

**Erwin Arthur Clark**  
**Retired Addison, Vermont dairy farmer**  
**Interviewed for Mountain Lake PBS on July 14, 2011**

“After I got done with college, I went in the Air Force for four years and after I got out, I realized that maybe farming is what I wanted to do. And worked with my father until he was ready to retire and then bought the farm from him and later years had the opportunity to be a Dairy Cooperative Director, travelled some but had to be a farmer in order to have that position and I retired around 2001 and since then I’ve studied history and played with my toys, which is mostly farm equipment.

My personal interest in the bridge has varied, depending on what part of life. As a young man or big boy, I remember going to Essex, New York with my father in the truck to get bedding for the cattle and of course, we went across the bridge and then later, we belonged to a Seed Growers Co-op and the headquarters was in Westport and we took our seed up there to be processed and sold and went to meetings there and got acquainted with New York members of the group. And I guess about then, I went in the service and when I came out we were still going over the bridge on occasion.

Actually, we discovered we could get a bargain on grain if we bought it in Crown Point but we’d have to bring it over ourselves. We’d have to go over and bring a truckload of grain home and go back and get another load and so that was 8 ton of grain we had done twice in a day to get it all home...but I was young and didn’t think much of it and then as the time progressed....oh...one item that I remember, my father shortly after World War II, he noticed a sawmill that seemed to have a lot of lumber, so he stopped and asked for a price and they made him a price which he couldn’t pass up and he bought enough lumber to build a large barn and had some left over, stored so that in ’62 he used a little to build his new house.”

Then as I got into the business, it worked out that we did not have to go to New York very much on business, but we went over to visit and my mother had a good friend in Long Lake so when I headed toward Syracuse, I would go around that way so that she could visit her friend for a couple of days, while I was gone. And I guess not a lot of New York visits for a while and then after I retired I found out that well there was a lot of history near the other side of the bridge that I wanted to find out about. And so that meant travels over there and sometimes with a friend of mine, Bud Bodette, and we looked here and there and everywhere and I guess that kind of sums it up.

**Interest in bridge history**

The reason that I started to get interested in the history of the bridge was that my friend again, Bud Bodette, had discovered that he had a bunch of [photograph] negatives, which he had got printed that his uncle had taken of the bridge. And so

then, I thought, well gee, that's interesting and thought what history do I have that I could add to that and actually my family had newspaper clippings from the opening of the bridge and these clippings told a lot about the history of the bridge and so we, things sort of progressed from there.

I gave talks around because I had - the Sheldon Museum wanted people, the local historical societies to put some displays in and so I found some pictures that I thought would be appropriate and I developed the, after their, at their request, I developed a talk about the bridge and gave it to a group. Of course, this was about the time actually that there was concern about the durability of the bridge and the talk was very well attended and almost immediately after, I got a request from Westport Historical Society to give a talk up there and several other places from time to time and I guess I gave the same talk about eight times and once in a while, I'd discover something new that would, so it always wasn't the same, minor adjustments only, but it was interesting to do.

### **Pouring concrete**

The concrete for building the [1929] bridge, now the cement to make concrete comes in a tanker truck and it's delivered into the mixer without being touched by human hands. Back then, it came to Port Henry in bags. They would send a barge to Port Henry to bring down the bags to put on the barge to bring over to mix the concrete. And I suspect these bags were 94lbs. which was the standard weight for concrete because this was a portion of weight of a barrel of concrete. Why this all was, I don't know, but they were good, heavy bags and there was a fellow in the group of laborers that were to load the bags on the barge but he discovered as soon as he got to shore that he had to go to the, well we'll call it...it wasn't a porta-potty then but it was similar, up the bank a way and he timed it pretty well, that by the time he got back it was pretty well loaded... but the other fellows, they remembered that and they probably didn't recommend him for work.

As they poured the concrete in the piers, they had to what we call now, puddle it, to get the air bubbles out and at that time they thought well the easiest way to was for guys to just walk around in boots and puddle it that way. And so they were doing it but one fellow from Addison, was doing a lot more chattering than he was stirring the concrete, and so the foreman sort of grabbed him by the back of his belt and give him a shove, not so he would fall flat, more walking and less talking there fellow.

I think that was after the bridge was built, and maybe Bud Bodette can give more detail on that, but the Captain had pulled in to I guess a dock along there. Then as he pulled away, he didn't think as he had to go to the center of the bridge to go under it and so he went part way under one of the other spans and the funnel to the engine hit and he had to back up and some and give another try at a different place, somewhat embarrassed I'm sure.

Oh yes, as the final pieces of steel connected at the top, the foreman for the crew called the company engineer and said the holes don't line up to get the bolt in and he said well it's morning, this afternoon with the sun on it will expand enough so they will be fine and they were.

### **Bridge's value**

The various uses of the bridge were extensive. As the mining was active in the Port Henry area, the people would import meat from Vermont, so they had fresh meat and there just wasn't the number of animals in New York to supply. And I mentioned the seed being processed in Westport and the milk plants. There was a milk plant in Crown Point but some of the farmers felt that they didn't get a good price there or the cooperative that operated it didn't treat them right and so a lot of the milk was brought across to Vermont and eventually that plant closed and then just about all of Vermont, and then all the milk in that area came across the bridge to Vermont. And then of course, there were always the logs that were going [across] one way or another, some were going down to the Paper Company and some were coming this way to local saw mills and so now I guess some of them go across and go to Montreal for they ship overseas. Well, that's just a few of the uses and of course, there were a lot of people in New York that worked in Vermont.

The value of the bridge to the local folks depends on your.. on what you're doing, but the farmers that rented land in New York State or owned it and actually had animals in New York and Vermont, the bridge was very important to them in getting back and forth maybe twice a day or more than that and especially if they had a crop in New York that had to come to Vermont, well....ah...it was so important to have a bridge there.

### **Damaging road salt**

When I heard that the bridge was going to be demolished, I was not surprised. I had been reading up on the maintenance and the original engineering and it was a whole different world in 1929, then it is now...and just a small item, well not so small, was that they had no idea that salt would be used on roads, so they didn't worry about it when they built the bridge and it corroded and a few times in the process of repairing. They actually did not prepare, what shall I say, the pipes that delivered the melting snow off the bridge away from the steel, so it'd run down and leave some salt on it and so, no, no I was not surprised....disappointed but that's the way it was.

The problems that they didn't anticipate when they built the bridge, well one of them was the salt that they used on the bridge. That of course was corrosive to the steel over the years. And another thing was actually they did not anticipate the very large trucks that go over and when you have two trucks meet on the top of the bridge and each one weighs 80 thousand pounds, or more or maybe there's another

one, right behind him, well they really had no idea there were going to be trucks that size in 1929.”

It was sort of like, you have an old tractor, it has served you very well for years and years but it gets to the point where you can't afford to maintain it to do what little it's capable of...and so the bridge was sort of like that.

### **Public input on design**

I very much like the design of the new bridge. Well originally they offered four designs to us and after some public comment, they were able to come up with an improved design, this very design, well, just about that evening...had to be of course fine-tuned a few thousand hours but they came up with a very nice, beautiful structure, I believe.

As far as the public process goes, I think it was well done. And they tried to get public input and the public was VERY willing to give them input, sometimes more than they wanted to hear but they came up with a very good end to the whole process.

The sentiment of the public now is I believe is sort of exciting to think that it's going to be going before long.

I have admired the diligent efforts of the crew to keep going through a nasty winter with wind and cold and the progress kept right on. They've had contention with the lake way over flood which presented more problems and they coped with them. And I feel they are coming very well along with the arch now.”