

Interviewed on March 26, 2009

Approximately: 39.5 minutes

Interviewer: Could you please state your name and spell it for the camera?

(John Mylod): [laughs]-excuse me [laughs] I'm sorry, start again. [laughs] Sorry. It's not that funny is it? No no, it's just the way you spell it for the camera. Yes, I'm John Mylod M-Y-L-O-D.

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

Mylod: Well that's a walk down memory lane I'm a native of Poughkeepsie. I went to Poughkeepsie Grade School, Poughkeepsie High School and I graduated from Fordham University and almost have a masters in American Literature from Fordham University except, I couldn't pass the French test.

Interviewer: When did you become director of Clearwater?

Mylod: I became the director in 1976, September the 1st 1976. I had been on the board of the Clearwater for about a year or two-, maybe two years before that. I got involved because there was a building in Poughkeepsie that the Clearwater had obtained and was turning into its office in downtown Poughkeepsie. And I was asked by some folks if I would volunteer and help rehab the building. It's a learning experience certainly to do something like that and probably, I wouldn't recommend it in the future, in terms of having it so completely done by volunteers. I think sometimes you need-even though volunteers that are skilled; I think sometimes not all of them- not all the work was up to par-including my own.

Interviewer: Could you comment a little on how Clearwater formed, what were factors leading up to it?

Mylod: Well you have to go back to sort of the atmosphere in the '60s. As you may know, there was a proposal in 1962 by the Con-Edison company, to build a large power plant on the river called a pumped storage plant. And it would take large amounts of water out of the river and store it on a reservoir on top of Storm King Mountain, which is a little north of West Point, and it would then during high-peak needs, release the water out of the reservoir turning the generators and creating electricity. That provoked a lot of opposition, suddenly, by folks who were very concerned about, initially, the despoliation of Storm King Mountain which is a very beautiful area and also it was the backdrop for the Hudson River School of painters. And it was the backdrop for what is known as the Gateway to the Highlands, the northern gateway. And so a group called Scenic Hudson Preservation Conference was created in and around 1964 I believe it was to battle the plant because they said that the considerations for getting a permit were not sufficiently explored to look at other impacts other than the engineering needs and the construction costs etc. So the power plant was granted a permit but then there was a lawsuit

brought against Con-Edison, a very long protracted lawsuit, that I can talk about a little latter but in that atmosphere of environmental concern, which was also being sparked elsewhere, it was also part of the atmosphere of the '60s. A very great concern about what was happening in this country and so there was a grass roots movement that began to build to clean up the Hudson. And in addition to fight the power plant and some other organizations were formed at around the same time the Hudson River Fishermen Association was formed in 1966 and so was the Clearwater. It's original name was the Hudson River Sloop Restoration. And a group of people got together at a concert actually that was held outdoors on a lawn in Garrison, New York and these folks came together, they created something called the Hudson Valley Folk Picnic and in the middle of the concert, during the intermission, folks got together and started talking about the need to clean-up the Hudson in terms of its water quality and in terms of its overall protection. And as a result of that, the organization, Clearwater was formed, literally at that concert, people said, "okay I'm going to sign up here." It was driven largely by Pete Seeger and some other folks who were also similarly interested in cleaning up the Hudson. Pete lived of course in Dutchess Junction, a little bit south of Beacon, and had experience on the river. So he gathered a lot of people and the organization was formed. Now the name Hudson River Sloop Restoration was such that they thought could find an old-an old Sloop and restore it. Now part of the reason for this was a book that was published in 1902, written by Moses Kyler and William Verplanck, who were two old river captains. And they wrote a book called *Sloops of the Hudson* and the *Sloops of the Hudson* were, in their words, the most beautiful boats that you'll ever see and you'll never see them again was their concern. And they wanted to get down on paper as much as they could about sloops, their names, what they looked like, because they were-it was kind of a romantic time in some respects, from their point of view. But also, they were very beautiful boats and if it weren't for the Clearwater, you really wouldn't have seen it again. And so folks got together and set out to build a Hudson River sloop, to be the symbol so to speak and a practical classroom. Although in the beginning it wasn't clear how that was going to work, as far as what the focus of the actual sloop would be. But because it was a grass roots organization, there were a lot of- there was a lot of input of what it should be doing and so from that early time and many other fund raising concerts, they laid the keel for the sloop up in Maine. And in May of 1969, it was launched in Maine and latter that summer it came to the Hudson.

Interviewer: What was Clearwater's role in Storm King, did it play a significant role?

Myldod: The original lawsuit was brought by the Scenic Hudson Preservation Conference which ultimately changed the named to just Scenic Hudson. The early days of the Clearwater and the Hudson River Fisherman's Association were not focused on Storm King, although it was something everybody talked about and went to hearings about and commented on and took advantage of the opportunity to draw attention to the river and to the problems because of Storm King. I am not 100 percent sure why-I wasn't involved in Clearwater at the time. I am not a 100 percent sure why it wasn't involved in the lawsuit other than they probably didn't have any money. Since it was spending most of its time trying to raise money to build this boat and I think part of this too was that building the Clearwater as a symbol of people getting together to clean up the river was also a different way of approaching the same issue which was the need for the public to focus on this great natural resource. And it really was-the Storm King was really the trip wire for huge outpouring of interest in the river. An attitude that you can't keep polluting

the river and they viewed the power plants as a form of pollution because of the way it would kill fish in addition to it being a massive eyesore.

Interviewer: Could you describe your directorship between 1976 and 1991, what direction did you take Clearwater?

Mylod: Well I was there until 1994.

Interviewer: I'm sorry.

Mylod: Almost eighteen years to the day actually, it was. I had started on the 1st of September and I ended on the 31st of August. I think it's important to realize that the Clearwater purpose was to-in the beginning, to bring people to the river and it wasn't in of itself that to have a boat. It was to use the boat, as a classic sloop from the past operating in the present for the-working for folks in the future. That it would be a way for people to come to the river, to be drawn to the river, because it was an unusual and beautiful boat. And then once there, presumably people would hear messages and become concerned themselves particularly on their own local waterfront. So as it evolved, and I was the director for the longest period of time, we had a three part approach which was celebration, to tie us back to our origins, education and advocacy. So it was a three part-three pronged approach I guess you might say, all of these presumably complementing one another in terms of the actions. So we did and again the reason was for the advocacy and the educational build-on the advocacy, and music and celebration was way to bring people together and also spread a message. So some of it was associated with food, that started again back in the early days with strawberry festivals and pumpkin festivals and shad festivals and again a way to bring people to the waterfront and to have a message and the message was mixed with music as a way to spread that message. We as an organization though, were involved in a lot of advocacy that involved lobbying in Albany for better legislation, lobbying for more enforcement of existing laws, bear in mind too, that in the early '70s, it was time in the country where the green light of environmentalism had been turned on and people were now beginning to pay attention both as the public was leading and as the elected officials began to follow. We had some very significant legislation that was passed with the National Environmental Policy Act in '69, the Clean Water Act. In New York State, the state Environmental Quality Review Act which is still similar to the National Environmental Policy Act in that it requires, that if you're going to do a project, you to have to look at the impacts of that project. And SEQRA as it's called, doesn't say you can't do the project, it says you have to look at the impacts and the options and alternatives. And it may lead to the denial of a permit let's say but it doesn't automatically say you can or can't do something. It really gives the public the opportunity to understand what the impacts of a particular project will be. In most cases, a project that has gone through the SEQRA process or through NEPA the National Environmental Policy Act in most cases, those projects turn out to be better projects because the developer or the agency initiating the project or the cooperation hasn't really thought through all of the pieces of it and more public impact- or input rather, is often very important and give the community an opportunity to say what it thinks something should or could be.

Interviewer: What were some of the big environmental challenges that you faced as director?

Mylod: Big environmental challenges, well certainly the PCB case was major-a major problem on the Hudson that Clearwater took a leadership role in pursuing. One of the things though we tried to do as an organization, was to work collectively with other organizations and try to get people in the valley concerned and also provide good information. We also were very heavily involved in the Westway case and that was case brought by the Hudson River Fisherman's Association and Clearwater in fact, was a part of that lawsuit for many years and that was a great victory. That was a plan to fill in over 500 acres of the Hudson, on the west side of Manhattan, and then they would dig a tunnel through that landfill and put the highway in the tunnel and then have development on top of that and also in and on the land that the current highway is located on. And it's still going on. In 1985 when it was-when the final nail was put in the coffin, by Congress, who said we're not going to give you any money for this. Then Governor Cuomo said, "well we didn't lose Westway, we lost money for Westway" and one of its people put together a secret plan that eventually became public that said here's how to do it, you just build out on pilings and piers and do it incrementally and you'll end up with the same economic development you were seeking. The problem with that is that a lot of information that was developed in the Westway case on the impacts of these kinds of structures on aquatic habitat helped to stave off a lot of projects. Although they are still being proposed and it's still a problem. We've learned over time, there's been so much science and so much biology, that we've learned about on the Hudson as a result of lawsuits largely. That we know so much more now about the impacts of these kinds of projects on aquatic habitat and on fish resources. Now you say, "well you know, the fish will go swim somewhere else." It's not that easy. Habitats have been destroyed throughout the eastern seaboard; it's been destroyed in the Hudson, largely by dredging and filling areas in the early part of the 20th century and the late part of the nineteenth century through deepening of the channel and making the river more navigable, particularly north of Kingston. So we now know a great deal of what this estuary means with respect to its role in the whole east coast ecosystem and it's beautiful in its complexity and it's extremely important in trying to get the message across to decision makers as well as the public. It's been a struggle but a life's work for many of us

Interviewer: How has Clearwater transformed over the years?

Mylod: Well by necessity, it had to get more professional because of the demands of the projects and complexity of the projects. The PCB issue for instance, was-is a case that has gone on for- since it was really-I wouldn't say discovered, it was really reported on in 1975, in a large article in the *New York Times*. It caused a great deal of concern over-although the state did know about what was happening prior to that, and G.E., the corporation that discharged most of the PCBs, way over a million pounds over time, knew about it well before the '70s. When I say knew about it, they knew that PCBs in large amounts were going into the river and that PCBs are detrimental to fish and by extension to people and so in 1976, most commercial fisheries in the river were closed as a result of PCBs and all but shad and blue crabs, herring and sturgeon. Now sturgeon has now been also closed but largely because of decline in the population of sturgeon not PCB related. Striped bass which is hugely popular, as a recreational fishery, is still closed as

a commercial [fishery??] related to PCBs. The good news after all this time, is that G.E. is going to begin dredging the PCB contaminated sediment from the Upper-Hudson this year, 2009. In the late 70's we knew then what we needed to do and we that knew dredging was necessary and we knew it could be done safely. There was science that had been conducted over a number of years that showed that PCBs were available to the lower river through scouring and flooding episodes. So they couldn't really just stay buried as a lot of people thought they should in the upper river but the science looking at it sedimentologists and others who were brought in, indicated that it could be done safely and it could be done with a very well planned out process. An environmental impact statement had been begun to do this, the problem was that Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980 and in 1981 the PCB reclamation process hit a stone wall and pretty much remained in limbo all the years after that, until a variety of lawsuits and efforts to break it loose finally has taken place. And so this year, it will begin dredging the contaminated sediments in the upper river. The problem is too though, that a lot of the PCBs that could have been removed hadn't and floated down into the main stem river. So Clearwater had participated heavily in all the hearings and public participation opportunities on the state level, on the federal level through litigation. We sued the EPA for not working more diligently the Hudson river, the entire Hudson River, was declared a superfund site at one point, as a result if the PCB problem and there was no political will on the other hand, in Washington, to move it up front more quickly. Clearwater was also involved in a lawsuit against the U.S. Navy for presumably bringing ships with nuclear missiles on board into New York Harbor that would be have a home port in Staten Island. Now the Department of Defense said, "that we neither confirm nor deny, that there are nuclear missiles on board these ships," however, they did not do an environmental impact statement to the standpoint of the worst case scenario of a missile accident. No one was expecting that it was going to become a target I mean any more than New York is already a target but that there could be an accident on board, a fire or something like that and it could be a dangerous situation. We weren't successful with that lawsuit but ultimately because the court ruled that because we neither confirm nor deny, you wouldn't know if there wasn't necessarily any missiles on board but that would in fact cause a problem. It was the only time in all of the years that I was at the Clearwater, or another time, that the Clearwater was audited actually and found to be clean as a whistle but I could only imagine it was a result of suing [slight laugh] the Navy that caused that to happen. So again we used a variety of tools in the tool box, whether it was litigation, whether it was public participation, whether it was education in terms of getting people-making people aware of problems and also trying to do – take steps to fix some of the problems though litigation. We at some point sued under the Clean Water Act, the federal Clean Water Act. We sued the Conrail Company at the time; Conrail was still in business, for discharges of oil into the Hudson south of Albany. And we were successful, it took quite a long time to wind its way through the legal process but we were ultimately successful in not only stopping them, but getting a fairly large fine at the time. It was-the Clean Water Act allows you to take action, now citizen suits is what these are called. It allows citizens to take action when the government agencies that are charged with enforcement don't take action, and so it's an important tool. Unfortunately, there is no citizen supervision in New York State even though we and other environmental groups had been trying for years to get a citizen suits in New York State which would allow the same kind of thing to happen for some areas of the law that aren't covered by the federal law.

Interviewer: So what have you done since you've left Clearwater?

Mylod: Well I've done a combination of things. I am a commercial fisherman and I have been since '74 for shad and now blue crabs in the river and, "you say, well how can you have fish for shad and blue crabs, weren't they contaminated?" Most people these days want shad row. Shad were not highly contaminated in the first place, because they don't spend very much time in the river and they don't feed for the most part while they're in the river. So there's not the same uptake of PCBs then say striped bass have because they a) spend more time in the river and b) they consume other fish and they therefore bio-accumulate PCB. Now those levels have dropped significantly over time because the faucets so to speak, the pipes where the PCBs were coming directly into the river, have been turned off for quite a long time now. And there was an event, where one of the areas of a G.E factory, at Hudson Falls, was breached and a lot of PCB went into the river. The sight was so contaminated that when it rained it migrated PCBs into the sediment as matter of fact into the bedrock. So PCBs were coming in spite of the fact that they had been stopped as a direct discharge overtime that has abated. And G.E. was forced actually to pump water out of the ground, filter it, and then return it to the river as a way of getting PCBs out of the groundwater. It's an incredible story when you consider how slovenly they were in their practices of contaminating the whole area up in that part of the Hudson. The river has over time gotten better in many respects, but it's still is big a problem and doing commercial fishing, I see on an annual basis, tremendous amounts of plastic in the river, largely, I suppose through storm drains and sewage treatment plants. But we've also seen a significant decline in the fisheries of shad and herring because of many factors, one of which is the massive amount of water that power plants remove from the river for the operation of power plants. And that's killing billions of fish and fish eggs on annual basis. So it's one of the causes of the decline in some of the fish populations. Interestingly enough, striped bass which is a signature fishery for the Hudson, is in very very strong numbers in the river now; largely because of a conservation effort that was put in on the coastal zone back in the '80s. And it was a very significant program that led to enormous spawning success of striped bass and so now the river is loaded with striped bass. You're allowed to keep one a day, if you fish with a hook and line. You're not allowed to keep any of your commercial fish because of the PCB issue.

Interviewer:- Could you talk a little about your book *The Biography of the River: The People and Legends of the Hudson Valley*?

Mylod: Well this year marks the 40th anniversary since it was published. I believe it's out of print and has been for quite a while. I've always been interested in the river largely through my family connections to history and the river and I had the opportunity just out of graduate school to become involved writing this book for a company in New York City and which was interested more as a kind of historical document versus an environmental book. So there's not a whole lot on the environment per se and I happen [to read it??] in forty years. So I -[laughs] I've forgotten a lot of what's in it and I know a lot more than I did then.

Interviewer: There's one interesting aspect of the book that- I looked it over- was the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge

Mylod: Yeah, well the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge, a project of potential when it was built, to link the western coal fields with the New England factories and take finished products west. It opened in 1888, a certainly an engineering marvel of its time, and an urban-they didn't have an environmental impact statements in those days. So what it did to Poughkeepsie from a standpoint of urban planning is pretty remarkable, now with the idea of having a walkway over the river, which is a useful retooling of so to speak of the bridge. It's a good thing, otherwise you'd have to tear down the bridge or eventually fall down and cause problems and therefore it makes more sense to create something than to spend more money just tearing it down. I think it will be a major attraction for Poughkeepsie. We'll now be called probably the walkway city. We used to be known as the bridge city actually because the Poughkeepsie Bridge was the first bridge built below Albany and across the Hudson and then of course the Mid-Hudson Bridge came-opened in 1930. The railroad bridge has interesting history and its impacts are more aesthetic than environmental from the standpoint of it- you know from a real point of view- I mean a technical point of view, yes it created a certain amount of landfill in the river by putting the piers there but from a practical point of view, I don't think that it's caused much of an environmental issue as far as fisheries are concerned, water quality. It's a navigation issue but there are all kinds of navigation aids now that help ships and barges safely navigate through the bridge. It wasn't always that way, there used to be, because of the nature of shipping in those early days. Large numbers of barges, sometimes forty and fifty barges, would be linked together and then towed by a tugboat south to New York-with supplies from upstate or from the D&H Canal or from the Erie Canal and then they returned largely emptied back upstate to those other locations or from way stations along the way. And the railroad had a tugboat parked in Poughkeepsie that would go out and help the barges through the bridge without hitting the bridge piers because it was common for the barges to smack the bridge piers as a result of different river conditions and/or different pilot error. So now because of the nature of the industry and the large barges and extremely powerful tugboats that it's not so much a problem. It's a problem and you still have to be careful and there's a lot of radio communication back and forth if barges are going to meet near the bridge or ships. As you may know, Hudson river ships larger than barges, have to have a pilot on board who is knowledgeable about all aspects of Hudson River navigation and so that's an additional safeguard in terms of accidents

Interviewer: Is there anything else that you would like to add that we haven't covered about Clearwater or perhaps any comments on the quadracentennial?

Mylod: Well I don't really have any comments on that. I think the- I think Clearwater has severed a significant purpose in the valley and beyond as far as being a magnificent classroom aboard the sloop. But also sending a message of care for the environment, generally and a specific care for the Hudson River in particular. It's individual programming, and advocacy and celebrations are important aspects of life on the Hudson. I believe that celebration is as important as education that you have to remember the magnificence of the river but it's not just the river, it's the extended community and the river is a way to bring people together. Lots of people have very particular love for the river, very particular ideas about the river, many people think of the Hudson as their river. It's certainly America's river from a standpoint of everything that has happened in America happened here first, more or less from discovery to pollution it's all gone on here. We've got nuclear power plants, to being a superfund site as a river, we have

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the magnificence of protected Adirondack to the best harbor in the world in New York City. So it's in a fairly short space, it's only 320 miles roughly and another 100 miles out into the Hudson canyon. But the river is a fairly short river as rivers go, but its role in American history and in world history for that matter has been significant. And it's just fun to be on whether it's out on the river fishing, or out on the river coaching rowing. It's the place to be, for me.

Interviewer: Is there anything else?

Mylod: No, can't think of a thing.

Interviewer: Alright then thank you very much

Mylod: You're welcome.

Interviewer: For your time.

Mylod: You're welcome.

Transcribed by Paul Contramino