

Hudson River Valley Institute  
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral History Project  
Dave Conover

**Date:** Thursday, March 26, 2009  
**Length:** Approximately 17 minutes

**Interviewer (Paul Contarino):** The first thing I want to ask you is could you please state and spell your name for the camera?

**Dave Conover:** Sure, the name is Dave Conover –C-O-N-O-V-E-R.

**Interviewer:** Could you talk a little about yourself, where you grew up and where you went to school?

**Conover:** Sure, I grew up in the Catskills in a little town called Boiceville, right in the heart of Ulster County. I went to Onteora Central School-High School there. After I graduated, I ended up going to school at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry where I got a degree in biology there. And then eventually I went on to get a graduate degree from Antioch New England Graduate School where I got a masters in environmental studies. And I was also a candidate for a teacher certification. So I got certified to teach as well up there.

**Interviewer:** How long have you been with Clearwater?

**Conover:** Well after I had left graduate school, I was looking to get a job as a teacher, actually, a classroom teacher. I was having a hard time finding a job. There's not a whole lot out there. So I found out that Clearwater was looking for a teacher on their boat. And I knew about Clearwater because I grew up in the Hudson Valley. So in the fall of '91, I started work as the educator on board the boat and I did that work for about three years. And I've worked on and off for Clearwater since then. I've taken various breaks of time from there [laughs] doing other things, teaching in school, working for other non-profits. But my Clearwater experience really started in 1991 as a crew member on board the boat.

**Interviewer:** I'm sorry could you describe your experience being on the boat?

**Conover:** Sure, Clearwater is a replica of boats that used to sail on the Hudson a couple of hundred years ago. So there used to be a lot of these boats. They were cargo vessels and they were the main link, transportation link for the Hudson River back in the 1,700 and 1,800s. Back in 1966, Pete Seeger and Vic Schwartz and some other friends got together and came up with this idea of building a replica of a boat, to draw attention to the pollution in the Hudson River at the time. So since then, that boat has been used as a platform for environmental education and also to draw attention to Hudson River issues. So it was one of the first sail boats to be used in that fashion really, it was really a pioneer effort to do that. The program that we do on the boat is very interactive and combines environmental science, ecology, history, and it gets kids very involved, engaged with sailing the boat. So they get firsthand experience doing it. And as the teacher on the boat, it's great experience because you get to-you get exposed to kids from all different backgrounds, all different ages. You could be sailing with fourth graders from Harlem one day and West Point cadets the next day. So you really get a big broad range of diversity that's in the Hudson Valley coming on board and getting them engaged with the Hudson River. So it's a lot of fun.

**Interviewer:** Could you tell me a little on Clearwater's formation what were some of the factors leading up to it?

**Conover:** Yeah, I think back then the Hudson River was really the victim of an attitude of the day that rivers were a convenient and cheap place to get rid of waste. There's a famous anecdote about the General Motors plant in Tarrytown where you could tell what color they were painting the cars by looking at the color of the river. So if the river was red that day, they were painting the cars at the General Motors plant red or if the river was yellow, they were painting them yellow and that just-I think that really kind of symbolizes the attitude-was that the river was just a great place to get rid of waste, whether it was industrial waste from a car company, PCBs that General Electric was using or municipal sewage waste. So the river was suffering as a result of that. So part of the idea I think behind the building of the Clearwater, was just to change the basic attitude about what rivers were about. That they shouldn't be looked as industrial canals for disposal but that they're really living and vibrant ecosystems that were important to our heritage. So I think that was the idea that undergirded the philosophy of building this boat to really change people's basic attitudes about the Hudson, specifically, but rivers in general. So that was what went into, I think building the boat. The actual building of the boat took a while to do -it was a difficult undertaking because there were really no plans to build a Hudson River Sloop. They had all disappeared by the early 1900s. They had been just all had rotted away, or sank or converted into barges. So there really wasn't; nothing to base a design of a boat like that again. So they used some creative methods to try to recreate one these boats using some paintings, Hudson River School paintings and- of these boats to-and they gave them to some boat designers. So through that and through just their skill, they re-created the sloop and they raised money, mostly it was a grass roots effort, small donations raised through fund raising, through concerts, and things like that and in May 17<sup>th</sup>, 1969, the boat was launched up in Maine, that's where it was built, and it sailed down the coast of Maine down into New York Harbor and began its work.

**Interviewer:** Did Clearwater play a role in the Storm King Case that happened to be occurring at about the same time?

**Conover:** Clearwater did not-was not one of the leadership groups involved with that case they played a support role but-the essential-when the essential elements of that case were being articulated, the real leaders in that effort were Scenic Hudson and then the Hudson River Fisherman's Association. Clearwater at that time, you know, was founded in the 1966. The boat was launched in 1969. So the Storm King case was well under way at that point and the focus of the organization was to get the boat built and raise money for that. So the Storm King case, even through Clearwater was a big supporter of the efforts that Scenic Hudson and the Fisherman's Association were playing, I think Clearwater at that time, was mainly just focused on getting the boat built and getting established really so. So our efforts- I think Clearwater's efforts at the time, were mainly as a support role. But we weren't taking a lead in as far as the legal case. We weren't supplying the lawyers or any sort of that thing.

**Interviewer:** What is the biggest challenge you think Clearwater is facing in regards to bringing environmental awareness to the Hudson today?

**Conover:** Well I think there's been some complacency because the river has improved dramatically. The ecology of the river has improved greatly. When you-one of the first things that Clearwater did when the boat was built and started sailing, was try and gain support for the Clean Water Act, one of the seminal environmental laws that we have today. And we actually sailed the boat down to Washington D.C. to try to rally support to pass that law but that was in the early 1970s. Once the Clean Water Act was passed and implemented and companies like General Motors or General Electric stopped being able to just causally dump pollutants into the river and communities like Poughkeepsie and New York City and Yonkers had to actually upgrade their sewage treatments plants, so raw sewage couldn't just be causally dumped into the river either, the river started to improve. And so it was harder for us to make the argument when you couldn't just point to the river and at the oil slicks and the tires and the dead fish. The pollution was a little bit more subtle then, the PCBs that were in the river, were still there and we took a lead role to advocate for that clean-up-the PCB clean-up, but that was a harder role to play because you couldn't point to a fish and say, "ah ha see it has PCBs in it," because you can't tell just by looking at the fish. So we had to find ways of articulating the science of and the rationale for PCB clean-up to the public and that takes some skill to be able to do that when you don't have dying fish just- you could point to. So once the PCB decision was finally made after many years of debate and controversy, once the decision was made to clean-up the PCB, a lot of people thought, "oh well the Hudson River is saved, you know everything is fine now." But I think right now, a big problem that we're facing in the Hudson Valley is there's been a lot of sprawl development a lot of loss of open space a lot of fragmentation of forests and the watershed itself is-has been compromised. So the ability of the land that surrounds the Hudson River, to actually help clean the water before it even gets into the river, has been compromised too. So that's an issue. Today we are also working on dealing with the problem of Indian Point, the nuclear power plant. They use about over 2 billion gallons of water a day to cool the plant and the result of that involves killing a lot of fish, mostly fish larvae and eggs but that's a major impact on the Hudson River ecology and just the safety factor. We feel that Indian Point is not really a safe plant. It has some really serious environmental issues as well. So those kinds of things we constantly have to again go back to the science and say, "hey this is the reason why we have concerns about this plant," and go back to the public and try to get them to understand why we have taken the position we have on it. But there are a lot of challenges and they're just-in many ways are a lot more complex than they were back in the '60s when it was a lot easier to just point to the river and say, "yes we have to clean it up," so.

**Interviewer:** When was the decision made regarding PCBs in the Hudson?

**Conover:** That decision was made in 2001 and the cleanup is going to begin this spring, in the spring of this year, 2009. So we worked really hard on that issue. We're very strong proponents of a comprehensive PCB clean-up. The clean-up as it stands now, is not everything we want it to be but its-it will make a difference and so we're pleased about that. And we're still encouraging people to be involved no matter how they feel about the issue. We want people to be involved in the clean-up process, to understand what is happening as each step of the cleanup is undertaken.

**Interviewer:** So what are Clearwater's plans to commemorate the Hudson-400?

**Conover:** Well the quadricentennial is a pretty exciting year for us, not only is it the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Henry Hudson sailing up the river but it's also our 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the boat being launched. And it's also, Pete Seeger's, our founder, 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. So that we have a lot of special events that we've been asked to take part in. There's a Hudson River flotilla of boats that is going to be happening in June that will involve the Clearwater and the *Half Moon* which is Henry Hudson's replica and a few other boats too. So there's going to be a lot of celebrations at various docks along the Hudson River, community organizations and municipalities are doing some events and we're taking part in those. So we have a whole cluster of events that are happening in June as a result of that. We'll also take part in the opening of the railway over the Hudson, the walkway over the Hudson over in Poughkeepsie, the railroad bridge and that will be in October. So we'll be part of that big opening celebration as well.

**Interviewer:** Is there anything else you'd like to add that we haven't covered?

**Conover:** It's an exciting time to be in the Hudson River, it's also a challenging time because of our current financial problems that the country is facing. So I think that forces people to look at what's really important. And I think that's something we at Clearwater are encouraging people to do, is what makes the Hudson Valley important to us and the quality of life here, whether it's the quality of water, the quality of our open space around us or the quality of the air that we breathe here. All those things are really important to making a high quality of life for everybody here. So we are encouraging people to be involved and get involved in whatever way they feel comfortable. They can come on board the boat and go sailing with us that's a lot of fun. They can take part in some of our events, our festivals that we do. They can support the education program that we do on the boat. We're doing some great work with teams from urban areas, leadership programs for them. So there's a lot of things that we can do. I think we're just trying to figure out ways to make sure that the Hudson Valley stays a place that people want to live in for a long time to come.

**Interviewer:** I'm just curious, have you ever actually been up on the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge?

**Conover:** Yeah, I have, it's great, [laughs] I've taken groups of students up there and it's an amazing view of Poughkeepsie and the Hudson Valley and the fact that you can really get a sense of history too while you're up there. It's a nice view and I am looking toward to when they actually formerly open it with actual platforms. When I was walking on it was-there's a metal grate that kind of covers the railroad ties so you can walk on it but you can look through, and it goes all the way down and it's very high. It's like over 200 feet high. So I think it's the highest bridge, it's going to be the highest walkway, I think over a river in the world or something like that, so it is a nice view up there. So it should be- so I think it's a great project.

**Interviewer:** I think that's it.

**Conover:** That's it, good.

**Interviewer:** Could you elaborate on the battle of urban sprawl in the Hudson River?

**Conover:** Sure, I think a good way to look at this is back in the days of the '60s, when a lot of these pollution issues were really getting public attention for the first time, thanks to a lot of

these grass roots efforts in the Hudson Valley. It was easy just to point to General Motors in Tarrytown or General Electric or to a sewage treatment plant and say, “that’s bad, that’s got to be cleaned up.” So those kind of point source pollutions were easy for the people to understand and grasp because they were obvious, there was a pipe going into the river. The Hudson River is more than just the strip of water that’s in the valley. Really it’s a reflection of the land that drains into it. So those non-point sources of pollution like runoff from a farmer’s field, or a golf course, or a mall parking lot, those are harder things to point your finger at really and say, “that parking lot is causing this problem in the river.” It’s the cumulative effect of all those things that can cause a degrading of the water quality and that can be reflected in lower oxygen amounts or just other water quality indicators. So I think that’s a big part of it and also it’s important to think too that the Hudson River is not this static watershed that’s kind of isolated from the rest of the world. We’re also connected to the Atlantic Ocean. It’s an estuary for half of its length, the Hudson is. So we’re impacting the fish that come up river every spring to spawn are impacted by fisherman and fishing boats offshore that may intercept some of these fish before they even get up here . We also very vulnerable to invasive species, things like zebra mussels for instance and more recently even, the Chinese mitten crab, that has arrived in the Hudson River. So these other kinds of threats that come from even outside the watershed are also something that we’re trying to come to grips with. We don’t even really know what the impacts of all these things are. So yeah, I think the problems are more complex, we’re part of a global economy now and we’re not isolated from the impacts of all that too.

**Interviewer:** Thank you very much.

**Conover:** Thank you.

**[End of Interview]**

**Transcribed by Paul Contarino**