Interviewer: Where did you go to school?

Vivian Wadlin: I went to grade school in New Paltz, I went to college in Cortland and Marist.

Interviewer: When was the first time you came into contact with the bridge?

Wadlin: Probably [pause] was passing it my whole life from the Mid-Hudson Bridge. The first time I can remember being aware of it we were crossing the Mid-Hudson Bridge in a car and there was a train crossing the railroad bridge and my parents pointed that out and that was the first time I understood what it was for.

Interviewer: You were a member of the, how did you first get involved with Walkway Over the Hudson?

Wadlin: I think I read about it in the newspaper and I contacted Bill Sepe and I became a member of the organization and I did their newsletters and tried to get other people interested in it, and sold planks, which was one of our fundraising efforts.

[New interviewer comes in]

Interviewer 2: What did you find most interesting about the bridge?

Wadlin: Probably the enormous engineering feat that it was in its day. My husband's great grandfather was one of the original people who wanted to see the bridge built back in the 1870's. And we live on the Hudson, we live exactly right across the Marist in fact so I see the bridge all the time and it is just such a beautiful structure. The fact that it's built with Rosendale cement makes it very special and we watched it burn both times, it actually had two fires on it. The first one was the May 8th fire that really destroyed it and then several years later, I think, somebody shot some fireworks up into it and there was a small fire. And at that time they had learned how to put them out better and they used a helicopter with water to put it out, and we watched that too, so it's always been part of my life.

Interviewer 2: Have you ever been on the bridge?

Wadlin: Yes.

Interviewer 2: Do you go often, or once in a while or [cut off mid sentence].

Wadlin: Well it's not open so you can only go when they have tours. But the first time I went up, I went up, I was supposed to meet Bill Sepe and we were going to walk out on the bridge, it was in January, and it was really cold, and the wind was blowing and the ice was crashing into the piers, and it was very loud. And Bill had gone on ahead and walked out on the bridge so I actually went out on it by myself, and it was a moment of true courage on my part because when you walk out on the bridge, you have a choice of what you're going to walk on. You can either walk on the railroad ties which have about a ten inch gap between them, so when you're walking

you have to look down, and when you look down, you can't help but looking down the two hundred and twelve feet to the river. Then, if you don't want to walk on that, you can walk on the steel gratings which are on the side. And they have very long expanses between the larger ties that come out, so looking down at them, you don't even see them; it looks like you're stepping off the tie into the river. So I chose to walk on the many ties and look down at that and after a while it stopped bothering me and now I've been out other times too and there's nothing to it now. But that first time was, between the storm and the ice, it was exciting. And the view is unparalleled [someone hands her a water] Thank you.

Interviewer 2: Do you remember any local businesses that depended on the railroad for their supplies or… [voice trails off].

Wadlin: Not in my lifetime, but there used to be a trolley that ran from Highland to New Paltz and it stopped running in 1925. But prior to that there was what was known as the bud car, and it was a tiny, like a trolley car but it would come across the Railroad Bridge from Poughkeepsie, bring passengers over here, they would get off down at the New Paltz landing, which was in Highland, and then they'd take the trolley to New Paltz. So there were races, horse races, in New Paltz, and there were the Mohawk and Minnewaska, the huge tourist destinations. There were businesses like the casino in New Paltz, which was a dancehall, and people came from Poughkeepsie to go to those, and then of course people went in the other direction to go to the theater in Poughkeepsie. The other way it was used, New Paltz had what was called the normal school, and the normal school was the precursor of SUNY New Paltz. So you had a lot of people who would take the bud car from Poughkeepsie, then the trolley from New Paltz, and that's how they would go to college everyday. So there were a lot of businesses in New Paltz, and all along the way, that were, in a way, dependant on the amount of traffic they could get from Poughkeepsie over there.

Interviewer 2: Have you heard any other ideas, in a way to like recycle the bridge, like a way to reuse the bridge other than Walkway, like were there any other ideas?

Wadlin: There were a lot of ideas. There were, people wanted to take it down and sell it for scrap, people wanted to build stores on it, people wanted to build apartments on it you know, there are always a million ideas out there.

[Interviewers switch again]

Interviewer: I want to talk about when you were on the first board of Walkway Over the Hudson. Did you agree with Bill Sepe's view on the direction of Walkway over the Hudson?

Wadlin: Yes, in a general way that the end product I agreed with, that it made a lot of sense to turn it into a walkway. Into a way that the people of both counties, and actually people from all over the world, can get up on it and use it and make it a tourist draw for this area. So in that, yes I agreed with him.

Interviewer: Did you agree with how he was going about, how he wanted to go about completing the project?

Wadlin: No, I did not, and that's why I left, because it just seemed like it was hopeless.

Interviewer: Ok, what do you think of how the project is being pursued today?

Wadlin: Well I'm not on the board and my only real relation to it has been that I've helped them put together their newsletter until they could get someone within the organization to be responsible for it. I'm very happy with everything that's happening, with the amount of attention it's getting. I would have been very happy if Bill Sepe's idea of being able to raise the money privately could have taken place, but it couldn't. It would have cost a lot more money to tear the bridge down than to turn it into a Walkway and so, in a way, I'm thrilled.

Interviewer: You're a publisher, you're the publisher of "About Town", does that talk about the bridge and the project? [voice trails off].

Wadlin: "About Town" is a very small area guide, it covers just the southern part of Ulster County and I have done stories on the bridge. It's mostly a calendar of events and then I do a story either on history of the area or natural history of the area, two or three stories, it's not a newspaper, it's quarterly.

Interviewer: What role do you feel the bridge has played for the community?

Wadlin: In, well in its history it's played a huge role in the way, if you're talking about the community in Ulster County end of it. A lot of the people who came to work on the bridge, the laborers, were of Italian origin, and Highland since those days has always been known as an Italian community. If you look back on any of the books of the government, of the Town of Lloyd and so forth, many, many of the names end in vowels. We also have always had Italian food in Highland, a lot of zucchini recipes you'll find in all the church bulletins and so forth. So in that way it had a huge impact, and then again, when the bridge would be part of the trolley system, again, even my grandmother would come to, she would walk out to the end of North Eltings Corners Road to 299 where the trolley went through, take the trolley to Highland to be able to pick up piecework. She would sew piecework. So a lot of the stuff that went on always had the transportation part of it, and that was linked to the bridge because I don't know that the trolley would have been as successful as long as it was had it not been for the Railroad Bridge making the connection to Poughkeepsie and the larger population area.

Interviewer: Is there anything we haven't discussed yet that you would like to talk about that you feel is important about the bridge, or the organization Walkway Over the Hudson?

Wadlin: Well I think it would be important to extrapolate what it might mean for the area. The many, many railroad buffs, many people who like beautiful views, many people who just want to do something unusual and be able to write home about it, I think it will be a very big tourist draw for our area. And in that way it's going to create a lot of employment, tourism is really the industry of New York State anymore, so I think that's an important one. [pause in conversation] My husband's uncle used to talk about walking across the bridge years ago, I mean we're

talking, you know, 1930's. And one time he walked across it in a snow storm, I can't imagine what that must have been like.

Interviewer: So there was a coup about the organization?

Wadlin: Yeah, after I was no longer involved with the board [pause] Bill Sepe would appoint board members and when he was no longer happy with their performance, when they no longer agreed with him, he would just reappoint someone else to the position. At least that's the way the story goes since I was not privy personally to any of this. But I do know that not much was happening and finally the membership got together and said we insist that we have a true election, and that's what happened, we had a true election of the board members. New board members were elected and Bill stayed on for a while and then eventually he left, but had it not been for Bill Sepe, none of this would have happened. I mean none of the, bridge would not be turned into a walkway, he was absolutely instrumental in bringing the plight of the bridge to the attention of both communities on the east and west sides, so I'm ever grateful to Bill Sepe.

Interviewer: Anything else that you're thinking about?

Wadlin: Well I think you two should go up there as soon as possible.

Interviewer: We were thinking about doing that I think as a class field trip.

Wadlin: I think you should, it'll give you just such a different feeling about why people become so exercised over this issue, and why people have, for so many years, worked very hard. I mean the gentleman in the other room has been up there with hammer and nails, you know stringing electrical things and trying to keep the Coast Guard happy with the lights on it and so forth and it just, it's inspirational, it really is. I mean you realize it's over 6,700 feet long, I mean that's quite a span, it was considered one of the wonders of the world in its day, and you look at all those… [interrupted].

Interviewer: I have a question, given present day environmental causes, protecting the river and so forth, do you think it's important to education people of a different generation just, you know, how important that industrial age was to the City of Poughkeepsie and the neighboring areas, you know. I mean, we all think of factories belching smoke and so forth, but truly what got most of these cities started up and down the Hudson River.

Wadlin: Absolutely.

Interviewer: That's an important part of preserving this bridge?

Wadlin: Absolutely.

Interviewer: And if you could elaborate on that a little?

Wadlin: Well I think you [laughs], when I said before about the engineering feat and the techniques that were used to build the bridge, the number of people who were involved in it,

from the engineering staff down to the laborers. It was an enormous effort, it was enormously expensive at the time, there were a couple of different bankruptcies as I recall reading. My husband's great grandfather, who was one of the 1871 group, he was eventually not involved in it anymore after it went bankrupt the first time. People lost money and yet they kept coming back because it was something that was so needed in the area. And Poughkeepsie was growing and this side of the river had a lot of produce that was being grown and it needed to be shipped to different places. The Hudson River was just a great north-south access, but there was nothing that could get things across the river as efficiently as a railroad. And I think that whole era of the 1870's to the 1915 or 1920 when you had the Brooklyn Bridge, and you had all of the great monuments in New York, and you had the Panama Canal, I mean all these incredible engineering feats that we just take for granted now. So I do think it has that place too for teaching about the industrial history of the area.

Interviewer: So would you say that because this is like, a lot of people who were born here have stayed and many people who have, they realize that it's probably their ancestry or their grandparents that actually put their effort into making the bridge, that it's so important to them to keep it up and like as a monument of what their grandparents built so…

Wadlin: You know you just brought up one of my favorite topics, about maybe 5 years ago, some professors at Albany did a study of the 300 and, excuse me, of the 3,600 counties in the United States and the object of it was to ascertain the rootedness of the people who lived in these counties, to the counties. And that included everything from civic engagement, how long people had owned businesses, how long their families had lived there, where they had gone to school, just a whole range of possible ways that would indicate how you felt about your community. And out of the 3,600 counties, Ulster County was number three, and I think that may be part of even why I feel the way I do about this area. When my grandparents bought their farm in 1921, to me, it was a miracle that my family ended up here and I'm so grateful to all of these people, the people who built the bridge, my grandparents for buying the farm, it's like you get your roots into the soil and you can't let go, it's great.

[Break in the action]

Wadlin: Actually I would like to mention something, in fact I wish I had brought in something from my car but [pause] we live directly across from Marist and our house is on the site of what was a five story hotel. And that was owned, built and owned, by the same—Abram Hasbrook—who was involved with the 1871 group who tried to start the bridge. And that hotel burned in 1904 right after it went out of my family, my husband's family, but we still have a lot of the things from the hotel, things like menus, and letters, and my husband's great grandmother's sort of diary of who was doing what. And it's incredible the amount of travelling people did in those days, they just thought nothing of, you know, getting on a boat, going to New York, going to a show, whatever they were going to do down there, getting back on the boat, coming back up here, taking the trolley or taking the train, going someplace else. And they just did this all the time, and we always think of you know, the people in the late 1800's being pretty cement bound to where they were because there wasn't the ease of travel, but actually, there was.

Interviewer: Is there anything else? I know you added more, but any other [voice trails off]

Wadlin: [takes long pause] Not really, I could go in a hundred directions but I think we want to stay around the bridge.

[Another stop in the action]

Wadlin: [clip appears to pick up mid-sentence] and they came and took pictures of the foundations because they're still very visible and then they also took the picture that we have of the Belview Villa which is taken from the river, up, and shows how, interestingly, when you look now, from this side of the river to the other side, you see a lot of trees. Back in the 1880's, it was clear cut, it was fields everywhere, it was all used to grow currants, and grapes, and apples, and wheat, and I mean it was just all farm. If they could get two rocks out of the way, they would plant something, so it's just, you know, it's just a completely different place than what you're seeing today.

Interviewer: Where's your house?

Wadlin: You know where the Marist finish line is? At least it used to be there when I was in college, there's an X.

Interviewer: On the river?

Wadlin: On the river side, because actually our property comes down to that on the other side, on this side of the railroad track. There's a little point that comes out and Marist used to have its crew finishing line there. Do you know where I mean?

Interviewer: So if I'm standing over here and looking across the river, and the railroad bridge is down there and we can see where it's coming, you're north of that?

Wadlin: Yes, I'm right across from you, I look at the library.

Interviewer: There's a house right on the tracks there…

Wadlin: We're up on a cliff, yeah there's no house in front of us.

Interviewer: There's a structure though, right on the tracks, and if we look, like if we go right out here and we look down the road that takes us you know, below the dorms and Mid-Rise, it seems like there's a small house or structure that's right on top of the tracks, the tracks go right by it. I don't know if it's a boat house or if it's part of a small marina or something but…

Wadlin: To my knowledge there's nothing down there. We have a deck that's half way down the cliff but, if you look across the river you can't see our house very well because it's dark brown and sometimes when the sun is coming up you just see our windows, but in front of our house is a cliff, then there's a deck that we built, and then there's stairs going up to our house but we're, I want to say two hundred feet up and from our deck you'd have to climb down a cliff, in fact we had a, one of our dogs fell over the cliff and we had to have people come from the

Shawangunk group and repel down over the cliff to find the dog, who was not hurt amazingly, she was very tiny so she just [makes sound]. Of course for years we had cut stuff and thrown it over there so it was very springy, and she landed on that. Our house is the highest house over there, and there's a white house to the south of us, I mean to the north of us, a big white house.

Interviewer: A low, lone house, I think I look right across at that house from my office.

Wadlin: Well just look south of it, one, two, we'll be the third one, but the highest one, and that's where Bellview Villa was. And people would come up on the Hudson River day line to that, to the train station, and then they'd come by horse and buggy. There was actually a dug road up the face of the cliff so that people could just go right to the hotel.

[End of Interview]