Hudson River Valley Institute
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories
Peter Sala

Interviewer: Can you tell me your name?

Sala: Peter Sala

Interviewer: And could you tell me how long you've been in the Hudson Valley?

Sala: All my life, I'm 80. Well no, I was here 79 years and 3 months, I moved here when I was about a year old.

Interviewer: And can you describe the Hudson Valley from you own personal experience, what you love.

Sala: Well when I started, I lived in Wingdale, New York which is east of here. And we had a fire and our house burned down, and we moved to Dover and my father was a, you know, came from Italy and couldn't speak English and he worked in the quarries and he worked in making timber for railroad ties. Then from there we went to school and, I found it quite clever, my dad says that we won't speak Italian in the house anymore because he wanted to learn English. So we spoke English in school and English at home, it was because my father insisted on English, because when we went to school we couldn't speak English.

Interviewer: Was the neighborhood you grew up in a strong Italian neighborhood?

Sala: Oh yeah, without a doubt. Everybody had their own little clique. I found out now, like my father made wine and ( ) made wine, and different people made wine, different kind of wines, and they grew their own grapes and everything. And one of the guys had a real nice house and it was always real nice girls that lived there, I mean, you know, mature women. And I didn't know what they were, but now I found out what they were right, but everybody had their own little specialty and it was a house of ill repute right, so a guy made wine and the guy did things like that. It was an interesting life, we never knew we were poor you know. I found out later when I left and we were supposed to be poor, but I didn't think we were.

Interviewer: What brought your family to the Hudson Valley?

Sala: Well my dad came from Italy and he went through Dover and he went to Lee, Massachusetts. And he was a boarder in my grandmother's house and she had five girls, and we found out later, as we were talking, I said to my mother Zia Anna, Zia Alice—which is aunt—Aunt Anna, Aunt Alice. You know they're all girls and they all married boarders, so my grandmother was very smart too because she married all five girls off to boarders. And then my father moved back down to Dover and then he ended up working for a ( ), he was a powder man, a dynamiter, and he had very little formal education but he could do anything, and matter of fact for (years) he did a lot of the land surveying by telling what kind of a tree grew there and did the root grew straight down, if it did it wasn't rock, if it spread out it could be gravel. He had the knowledge to do that and I

don't know where he learned it from but he was a powder man, and then he left there and he went to the Hudson River State Psychiatric Center. He was working in the boiler room. Again, I don't know where he learned that but you know, we kept learning from him. And that's how we came to the Hudson Valley and I've been in the valley all my life.

Interviewer: Can you tell me your, like what your job was, what your career was?

Sala: Well, it was never planned, it was more like, "Oh I'm tired of this. I have no more to learn." And you know, I've been a lumberjack, I trained horses, I broke horses, I was a deep sea diver, I was a sailor, I was a waiter for Alumni House at Vassar College where I met my wife, who's grandfather worked on the railroad bridge years ago when they built it. I've done many, many jobs and I ended up working for someone in the salvage business—outside of my career in the Navy—and he ended up with a salvage yard in Poughkeepsie, and that's where I retired from. And then I went into the real estate business, and I kind of retired from that although I'm still doing that. But I've been lucky that I can make a living doing what I loved so you name it, I've probably done it. I've done all sculpturing and art. I love to fish and I go to the Keys fishing. I'm a very, very, very fortunate man. I have a wife that's the same wife I've had for fifty five years, we have three children, one is with IBM in Burlington, my other one—that's my second son—[pause] I just started thinking about my first son who was, I had another son that I lost, he was murdered in ( ). I'm sorry, then I had a daughter that's a nurse, and she's very, very successful, and our grandchildren are very successful. I have a granddaughter that just joined the Coast Guard and she just graduated from boot camp, which I've very proud of. And I have another grandson that's studying to be an engineer, so we're very, very blessed and what else can I tell you. I'm sorry about my son, I haven't thought about him in a long time.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about your relationship to trains, I know you said your mother, or your wife's father worked on the trains?

Sala: Her grandfather.

Interviewer: Did he ever tell you stories?

Sala: No, I never met him. I just know he, she keeps telling me that her grandfather… the blast went off and he got all scratched up with gravel and everything else. But the bridge has been a part of my life even when I didn't know it. We lived near Creek Road, which was near the railroad tracks, so we used to see the train go by. And the bridge carried double tracks two ways. I mean there were trains coming and trains going on that bridge, and loaded with coal. Ed Loedy remembers the equipment, but I remember that they were all loaded with coal, and strangely, you'd be sleeping in the middle of the night and you'd wake up at three o'clock in the morning and it wasn't because the trains went by and shook the house. It was because the train didn't go by. I mean, it's just in your computer mind, the train didn't go by, you woke up, oh, and then you went back to sleep. And then, like I say, we lived next to the tracks, quite a way from the tracks but the trains

went by. And then, I was at some kind of a meeting and Bill Sepe was the guest speaker, and he spoke about the bridge, and it was just like he reached out and grabbed me you know. I was immediately interested because I was in salvage and we used to take down buildings, stuff like that. And I just dreamed of taking that bridge down right, and it seems strange to me. I mean here I am telling you, hoping that when I tell you I'll help to preserve that bridge, but I got to admit to you, one time my biggest dream was to take it down. I mean I would have taken it down, the last piece they put in it, I would have taken out first, and then being a salvage diver I would, when I got close to shore… I would have dropped it in the river and pulled it out with beaching gear. So I went from wanting to take it down, dreaming of taking it down, to now I hope it becomes a reality… even though Ed said it would cost thirty million dollars to paint it every year. They don't paint the Beacon Bridge every year, and ( ) didn't store his equipment in buildings because if we stored them in a building they'd rust away, they left them outside so it rained on it, water fell off and it wasn't destroyed. So maybe we don't have to paint the bridge, they don't paint the Beacon Bridge, I don't know. But that's how I got involved, because Bill Sepe was there and he was the guest speaker, that started and he asked me if I would help, and then from there I went to loaning my trucks and climbing up grades of like forty five degrees with a four wheel drive truck, with no place to turn around, I had to back down and big stones. You can't believe what Ed would, Bill Sepe did on that bridge, but that's how I got started on the bridge. And then one of the real things I liked about the bridge was we helped put up the flag pole, and I was always happy about having the flag pole. The flag only lasted about three months and the wind shredded it. But there were so many people that were involved in the bridge, like even with the flag pole, we had to take the flag pole down one time because the top ( ) on the rope was broke and the guy was Paul Sullivan—he's a town justice, been there for twenty years—and her son who was sixteen or seventeen, came out to watch us and help us take the flag down. So there's people from all walks of life that have worked on that bridge, and my feeling with the bridge it's almost like, you get out in the middle of that bridge and you get like a religious feeling or a holy feeling. You'll get to know more about yourself than you ever did before because you've looked at it, you've seen it, but when you go out on that bridge, it does something to you spiritually. I don't know, why, I don't know what it is, but you go out on that bridge, and then we had people who tried to out there and wanted to go out there, and tried and tried but couldn't make it because of, you know, fear of heights. But Paul Sullivan worked there, Kyle Ball (?) worked there and we had people from all, farmers, and construction workers, and myself—a navy man—and everything else so, I don't know… We've probably had seven, eight, nine hundred people that volunteered on the bridge, shoveling and moving stones, and doing things that were impossible. So that's how I was involved with the bridge.

Interviewer: What is, in your opinion, the state of the bridge when you were up there? Did you get to see the fire damage, what did that look like?

Sala: Well I saw the fire damage because I was coming north on the new arterial. But if I remember correctly, I remember seeing the smoke, you could see a lot of traffic, I vaguely remember turning off. I don't know what street it is there, to go home. I didn't want to get caught in traffic, but when I was on the bridge, I mean the bridge looks

structurally sound to me. And the bridge is alive, because as you walk out there, you carry a piece of slate in your pocket or something, and they have a slip joint in the railroads, and you put a mark across them in the morning, and as the bridge heated up, the marks would go apart. Sometimes that mark would be probably four inches apart. So the bridge is actually moving, you can hear it sometime, but it kind of has its own life and it has a religious feeling to me. I don't know why, I get it when I go up there. You kind of feel like… you feel like you're about that big [make gesture with his hand] you know.

Interviewer: What's the view like from the top of that bridge?

Sala: You can't describe it, you have to see it. I mean, you look up the river, you look down the river, and you look at Poughkeepsie, you see Poughkeepsie like you never saw it before. And you look toward Highland, you look down and you see the little boats going back and forth it's… I can't describe it to you. But I would be shocked if you went out there and didn't get a feeling like you've never had in your life.

Interviewer: Can you describe some of the specific things you did when you were volunteering to help?

Sala: Oh god, everything you know, shovel snow, we fixed fences, we moved huge boulders as big as that desk. I mean, these stones were three foot by four foot by seven foot long granite stones, and we moved them with bars and jacks. And we went and got equipment, we took loose pieces off the bridge, we put in the [pause] the guard system so if anybody went on the bridge, we could tell they were there. To delivering papers to Millerton and Millbrook, the original copies so they could print them and we could distribute them. I got to tell you this one story, Bill Sepe and I were going to Hudson, New York to pick up a crane that we bought to use on the bridge. And on the way up, I casually said to Bill, I said Bill, "you know why don't we meet with Ed Loedy and see if we can work something out together." I thought he was going to throw me out of the truck, I mean I can't tell you what he said to me, and it was the most quietest trip I've ever had in my life going back, but I thought my career on the bridge was done, and so I never mentioned Ed Loedy's name to him again. But it was that and stringing the wires and climbing, I shouldn't tell you this if my wife ever sees what you're going to do here because I wasn't supposed to be climbing on the bridge. But we climbed on the bridge, under the bridge, over the bridge, through the bridge and did a lot of pure, unadulterated labor you know, just hard work. And we put the grates down, we took the railing down, we put the railing up, and we worked with many, many people. One of my weaknesses is that I can't remember names, I can remember a contract I drew up twenty five years ago and every detail, but I can't tell you the guys name I did it with. You know, so I met a lot of beautiful, nice people on the bridge that spent a lot of time, and put a lot of money out of their own pocket on there. You know, so we did about everything you know.

Interviewer: Can you describe what the community's response was when the bridge was briefly opened?

Sala: Pardon?

Interviewer: Can you describe what the community's response was when the bridge had that.

Sala: Well, there was a lot of talk when Ed had his project going, I thought it was interesting, but really never got that involved in. But I really, I have no way of knowing what the community feeling was, I know when we was on the bridge people were there, twenty five, thirty, forty, fifty people. Everybody was excited about it, you know, everybody thought it was an excellent idea, and even today when people go up there, they're all in awe, can't believe it. You know, so I really, really hope it becomes a reality.

Interviewer: Can you describe some of your background in salvage, the salvage industry?

Sala: Well, I was in the Navy. I was in the Seabees and I did a big job in Guam. They pulled out the civilians and somebody recommended that I finish the job. They were building a big gantry crane. And I was only like a, I was a 3rd class Seaman then, so when they took me up to the commander, you know, asked me to finish the job, well I said, "who the hell's going to listen to me?" You know, he says, "you know, we'll get somebody that'll give orders." so I finished that job and they wanted to reward me so I said, "well send me to OCS, send me to officer training school." He says, "Ok you got it." So then he calls me up about a week later and he said, "What the hell are you trying to do to me?" I said,"why?" He said, "You don't even have high school education," I said, "What's that got to do with it?" He said, "I can't send you to officer training school." I said, "Well you didn't think of that when I finished the gantry crane did you?" He said, "Pete, I can't send you to school." He says," Well what else can I do for you?" I said," well then send me home, send me back to the states." So that's how I got in diving school, I went down to ( ), New Jersey and the first thing they did was put this helmet on you and put you in the river in water that's so black you couldn't tell where up was. So if you had claustrophobia you were going to flunk right there, which we lost a bunch of guys that day. But I went down in the river, in the mud and the potting, and I was holding onto the potting for dear life. And I was pulling the hose down and I had the hose all piled up over, and I couldn't see nothing right, and he says, "Sala where you going, stop walking around down there." I wasn't walking around, I was right down there frozen on that bowl right, and he says, "well come on back in." So we came back in, came up, and we went through the rest of the course. You had to be a demolition expert, you had to be a diesel mechanic, you had to be seaman, you had to be an expert in every field because you couldn't go out on the job, and you're on the bottom, and the compressor quits, and I flunk compressors, and Ed flunked, we all flunked compressors right. You couldn't do that, so when you had a demolition job, you had to know your job, and the compressor blew we all had to fix it, we all had to be the expert, where you flunked is where you left the course. And I was lucky enough I got through it, so that started my salvage career and then I went back to the pacific and we worked in Guam, and the Gania (?) Bay, and Pearl, and Midway, and Saipan, and Kwajalein, all the islands you know, bringing up this and flattening ships, and searching ships and things like that.

So that's how the salvage life started, and then when I came out I kind of went into the salvage business. I called up a guy, I can't think of his name now, but we were going to start a salvage business, and we were buying equipment and everything else, and they called him back for one of the wars and he came up from under a ship and split his head and he got killed. There are two plates on the side of a ship that keeps it from rolling, and he came up and forgot it was there and it just split his head, and he got killed. Calvin Folks, I just told you I couldn't remember names, Calvin Folks, and he got killed and that ended my diving career. And then my next opportunity, when they put in the Rhinecliff-Kingston Bridge I went up and looked for a job, and he says nah, he says, "We can't use you here." And I says, "Look, put me in a suit, put me on the bottom, see what I can do." He says "Nah, you ain't getting no job here." And I said, "Well, I'll just write the Washington ( ) and get my own charter right." He said, "Somebody's going to drown you on the job." So that's what ended my diving career, after that I became a member of the Dutchess Divers and we worked with the Sheriff's departments and stuff like that, and did a lot of scuba diving and recovery work, but I never did do anymore hard hat diving.

Interviewer: So you've dived in the Hudson River?

Sala: Oh I started in the Hudson River and ( ) in New Jersey, our base was right there and I could look from my window out and see the Statue of Liberty, and it was as black as any telephone you could see, but that's where I started, right there. And then I dove in the Hudson River a lot of times. I did a job for Marist across the river. We put, we had a big pipeline that came out in the river and I embedded it into solid rock with an inch and a quarter tool steel and I said "yeah, that'll take care of that problem." Well that winter, the river froze so when the Coast Guard cut a ( ) down and the tide went out, the shore pulled in and it pulled that six inch pipe apart. So I dove there, and then we worked on salvaging all the little boats, and waterfront jobs and stuff like that, but I never made a living from it anymore.

Interviewer: Have you ever gotten a chance to dive near the bridge, at the base of the bridge?

Sala: No, I've never dove around there, matter of fact they just had somebody check those piers and I tried to get word to him. I called Schaeffer, the new chairman of the board, and told him, because I know the people who tried to steal a bell. There was a bell on that footing the closest to the Poughkeepsie side. They were down there taking the bell and they got to lift it up on top of the railing and then they dropped it, lucky they didn't hit in the boat or they'd have killed him right. But they said the bell must have been about two hundred pounds, and it was on top of the pedestal that's still there, and they worked with air or something they didn't, and a plunger just came out and bang! You know, it was like a fog horn thing. But I would like to have dived down there to see if I could find the bell because I bet it's still down there, you know. I don't think it would move. It'd probably be in the mud. I've been in the mud so deep you had to put your hand up like this [raises arm] to see how deep you were in the mud you know, you couldn't tell where up was, you couldn't tell where down was. I've taken a six inch hose with a jettison nozzle and tunneled under a submarine, and the hole keeps filling up

behind you and as you came up the other side. They would cut your lines and put new lines on. Then we'd pull up a cable and then we kept pulling bigger and bigger cables until we sunk huge five thousand gallon tanks to raise the ship and stuff like that. So I did a lot of salvage work, you know. I mean, and I'm going to tell you something else that's going to surprise you. I have claustrophobia. I went to a psychiatrist because I woke up one night and I was pulling the curtains off the windows, and another time I was doing something else, and my god, I think I'm going crazy, I better go see somebody. And he told me I got claustrophobia and I laughed at him, I said, you got to be an idiot or something, I got claustrophobia. And I told him what I used to do and he says, "no." He says, "Cat skinners and tree climbers and pilots, they do it for years and then one day, it's all over." So I got claustrophobia now. I'd rather be in an elevator with a guy that knows he has claustrophobia than a guy that don't. Because if we're in an elevator I'm watching you because if you don't know you got it and you're going to have a claustrophobia attack, everybody in that elevator is in trouble because you're going to go through the wall. Because that's another thing, I was in the airport and that door closed and God is the one that opened it because when he opened that door, I took off and they ended up in the lobby. And my brother had a ( ) in him, and I said what's the matter, he said I don't know, and that was my first claustrophobia attack. You know, so, it was an interesting life.

Interviewer: So if your background is in salvage, can you describe what would go into taking down the bridge, how you would go about it?

Sala: Well back in those days, like someone was saying before, you know like Ed Loedy was saying, you know you couldn't put a drop of paint in the river. But back in those days we just literally cut it with a torch, and what I would do… I would take the last piece out that they put in first because it was cantilevered over right. So if I took this last piece out, cut it up with a torch, the bridge is still here and I just cut my way back to the shore. And then you know, for some unknown reason I fell in the river I could buy beaching gear which are huge block and tackles, I mean they were probably ten shivs, probably four foot high and we run two inch steel cable through them, and huge winches and we'd hook onto a ship on the beach and we'd almost tear it in two if we couldn't get it off. We'd lay up with a tug, we'd run the tug. I was on a tug, and we'd put an anchor off the starboard side and an anchor off the port side, and one straight, dead ahead. And we pulled on those until they set and then we'd run the cable to the ship that was on the beach, and we'd either pull her in two, or pull the bollards out, we'd pull it apart. So we used to pull them off you know, and then I did a lot of the gauzing in the Panama Canal. That was, you couldn't see nothing, I mean, unbelievably black. We had these cylinders that had to be perfectly perpendicular and we sunk them in the mud. They called it de-gauzing. So I did a big job down there, and I did big jobs in Guam, and it was good job because back then I was getting ninety dollars a month and when I was diving I was getting five dollars an hour, oh I like that you know. And then we got special food and special rations, and we were treated like, you know, big shots you know.

Interviewer: So would you, how long do you think it would have taken to take down the bridge?

Sala: Oh I never thought about it, I'd wake up before I got to getting it all down. I don't know how long it would have taken, you know; just literally eat it piece by piece by piece you know. And today I'm doing just the opposite. Today I would do anything, that's why I'm here you know. I don't know why you had me here. I just thought you'd want to talk to one of some of the people that worked on the bridge, so now I'm here trying to save it. And I think it'd be a big economical factor for this whole area, I think that [pause] people would get a spiritual feel when they get out there, they learn something about them. And another thing that nobody never mentions, supposing the Mid-Hudson Bridge collapsed, or the cables had to be replaced, you'd either have to go to Kingston or you'd have to go to Newburgh or something else. But that bridge could still carry emergence vehicles, so we could make a way to get on that bridge for an emergency, I mean nobody ever talks about that. But you know, we could put fire engines across there. I don't think we could take tractors, maybe you could take tractors and trailers across, but you know, we could surely get emergency vehicles back and forth so that's one of the assets that nobody thinks about. I just think people would come from all over the world to see it.

Interviewer: How much work do you think, based on what you've seen from up on top of the bridge, how much work would go into actually completing this, do you imagine?

Sala: I don't think it'd be anymore than building a road I mean because that's what they're going to do, they're going to build a road across the top and put guard rails on side of it instead of being guard rails, they're going to be hand rails. And you know, it's going to be painted but it's going to be an expensive job because anything to hire to do these days. I mean gas is three dollars a gallon. I was talking to a welder the other day, he paid nine dollars for a tank of gas to do special welding, the same tank today is seventy three dollars. You know, I did a brake job on my car this morning, the brake shoes were seventy, seventy some dollars, and then for a quart of brake fluid, it ended up with eighty dollars just for parts. You know when I was in the salvage business I'd sell a set of brake shoes for three dollars. You know, so it's going to be expensive but it'll be the same as building a road. You know, so they have to build about a mile and a half road and like Ed said, we're going to paint it. I don't think we have to paint it. I think just leave it, I don't think it'll rust. I mean you go look at it now, its not, its rusted, I mean the biggest damage it got, when the freight trains used to stop and they had salt in the cars, you know, and the salt dripped on the bridge and there are plates that are wore out and everything else. But the structure itself is, well they've had engineers that have said, you know it'll only last another ninety years. So the actual cost I don't know but…

Interviewer: How long have you known Ed Loedy?

Sala: Oh god, we went back to, I think just before we got married because he used to, he had an office down the street from us and my wife was the bookkeeper in ( ) design, so we got to know each other then. And then our paths crossed at different times and he knew people that I knew, and then we went to dances together and I don't know, our lives just seemed to cross a lot of times.

Interviewer: So how did your relationship with Ed work when you were talking about tearing down the bridge and he's talking about building up the bridge?

Sala: Well, I don't know, it never was a big issue you know. I mean, I don't even know if I told him that I was thinking about it. I must have told him, I mean when he showed me that picture, I must have said, yeah I want to dream about tearing that down. I mean it was no big thing, he had his dream and I had my dream, and now my dream is the same as his.

Interviewer: One last question, how do you envision this project going? Do you think that the bridge will be completed?

Sala: I think, I think the bridge will be completed. Unfortunately because of the political situation you have now, Spitzer was one of our big supporters. But I think the emergency use of the bridge, the economics, the new employments they're going to have, and people, like I've been to Europe and over there they build where it's a decided amount, I mean we have condominiums here. Now they've had condominiums there for years and years and years, I was in Venice and they got all the bridges across the streets, well not all of them, a lot of them have stores and everything else on them. So, you know, this bridge is a hundred years old already and is there. We could never rebuild it, we could never replace it. A lot of people are going to get work, and I think it'll be a big asset. I think it'll be, for the emergency reason to cross the bridge, I just think it's a fantastic idea and I'm proud to say that I was a part of it. I wish I could get Schaeffer to let me put the flag up again because the flag hasn't been flying for years, and I'd be willing to sign the paper if I got hurt, but you know, we don't have a flag on the bridge and I'd love to see the day when the flag is flying over that bridge again.

[Interview ends, but comes back with a few more questions]

Sala: Well you know, everybody has a different perspective about how safe it is and how dangerous it is to walk on the bridge. We were out there one day, Bill and I and some of the other wonderful volunteers, and we look up and here comes this comes this guy from the Poughkeepsie side over to where we are in the middle of the bridge. And from the middle of the bridge over, all we have is the beams, there's no more ties or nothing else, there's just this huge beam right, probably half the width of a sidewalk. And he's coming over drunker than a skunk, he's going to Highland. So it's only a matter of who's crossing the bridge, he didn't think it was safe, I mean we almost all fainted when we saw him. But you know, he came and said, can I continue, said yeah, go ahead, so he get on the bridge and crossed to Highland, so you know, that takes care of that guy.

[Interview again ends, then comes back mid-sentence]

Sala: The people only the bridge, I say we, the group, and when we caught these kids, I don't know where the hell they come from because it wasn't easy to get up there, it was

all enclosed with fence. I mean, it took an effort to get on there, but then when we apprehended these kids, we take them to the judge for trespassing. The judge would make them do community service on the bridge. So you know, we'd make them carry something or do something, and some of them got to be good volunteers.

[End of Interview]