

Hudson River Valley Institute  
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories  
Mary Yankajtis

**Date: Saturday, April 26, 2008**

**Length: Approximately 17 minutes**

**Camera Man:** Alright all set when you're ready.

**Interviewer (Joe DeLisle):** Could you say and spell your name for us please?

**Mary Yankajtis:** You want me to spell it [slight laugh], thank you; you have me starting off real good. Hi my name is Mary Yankajtis it's M-A-R-Y Y-A-N-K-A-J-T-I-S.

**Interviewer:** And where did you grow up?

**Yankajtis:** I grew up in Pleasant Valley, New York which is in Dutchess County which is about ten miles from here.

**Interviewer:** And where did you go to school?

**Yankajtis:** Arlington which is also in Dutchess County.

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

**Yankajtis:** My mother was a cake baker she made cakes out of our house and decorated wedding cakes and we delivered them all around the Hudson Valley. My father worked at De Laval Separator Company in the boiler room.

**Interviewer:** And what is your profession exactly?

**Yankajtis:** My profession exactly, I have many different professions, I'm a mother and I work at an elementary school in the cafeteria and on the playground I run an after school activity program for the elementary school. Mostly I work in child care I do some gardening some housekeeping and various other things I can find.

**Interviewer:** And how long have you lived in the Hudson River Valley?

**Yankajtis:** I've actually lived in the Hudson River Valley for about forty-five years, I moved to New Hampshire and Maine for a couple of years in between but then it was so beautiful here that I really wanted to come back.

**Interviewer:** Do you think you could you contrast between New Hampshire/Maine and the Hudson Valley a little bit?

**Yankajtis:** Well there're all beautiful, I would be just as happy to stay in Maine or New Hampshire, or Vermont they have striking scenery and it's very different from here but my family was back in Dutchess County. So it made sense to come back to this area they have mountains, we have mountains but not as big as the White Mountains but we've got this

Hudson River Valley Institute  
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories  
Mary Yankajtis

incredible river. I grew up here obviously and always thought that all rivers looked like this until I crossed the Mississippi and I was kind of where's the river? It was so narrow that I was shocked and didn't realize until I started traveling how beautiful this area is.

**Interviewer:** So one of the big draws is definitely the river?

**Yankajtis:** The river is wonderful you can see it, you can smell it, you can get in it, you can be on it, you can go to the parks nearby and enjoy it. It's just incredible, that we have this and it's very different up north than it is here in the Mid-Hudson and all the way down to the city, it feels different all the way along the way.

**Interviewer:** Alright, what role do you think the bridge has played not only for the community but also for the region in general?

**Yankajtis:** It, the bridge for the region has been a historic, not a building, a historic bridge. Where ever you drive along the river you can see it tells you that you're getting into Poughkeepsie, it reminds you of the trains that used to cross the river and brings us back to the days when most transportation was by train. When I was little I would know where I was by looking at that bridge literally.

**Interviewer:** So you think the bridge is kind of a landmark of Poughkeepsie, that it is Poughkeepsie's bridge?

**Yankajtis:** It is, I don't know of any other bridges that large and that high that were for train travel. I'm sure they exist but I've never heard of them. I've never seen them and I've traveled quite a bit. So it's pretty unique.

**Interviewer:** Alright, what role do you think or feel the bridge will play for the community and the region?

**Yankajtis:** In the future since they are moving forward on this Walkway Over the Hudson it's going to provide the most incredible recreation opportunity that will be available I hope for free. I don't know about that for everyone to come and see. And if you haven't spent much time on the river in this area it's going to provide a chance to see how incredibly beautiful it is both from spring time with the trees blooming right on through to the fall when the colors are changing and then you get to watch and see everybody down below and what they're doing on the river.

**Interviewer:** What would you like to see people be able to do on the bridge when it's reopened?

**Yankajtis:** When you're on the bridge what can we do, I want to see the fireworks from up there I have watched the fireworks from the water, from the land for years so I would like to be up there to see them I think that would be really neat. Definitely walking, picnicking, sitting down, strolling I've been on the bridge and I know how wide it is maybe some music events or artists up there; I would imagine people would want to be up there painting and drawing as much as they could. Don't know about bicycle but maybe there could be special days set aside where everybody on the bridge is on bike as opposed to picnicking at the same time so that there's

Hudson River Valley Institute  
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories  
Mary Yankajtis

enough room to make that safe because that would be an awesome opportunity to bike across the Hudson too.

**Interviewer:** And what do you find most interesting about the bridge exactly maybe a person, an event, a fact that pertains to it?

**Yankajtis:** I think the most interesting thing about this bridge is that it was used by trains so many years ago and then now we're able to get up an walk on it certainly trains have been turned into bicycle paths and recreation pathways but those are the ones on the ground. I mean this one is hundreds of feet above that water and it's really awesome to look down and see that.

**Interviewer:** Now I may be jumping the gun a little bit here on Andrew but you've been on top of the bridge right?

**Yankajtis:** About thirteen years ago I had the opportunity to take my family out on the bridge and I'm really glad that I did it. Since we haven't had that much activity on that bridge since then but I was very scared. I didn't think about it when I was going there, we parked the car and out we went and I had my three year old daughter clutched in one hand and my nine month old son was in a backpack on my back. And when we started walking across the bridge, we realized that we were walking on was a grating with holes in it and so when you looked down you could literally see through the walkway down to the water. I knew I could see everything on the sides but I thought I would have something solid underneath and it wasn't. And so that made it very scary for me with my children so I passed off my daughter to my husband and I just had the baby in the backpack and he decided to start wiggling all over the place. And so I'm like holding on to my balance as I'm walking and started panicking three-quarters of the way out there but got myself out there and just enjoyed this incredible view. It was like being in an airplane or hot air balloon but still having your feet on the ground.

[Delisle and Buccitelli switch]

**Interviewer 2 (Andrew Buccitelli):** Okay, do you recall any local businesses that either generated or been affected by the bridge and its local traffic, like? [Cut off by Yankajtis]

**Yankajtis:** No I'm sorry cut that part out [laughs]

**Interviewer 2:** Have you heard of any ideas to recycle the bridge or destroy the bridge?

**Yankajtis:** I have heard at different points in time that they were going to take the bridge down which I'm sure would cost an enormous amount of money and remove this historical monument that's there. And then I've certainly heard about all kinds of plans to get the bridge up and running as a walkway and make it a permanent recreation area. I know Walkway Over the Hudson, Scenic Hudson has been working on that for many, many years.

**Interviewer 2:** Okay, what was your first impression of the bridge?

Hudson River Valley Institute  
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories  
Mary Yankajtis

**Yankajtis:** My first impression of the bridge? It was big, it was really high up, you know you're up there with the birds and the clouds, you know on a foggy day. I don't know if I would want to be in a train crossing it, going across it because it just, it just felt like you were hanging out up there.

**Interviewer 2:** Now you said you were up there, how was the view like?

**Yankajtis:** When I was up there it was a beautiful sunny day so you could see from the Catskills right on across Poughkeepsie, the city of Poughkeepsie, north and south, up and down the river you could see everywhere 360 degrees. There's not many places that you can do that. Even on the Empire State Building, you can walk around and see 360 degrees but from one spot you can not and up there you could see everything. It was breathtaking.

**Interviewer 2:** Would you say the bridge was sturdy?

**Yankajtis:** At the time, thirteen years ago? The bridge was not sturdy at all. Some of the hand rails were actually missing; the rails on the siding were just some, not rope but some kind of a little chain or metal three pieces of it going across, someone there could easily climb through it, not that you would want to. And then so, and we're only about this high and then some of them were missing so you couldn't hold on to them if you were starting to get scared so in that sense it wasn't very structurally safe at that point certainly they're going to change all of that.

**Interviewer 2:** Okay, that's about it for any questions I have.

**Interviewer:** You said you worked in education; do you think the bridge when it reopens could be an educational asset for maybe field trips?

**Yankajtis:** Oh, when the bridge opens, to bring school kids up there, absolutely I would suggest a very high staff-child ratio though, just because it's going to be awesome for them and some kids will get scared just as some grown ups will get scared but they will be able to study geography, and history and talk about the water and the water sources including up the river and why we want recreational areas and turn around and look at the mountains and talk about the geology and the formation of the mountains. It's going to provide wonderful opportunities for the kids.

**Interviewer:** Do you think this is a good way to ground the kids in the history of not only of the region but Poughkeepsie in general?

**Yankajtis:** Yes because even though, I think this would be a great chance to learn about Poughkeepsie. I grew up in Pleasant Valley which is only a few miles away but I don't think I could tell you anything about Poughkeepsie when I was a student. I don't remember learning about the history of Poughkeepsie I know as an adult now maybe it's because I'm out in the stores looking around I see all sorts of historical books that are out about different aspects of Poughkeepsie. I don't remember that being there when I was younger so I think it is important to learn about the area you're growing up in especially with the river and trade and how

Hudson River Valley Institute  
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories  
Mary Yankajtis

development furthered along because of the river and commerce and everything else, it's a great learning tool.

**Interviewer 2:** Do you think it will bring tourism into it?

**Yankajtis:** Tourism, tourism is already in the Mid-Hudson Valley, there's an incredible list of historic sites up and down this river. This is simply going to add one more to it and give people another reason to come to this area and it's so unique again there maybe other train bridges somewhere that are still in existence but to have a walkway will make it absolutely unique. I can see people you know driving to see this. I will drive twenty miles to get to a bike trail, why wouldn't people drive that distance to come here? People will drive three hours to go skiing why not drive a bit of ways to get up to this bridge? And the train from New York City comes right in the Poughkeepsie Station just figure out how to get a shuttle bus to take them right up there.

**Interviewer:** Could you talk a little more about when you when on the bridge, maybe the sights, the sounds, seeing the water underneath you, meeting the sun the birds?

**Yankajtis:** Let's see, the day I went out on the bridge it was warm and sunny, crystal clear the sky was blue, a few clouds there were some birds but I was looking down on the birds which is a wonderful experience to see. I was struck by how old the bridge was and how high up it was. I've only been out on the Poughkeepsie car bridge you know once or twice and I believe the train bridge is higher, I think so. So looking down, straight down into the water and just seeing the color of it and knowing that they've been trying to clean up this river and how poorly the river had been you know twenty, forty years ago and that it is certainly much cleaner they've been working on that and just seeing all of it all together. And you know, my three year old tells me she remembers being on the bridge I'm not positive if she does but she feels like she does.

**Interviewer 2:** Did you see any major structure problems about the bridge, I know you? [fades off]

**Yankajtis:** Major structural problems, I don't know if I would recognize a major structural problem if I saw it, sorry. Certainly they need to, you know, give a solid base for walking and I'm sure that's part of the plan. I remember seeing sketches once of actually seeing flower boxes and benches and grass growing up there. So I don't know what the new plans are, if they've revised it at this point.

**Interviewer:** Can we get your opinion as fire safety educator, maybe what you think about the bridge when you went up there and what do you think they should improve upon a fire safety stand point?

**Yankajtis:** That's an interesting question, I hadn't thought of that. I've been a fire safety educator in Rhinebeck for twenty years and I worked predominately with elementary school kids, teaching them what to do if there's a fire and certainly a bridge like this would pose a different possibility if there ever was a fire while people were up there. So one of the things you may need to do when somebody is approaching the bridge is have signs posted and clearly let them know what the plan is for evacuation if there ever is a problem up there. Especially if it's a

Hudson River Valley Institute  
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories  
Mary Yankajtis

night of fireworks you know they certainly can get that high and you can't tell what would happen and make sure that there's egress, you know both sides of the bridge. And how they would handle that, perhaps there needs to be fire safety call boxes or emergency boxes of any kind at different points along the bridge so someone doesn't have to get a quarter of a mile off the bridge before they could call for help. I think also people just need to be very aware of their children and what they are doing, hold on to them, keep them with you. It's not the place to bring a Frisbee, it's not going to go home with you if bring something like that. [Slight laughter]

**Interviewer:** Do you see any major problems with them opening the bridge up to the public?

**Yankajtis:** I do wonder about parking and bathrooms just you know I've done a lot of hiking and those things are always an issue. So I do wonder you know how they're handling that, I'm sure someone has worked on that but I haven't seen the plans for that yet

**Interviewer 2:** If there was a walkway made would you bring your kids to it?

**Yankajtis:** My kids are teenagers now, if the walkway was opened I would hope that they would come with their friends but I will absolutely be there as fast as I can because I would love to see the new bridge opened up.

**Interviewer:** Could you mention a few of the benefits you think of opening it up to the community at large?

**Yankajtis:** The bridge has a lot of benefits, just fresh open air is one of them there's never enough parks and places to walk available to people at any part of the country, solitude it's very quiet when you get up there and I'd imagine even with a hundred people up there unless people have their boom boxes perhaps that's something you could ask them not to do that it's going to very quiet and you can hear a few cars, you could hear the trains, the passenger trains going by, hear the birds, you could even hear the water lapping against the sides of the pilings for the bridge, hear and see the motors boats out there, so just a chance to be alone and commune with yourself and nature and God and whatever else you could find up there.

**Interviewer:** Is there anything you would like to add to the interview that we haven't asked about?

**Yankajtis:** [to Delisle] Have you been on the bridge?

**Interviewer:** We're going up Friday actually.

**Yankajtis:** Next week?

**Interviewer:** Yep.

**Yankajtis:** I hope the rain has stopped by then [laughs] don't bring slippery shoes. There's nothing else I want to add [laughs].

Hudson River Valley Institute  
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories  
Mary Yankajtis

**Interviewer 2:** Alright that was perfect, that was awesome.

**Interviewer:** Watch out you still have the cord on you.

**Yankajtis:** Oh yes I do, I wouldn't have thought of that and I don't know exactly where it is, oh here it is, yeah here we got.

**Interviewer:** Thank you very much that was great.

**[End of Interview 17:17]**

**Transcribed by Paul Contarino**