

Hudson River Valley Institute
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories
Harold Tartell

Date: Saturday, April 26, 2008

Length: Approximately 28 minutes

Interview starts at 20:52

Interviewer 1 (Andrew Buccitelli): We're going to asking you about your background or how long have you lived in the valley? And you say I've been in the valley?

Tartell: All my life or whatever how many years, okay, okay.

Interviewer 1: It just makes it easier for us.

Tartell: Okay, alrighty.

Tartell's girlfriend: [In the background comes in front of the camera] Let me make sure his collar looks all nice [Proceeds to fix collar] There you go because you look cute.

Tartell: Okay.

Tartell's girlfriend: There you go. [Fixes his hair]- then exits

Tartell: Alrighty.

Interviewer 1: Just to start off could you please state your name and spell it?

Tartell: Yes, my name is Harold, last name is Tartell, I'll spell it, H-A-R-O-L-D, last name Tartell T-A-R-T-E-L-L

Interviewer 1: Thank you; start off with some general questions, where did you grow up?

Tartell: Where did I grow up? I grew up in this area I was born and raised here I have lived here all my life. I was born in Newburgh; New York and I come from the small community known as Milton which is across the river.

Interviewer 1: Where did you go to school?

Tartell: I attended grade school, kindergarten through sixth grade in Milton Elementary School and Junior High and High School; I graduated in 1965 from Marlboro Central High School.

Interviewer 1: Okay, what did your parents do for a living?

Tartell: My parents what did they do for a living? My parents came up in the year before I was born in 1946 and they owned and operated the drug store in Milton, New York until my dad passed away in 1967 and my mom ran the store without a pharmacist until 1976 when she passed on.

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Interviewer 1: What was your first job?

Tartell: My first job was after getting out of the service was I worked many different jobs. I worked for a tractor company over in Highland, New York, in a parks department and I worked for the winery in Milton for awhile. I helped in my parent's business and these other jobs were side jobs and then I went to work in 1976 for the Ulster County Bureau of Fire as a dispatcher up in Kingston, New York. I was in the emergency services fire dispatcher, and dispatched ambulances.

Interviewer 1: What is your profession and what was your profession?

Tartell: Presently, I work for the Marlboro School District I was in custodial maintenance but do to a back injury a year or so ago I have been out of work but that's where I stand at the moment.

Interviewer 1: How long have you lived in the Hudson River Valley?

Tartell: All of my life, how long have I lived here? All of my life.

Interviewer 1: What role do you feel that the bridge has played in you community your region?

Tartell: What role did the bridge play in this region and in the community? The bridge was a vital means of transportation basically during the war years. A lot of material was shipped into New England and the bridge was also a vital link with goods being transported from New England into this area and commodities were going from Maybrook west to be distributed through the rest of the United States.

Interviewer 1: What do you find most interesting about the bridge?

Tartell: What do I find most interesting about the bridge? It was an engineering marvel for its time. The bridge was built in 1888 and still standing today it's what 110 years old and basically it is still structurally sound. And for its time I mean comparing today with the modern technology, the modern equipment that we have to build bridges and what they back then when that was built it really was a marvel to see something like that constructed.

Interviewer 1: Have you ever been up on the bridge?

Tartell: Yes I have, I was up on the bridge when I was teenager. In fact I got stuck out on the bridge once one day when a train was coming and [slight laugh] it was kind of a scary experience but other than that the only other time I was up there was on the day of the fire.

[Change of interviewers]

Interviewer 2 (Joe DeLisle): Alright, so you have a unique perspective on this bridge as you fought the fire?

Tartell: Yes I do.

Interviewer 2: Could you tell us a little bit about that?

Tartell: Well the day of the fire it was a beautiful day in May, balmy day, breezy and from what I understand there was a train coming across, I think it was headed westbound and what caused or started the fire we seem to believe or people seem to believe is, there was a brake shoe or a brake dragging and the hot slag or what have from the brake got the ties in the crosol started and of course with a breeze that spread things and it really got going up there and from my community I could see the smoke but at the time I did not know what was going on and somebody said to me did you know that the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge was on fire and I said no but I could see the smoke. Well shortly thereafter the alarm went in for my fire department the Milton Fire Department and we were called under mutual aid to assist Highland with an engine and the man power. So we responded and I guess this was probably a good maybe an hour or little over an hour after the actual fire started. And when we got up there first of all they asked us to shuttle water and then it became apparent that they had to stretch hose lines across the bridge so that's where the man power came in we had to stretch 2 1/2 hose lines from the Highland side out to the area where the fire was and that was quite a bit of hose if you take fifty foot lengths of 2 1/2 in hose that's a lot of hose but what was the problem out there, there was a stand pipe that was I guess around three or four inches in diameter you know iron pipe that was supposed to be for firefighting purposes and there were hose stations spaced at least every fifty or one hundred up there in the need of a fire that there would be water, you know to supply those lines well evidently when the winter before the fire they didn't drain the stand pipe and the standpipe was probably filled with water and it froze and burst and when they attempted to get water out to the fire via the standpipe the stand pipe was full of holes and the efforts were very unsuccessful.

Interviewer 2: Can you describe what you saw when you first arrived at the scene?

Tartell: A lot of smoke there were flames I was within, with the Highland Fire Department within fifty feet of the fire. Once we got the lines stretched out there, Poughkeepsie had an area ladder truck stationed below the bridge on the Poughkeepsie side. And there was a lot of debris falling off the bridge as the ties burned, tie plates and pieces of ties what have you. And the aerial truck could only extend so far and basically what the aerial truck was doing was Central Hudson at the time in fact they still have a couple of the tanks over there. They had I think several natural gas storage tanks and what they were afraid of is that hot material coming down and even causing more of a severe situation if those tanks ever, you know caught fire or were going to blow up. So Poughkeepsie basically their efforts to try and fight the fire with the aerial, the aerial wasn't high enough, the water and plus the breeze the water was just going in different directions. So basically what had to be done was the fire had to be fought from the bridge and this is where we came into play in stretching the lines out there and you know getting water on to the fire. And after we had stretched line and got water into the lines we were very successful in knocking it down.

Interviewer 2: What was going through your head as you were fighting the fire on the bridge?

Tartell: Well it's kind of scary. I wasn't afraid of the bridge collapsing or anything I mean we weren't in the area where there was any danger of collapse. But it was tense up there you know

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the wind was blowing what have you and of course you had to pay attention to what you were doing you know you fall or something like that you know you get injured other than that you know you're main objective was to get water on the fire and get the fire out.

Interviewer 2: What was your impression of the attitudes of the other firefighters there?

Tartell: What was my impression of them? They were quite excited too. I mean it was kind of an unusual fire, I mean you're used to fighting structure fires, you're used to fighting automobile fires and such, brush fires but to be on a railroad bridge fighting a fire that's kind of you know a stranger unique type of fire to fight.

Interviewer 2: Could you see on top of the bridge? Could you see people like coming out of their houses and looking up or anything along that?

Tartell: Could I see people? Oh yes definitely, there were on both sides of the river on the Highland side down along River Road where Mariner Harbor is down in that area there were quite a few cars and spectators watching and also on the Poughkeepsie side as well.

Interviewer 2: What do you think was the attitude of the Poughkeepsie of everybody around in the community right after or actually during and right after the fire?

Tartell: I think most of the people; their attitude was to get this fire out. I believed they realized with the gas tanks under the bridge, that was a very potential hazard that if something that had gone astray that there would be more devastation. But I think that was pretty much everybody's concerns citizens as well as the fire department to keep things in check or try to get the fire knocked down before a more serious situation evolved from what happened.

Interviewer 2: Could you once talk again, a little bit on how you got the water up there, the running of the lines and what not?

Tartell: How did we get the lines out there? Well it was a lot of hoses as I had said before and of course Highland has a city water supply and to kind of alleviate draining the water supply, our truck and several other communities that were also called for tank trucks and we also used that as mean to pump water out rather than to completely deplete the community water supply.

Interviewer 2: And could you tell us a little bit about Bill Sepe on how you know him and how you got to know him?

Tartell: How do I know Bill Sepe? Bill Sepe was a very interesting man, he was I know the bridge after the fire I can kind of briefly tell you what was going on. There was a gentleman from Pennsylvania that bought the bridge because at the time Penn Central Railroad owned the bridge that was in 1974. And the railroads were going bankrupt and of course after this fire devastated the bridge it effect a lot of different things there was a railroad called the Lee High and Hudson River Railroad which was based out of Warwick and they were like a feeder railroad that brought cars you know Maybrook. And there were several other railroads of course the New Haven was the main railroad and the railroads eventually started going bankrupt and Conrail took most of these railroads in 1976 and Penn Central I guess didn't feel they wanted to

bother rebuilding the bridge. And evidently what happened was it effected the Maybrook Yard and it effected these other railroads, feeder railroads what have you feeding cars into Maybrook and what eventually happened was, the railroad bridge in Castleton which is still in operation today, came out of Selkirk Yard which trains come in from the west and you know delivers commodities to the east via that bridge and vice versa stuff from New England comes into Selkirk is distributed to the western points, you know there on. So to rebuild the bridge, since they had that bridge, they I guess felt it wasn't feasible to do that and so the bridge was left in disrepair. And some gentleman from Pennsylvania I can't think of his name at the moment but he brought the bridge I guess for you know a minimal amount and you could never get a hold of the man, I understand. In fact the Hudson River pilots and towboat operators on the river, there were no lights displayed on the bridge for navigation purposes which in the law, there has to be navigational lights on the bridge in case, you know, there's a collision with the bridge. Vessels have to be able to see these and they could never get a hold of this man. And evidently when they called him out in Pennsylvania they got a hold of some taxi stand out there and they could never get a hold of him. So anyway from what I understand, Bill Sepe came into the picture and started this group called Walkway Over the Hudson and he was very, very instrumental in fundraising. I know they sold planks or what have you or blocks to people who wanted to make a donation and some of them I guess are still up on the bridge. And Bill worked very, very tirelessly and put a lot of effort in trying to get the thing of the ground. And of course with political problems and on both sides of the river with who owns this and who owns that and also problems with financial, you know getting grants, you know he kind of backed out of the picture. But then I understand, I haven't been in touch with him for several years but I hear that he had family commitments and he you know kind of got out of the picture. So there's gentleman now I understand named Mr. Schaeffer, who I believe is the head of Walkway Over the Hudson and he's I guess trying to you know get things off the ground, to get the bridge you know, prepared for next year's celebrations there for Hudson-Fulton-Champlain or whatever. And, but Bill Sepe I don't want him, you know, to be forgotten in the background because through his efforts, you know Mr. Schaeffer and the people who are attempting to give the bridge you know a go ahead again, owe a lot to him and the people who volunteered along with him.

Interviewer 2: Do you ever meet with Mr. Sepe?

Tartell: Many times, many times, I know him very well.

Interviewer 2: How did you actually come to meet him?

Tartell: I met him, I'm a railroad enthusiast I met him at a couple of railroad train shows that I had attended and then I did go to a couple of things where they had him speak you know in relation to what was going to be done with the bridge, if they were successful, and I met him, you know at various gatherings like that.

Interviewer 2: As a railroad enthusiast could you maybe compare the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge to another railroad bridge that you know a lot of, that you particular like?

Tartell: As a railroad enthusiast I'm not too familiar with other railroad bridges other than the ones in the area. The one in Castleton which parallels I-90, the Thruway or I-90, I guess that one, this one here was built like I said in 1888, that one was built much later on in the 1900s but

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like I said that's right now a vital to rail traffic in many places and basically what this bridge for many years you know did. I often wonder if the bridge was still in operation after all of the changeovers from Conrail and of course Conrail was bought out in 1999 and split up between Norfolk Southern Railroad and CSX transportation. And I sometimes wonder or envision if the bridge were still able to you know sustain train traffic and the yard and the Maybrook were still in existence if it were you know feasible it would still be used.

Interviewer 2: Is there something about the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge in general that you just find fascinating?

Tartell: What I find fascinating thing about the bridge is after all of these years the shape that it's in, it's structurally sound. In fact, engineers went up after the fire and you know surveyed the bridge to my understanding and found the bridge to be and the piers, the piers they sent divers down and they found the bridge to be in very sound shape. And of course the area where the fire was, to replace that steel if it was you know to the point where it lost its temper that wouldn't be I think a great problem to replace it, it was just a small section of the span. To replace the whole span now we're talking something different but there area where the actually fire damage was to replace that would be a very easy task rather than to try and replace the whole bridge.

Interviewer 2: What would you like to see come out of reopening the bridge making that a walkway?

Tartell: What would I like to see, it's nice to preserve something like this if it's in sound condition especially now to have local residents enjoy and see some of the heritage that was here from years gone by. Of course now the railroad bridge to reopen it to rail traffic again would be impossible because the right away, much of the right of way from Maybrook you know to the bridge on my side of the river and also on the Dutchess side of the river housing has been built up and right of way basically has been, you know a lot of it's been used. But a nice thing some of the area, Highland got the ball rolling, they built a rail trail from out on Old New Paltz Road to the bridge and I believe on this side of the river, now some of the areas where the rails trails or the abandoned rail bed was, is being developed into a rail trail. So that's going to be a recreational means for people to enjoy and I think it's very nice and I understand some of the other things they had in mind for the bridge, they were going to build an elevator I heard from the Dutchess side from the Poughkeepsie side up to the bridge and they were also thinking of putting shops or some kind of things on the bridge as well as the walkway. So I think it would be very nice for the area to have this to preserve.

Interviewer 2: Do you think it would also be a good idea to put shops up there?

Tartell: Yes and no, I think so. I don't know if the shops are going to be you know that great of a thing but what would be nice I guess up there is to have some place for people using the rail trails to maybe stop and get a drink or something like that or a snack, you know after they've walked especially on a hot sultry day. It would be nice to have the means to get something to drink, or something to eat, that would be a great idea I think.

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Interviewer 2: Are there like any communal events or activities that you would like to see take place up there?

Tartell: Communal events, well they could do walks for good causes, for charity like cystic fibrosis or for the Cancer Society, things like that would be great you know and use the bridge to function those things.

Interviewer 2: Alright, is there anything about the bridge that we haven't discussed that you would like to touch upon, maybe the experience while you fighting the fire that we missed or anything along those lines?

Tartell: Well to basically sum it up I would say, it was a challenging day not only did we have to stretch a line out there to fight the fire. We fought the fire and we got the fire knocked down but it doesn't end there. All that, the hose had to be rolled back up again and the apparatus had to be put back into commission, you know to be ready for another fire and all the people that worked up there you know under the conditions, it was very dangerous like I said. I mean you could have slipped and fallen, you know it's a situation where firefighting is a risky and dangerous business. And to say volunteers were up there that did it, it's a thing to be proud of because most of the people up there were like I said volunteers from that side of the river.

Interviewer 2: Would you like to see possibly a monument put up for that in memory of the fire, fighting the fire when it is all set and done?

Tartell: Yes a monument would be nice; it would be nice to maybe erect something on both sides of the river for the people to enjoy or to be able to look at you know commemorating the date the of fire and probably to thank all those who were instrumental in extinguishing the fire, the volunteers who responded that day. And also to add to that, to commemorate the people who have worked hard and tirelessly to make something of the bridge, you know the Walkway Over the Hudson people, Bill Sepe and peoples names to put on there who you know volunteered or tried to make an effort to get the project off the ground.

Interviewer 2: [to Andrew Buccitelli] Andrew do you have anything?

Interviewer 1: Let me see, let me go back a little bit, have you ever heard of any ideas of recycling the bridge?

Tartell: Have I heard any ideas... I did hear a couple times back before everybody was giving up hope on the bridge. I heard various rumors that they were going to dismantle the bridge, tear the bridge down and that is a very, very, very costly situation because the bridge most of the paint on there is lead, lead paint and contamination of the river was a big concern and also it is very dangerous and you know it's a very expensive not only with the paint and worrying about contaminating the river but you know the dismantling of all that steel and labor and what-have-you would be a very costly project. There were also talks of using explosives like they use to implode houses and what have you take it down that way but not a good situation.

Colonel James Johnson: May I ask you a question? [in the background]

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Tartell: Yes.

Johnson: Did you train for a fire up there? Were there contingency plans? Had this been something your fire company or other fire companies were prepared to do that, you had to knock down fires in the past because I would think that trains routinely have sparks and cause potential small fires, was this the first time you had to respond? was there a plan had you done it before or was this it?

Tartell: Did we train for this type of fire? No, not really I believe that was the first fire up there to my knowledge ever up there may have been ones no one has mentioned but the only other fires that we would get involved in along the railroad would be brush fires from sparks from locomotives even the diesels today a lot of them have spark arresters but sparks from exhaust from diesel locomotives would set brush and leaves on fire this has been a thing that has occurred and still the thing with dragging breaks or something you know on the train actually causing a fire. In fact, just the other day they had a fire over in Highland in a [gondola] car from a train coming down from Selkirk I believe it was construction debris in the car, how the fire started no one knows but they got called to extinguish the fire over on River Road. But basically these are the only other, other actual fires involving a locomotive or something you know on the train which happens occasionally but no, not a bridge fire. That was pretty a unique thing.

Johnson: If their water system had worked properly on the bridge would this have been a much easier firefighting proposition that you faced?

Tartell: Had the standpipes worked?

Johnson: Had the standpipes worked?

Tartell: Had the standpipe been in good working order and was able to hold water that would have been a big beneficial thing to all of us out there because then we wouldn't have had to stretch two and a half inch hose line and of course from the two and half inch line we gated them down, a couple of the lines down to smaller inch and a half easy working lines. But had the standpipe been fully operational and water was able to be pumped through the standpipe, the fire stations that were out there, we could have tapped into them and we would have had it made. But since that situation gave us adversity we had to rough it and it was more involved project to get hoses and water out there.

Johnson: Must have to pack that all up?

Tartell: Right, that was what I was saying the idea of getting out there was one thing but we weren't done after that [slight laughter]. We had put it all back and get the apparatus back in service for any future fires.

Interviewer 2: Earlier on you mentioned that you actually got, you were stuck on the bridge at one point earlier, before the fire, could you maybe talk about that?

Tartell: Oh when I was teenager? [laughter] Well we were kids, we used to we used to have a lot of fun doing different things. So one day we got the idea, let's go out on the railroad bridge,

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so we got out on the Highland side and we started to walk out and I guess we were pretty much out in the middle and we saw a train coming. And we said oh boy, what do we do now? And it was very, very narrow walkway up there you know for maintenance people to up there what have you. And when you know you're a kid and you see a train coming what do we do? And I mean they passed us safely but I mean it was a little scary there for a few minutes because we didn't know, and it's a long jump I think it's like a from the top of the deck of that bridge to the surface of the water is like about 212 feet if my calculations are right. So that's a long jump.
[laughs]

Johnson: Any thing else you wanted to tell us that we didn't ask you?

Tartell: I think we pretty much have it covered but if you want to ask me some other questions if there's [cut off by Johnson]

Johnson: I was listening; I think the interviewers did a good job [to Jason Schaaf] Jason?

Jason Schaaf: Yeah definitely good, they covered everything.

Johnson: Well, we really appreciate you doing this so thank you very much for joining us today it was great story and we [cut off by Tartell].

Tartell: You're quite welcome.

Johnson: We're glad we're able to talk to you.

Tartell: I'm glad that I could come [cut off by Johnson].

Johnson: Our responders don't get the kind of credit you deserve.

Interviewer 2: Yeah.

Tartell: I'm kind of glad that I could come and share with you because like I said it was something that I had seen on the internet and my companion said to me, oh they're going to have an interview over at Marist about the railroad bridge and I said well I could probably feed some input in. So I'm glad I was able to come here and share my stories here with you.

Schaaf: Thank you for the unique perspective, definitely thank you very much.

Tartell: You're quite welcome.

Interviewer 2: Thank you.

[Tartell shakes hands with DeLisle]

Interviewer 2: The microphone.

Tartell: Whoops I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

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Interviewer 2: No that's alright.

[End of interview 48:54]

Transcribed by Paul Contarino