

Hudson River Valley Institute
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories
Michael O'Connor

Date: April 26, 2008

Length: Approximately 15 ½ minutes

Interviewer (Jason Schaaf): We'll contact you on when we are going to have a showing and [cut off by O'Connor]

Michael O'Connor: Okay.

Interviewer: And hopefully long term what this might even do.

[O'Connor clears throat]

Interviewer: Even a start for an opening pilot at some point for of a regional show RNN on the Hudson which will focus on different aspect of the Hudson River and what's happening in the valley and stuff like that so hopefully this will be a launch pad for it because there is so much attention to opening this bridge for the 2009 quadrennial.

O'Connor: Yeah.

Interviewer: Schumer was just up on the bridge.

O'Connor: Yeah, I saw that yeah.

Interviewer: So there's a lot of attention, a part of it an extension of it.

O'Connor: I'm thrilled to be able to participate.

Interviewer 2 (Joe DeLisle): We're grateful for you to come and speak with us.

O'Connor: Okay.

Interviewer 2: On just one little side note if it is possible, we're going to ask you a question, if you could somehow try and get the question in with you answer, for instance if we were asking what do you think of some of the benefits of the bridge could you say something along the line I think the benefits of the bridge are xyz trains, rephrase the question in your answer.

O'Connor: Okay so [you have your question gotcha so].

Interviewer 2: That way we don't get my sinus infec-[cuts off] my sinusy voice.

Camera man: All right we're all good to go.

Interviewer 2: Could you say and spell your name for us please?

Hudson River Valley Institute
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories
Michael O'Connor

O'Connor: My name is Michael O'Connor and the spelling if it is M-I-C-H-A-E-L middle initial J O'Connor is O apostrophe C-O-N-N-O-R.

Interviewer 2: Where did you grow up?

O'Connor: I grew up in Poughkeepsie.

Interviewer 2: And where did you go to school?

O'Connor: I went to; first I went to parochial school for the first five years. Then I went through the Poughkeepsie School system, Poughkeepsie Middle School, Poughkeepsie High School then I went on to Columbia University and then Vanderbilt Law School.

Interviewer 2: And what did your parent do for a living?

O'Connor: My father was a chemist for Texaco. They used to have a big research facility in Beacon and my mother was primarily a homemaker while I was growing up she had office jobs too.

Interviewer 2: What was your first job?

O'Connor: My first job was a paper boy.

Interviewer 2: And what is your profession?

O'Connor: I'm an attorney.

Interviewer 2: What type of an attorney?

O'Connor: I have my own law office in Poughkeepsie and I do a variety of civil things, some family court, some real estate, civil litigation.

Interviewer 2: How long have you lived in the Hudson River Valley?

O'Connor: I've lived in the Hudson River Valley almost all my life. We moved up here when I was about five and except for going away to college and law school I've always lived here.

Interviewer 2: Could you maybe contrast your time at college/law school as compared to here, maybe the sights, the sounds, the settings?

O'Connor: I'm not sure how I can contrast that when I was in college it was in New York City which is more urban than it is here. When I was in law school at Vanderbilt there were some unique things about living right in Nashville but it didn't have the same kind of urban environment in New York City that I did want to escape.

Hudson River Valley Institute
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories
Michael O'Connor

Interviewer 2: What role do you feel the bridge has played for the community in the region at large?

O'Connor: Well the role that the bridge has played in the community I think ended before I got here with you know being an important link in a transportation chain. It hasn't played a big role now except to give us, I think recently in the last couple of years something to do in terms of you know celebrating the Hudson Valley and something to rally around so far as reestablishing some of the unique features of Poughkeepsie and the river

Interviewer 2: Do you feel that the bridge is uniquely something of Poughkeepsie or that it's more of a community thing that brings both sides of the river together?

O'Connor: I'm sorry what? [Looks for clarification]

Interviewer 2: No it's my fault; do you think that the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge is like, almost like symbolic of Poughkeepsie in general, structural monument almost if you will for the city?

O'Connor: I think the bridge has the potential for being a symbol of Poughkeepsie, an icon of Poughkeepsie; it doesn't have anymore a real practical use other than that. There's a bridge right next to it that does that and carries that load of carrying people and vehicles across so we're kind of stuck with the bridge because it's a lot cheaper to keep it up than you know to tear it down so the best thing we can do is to make it useful again instead of just something that happens to be there.

Interviewer 2: And what role do you feel the bridge will play for the community?

O'Connor: I believe that Walkway Over the Hudson and its leader Fred Schaeffer have done a terrific thing for Poughkeepsie and brought a lot of attention statewide to this bridge and really developed the opportunity and convinced the right people that's it's an opportunity for Poughkeepsie and the Hudson Valley and the Hudson River and that you know make it into something that's really going to stand out and make Poughkeepsie notable for something again.

Interviewer 2: What do you find most interesting about the bridge itself?

O'Connor: The most interesting thing about the bridge is how it has changed in its use from something that was utilitarian when the railroads used to come over it and so part of it now is the history for us and part of it now is going to be an opportunity for people not only to celebrate that history but to celebrate the transformation of the bridge into something that can be useful in a wholly different way.

Interviewer 2: How long have you known Mr. Schaeffer?

O'Connor: I've known Mr. Schaeffer for probably twenty years.

Hudson River Valley Institute
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories
Michael O'Connor

Interviewer 2: And did he really get you involved with the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge and Walkway Over the Hudson?

O'Connor: He, I got caught up in Mr. Schaeffer's enthusiasm for the bridge, yeah. [cuts off]

Interviewer 2: Alright were going to switch now.

Interviewer 3: Have you ever been up on the bridge?

O'Connor: Yes, I've been lucky enough to take two trips onto the bridge in the recent past.

Interviewer 3: Okay when were these?

O'Connor: The dates of me being on the bridge, the last one I'm not sure of the date, I think it was February 3rd it was Super Bowl Sunday and maybe a year before that I was on, [cuts off] I had my first chance to walk on the bridge.

Interviewer 3: Okay, what were your impressions of the bridge?

O'Connor: I thought that the bridge was going to be a terrific place for people to go once it was finished it's a little scary now being on it even though there's a grate beneath you it's kind of daunting for some people to you know take that trip.

Interviewer 3: How is the view?

O'Connor: The view is spectacular you could see all sorts of things up and down the Hudson. You could see the Culinary Institute, Franklin Roosevelt, the Vanderbilt Mansion and to the south you could also see some landmarks, it's a terrific view from up there.

Interviewer 3: Did you see any problems with the bridge?

O'Connor: The, well the only problem that I saw with the bridge is that it's not yet even something that you could walk all the way across. There's a point where you can go and it's not ready to accept people to go any further right now.

Interviewer 3: Okay, have you heard of any ideas to recycle the bridge?

O'Connor: I remember that were some ideas, I would say probably ten years ago to tear down the bridge. I recall that being discussed.

Interviewer 3: Would you say the bridge is sturdy?

O'Connor: The bridge is very sturdy Mr. Schaeffer has, I've been an audience for a couple of his demonstrations about how sturdy the bridge is. It was built to withstand you know loads far in excess of whatever had to, [slight pause] whatever it had to manage as far as the railroad travel and as a result it's been able to stay sturdy through the years.

Interviewer 3: If there's a walkway put up there, would you bring your family, friends?

O'Connor: I would definitely use the walkway and I would try to convince my family to come with me.

Interviewer 3: Yeah. Do you think the walkway would bring more money into Poughkeepsie? Like tourism?

O'Connor: I think that the walkway would be an opportunity for a lot of businesses to flourish and it would present an economic opportunity for Poughkeepsie and the surrounding area.

Interviewer 3: Okay do you think when trains; when it was closed in 1974 do you think any of the local businesses were affected by that?

O'Connor: I don't think any of the businesses were really effected by the you know the final last gasp of railroad travel in 1974 when the bridge had its burning that prevented railroad travel from using it anymore. I don't think any of the railroads stopped in Poughkeepsie it was just that the bridge was a place where they had to cross the Hudson.

Interviewer 2: Okay. As an attorney maybe you could touch on some of the legal aspects of the bridge to worry about or the legal aspects that need to be addressed or have been addressed?

O'Connor: The legal aspects of the bridge, I guess the legal concerns would be making sure that it's safe, that there's not going to be an accidental falling off or accidents in connection with the bridge. And also that people won't use it, to you know either to jump off or, you know just use it as a place where they could do whatever they want and be away from everybody I guess.

Interviewer 2: Could you maybe describe some of the sights and sounds when you went up on the bridge?

O'Connor: When I went up on the bridge one of the interesting things that happened was a freight train below us went by so you know that was an interesting feature of it. You can see the ground drop below you and for a good portion of walking on the bridge you're really still over the land so you see trees below you. And then finally you go over the water there's metal grates that you walk on and it's just a sensation of being out in the open and the sensation that, it's not for everybody but it's for me.

Interviewer 2: So maybe you could touch on some of the emotions, like is it exhilarating to, you know be standing over the water and just the little grate that you could see through?

O'Connor: It's great to be on the bridge, it's an exhilarating experience it's great to be as far out as you can and have the best view that you can. The second time I was out there I was smart enough by then to have brought a pair of binoculars. So that's something that if you're going to be on the bridge you would want to think ahead and have with you.

Hudson River Valley Institute
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories
Michael O'Connor

Interviewer 2: Did you bring anybody out with you?

O'Connor: I didn't bring anybody with me I was with a group of about thirteen people with Fred Schaeffer.

Interviewer 2: Could you maybe touch upon, maybe did you have any idea what the group thought? Like maybe before they went up they were hesitant, but when they got out actually on the bridge they were just awed by the sites?

O'Connor: Well I think everybody that came with me was eager to go on the bridge. And I don't think there's going to be too many people who are going to find themselves walking on the bridge and then have a change of heart once you've decided to make that trip I think you're going to be rewarded by it. And that's what I felt, I thought everybody that I was with, pretty much had the same feeling this was a great opportunity and a great moment.

Interviewer 3: Is there anything else you want to talk about the bridge, you feel like we missed out?

O'Connor: No I can't think of anything.

Interviewer: I have a question; can you envision perhaps how a completed bridge might impact the community?

O'Connor: Once the bridge is complete it's going to be an opportunity for a lot of different groups of people. I run some chess tournaments I would like to see if I could hold a chess tournament on the bridge. I am a, [cuts off] I run in road races and I certainly want to run a road race across the bridge as just next weekend I'm going to be running across the other bridge and that's another opportunity. I know Fred is also a big bike enthusiast and hopefully there will be an opportunity for bikers to use the bridge so there's a wide variety of people who enjoy outdoor activities of one kind or another who are going to find a use in this bridge. Not to mention conservation and environmental groups they'll benefit from using it just to bring more attention to the Hudson River and how important it is to keep it clean and safe.

Interviewer 2: Are there any other like communal events you would like to see or you know of that could happen on the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge?

O'Connor: There are more communal events out there than I have the imagination to think of [slight laugh].

Interviewer: Okay thank you very much.

O'Connor: Okay.

Interviewer 2: Thank you.

Interviewer: We appreciate it thanks.

Hudson River Valley Institute
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories
Michael O'Connor

Interviewer 2: Watch the wire.

O'Connor: Alright un-wire me.

[End of Interview 15:35]

Transcribed by Paul Contarino