

SAANICH ARCHIVES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT 2007 JOAN OUTERBRIDGE INTERVIEW SUMMARY

Date of Interview: 9 August 2007
Interviewer: Louise Ditmars

EARLY LIFE IN BERMUDA:

Joan Higinbotham was born in a St. George's, Bermuda nursing home on October 7, 1920. Her parents, Reginald Herbert Higinbotham and Catherine [Smith], had two boys and one other girl. Her father worked all his life as the Postmaster. Her mother was from Everett, Massachusetts. As a girl she attended St. George's Grammar School. There she enjoyed the outdoors, and developed a shell collection.

ADULTHOOD:

Joan worked in the Bermuda aquarium, giving tours and showing the fish, ca. 1938, when she was about eighteen years old.

In World War II, Bermuda became dangerous in its location near the site of the Battle of the Atlantic, and her parents sent her to New York ca. 1941. The ship travelled a zig-zag route to avoid submarines. She returned to Bermuda after the war.

She enrolled in a two-year program at the Pennsylvania School of Horticulture for Women under the directorship of Mrs. Bush-Brown in Ambler, Pennsylvania ca. 1950. She graduated as a landscape architect from this all-female program at age 31 in 1951.

In 1954 she worked as an assistant to the noted horticulturist John Wister at the Swarthmore College arboretum in Stewartstown, Pennsylvania.

At the age of 44, Joan met Lancelot Outerbridge, a builder, who like herself had a boat in St. George's harbour. They were married January 19, 1970. They first lived in "Whale Cottage", then in the "Big House" on Smith's Island, Bermuda. She grew Small Cavendish bananas and other fruit there for the local market. Lancelot died five years after their marriage.

IMMIGRATION TO CANADA:

Joan immigrated to the Victoria area in 1987 after seeing a tv program about it. She bought a house at 1171 Royal Oak Drive and soon began to plan a special garden for the public to enjoy. (See *Saanich Centennial 1906-2006*, page 176-77)

"SHANGRI-LA":

Joan began to buy properties adjacent to her house with the idea of creating a bird sanctuary and a place for local residents to walk among beautiful surroundings. House prices were booming so she was able to afford to purchase, over a period of several years, four houses and one empty lot on Royal Oak Drive, and four houses on Blenkinsop Avenue. She would sell off the houses, which were situated at the front of the lots, and subdivide the rear of the properties to create her nature sanctuary. Altogether she accumulated nine acres for the sanctuary: three of these were developed as gardens and the larger portion left in a natural state. She created hummingbird and butterfly gardens, a Japanese garden and a "secret" garden.

"Shangri-La" was purchased by Saanich Municipality in 2005. Her lawyer is working to create a "friends" society of volunteers which will maintain and restore the gardens.

Saanich Archives Oral History Project 2007
Interview with Joan Outerbridge

Date of Interview: July 17, 2007
Interviewer: Louise Ditmars for Saanich Archives
Interviewee: Joan Outerbridge (*pronounced Jo-Anne*)
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Can you tell me your full name please.

Joan Richmond (was a Higinbotham) and now I'm Outerbridge.

What were your parents' names?

One was Catherine and one was Herbert and our father was Postmaster in St. Georges in Bermuda, all his life in fact.

What was the town that you lived in, that you grew up in?

We grew up in St. Georges which is on the eastern end of Bermuda and then later we moved up toward Hamilton which is now the capital. St. Georges used to be the capital of Bermuda.

Where was your Mom from?

She was from the US, Connecticut. She was quite proud to come from Everett, Massachusetts.

What sort of facility were you born in? Were you born at home or in the hospital?

I was born in the hospital, my sister was born at home. In those days that's usually where you were born. I don't think that hospital was built then.

What was your birthdate?

7, October, 1920.

What about the other children? How many were there?

We had two brothers, younger than us but they're both deceased now.

What's your sister's name?

Helen Dewder Tucker. She's married twice.

So her married name now is Owen, right?

Yes, it is.

What schools did you go to?

I started out in Bermuda at the St. Georges Grammar School and later went to the convent, St. Agnes Academy it was called, in Hamilton.

When you were a young lady, I understand you worked in the aquarium.

Yes, actually, our uncle Louis Elmer, rebuilt the aquarium, and he had me as the curator out in the museum, and then they had a small aviary, it wasn't anything too extensive but it was interesting.

So that was about maybe 1938 around there?

Around that time.

And then the war came along, what then?

It didn't affect us too much in Bermuda because we were so close to the US and the US had a big base there, England did too. The Dockyards were quite famous. We didn't get involved with the war, thank goodness. Because they had an American base, we were able to get foods that ordinarily we wouldn't have gotten, because they had about everything there. I remember everything was rationed, especially butter and things like that.

I understand you were fairly near kind of a high risk area and that you were made to leave at some point.

Well, high risk ...what manner?

Near the site of the battle of the Atlantic.

We really didn't get involved in anything like that.

So, did you leave the country at some point during the war?

I did, I went back to Bermuda and then I came back to the States again.

You told me last week that when you went to New York, the boat had to zigzag around?

Yes, zigzag all the way up because they found a German submarine was waiting for us. And what they would do is circle us and they'd run up poles and put up lights so all the ships would think it was a passenger ship. But we had a very intelligent captain so he knew about that so we got back up safely.

So then you came back to Bermuda after the war?

Yes, back to the same place at the aquarium.

What was your job like there? What did you do?

Well, I was mostly out in the museum. They also had animals there too and I would take care of some of them. There wasn't too much involved. That's where I usually was, in the museum there.

So did you give people tours and that kind of thing?

Oh yes, I did that.

Would you say when you were a young person, were you quite interested in the outdoors?

I've always liked the outdoors. In fact, in the old days, I know I came ...even to do the dishes, I managed to sneak out, I had favourite trees I went up, I know that.

What about the sea shore?

Oh yes, I was there most of the time. Along the shore, then collected specimens. My Uncle, Louis L. Mervin was in charge of the aquarium, so I'd take them into him. He always said never refuse anything anybody brings in, no matter if it's common or not. Because there's always a chance that it's something very unusual. So I did pretty well.

I'm asking you this, because of course, later on you had a fabulous garden.. I want to talk now just a little bit about the Horticulture Program you were involved in. So this was something just for women.

It was at one time when I was there but they did get the young men involved too so it wasn't just for women. That was the result of going to a school started by a woman Lois Bush-Brown, and her husband was quite famous, they wrote a book on gardening. That's how I got started.

The name of this place was the Pennsylvania School of Horticulture for Women. It wasn't in Bermuda right?

No, not then, I mean they eventually had young men too but when I went there it was only for women.

So that would be around 1950?

It would be around that time, yes.

What did you study?

I went mostly into gardening and that sort of thing and had to learn all the different names of the plants. I didn't mind that because that was quite interesting. But that was my line, mostly horticulture, and landscaping, I got into landscaping too.

So when you got out, you would be a landscaper.

I would have been but I remember, but at that time, I was just out of school and I didn't have any finances to do much in that line, so I didn't do an awful lot then.

What was the town in Pennsylvania. Where was it located?

This is so long ago. You should have asked me.....

I think it was Ambler.

That was the school Ambler, Pennsylvania, yes.

After that, a few years later, after you got out maybe in 1951, the 2-year program, you went to work as an assistant to somebody.

John Wister. He was quite a noted Horticulturist. I learned quite a bit from him too.

You worked as his assistant and what were your duties? What kind of stud did you have to do?

We'd go round to various places to study plants and that sort of thing?

He was at the Swarthmore College Arboretum in Stewartstown, Pennsylvania. So you were still in the States.

Oh yes, I was there.

Did you go back and forth much to Bermuda?

Not too much but I know I went back at least once anyway.

So when you were 44, what happened?

That's a good question. I can't remember that, what happened when I was 44? What did I do? Get married? I always said I didn't want to get married until I was at least 50 so I think I was 49 ½ so I think I held it off as long as I could.

So who was the lucky gentleman?

Lancelot Outerbridge.

What did he do? What was his occupation?

He was mostly outside, he was a carpenter and he was also.. he liked landscaping too.

What did you have in common?

We both liked the outdoors so we worked mostly outdoors.

I think you each had a boat?

Oh yes, he had a schooner, a 2-masted schooner. I think it was 45 ft long or something. Once in a while we would take a trip out to the reefs. I liked that. Bermuda is surrounded by all kinds of reefs. That's how it was discovered, you know, the Sea Venture hit a reef and that's how it all started in Bermuda.

Did you know him for quite a while before you got married?

Not too long, no it wasn't too long I guess.

What were your homes, what kind of places did you live when you were married?

I wished you'd asked me this sooner, I've forgotten a good bit of it now.

I think one was called Whale Cottage, does that ring a bell?

Oh that little Whale House, well actually that's where that was. And then there was a larger house we moved there later. Forbes House I think it was called.

You told me last week, you used to grow bananas.

Oh yes, most Bermudians always had a patch of bananas. They called it a patch of bananas. We had two or three of them and of course in Bermuda, you can always sell bananas. Most Bermudians won't eat any others if they're not Bermudian. They were different, they were called the small cabbages banana and they were quite different from the regular ones, very sweet, probably that's the reason they liked them better.

Were they the same size as bananas we'd buy now?

No, they were little guys, like that. Then they had another one called a plantain, which was quite different again, very large and when they were green, they fried those, they eat them that way, they didn't eat them when, they didn't taste very well when they got ripe but they were good fried.

Tell me about when you came to Canada. How did you find out about Canada?

You told me you'd seen a TV program about Victoria.

Oh yes, that was interesting.

So you were kind of thinking you would move to Canada. You bought a house at 1171 Royal Oak Drive.

That's where I started out, I remember that.

But that wasn't the end of it was it?

No, because I went off to do the other house from there.

So what was your idea? You wanted to have a garden.

Yes, I thought I would like to make a place. I had the land, quite a bit of land, I think it started out to be 11 ½ acres, I sold 2 when I sold the house, so I had about 9 or so left at least and I figured that people didn't have too much space to go, houses were built and everything, so that's how I started, really to make a place. Then I knew someone who had a backhoe and he was kind enough to make ponds and I had those put in, so that helped and that's how we developed it mainly.

What did you call your garden?

So long ago, what did I call it?

Shangri-La

Yes, Shangri-La.

So, a beautiful place, so this was a place for humans, so what about animals?

I did for them too. I know I planted a special garden for birds. I knew the things they liked, so I did that.

You're quite a photographer. I was looking at some of the postcards that you had created a few years ago and there is some lovely, lovely work there.

Well, I did like that.

You've got red hot pokers, you've got hummingbirds, all sorts of lovely things that you photographed. What kind of camera did you have?

I think it was a Leica, which was about the best. Isn't it?

I understand you bought a lot of different properties first of all on Royal Oak Drive and then also on Blenkinsop. You had these properties that were long, narrow.

I remember that, I bought them in and and I think there were about 4, one up there and one down lower, and I cut that off and just saved the rear because they were long

narrow properties and then made that into a sanctuary. Everybody was happy because I gave them enough land with the house and I kept the rest which was turned into the sanctuary and that's how that developed.

This is a beautiful place to walk, a beautiful place for birds to live.

Yes, as I say, everything was so built up, people were glad, they had friends to bring them there, and they could walk over and you could go right over to Blenkinsop and it ended and I made sure it had an exit too, you'd come in one side and look around and go out the other.

I understand you had quite a few different kinds of gardens, a hummingbird garden, secret garden.

I tried to do that, yes, plant things that hummingbirds liked, Japanese.... It made it interesting for people, because as I say, as you know, everything was so built up, and houses, and a bit of land they had to put houses on it, but I didn't want that, so I said well one house and that's all so the caretaker could look out for it and that's how I left it.

Who did all the work, all the planting and all the care of the sanctuary?

Well I did, I had people come in to do it, I did my share but I also had people to take care of things. But I didn't want it too much like a lawn so I left it more or less natural for plants and animals so that's why it is still the way it is.

I understand that Saanich bought it in 2005.

Yes, they did.

And have they taken care of it?

They never did, we always heard they didn't but that's the way I wanted it, left, and didn't want it looking like a manicured lawn or anything like that.

Was it left in a natural condition?

Yes it was as a matter of fact, and that's what the animals like too, birds do.

I understand your lawyer, Marlene Rousseau has got a plan having to do with the garden, and she's thinking about, she's doing something for the upkeep of this beautiful garden.

She's done a lot to help me, and keep it protected, that's the main thing I wanted and she's taken care of that so I think it will remain in the state it is, it should.

I think her idea is to get a group of volunteers that will be working with the sanctuary.

People like to do that, you know, they have others to help them to preserve something, you can always get people like that, which is good.

There are very few places like that in Saanich.

I know, it's true, it's been built up quite a bit.

Very seldom does anyone take a project on like this single-handedly like you did.

I could see the potential of the place and I thought well I might as well do something, leave it for nature, and then creatures to take over, because after all, they're the ones that need protection nowadays because everything is so built up, houses are everywhere now.

You've done a wonderful thing for Saanich.

Well, I was glad to do it, and I'm glad it's surviving now.

How have you seen Saanich change since you've been here? You've been here a while now, since the late '80s? Have you noticed any big changes?

In Saanich? Not especially, but I think they appreciate having something like this because they know better than anybody how it's been built up and I think they appreciate it and I think they're planning to look out for it in the future.

Well, that's about all my questions and I'd like to really thank you for doing this interview today. We really appreciate it.

Thank you for having me and I hope that everything will continue as it is now and be of help to other people. That's what I wanted. A place where they could bring their friends and look around so I guess it will be like that.