Hudson River Valley Institute
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories
Carleton Mabee author of Bridging the Hudson: The Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge and It's Connecting Rail Lines

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Length: Approximately 53 minutes
[Interview Begins at 0:21 seconds]

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

Carleton Mabee: My name is Carleton Mabee and it's strange, difficult to spell C-A-R-L-E-T-O-N there's an e in the middle of that name, Mabee M-A-B-E-E.

Interviewer: Great and can you tell us how long you've lived in the Hudson Valley?

Mabee: I've lived here since 1965. I came here to teach at the college in New Paltz, a teacher of history, that's why I came. But my family actually originated back in the 1600s, in New York City, a Huguenot family, my name, Mabee, is a Huguenot name. So I feel as if I belong [laughs] here even though I wasn't born here, my father wasn't born here, my father's father father wasn't born here but still my ancestors lived in the Hudson Valley.

Interviewer: You must have felt coming to New Paltz and being around Huguenot Street and the church and all that, you must have felt a sort of kinship?

Mabee: I always was very interested in that. One summer I acted a guide on Huguenot Street showing people the old houses.

Interviewer: Could you tell us what your general impressions of the Hudson Valley are? What are some of things you love about the Hudson Valley from your time here?

Mabee: I love its history of course, that's major part of my interest. I'm a teacher of history. I also love its mountains. I'm quite a hiker in the mountains nearby up in Minnewaska and Mohawk, I do that a lot. I've been swimming in the Hudson River believe [light laugh] it or not. I've been swimming quite a bit up at Minnewaska. I enjoy the outdoors a lot. I enjoy gardening around the house, that's important to me.

Interviewer: Alright, alright so let's move on towards talking about the bridge. What was one of the things that inspired you to write your book *Bridging the Hudson*?

Mabee: Well it happens that I'd already written a railroad book before that. The railroad line that ran from Kingston through Rosendale, New Paltz, Gardner, the town where I live, down into Orange County, I had written a history of that and so this was another railroad history project. Both these railroads were fairly close to where I live, about a mile and half down the road that way [points with his right hand] was the Wallkill Valley Line that I wrote. About a mile and half in the other direction, the line passed over the Poughkeepsie Bridge. So I'm close to it, on both sides, surrounded by it.

Interviewer: And so when it comes to the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge, what were some of the things that brought your attention to that?

Mabee: I think I've already answered the question mostly because I've written the railroad bridge story, a railroad story. So I thought of it as a railroad line that crossed the bridge that happened to be at Poughkeepsie. I was also always aware of the connection of the rail trails with the bridge. As I walk a lot on the rail trail is what the Wallkill Valley Line became the rail trail that passes to Gardner and New Paltz and so forth. I was also aware, the rail trail that supposedly would have crossed the Poughkeepsie Bridge if it were possible to walk across it but it wasn't. But the rail trail that went fairly close to it in Highland, I walked on that rail trail also and I also walked on the rail trails in Dutchess County on the other side of the bridge which would connect with the bridge if it were possible to walk on the bridge. So I was conscious from way back of that possibility. So when I got involved in writing about the bridge, it was already being talked about as a possible walkway. I knew that and I was enthusiastic for that idea, no question about it.

Interviewer: Great, so that being said, let's get into some of the details that you've come across in your research on the bridge. One of the things that we've been looking at in this project and talking to some people related to it is influence of Italians who first came into-the theory is first came to the Hudson Valley in part as laborers on the bridge and then perhaps settled. Is there anything to add to that or say to it?

Mabee: Well it's true, in the 1880s; Italians and large numbers were providing the labor for building the railroads in this region. Back in the 1840s up to the 1870s, it had been Irish who had particularly provided the common labor for railroad building and they came in large numbers to do that in this region. But by the 1880s, there'd been a shift, there's now the Italians who were doing it. One of the interesting aspects of this is while Italians provided most of the labor to build the bridge, the chief engineer who guided the building of bridge was an Irish man, which is a suggestion that the Irish who had been the common laborers had risen by this time as exemplified by John O'Rourke, the chief engineer. The Italians who were the common laborers of this period, later rose to the-to be the chief politicians of this area, the people who ran the legislator and the governor and so forth. So it was just sort of a general transition through history of different people passing through in a different way in American immigration.

I can tell the story of one Italian boy who worked on the railroad. He was actually born in Argentina, large numbers of Italians immigrated to Argentina just as they did to New York. He was born down there and at the age of 15, he finally persuaded his family that he wanted to move up here. He knew about New York City, he had relatives in this area and they finally let him go. He had difficulty persuading them to allow him to do that. Sometimes he refused to eat to try [slight laugh] and convince them that he was determined. A lot of his purposes in coming was that he wanted to help his family buy a house, they lived in a miserable shack down there in Argentina with a leaky roof. It was really unfit for habitation. He wanted to come to New York, earn some money, and send it back to them [and build a house]. So he came at the age of 15 and of course he had to look for a job and they got here and one of the things he did, he went to Grand Central Station to the labor department of the station, a room there, crowded with immigrants looking for jobs. He persuaded, eventually, an Italian foreman to hire him to work on the New York Central Railroad. He came up to Dutchess County to New Hamburg where he worked for a while as a water boy on the New York Central Railroad for a few months. Then he had relatives in Poughkeepsie. He visited them often, he got acquainted with them and they

helped him find a job on the New Haven Railroad; at the time ran the trains across the Poughkeepsie Bridge. So he began to work as a water boy for a construction crew that took the train everyday across the bridge and down into near Maybrook where there was a railroad depot, a big railroad track, a big yard and he worked near there and carried water. It was struggle for him but he was impressed with the railroad bridge. He honored the engineers who built such a great bridge that could carry such heavy trains and so on. His feet got sore day by day and all that but he sent a little money down to his family in Argentina. Then he decided that he wasn't sending enough so he wanted to do something more and he conceived the idea of picking raspberries and dandelion greens by walking across the bridge where he lived in Poughkeepsie, near the bridge, on Sunday morning. He had made the arrangement with the Italian run store in his neighborhood that they would sell the stuff, if he picked it early in the day, it would be fresh. So early on Sunday morning, he walked across the bridge; he was allowed to do that because he was an employee of the bridge company, the chain-the company that ran the trains over the bridge, the New Haven. He walked across, he picked his berries, he picked dandelions greens and then he was ready to walk across the other direction. While he was walking across the other direction a train came by. He apparently was not expecting that, he knew at some level of his mind that you could walk on the bridge, there were wooden walkways on each side of the bridge for maintenance men. You could walk on the bridge and allow a train to pass but he had never had this particular experience and he was carrying big bags, they were bags bloated with particularly the dandelion greens that were- took a lot of space. He was afraid if the train came by but it had passed and he survived. I heard this story by reading about it in the memories. This guy wrote his memoirs when he was an elderly man. I never met him but you may know that the Poughkeepsie Railroad Station recently had big panels of pictures prepared inside the main waiting room of the Poughkeepsie Station. One of the pictures was of this boy, DiRosa was his name and his family came all the way from Argentina for the occasion of the dedication of these pictures. He died by this time, he died in Florida but his family came and that was a far as I got in meeting his own family from Argentina, which I was very happy to do.

Interviewer: I think we've been in contact with DiRosa –

Mabee: Yeah, I never met him but I did meet his family.

Interviewer: His son I believe is local and just had a knee operation. So we're hoping to meet him soon and interview him so we can talk about that.

Mabee: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: Great, one of the great things about *Bridging the Hudson* is that you add a lot of anecdotes and human interests sort of stories into it. One of the things that particularly caught my eye was the stories of people who used the bridge as a means to jump- [laughs]

Mabee: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: Could you talk- speak to that?

Mabee: Well there were several people who got to be well known by jumping off the bridge. In that story you have to say there's always questions you could to raise about whether they really

jumped off the top of the bridge or whether they only climbed partway up and jumped off. Then there are questions about what kind of clothes they wore? what kind of special equipment they took as they jumped to protect them. Then there are questions about the medical treatment that they got that might or might not preserve their lives after jumping and all of that is involved in stories of all these people. The name of one of these guys was Steve Brodie. He became famous as a bridge jumper. He jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge or so it was said. So he climbed but people were not sure whether he jumped off the top of the bridge or whether some kind of an image of a man was pushed of the bridge that made it look as if he jumped off the bridge. No one ever really knew for sure. The same kind of problem arose in the story of whether he jumped from the Poughkeepsie Bridge or not. Supposedly he came up the Westshore line, to the Highland Station one morning and he came in the evening and stayed overnight in a hotel. Then he was dressed by his friends specially for jumping off the bridge. Then he walked passing a guard, who presumably should have prevented his walking out on the bridge. But he got by because the guard was busy starting an engine, didn't pay much attention, he walked by. If he walked out on the bridge, he walked to the top of the bridge and did jump off and he was met below in the water by some people who were in rowboats there; intending to pick him up. They picked him up and they took him back to the hotel. He survived. He went back to the city, bragged about jumping off of the Poughkeepsie Bridge and became known for it and survived. When he died, he didn't die for jumping off a bridge, he died because he was ill, quite a different story. There's another person who also came to jump over the bridge. Patrick Callahan was an example of another one. He came up to the railroad to Poughkeepsie and stayed in a hotel and when he left the next day, he hadn't paid his hotel bill and he was arrested for that. He did go out from the river with a group of reporters; he welcomed reporters to follow what he was doing. It had been raining that day and it was rather hard to see up in the mist as to whether he really went up to the top or not. They don't know, he climbed up, one of the towers in the river, and jumped and was picked up by the rowboats and uncertain how far up he went. But however far up he went, he went up enough so that he was injured physically and he died the next day. The stories vary but they're very dramatic stories and they stuck with me [laughs]. They're a part of my picture of the bridge.

Interviewer: Same here. What sort of awards were these gentlemen looking at? if you can speculate on such an issue?

Mabee: Well one of the newspapers in New York offered an award if, I forget who it was. I guess it was Callahan, if he really jumped of the bridge. They advised him however, not to do it because it wasn't wise; the possibility of death hangs right over your head. I guess since he died, they didn't have to pay it but sometimes awards could be offered for such things.

Interviewer: That's funny.

Mabee: And of course it was mostly just that you became famous. You could appear in bars as Brodie did. He appeared in bars frequently after doing all this jumping claiming that he jumped. He mimicked jumping in the bars to the applause of the crowd and Brodie became very wealthy as a jumper.

Interviewer: That's fascinating. Another area of the bridge I'd like to ask you about is the issue of turning the bridge potentially into an automobile bridge.

Mabee: I'd like to broaden that a little bit and turn it into a walkway which was an issue that appeared very early as well as turning it into an auto bridge, from the original charter this issue arose. The original charter provided the company that built the bridge would be allowed to open the bridge to walkers and not to autos at the time but carriages. It didn't require it however, and the bridge as built, did not provide for a walkway except for maintenance on the side of the bridge right next to the railroad tracks. It didn't provide for a carriage road. It is true however; that some of the original designs of the bridge did provide for a carriage road and a walkway but when it was finally built it didn't include them. Well there were always people who were disappointed that you couldn't walk on the bridge. For instance, there was somebody who was quite disappointed and once he lived in Poughkeepsie but he had an appointment over in Highland. So he decided that he was going to walk across to his appointment because he had understood that the bridge would legally allow this. So he went to the gate, the gateman said, "no you can't do it, we're not prepared for that now," although he was aware that legally that it was possible to do it. So the guy decided that he was going to walk without permission and he tried and the guard stopped him and turned him back. So he went back but then he decided to sue because he believed that he had a legal right to cross. He didn't get anywhere with his suit. In this case and in other cases, the position of the courts seemed to be that the railroad wasn't required to do it. It could do it if it wished but it didn't want to but then the pressure was put on it after that.

In the 1920s, the pressure became very strong to turn the bridge into an auto way as well as a railroad way and this time there were people who put the pressure on the state legislature to force the railroad to turn it into a bridge that was open to autos. The legislature did it, it adopted charters for the railroad setting that you have to allow railroad-autos to cross the railroad bridge. Well this was a period when FD Roosevelt was sometimes the state legislature, eventually governor and he took an interest in this issue and when he finally decided that the agitation was not getting anywhere fundamentally because it wasn't possible, easily to adapt the railroad to autos. It just wasn't practical and so Roosevelt turned the issue around and said we ought to be able to agitating instead for a new bridge that would supplement the railroad bridge and this turned out to be the Mid-Hudson Bridge which was opened finally in 1930. Of course Mrs. Roosevelt and Governor Roosevelt were there to open the bridge as an auto bridge which would complement the railroad bridge.

Interviewer: I'd ask you to speculate on maybe O'Rourke's designs, why in the end did there not have walkways attached to it as the original charter had said, was it a cost cutting method or-?

Mabee: I think the railroads were just not interested in the additional costs [laughs] it was just a burden to them. The position the courts took, even though the later charters required them to do it was it was unfair to require the railroads after the bridge had already been built to refurbish it as an auto walkway. That was an unfair burden on the corporation and the court decided with the railroad companies all along and not with the people who were agitating to make it into an auto way or a walkway even then.

Interviewer: Great, the next question or topic I want to get into, are some the colorful people that you describe in your book, one in particular was Nathan Blodgett and you offered up several great stories about Blodgett. If you could kind of retell some of these stories and add maybe some of your impressions on Mr. Blodgett?

Mabee: Well it's true; I never met Mr. Blodgett, he died before I had undertaken this writing. Most of what I learned about him was from a tape and letters of recollections that he wrote in his old age and which were both in the possession of Leroy Beaujon. Now Leroy Beaujon grew up in Connecticut-Canaan, Connecticut, one of the routes to the railroad bridge ran through Canaan. He was always interested in the Poughkeepsie Bridge. He himself worked for various railroads, including railroads that ran across the bridge and he's been a fanatic in saving information that relates to the history of the bridge and the railroads that used the bridge. He lives in California now but he came here several times, I spent a lot of time with him and he was very generous in making materials available to me that I could use. So I do know some of the stories about Blodgett but never met Blodgett himself.

Well let's see, what's one of these stories, [looks through notes] one was a story about a railroad that- a railroad that ran across the bridge but on the eastern side of the Hudson River. One time the railroad crew noticed that there was blood on their engine and they didn't know where it came from. When they reported it to the railroad authority, the railroad authorities asked them to go back over the route slowly, watch all along the way where that blood could have possibly had come from. So they retraced their route and they found eventually the remains of a body which had been cut. They finally figured out what had happened. This person who was killed by the train, had worked recently for the railroad but he turned out to be drunk and he got fired for being drunk and fired from right where he was and he wanted to walk back to Poughkeepsie. He tried riding in the train, they put him off because he didn't pay his fare and then he decided to walk the rest of the way to Poughkeepsie. So apparently drunk as he was, walking at night on that railroad, he just laid down on the track and the train ran over him. That's one of the stories he told.

Here's another one, again this is the railroad that is running on the bridge line in Connecticut. A railroad with a special train was doing construction work on taking workers from various points in Connecticut and New York State to a sight where there was being construction work. An unemployed man mingled with the railroad workers and people around the train didn't know all these workers. So they didn't identify him as not really entitled to be there on the train with the other workers. He was unemployed and he mingled with the workers, he got a ride to a certain place where he wanted to go and look for a job. Then when the same train was going back at the end of the day, he again mingled with the workers who got on at that station and the crew didn't know the difference. He rode back in the other direction and when that railroad came into its home, the train came into its own railroad yard, it was in an accident. Another train came up behind them and pushed against them and broke up some of the cars and in the process one person was caught. He was the same unemployed person who had no right to be there but he was there anyway and he got caught, squeezed between two cars and a leg had to be amputated. Interesting thing about these stories is that Blodgett tells these stories without commenting on them. So you don't know what kind of a person Blodgett was really. He doesn't show any feeling about a person being injured on the railroad. He doesn't follow what happened to this

guy who lost his leg, you wonder what happened to him? There's no answer to that, he doesn't say anymore [slight laugh].

There's one more story for Blodgett, this is a cat story. There was crew that ran a work train over the railroad, over the railroad bridge while the bridge was being repaired for some reason or other. This was a dinky little train, a small train. The crew of this train included a conductor who lived in Poughkeepsie and owned a cat and this conductor was tired of this cat. The cat was old and he wanted to get rid of it. Instead of killing it, it was a pet, he didn't want to kill it, he was willing to abandon it. So he took the cat on this little dinky train riding across the bridge to Highland and then abandoned the cat in Highland. Well the rest of the crew saw what he did and to make sport of this guy, they caught the cat, put it in a box in the train so that the conductor didn't know about it, carried the cat back to the other side of the river in Poughkeepsie and let it loose. So when the conductor got home to his house, he found his cat on the porch of the house again and he was just amazed. He said, "how could it possibly be this cat could find its way back across the bridge?" That bridge is full of holes, you know between the rails you- a cat could fall down, a human couldn't fall very easily through the cracks but a cat could fall through those cracks. How could that cat safely find its way through the construction mess on the bridge, all the obstacles on any bridge, all the way back? So he said, "cat you have found a home for life."

[Interviewer laughs]

Interviewer: As a cat lover, I'm sure you can appreciate that story. [laughs]

Mabee: Yeah, but you still don't know learn very much about what Blodgett was like from these stories, to him they are just good stories. They are good stories of course but you don't know Blodgett from them.

Interviewer: From Blodgett's material, could you speculate on what life might have been like on-as a railroad worker?

Mabee: Oh you can from this material and many other kinds of items, you get some picture of what life would be like. I've talked to a lot of people who have worked on the railroad, who could tell me their own stories about the railroad and what it was like to be an engineer. I got the strong impression of how difficult it was to run a train from the west side, down the slope, quite a slope, from Highland down to the bridge, then across the bridge and up on slight rise on the other side. I got very much the impression that if you were an engineer; you had to watch your speed very carefully. The speed limit on the bridge was 12 miles an hour, very slow because they didn't want to shake the bridge, to loosen it, to make it more dangerous to use. And to slow sufficiently on the slope going down and then to go slowly on the bridge itself but still enough so you could go up on the rise on the other end, it was difficult. Or if you were coming from the east side and you wanted to go slowly over the bridge or you were required to, then you had to put on some speed somewhere to climb the incline up at Highland and it was hard to follow the rules precisely and worry about all those things. There were problems like that to think about if you were a crew on the train. There were also problems like hoboes who you might meet on the train. You might be sympathetic to them you might not. You had to follow the rules to some extent and there's a story about a train, an engineer who put a hobo off his train. Sometime later,

he saw the same hobo on the train, riding on the engine and he was afraid for his life. He couldn't stop the train very abruptly, that would knock him off, but eventually crawled out on the engine and grabbed a hold of this guy and pulled him into the engine, put him inside. A lot of problems, a lot of human problems, mechanical problems that would arise being a crew on a train, I got a lot of stories out of it, a lot of people and things like that.

Interviewer: Yeah, we've talked to Peter McLoughlin over there at Danbury and Tony Marano over in Maybrook and while they say the same similar things, one thing I do get from them is the sense of camaraderie-

Mabee: Good, good, yeah.

Interviewer: And real love for the trains, they still care [cut off by Mabee].

Mabee: Yeah, of course what they loved were the old steam trains and when the trains turned into diesels, they were not very happy; they didn't feel the same affection for the trains as they did from steam trains.

Interviewer: Yes.

Mabee: Yep.

Interviewer: Another person I'd like to ask you about is Bill Fell who painted on the bridge and some work on it-

Mabee: Bill Fell was somebody that I met. I went to see him, he lives in Hyde Park just outside of Poughkeepsie and he told me his life story. He grew up in the Bronx. He came up to this region, in the summers with his family and then eventually he stayed in this region for awhile, in the CCC camps during the Depression period. Then after, he got out of that, he got-he married a Poughkeepsie girl. He'd never ridden in a train across the bridge and didn't know much about railroads but he got a job as a young man painting on the bridge. He was afraid to tell his wife that's what it was, it would obviously be so dangerous that she'd be scared. It was only several months later when she saw him climb up the bridge that she became aware that he wasn't just working for the railroad, he had told her that much, but he was working for the railroad painting the bridge. Painting the bridge meant that you had to scrape off the old rust and paint first a coat, then another coat, and you had to do this often hanging from the bridge by rope. You had somebody up there managing the rope at the top, while you were hung somewhere down below dangling from this rope, sitting in a special seat that was made to hold you. But you weren't buckled in the seat; it was fitted so that it would supposedly hold you. I myself would much rather be buckled in this seat but that wasn't the way it was done. Also it wasn't done with any nets underneath, so that if you fell, you would fell-fall into the water. You were not protected as some construction people are with nets that you could fall into that would save you. Bill Fell always wondered why there were no nets but there weren't, they never were. One of the things that he did while he was in these seats was, if he could reach what he need to paint from sitting in his seat, that was fine but sometimes he couldn't reach it and he would crawl out of his seat and crawl on the frame work, the steel framework of the towers to reach what he needed to reach to paint. That would of course be even more dangerous but he did that too. It's an interesting

question what he did at lunch time. At lunch time, if he was painting near the top of the bridge, he would yell up and they would just haul up the rope and he'd go up and have lunch there. If he was way down, let's say at the bottom of a tower, he said, this was very interesting to me, that it would take so much energy to get up to the top of the bridge, that it would be better not to do it, just stay down there where you were and have lunch in your seat or climbing around those girders somewhere. They would just hand down your lunch by rope to you; you could do that if you wanted to, that was your choice. [Pen drops in the background] That suggests, that just suggests some of the danger and some of the energy that was demanded of you going around these girders and going up and down this rope.

One of the stories that Bill told me about his work was when they got bored with what they were doing, they would throw paint at each other. They would flip one of their paint brushes on each other. Then some time, a barrage was passing under the bridge [laughs] and they saw that down there on the barge, was a man reading a newspaper, just sitting there doing nothing but reading a newspaper. They thought to tease him; they would just drop a little paint on him. So they shook their brushes a little bit and at first the poor guy didn't know what it was but he touched his forehead and he saw it was paint and he saw the painters up there and then he knew and then he jumped up and down yelling at them accusing them, you know, of tormenting him which they certainly were indeed doing. On another occasion, Bill Fell [laughs] was [clears throat] spattered with paint by one of his fellow painters. To get back at him, he decided to dump a whole can of paint on this painter. The only trouble was, he selected the wrong person and he dumped a whole can of paint on a person who had not flipped any paint at him. He got into trouble over that one, a lot of it. Bill Fell painted the bridges for about five years but there were other painters, maintenance men on the bridge who worked in those very dangerous circumstances for many years. One of them that I met, who lived in Orange County, Davis by name, worked on the bridge as a maintenance man for 30 years. That's a long time.

Interviewer: Let's see, I think I'll move on towards talking about the influence of FDR, you kind of hinted at that already as well with the CCC and stuff like that.

Mabee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Could elaborate more on FDR's interest into the bridge and maybe how he was governor and stuff like that, he started heading towards-?

Mabee: Of course FDR was from an old New York Dutch family which had lived in New York City or somewhere along the river as he loved to say, "my family lived on the river 200 years." He loved to say that. He was very aware of the river. His father had lived in summers in a house right-on the edge of Poughkeepsie which eventually burned and when it burned it was bought by the state and became the state hospital property on the edge of Poughkeepsie. His father James Roosevelt was considerably involved in [clears throat] railroads and even in the bridge. In some ways, his father was active investing in railroads. He had a special railroad car of his own that he took his family around in. James Roosevelt married into the Delano family which had a home in Newburgh but which invested in the coal region in Pennsylvania. So that there's a town in Pennsylvania named Delano, which I've been too. Well these combinations of being invested in railroads and invested in coal helped to relate James Roosevelt to the Pennsylvania Railroad

which at one time wanted to build the Poughkeepsie Bridge, it didn't eventually do it. James Roosevelt was involved in fact in that interest of the railroad. When the railroad was finally built, James Roosevelt was one of their commissioners which had to do with supervising the state seizing land for the purposes of the railroad connections to the bridge and the building of the bridge itself. So that he tried various cases about land seizures for the bridge. FDR, himself as a child, grew up when the bridge was being built, he was still just a kid then. He swam in the Hudson River. He was an iceboater, an enthusiastic ice boater as he grew older in the Hudson River. He ran yachts. As an iceboater he went under the bridge, back and forth as a [clears throat] sailor. He ran yachts underneath bridge back and forth. He was very conscious of the bridge and you could at first in the early years, you could see the bridge from the Roosevelt home in Hyde Park. After James Roosevelt had lost the property on the edge of Poughkeepsie; he built a new house, Springwood, up in Hyde Park and from that sight you could see the bridge. It was easier to see it in the old days, before the many trees had grown up but even now you can still see it from the second floor of the Roosevelt house. You can see the bridge.

Roosevelt himself was a great railroad man, he often rode on the railroad, his father had brought up to do that and so it was natural for him to do it. When he was president, he often came back to Hyde Park by train and one of the routes he often followed was to take the trains simply to New York City and then up on the Hudson Line to the Hyde Park Station. Another route that he often followed was to take the railroad to Jersey City and then come up on the Westshore Line to the Highland Station that was a route that he often favored. There were kids that I found out about who could tell every time that he was expected to come to Highland because the secret servicemen would spread out in the area long before he arrived. It was sort of an invitation to everybody, you better come and see because Roosevelt' coming, you know he's coming. The secret servicemen would protect the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge because it was near enough to do damage to Roosevelt. They would also protect the Mid-Hudson Bridge because if Roosevelt got out of the train in Highland, he had to take a car and cross the Mid-Hudson Bridge to come back to Poughkeepsie. They would protect the Mid-Hudson Bridge more than they would protect the Poughkeepsie Bridge. Sometimes Roosevelt also took the Poughkeepsie Bridge route, I never could never find out that he ever crossed the railroad bridge in a train. Maybe he did but I never found the direct evidence to support that idea. He did take the Poughkeepsie Bridge route to Highland at least. Then he seemed to get out of the train there. In 1944, one example of his taking that Poughkeepsie Bridge route to Highland was that he took a train in New Jersey to visit an old girlfriend. He'd once fallen for a secretary that he had. Many years later in his old age, he still remembered her, kept up with her a little bit and visited her in New Jersey and then continued on the Poughkeepsie Bridge route to Highland. Then he got out of the train in the Highland Station, and Mrs. Roosevelt who had been in Hyde Park met him there. Then of course they drove by car over the Mid-Hudson Bridge to come back home. I never could find out, I always wanted to be able to say that FDR rode across that bridge but I never was able to say that, never found the evidence for it

Interviewer: Could you speak to some of the New Deal policies as it concerned the bridge, in terms of putting people to work on the bridge, maintenance? I know you spoke about the painters with Bill Fell. Were there any other ways in which a New Deal policy influenced the bridge?

Mabee: I can't think of any directly, no I can't.

Interviewer: Okay, fair enough. What do you feel about the new walkway program, to make it the largest walkway across?

Mabee: Well of course I'm very enthusiastic about that, while I was writing the book, I walked out on the railroad bridge. I'm very aware that this bridge is not like most bridges, it doesn't have a superstructure above the railroad track. If you have a superstructure above the main roadway such as the Mid-Hudson river does, it's difficult to look out on the river, especially if you're driving a car across, you're busy keeping a car in the right path and you have all these beams, these enormous girders, these ropes that obstruct your view. The Poughkeepsie Bridge is unusual; it doesn't have any superstructure over the railway line where the tracks are. It's open, so if you're on that bridge, you get a full view up and down the river, that's remarkable. Bridges aren't usually built like that but this one happens to be. Another factor in this situation is of course is you don't have any traffic, any noise that interferes with the enjoyment of the situation. So you're out there in the quiet, relative quiet on the river, you can look down with boats passing underneath, you can see the side of the river, both sides of the river, way down back and forth. You're aware of all the historic nature of the setting and of course you're aware that this is the first bridge built over the Hudson River between New York and Albany and as you're aware that the bridge was used by passengers and freight for many many years. You're aware that one time, there was a regular through train that ran from Boston across the bridge all the way down to Washington or daily train back and forth carrying passengers by night over that bridge, being aware of all that history and enjoying the quiet and being up there, walking is a magnificent experience, it's just terrific. When I first got involved with this, there was already a private group that was interested in turning the bridge into a walkway. This walkway group got the ownership of the bridge from Penn Central Railroad which at the time had owned the bridge up until that time; this is now in the 70s and 80s. They were talking about and as a matter of fact, I had the experience of going with one of the directors of this private group, who was an engineer, going down to Philadelphia, where Penn Central Headquarters are, and securing from them, their collection of manuscripts about the bridge and bringing it back up here because it now belonged to the walkway. The Penn Central said, "We don't want documents, engineering drawings, manuscripts, we don't want that kind of thing, for a bridge that we no longer own, it ought to go to the owners." So they gave it to the walkway group that was advocating turning the bridge into a walkway. We brought it back up here and now it's in a historical society in Dutchess County at Clinton Corners.

Interviewer: Alright, I know I didn't put this on the list; maybe you can speak to it, could you talk about the circus trains that came across.

Mabee: About what? [Looks for clarification]

Interviewer: The circus trains that used to come across and that the bridge-

Mabee: Circuit trains?

Interviewer: Circus, as in the Barnum and Baileys and-.

Mabee: Oh, circus, oh yeah, yeah. I think I should say, just on the previous subject I should say, since I've finished writing this book, the group that was advocating-turning the bridge into a

walkway changed its nature considerably. At first it was devoted to the idea that raising all the money to do the job privately, it was unable under those circumstances, to complete the walkway because it never could raise anywhere near enough money. The group got revised, it got new personnel and it got revised into a different kind of group which was willing to accept government grants to help it do the job as well as-remaining a private group which wanted to put private money into it too. It succeeded in raising the money in a remarkable, remarkable story of government support, public support, private support, coming together to make it possible to complete this job. Now in regard to circuses, yeah there were circuses in Poughkeepsie. There were circuses along the railroad lines. But near Poughkeepsie, and it is true that the circuses made a lot of the use of the Poughkeepsie Bridge when they were in town. And so the railroad advertised, sure come and see the circus in Poughkeepsie; come by using the railroad bridge or while you're here take a trip over the bridge back and forth over the bridge to just enjoy it, to show off. The railroad bridge was almost a feature as important as the circus in Poughkeepsie.

Interviewer: Great, Paul any questions that you might want to throw out there?

Interviewer 2 (Paul Contarino): Maybe about the bridge fire, just those years in between, the whole issue of ownership over the bridge. I know it wasn't part of the questions you prepared.

Interviewer: Paul was asking about the fire, it's pure speculation, what were the causes, in your opinion of the fire?

Mabee: Well I'm not sure, what the thing that's important in my mind about the fire is that the railroads had given up in really protecting the bridges from fire. Fires on the bridge were common enough, when trains go across the bridge; the sparks from the engine could easily start a fire on the railroad ties which are soaked with oil. They're ready to burst into flames. This had happened for years on the railroad bridge but they had a system for taking care of it. They had persons whose responsibility was to look out for fires and put them out properly. There had been along the railroad, a system of hoses across the bridge which could be used in fighting fires, barrels of anti-fire equipment had been ready on the bridge. In 1974 when particular fire came, the railroads had given up. They didn't care enough about the bridge anymore. It was a burden to them, they weren't using it but about once a day for a train. They couldn't see a future for it. So they had really given up. So that's why the fire, once it started, easily spread, and did an enormous amount of damage. So it put the bridge out of business.

Interviewer: Alright, anything else you would like to add, anything maybe I didn't ask, that you would like to speak to or anything else?

Mabee: Well I just want to say, that I look forward as a rail trail walker to going out on that bridge when it's open to the public as I hope it will be by next year or by later this year I should say. I think it's going to be a magnificent experience and I think there will be a vast number of Americans and people all over the world who will be attracted by this remarkable long bridge across the Hudson River.

Interviewer: Well said. I hope so too. I can't wait. I can't wait to take my bicycle up there and see it [cut off by Mabee].

Mabee: Good for bicycle too.

Interviewer: See if I lose my nerve. [Laughs]

Mabee: Absolutely.

Interviewer: Alright let me just turn this off.

[End of Interview 53:15]

Transcribed by Paul Contarino