

RALPH ROBINSON INTERVIEW

Interviewed by Diane Melone, Aug. 13, 1998

Transcribed by George Scholhamer, November 17, 2002

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**I'm not going to be graded!**

No, no grades on this. You can't answer wrong.

**I can't flunk it?**

No. How did you first come to Bayside, you and your family?

**My grandfather's (grandmother ed. ZH) mother came, I think she was one of the probably the Methodists or whoever started this. I'm not sure. Flanders(?)**

Well, how many generations might that be?

**Ah, seven. Keith's son was the sixth generation. And the same for Jo Huntoon's grandchildren. They are also the sixth.**

The sixth generation, okay, Keith, is your nephew who is here now. Does he live here?

**Ah, they stay now, I have two apartments here, we winterized half of it and not the other half and they stay there. That's his wife, there.**

Is she coming from the Community Hall?

**I don't know--If there was a ballet class, yes.**

There was, I walked by ~

**She was teaching it.**

And there was a man there too.

**Well, maybe he was teaching and she was taking it.**

Okay, so would you like to tell about the house?

**The house was built by Mr. Cobe, who built the big mansion up the hill. That the street is named for now.**

Mr. Cobe.

**And he was here a year or so. That was the main house across the**

**street, the Bohemia.**

The Crofoots house?

**Yes, The Crofoots house. And this was the stable, carriage house and servants' quarters. And that cottage across the street, next to the community hall was the laundry for the estate, And for Mr. Cobe it wasn't big enough or good enough so he lived here a year or something and built the mansion up the hill. And sold all of this to my grandfather. And he's also Jo's grandfather, Jo Huntoon's grandfather.**

**Jo's mother and my mother were sisters.**

So you are a first cousin.

**First cousin.**

Okay, I think we get it. Do you mind if I ask your age?

**My age? I am 67 for one more month.**

Okay. So your birthday is in September? All right, and could I to ask about your career, your education?

**Graduate of Milton Academy and Harvard, United States Navy, and Bayside.**

Now where was Milton Academy?

**Milton Academy is just outside of Boston.**

Okay. Then you went to Harvard University? And what was your degree?

**English literature.**

And you did two years in the Navy.

**Two years in Korea.**

And then your career after that?

**I started with Jose Limon modern dance but he said my strength was athletic rather than artistic and I better shift to ballet, which I did ... and got a job and worked the rest of my active career life.**

You took up ballet after the Navy?

**Yes,**

Never danced before that? Never used your Literature degree?

**No.**

Interesting. But you were a Harvard graduate. Was that a family thing, or were you the only one in the family to go to Harvard?

**Oh no, we all went to Milton and Harvard.**

Where did your family live?

**My father worked in Chicago and that's where I grew up. Its my mother's family, we came here every summer to visit our grandparents.**

Okay. Now, they sent you to boarding school at Milton? Oh, at what age?

**Fourteen.**

And what is your memory of that or feeling about that?

**I think that the boarding school was probably fine for the era, but I think it was ridiculous.**

Okay, did you ever resent being taken from your family? Or was that just part of your life?

**No, no. Everybody expected to do that.**

How big was your family?

**Two brothers.**

And they all did the same?

**Yes.**

All went to Harvard?

**Yes.**

Now you became a dancer, was that sort of stepping out of the family mode?

**Total. My father was---We had seven generations in the steel business. And my father stepped out of the family mode, because he became a salesman in the steel business, and that was unacceptably slimey to be a salesman. It was not approved of.**

Wow. Was he a Harvard grad?

**Yes. He should have been an assylist, in production. Sales was unacceptable. It was beneath the family. Shouldn't have been done.**

Was the relationship kept up by the family, it wasn't like he was ostracized by the family or anything?

**Oh no, no, no, neither was I, neither was dancing. It was just the same thing. It's not acceptable. But we love you anyway.**

Well, that's the way it should be. Did your brothers keep any connection with Bayside?

**My brother Snelling, has always come here. My brother Keith, who lived in Denver, didn't really like boating or sports, so he didn't come here often but his children did. Keith is my brother Keith's son who died. My brother Keith was the middle brother and he died five years ago, six years ago. And my brother, Snelling is the eldest brother, and he is, more or less, always coming.**

**Yes, and he lives across the street until last year. In Ann Ayer's house, who is our great- aunt.**

Ayer?

**A-y-e-r.**

**There was Mary Ayer, my grandmother. And Ann was her sister. She lived the next house down.**

Are there any other houses in Bayside that you or your family ever occupied?

**Yes, My grandfather's (grandmother's ed. ZH) mother had a house, I think. You know that street where there's the house that is kiddy-corner to Blairs?)**

The Wiesenbach house now.

**Yes, I think up that street.**

That's Maple, I think.

**I think that is where it was. Jo would probably know better, I don't remember.**

Okay. Did you finish telling me about this house parts and about the winterized parts and the apartments?

**Yes, this was the stable which is still here.**

Oh my, I didn't notice that. It is beautiful.

**Because we weren't going to live down here, but then I thought of this. And I put screens in the center, and we have a full water view which we don't have up stairs so we live down here all the time. We weren't going to live here at all, it is finished upstairs, a regular apartment. This was just rough but with this window we gravitated down here. And that's where the little fire truck was, horses. This was the tack room, and the next room over which was dance studio was where the carriages were, And that's where the hay was pitched down for the horses.**

Oh, wow.

**And the stone wall you see out there was the manure pit. They had their own gas light system from the manure pit. They put all that stuff in here and it formed gas. And they had their own gas light system. And**

And the gas was from the manure?

**Yes, like vegetable compost\_\_\_.**

Oh I never thought of using it. That's fabulous.

**Or they pumped it in I'm not sure. But the upstairs here was the hayloft. And then all the other rooms, the back rooms upstairs were the servant's quarters, and except for new fixtures and stuff, it's just as it was.**

So this was where you spend the summer, the down stairs part.

**And in the winter.**

Oh, this is winterized, now? The whole thing?

**Our part.**

It is? Oh, Okay.

**That apartment over there is not winterized. We turn the water off in the Fall and that's closed.**

Now, who stays there, then?

**Keith and Maureen.**

Oh, just for the summer, then.

**We were talking about, Ian, he's nephew Keith's son. He's thirteen. He dances with the company and he has played three Eastern regional tennis tournaments with 14 year old, 12 year olds, in Boston, and has gotten into the finals with each one.**

So, where does that family live? In the winter.

**In Brewer.**

Oh, Maine.

**They run the ballet company there, in Bangor.**

Out of Bangor, OK . So, you brought ballet to the family. Did you bring tennis to the family?

**No, I think his family, mother, and whatnot, they all play tennis.**

Okay. So it's third generation, now? Ballet and tennis.

**Except my daughter doesn't do either one.**

It doesn't mean everybody does.

**My daughter is horses.**

Now how many children do you have?

**One.**

Just the daughter, what is her name?

**Maya.**

Oh I did see the name Maya. M-a-y-a ?

**Yes.**

And we should probably mention your wife, first.

**Jeanne-Marie ...**

Where did you meet her?

**We were dancing in the same company, actually we met in Paris, and then we both got jobs in the same company in Nice, on the Riviera.**

So you have been overseas with this dancing.

**Oh yes.**

I didn't realize that.

**In France, mostly, toured Spain, Portugal, Switzerland.**

An interesting life! So you met Jeanne-Marie in the dance company, and then did you always live in America, when you were married or how did that work out?

**Yes.**

And you had one daughter, Maya. Is Maya local?

**Local?**

Is she around here now?

**She just graduated from St. Lawrence University, this Spring.**

Congratulations.

**And she is thinking, I guess, about a career, like, for the nonce, she is back working on the horse farm, because she gave up horses for the whole four years. And that's what she had done for her whole youth. Now she is back doing that for the summer.**

No tennis, no dance, she's a horse lover.

**She has played tennis, and danced, but never...**

What is her degree in?

**She had a double major in speech and theatre, and French.**

I see. OK When you used to come to Bayside to visit your grandparents, how did you travel here?

**By automobile.**

You did, OK.

**And we all took turns, my brother Keith was 13 with a driver's license, driving us across the country from Chicago to Maine. 13. In a farm community.**

How long did it take?

**Three days.**

It did.

**Three days, two nights.**

And how long did you stay in Bayside?

**Until school, my father stayed and worked in Chicago, and my mother brought the three of us here and stayed for the summer.**

And did your father travel back and forth, or not?

**He spent his vacation here but those days vacations were one week.**

Now was it his parents here, or your mother's parents?

**My mother's.**

OK that makes sense. Any memories of things that happened on the trip?

**Ah, You get out and walk, you got three boys in the car and you get out and walk for a mile and a half, and my mother stopped at a gas station and drank a soda or something, and then she'd come and get us.**

Is that right? I have three girls and I was the oldest of three girls, I do have a son a lot younger but I haven't done boys, but girls are quite, challenging in a car for any length of time. I can imagine. We talked about the cottages. What are your memories of Bayside as far as activities you did when you used to come to visit your grandparents as a youth?

**On the water, in the water, on the basketball court, golf course, constantly.**

Was there a tennis court in Bayside, then?

**There was a tennis court at the golf course.**

Oh there was? And that's gone now.

**That's gone, in the parking lot.**

Oh right up there. OK you say the basketball court was in the same place?

**Basketball court was in the same place.**



Was there a playground?

**There was a playground, but not as fancy, there was a bandstand.**

Oh really?

**Down just below the swings. There was a circular wooden bandstand.**

Was the yacht club there?

**No. No yacht club.**

No building there at all?

**No building there at all, there was I think, when I was very young, there was an inside building on the wharf.**

OK, you do remember a building you could go inside on the wharf?

**Yes.**

What else can you remember about the wharf?

**Just that you swam off it, boated off it.**

Did they do the jumping like they do now?

**Oh sure, we all did that. And I do believe that I came on the Boston boat, but I don't remember.**

The old steamship- really? When you were quite young. You were the baby of the family.

**I was the baby.**

It might have been something they were doing...

**I do believe that I travelled on it...**

Right. Well, where would that have originated from? You came from Chicago.

**Boston**

You would have gone to Boston, to come up on the boat. Because the roads were better to Boston?

**We were visiting my grandfather who was the manager of the New England Conservatory of Music and the Boston Opera\_**

Really?

**Any would be interesting for your tape, maybe Jo knows, I don't remember the names but they all came here for the summer, like Pavlova and the guy who was best known as piano interpreter of Debussy and all the conductors and this was quite an arts community.**

**A famous well known actor lived here. (you can investigate) that around 1910, 1915, before my days. They all used to be here and come and until my grandmother thought that her daughters were old enough now, so they shouldn't be exposed to theatrical people. So they stopped inviting them.**

Is that right?

**Art has lots of homosexuals and hard drinkers. She figured that the girls were old enough now to see them.**

This was grandmother Ayer or Flanders?

**Flanders. Her maiden name was Ayer~**

Oh I see, she married Flanders, I see.

**Ann Ayer was the sister, unmarried, maiden aunt.**

Oh, I see. OK And what was the first name of the grandmother?

**Mary. She was the organist for a Methodist church in Bangor, where my grandfather, and this is why you can't say anything to my brother, because my grandfather ran a cigar store in Bangor. And he was a hunting pal of a guy named Evan Jordan (Jordan Marsh store). Evan said well, how would you like to manage the New England Conservatory or Boston Opera for me, if you can run a cigar store you can run these place. That's how my grandfather got it.**

That's the credentials? My!

**That's the credentials. He wasn't the artistic director. He was the business manager.**

Interesting! So did he give up the cigar shop to do that?

**Oh yes, sure!**

He did? Isn't that interesting. How many daughters did they have?

**They had three.**

They did, I'm very empathic to that family constellation. Well, this is great! How about the beaches? Any difference?

**Ah, I'm missing jellyfish, and I'm missing flounder, and they were much cleaner, and clam bakes.**

The beaches were cleaner?

**They were cleaner. They were full of jellyfish.**

What kind?

**White ones, and red.**

Nice ones or the stingy ones?

**Both. Everywhere.**

Really, I've never ever seen one.

**Pollution got rid of them. And Flounder,**

As in fishing.

**Yes, the good edible. Sole.**

And you can catch them right off the pier?

**More in the boats, and around the moorings.**

OK. And bring them home and, cook them up for dinner. That is too bad.

**And of course, we would just go to the beach, and dig up the clams for your clambake.**

For your own clambake. Was the mussel population always this big?

**Oh, Americans didn't eat them,..so they were always there.**

Now what about lobsters, more or less, was that ever the case?

**No, the crabs.**

A lot crabs. I noticed fewer crabs in just the 12 years I have been coming here. An it makes me very sad.

What about the bird life? Was that about the same?

**I didn't even know there were birds.**

There weren't a lot?

**I was not attuned to birds. Basketball and baseballs and boats were lots to think of. I wasn't attuned to birds.**

Now, was the harbor similar, moorings, and boats and sailboats and working boats?

**Seems to me there was the same number of boats except there was always somebody in them, now there isn't. They were always sailing and pulling into the wharf and pulling out of the wharf. And all times, there was boat and water action.**

Now you see a lot of boats sitting but not as much of the action.

**Oh nowhere near as much.**

Is that right? I'll bring this up just because its an issue, how about down in Bayside, were there a lot of dogs around the wharf , running free , was it something you remember?

**Ah, not something I remember, because we left ours in Illinois.**

So, its not like dogs were a problem, it was not an issue?

**No.**

Ok.

**I'm apolitical as long as I can.**

What are your memories of the stores, or other public buildings in Bayside?

**I don't remember the candy store down here next to the community hall. It was there, Sybil Kunhle lived in it there at one time. But I do remember that little store to the right of Blairs, and the one's that Blairs and of course, Hastings. And the corner store, there three of them all going at once, I guess.**

Did you frequent those?

**For penny candies and whoopie pies, sure. Whoopie pies and coca cola.**

How about any delivery services you remember?

**Ah, I think McCaskle the ice man, I think his name was Jack McCaskle.**

Where did they get ice?

**From the lake. They would saw off big huge chunks and put them a barn full of sawdust.**

And they would last all summer?

**You bet, they had to.**

Interesting. All right, any sort of social activities you remember, picnics, parties, games, anything like that?

**Clambakes, kick the can, post office, kissing games on the wharf. Every time you saw a shooting star you got to kiss a girl, in August it....gets pretty heavy. And then the Community Hall dances and minstrel shows. We went to Skowhegan Fair on V.J. day. That was exciting.**

V. J. Day?

**Victory over Japan. V. E. day was victory over Europe and V. J. day was the end of the Japanese war.**

Really? I don't know that I have heard that expression.

**That was the end of WW2.**

Where did you go shopping? Like now, we go into Belfast every other day. Were things more contained in this area?

**Hastings store had stuff on the shelf. Of course, I didn't do the shopping. They had a store in Belfast they went to, Kittredge's, I think was the name of it. And after that, Cottles**

So you might have gone into Belfast less frequently than we do now, because you had more stores right here, and delivery services?

**Ah, I can't answer that.**

You weren't tuned into that.

**I do remember that we had gas here, during the war. Cause you had rationing, and we had to leave our farm and move into Chicago, because we couldn't get gas for my**

**father to commute. But when we came here in the summer, we had all the gas we wanted. It was Maine, rationing was not adhered to here as it was in Chicago, in the west. If you wanted gas, you rolled in and filled it up.**

And it was in Bayside?

**Belfast, we did.**

You went to Belfast. Do you remember the inn, the hotel?

**I don't think that was ever in action until twenty years ago as far as I can remember. I think it, was just run down when I was a kid.**

**Because it was going hot and heavy before and then it burned . So you don't remember just sort of its down time, I guess. When you were a child.**

**Right, my memory is really, you know, again, late 30's. Of Bayside. I think it burned in 1917 or something like that...Before my day.**

Yes, exactly. All right, have you memories of the police or the harbormaster or the postmaster or any of those firemen, or anyone else?

**None. I do remember the air raid siren, they had an alert for that. I remember going down to the Cove, to look out hoping to see a periscope. I wanted to announce an enemy submarine. I was sure I was going to see one if they were going to invade Maine, and I'd get to announce it. The war being on the water, you know, you would read in the papers that there were some U-boats off of Cape Cod, and what not, so naturally assume that they would come here because it was Maine. If they were off Cape Cod, they would certainly come here, because it was nice.**

Great! OK. Any other stories you can tell about Bayside, or your family, or dogs in the family" other interesting or funny. You told us quite a few, but I don't know if there is anything I didn't touch on?

**My most interesting part was from Bayside, I played for the Belfast Merchants, semi-pro baseball team. That was a lot of fun! I played at Harvard and the Navy, too. I played the whole summer for the Belfast Merchants and they had nothing to do with this.**

No. We want to hear that. That was semi-pro? Out of Belfast?

**Semi -pro out of Belfast. All over the United States. Television killed semi-pro sports. Because you see a real game on television.**

What year was that?

**50's.**

How old were you?

**Twenty. I was in college. I played for Harvard and then most of the college players would play summer ball.**

Oh that's great!

**Pick up a few dollars and ---.**

Just one summer?

**Yeah.**

And you traveled all over the country?

**No, no, no. We traveled all over Eastern and Northern Maine. Our league was Greenville, Dover-Foxcroft, Pittsfield. I can't remember exactly. We played Bucksport. And we would go to Mt. Desert, and we would go to Houlton, Presque Isle.**

What fun! For a twenty year old in Bayside. Oh that is great! Good for you. Any other memories, I am just going to back up a little, the lifeguard?

**The lifeguards, we all took a course one summer, the summer of V J Day, so it's got to be the summer of 1944, 1945 or whenever V J Day was. The guy that they hired to give us the course. And now they put fellows like that in jail, because he was using alcohol -fourteen years old. He would take us down and teach us how to play poker and how to drink.**

And he taught you, lifeguards that, oh wow!

**We all got our lifeguard, whatever it is, from Bud.**

Did you ever use it? Were you ever a lifeguard?

**No.**

Were there hired lifeguards on the wharf like there are now.

**Not that I recall. No.**

OK. What were some of your other summer jobs? If you even had jobs.

**That was it. Actually, in high school I just came here and had fun, I think. In college was ROTC stuff.**

OK And I am going to ask you again, because it didn't come up on the tape, why you are not on the water now.

**On the water, now? Because I had enough water in the Navy.**

And it lasted you how many years?

**I got out of the Navy in 1954.**

Oh, that was the year I was born! Good year! That's 45 years almost.

**It can't be that long!**

Yes. I am going to be 45 in January.

**I can't run anymore, if I can't run anymore, I'm back on the water. When you can't play tennis anymore, you are going to fall back in the water. But it will be something very small.**

Sail or motor?

**Haven't got that far. Haven't decided. Oars. I have been back on rowing.**

Do you swim?

**I did. I spent all day in the water.**

I mean recent.

**No, I was in it once, this summer. It's been a warm summer, nice in the basement, pretty warm.**

**I'm in the water every day. That's my rehabilitation for my ankle. You want to see me at five o'clock, I will be sitting on the float, flipping.**

Really? For your ankle. With flippers on?

**With them on.**

I'll remember that, 5 am or 5 pm?

**5pm. I went to the nurse. I was out a year , got bone chips and bad arthritis and**



**I went to the dance physiotherapist for Maurice Basure company in Lausanne and she took ahold of it, and said, you know you broke this. Which I more or less guessed; I danced 25 more years on it.**

What was it, more like a stress fracture?

**I jumped, and I heard a horrible snap like a branch breaking.**

And you kept dancing? It must have been something.

**You know what is, your muscles are so strong they probably helped hold it together and most normal people would have been, you know,...**

**No idea, but it didn't slow me. It hurt, but it didn't slow me down at all. Until last year, and I just couldn't walk. And part of the therapy she said,...**

How long do you work?

**Good Lord, ten minutes, something like that.**

Every day? Good for you.

Well, you have been very active. All your life. Obviously, quite a bit you have done. Any other secrets that you haven't told me?

**I don't know.**

I am going to ask you about golf, because I found that fascinating.

**Golf. Its technical~ I have no trunk rotation. And I don't have strong wrists. I was not a power hitter in baseball nor in tennis. And if you can't rotate your trunk, you don't have mega-wrists, you can't hit a golf ball.**

I like the part about the defenseless.

**Yes, the ball sits there and when you hit it you have to chase it. Its defenseless, and when you hit you have to go chase it. Ridiculous!**

You like a ball that is moving and attacking. That must be why I like tennis, too. I think golf is silly. Very nice! I have so enjoyed this. Do you have anything else you'd like to say?

**I have nothing to say. I refuse to answer.**

Oh that was just great! What position did you play?

**Outfield. I could run, I could hit for average, and I could throw. But I did not have enough power for the scouts to finalize their interest. They were there, but they did not...**

**So this was before ballet?**

**Yes.**

OK. After the navy?

**No, I played for the fleet, that was entertaining. I would go to Korea where there was a war and they would transfer me to spring training for to play for the fleet, they transferred me back from the war to San Diego, so I could play for the fleet. Then when the baseball season was over, they would send me back to Korea.**

Are you kidding?

**That was one of the things that Senator McCarthy was after. He didn't believe that was morally justifiable. He didn't.**

To keep you out of the war?

**To play baseball for the fleet.**

Interesting.

**It was morally justifiable sending me back.**

You were on active duty in the war.

**Yeah, sure, the Korean war.**

**On a boat?**

**On a boat. You watched them shoot. That's the best way to go to war. Watch somebody else shoot.**