

Hudson River Valley Institute
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories
Fred Pizzuto of the New York State Bridge Authority

Date: Saturday, April 26th 2008

Length: Approximately 17 minutes

[Interview Starts 00:50]

Interviewer (James Duryea): So your eye contact will be right here.

Fred Pizzuto: Okay.

Interviewer: With Kim.

Pizzuto: I can do that.

Interviewer: And you can start whenever you're ready.

Interviewer 2: So does he just have to? [To Duryea]

Interviewer: Oh yeah, if you want to introduce yourself. [To Pizzuto]

Interviewer 2: Okay, if you want to introduce yourself?

Pizzuto: Let me know when I'm wrong.

Interviewer: Any time.

Pizzuto: Hi my is Fred Pizzuto, I currently work for the New York State Bridge Authority. I'm the Director of Human Resources.

Interviewer 2: Can you tell us a little bit about where you grew up and?-[cuts off]

Pizzuto: Sure, I was born in Poughkeepsie, a few years ago. I went to Mount Carmel grade school my mom's family is from Highland. My grandfather and dad ran the bus service in Dutchess County and in the '60s it was time to, (a) build a garage and they were going to build a house. So they chose Highland for the house, anyway cause my grandfather owned a farm which had just recently become a small development. So I went to Highland High School and then came back and went to Marist- went to Dutchess Community College and then to Marist.

Interviewer 2: Okay. What was your first job like?

Pizzuto: My first job, in those days; with the family being in business was to sweep out buses.

Interviewer 2: Okay.

Pizzuto: And I graduated from sweeping out buses to steam cleaning buses. It was interesting having a family business and being involved in it and then as I of course got older and got

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licensed, you kind of graduated to you know driving the charters back and forth to New Haven, New York and wherever they were going to send you off for the weekend and so it was actually a lot of fun.

Interviewer 2: Okay, and can you tell us a little bit about your professional career like after college?

Pizzuto: Sure, I spent about 25 years in the mortgage banking business, most of it here in Dutchess County. I was vice-president for Inter-County Mortgage Corp. We had several offices; the major one then was in Dutchess. Inter- County then became part of Union State Bank which then became part of Fleet which is now still there. During my career in the mortgage banking business, I stayed-my residence stayed there but at one point, I managed five offices across the state, we had 250-300 employees and probably half as many sales people. And in those days, unlike today, when you're familiar with the news and the mortgage industry, we-our strive was to be a prudent lender. I think my office had maybe one foreclosure in all those years and with the market on the growth side, that kind of self rectified itself. So you know, we didn't have 100 percent lending in those days, we didn't have subprime or high interest low credit score loans. So for the years I was in the business, you know, we were actually quite successful. I won't go into comment about that, cause that's a whole nother story.
[Maschak laughs]

Interviewer 2: Can you tell like a little bit about the impact of Hudson River Valley on your life, like living in the Hudson Valley-?

Pizzuto: Yeah, I want to say the Hudson River Valley impact on my life has probably kept me here because you know after college, you know I've been-I've been all over the United States, you know either on vacations or business or on seminars and geographically, you know being an hour an hour plus from New York, or an hour plus from an ocean, or an hour plus from the mountains, it's a pretty nice place to live and having everything you know quite accessible to oneself and family and have the ability of living in a rural environment.

Interviewer 2: And your experience with the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge?

Pizzuto: Sure, let me tell you a little bit about the railroad bridge and myself. As I mentioned, I went to grade school at Mount Carmel and I can remember days staring out the window looking at the bridge and watching trains go back and forth and obviously being-my attention being rectified by the nuns. My dad being in the transportation business knew most of those fellas on the railroad. So at a very young age, I had the chance to go out and you know be on the bridge, you know it was always a spectacular view as it is now. So there's always been a passion you know, for the bridge itself and to try to see it, you know kind of come forward.

Interviewer 2: Okay, your father knew the people that worked on the bridge, were you able to see kind of what their lives were like?

Pizzuto: Dad knew some of the people for the railroads, cause some of them in those days, you know everyone either had no car or one car and lot of them commuted you know on the buses.

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So we got to know, you know, we got to know the people who worked on the railroad and maintain-they were the people who kind of maintained the bridge?

Interviewer 2: Okay, what role do you feel the bridge had played on the community itself like-[cuts off]?

Pizzuto: You mean currently or going forward?

Interviewer 2: Like in the-well both in the past and? [cut off by Pizzuto]

Pizzuto: Well in the past, and you may have- the role the bridge has played and you may have kind of tipped on this in some of your early interviews. When the bridge was built back in the late 1880s, it linked up western New York and the Midwest with the New England states that ran all the way over to Connecticut, New Haven into Rhode Island. It was the first link across the Hudson River which was a barrier in those days for goods and transportation. This is long before the infrastructure that we know today in highways and trucking. So the bridge, you know was like an international sensation when it was built and even today when you're standing there looking at, it is a pretty awesome piece of engineering.

Interviewer 2: How does your work at the Bridge Authority like impact your view on the bridge now and then new projects for Walkway over the Hudson?

Pizzuto: Well let's see, quite coincidentally I now work at the Bridge Authority, so you know one involvement we have now is the ability to host meetings to you know help shepherd this along. In my position as the Director of Human Resources, I'm not directly involved in the Bridge Authority and what goes on with the railroad bridge. But again from being able to stare at it from one side of the river, I get to now look at it from the other.

Interviewer 2: Do you have something that you find most interesting about the bridge or a person-[cuts off]?

Pizzuto: Yeah, I think the most-one of the most interesting aspects that bridge has to offer, years back when I was involved in politics, I spent some time on the town board, Town of Lloyd, a term on the Ulster County Legislature and then eight years on the Dutchess County Legislature. At one point with everybody building rail trails, I thought it would have been of interest to try to do something with the railroad bridge. The problem we had at that point in time and I'm talking early '90s was twofold, one, the bridge and its board was entangled with some legal issues with the County of Ulster and Judge Bradley, and when I was running around talking to people on both sides of the river politically and also the Bridge Authority at that time, it also then came back to dollars. The most important thing at the time and I guess the most shocking thing for me was you know was, it was a \$10 million dollar project in those days just to get it up and going. And some of the major portions of that money was just in the initial engineering because up until then, nobody knew how structurally sound the bridge was from the top all the way until the bottom and the caissons into the river.

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Interviewer 2: Okay. What do you think of Walkway Over the Hudson's new plan to make it a bicycle and pedestrian path and along with like the parks for it?

Pizzuto: Well my opinion of the plan, if I had to jumping jack you know, I could possibly express it to you physically but I think this will be a greatly added addition to Dutchess and Ulster County. I think it will be a great tourism attraction. We've got the walkway, with the rail trail in Ulster County which runs from Highland all the way out to New Paltz and in Dutchess County now with addition of the last link in the City and Town of Poughkeepsie will link it up and take it, you know all the way through Dutchess County. Once they're able to deck the bridge and put it all together, I think it will be a fantastic piece of property for the people not only on both sides of the river to use, but again as I said to bring tourism into the county.

Interviewer 2: Do you have any suggestions for the names of the state park or the bridge?

Pizzuto: Yeah a couple, a little corny but I'm sure people have kind of talked about them before. I think next year with the 400th anniversary of Henry Hudson's trip up the river, I thought that-that it could either be named the Hendrick Hudson Bridge or after his boat the Half Moon, the Half Moon Bridge but that's just you know some ideas from myself.

Interviewer 2: You had said earlier that you had been up on the bridge, when you were younger, riding your bike, can you expand on that or-and have you been on the bridge since?

Pizzuto: Yeah, [slight laugh] years after dad took me out on the bridge and I guess what most people don't realize is the width of the bridge, once you're up and on it, and if one's never been on the bridge, it's hard to explain to them that it's not this narrow little piece of steel. At one point in time, there were railroad tracks running in both directions. So you had a pathway up on the top of the bridge which was probably in excess of maybe 50 or 60 feet wide. In the '60s when we were young adults, before we all went into the service, we knew that the trains would stop, you know sometime around 10 o'clock. So we would take our bikes-motorized bikes and kind of go out in the middle of the bridge. The view used to be just staggering and we obviously kept that all to ourselves but it's a wonderful place to see whether it's from-from either the daylight or from the evening. It's quite spectacular, especially, you feel like you're at the top of the Empire State building cause when you're standing there, you have no obstructions around you- and the view's outstanding.

Interviewer 2: Okay, do you have anything other? [to Duryea]

Interviewer: Fred, the one thing I ask each of the people who we've interviewed is do you think it is important to-how am I putting this-do you think it is important to remind younger generations to what that bridge represented, sort of our industrial past?

Pizzuto: Yes the answer to your question as to what the bridge represented and I touched on it briefly, just earlier. I think that part of this renovation project, if we can get it funded and it looks like we can, I hope we can, will really remind people to where the bridge came from and what it was built for. Most people just see it as a structure again not understanding the value of the bridge back in the 1800s as a transportation link and then a passenger link. There was no way at

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one point and time to get from Western New York or from the central part of the United States to the New England part of the country without going all the way down to the coast and either taking a train into New York and then getting off and getting on another train, and by boat. So probably in- I think the bridge was finished in the late 1880s, early 1890s. It was phenomenal piece of engineering and a very economically viable piece of work for the infrastructure of the country back in that time.

Interviewer: Do you-are there any forethoughts? Is there any feeling about what the future might hold for the potential walkway?-Do you think it would be a bad thing if this were to become more of a commercial venture meaning that because of the attraction from tourists, maybe a restaurant on the Highland side opens and maybe an additional hotel opens up to accommodate people when they come, is that a good vision or is it more along the lines of- ? [cut off by Pizzuto]

Pizzuto: Well from the aspect of a vision, and I tend to be kind of a pro-capitalist visionary, I think given where we are in the beginning of this century, bringing tourism into the area along with generating interests in both sides of the river, I think it's a win-win situation. You know if it brings a hotel, if it brings a restaurant, if it brings revitalization to the shores of the river, I think what we've seen with the revitalization, contrary to what used to be thought of in the past is it's actually led to the cleanup of river. The more the river becomes developed or as the land becomes developed along the river, the more cleaner it becomes and I think it's pretty obvious when you look at the lower part of Poughkeepsie now or if you go down to the City of Newburgh and see what they've done along the river and/ or go up to Kingston, contrary again to what many people used to speculate it's actually done quite the reverse and it's added to elegance of the river.

Interviewer: Do have? [To Maschak]

Maschak: Not that I can think of.

Interviewer: No [to Maschak], are there any other points that you'd like to make? [To Pizzuto]

Pizzuto: No I don't think so. I think we covered pretty much all bases.

Interviewer: Okay, when you see the bridge on a sunny day, does it-anything- as you're driving down Route 9- stir any emotions?

Pizzuto: Yeah, when I look at [cut of by Duryea]

Interviewer: Does it change? [Duryea talks over]

Pizzuto: Well two things, when I look at the bridge it's (a), for me it's a throw back in time because I can remember the moments when I was on the bridge you know with my friends, with dad and things like that and going forward I would love to be able to take my son out on it and walk him across the bridge because it is a moment that, at least for the first time when one's out there, you really don't ever forget

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Interviewer: Excellent, alright.

Interviewer 2: Thank you very much.

Interviewer: We're good. Thank you very much.

Pizzuto: You're welcome. See how easy that was.

[End of Interview 17:33]