

Hudson River Valley Institute
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories
Matt Smith, manager of the Highland Landing Riverfront Park

Length: Approximately 25 ½ minutes

[Interview Starts at 45:30]

Camera Man (James Duryea): Okay when you're ready start anytime.

Interviewer: Could you just say your name and introduce yourself?

Smith: My name is Matt Smith.

Interviewer: So you grew up in Poughkeepsie?

Smith: Yes.

Interviewer: Where did you go to school?

Smith: I went to Arlington primarily

Interviewer: And what did your parents do for a living?

Smith: My father had an oil business, he was a chemical engineer for Shell Oil for years then started his own business in 1960 and my mother worked with him at the business. I would always help when I was a little kid; I'd ride around the oil truck, or go with the servicemen and do oil burner work.

Interviewer: And how did you get involved in this project? [door slams]

Smith: In this project? [Leaf blower in the background] I started helping Bill Sepe years ago with the bridge, when it was his dream to make it a walkway and it was back in the stage when most people I think, thought it was a hare-brained idea. I still remember when he came to Highland town Board meeting and he told people what his idea was during the public comment period and several members of the board even said, "that's craziest idea I've ever heard of." Well I kind of liked it, so afterwards, I went up and said, "Bill I'd like do whatever I could to help." So we had a company at the time, we had a loader that we used to load coal and I brought that big loader over and we loaded a lot of the big stones that had been placed by the railroad at the west end of the bridge and dragged some of the rails off the loader. I did some work that way for some time.

Interviewer: And you had some diving experience, what was that like?

Smith: Well Bill Sepe was told a number of things by all these different naysayers and one of the things was, that the bridge was probably in danger of collapsing because it was so old, and you know, who knew what the structure supporting it was like. So he knew I was a diver, a Marine services company, and he asked me to take a look at the piers. That would normally be quite and expensive project but like I said, I was sort of sold on the idea. So I went out there with my crew and we had a remote operated vehicle that we used and also, actually divers went down and felt the structure over basically. We did-I think we did three of the piers, we didn't do all of them but what we found was great. The thing was in perfect condition, there was no

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erosion around the bases of them, the wooden structures were fine. So that really laid a lot of fears in people's minds that the thing was worthless and was going to collapse.

Interviewer: What do you feel is most interesting about the bridge, a person or event?

Smith: The most interesting thing to me is the underwater construction really of the bridge. Most people probably look at it and, why is that even at all interesting? Well I think it is because the bridge, when you look out at the bridge, you see big stone piers that it's built on it and it looks very strong but that's really not- that only goes 15 feet below the surface. It's built on a wooden cribbing structure that's filled with you know crushed stone and rocks and so on and to have that structure be there that length of time and the engineering that went into it, way back in the 1860s, really when they figured out how to build this thing and that to me is the most interesting part of the bridge.

Interviewer: Are you concerned about the direction that the bridge is going, or are there any concerns?

Smith: I'm happily concerned right now; I think it's going in a great direction. It's-you know Bill Sepe had a magnificent idea. I know there was a lot of people that said it was hare-brained but he didn't care, he just kept right on plugging along and it's really morphed into what it is now. There's many more people involved, I know they've gotten grants [sirens in the background] from a number of different people and now with governor Spitzer's announcement that you know it's going to be a state park when it's finished. It's a fantastic opportunity for the central Mid-Hudson area. I think the bridge is going to serve a greater function now than it did actually when it was running as a railroad bridge. I think it's going bring more people to the area. There will be more money spent in the area. The trains were going through before; just leaving the pollution. They delivered freight to both sides including my own company-coal company, in Highland. I think what it's going to be now is actually better than what it was.

Interviewer 2: As the project manager for the Highland Landing Park how do you feel about this bridge will effect-?

Smith: Well the Highland Landing Park is-I'll give you a little bit of background on that. There's 280 miles approximately, of river front on both sides of the river. Highland, we believe is the only community that does not have public access to the river and of course we're in the shadow of the railroad bridge. The railroad bridge is a beautiful structure as is the Mid-Hudson Bridge just a little bit further to the south from our park location there. So since 1993 or 1994, I've been working on getting this piece of property down by the river for a public park and our closing is April, 11th 2008, coming up here. So it's been a long struggle for that and all these other things all tie into it, the Hudson Valley Rail Trail, which is going to go to the end of the bridge, the walkway, the walkway itself; Dutchess County's development of their rail trails. Parks and open space have become much more important. The river has really regained its importance. The river in the 60's, I spent a lot of time on the river; it was an industrial sewer [clears throat] excuse me. You could actually at times see raw sewage floating in the river. When the waves would break on the shore, there'd be big balls of foam and it was soap from people's washing machines which was just flushed directly into the river and it was awful. I mean you caught fish that had gross you know, deformities and it's just come a long way. The people who didn't have as much money were pushed down to the river banks really; that was

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where the old industrial factories were at one time. As industry sort of dried up and the people who didn't have much money got pushed down to live in the poorer section of town, they called it and now you know you better have a lot of money if you want to buy a river lot now. So it's just-that just delights me that the river has come back and it's clean. You know when you look in the river, it looks brown but it's not that it's dirty, that's sediments that come after every rainstorm. All the streams wash into the river and they carry more mud and dirt into the river. When Henry Hudson sailed up the river, it looked like it does now, it wasn't blue. So the fact that it's clean has nothing to do with the brown color of it. It's clean, there's no chemicals being flushed into the river, there are very few now. Sewage is not being flushed into it. It's just-it's really come around and everybody recognizes the importance of the river now to the community. So our part [door slams] the Walkway Over the Hudson- in the 1960s, if somebody said, "you want to walk down to the river," they'd kind of look at you funny, it smelled bad it was just not a good place. There were so many dead fish along the sides; it literally smelled like you know rotting flesh, nothing could really live in the river very long. It's hard to believe nowadays that anyone could ever been that sure excited, that's the way it was.

Interviewer: So you think that this bridge is just another improvement to the-[cut off by Smith]

Smith: Absolutely, yeah it's another recognition by people that the river and the Hudson River Valley is very important. We all think it is, cause we live here but it's nice to have other people recognize the importance of the river and the Walkway Over the Hudson and the parks, yeah that's a great thing.

Interviewer 2: Okay, so how did your coal like company effect your involvement in the bridge?

Smith: We were directly affected by the bridge fire and closing. The bridge burned in the mid-70s I believe, '74 or '75 and they still ran- they shut the bridge off itself, right at each bank but they still ran freight deliveries on the railroad tracks up to our coal yard. I believe it was the last sighting before the railroad bridge. We were only less than a mile from the bridge and we continued to get coal until Valentine's Day of 1983 and that's when they decided to close that line from Maybrook all the way to the bridge. So too bad, we couldn't get any more coal. So we had to start trucking coal and then so-that really had an effect on us. It was very difficult even to schedule shipments from when the bridge built until when they closed that spur also because they just weren't running that way very often. They had to wait until they got two or three cars and wound up waiting a month for coal and people burned coal in the winter, so when the car you ordered back in December got in there in February or March, it wasn't that great. So-[Cuts off]

Interviewer 2: So you've been on the bridge many times then?

Smith: Yes we- [cut off by Interviewer II]

Interviewer 2: What was that like?

Smith: We actually delivered coal to a little watchman shanties on each end of the bridge and they all had coal stoves for some reason, railroads stuck with coal stoves right through-maybe they still do. I don't know. When we delivered coal there, we talked to the watchmen and after the delivery and if they were heading across the bridge, apparently they walked the bridge many

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times a day to check for fires and so on. I would walk with them across and I walked on it when it still had the wooden deck. It was a little scary, it was so high and the wooden deck didn't look to be all that new, it's kind of weathered and old looking but they walked it all the time and they seemed to be happy. [Slight laugh] Like the (lundings???) maybe I don't know.

Interviewer 2: And so like when the transition happened from Bill Sepe as like the leader of the organization, to the new like leadership, how do you think that affected the project?

Smith: Well Bill Sepe had the grand idea and the vision to push this thing to where other people took over and really developed the idea. Bill did a lot of work and without Bill; I don't believe we'd be talking about this thing as a park or a bridge or anything at this point. Bill's dream was to build that bridge himself with volunteers from one side to the other and it was just taking too long and there was too many impediments put in the way by different other safety organizations, the Coast Guard, the Army Corps. of Engineers the building departments on both sides of the river, you know there was many safety concerns. So that this new generation of bridge people have overcome all of these things, they've addressed the safety concerns, they've applied for grants, they've gotten money from a number of different places and the bridge project is basically, I think, like a ball rolling down hill, now it's unstoppable. There's so much momentum that it would be very difficult to stop it, put it that way.

Interviewer 2: And what are you most excited about for the bridge like when it's completed?

Smith: I'm excited about the opportunity that it's going to bring for the Mid-Hudson Valley region, the central Mid-Hudson Valley region here going out into Dutchess County and on out into Ulster County. There's going to be so many people that will come up to enjoy this wonderful thing that we have this walkway. The glass elevator on the Poughkeepsie side, there's going to be people who will come just to ride up and down the elevator. They're going to be scared to walk out on the bridge you know, some people don't like heights and they're not going to go out there. Just the whole project is going to be wonderful and it's going to have many offshoots. I'm a member of the board of directors of the Hudson Valley Rail Trail, on the west shore in the Town of Lloyd, and right now the rail trail has become the most used recreational facility in the Town of Lloyd. When that bridge opens, it's going to be even better. I mean anything that borders on the rail trail, now you're going to have so much traffic pass there, it has to spur you know economic development, not only on our side of the river but everywhere. I know it's going to happen and I think our side, we have access right now, it's probably going to start from our side. So we're sort of looking forward to this, this whole project.

Interviewer 2: And did you ever hear of any other ideas to like recycle or redo the bridge that you thought were better or do you think this one is-?[cut off by Smith]

Smith: This one is the best idea, it's funny you mentioned that because back right after the bridge burned, I had talked to a number of friends of mind some lawyers and doctors and so on. We decided that, people with money, this would be a great thing to buy because of the congestion on the Mid-Hudson highway bridge, they didn't have the three lanes at peak time then, they just had two lanes. The traffic backed-up for miles and miles every day and the people in Ulster County worked at IBM, mostly in Poughkeepsie and the line on our side of the river went all the way up on 9W, you know right up to 299 and further sometimes and south to, you know close to Milton. So to build another crossing and you know the Mid Hudson Bridge

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Authority talked about building another crossing at the time and then they decided to modify the Mid-Hudson Bridge and make the third land but they said any planning for a bridge like that, we wouldn't have a bridge for 10 to 15 years. So we're looking at this traffic, it's just steadily going to grow and grow, so we thought it would be a great idea to buy this bridge, put a deck on it, if it held two trains, it could certainly hold cars. We actually had an engineer that went out and looked at it. Then one of the lawyers that was involved, talked to some of the people of the state and said they're going to throw every roadblock that you could think in the way, they don't want that to happen. So we just kind of gave up on it, but that was- I know there were several other people that had the same idea but we might have been the first ones to have the idea, but this is so much better, this project, than highway crossing.

Interviewer 2: So you think it will be useful as a state park as opposed to like having like traffic over it?

Smith: Oh absolutely.

Interviewer 2: Cars or trains.

Smith: Traffic- well you know, the jury's still out exactly what they're going to have up there. There's some talk of a little trolley car or train up on top, just for commuter use. That would be a nice thing too, you know, there's- I guess nothing really completely firmed up yet. They're going to put the deck on, the design is still on, but yeah this going to be a much better for the region than just a bridge that people can drive across.

Interviewer 2: Are there any other stories you have like about the bell or anything else that you want to tell?

Smith: The bell. Bill Sepe asked me to do the diving around the piers, to check them out and we were actually getting ready. I think we had launched at Waryas Park, we launched our dive boat. There was some guy there telling us about this story about this bell that was on the bridge and we thought yeah, yeah, well then, one of my divers showed up and he knew the guy and he said, "yeah, I've heard this story before." There were three guys that went out to take this bell; they were going to sell it for scrap I guess. So they climbed up; there was ladders that came down each of the piers, almost to the water, which they've since cut off. These guys took this little boat out there and they went up and got the bell and they lowered it down with ropes and it was very heavy and they lowered it onto the bow of the little boat. Supposedly the story goes, the boat leaned because of the weight and the bell went into the water and sank and it's about 70 feet deep there so that was that. So I told Bill this story he said, "boy if you could find that bell, that would be great." So we didn't spend a lot of time looking for it. It was supposed to be down at the bottom there underneath, where the little tripod is which still in place where the bell used to mount. The bell I would imagine has sunk in the bottom sediment and you know you need to go down there with a metal detector and proton magnetometer and find it like that. Supposedly, it's down there, it maybe a legend but that's the story.

Interview 2: Were you nervous like scuba diving down there with how like you said, the river used to be so polluted and everything?

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Smith: Yeah it's actually interesting that you said scuba dive because we started hard-head diving there. We have a superlight 17 system, which has an umbilical that goes to the surface and supplies you with air from the surface which is very comforting if you get stuck because you've got air coming from a non-exhaustible source. There's so much current out there, the current runs about three to three and a half knots and it splits at the piers and actually accelerates. So with this long hose, when you're down there near the bottom, you've got so many feet of hose out, you had to wear over a 100 pounds of lead to stay in one spot and hang on for dear life. So we went to scuba and it was much easier. We still had strong lines down there, but you didn't have all that drag on this umbilical cord that was you know two or two and a half inches in diameter going all the way to the surface. So the scuba allowed us to be you know much more maneuverable down there, of course you didn't have an inexhaustible air supply but you still have a tender on the surface, and there's wireless communication. So they're keeping track of your air and so on but we pretty much felt over all of the three piers. We did find an area on the Poughkeepsie-I think the pier nearest Poughkeepsie had a void in it. There was a couple of the timbers that were moved out and you could feel in there nothing. So I took an extendable boathook, telescope and boathook pole and I felt in there, it didn't-the cavity didn't seem to be too deep so-but you know we told Bill that this was in good shape, there was no erosion at the bottom. It was a little scary sometimes. You know there's blue claw crabs in the river, I don't know if you knew that or not. They're generally thought to be pretty much a salt water delicacy, people eat blue claw crabs, you know Maryland crabs are blue claw crabs. There's actually a lot of them in the river and people catch them right over at Marnier's Harbor at the dock there. They'll fill a whole five-gallon pale with little blue claw crabs and take them home and eat them. The river is clean now but they did that even back in the '60s though; so I don't know, explains a lot of things maybe [Interview II Laughs]. At any rate, these little crabs love the timber structure and little fish. It's actually a bottom habitat for you know raising little fish and little crabs. So you're feeling around and then all of sudden a little crab runs up your arm it's just-we saw a sturgeon at one point. Actually, I'm not sure if that was on that project or it was on a water intake inspection for one of the communities but the sturgeon was at least six feet long. It-everything's so immediate down there, you know your visibility is no more than a foot usually. Even with a strong light and when the silt is really bad, the light only makes it worse; it looks like a blizzard then. So yeah, it's interesting diving into the river.

Interviewer 2: And how is the void like repaired now or [cut off by Smith]?

Smith: No it's-I think the divers looked at it again. They just did the re-inspection and they said it will be repaired at some point, but it's not structural, not a big problem.

Interviewer 2: Okay, is there any other stories that you wanted to tell that we didn't mention, about like your childhood or anything like that?

Smith: Well we had the Poughkeepsie Yacht Club that used to be down just south of the Mid-Hudson Bridge on shore there and the Pirate Canoe Club was right under the bridge actually, their parking lot was right under the road deck. As a small child, my father used to take me down to the Poughkeepsie Yacht Club where he's a member, actually he was the commodore for several years. I would leave there with a little aluminum boat that I bought myself, I think I was twelve and I put my dog, a Labrador retriever, in the boat and a little tent and a little frying pan. I would go all the way up to Esopus Island or further north even you know by Norrie Point with

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this boat and go camping for the weekend. I guess you can't do that anymore with your kid but- and I remember, going around all the piers on both the bridges, the Mid-Hudson Bridge and the- what's the walkway now, the railroad bridge. They were still using the bridge of course at the time. So it was fascinating to be underneath there when the train went chugging across it. It was great and we had a sailing day and I used to sail all around that whole area underneath the bridge. It's always been part of my life really, the bridge. I'm just so happy to see that this is happening now. It's going to be used for something.

Interviewer 2: I think that's it.

Smith: Okay.

Duryea: I have one question to ask, cause I'm the one person whose had the chance to hear all the interviews. So the one underlying theme that I'm trying to come up with is, as our generation-do you think it's important that we sort of-that we remind them or educate them, this generation, as to what that bridge meant during the industrial period? I mean you know it was sort of a high-tech bridge at its time and Poughkeepsie was sort of known as an industrial city with iron works and coal-

Smith: Yeah. [Door slams]

Duryea: And so forth but now we're sort of transitioning the whole river valley into a greener more.

Smith: Right.

Duryea: Do you think that it is important to remind and educate to everyone just what this bridge represented a 100 years ago or so?

Smith: You know history is always important but I think more important is the reconnection of our young people with the river and the bridge plays a big part in that. It's so important to, I think to grew up around water and know all about it and know how to sail, know how to row and to be concerned about the environment, just from that stuff, from dealing with it. I was a little kid; I was shocked and very upset by the sewage and the foam. I'll never forget the foam rollers up on the beach and I think that's much more important than the history really. Not to say that history is not important but the reconnection with the generation to the river, to the environment basically not just the river.

Duryea: And do you anticipate or do you see the proposed walkway becoming a good mix of recreational and maybe commercial? Do you think that's feasible, that you know the walkway opens and tourists come but then very quietly a little food stand opens and then after that a restaurant opens at one end, and then where's there's a restaurant and there's groups of people, now maybe a hotel opens or other tourist types of (destinations???), do think that's feasible? is that manageable to do?

Smith: You're not talking about on the walkway, you're talking about?

Duryea: No I'm talking a step back.

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Smith: On the periphery, yeah, absolutely, that is what's going to happen, no question about it. I was on the economic development committee in Highland, in the Town of Lloyd for a number of years, and that's absolutely what happens. I went to a number of training seminars for that kind of thing and to have a core that attracts people. In our case, we focused on the downtown in Highland and that was one of the reasons, I was on economic development committee when I came up with the idea of the park on the river. Our post office had left town and we had counted-we were against that of course. I was president of the downtown business association also and that was a biggest concern, the post office was leaving and the economy wasn't very good and all the stores weren't filled as it was. We actually sat in a store across from the post office for a whole week and we had people volunteer to count the foot traffic in and out of the post office and as I recalled it was 800 people a day went in and out of the post office. Then we actually counted the ones that went from the post office to somewhere else to pick something up and then got back into their car and left, carrying boxes and bags from the stores. When the post office decided to go up onto 9W, that was a real big concern to us. So we were casting about for some way to attract people to the village. Ray Cosentino came up with the rail trail. I thought of- in the park, to get to that park, you have to go through the downtown. So all these things are economic development initiatives and that park, that's the biggest thing yet so-[cuts off]

Duryea: Good, alright we're good.

Interviewer 2: Thank you.

Smith: Thank you for your time.

[End of Interview 110:52]

Transcribed by Paul Contarino