

Martin Bezon

Attended 1929 opening day ceremony

Interviewed by Mountain Lake PBS on July 18, 2011

"I've lived here all my life except times I spent in the serving World War II and the Korean War and then I took a leave of absence one year in 1946 I had a job up in Alaska that I couldn't pass up so basically all the time counted so I really have all 31 years with Republic Steel.

Opening day ceremony

I says I was really surprised because I never thought about going over. But I mean we used to watch them build it when we were kids walking along the shore fishing here. Then my mother come up and says a put your shoes on were gonna go across the lake to see the bridge opened up. A gentleman by the name of Alec Cutser had a Model T Ford, and he offered to take my mother and myself over. So [it was] the first time I had a ride in a car, even first time I was ever drove that far. And so we went over and that was the reason I went over 'cause just out of the blue my Mom says, 'we're gonna go see the bridge opened."

There was thousands of people there and uh even the Vermont side was packed. And there was the governor, I think it was John Weeks of Vermont and Franklin Roosevelt of course, our New York governor and other dignitaries, but they were the main ones for the opening ceremony.

I was born in '21 so I was seven years and nine months old, seventeen days, though if you want to go further so I was about seven and three-quarters years old.

I was amazed. I mean I've never seen that many people except in kindergarten when I went to school. So it was an awful lot of people and I kind of knew I was gonna be lost, I'm gonna be separated from my mother. But there was a large oak tree out in there in the plain view of every place you might stand so I told my mom I said, in case we get lost or separated, I'll eventually be sitting underneath the tree and you do the same. So we found ourselves there so it made it easy.

Introduced to airplanes

But it was nice wandering around by yourself [at opening day] you know, especially when they had the little bi-plane land and I, it just threw me. I had to get over and touch it and the pilot come around and says, "Would you like a ride it's gonna cost you four dollars?" I said I'd love to. I said I wouldn't ask my mother but she, we didn't have the money. We were coming out of the Depression or rather getting into the heavy Depression so um but I did touch the plane, and it kind of affected what I did all my life after 'cause I eventually joined the air force and got plenty of flying over in Europe. So in a way that [opening day ceremony] was a cause of it. I fell in love with airplanes.

It didn't affect me that the governor of New York, okay governor of New York, you're not in to uh reading newspapers or politics or things, so we just knew that the head of New York was there. So I had to get over close so I could see him which I did and Governor Weeks, but uh I was trying to watch and a parade came across the bridge. I don't know if he was in the front car or not, 'cause he had a podium right in the middle of the road, where the dignitaries stood and all the cars went by them. You can see it on that large picture that I have there.

Jack Carpenter and I started school way back in parochial school and the school was down here where the dollar store is at the north end of Port Henry. So we walked from this way over there, ran home in no time and ate, and run back. So Jack and I grew up together and knew each other for 85 years at least. I go up every Sunday and see him at the nursing home and call him every morning.

Well he says his father said come on I want you to meet the governor so he took him over and he shook hands with Governor Roosevelt. [Jack] he was more or less like me but he was a good two years, older. So he kind of wandered a different path then I did but uh he was overwhelmed by all the people too.

I'm surprised because we never gave it the thought of going over there. But my neighbor, he took a boat, a row boat. He rowed across and some people walked over all the way over from Port Henry. But uh my mother was a very sweet woman. I mean, and just she was the greatest woman in my life I think, but uh she was calm and she was always a lady. You know nothing really excited her but I knew she was excited to see this.

[The airplane] it kept landing giving rides to the people that wanted to go. I think it cost four, four or five dollars. I'm not quite sure, clear on that, but they give you a ride around, come back and land on the field just on the grass there. He, he was busy taking off landing all day long. Well I went over touched it and I sat over there most of the time and I just watched that plane take off and come in.

Crossing the lake

The original one [bridge], I walked over it the day they opened it. It was a long walk to me and uh come back walked over it and it was quite a while before I went over it again because it's like I say uh we didn't have no car and there was no reason for us going to Vermont 'cause if you had a job or you wanted to go look at the scenery and stuff like that. That just didn't exist at that time we were more or less right here in town that's it.

Well before you had to go across on the ferry it ain't like that ferry we got now - it can take 50, 60 cars big trucks and log trucks everything. It was just uh a little ferry that went between Vermont and New York and that's the only uh transportation we had around here. To go across in the other way you had to probably go up to Rouses

Point because I don't believe, it might have been. I don't believe the Essex Ferry was going at that time. It might of, it might have been ferries up and down the lake but being a young kid down here I had no knowledge of what's going on north of here. Matter of fact the first time I was in Plattsburgh I was in high school playing football and we took a bus, had to take a bus to Plattsburgh. We beat um too. But my whole life is centered right around Port Henry.

Oh it was, it was for the whole area, whether it be Ticonderoga, Chilson, all over the area. They all depended on it from then on, when it shut down it was really bad.

Oh they couldn't believe it, they kept calling each other did you hear the news? Hear the news, 'cause I think it was late in the afternoon we heard about it. We just couldn't believe it. How could they blow up that bridge that served us so well for all these years you know? And uh it was a shock there but then the realization set in that they're going to have to do a lot of traveling to get to work. And a lot of these people were, got jobs where they would be lucky to make 12, 13, 14 dollars an hour and how can they go on that ferry and they have to wait three or four hours sometimes? It was devastating. So I guess there was a lot of letter writing going on to the governor and everything.

"We were all stunned"

Not only was I there when they opened the bridge but I was there when they closed it [demolished it] by invite and uh, and the visibility that day was poor, real poor. The people on the Vermont shore, on the New York shore over here all lined up they couldn't see a thing but uh I asked a fellow how long it would take to blow it down. He said don't blink and that's just what it was. And I think what they did they placed some cylindrical dynamite encased in copper and wherever they placed it when that went off that piece it cut that steel right in two like you cut it with a torch. So had the whole bridge, after they weakened several spots lined with dynamite and it started, reminded me of Chinese firecrackers. Get a bunch of them lighted, they keep popping, popping. So. it went all across the noise and you can see them blowing up and then when it reached the Vermont side you hear that one big boom and boom everything was in the water. It last just a couple of seconds and the whole bridge went down it's like uh I just couldn't you could almost see the tears to see that thing go down.

Well we got news of it, we were all stunned. We couldn't believe it 'cause it looked to me the bridge was like a little a lady that I knew. We used to fish under there. Where you going? Over by the bridge for a picnic. Where are you going? We're gonna go fish over by the bridge. Everything was referred to by the bridge or near the bridge or over the bride so um it was quite a shock for everybody 'cause a lot of them that work there know it means an awful long travel. You got to go down through Whitehall and come around. I used to go to Burlington, uh Middlebury to a doctor and what it would be maybe 35, 40 miles from here, to go down to Whitehall it was 176 miles by the time I got over to Middlebury to where I got to go. And that's

driving down through Whitehall. I went in the summer thank goodness. In the winter that would have been treacherous going over them hills headed toward Whitehall.

So this, it was a hardship. A lot of people got up at three o'clock in the morning hoping they could catch the ferry uh down in Ti, which only is a cable ferry. [It] took very few cars and they had to pay \$7 one way and that \$14 round trip would just about take half their salary some of them. It was a hardship on them they would wait in line for two or three hours to get on that ferry then even now when you're coming back home now from uh Vermont around four or five o'clock when the work force is coming out, you sometimes have to wait an hour or two over on the Vermont side to get on the ferry to come to New York.

They can't wait [for the new bridge to open]. The ferry's good. It's handling everything good 'cause it's just continuously going back and forth, the two of them, and they take quite a load. It only takes five, six, seven, eight minutes to cross so their handling the thing but it's a terrific cost for the state. I understand it's around \$17 thousand a day, so uh that's a lot of money.

I think the opening ceremony was much more memorable than the closing, when they blew it up. Well because I uh, well it did more things that I remembered all my life with the plane and everything. And from then on some day somehow I wanted to be on a plane. So only a few years later of course you know it we were in World War II and they uh opened the enlistment into the Cadet program to high school graduates. And in '41 I graduated so I jumped in. I joined the Army air corps um cadet program 'cause we didn't have any air force. Air Force came into a separate branch in 1947; prior to that we were a part of the Army.

Demolition

Well there's been opinions going around that it's been easier to take it down piece by piece while it's in place because the uh salvage crew had a lot of trouble with some of these steels uh oh went imbedded into the mud and everything and they had trouble getting it. And I think so too. I think they could have demolished it and cleaned it out uh standing rather than drop it into the lake and then have to dig out [and use] all of these equipment. The consensus that I heard after that, they said that they think it would have been better.

They told us how many ton of dynamite they placed. Like I say, wherever they placed that dynamite when that went off that cut the steel right there. Oh for days and days and days we watched them uh the plates flying from the torches and everything their cutting the bridge certain places at night time you could see all of that going down into the water and it was weak at certain spots. Then they had one terrific dynamite blast so uh before it got set they give us all earplugs 'cause we were fairly close to it and uh they had a countdown there was oh maybe 15

television stations, radio stations all there recording everything and even had a high chairlift someone with a camera way up in the air taking picture of it. So uh they had a countdown to five, four, three and then one and then it went like pop, pop, pop, pop, pop like a bunch of pops like firecrackers and then you can see all of them uh blowing up, going across the bridge, and all of a sudden just one big terrific boom and uh you look and all the bridge just drop immediately into the lake.

They left about, I want to say, maybe 100 feet maybe on each side. They didn't blast it because these cranes can reach that from the shore easier than blast it down then pick it out of the water. So those sections were purposely left standing. Just between those two sections the entire bridge collapsed. They had big jack hammers working off in the high cranes and they jack hammered the cement abutments that they had right down to the about a foot above the lake and they used them for platforms while they were getting everything else fixed. So it was quite interesting. I went over quite often to watch them work over there.

Like I said, I inquired to see where they find the steel [to build the new bridge] and I was afraid they might get it from foreign countries instead of letting us have the business. But they said it's some kind of agreement they had to buy uh steel from the United States. What company I do not know.

Building the new bridge

Flatiron [construction company], they're doing a good job and they said that this is one of their smaller bridges so I'd like to see what they put up other places. But the guys are good there. Since that flood receded and they're able to work at it, make up a few weeks lost time, 'cause I never I've lived here all my life and I've never seen the lake as high as it was. It was terrific.

They think that October 9th they'll be ready for that deadline. We can't tell what's gonna happen but they, they feel pretty sure that they'll be ready by then. I asked the other day. They said that the arch, the center piece, would be probably going over in the middle of August. Then I inquired about the cement. I said after you pour the cement in the middle section you can't go on there for about 30 days. They checked the bridge and the cement may be a little bit less, a little bit much more but uh they usually want 30 days no traffic on that but my son-in-law told me no they already pre-poured the cement, it's gonna come in slabs. So the center section they're just gonna lay in slabs in it.

The other both ends they're pouring cement now uh a little each day. So they're coming along pretty good. They cleaned up quite a bit around there and went from six high boom cranes down to three now they got.

I went to the meeting where we voted on I think it was three pictures of different bridges and uh everybody agreed on the one they're building now.

Well I think they will be [finished building arch on schedule]. See right now it's it looks in a rough stage but they got two more sections to go and then both arches will be done, I mean both sections. And they're gonna have to put in one crossbeam for uh braces. Then all the center will be taken out. They cut the cables there where all the cables will be hung and that should be uh loaded by the two cranes, lifted up and sent on barges. And it's gonna take quite a while, several hours to go across the lake, but it's, they got to get the weather right because it's got to be uh no waves at all to speak of. We understood that they uh jack the bridge up after when they get over to Vermont. That's hearsay I don't know for sure what they're going to do.

Celebrating the new bridge

I have been invited to ride in the first car and go across. So uh, Lord, give me my health I, I will be there. They said they were going to have a three day celebration. They might but I would think, even bet, they will not. How can the State of New York allow a couple more days paying a ferry to go \$17 thousand a day and hold up the bridge for three days and they have been so long waiting for it? I think it's going to be, myself think it's gonna be a one day celebration. It might be celebration but on the side. They won't stop the flow of traffic.

I uh kind of feel bad. I think they should put a toll on the bridge. I don't mean an immense toll; I don't mean two dollars or something like that. But I think 50 cents one-way and that money go into a fund and not to be touched except for bridge maintenance and improvements or whatever necessary 'cause when they stopped taking toll, let everybody going across free, it didn't hurt anybody to pay a quarter or something you know. So I, I would like to see them put the toll on but that's not even mentioned.

But the uh picture I had there, it shows you the old toll house is still there, but...it's in the paper in a picture and uh I was amazed at the uh the number of floats that came across the bridge that day[1929 opening day] oh float after float after float and they were beautiful and I watched them from a distance and all the men had their hats on and the women with the long dresses down to their ankles and children running around a few dogs barking. It was a great day, that was one of the greatest days of my life and uh except coming home from service that was the greatest day. So uh, it was uh a fun day to me, a learning day, a day of amazement you might say. So it's hard for a little kid to explain just what it was. But I have to say if I was 12 years old I would have a different view of what I thought happening, but I know it's a great thing. It was a great thing and we used to take a row boat and row over there watch the cars go across if the waves weren't too big then we'd row back across.

Demolition

Yeah I received a request that I ah be over there to see it since I was there when they opened it and sure I'll come over and pick me up in the car and went over. And uh had a gentlemen by the name of Fred Buck drove me over in his Cadillac and uh

were able to see the entire thing and then uh oh maybe interviewed by five different television stations. They ask questions and I give them what answers I had. Snow was falling a little bit and only trouble it was foggy and a lot of snow and people couldn't see us clear as they would of like to, but it was a nice day.

I was overwhelmed to tell you the truth, I didn't see that coming I didn't think that we were gonna be interviewed or anything. I know going in the only way you can get over by the bridge is with a pass. So they had a pass for my daughter and myself. So were driving over and before we reached the approach, any place near the bridge there was cars up, television cars on the vehicles and the equipment, lined up for almost better than a quarter of a mile and we were about 10 more minutes before we had to be at the site. So my daughter said what are we going to do Dad? Turnover on the left side, go right down through, then just pretend you're an important girl. So we got over. The state trooper stopped and they [asked], what our business was? We showed them the pass; go right through. So that, that was all right, so I didn't realize there was going to be that much publicity over there.

[Surprise about getting invited to demolition] Yeah, yes I am. But then again I think hey they're more important people than just Marty but I said oh heck, they want me, I'll be there.

I had the opportunity to meet Governor Patterson twice he came over and shook hands, and he was giving a talk, he said I hope to be over there when they open the bridge and I hope Martin's there with me. So uh and I went over and introduced myself to the Governor of Vermont same time and I talked to both of them had a nice talk with them.

Depression days

You got to realize back in '27, '28, '29 we're in a heavy depression, uh we didn't realize how poor we were until we got way older, you know 20, 21 years old, 'cause we had a wonderful life. You get outside, work, play, no TV, no radio, and, but, you ate good. Our mothers all come from foreign countries. My mother came from Poland, Karlakov, along with my dad, and if we didn't have 40/50 pounds of a bushel of potatoes for the winter, we had to skimp a little bit. But she had wonderful food, we ate beautiful, we ate full, we ate great meals but the rest of it we had nothing.

I know I had holes in my uh the soles of my shoes and every night I'd put cardboard in there so I wouldn't wear out my stockings and would go to school and every night I'd change that cardboard. So I remember one time I almost, we almost went on the, ah what would you call it, uh well we went to get help from the state. They sent me to the old jail in Port Henry to get a pair of shoes and uh I was always ashamed of myself going up there you know. I felt like everyone was looking at you. And so the rough talking guys said well, what do you want here? I says, I was sent up here to get a pair of shoes. He says there's a pile of them over there. Go over there and find two that you like and then I hear the giggling and everything. I turned around and I left

and I begged my mother don't let me go up there again. So uh that's how close I came to taking welfare one time. So we never did go on it. We uh made our own way.

At the time there was so many more people went to work in Vermont and vice versa. Vermonters came over here and they, a lot of Vermonters, moved over here. I got two Vermonters across the street from me, one on each corner. Greatest people I ever had; they're great neighbors. And uh I know a few families moved to Vermont. A lot of factories came out since in Vermont, there going along further outside of Middlebury. I didn't realize how many factories are along the road there. So the, I think the employment picked up and uh it helped us get out of recessions, out of the Depression we were in and I think in 1932 when Roosevelt came into power we started the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] camp, started the NRA [National Recovery Administration] and uh so all these different things and uh it gradually pulled us out.

Of course the big thing that pulled us out [of the Depression] was World War II. Because then all the factories opened up. Women had to go to work and so I spent three and a half uh three and half years in the air force. My last mission I got shot down over Berlin but uh we were able to bail out okay. After we got over Berlin, Germany and uh got in to Russian hands and made our way through Poland and over to Russia over Poltava, Russia, where we patched up an old plane and we flew that down to Italy and so we got home. Laughed and joked about it, we got back to the base we looked like a bunch of hoodlums coming in, old clothes and all of that.

All of our buddies already left for home 'cause it was eight weeks since we got shot down. They had us down, I didn't realize, that we were killed in action. And so, uh we come into the mess hall. The CO jumped up and took us down to the head table where we waited on us. I asked one of the men there, I said how about our clothes? Where do we get our clothes? He said they're at the post office, I think. I says, somebody better go up there and find out. So it was after hours I, I dare say I stole a bike, but I borrowed a bike which everybody did. Once a month they get all the bikes together and [you] come pick up your bike. So I grabbed a bike outside the mess hall and I peddled outside to the post office out in the outskirts. I banged on the door 'cause I see somebody way back there working and uh he come over and said. "Closed." And I said, "no, open up I want to talk to you.", So he opened up I said all I want to do is ask a question, have you got any boxes or clothes, anything that's going to the states and I named for Chapmen, Wallace, Rasmusqo and Bezon all through there? "Yeah," he said "they're going to go out tomorrow." I said, "don't send them out. Please don't send them out." I said we're here. I said, "Do send Harold Vantrez," a good friend of mine who was killed, and uh and George Fuller. They got it that day. I said, "Those two you can send." They got killed in action but the rest of the men are here. So it's a good thing I went over that morning or that evening.

Circling the bridge in a bomber

In '48 I got married and '49 in December they sent me a letter, get back in the service. They needed what they call 0142's. It's the radar navigator bombardier so I had to go back in the Korean War.

I did want, see they gave us a B17 brand new one to fly overseas and we had to make a thousand mile test hop on it, to everybody check his position on the plane to see if there's something that should be corrected or everything worked on it. And they gave us three sites - one was in Burlington, one was out down south and one was out west from Langley Field. So I asked the pilot any chance of going to Burlington I said without disrupting some planes of the other men. If they want to go some other place that's alright with me. He said no, Port Henry we'll go up and fly over Port Henry, so I said, can we get permission to drop down low? They said we can get down to 10,000 feet with a big heavy four engine buffer.

So we came over. I called my mother up I said you be out in the garden and I'll wave a white flag and I says uh you'll know it's me were heading overseas Mom. So we got over and she was out in the garden. We circled twice. We dropped down to about 2,000 feet. It must of shook up all of Port Henry. So we come around the [Lake Champlain] bridge and everything. And I told Toddle, I says you know we can, we can fit underneath that bridge. He looked at it a couple times and said we better not, but I think we had room to get under there but that would have been an early demolishing of it, if we did.

Oh yeah we flew over it, circled around Port Henry several times and then went up to Burlington turned around and headed back uh Langley Field and the next [day] we headed out overseas. We had to go to Bangor, Maine. The next day then the day after that flew to um uh what was the name of the time, uh Labrador, up in Labrador. My, they told me, my job going overseas was to be helping the DR Navigator. I was an ACE to X navigator operator, a radar navigator 'cause if you're on the lead ship, that's the only one we could fly on the lead ship or number two, you always have two navigators. Sometimes we had a thousand planes following us and you had to know where you were going.

She waved back and, that's something. As a matter of fact I had a handkerchief and I wrote a letter to her telling her I loved her and all that and I dropped it. I knew which way the wind was going so they, she wrote me a letter later on she said that we got it. So that little handkerchief parachute and wrapped up just put a little, light weight in it."