

Hudson River Valley Institute
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories
Ned Sullivan of Scenic Hudson

Date: Friday, January 16, 2009

Length: Approximately 29 1/2 minutes

Ned Sullivan: Should I be looking at the camera or-[pointing to Schaaf]?

Interviewer (Jason Schaaf): Could you just state your name and spell it for the camera?

Sullivan: It's Ned Sullivan N-E-D S-U-L-L-I-V-A-N.

Interviewer: Great, and can you tell me where you grew up?

Sullivan: I grew up in the Hudson Valley, in Westchester County. Initially my early years were in Yonkers, a city right on the Hudson and my family eventually moved to northern Westchester in the town of Bedford.[To some in the background] Could you bring me some water please [coughs] Excuse me.

Interviewer: So as Hudson Valley resident did you spend much time as a young person around the Hudson River?

Sullivan: Yes, actually my Little League field was right on the Hudson River. I loved going down to the water's edge. In fact once time, I climbed up a tree, to get a better view of the Hudson, and got myself in a little trouble. But it was inspired by a passion for the river and love for its beauty, even as child.

Interviewer: What would say is it about the Hudson River, the Hudson River Valley that still captures your imagination, your love?

Sullivan: Well certainly it's an inspiring beauty. I love to kayak on the river, to canoe. I love to run in parks along the river and take my family down to the water for picnics and hikes. So the Hudson is really the greatest resource we have in this whole region but it's really the passion and beauty that it evokes in all of us that it-there's something magical about it, that keeps drawing me back to it. [Takes a glass of water]

Interviewer: And can you tell me about your work here at Scenic Hudson?

Sullivan: Well I left the Hudson Valley for a number of years. I was living up in the State of Maine. I was the Environmental Commissioner of the State of Maine. So that is a beautiful place as you may know and many people often ask me, "why did you ever leave Maine? It's so beautiful." The reason is that the Hudson River and the Hudson Valley are just so beautiful and inspiring; full of culture and history and great people. Scenic Hudson's mission is to preserve and restore the Hudson and it's waterfront, landscapes as a fantastic natural resource, the key treasure of this entire region and indeed a national treasure. The opportunity to work for an organization like Scenic Hudson that has terrific staff and the ability to buy land and work with communities to create wonderful parks; that's what drew me back to the Hudson Valley for me.

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Interviewer: Great, great [clears throat]. So in terms of the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge, I'm sure that you've or Scenic Hudson has probably had some dealings with or maybe some concerns about that bridge from environmental issues, could describe what maybe are some key environmental issues concerning the bridge?

Sullivan: Well 2009 is the quadracentennial, the 400th anniversary of Henry Hudson's historic sail up the river that now bears his name. And we felt that this was a great time to celebrate the incredible history of four centuries, all the wonderful things that have happened here, the Revolutionary War, battles that have been fought, not a wonderful thing but something that laid the foundation for this country's freedom. The Hudson River School of painters brought the region to life for the entire world, through canvasses created by Thomas Cole and Frederic Church. The Hudson Valley played a pivotal role in helping rescue the country from the Depression under Franklin Roosevelt's leadership. Many of the elements of the New Deal that FDR rolled out during- to get the country back into economic shape, were tested in New York State when he was governor, under his leadership. But you know, there are so many things that we want to celebrate, including the launching of the modern environmental movement that really began here in the Hudson Valley, with Scenic Hudson's protection of Storm King from an industrial power plant that was proposed by Con-Edison. So there are all these incredible chapters that we can celebrate during the 400th. But it's important not to just celebrate the past but to look to the future and so Scenic Hudson has launched an initiative, we call it, Saving the Land that Matters Most, aimed at protecting the critical resources, the critical natural resources along the Hudson. And we've identified 65,000 acres of land that meet the state's highest standards for natural resource protection, in terms of the ecological resources, the scenic beauty and the agricultural lands that are so much a part of the area, the beauty of the landscape, the working farms, the fruit and vegetable stands that we all enjoy, the maple syrup. So we feel that the most important thing we can do in the quadracentennial year and the decade that will follow, is to launch and carry out this initiative to protect the land that matters most. We're now working with more than a dozen land trusts and conservation organizations who share our commitment to protecting these lands. So it's national organizations like the Trust for Public Lands and The Nature Conservancy, it's regional and local land trusts [cars honking in the background] like the Hudson Highlands Trust, the Dutchess Land Conservancy, the Winnick and Columbia Land Conservancy, Kingston Land Trust and many others. So this is a joint initiative, a collaborative effort, that we are really committed and excited about. It's going to take time, it's going to take a decade but we have an extraordinary opportunity to act now when real estate values are low, to protect these critical lands but we felt that it was equally important, on a parallel track, to make these lands great assets for communities. So we're investing our resources in helping to steer state and federal funds to parks that are being created all along the river, from Manhattan all the way up to the foothills of the Adirondacks. So when local organizations say they want to make something happen, that's going to create a fantastic park, a place where people can enjoy the river, get down to the waterfront, enjoy its spectacular views. We want to stand up and be there and help them. So one of those great initiatives is Walkway Over the Hudson. And so when we saw the kind of leadership that Walkway Over the Hudson was providing with Fred Schaffer, the backing of Rob Dyson, and the Dyson Foundation, we felt it was critical for us to be part of this and to lend our support. So we've actually made a very substantial contribution, financially to that. We're working with Walkway Over the Hudson and the other groups that are committed to making it happen, New York State, Governor Patterson,

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Carol Ash at the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation and others to make this a truly important project that will be a catalyst for revitalization of the entire Mid-Hudson Valley.

Interviewer 2 (Chris Pryslopski): One thing looking at the history of the bridge is the political dimension, of how many people it took, how many organizations it took, and the levels from local individuals, to state governments, to build the walkway as a railroad bridge in the 19th century. I'm very impressed and also very intrigued by the sort of coalition effort which is a common effort for Scenic Hudson, one of the skills, one of the more impressive-most impressive aspects, I think of your organization is your ability to work with these diverse groups. I'm curious, if there's anything that you might want to share, that the public could know, but wouldn't likely see in terms of working with this diverse cast of players, the state, the other non-profits and local governments?

Sullivan: Yes well, I think what has characterized the Hudson Valley's history is the emergence of individuals or groups of individuals that band together for a cause. Protecting Storm King Mountain is an example, a small group of citizens got together and said, at a time where there were no environmental laws that gave them access to federal and state decision making processes. They said, "We're not going to let this happen," and took them 17 years but they protected Storm King. The Scenic Hudson decision that gave them the right of standing in court to protect that mountain, to fight for it, became the cornerstone of the National Environmental Policy Act, this country's seminal environmental law and that has led to a whole body of environmental law, and the modern environmental movement. Similarly when a group of people, a small group of people gets together to make something positive happen, people rally around. So when Bill Sepe took the first steps and secured the bridge and then passed the baton onto Fred Schaeffer and the board, people like Mitch [Markay] and Barbara [Hensey], people started getting involved. The first person to do that was Maurice Hinchey, Congressman Maurice Hinchey. [Car honks in background] Maurice really deserves credit for saying; this is a project that is worthwhile. This is a project that can be transformative; it could dramatically change the landscape, the economy, the quality of life of this entire region. So he secured federal funds for the project and he really deserves our thanks for giving it that federal imprimatur. The next person was Rob Dyson, Rob Dyson walked out on that bridge and he saw the same thing. He saw the potential [phone rings in background] to really transform this area, for the bridge to be a catalyst for economic development and positive recreational activities, to build on the \$4.5 billion dollar tourism industry that we experience here in the Hudson Valley. So Maurice Hinchey, you have Rob Dyson, you have the Dyson Foundation, you have the State of New York, Governor Patterson making his commitment to the bridge following up on former Governor Spitzer's commitment and you have all the organizations in the valley now seeing this as a real opportunity to transform the region. So Scenic Hudson was really pleased to join forces with all these groups and to help lay the groundwork for a whole new generation of recreational based tourism, but also other kinds of economic development that can be attracted to the area because there will be this iconic park, a state park, the highest, longest elevated state park in the country, this will be fabulous.

Interviewer: On the grassroots level or along the river front, how do you envision that the bridge, the influx of tourists is going to impact riverfront projects?

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Sullivan: Well we see a real opportunity here; we see an opportunity to really link together all the wonderful waterfront sights that exist in this area of the Hudson with the walkway as the center piece. So Scenic Hudson has actually been leading efforts to create a walkway circuit trail that would go from the walkway, that would then link up to the Poughkeepsie waterfront, the Children's Museum, you have the community boathouse, you have the Vassar and the Marist boating clubs down there and Marist's waterfront park. There's the opportunity to transform the Dutton Lumber site into some kind of mixed use development with waterfront access along there. We have Waryas Park, the city park that is a wonderful place for picnics and festivals and concerts and skateboarding and all sorts of great recreational activities on the waterfront, you have restaurants there. Then you proceed down and you have the Cow Rock Park and then you have the Mid-Hudson Bridge, you also have Shadows on the Hudson a little farther to the south and that looks straight across at the Franny Reese Preserve, several hundreds of protected land that Scenic Hudson purchased. We named it for our founder Franny Reese and ultimately transferred it New York State Office of the Parks and we are now working with the Office of Parks to turn that into a great community asset for people, on both sides of the river and Ulster County. People will be able to walk across the bridge, the Mid-Hudson Bridge, from the City of Poughkeepsie on their lunch breaks or on weekends and go up into this incredible, beautiful, bluff overlooking the Hudson and be reminded of Franny Reese and the great spirit she brought to fight for Storm King Mountain and the preservation of the entire valley. That will then be linked up on the west side of the Hudson, through a trail back to Walkway Over the Hudson and then a waterfront park in the Town of Lloyd that Scenic Hudson has worked with town leaders to create, it exists now, there used to be oil storage tanks right down there on the waterfront. Those have now been cleaned up and have been replaced with a great place where people in the Town of Lloyd can get access to the Hudson. So you have this tremendous circuit trail that's being created now. It's been a collaborative with Scenic Hudson working in cooperation, in a small collation with Walkway Over the Hudson, Office of Parks, the City of Poughkeepsie, the mayor of Poughkeepsie has been really enthusiastic about this, and the county and all the key players, the Children's Museum and the schools. So we're very excited about this and we think this is just going to be one more asset that links together and creates these wonderful linkages so that people can enjoy all those different assets.

Interviewer: Do you-does Scenic Hudson envision any potential environmental concerns by building up the riverfront, having the bridge, having so many tourists come in, have you heard about any ways in which organizations are trying to manage and lessen potentially an impact?

Sullivan: Well I know the construction work is being conducted under the most stringent environmental reviews, certainly with the Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation, you know leadership role in collaboration with the walkway. They're highly sensitive to the environmental concerns. The state would be the main party enforcing, through the Department of Environmental Conservation. So the good news is that this will be done in compliance with all the appropriate rules, that a liability, this rusting bridge that could over the long term cause environmental problems, certainly if it were allowed to degrade and collapse into the river, we would have terrible environmental problems and not to mention navigational issues. I know that it's being carried out under careful review and so I think it's really going to be a great benefit. And the walkway itself, in addition to the linking up with the circuit trail that we've-I've described, is also going to be linking-up to rail trails on both sides of the river. So people will be

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able to ride their bicycles into Ulster County and throughout Dutchess County and so we'll have a reduction of the use of automobiles as people can perhaps even commute from Ulster County over to the City of Poughkeepsie and perhaps for some going in the other direction.

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

Sullivan: Oh yes, I've been up a couple of times. I find it very exhilarating.

Interviewer: Can you describe what that view is like?

Sullivan: Oh, it's spectacular. One of the great things is that you can look up the river and see as far as the Roosevelt sight and the Culinary Institute, if you look down the river and you see the majestic bluffs of Franny Reese Preserve and so you have spectacular views in both directions. So I think as people come up the river, and arrive by train, Metro-North trains stops within walking distance of the bridge, and there's going to be an elevator that links the waterfront up to the top of the bridge. So people will be able to come up by mass transit, be able to take an elevator up to the top of the bridge, they'll be able to look out and be able to bicycle, to hike. I think the benefits completely outweigh any concerns that there will be-this will cause-congestion or anything like that. Because it's all about mass transit, bicycles, hiking, this is the kind of positive economic development that we want to see in the Hudson Valley that will just be beneficial for generations to come.

Interviewer: Have you noticed since during the time when you were younger playing Little League, to now, that there has been an even greater increase maybe over the generations in outdoor activities centered around the Hudson Valley, Hudson Valley activities?

Sullivan: Well we're certainly seeing a tremendous amount of interest in use of our parks. Scenic Hudson has 40 parks and preserves, we've protected 25,000 acres of land along the river we've protected 8,000 acres of farmland, and we- we're just getting tremendous visitation at our parks. People love the programs that we're carrying on in our parks, map-orienteeing; people are taking maps and running around from one spot to another with compasses and kids and everything. We have poetry reading at Poet's Walk and we have a pumpkin carving program down at our waterfront park in Cold Spring. We've even had a movie at our waterfront park, Foundry Dock Park in Cold Spring, an outdoor movie. These are just-suddenly people are realizing, wow, what a great asset the Hudson River is. It's fantastic to be able to go out on a Friday night and watch a dramatic performance on a barge on the river, particularly last summer and down in Beacon and in up in Saugerties. So yes, I think people are discovering the river. One of the down sides with this though, is that as the river has become cleaner, as people have realized how beautiful it is, there have been examples of really bad development, occurring on the waterfront. And condos that are great if you live in them, but that are designed in a way that bars most of the public from the waterfront that effectively privatize the Hudson River waterfront. So we're not against having residential development as part of the waterfront but we want to see it as part of a mixed use development that has restaurants, and that has shops and public esplanades so that people can get down there, that the river is theirs, it's ours, it's the public's, it's not just the domain of people who can afford the million-dollar condos. So we've seen examples of this in Yonkers where there was initially a proposal to build 36-story

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skyscrapers all along the waterfront, it would have completely blocked the downtown area from accessing, people of downtown from accessing the waterfront and seeing the views of the Palisades. We were able to stop that project and create these public esplanades in place where people can get down, go to a restaurant; enjoy the views of the Palisades. There's still housing down there along the river, along with restaurants, along with pizza shops, you know there's something for everybody down there and that's the kind of thing we to see throughout the Hudson Valley. I think as people enjoy the walkway over the Hudson, as they get up and they see the incredible views, I think they'll realize, "okay this is our waterfront, this is our river, this is something that is worth protecting for generations to come." We'll see development clustered around the train stations so that people can walk to the train and to the waterfront or bicycle, we'll see bicycle friendly access to things like the walkway, and parks and everything. But this will be a public resource that people will enjoy and celebrate for the next 100 years. So when we're celebrating five centuries since Hudson's arrival, in the New World, Walkway Over the Hudson, a string of parks owned by the state, or Scenic Hudson, or Audubon, or our other partners, this will be a nationally recognized and celebrated as a national resource, a national and international model about how good development can occur.

Interviewer: You mentioned that several events and some taking place in the parks, perhaps educational, do you envision ways in which the bridge might be utilized for drawing attention to more educational purposes or even just to maybe concerts and stuff to get people out?

Sullivan: Sure, I think Walkway will be a fabulous venue for concerts, for educational activities, [car honks in background] the history of the railroad. The bridge played a pivotal role in linking the Mid-Atlantic States with New England in its day and so that history of rail and how it help transform a nation in one generation. Now we still have Metro-North and Amtrak coming up along the east side of the Hudson. We have freight on the west side and mass transit can play a crucial role in our future. As we see a new president, Barack Obama, the vision of mass transit as a solution to climate change and the notion of transit oriented development- development occurring in walking distance of busing and train stations, that's a message that can be shared on the railroad bridge as people enjoy it.

Interviewer: Great, Chris do you have anything?

Interviewer 2: Just to note, that we're just past quarter but we were about 12:20 so-[cut off by Sullivan]

Sullivan: Maybe I'll say one more thing.

Pryslowski: Yeah.

Sullivan: I think the railroad bridge can also be a great example of what citizens can accomplish when they set their minds to it. This is an example of one person who had a vision, passing the baton to another group of people who have a wild and crazy idea of transforming a rusting railroad bridge into a fantastic public park. So this should be a message to young children, to all of us, that if we believe in something and set our minds to it and bring together like-minded people, we can accomplish great things. We're in difficult times economically; if we all work

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together, we can get ourselves out of these economic hardships. We're facing the greatest challenge of many generations, global climate change. If we all work together and take steps, we can all save the planet. We're seeing development transform our landscapes; we're losing the beautiful places in the Hudson Valley and throughout the country that can provide the recreational resources it can [sequester] carbon as a solution to climate change. We've identified- Scenic Hudson has indentified 65,000 acres of land that must be protected to preserve the integrity, beauty and inspirational value of the Hudson Valley. If we work together we can accomplish that goal.

Interviewer: Great, thank you very much.

Sullivan: Okay, thank you. [Proceeds to shake hands]

[End of Interview 29:40]

Transcribed by Paul Contarino