

Fell's Point Out of Time



Sharon Bondroff Interview, December 8, 2003

Kraig Greff, Interviewer. Jacquie Greff, camera.

[Kraig]

I've only known you for a short time, but the word is your family in Fells Point - all immigrants? Tell me a little bit about them.

[Sharon]

Well, as far as I can tell, all my grandparents came over on the boat around the turn of the century and landed in Baltimore, probably in Locust Point and then took the ferry over to Fells Point, and stayed in East Baltimore for a while and eventually left and moved farther and farther from the water because that's what people did. They didn't want to be close to the water. They wanted to be away from the water [parrot squawks]. They wanted to be up the hill. They wanted to make better lives for themselves. And, that's what happened. I changed all that when I turned around and went back to Fells Point. I wanted to be back down there. I wanted to be...

[Kraig]

Why'd they move away from the water?

[Sharon]

I think historically [parrot squawks] people ... you could get diseases ... living down there wasn't very healthy. And the more money you got, the further away from the riffraff and the working class you wanted to be [parrot squawks, also clock chime]. In other words, people first made their living on the water and there were the canneries, things like that, and then as they put some money in their pocket, they bought a home a little further north or west or east, just [parrot squawks] away from the harbor.

[Kraig]

So at the time, Fells Point was really considered the working class ... all the shipping ... and if you wanted to not be involved in all that, you pretty much got the hell out of there.

[Sharon]

Oh, yeah. Then my father, I guess they lived about...

[Kraig]

Came in from where? [parrot squawks]

[Sharon]

Russia. His family came in from Russia. They lived up the street. I guess they lived up on Baltimore. And he used to come down and go swimming off the Rec Pier ... early in the century. He was born in 1910, my dad. So, I guess when he was ... by 1920 he was jumping off the Rec Pier and swimming in the waters, which [parrot squawks] ... you could do then. And my uncles, everybody hung around East Baltimore [parrot squawks].

[Kraig]

So you said you came back down to Fells Point and changed all that. Tell me about why you did it and what happened.

[Sharon]

Well, I grew up on a street called [parrot squawks] called Bland Avenue, and it was pretty bland. It's ironic because people like my family got away from East Baltimore and Fells Point and the harbor to live a better life but [parrot squawks] what happened was - they all moved into these separate homes and suddenly they were isolated from their neighbors [parrot squawks] ... they had air conditioning and they'd stay inside. So, the close-knit, the tightly packed large family living of Fells Point was no more. Instead, you were living very quietly and separately. And [parrot squawks] to me, when I was a kid, I'd go for rides through Baltimore and they'd take me to the old neighborhoods and I'd see all these people sitting on their stoops, their front stoops, and I always wondered what it would be like to live down there. That looked interesting to me.

So, they left - they wanted to get away from it - I wanted to get back to it. So eventually that's just what I did. I started moving closer and closer in the city back in the 60's [parrot squawks] and by 1978, I was in Fells Point again. Well, '79, something like that, I was back in Fells Point.

[01:03:51:01]

[Kraig]

And? What'd you do? Occupation?

[Sharon]

I worked at the Baltimore Sun from 1980 to 1985 and after that, I was a freelance writer. I also helped Steve Bunker with his store, and in 1990, I just started working all the time with the store, with China Sea, and really liked that. I was [parrot squawks] still doing pretty much writing, too, actually. I just love living in the city. I love the colors and the textures [parrot squawks] and the people and the shape of things, how it felt, and being part of a community. Again, you can't be much of a part of a community when everybody lives indoors all the time and doesn't get together. Down there, everybody gets together [parrot squawks] outside. You can't hide. It's great. I liked it for many years. It was just wonderful to be able to walk down the street and see everybody you knew and know all the shopkeepers... It's just a real friendly feeling.

[Kraig]

Do you see that increasing or decreasing since you've moved up here to Maine? What's happened in Fells Point to you since you departed Baltimore, and what year did you leave?

[Sharon]

When did we leave? We left in '98, '99... Everything changes [parrot squawks]... That's my bird. Everything changes. When you show up there, and you become a part of it, you think you own that and you don't like to see a whole lot of change take place, especially if you like the way things are going.

[Kraig]

If it's not broken, don't fix it.

[Sharon]

Right. That's how I felt [parrot squawks]. So while we were there, there were people there that wanted to come in and change [parrot squawks] ... "Oh, isn't this a great place, let's see how we can change it... It's so charming, but let's see what we can do to make it more like what we want... where we came from..." Well, you just can't do that - it's not a great thing to do. So, we fought a lot of that and the neighborhood has managed to retain a certain charm. And I think it will for the foreseeable future, but again we don't know what's going to happen [parrot squawks].

[Cut - 01:06:25:06]

... you get to borrow it but you don't get to keep it ... Fells Point's like that. You get to borrow it. It becomes yours for a while. But not forever, because it's got to belong to other people [parrot squawks], so you have to let it go.

[Kraig]

What do you see happening in the next 10 to 15 years, with all the new building and the new condos and the new administration in the Mayor's Office and new Governor... ?

[Sharon]

Well, I see a lot more people with a lot more money coming into town. And I'm hoping it doesn't squeeze out [parrot squawks] a lot of the folks that have been there a long time, the smaller shopkeepers and the people of moderate or modest income. I hope there's room for everybody because that's what makes it nice, the mix. That's what brings people there in the first place. I'd be [parrot squawks] I'd be sad to see that leave, but again, things change.

[Kraig]

That's exactly what brought us there when we came to Baltimore, we saw the ... [parrot squawks] ... and they had birds squawking in the distance, constantly ... and, that was nice.

[Sharon]

[Laughs] Well, Saigon used to fly around on my shoulder ... she used to be on my shoulder all the time we'd walk around Fells Point. I'd be the woman with the bird on her shoulder [parrot squawks]. Tourists would go "Polly want a cracker?" and poke at her.

[Jacquie]

Do you want to put the bird on your shoulder now?

[Sharon]

Do you want me to put the bird on my shoulder, do you want to see Saigon?

[Kraig]

Sure, might as well because ...

[Cut - 01:08:04:18]

[Sharon]

... There was the period in Fells Point with Geoff Footner and his bar and all my friends ... we were single and we were probably crazy [parrot squawks], and we spent so much of our time down there - this was at Rick's Cafe American - and [parrot squawks] there were others...

[Kraig]

Do you know, there was another Rick's Cafe Americana opened up in Canton. It used to be Razorbacks on the corner by the fire house there.

[Sharon]

They stole the name. [Laughs.]

[Kraig]

When mentioned that, I thought "Wow, that's not the same bar." Of course, that's also the bar in Casa Blanca, too.

[Sharon]

[Parrot squawks] There goes my bird. What are we going to do about her?

[Jacquie]

Just keep talking.

[Sharon]

She's a big part of Fells Point. She's ...

[Kraig]

The birds?

[Sharon]

All the birds. Oh, yeah. People loved the birds at the shop. They'd come in to see the birds.

[01:08:59:08]

[Kraig]

Now it's dogs. Tons of dogs.

[Sharon]

That's right! There's a big change.

[Kraig]

You know everybody by the dog names.

[Sharon]

Designer dogs.

[Jacquie]

Were there always dogs?

[Sharon]

[Laughs] As more affluent people moved in, they brought their affluent dogs with them. So instead of having strays pooping in the street ... Geoffrey once said, this is years ago, he said you could tell a Fells Pointer from a non-Fells Pointer because the Fells Pointer just automatically stepped around the dog poo. [Laughs] I thought that was funny. Actually, I thought I could be one of those people who could walk barefoot down the street in the 70's. And of course, the first thing that I did was cut my foot on glass. I just couldn't be like that. I guess I wanted to be kind of a hippy [parrot squawks]. But I had northwest Baltimore part of me and I just couldn't get that rough, that comfortable [parrot squawks]. All right, Saigon. [Sharon and Kraig imitate bird squawk.]

[Kraig]

That bird's loud, too. It's just really loud. What else? Help me out here.

[01:10:23:10]

[Jacquie]

Tell us some things that you think that we should know and have captured about Fells Point. Don't assume that other people have told us, because some people are more candid in front of the camera than others.

[Sharon]

Fells Point has a spirit and a soul and a life that is apart from every other neighborhood in Baltimore. I've lived in different neighborhoods in Baltimore and I've explored them. There are many good

neighborhoods, but nothing is like Fells Point. It is a wonderful mixture of the sacred and the profane, the funny and the sad. It's a very rich place with very interesting people who come there for all kinds of reasons. Steve says it's a second-start town, and maybe that's true. Maybe you can understand that. When I got down there, it was home. It was home. I could wander those streets and I could feel at home.

You become friends with all kinds of people. My neighbor, John Ignatowski used to have a house down on Shakespeare Street. And when they were putting the road through, he lost his home. So he moved up the street closer to where I lived. And he ran a bar called the Shed Rogue - I do not know where that name came from. When I knew him, he was 80 years old. Every Wednesday, he would go out and visit his wife's grave at the cemetery and on the way back, he'd buy pies and he'd come back and bring me a custard pie. Anyway, he finally got his house back - I think at a really low price - on Shakespeare Street, and it was renovated and he got his house again and I thought that was really nice. Then he died. But I think I was really lucky because ...

[Kraig]

That's an amazing story. Dah ta dah ta dah and he brought pies and he got his house back, then he died.

[Sharon]

[Laughs] And then he died. But his son got the house. Yeah. But he was all right. He lived his life up the street away from the waterfront and he did OK. But like I said, all kinds of people and a very special neighborhood.

[01:12:38:27]

[Kraig]

Any interesting stories ... anything?

[Sharon]

[Laughs.] All kinds of interesting stories. I'm not the storyteller in my family, but

[Kraig]

Well, throw a few out. Anecdotes or little things....

[Sharon]

Did Steve ... [laughing] did Steve, did he tell you about Captain Martin? Captain Marty and when his alarm went off? The tall ship, what is it ... the Nighthawk, that used to be right there on Thames Street, Thames and Ann Street Wharf?

[Kraig]

Right, right ...

[Sharon]

One day his alarm went off ... he had a little building like a little [parrot squawks] a little stand-alone place where he sold tickets.

[Kraig]

Right, right...

[Sharon]

One day, he wasn't there. He wasn't there at all ... like a Sunday afternoon and the alarm went off and it wouldn't stop. And it kept ringing and ringing and ringing and ringing, and it just wouldn't stop ringing.... So Steve, I think, got a rifle from somewhere [laughing] and shot it out. And all the people at the Cat's Eye were going "Wahoo!" and screaming and carrying on...

[Kraig]

Where was his alarm?

[Sharon]

It was somewhere in that building. It was somewhere in that building. And Steve just ... he just had to shoot it out. You get away with stuff like that down there.

[Kraig]

Not now.

[Sharon]

Oh yeah? It's changed, huh?

[Kraig]

Maybe you can... I don't know. What else?

[Jacquie]

Let me stop a second.

[Cut - location changes to bird room - no lavalier mic - 01:14:08:28]

[Jacquie]

Tell me some stories about these birds in Fells Point.

[Sharon]

[Sharon moves back and forth looking at bird. Bird begins moving back and forth with her.] Well, let's see. Let's think this thing through. Can we think of a Saigon story? Oh yes, Mommy loves you so much. Well, Saigon, the thing with Saigon when she was in the back of the store when the store was on Thames Street... She was in the back of the store and some people didn't get a chance to

see her as much, they saw mostly Jack and they saw Singie, they loved Singie ... Right? It used to hide... Now Jack, Jack was something else. Did Bunker spend any time telling you about Jack?

[Jacquie]

Not on camera.

[Sharon]

Oh, Jack was so funny. Jack would fly around the neighborhood [laughs] ... He'd fly into the trees. He'd fly into the Cat's Eye Pub. And he was totally blasé. Oh, this is great. Here's my favorite Jack. Jack was living with Steve in Steve's apartment. I get a call one morning from Bob Keith. "Sharon, is Jack missing?" And I said, "Not that I know of." He says, "Well, there's a parrot outside in a tree behind my house." Now, it's freezing out. There's ice in the trees and there's a parrot... So I called Steve. Jack had flown outside in the dead of winter and was out in Bob Keith's back yard. So Steve had to climb up the tree and bring Jack home. And as always [parrot squawks], Jack is blasé. Jack goes "Ehhhh.... Whatever. Yeah, I'll come home with you." [To Saigon] Yes, you didn't like Jack. You were jealous of Jack. I know.

[Cut. Camera move. 01:16:09:08]

Sharon continues - So anyway, little Jackie, little Jackie... One time we got him back... He saw a blonde girl in the street, so he flew to the blonde girl, and let the blonde girl walk him over, flew on her, and allowed us to take him home. [To Saigon] Yeah, I know. It's very difficult. Here you go.

[Jacquie]

Did Saigon get jealous, or did Saigon know Jack?

[Sharon]

Saigon bit Jack. Saigon bit Jack's foot one day when the store was on Ann's Street Wharf. So, Bunker took Jack to the vet. And Jack seemed to be in good spirits. Jack was kind of talking on the way. [Saigon climbs on Sharon's shoulder.]

[Jacquie]

There we go. That's a great shot.

[Sharon]

Hello, sweetie. Anyway, Steve and I were out to dinner. We were thinking Jack was going to be just fine, [sadder] and we get back and there had been a call from the vet that Jack didn't make it through the operation. We lost Jack. So we had a funeral and a wake for Jack. We had a little coffin. A little flag draped over it as I recall. People spoke. He had some special friends who came. And at the end, he was buried under Broadway Pier. Jack is actually buried under Broadway Pier and he even has a brick on the Pier, by the way.

[Jacquie]

Now, Broadway pier was being constructed at the time?

[Sharon]

Oh, yes. I guess I should have mentioned that. It was under reconstruction, so we were able to slip out on the Pier one night ...

[Jacquie]

So you snuck it in?

[Sharon]

And we buried Jack... Jack's on the Pier. Jack's a happy spirit. Jack's a happy bird. [Saigon rubs beak on Sharon's arm.] Hey sweetie.... I didn't like Saigon for a while after that. I felt very bad. Oh, and like I said, Jack had special friends. He lived with Nancy Caudill for a while. And she'd go, "Spread your pretty tail, Jackie. Spread your pretty tail..." [Laughs] You just can't beat that neighborhood, I tell you.

So what else can I tell you? What else can we talk about?

[Jacquie - shows picture to Sharon]

Isn't that a nice shot? [Sharon moves forward with Saigon]

[Sharon]

Here's my little sweetie... Here's my little sweetie... You liked it in Fells Point, didn't you.

[Jacquie]

The audio in here is terrible, but the shot is so cute!

[Sharon]

So the voice isn't coming through well?

[Jacquie]

It's coming through, but there's a lot of bounce of sound. You learn to tune things out when you are just kind of being yourself that the camera doesn't tune out, and you know the audience isn't going to tune out.... So I might be able to put some noise reduction on this or something, but...

[01:19:08:09] Tell me the cutest story about a parrot in your shop in Fells Point. Or parrot story in general.

[Sharon]

Cute parrot stories... Oh, Bunker, he's the ... The one where the bum calls Saigon King of the Pigeons?

Saigon... when we first got Saigon, we didn't know Saigon could fly. And one day, we're walking around Fells Point with Saigon on our shoulder and Saigon took off. And he landed on the median, you know where the Market is, the south shed of the Market, amidst a huge group of pigeons. And

a couple of the winos were sitting out there. And one of them says to the other, "Look, it's the King of the Pigeons, it's the King of the Pigeons!" It was Saigon.

[To Saigon] Yeah, you just took off. We thought we'd lost you. We didn't know much about taking care of birds, but we learned, didn't we Saigon? We learned. [Makes kissing sound. Saigon responds with squawk.] You were one cute story.

And then there was the time that we didn't know Willy ... I had a lilac crowned Amazon named Willie ... We didn't know Willy could fly because we'd had Willy for a couple of years and Willy never flew. Not a foot. And then one day we were on Bond Street and Willy's on my shoulder and Willy flies into a tree. And the whole neighborhood came out to try to get Willy out of the tree. It took hours. Willy just sat there and waited. Steve climbed up finally and we got Willy. [Saigon squawks.] Actually, I think he had to cut down the branch. He cuts the branch, and Willy comes crashing down to the ground. [To Saigon] We got Willy back. Yes we did.

[Jacquie]

How did you end up with so many birds?

[Sharon]

I think Steve thought it was appropriate that he had a parrot. He sort of came from the sea so we thought we should have a parrot. So it started with Willy. And then it became Willy and Saigon. And then Willy got sick and died. Willy was an old bird. And then one day it was Saigon and Singapore. And now we have Jack the parakeet who came to us because ... Jack was at the town dump. Jack was drinking water on the ground in the town dump a couple of years ago and we picked him up and took him home. So now we have him in the family. But I, I knew nothing about birds.

[Cut. Brief discussion about camera picking up radio station. 01:21:42:22]

[Jacquie]

You were telling me about immigration and your research on immigration, and the thing about the number of immigrants. Can you go through the number of immigrants vs. Ellis Island ... what you found?

[Sharon]

I wish I had the papers with me. Basically, Ellis Island was far and away where most of the immigrants came [parakeet chirping] when they came to the United States. However, many, many, many people also came to Boston and Baltimore and other ports of entry. But, compared to Ellis Island, it just wasn't that many. That being said, Baltimore, given its size, we had thousands of people coming through here throughout the 19th century and the early 20th century. I guess up until World War I. Now, there's different kind of immigration after that. Different countries. But then a lot of people from Eastern Europe were coming over for one reason or another - my family probably because they had to deal with prejudice and desperates who wanted to destroy them, destroy their culture. [Talks to Saigon.] So anyway, Baltimore's not second only to Ellis Island in the sense that there was any kind of real competition.

[Jacquie]

How did you find this out? What was the context? How you learned this?

[Sharon]

I was doing some work for an immigration project for the Baltimore Harbor Endowment and I went to the Maryland Historical Society and did some research on the numbers in their research facility. And I just got the raw numbers and I looked at the raw numbers... At no time did I ever get the sense that we were huge compared to Ellis Island. But we did our share. So did Boston. So did Philadelphia.