Ost bought. Jack was a dentist from New Jersey. He had a bunch of children. He bought that land and subdivided that into about seven, eight or ten lots that went right to the pond. They were good-sized lots. I know Al bought a couple of those.

Q: I was getting at the history of the ball field and the tennis courts.

A: Do you mean the tennis courts on West Beach Road?

Q: I was focusing on where the ball field is. Didn't your grandfather give that property to the community, or set it aside for the ball field?

A: Yes, he did. The ball field and the tennis courts—that whole chunk of land. When that was platted, that was cut right out of it and designated as the ball field and the tennis courts. Of course, they had a storage shed down there too, which I guess is still there. They have a basketball court down there too. That was part of the deal. He wanted recreation for the people.

Q: Did you go to the dedication?

A: I was there in 1960 when they dedicated it to my grandfather. My father and my grandfather were there.

Q: People have been playing ball there for 60 years.

A: Every Sunday morning there would be that softball game between the kids and the old goats. I played for the kids for a while and eventually played for the old goats. That was fun.

Q: Did you graduate from college?

A: Yes, I did.

Q: What year was that?

A: I graduated in '61.

Q: What was your degree in?

A: I have a degree in economics and finance. I took ROTC. I got my commission also in the Army when I graduated. It was what they called general business. I took all my electives in economics and finance.

Q: When you graduated, did you have to go into the Army?

A: Yes. I went in for two years. I tell a funny story. When I graduated, I tried to get two years, but I had a reserved commission that would only allow me six months. And then I had seven years in the active reserves, which I didn't want. So, between the time I graduated in June, I think it was that November that the Berlin Wall went up, and everyone was extended for two years, which made me very happy. Fast forward to 1989 when my son, Howard, went to The Citadel, and he was taking ROTC down there, and the Berlin Wall went down, so they said, "You don't have to pay back the few months that we paid towards your education, and you don't have to go into the service." He opted out. I got extended because the wall went up, but he got out of it because the wall went down again. I always know when the Berlin Wall went up and when it went back down.

Q: When were you married?

A: I was married in '64.

Q: To whom?

A: I married Dinah Dumalow. Her father was in charge of the high lines here. He was a graduate engineer in charge of the high lines for Narragansett Electric back in those days.

Q: You had at least one child, right?

A: We have two children, a daughter and a son.

Q: When was Howard born?

A: Howard was born in March of '68.

Q: How about your daughter?

A: Jennifer was born in October of '66.

Q: Did they spend a fair amount of time at Quonochontaug too?

A: They did. My grandfather died in '69. My step-grandmother had the house down there, and she didn't want to be there by herself. She tried to see if her family was interested, and they weren't. And my sister wasn't. They were into sailing. It finally got to me. My father said, "Ask Neil if he'd be interested." My wife and I decided we were, so we bought it from her subject to her life estate. Her family took up a mortgage on it. In 1974 she decided that she didn't even want to want her life estate, so we bought her life estate out. My wife and I have owned that since 1974. The kids were born in '66 and '68, so they had some good years down there. We leased it out a lot of times for July and August. The same people would come back for a few years. We'd go down in the spring, early summer, late summer and early fall.

Q: How old was Howard when he died?

A: He was a month or two short of his 80th birthday.

Q: He died in 1971?

A: No, '69. I think he died a couple weeks before they walked on the moon.

Q: And then your father passed away in '87?

A: He passed away in '87. He was just shy of 75.

Q: He sold Spray Rock before he died. When was that?

A: They sold Spray Rock in 1983. Then he passed away four years later.

Q: Are you still working part time?

A: Yes. We have a place in Florida. We usually go down from early January to mid-May. Sometimes the end of May. When I'm down there, I do quite a bit of work by computer. About three days a week when I'm up here—Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday—I do a lot of budgeting and reconciliations and stuff like that helping Howard out. He's in sales and whatnot. He's been doing a great job. He really has.

Q: That's great that you get to work with your son. That's an insurance business now, right?

A: Yes. And we get along famously. We literally get along well. When I live here, we get together either at my office or at his office for half an hour two or three times a day and talk about this or that. It's great. We really get along well. A lot of fathers and sons don't. I'm very fortunate that way.

Q: When you got out of the Army, you joined Thorp & Trainer.

A: Yes. I got out in early '64. At that time, we didn't own Thorp & Trainer, although we had first option and first refusal, because my grandfather started it with Roger Trainer. My grandfather was more interested in the real estate, and Trainer was more interested in the insurance. Trainer had just gotten back from the first world war, so he had taken over the insurance. In '64 we only had the real estate office until July of '69. For five years I was strictly real estate. We did a lot of rentals down in the Quonochontaug area, and sales and whatnot. At that time my grandfather and father had sold out the lots. In 1969, after my grandfather passed away, Roger Trainer decided that it was time for him to retire, so we picked up the option and we bought the insurance. As a young guy on the staff, I went in there to run it. I had a friend from college who was an insurance manager, and he was looking for a job, so he came down. We took that over in July of '69. It's been in existence since 1910. Just 110 years.

Q: You have sold off the real estate business, right?

A: Yes. That was the late '90s. We sold that to Steve McAndrew. He took that over. At that point, I was pretty much full time in the insurance, although I did help him

downstairs for a while too. I was kind of both ways. I wore two hats there for a while for two or three years.

Q: So, you made your living after you got back from the Army through Thorp & Trainer?

A: Yes. Except for those five years in real estate from '71 or '72. Then I started drawing most of my salary out of Thorp & Trainer.

Q: What year did your son enter the business?

A: My son went to The Citadel, and he graduated in 1990. He came in that year, the summer of 1990.

Q: So, you've worked together for 30 years?

A: Yes. For 30 years. I don't know where those 30 years went.

Q: This has been so helpful and interesting. I'm glad we have captured this for the Quonnie Historical Society.

A: That's great. I can't think of any more stories. That's about it.

Q: We're always looking for memorabilia. You said that all those old real estate records went with Steve McAndrews, right?

A: Steve has all those now. Some of those go way-way back, back to the '30s and whatnot. It's amazing. I don't know what he's done with them. I was going to call you with his cell phone number. I apologize. Steve is very happy to talk about his experiences down there too, I'm sure.

Q: I was a capitol policeman in 1969 in the U.S. Senate. One of my colleagues was Tom McAndrews.

A: Steve's brother.

Q: He went to American University. We were on a 3:00 pm to 11:00 pm shift. Tom went to school, and then at 3:00 he got out of his school clothes and put on his capitol police uniform, billy club and 38 and worked in the senate.

A: Tom is a great guy. I haven't seen Tom in years, but he's doing pretty well. He's doing a great job. I think he's still in Providence.

Q: Did he have a lot of kids, or did Steve have a lot of kids?

A: Steve and Tom come from a family of a lot of kids. Their father, Joe McAndrew, worked for the Providence Journal and a travel agency. They have twelve children in that family. I think a couple of them have passed away. They're very close. There was Dave, Tom, Mark—I knew most of them well. They're really good people. Tom I guess has done well for himself up there in the Providence area.

Q: How does he make a living?

A: I'm not sure what form of law he's in—Steve. They all kind of went their separate ways, and I've kind of lost track of them. My wife taught a couple of them in school. She was teaching elementary school in Westerly. They were always good kids. Well dressed.

Q: Other than the old canon ball, are there any other old photographs? We like to borrow them and photograph them, and then give you the originals back.

A: Off the top of my head, I can't think of anything. My daughter gets very much involved in lineage. She's very interested in that stuff. She might even have some stuff. I'll have to ask Jennifer.

Q: It goes into the archives.

A: That's great. I give you a lot of credit for doing this. I remember one thing my grandfather said to me walking down Seabreeze Avenue—I can remember where we were—this was probably three or four years before he died, and he said, "I just wish I could take my experiences and transfer them to your head." If I come across something—I'll keep my eyes open. Steve might have some stuff too—some old photos and old postcards. I've still got the finance books from the old real estate business here in the office.

Q: Would they show some of the old 1940s prices?

A: They might. I don't know if it goes that far back. I haven't looked at them in fifteen years. We've had three or four people from the Central Beach area over the years complain about—"You made a bundle down here." My standard answer back to them, "I'd be happy to refund your money, every nickel you paid for this, even with small interest," which kind of shuts them up.

Q: Thank you. You've been very generous with your time.