

## **Transcript for Save the Skinners Falls Bridge in the Historic Milanville District**

Ed: In the late 1970s Barbara and I started canoeing up here. I had a friend who worked here for the Park Service and he said why don't you come up and spend some time with us and canoe on this part of the Upper Delaware River where I had never been.

The very first trip that we made, we started at Callicoon and late in the afternoon passed under the Milanville Bridge, which was the name it was given when it was incorporated back in 1900. The first bridge that I ever saw on the Upper Delaware River was the Milanville bridge. We passed under that and got permission to camp in somebody's yard in Narrowsburg that night and went on down the river. Little did we think on that trip that about four or five years later we'd be living about a mile below that river and Skinners Falls. One of the pleasures of canoeing under the bridge was to canoe through Skinners Falls which is a really nice shelf of rocks that makes a beautiful rapids there, everyone knows Skinners Falls. That's why the bridge is called the Skinners Falls bridge but the company that built it, Milton Skinners company, was called the Milanville Bridge Company and was known as the Milanville bridge for a long, long time.

Rosie: How did you come to learn about the history of this? In the studio here you've given me several little pamphlets about the Milanville historic district. Tell us about what you know about the Milanville historic district.

Ed: We had a small farm about a mile south of Milanville on River Road. It bordered right on the river. We moved there in the early 1980s and we were there for 30 years until 2013 when we sold the farm. Barbara had to move down to the south for health reasons.

Rosie: I believe you are speaking of Barbara Yeaman.

Ed: That's right we shared a farm about a mile below Skinners Falls on the Delaware River. We were there exactly 30 years. For years and years, we canoed on the river and had a nature center at our barn and so forth. I hadn't the least idea about the history of Milanville or the river or the bridge and it really wasn't available. I think it was in December 2015 PennDOT closed the bridge. It was unsafe and it stayed closed for almost a year. When they closed it they said they had no idea or maybe even no interest in reopening the bridge. Vanessa DeGori who owns now the Milanville general store started a petition drive and she got thousands and thousands of signatures and emails to PennDOT

Rosie: You keep mentioning PennDOT. I know that it stands for the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation.

Ed: Yes, and so in early 2016 they said okay we will fix it and they eventually reopened it to 4 ton traffic, I think November of 2016. At that point I had no idea that the bridge had such a storied history or the little settlement of Milanville did either. So I started digging into some old books a friend of mine had. The Milanville historic district consists of I think about 21 structures. It was created in 1988 through the work of Mary Curtis, who the Curtis family, I

don't know how many generations they were in Callicoon, the Curtis Nursey was one of the big businesses there. Mary knew a lot of the history of the river and what not. She was working for the park service and drew the outlines of a historic district; 21 structures including the bridge, 4 houses that had been owned by the Skinner Family, which first came here in the 1750s, the former one room school, and a church. Of these 20 or 21 structures, 14 of them were so important that they were then and are still now listed on the US national register of historic places. In just a small compass you have an area of houses and structures like that and a beautiful bridge. So that's the Milanville historic district. I doubt if anyone around Milanville even knows that it's listed as such. It has never been advertised. So that got me interested in the history of the bridge and the Skinner family. I just found some old pamphlets that a very dear neighbor friend of mine, who had lived in a farm near Milanville most of her life. She would loan me these things and I just started reading and the more I read the more fascinated I got with it.

Rosie: You just mentioned the year 1750. It's before the American Revolution.

Ed: It definitely was, but the problem that goes back to that day was that when the English Kings made land grants in Eastern North America there were no decent maps. What happened was the grant of what is now Pennsylvania to William Penn overlapped with a grant that was also made to people in Connecticut for land in the latitude of present day Milanville. A Connecticut land company developed and settlers from Connecticut came over here in the early 1750s. Including the Skinner family who were very prominent in the area both in building a timber industry and finally in 1900 in building our beautiful bridge. Milton Skinner, who was the great grand son of Daniel, who lived right by the river and in fact his house is still on a knoll looking down on really one of the most beautiful parts of the Delaware River and the bridge. Milton and one or two of his brothers ran a ferry that crossed from the Milanville shore over to the New York shore where the Skinners Falls camp ground is today.

They thought boy if we could get a bridge here we'd really have something. So they had to get legislation through the Pennsylvania legislature and also the New York legislature to charter their Milanville bridge company. The charter in Pennsylvania was easy but down river you had a bridge at Narrowsburg, upriver you had a bridge at Cochection and they didn't want a bridge in between. There was quite a bit of politicking you might say. It seems plausible that both the Narrowsburg and Cochection bridge are two lane roadways that cross, our Milanville bridge is one lane, which anyone knows whose crossed from PA and hears a car coming from NY, you have to wait – it's thought that maybe that was a compromise that they worked out with their opponents from Narrowsburg and Cochection, okay if you let us build a bridge we will just make it one lane.

Anyway the bridge company was chartered. Work on the bridge began in 1901. It was finished a year later. It has been there ever since - built by the American Bridge Company, which itself has quite a history. It was founded by the great financier JP Morgan in 1900 and a year later incorporated in Andrew Carnegie's US Steel Corporation. Known as American Bridge Company they went on to build some of the really great structures and great bridges in the world. For

example, with a steel fabricating plant that Carnegie built down river from Pittsburgh supplying the steel, they built the Empire State Building and in recent years, the most famous bridge the American Bridge Company built is the Verrazzano-Narrows bridge down in New York. Anyone who's seen that, it's one of the wonders of the world. They built beautiful bridges all over the United States and around the world. They became known for that and it might very well be that our little Milanville bridge was the first bridge that this famous American bridge company ever built. It seems to me that historically that would have some great value. If I found a sketch that Pablo Picasso the artist made when he was 5 years old, I bet it would sell for thousands of dollars today. Well it is the fact that our Milanville bridge is like one of those very early sketches that a great artist would make and a tremendous amount of artistry went into that bridge. The trusses, particularly in different light regimes during the day, the way they reflect light are just amazing. I think it is the most beautiful bridge that I've ever used regularly. I wish my feelings were shared by others who just take it for granted. But this bridge is also on the National Register for Historic Places, the National Register for Historic Bridges. Pennsylvania put it on the national register so it has renown in the state and renown nationally, but not much in Milanville unfortunately. Well we would like to keep it here – let me put it this way this is the second time the bridge has been closed in the last four years.

Rosie: If you think that people want to get involved with preserving this bridge, what would you recommend?

Ed: I would recommend they support the National Park Service. If you ask the park service what's worth preserving in the Upper Delaware national scenic river corridor runs from Sparrow Bush almost up to Hancock. The local Park Service staff decided that the Milanville bridge is worth preserving. That is very important I guess, in a category they call outstandingly remarkable, or whatever you will. So now if PennDOT wants a permit from the Army Corps of Engineers or from the Federal Highway Administration to demolish this bridge and build another one, that has to be approved by the Park Service. The position of the Park Service right now is this bridge has such outstanding qualities historically and scenically that it must be preserved. If you value the bridge support the Park Service.

Rosie: And why do you think it is important to preserve these local places of history, these original structures? Why is it important to the community?

Ed: One thing I think is true about modern American society, it is more and more rootless and if you don't have roots in a place I think you pay a price later in life. If you don't have structures and landscapes that harken back to other people, to the Skinners who came here for example, I think you lose a great deal of purchase on life. In the whole 75 miles of the Upper Delaware River, I think one of the most beautiful riverscapes and landscapes is right at the Milanville bridge, above and below it. It's really a beautiful, beautiful area. Tourists should be flocking to see it, particularly in autumn when the colors change in autumn. You've been there, it's just unspeakably beautiful. If I were a great painter I would want to paint that area and I would want to paint the bridge. I can only speak for myself, but without roots I would really be just a prey to all the stuff on the internet, the social media and stuff like that. Well, that's not a life. A

life is to see with your own eyes and your own heart and your own spirit. How can you do that when everything around it is concrete and so on, you know what I mean? Put a concrete slab across the river there and you've changed forever that entire setting, that beautiful, beautiful setting.

Rosie: I have to say that you are remarkable in your visual representation of natural beauty in this area. You really are a gift to our community, Ed. It is impressive that this knowledge you have and your love for the Milanville historic district, the bridge, and the community. I feel honored to sit in the WJFF studios with you and discuss this. Thank you so much for coming here today to share with us what you know.

Ed: Well, I'm grateful for your interest, especially.