

**Virginia LaPointe Southworth**  
**Great Grand Daughter of Mortimer Ferris, first Chairman of the Lake Champlain Bridge Commission**  
**Interviewed by Mountain Lake PBS on July 18, 2011**

I'm Virginia LaPointe Southworth. Well, this bridge is very, very special to me. My great grandfather was the commissioner to the bridge. On my father's side: Mortimer Yale Ferris. He was an MIT civil engineering graduate. He also worked on the Rouses Point Bridge. He worked on Tongue Mountain [road]. He gave the beach to my hometown on Black Point Road in Ticonderoga. So he was in his young years. Today it would be middle aged. He lived to 59. But he was a humble man who aspired to great things and was interested in the welfare of the community; to bring it together.

**Grandmother christened bridge**

My relationship [to the bridge] goes back to when I was a little girl. With this bridge, I've heard about how you had to pay a toll. But we were told that we could go over free because my great grandfather was a civil engineer for this bridge. He was an MIT graduate and a civil engineer. Mortimer Yale Ferris, my paternal great grandfather. His daughter, my dear grandmother Elizabeth Ferris LaPointe, she is the one who christened or cut the ribbon [at the 1929 opening day ceremony]. So we feel very connected. Many times going over, whether it be to the Fletcher Allen Hospital, for my Dad or for one of my brothers who may have gotten hurt or my uncle. [On] the bridge, we would always pause in the center to pay homage and to look at the name of Boopa, as we affectionately referred to him. It's a passage, passage of time a bridge metaphorically, literally. It's just very, very special.

My relationship to the original Lake Champlain Bridge is that my dear, late, great grandfather, Mortimer Yale Ferris, a civil engineer designed and built this bridge with other commissioners. And his daughter, my dear grandmother, Elizabeth Ferris LaPointe, on my father's side, she is the one who christened it and cut the ribbon. As a little girl growing up my family and I, many times, whether we were going to the hospital in Vermont, we would cross the bridge and pause mid-center to gaze on the plaque where my great grandfathers name was, to pay him homage.

**First bridge commission**

They wanted to have a passage of transportation from New York to Vermont and he was located, he was in the right place, I guess, he was probably in the right place at the right time and maybe had the, you know, wherewithal to proceed with it. He was also asked to work on another bridge in 1937 in Rouses Point.

I understand that when a bridge was being proposed, that Boopa, as we affectionately referred to my great grandfather, proposed doing it in the narrows, maybe closer to where the present day Fort Ticonderoga ferry landing is. But I

think because of the underlying muck, it wasn't as sound as it as it was to do it over here. He lived in Ticonderoga, coming from Brookline Massachusetts, where he came here to raise his family. Here in Ti, we're all close related and he joined the clasp of hands with Vermont for our, I think "Sister Wealth," was the expression they used back then.

There was a group. There were four [five] other commissioners but I believe he was kind of the main, the main commissioner. He was a civil engineer. He graduated from MIT. I guess he drew up the papers. Three [commissioners] from Vermont, three from New York. Yeah, I remember it was half and half. So he would have had to have gotten the permission from the governor of New York and Governor Weeks, the Vermont people.

My great grandfather, Mortimer Yale Ferris, he was one of the delegates selected by Governor Alfred Smith at the time, there, along with three chosen by Governor Weeks of Vermont. My great grandfather Mortimer Yale Ferris was one of the six Lake Champlain bridge commissioners working with the firm Fay, Spofford & Thorndike.

### **Feeling of pride**

My great grandfather Mortimer Yale Ferris was selected as one of the six Lake Champlain Bridge commissioners along with three selected by Governor Weeks from Vermont along with two other ones with Boopa as we affectionately called him for New York State. Alfred Smith was the Governor at the time and they were working with the firm Fay, Spofford & Thorndike. Many of these civil engineers were graduates of MIT my great grandfather being one of them.

This bridge is very dear to me. My grandmother cut the ribbon I'm wearing one of her dresses today and even the lavalier pendant my great grandfather had given to my grandmother. We as children, we stopped in the center of the bridge to pause and pay homage to the plaque where we could see my great grandfather's name on the original Lake Champlain Bridge. Every time we would cross; many times it was for Christmas shopping or more importantly to get to the Fletcher Allen Hospital in Vermont for my brother when he had an accident or for my father or my uncle. I remember seeing in one of the articles. It was more of a wonder how did we survive before it existed.

It was humbling. I might say it was a real feeling of pride that would surge in me when I saw [in the film of the opening celebration] the flags and the old model T's going, the parade. And just seeing my grandmother with FDR who was Governor at the time you know right, right beside grandma cutting the ribbon. I mean it was just a thrill. Just even coming across the photographs, I feel so close to them; so connected. Just a sense of identity, a sense of purpose and a sense of identity and a sense of responsibility to live up to and try to carry on a little bit of that and to just celebrate and honor what we have, what's in progress now.

Well I believe they used the term “two sister wealth’s” coming together to clasp hands. What it did was it provided a booming economy for Vermont and New York on both sides. It brought two states closer together; an alliance, if you will. Besides being panoramically beautiful.

I attended the demolition, the implosion, January, a year and a half ago. I wasn’t sure if I would be up to it and it was, you know, overcast that day. I was almost relieved that I couldn’t see it clearly. But the sound reverberates in my memory. I was overcome because this bridge stood for eighty eight [eighty] years! (Sorry!) I was glad to be there though because I felt I should have been and yet originally I hadn’t planned to be. But they postponed it so it worked out that way. My brother gave each and everyone of us original aerial photographs of the bridge for Christmas that year. Everyone has it in his or her living room. In my family, it’s special to all of us.

### **The new bridge**

Well I think it’s good and it’s necessary [that they’re rebuilding the bridge] and I’m almost glad that it’s different because that was original design for my great grandfather’s *confreres*, so it’s good. It’s necessary. And it’s good that this plan will be original with its design. It’s a good thing and it’s- yeah- life goes on.

Okay, the new design: it’s appealing, it’s different and I’m glad it’s different because rightfully so. But I’m very pleased that it’s on the same pathway as the original and it’s necessary to keep the economic progress going. People joining. A boom. Both emotional as well as economic. Like the Bridge Restaurant and what do they call it, the No Bridge Restaurant, which I think is very clever. Very good. Even in Utica the other day I was gassing up and everyone automatically associates, “Oh yeah that’s were that bridge is right?” and I’m, like, “mmm. Oh, bitter sweet.”

I very seldom watch movies, newer movies. But I did happen to see that one with Harrison Ford. It was kind of eerie but, yeah, they saw a good mark and now I’m glad they did do that ‘cause it’s no longer here and it’s just another footage of history, in a different way, to be preserved. I did [feel pride] in the fact that my grandmother cut the ribbon that day. Yeah, I did. And I think when the movie came out, I probably told everyone that.

I’m so happy that the plaque has been preserved and it’s not under the lake but it will be in the exhibit. That pleases me immensely and all my family.

Oh, I feel humbled because I’m here today but each and every one of my family feels as strongly. It connects us all. Like I said, my brother gave Christmas gifts of the aerial photograph of the bridge for Christmas last year. It was one of my favorites probably one of my favorite wedding gifts and it’s a shot in the wintertime, another shot I have of the bridge.

## **Recalling 1929 bridge**

I just remember seeing the parade and some banners in some old news reel. And I always remember seeing the picture of my grandmother with FDR beside her, and [being] told that originally they could go over free, which was, like, you know, a big deal even though it became free later on. But that was pretty special, pretty neat, yeah. I guess it's just a feeling inside just a real strong feeling.

Growing up, the greatest feeling was going over the bridge in our old Ford sedan knowing that we were going to stop at the center. And my brother was a little frightened going over the bridge 'cause it was high up. So it was exciting in that way and then very special to stop to pause to pay homage to our great grandfather on my father's side, to see his name there. And if we were lucky, there wasn't much traffic and we could pause for a moment, maybe. And to see that plaque, it was just a feeling of pride and very special.

After the ceremony that day August 26, 1929, ceremoniously a plaque was placed in the center at the top at the exact line between New York and Vermont where that clasping of hands took place and there, emblazoned on the plaque, was the name of all the commissioners, namely my great grandfather Mortimer Yale Ferris. And that is where we would stop as children we would look forward to that. It was a little scary when we were little coming over this high bridge but I remember stopping on the way and, often times with an ice cream cone, pause, and there we could see Boopa's name on this wonderful bridge.

I'm very grateful that the plaque has been preserved and that it did not go down with the implosion. The feeling that I had, and that was a general feeling with all my family when the bridge was demolished, was likened to the sinking of the Titanic. That's all I could think of. It, was this type of feeling. But thankfully this marvelous plaque is preserved and will be on display in the exhibit. Thank you I'm so happy about that.

Well before I came today I stopped at the cemetery to visit the grave of my great grandfather and grandmother and grandma LaPointe who christened the bridge and I asked them to intercede for me now. I think he would be very pleased, that the safety of all would be foremost for him because he was a man of what was right and a man of honor. I think he would be very pleased to see that it is being continued and in the same place and I think that he would be happy to think that his descendents feel so strongly about it, yeah.

## **Letting go**

When the decision had been made to close the bridge I had hoped it was to refortify the original to make it sound and I was fine with that. But I wasn't quite prepared when I learned later that it would be demolished. It was a tough one and it was hard to swallow.

Everybody, was talking about it. We all, we were. It was like something in our heart or in our throat. It was kind of a sad sick feeling but we knew it was necessary, .

I didn't attend any of the meetings because I'm located out near the Mohawk Valley now since I got married. My husband's a farmer and with our son. So it hasn't always been feasible to get away for those. But I've been keeping abreast as much of the situation as I could through the computer and what not and through the papers.

I don't believe anybody was adamantly opposed because it would have been you know, nobody would want a tragedy and we deemed it necessary. If this was a general consensus who were we to question that. The emotions, those will be there that's natural but it was necessary and we all understand that you know yes, and were very proud of what's taken place now and where it has taken place.

I will be at the opening ceremony. You better believe it. With bells on. Yes mam yes sure will, with my family too and probably all my family, my many relatives.

I have a five year old son, James William, and I've shared with him all about this, the bridge. In fact, I have his picture - a little black and white one alongside my great grandfather's, his great great grandfather's [at a] comparable age. And he's excited whenever he sees a bridge. He wonders did great great grandfather build the bridge so yea he'll be here yes.

Well we've already taken the ferry. We've taken the ferry a couple times. Yes, I guess we'll have to [drive over the bridge]. We sure will. We'll go across the new bridge by all means. We will stop at the top for old time's sake. Absolutely yes we'll stop at the top."