

Hudson River Valley Institute
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories
Suzanne Isaksen

Date: Thursday, August 14th 2008
Length: Approximately 19 minutes

Interviewer (Paul Contarino): Could you please state your name for the camera?

Suzanne Isaksen: It's Suzanne Marie Isaksen.

Interviewer: Could you please spell that?

Isaksen: S-U-Z-A-N-N-E M-A-R-I-E I-S-A-K-S-E-N.

Interviewer: How long have you lived in the Hudson Valley?

Isaksen: I've lived in the Hudson Valley for about eight years.

Interviewer: Where did you grow up?

Isaksen: I grew up in Warren County, New Jersey along the Delaware River.

Interviewer: Where did you go to school?

Isaksen: I went to high school-Phillipsburg High School in Phillipsburg, New Jersey and then college was Cornell University where I studied anthropology and archeology and then graduate school, at the University of Toronto for Ancient and Near Eastern studies.

Interviewer 2 (Jason Schaaf): That's quite an adventure, what has brought you to Maybrook and to study the history, or keep alive the history of Maybrook?

Isaksen: Well, because Ancient and Near East studies isn't the most practical area of study. I got into historic preservation and my husband who started out as a re-enactor in- during the bicentennial, had worked at New Windsor Cantonment and he was familiar with this area. So when we decided to look for a house, and we were living in Passaic County, New Jersey, he naturally decided to- that he wanted to explore opportunities in the Hudson Valley. So we started house hunting and we found a place in Walden that we liked and we moved here. I got involved in local history, I guess just naturally because of my interest in historic preservation. Walden has a lot of very unique buildings and so I started attending local historical society meetings and then the opportunity came up to become Town Of Montgomery Historian and I jumped on that opportunity and I've been town historian since 2005.

Interviewer 2: What are some of the challenges and accomplishments that you've seen along the way as town historian?

Isaksen: Well our town, which also has three villages, one of the interesting opportunities is to work with the different groups in the three villages; the villages of Maybrook, Montgomery, and Walden. Within the town, we have a very interesting colonial heritage as the home of the lieutenant governor [Cadwell Edward Colden??] and so one of the challenges is to educate people about that particular heritage and to overcome the whole association with the Tories and to get them to understand the bigger picture of the American Revolution. We have a site that

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was the 1801 find of a mastodon which was a very significant scientific discovery during the early 19th century, during the Early Republic. So there are some opportunities with respect to that, to educate people about the very early history our country as we see in the Town of Montgomery. Then of course there's preservation of 19th and 20th century history. So as we- one of the challenges right now as we lose many of our farms, we try to document our agricultural heritage in different ways. I have also an oral history project where I'm working with veterans of the different foreign wars to capture their experiences for our community.

Interviewer 2: So then you've seen or examined several of the different periods in which major change has occurred within this area, which is great because the focus is on the railroads. So could you talk about what this area was like before the railroads and perhaps as the railroads came how did it change?

Isaksen: Well I guess I'm approaching this because I had done some research into one of the particular railroad, the Lehigh and Hudson River Railroad that had come into this facility and all of these were farming communities and they derived a lot of their subsistence based from different agricultural products. The railroads during the late 19th and early 20th century brought things to various communities, and they took things like agricultural products out and so they were essentially the life blood many of these agricultural communities. Some communities became the headquarters of various railroads and Warwick was the L&HR. Here it was this large switching terminal that was the life blood of this community and what you would see with these railroads is they would pick up these various products and transport them and in many cases to New England or into New York City. The agricultural-the farmers and the small villages relied upon on these railroads to deliver goods out and bring things in and coal was one of the primary things that was delivered to many communities as well.

Interviewer 2: Was there much resistance to the railroads at first? I'd imagine with agricultural lands and property lines being what they were, might have presented some challenge to agriculture?

Isaksen: Well I-my research indicates that when they were buying up land, there was some initial resistance but the railroads really worked with members of the community to- because everybody realized that they need each other to accomplish what had to get done. So in the case of here, there are-it's a very complicated story in terms of you know what was going on in terms of dynamics, the different railroads that were involved in establishing the switching terminal. This is something that Peter Brill who's researching the book, would be able to provide a clearer picture on as to how the dynamics of those businesses effected a particular community.

Interviewer 2: Have you come across anything in regards to people working on the railroads? New people coming into the region? Was there collaboration or contention with people coming in?

Isaksen: Well as people were coming in to work on the railroads, many of them were immigrants and so there were particular neighborhoods that were established for workers. They supported the community. So there was an understanding that these people were necessary but as even happens today with new people moving into the area, there's sometimes resistance of people who've grown up because you know you don't necessarily understand the community

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because you didn't grow up here. So when you interview Mr. Marano, he would be able to tell you more about how his particular family was received in this community.

Interviewer 2: Were there different types of people who came here, different ethnicities and how this evolved in terms of labor being imported into the area?

Isaksen: In Maybrook, again from my research, there was a very large Italian population that worked on the railroad. In other places there were German populations. It depended upon who came here first and who their associations were, who they brought into the community and what type of jobs and job skill sets were involved in the particular operations but here in Maybrook, there were a lot of Italian immigrants who came here

Interviewer 2: Could you explain a little bit about-to speak to why Maybrook became a place chosen as one of the major hubs?

Isaksen: Well Central New England I believe- started the switching terminal here and again that's something Mr. Marano might be able to address better. Again this gets back to the dynamics of the railroad business and Central New England because then eventually the New Haven took over the operation.

Interviewer 2: Could you speak to the effects on Maybrook after the railroads dropped out, after the bridge fire and what it is and how has it evolved up to this point to where it is today?

Isaksen: Well as you look at any community that focuses its manpower on a particular industry. When that industry is going very, very well, and when it's thriving, the community thrives, there are many jobs and the economy is good and when that fire took place on the Poughkeepsie Bridge and the traffic was no longer able to come in or go out along the route, there was no longer the need for the manpower. So many people lost their jobs and what jobs were available at that time. So the railroad was eventually replaced by the trucking industry and many people were able to find job opportunities in that respect but Maybrook, like many of these communities, Walden for example when it lost its knife factories, people had to scramble to figure out what to do and some communities are better at doing that than others and it resulted in many, many changes in the Maybrook community. It's an interesting question because right now in the Town of Montgomery, if I can use 21st century example, as we look to our economic base, a lot of it focuses on Interstate -84 and the logistics centers and the trucking terminals and so on and so forth that are focusing on Interstate -84 and if something happens with, you know, with respect to the prices of fuel or something that is similar to that, the same thing could happen in Montgomery. Again, but here, it would be the trucking industry and not the railroad industry. So it raises some interesting questions about communities that focus on one particular industry as their life blood.

Interviewer 2: What would you say is the state of Maybrook now and how is Maybrook going to approach in your opinion, how is Maybrook going to approach life in the 21st century?

Isaksen: Well Maybrook like the other villages in the Town of Montgomery and there's an effort to create more of an inter-municipal cooperation with different things. I have had some contact with one particular trustee, there's a town economic advisory committee that is working to identify different opportunities for communities in terms of its history-facilities like this are

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very important because they preserve the history but they provide an opportunity for people to come and explore this museum as well as the many other museums in the area.

Interviewer: When was the railroad museum established?

Isaksen: You know what Tony, what was it, in the 19, if I might ask him a question. Tony could probably answer that question.

Tony Marano: It was 1989.

Isaksen: Okay, 1989-so they've done a remarkable job in preserving the history of the area. They also, you know, they work with different groups in the community on different projects. We have railroad merit badge program that is starting up. So your question with respect to how the community moves forward in the 21st century is going to have to focus on where it's been and where it can go. In some respects that's going to have to deal with inter-municipal relationships, dealing with the other villages and with the towns in general.

Interviewer 2: Is there any significant characters, larger than life figures, that have surrounded the railroad industry that you can recall, that you might want to speak to, to add a little color to the history of Maybrook?

Isaksen: The historical characters?, again that's something that Tony would be able to address better with respect to Maybrook. I mean there are historical characters with every different railroad and again with the New Haven, Peter Brill who's writing the book has researched that as well. That would be a good topic for him to talk about.

Colonel James Johnson: What about the Quadricentennial and the Walkway Over the Hudson, how will Maybrook link into that or how will that effect the Town of Montgomery? Will it be part of the rail trail? Is there any connection that could be made to the bridge itself- the Poughkeepsie Highland Railroad Bridge, from your perspective as the historian?

Isaksen: Well I know there's an annual trip, an excursion and people coming down from Danbury, visiting this facility and I'm a big believer in heritage tourism and heritage trails and so I think that something could be developed with the New Haven line in mind that would link up different sites along the corridor. You could possibly start out at with Warwick where the LH&R had its headquarters and move up through Maybrook, follow one of the lines as it moved and then go up to the bridge and the walkway and focusing on various railroads that traveled through the Hudson Valley as a heritage trail of the railroads.

Johnson: But nothing's been done yet, this would be conceptual at this point?

Isaksen: Right.

Johnson: So there is the potential, you could have rail trails that then can link into the greenway trail that would allow people to walk through the Town of Montgomery, and be a part of the experience of going over the walkway?

Isaksen: Right and-right now it's locally based there's been no regional coordination, you know you have a rail trail along parts of the Erie Railroad; you have a rail trail that's being developed

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on the Wallkill Valley Railroad. There has been, not to my knowledge, any sort of coordination where people would understand fully where all these different rail trails are and where they can experience various aspects of rail history in the area. So that's an excellent project that could be undertaken that would bring people, and they're a lot of people interested in railroads to various areas. It could be a nice basis for a conference, where people could present histories of different aspects of the railroads, focusing on the bridge which railroads utilized that bridge and why the bridge and the bridge fire was so critical to the railroads those business and the people who supported the railroads and communities.

Johnson: I'm not trying to pick too much into your business guys but in your research on the Lehigh & New Haven Line, any insights you can offer us about its relationship with Poughkeepsie Highland Railroad Bridge?

Isaksen: The Lehigh and Hudson River?, well I researched that because I was working on a state-national registered nomination for a freight house in New Jersey and again I have to stress how critical that bridge was to the operations of the railroad. There's a quote in the one of the magazines, there's a gentlemen by the name of Bob (Mohaski???) who wrote an article about that fire. I think it was someone from LH&R who had been contacted by his boss who was asking how general operations were going that particular day, and the fellow said, "everything's fine except the bridge is on fire." That was you know it's- like the death now because once he said that, it reverberated throughout the whole system, that-that was going to be pretty much the end of operations.

Interviewer 2: Was there a sense in Maybrook before the bridge actually went up, [where things began to slow down??], that perhaps the end was near?

Isaksen: In my research, I haven't really seen anything like that. I think it was just business as usual, you know. There were peaks and valleys with business and different changes along the railroad as you went-you know people began to rely less on coal and you know different products were being transported by the railroad but my understanding was that you know, that it was business as usual, until that fire.

Johnson: That's good. Thank you, great.

[End of Interview 19:15]

Transcribed by Paul Contarino