

Lorraine Franklin**Business owner & lives adjacent to Lake Champlain****Interviewed for Mountain Lake PBS on July 14, 2011**

“[I am] Lorraine Franklin. I work, I own, co-own West Addison General Store and Champs Trading Post. I’m in West Addison, Vermont on [Route]17. We’ve had WAGS...West Addison General Store for about 20 years, a little over 20 years now. Champ’s Trading Post was originally was Vermont’s Own Products and we started that a little over 20 years ago, actually 25 years ago, We’ve been in this location about 20 [years]and in the last couple of years, we changed the name to Champ’s Trading Post.

We got a lot of traffic from New York. At Christmastime, particularly for me in this particular location, Champ’s Trading Post, half of my business at Christmastime comes from New York and that’s not even counting the traffic in the summer, which would come over the bridge. West Addison General Store would get 60-70% of their traffic from New York. The bridge was the ideal location for people to come through. It gave them that opportunity and definitely made a difference.

I used to own a store on the New York side of the bridge, which was Champ’s General Store in Crown Point. When I owned that, I was over it [Lake Champlain Bridge] several times every day for about eight years. In general, when I didn’t own the store, we’d go over several times a week.

Businesses impacted

The bridge was a necessary part of the commerce here in Addison County, not only in our immediate area, but also into Vergennes and Middlebury. When the bridge went down, the effects were felt all over to an extent that nobody expected. In our immediate area at our General Store, West Addison General Store, the day the bridge closed, we saw a drop in 75% of our business. It was like someone just shut off the valve on a faucet and it just stopped. Here at Champ’s General Store, I just shut the doors because I just knew no one was going to come through this corridor. There was no sense in being open. I just shut the doors and figured that was it for the season, until we figured out if the bridge was coming back or not.

When I heard that the bridge was going to be demolished, it was pretty devastating. I won’t say that it wasn’t unexpected because we all knew that something had to happen with the bridge. We were worried that...we were worried from the beginning that if that bridge ever closed it wouldn’t be re...put back the way it was, that it wouldn’t be...renovated. We were worried that the bridge would never be renovated and refurbished and have it again. We knew that if it ever closed, it would probably be a permanent thing. So we were pretty devastated when they said they were going to demolish it.

When it was announced that the bridge was going to be demolished, it was definitely the talk of the town. People of course, when they said it was going to be imploded, there were a lot of people that were excited about having an implosion here on one hand, but then there was this overall sadness of what was really going to happen, that the bridge was really going to be gone, this piece of us was really going to be gone forever and there would be no way to get that back. It was definitely the talk of more than this town, it was the talk of all of Addison County was talking about it and we knew it was going to be a life changing thing and there was also the uncertainty of what was going to happen, you know once they closed it, would they rebuild it? What would they do? How would we fare in the meantime?

In this community, our neighbors were very concerned, in particularly the farmers. They still had crops and animals on the New York side and they just didn't know how they were going to get over there to feed their animals, to get their crops in...so that was an immediate concern for them. There were three farmers that were affected and that day they had to figure out how am I going to get over to New York to feed my animals, how am I going to get my crops in...I still have corn or still some hay standing that I need to get in. So they were very concerned as to what was going to happen and how they were going to do that with a hundred mile detour. Other people were concerned about getting over for shopping. A lot of people like to go over to Ticonderoga or to Crown Point or Port Henry and they had places that they liked to frequent for restaurants or shopping, so they were concerned. There was also the bigger concern for commuters. People were very concerned about how am I going to get over for my job, you know, what am I going to do, how am I going to get there now, so that was very, very difficult for a lot of people; people who really didn't know what to think.

A lot of crying

When it came for the day of the demolition, I was able to attend. I was very fortunate. The firm that came to implode the bridge stayed at our house at the corner of the bridge, so I had this wonderful opportunity to get to know them and they invited us, gave us VIP passes for us and for our family and for our employees to be on the site that day and I'm so thankful for that because if we would have had to be off site that day, we never would have seen it. We got to stand right next to the Governor and be right there when the button was pushed. It was very bittersweet. It was extremely bittersweet. We knew that we had to be there to see it, but at the same time we knew we were going to...it was like going to a funeral....definitely. I cried. I cried when the bridge went down.

When the bridge, when the button was pushed and the bridge actually went down, my overall reaction was "Oh My God, It's actually gone." And I just started to cry and I know I wasn't the only one. There were a lot of people that had the same sentiment. There wasn't the cheering that people expected. Even Lisa Kelly of AED [Advanced Explosives Demolitions] had said, 'Gee Lorraine, why are you crying?'

And I said, 'you don't understand, this is a piece of us. This is never coming back. This is really gone now and we don't know where we go from here.

Not having the bridge was absolutely devastating to our businesses. As I mentioned, West Addison General Store, when the moment it was closed, you knew. No one had to even tell us because we heard rumors about it during the day but we thought they really wouldn't do that and, when it came official, the traffic flow just stopped. It was just like nothing. The traffic just stopped. I mean we had our local people that came by, the local farmers and people that stopped in. But in general, it was just all of a sudden, there were no customers. It just stopped and it was devastating. I closed the doors here because I knew without the bridge traffic, I was dead in the water literally. There was not going to be anybody, no reason for anybody to come down here, so there was no sense in being open. We, I just shut the door and I figured I had something else I needed to do now and being here was not going to be it.

From panic to activism

When I closed my doors, my first thought was I have to do something. I heard through Suzanne Maye at the Visitor's Center [Lake Champlain Visitors Center]. She actually called me to tell me that they had shut the bridge down and it was indefinite. They didn't know when they would reopen it, so total panic set in at that point. Again, it was our worst nightmare coming true. We all knew that someday the bridge would be replaced, but we really never thought that it would ever be closed. So panic totally set in and when I shut the doors, I went down to Lisa Cloutier at the No Bridge Restaurant, which was then the Bridge Restaurant. I'll never forget walking in and seeing her at the bottom of her basement stairs talking with her employees. She was just so upset, not knowing what to do now and couldn't believe this was happening and she still says she remembers that day because she saw me at the top of her stairs and says, Lorraine your face was white as a ghost. I'll never forget it. You just had this look of total 'Oh my God, now what?' And my first words to her were, 'We're not going to take this. What are we going to do? We need some answers and we have to do something about this because we're not going to survive.

We decided that we would get together with our state representative and a couple of the farmers in town and we were going to hold a very impromptu meeting that following Tuesday which was the Tuesday immediately following the bridge closure. And we were going to try to figure out what we were going to do as a community, or as a business community to get some answers. What was supposed to be about five people, turned into 50 that day. The media came, we had WPTZ come by. We had all kinds of representatives from state levels Addison County Regional Planning came by. People were coming through the door that Lisa and I were looking at each other going who's that, who's that and how did they know about this. The word spread that quickly and the support was that immediate. There were people from the community; there were other business members. It was just amazing and we

basically, we started at that point, saying we need answers. We need our bridge back. We need in the meantime some way to get across this lake and open this corridor because we will not survive very long without it.

From there, the problem with us on the Vermont side is that we had no way to connect to the New York side to know what was going on. It was funny. You had this bridge and the communities were separated still. We did not realize how important, until that bridge went down, how important it was to our survival that we worked together.

It became immediately known to us at that point and we knew we needed to get in touch with NY businesses and legislators. We just really didn't know how to organize ourselves to do that. The answers to our prayers came in the form of Rich Couch and the Crisis Program. We found out through Barb Brassard who was then the Director at The Ti Chamber of Commerce. She contacted Lisa from the restaurant and told her that Rich was looking for people to go to Albany. He was going to supply some buses. They wanted to have a rally and they wanted as many people that were affected by the bridge closure to accompany him and go to Albany. At that point, we thought it was only going to be New York people. Lisa and I both owned property in New York so we called Rich and said can we come on board, we do have a stake in this and we do own property in New York, would it be appropriate for us to join and he said, come on board.

So on the 10th of November, we all met at the Wal-Mart parking lot in Ticonderoga and just a few of us from Vermont, just the three of us. The rest were from New York. There were 22 people in all. We took the trip to Albany, all of us meeting each other, some of us for the first time on that bus, not knowing who the others were. All of us with the same story; all affected in one way or another- whether it was through their business, whether it was through commuters, you know the commuter traffic being their issue, or just through emergency medical issues that they had. Some people needed to get into Fletcher Allen [Hospital] or needed to get to Porter Hospital for their hospital care or for their medical care so they were now cut off and they did not know what they were going to do. So we had this congregation of everyone from all walks of life, from all people affected in different ways, these 22 people on this bus, all going to Albany, and wanting to do something, but not knowing what."

A bridge coalition is born

When we got to Albany, we were able to get on the state house steps. We thought we were going to have a chance to talk. We did not. Basically, the lawmakers spoke and said yes, we understand, and the usual, things that we expected to hear and we felt a little like we didn't make a difference, but the media was all there. And after it was over, they all took each one of us aside and asked us to tell our stories and they were there from the main New York, they were from Albany, they were from all over. And that night it hit the airwaves, our stories started hitting the airwaves.

When we were on the bus on the way home, we thought ok did we really make an impact today. We need to have a strong voice and, now we all know that were staying in it together, we need to know where we go from here. Rich suggested that we form a coalition, that we not let this opportunity die.”

“So the two hours that it took to come home from Albany, we had chosen our name. We had decided we were going to be the Lake Champlain Bridge Coalition and we created a mission statement and we created a plan for how we were going to proceed from that point on. We decided we were going to create a Facebook page to keep everyone informed of what was going on and invite others to be informed and come into the page and be part of it. And it just took on a life of its own after that. It was just one of those things, where the right people came together at the right time for the right purpose. And it was like taking all of these jigsaw pieces and putting them all together in this final puzzle. It was -we are still all amazed when we look back and think of how it all came together and that two hours changed everything for us.

The DOT responds

The relationship with DOT [New York State Department of Transportation] and the public was very strained in the beginning and that was very obvious from Day 1 when, well, it really wasn't Day 1 but it was Day 1 in a way because we were really upset that DOT allowed this to happen and we weren't getting answers in the very beginning. No one was saying anything. So we were feeling very frustrated. The feelings got stronger and stronger when we met [at public meetings] over the next week with both in Addison at the Addison Central School and the following night in Moriah at the Moriah Central School and I was able to attend both of those meetings. It was just the overwhelming feeling of anger and frustration toward DOT was just was very much evident at those meetings. People wanted answers. They wanted to know why this was going on. They wanted to know why this happened and they wanted to know what they were going to do about it. And to not get answers immediately was very frustrating or, you know not the answers that people wanted to hear anyway, was extremely frustrating.

So it started out very strained and as it's gone along, it's gotten better. People are realizing that things don't work at lightning speed. That the ferry was a godsend to us and for DOT to actually listen to the people and say “okay we've heard you, we will put this ferry in where you want it. It will be free, and we will build the bridge exactly where it was” just shows that people making a statement and standing together and saying this is what we want; the government can listen. And we do commend DOT for listening because, they didn't have to.

Realistically DOT didn't have to listen, they could've done what they felt they needed to do and just done it and we would've had to live with it. But the fact that they did include us, that they did include us in the design selection, was unheard of. So we're very thankful, that everyone finally in the end came to realize that we're all on the same page, we're all looking for the same thing and it's getting us to this point

where we have this beautiful new bridge going in and everyone is just very excited that we're finally working together.

When this new bridge opens we're hoping that commerce comes back. We're hoping that it's the end of the, the, the odyssey of the last two years, that it heralds the beginning of a new era for this corridor, and that includes, both sides of the lake. We're hoping that people will come back and see what's gone on here; they'll see this beautiful new bridge. That they'll see not just the bridge for what it is, but they'll also see what is in Addison County and in Essex County. That we have this beautiful landscape, we have these wonderful businesses, we have wonderful places to shop and eat, and one of what is historical resources and recreational resources. We hope that this bridge is basically bridging the gap between, what used to be and the new beginning for us.

Bridge celebration

The celebration for the new bridge is actually drawing it's inspiration from the celebration from 1929. We are going to replicate the "Grand Parade". We plan to have the "29ers" we're calling them. They're the folks that were here for the original opening in 1929, they were present at that, at that opening. We have about 35 of them that have responded to us and said they would like to be there when the new bridge opens. It's actually something they have been waiting for, for a very long time.

There will also be vintage automobiles that will be here this weekend supplied from the Vermont Automobile Enthusiasts. In fact, they will be transporting the 29ers in the parade and then leaving their vehicles here for the weekend to do a show for Crown Point. So, we expect it to be a grand weekend with a lot of things going on and definitely deserving of the celebration that it should be.

Also during this celebration we plan to have the boat flotilla. Lois McClure will be here from the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum. They have been absolutely instrumental in getting this boat flotilla going. Just as it was in 1929, they plan to do the same. They're working with Canal Core and are going to putting on this grand show on Saturday and also the Lois McClure will be here to give tours.

We will have a street dance on Saturday night. There will be a Sunday morning an ecumenical service on the bridge. The fireworks will be on Sunday night and they will hopefully be unlike anything that has been seen in this area, complete with music, and choreography, and something that really puts, it, everything into perspective to us.

On the closing night it puts an end to our odyssey, and what better way to do that than with a grand firework show. In between, during the two days we'll have musicians, we will have storytellers, and puppets, performers, and vendors, and the

vendors we're planning on having are all pretty much local people and showcasing what we have here, in our area between Addison County and Essex County. Same with the performers, we want them to come be part of this and show; what is here, why people should come here, what we have to offer to them.

We're also fortunate enough that this is going to take place on the two historic sites. Chimney Point and Crown Point are these incredible and valuable resources of history and we want to show people why they should come and learn why this area was so important. That is was instrumental on what happened in this country, and a lot of people don't realize that these historical places exist or what their significance is. So it's an opportunity for both of them to show off why this is such an important area historically. So, pulling this all together seems like the perfect marketing opportunity to re-open our area and to showcase what we have, and again starting a brand new era for us.

When the bridge closed, it was, it was definitely the talk of the town, I mean it's all anyone talked about. No one knew where we went from here. "How am I going to get it across the bridge?" "How am I going to get to work?" "How am I going to get home from work?" "How am I going to get to go shopping?" "How am I going to get to go to do things that I normally do? What are going to be my alternatives? Am I going to have to take that hundred mile detour?" It was the talk of the town for a very, very, very long time because there was so much uncertainty. No one knew what would be... there was no contingency plans in place, so it was take the Ti ferry or it was take the one hundred mile detour. And no one knew if the new bridge would be built here, no one knew what was going to be done in the meantime. Business didn't know if they were going to survive or how they could survive, and the farmers didn't know how they were going to get to their crops, to feed their animals. It was just, it was just total, total crisis for this area, there's no other word for it than "Crisis". We were fortunate that it wasn't a Life Crisis, but it was a Livelihood Crisis, and it was the talk of the town for a very, very, very, long time, and it still is.

Reconnecting the states

What was ironic about the [bridge] Coalition, in a way, was that, as I mentioned; when the bridge went down we didn't realize that we didn't have much of a connection to New York and that we needed that connection. The ironic thing is, when the bridge went down and we had to deal with it being gone, we became more connected between the two states than we had been when the bridge was up, and that was, that was just like a light bulb went off immediately for us. We knew that we would not have survived without each other. So, the Coalition was our way to finally get that connection back and to build on that and knowing that forever our lives were changed and we couldn't stand-alone anymore. We knew that we needed to be connected and not only create that connection be keep it going forever, that we could never believe that we could stand on our own again because that myth was just shattered from the beginning. When the bridge went down it was that we knew

we depend on each other, and we've said all along the way on this journey "We are two states, but one community." And that's been proven over, and over, and over again, and we hope to never forget that.

The 29ers that are going to be a part of this celebration are the people from 1929 who were here when the original opening took place. There are about 30 to 35 of them that have responded that would like to be a part of this celebration. They are going to be travelling in vintage automobiles that will be supplied from the Vermont Automobile Enthusiasts, and they will be our Grand Marshalls in the parade and we have a reception for them immediately following the parade so that they can all get together, share their stories, and reminisce. But we felt that they were a very important connection between the past and the present, because that's what this bridge is about, it's connecting the past and the present. We've learned from the past and we need to move into the present and having that connection, knowing that those people are still here to share their stories is a really important part of what we're about.

There was one thing that I didn't mention I was just thinking as I was sitting here. One good thing that did come out of this, besides the Coalition, was the support of the community. When the bridge went down we knew that we could not survive without that bridge being there and the traffic it brought. The amazing thing that happened was how the community, our immediate community here in Addison and the surrounding areas stepped up, knew of our plight, came to our aid in the form of going out of their way to come to patronize our businesses. They knew what we were up against, and despite a very poor economy at the time, and let's face it convenience stores are not known for their low prices, or being conveniently located for everyone outside of the immediate area. We found people came from all over to support us, to buy gas, to buy a Christmas tree from me. People came from as far away as Rutland, because they heard about us, came and bought a Christmas tree because they had to get it from somewhere, so they thought it would help us out. That support was instrumental in us still being here, if people had not stepped forward as a community and given that support to us we would not be here, and we are eternally grateful to our area and the support that we got. It was overwhelming and we know that we could not have survived without it."