

Hudson River Valley Institute
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories
David Ringwood

Date: Wednesday, June 11, 2008

Length: Approximately 22 minutes

David Ringwood: My name is David Ringwood

Interviewer (Jason Schaaf): And occupation?

Ringwood: Vice President for the development for the Community Foundation of Dutchess County.

Interviewer: And can you tell me just off the top of your head what does the Hudson valley mean to you?

Ringwood: The Hudson Valley means to me so many different things. We have so many roots in the area. The Hudson Valley just for the natural resources we have with the river, the mountains, it's a beautiful area to be in and we're so close to so many different things anywhere between Albany and New York City and east and west. It's a beautiful area. As far as ties to the local area we're a long time family in Poughkeepsie, we go back several generations. As matter of fact my maternal grandmother her last name was Ostrum and she had cousins who had done some research and allegedly we go back to one of the two founding families the Ostrums and the Van Kleecks that established Poughkeepsie. And so it's something we've wanted to do is kind of go back and verify that.

Camera Man: Here if you could just dab your forehead a little bit.

Ringwood: Oh sure. [Proceeds to wipe his forehead] okay thank you.

Interviewer: [slight chuckle] So kind of along the same vein [clears throat] what's when, you think of the Hudson Valley what immediately jumps to mind?

Ringwood: When I think of the Hudson Valley some of the things that jumps to mind is we're just very fortunate to be in this area. Just the different things we have that were so close to, we've got the apple farms, the farms in general, the dairy farms the history of the area going back between the river, the regattas, the fact that it is a college area the fact that we have so many colleges and educational institutions in the area and now with the Culinary Institute. It's just a very rich area as far as culture, history just almost anything you want is accessible from this area.

Interviewer: On a personal level what would you say is your favorite thing of the Hudson Valley?

Ringwood: My favorite thing about the Hudson Valley I would say would probably be a combination of the river and the fall foliage and the just the natural beauty of autumn in the area.

Interviewer: I share the same things too [clears throat] How long have you lived in the Hudson Valley?

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Ringwood: I have lived in the Hudson Valley my whole except for when I went to college for a few years. My whole life has been spent in Dutchess County.

Interviewer: I bet you missed it when you went away to college.

Ringwood: Yes it was good experience to get out of the area and see some other things and Syracuse was a larger town than the City of Poughkeepsie. So it was a little bit more metropolitan but nothing like coming back to your hometown.

Interviewer: So could you describe childhood in the Hudson Valley? What it was life growing up around here?

Ringwood: My childhood in the Hudson Valley, everything seemed to be accessible. There was nothing about walking from downtown Poughkeepsie going down to the river when the shad fisherman coming in or getting shad or when the boats came in, boats came up to the shore. Walking up to the Bardavon on Sunday afternoons to see a movie which was probably about a quarter at that time but seeing a double feature on a Sunday afternoon sitting up on the balcony with your candy and sodas, walking around to the shops downtown before they put in the main mall. It was going shopping, holiday shopping I mean our Macys and Gimbals was basically Wallace's and Luck Platts M. Swartz was the fine men's clothing store, the [Up To Date] for women, the- just so many things Tom McCann Shoes, the Doff Shoes, the book and records store, the record store on the corner of Market, the restaurants that were in the area. Just everything was just in a few blocks in the City of Poughkeepsie and going back to when my mother used to talk about downtown, every several blocks was its own community. You could get to a store, you could buy things, you'd have entertainment, you'd play on the streets every little few blocks was its own individual community.

Interviewer: Building upon that, what in your opinion has changed for the Hudson Valley, for the good, for the bad?

Ringwood: How much has changed for the Hudson Valley, good and bad. Good with I think the expansion of what we have as far as the resources again the colleges that are here, the businesses that are coming in and the economic development that's good. What's bad I would say at times how quickly the growth has happened, we've, the area has become a suburb of New York City now. People are moving up from the suburbs of New York because we're the new suburb. There has been a lot of development going on in the eastern part of the county. We used to have lots of farms, the Dutchess County Fair even years ago when I commuted to Westchester for work at one point and they used to make fun of me because of the dairy farms. And we were very rural they called it the sticks up here in Dutchess County and as a joke one day I came down with the classifieds in the Poughkeepsie Journal and showed them that they were selling sheep in the classifieds of the Poughkeepsie Journal.

Interviewer: Great, could you elaborate a little bit more on your family roots in the Hudson Valley?

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Ringwood: Our family roots in the Hudson Valley, my maternal grandmother she was an Ostrum, so that goes back to the founding of the City of Poughkeepsie. My mother's father was Edward Murphy, had come from Boston, he worked on the Mid-Hudson Bridge. And actually when he came here, is where he met my grandmother they would go into the shop downtown to get lunch and meals for the workers on the bridge. That's where he met my grandmother and so he ended up staying in this area. According to my mother two, it's either on the Ringwood or the Murphy side, on the Murphy side probably a great grandfather worked on the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge as one of the iron workers and that would be interesting to find out what kind of records they have, to actually see in researching and get some names and information there. We have long time firemen in the family. My father's father was a fireman in the City of Poughkeepsie and actually drove the last horse driven fire engine in the City of Poughkeepsie when they retired the horses. So we have many stories of my father about the horses Prince and Jack and my uncles we've got photographs of them with my grandfather on the rig down at Cataract in front of Mount Carmel Square and a photograph of the rig when they retired the horses. I guess they had a big ceremony at Mansion Square Park and also at Eastmen Park. As far as any other local history and family ties, I guess because we I used to think that our family was all fireman and nurses because we had so many that were in those professions and so kind of like those services and community tie-ins to the family was very tight with our family.

Interviewer: Great, could talk about growing up so close to the railroads?

Ringwood: When probably from the time I was born until the time I was about five or six years old, our family lived on Bain Avenue in the City of Poughkeepsie and in the back of the yard the hill sloped up to a level that would we could play on. And several yards back from that was a mesh fence, behind that was the train trestle and so the trains were going by constantly. So when we were out playing in the yard and we heard the train coming we shouted that a train was coming and we all got on the swings, because the swing set, you could swing and face the train tracks. And we would swing as the train went by and I just remember the loud clack of the wheels on the track as it went by. It was very rhythmic as the trains went by, I don't remember too much of them tooting the horn for us, but I do remember the horns, the whistles blowing on the trains at different times. But just those kinds of ideas of sitting, the train just so close, and that it was just a common daily event that you really didn't think were spectacular. I guess now in retrospect it was really impressive to have a train that close to the house and be able to see that when you're a kid. So I really don't think I ever had trains sets at home because we always saw one in the backyard. Also at one point my grandparents lived down on Parker Avenue and the apartment they were in was very close to the train tracks too and I remember I was probably about six or seven years old at the time but when we were in the house and the train went by the whole building would just shake with training going by. So it was kind of fun, I looked forward to have trains going by, just to have that experience.

Interviewer: Let's see, do you remember the fire? Where you in the area at the time of the fire on the tracks?

Ringwood: I'm trying to remember that, because I know, because of the relationship of my family to the fireman, we used to listen to the whistles whenever a whistle blew in. What we tended to do was we would look up the address because they used to have a fire whistle and we

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would give a three number code and everyone had a chart in their house and would tell you what intersection or fire box was at. And it was somewhere nearby or someone we knew you know where someone lived, it might be a big building we'd hop in the car and go over and see the fire because invariably we might have a relative working on it. So my mother's brother, you know Mickey Murphy might be there, my father's brothers Tom Ringwood who was the fire chief, his brother William Ringwood, Uncle Bill, Bill's son, Bill Ringwood, they were all firemen. So invariably we might see someone working on the fire and with the family relationships a lot friends were firemen. So invariably my grandmother would know pretty much anyone who was there.

Interviewer: Did you hear any stories about the fire on the bridge?

Ringwood: I remembered but I'm not sure if it's hearing from relatives about it, but it was apparently very hot up on the bridge it was very hot and very hard to get to and because the oils had seeped into the rails. I guess it was very intense and the heat was so high that the rails buckled. I mean, I guess they were just melting and I guess it was red hot. I think maybe Uncle Mickey had said something because Mickey was on the bridge as was my uncle Tommy the fire chief. But I think just saying how very hot it was and very intense and very tough to fight.

Interviewer: So have you ever gone up on the bridge?

Ringwood: Both bridges? I've actually been on both bridges this is back in high school. I walked across the Mid-Hudson Bridge which is really a nice experience because of the family relationship to my grandfather having worked on it. One thing I do remember is getting half way out on to one of the stanchions and looking down over the railing at the river and as you stand at the support of the river the illusion because the river is running by is, that the support of the bridge is actually moving in the water which is a kind of a very strange sensation. But then I also had the opportunity, I know Fred Schaeffer and one day he was bringing people up onto the railroad bridge because he was trying to you know encourage people as they would for years to support the bridge and the walkway. So we had the opportunity to go up one day and unfortunately it was kind of overcast and I didn't get the full effect of it. But speaking to several others who had gone up several times before on a clear day the view is just absolutely spectacular. So I'm sorry I didn't get to go up this last time before they closed the bridge to start the work. But just seeing the views that are possible for the fact that you could stand on the railroad bridge and look down at the Mid-Hudson Bridge is just an amazing, an amazing sensation.

Interviewer: You say the bridge, the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge has meant to the Hudson Valley area and the Poughkeepsie region?

Ringwood: I think the railroad bridge has just always been an icon, something that has always been there, always very functional. It was there as a piece of equipment, with the train tracks going by, that it was something there functional, just to keep things going, industry moving. Now and so many years after just having stand there and nothing being done about it and people wanted to tear it down and the different options they've been looking at, the walkway appears to be the best option that they can do for it. In looking at the reporting they've done, the estimates

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of what it would cost to tear it down versus converting over to a walkway. The walkway is just a great option and having been up there and seeing the views, I think a lot of people would take advantage of them. I think it could be a big draw and with all the other things it's got going for it. It would be the longest pedestrian walkway in the country if not the world. The views that it accesses, in talking with some volunteers too, they had gone up to make sure nothing happened to the bridge around the 4th of July and the fact that you could be up there at dusk and see fireworks all over the Hudson Valley at one time, especially with what they've got planned for the quadracentennial. I mean it's going to be a great opportunity with the ships going up and down the river, the fireworks and celebrations up and down, its just going to be a great launch for what appears to be a very good idea.

Interviewer: Would you go up there after it's completed?

Ringwood: I'm looking forward to going up there when it is completed. The office I'm at right now for the Community Foundation is very close to where they're going to have an access to Washington Street to be able to get stairs to go up. And I'm looking forward to the day when I can take a lunch break and walk down and across the bridge over to Ulster County and walk back again.

Interviewer: That's going to be great, that's going to be great. Let's see I have a couple of more questions, any anecdotal stories that you might be able to share that concern the bridge?

[Slight pause]

Ringwood: About the bridge, some [cuts off] 26:57 I remember growing up my father had a copy when the bridge first opened, there was a magazine made it looked like a large style almost like a life look sized magazine that was done but of course it was the late 1800s so there wasn't a lot of photographs not color photographs but basically it was a black and white but it was about the railroad bridge. And I think they talked about it being the longest bridge in the world but in that paper there were photographs of some of the buildings that were existing around the Hudson Valley in the City of Poughkeepsie at that time. And cleaning out my parent's home we're trying to locate that because we don't think they would have given it away but we're trying to find it because it was an intact magazine, it was the full magazine. I've seen reprints of the cover but going through that and seeing the old buildings and the City of Poughkeepsie the way they looked, you know prior to 1900 there's a lot of history around here and it's nice to see things are being preserved .

Interviewer: And just a final question, anything you would like to share about any of the topics we've hit before, anything you feel maybe I didn't ask and you would like to add into it?

Ringwood: I think that doing these oral histories is a great idea; they're so many people in the area who have been here their whole lives. They're so many stories of things that happened in growing up. The different experiences that even people my age and older and just be able to put this together in one place. I know that there is a lot of people who might appreciate the history of the area. They see as it is now but to appreciate where we've come, the city's been around for a long time. And it's gone through many ups and downs and different upheavals and different

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challenges over the past decades. But it's good to see where it is now because basically if you learn about where you are because of the history of how you got here and it's nice to add that, to see where we're going.

Interviewer: Okay, thanks, thanks a lot, okay it was a pleasure.

Ringwood: Okay thank you to [proceeds to shake hands with Interviewer] okay thanks so much.

29:00-29:15 blank

Ringwood: [a few words said before this but are inaudible] She met my grandmother here and so they settled in the City of Poughkeepsie. My mother was born in January of 1930 and the bridge opened in August. And my mother and grandmother would always tell the story about how my mother was only several months old when they had the grand opening of the Mid-Hudson Bridge and as a toddler she took her first steps. She was just learning how to walk and my grandparents walked her across the Mid-Hudson Bridge on opening day. So that's something my mother was always very proud about something she always shares with people and again it's just a tie into the family of the area.

Interviewed: So it's must be good to have a warm feeling every time you pass the bridge.

Ringwood: Oh it is. I know that my mother was extremely proud of the Hudson Valley and she instilled that in us and the fact that this is our hometown and that the long history we've had here. And the importance of the Mid-Hudson Bridge in our family because the bridge brought our family together and made it happen; with the firemen in the area, that's how my father was. Everyone grew up downtown everyone knew each other so yeah that's very important.

Interviewer: Could you ever imagine leaving the Hudson Valley?

Ringwood: You know I've thought that there's a possibility of moving out of the area but I realize that my roots are so deep, that it would be very difficult to leave this area. I would miss it too much.

Interviewer: Great, I'm the same way, every time I go far I come right back [slight laugh] it doesn't take long. Paul anything, any questions you might have?

Interviewer 2 (Paul Contarino): Did any of your family members who were firefighters happen to know the cause of the fire on the bridge itself, did they ever determine a cause.

Ringwood: I don't know if they every determined a cause, I've read a lot about what they talked about.

Interviewer 2: Since the train, I think it was Penn Central at the time; it wasn't doing that well and there was the possibility perhaps that an arsonist might have done it that was just like one of the [cuts off]

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Ringwood: Well there's a couple of things, the sparks from the train would have set off, because they used to have people who rode on the trains that would put out the fires but I think at that point they had shut the water off and if they made the decision to shut off the water then there would be no water available to put out a fire. so I don't know if it's coincidence or if it was planned but it just seems kind of little odd that there was no way to put out one if there was one. I'm not sure if what I read was they had eliminated that position on the train also but I think it was that there was no water to even put out the fire but it's kind of unusual.

Interviewer: There may have been some shenanigans on that,

Ringwood: Possibly.

Interviewer: [slight laugh] Alright, I guess we're all set.

Ringwood: Excellent, good.

Interviewer 2: Oh, I have an additional question.

Ringwood: Oh, go ahead.

Interviewer 2: Do see the bridge as an important step towards the revitalization of Poughkeepsie?

Ringwood: I think the Walkway Over the Hudson could be very important to the revitalization of Poughkeepsie. As I said our family history just going back to you know, our parents, downtown City of Poughkeepsie was very important. It was a Mecca, it was everything you needed in just a few blocks and then through the 60s and 70s there was a lot of upheaval there was the whole urban renewal take down the old to make way for the new was the philosophy and they put the arterial through. The fact that they put the arterial right through the front of the Poughkeepsie Railroad Station, which was designed by the same architects who did Grand Central Station, you could no longer appreciate really, the front of the building from any kind of view but that was the idea back then, tear everything down. We almost lost the Bardavon back in the 70s because they wanted to tear down it was just an old building that no one wanted to use. So having the walkway and tying something new into something old could be very important for the revitalization because it might make people look back and see really what a grand city this was and this area how important it was with the regattas and I mean that goes back to the late 1800s and they were, communities would come out for these races on the river even the president Roosevelt you know used to go out on the river so its looking back I think yes, the walkway tying everything back in again could be very important, let's dip into the past and pull it back up again, make it new rather than tear down.

Interviewer 2: Do you think the revitalization of the bridge would perhaps put Poughkeepsie back on the world map again? Being at the time it was built it was the world's longest railroad bridge.

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Ringwood: I think it will probably, because of the people who are supporting this and the amount of support, and the let me go back again. I think the walkway over the railroad bridge with the supporters they have right now and the people involved, it's going to be covered very well, it's going to get a lot of publicity, it's going to be made a focal point of many different things and I think that will give it some, at least national attention, world wide would be terrific. I think with our accessibility to New York City we're probably going to be a tourist spot for these things, you know with the Roosevelt Library, the Vanderbilt Estate and we've got so many things that would draw tourists in that might just be another thing but it's also functional because you can, bike over it, walk over it, race over it, run over it, it's going to have many different functions and so hopefully that will draw more people in and again be a multi-purpose and I'm drawing a blank on a word [pause] park? It will be a multi purpose unit once, excuse me, it will have many functions rather than just one as a railroad bridge.

Interviewer 2: Thanks.

Interviewer: Thank you

Ringwood: We'll see what happens in the end [laughs].

Interviewer: Great, good.

Ringwood: Thanks so much [proceeds to shake hands]

[End of Interview 35:13]