

2017-09-26 HANK PARKE 1 & 2

[Start Audio 1]

Eric Lidji: Today is September 26, 2017. I'm Eric Lidji. I'm speaking with Hank Parke and we are on the third floor of the Operations Building of the Somerset Trust Company?

Hank Parke: That's it.

Eric Lidji: So, the way I've been starting a lot of these is – especially when people grew up in the area – is asking them what the area was like when they were growing up.

Hank Parke: Okay. For me, I grew up in Hidden Valley. It's a relatively small ski resort west of Somerset. So, there was always this tourism and recreation kind of thing going around in my head. I like to ski, I like to kayak, I like to be outdoors. And, I think that's pretty much the same with the majority of the people in Somerset County, but a lot of them are more hunters and fishermen. I'm not. The most frustrating thing I've done in my life, I think, is fishing. But, that's just me.

Eric Lidji: But, you were always doing outdoor stuff?

Hank Parke: Yeah, yeah, and a lot of just hiking and exploring around Hidden Valley, getting lost, that kind of stuff, as I was a kid.

Eric Lidji: Did you deal much with the trains at all when you were a kid?

Hank Parke: No, not at all. Ironically, my parents came from Pittsburgh, and, along with my mother's parents, and started Hidden Valley back in 1949.

Eric Lidji: Huh.

Hank Parke: And, my father worked for the Union Railroad in Pittsburgh. And, it's probably been bought out several times over the years. Hated working for the railroad, so he would pretty much do anything to get away from the railroad job. And ironically, years later, in fact, he was on my board, on our Rails-to-Trails board – sort of the token old railroad man.

[Chuckle]

But, that was when we got started in the mid-'80s.

Eric Lidji: I did a quick newspaper search before I came over here just to see if there were any interesting stories and there were all these things from when you were a kid, like little projects you were involved in, like recycling and things like that. So, it seems like you were thinking about, I don't know, larger communal things.

Hank Parke: Yeah. Well, and I got that from my dad. He looked at the big picture and knew that the success of Hidden Valley was also contingent on the success of the local economy. So, you know, why not be involved? He was a Rotarian, I'm in the Rotary. Just things like that. And, I think there are a lot of businesses that don't get that. It's like they're this little island out there, and, "Why doesn't somebody do this for me? Why doesn't somebody do that for me?" I think you really need to get involved.

And, how I first really got involved in the trail was a bunch of us had heard that there was this trail from Ohioptyle to Confluence. And, I knew the park superintendent in Ohioptyle, and one thing led to another, and probably about 20 of us kids and parents and we did the whole thing, and thought, "Wow. This is incredible. Why can't this go all the through Somerset County? What's the path? Once it hits Confluence, where is this old railroad going to go?" So, we got really curious, and the more curious we got, the more we found out. The more we found out, the more we thought, "Well, how difficult can this be?" Very unrealistic.

Eric Lidji: Yeah. What were you doing professionally at that time?

Hank Parke: I was in business for myself. I ran the Hidden Valley Cross-Country Ski Center, I had a delicatessen in a barn by Hidden Valley, and I leased cabins in Kooser State Park.

Eric Lidji: So, with that background, what made you think that you could do the trail?

Hank Parke: Oh, hell, I don't know.

[Chuckle]

It was just, "How difficult can it be to build a trail?" And, not totally understanding the whole grasp of things. And, I think I got that from my dad because they came up from Pittsburgh and carved out ski slopes in what was all heavily forested land. Now, something like that, to me, is like, "God, where do you start, and how do you get the right angles, and the right widths, and everything else?" So, I think he just taught me that, I don't know, figure it out. You know, nothing's too difficult. I've seen them do a lot of difficult things.

Eric Lidji: So, what was the first step that you took?

Hank Parke: Well ironically, I started to do some research and I can remember talking to- I got involved in the Chamber in 1988 I think, as executive director, and talked to a Chamber executive on the Elroy-Sparta Bike Trail in I think it's Wisconsin, pretty sure. And, she was real involved in building that, but they didn't have bridges and tunnels. But, she was telling me, like, \$10,000 a mile for that. "We can come up with that." Well, that's \$10,000 if you don't have much work to do at all. So, we sort of got started off a little bit on the wrong foot, thinking that it was only going to be 10,000 bucks a mile. Now, had we got started off on the right foot, I think we would have been incredibly discouraged.

[Laughter]

Eric Lidji: What do you mean by that?

Hank Parke: Well, being unrealistic got us moving forward. Had we been more realistic about what the price was, I think we would have just thrown up our hands and said, "Man, somebody else has got to figure this sucker out. It's not going to be us."

I mean, the people that were interested in the beginning- I was on the Chamber of Commerce board, and Greg Chapelli was the executive director at the Chamber of Commerce, and George Kaufman, who grew up in Rockwood, was a friend

and local attorney. If you need spellings – I'll come up with that for you – and we actually incorporated- we put that incorporation together – the Somerset County Rails-to-Trails Association.

Eric Lidji: What was the idea behind, like, why start a new organization?

Hank Parke: We didn't really feel that there was an organization out there that fit at all. We really didn't have- I can't really think of, even now, of any outdoors groups that are headquartered here. It was interesting because different parts of the trail kind of did the same thing. We didn't realize, nor did we- not that we didn't care, but you had to set your priorities. What was happening in McKeesport was great, and, boy, this looked like maybe all the pieces of the puzzle would connect. But, we couldn't really help them because we were kind of floundering ourselves, just trying to get up and running and figured out.

We did a lot of deed searching, which was really tedious, terrible stuff, as far as I'm concerned. That's just absolutely the thing that, you know, send me through the briar patch and dragged naked, don't ask me to do deed searching.

Eric Lidji: So, the people on this committee were doing the deed search themselves?

Hank Parke: Yeah, and, then, I think we actually hired somebody to do it and pay them. Where we got the money at that point, I'm not sure. The recycling – it's funny that you bring that up because we were actually featured in *USA Today*. They did all 50 states and different projects in the 50 states that were involved in recycling. And, we recycled and then put all that money in the Rails-to-Trails account, so all those cans and bottles – that was our start.

And, we actually became the executive director of the Chamber of Commerce and our office was located where Turkey Hill is – if you got off the turnpike, right there by the turnpike entrance. And, somebody loaned us a big old trailer and people would bring the recyclables in and we'd sort them and then haul them to market. Oh, my God.

Eric Lidji: Did you make a significant amount of money that way?

Hank Parke: No.

[Chuckle]

No, but, you know, part of it was- I mean, I always thought recycling make a hell of a lot of sense. When I lived in Pittsburgh for a couple years and was involved in the – what did we call it – Group for Recycling in Pennsylvania – GRIP. I was actually vice president for a while. And, we were the recycling center and Somerset was sort of a member center of that organization. And, it was neat. It's great to be with like-minded people who do things that maybe don't really, on the surface, make a hell of a lot of sense, but in the long run, I think it makes a lot of sense.

Eric Lidji: When you're trying to raise money for the trail, does something like that have a benefit beyond the financial value? And, does it get people excited about it?

Hank Parke: Yeah, I think so. Probably our best recycling project was in Rockwood near where the trailhead is. We hauled about 500 tires, plus washing machines, and stoves, and things that were just dumped over the side of the trail. And, I think the community was getting kind of jazzed about, "Hey, somebody's taking an interest in cleaning this up."

When I was down at the Chamber, there was a fellow who was asking about the trail, and he had a New Enterprise Stone & Lime hat on and New Enterprise belt buckle. And I said, "Hey, by the way, do you work for New Enterprise?" He happened to be the crane operator. Well, he got permission from his higher-ups to actually bring the crane- I mean, this is a full-blown, huge crane. And, so, what he could do is lower this hook and cable down and we'd tie it around about ten tires because the bank was like that. You could bring one tire up and you would have slid back down – you probably did, like, twice the mileage, because it's so steep, you're sliding back down.

So, we stacked all these tires up and recycled them. It cleaned up what was a real eye-sore, and it was a preventative thing, too, because it was real easy for people just to take their pickup truck and go up the trail a little ways and just throw off a bunch of trash.

Eric Lidji: Something like the crane thing, is that something that only happens in a small town?

Hank Parke: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

[Chuckle]

But, it's funny, I became pretty good friends with the crane operator. We didn't really have a whole lot in common but found out he was interested in model railroad stuff. And, again, when I was at the Chamber, I made some arrangements for a storefront so those guys could set up their model railroad. And, they formed an organization, the Laurel Highlands Model Railroad Association, and it's still going to this day, and it's set up in one of the buildings. They own a building now. It's just ironic how all the pieces fit together.

Eric Lidji: Yeah.

Hank Parke: You couldn't count on something like that to save your life.

[Chuckle]

But, it is small town stuff, and I love it. I absolutely love it. I lived in Pittsburgh for two years and I don't think I accomplished, in two years, what I could accomplish up here in a month, just doing stuff.

Eric Lidji: Making it a smaller, and one person makes an impact?

Hank Parke: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And, it's easier to meet people, "Oh, yeah, aren't you the guy that sold me..." you know, "a horse and buggy 20 years ago?" or something. No, that's probably a bad example.

[Laughter]

Eric Lidji: I've never had a horse and buggy. Well, that's not really true. So, after you guys started the Rails-to-Trails Association, what was the next step?

Hank Parke: Well, we tried to sort of prioritize things. I can't remember exactly when the trail organization, the ATA, got started. Because that was one of their first missions – to prioritize how can we get the low-hanging fruit? How can we accomplish completion of the easiest pieces along the trail? And, that's kind of what we did, with Mankamyer.

Eric Lidji: Yeah.

Hank Parke: We looked at, "Okay, where do we have a piece of trail that has a logical starting point and ending point, and no damn bridges and tunnels?" Because we just didn't have the scratch for bridges and tunnels. And, we did get involved with the – oh, Lord, help me – the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. I spoke at, I think, two of their conferences. One in San Francisco – I think it was California somewhere, I think it was San Francisco – and the one in Chicago – Naperville. Getting to know the players in other states and how people did things – you listen to them and you think, "We're not too far off in how we sort of jumped into this thing."

Eric Lidji: Just intuitively?

Hank Parke: Yeah. How that worked, I don't know. But, when we opened up the first piece, people were excited. They really liked what they saw. I'm trying to think now...

Eric Lidji: That was the Rockwood to Markleton section?

Hank Parke: Rockwood to Markleton or Rockwood to...

Eric Lidji: Garrett?

Hank Parke: Garrett, yeah. I think it might have been Rockwood to Garrett, but I'm really not sure. Over the years, I've kind of thought

back and says, “Did we do that or didn’t we do that?” I can’t remember what I had for breakfast this morning, so this would have been a better interview ten years ago.

[Chuckle]

Hank Parke: The mind’s a terrible thing to waste, as they say.

Eric Lidji: What was the value of the ATA for you guys here?

Hank Parke: Well, one of the things, for sure, is that I think it kind of gave validity to our Somerset County project. We would go into talk to some folks at a foundation and we’d say, “We’re part of this big, long-distance trail from Pittsburgh to Cumberland, Maryland.” And, there were times that they’d say, “Gee, somebody was in here last week and said they were part of this big, long-distance trail from Cumberland to Pittsburgh.” And I said, “Yep, yep. We’re working together.”

In that prioritizing, I think, if I look at all the things that we did right – and there was a lot that we did wrong, I think, stumbling through – but prioritizing things so you can actually get a piece of trail done, because then people can imagine, “Wow, this 5 miles could be 15 miles, or maybe even 50 miles.” And, “Hey, I hear that people down in Cumberland, Maryland, that are working on linking up to the C&O Canal.”

And, ironically, since we got 90% of this done, I think there’s still a group that’s working on going from Pittsburgh up to Erie. So, once you have a piece done, it’s contagious, really. And, it’s just the nature of railroads. Railroads, generally, are not short from Point A to Point B, 50 miles or 100 miles – they’re 300, 500, 1,000, whatever. Or, it connects with another one. Because, actually, this is a combination of the – you’d probably know more than I do, actually – in Connellsville, there were two railroads there, so this is one of the two. And, I’m not sure I know which one it is. We dealt with CSX and CSX, beforehand, was B&O, and B&O bought out the Western Maryland Railroad. So, there’s sort of a progression of how that all happened. And, I think you probably already know this,

but at one point there were railroads on both sides of the Casselman River going through Somerset County. Obviously, that didn't make much sense, especially when, at one point, they were owned by the same company. It's like, "Let's just put our maintenance effort into one good rail line. We can't really afford to keep both of them up and running."

Eric Lidji: Yeah. Were you part of the group that went down to Jacksonville?

Hank Parke: Yeah. Yeah. Dave Mankamyer and...

Eric Lidji: What do you remember about that trip?

Hank Parke: I remember sitting around with the heavy hitters from the CSX – at least, they didn't look like heavy hitters to me. I mean, we're just boys from a small town and they knew we were damned serious. We flew down on a loaner jet and met with them and we were flying down the same day. That was pretty damn impressive. I was impressed. I was hoping they were impressed, too. Ironically – and I don't know if Dave told you this – but Kim Gibson, the county solicitor, Somerset County solicitor, went along. You know, I let those guys do most of the talking – a county commissioner who was real involved in the conservation district nationwide and a legal eagle. And, I mostly listened. But, if they wanted to hear about the green, buddy, I was right in there.

His son was born, Kim Gibson, his son was born that day while we were in Jacksonville. He had a note on his car when we got back to the Somerset Airport, "Go to the hospital immediately."

[Chuckle]

I'll never forget that. I think he was a little leery about going out of town at all, but he said, "My wife knows where I am."

But, I think that was a turning point with the railroad. We had talked to him about buying it, and we had raised the money,

again, and getting things chronological. The Mellon Foundation funded the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy in D.C. for a year, and I'm sure they were hoping the next year to get funding. We happened to come along, our Somerset County group, and nuzzled our way in, and talked to the Mellon Foundation folks, and actually flew Mike Watson over part of the trail so he could really get a handle on where this was going to go and how it was going to connect. And, they chose to fund us the next year, or actually that year. And, they didn't fund the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. Hopefully, they got money from somewhere. I don't know. We had applied to, probably, at least 50 foundations. And, we came up with the idea if they could sponsor a mile of the trail, "This would be your mile." In the little foundation we talked about a mile, but the bigger foundations, like the Mellon Foundation, the Heinz Foundation...

[Chatter 0:23:08.3 – 0:23:26.5]

[End Audio 1 – 0:23:26.5]

[Start Audio 2]

Eric Lidji: Okay, so back after an unexpected diversion.

Hank Parke: I'm making a note here.

Eric Lidji: The prompt to its hot shower.

Hank Parke: Yeah. Yeah, I got that down.

Eric Lidji: Okay.

Hank Parke: I'll get that in sequence here, though.

Eric Lidji: Where did we leave off?

Hank Parke: You're asking me, huh?

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Eric Lidji: Let's see. Oh, we were talking about foundations and you guys got money instead of the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy.

Hank Parke: Yeah, yeah. But, we still worked together and it developed a friendship and a relationship with the Mellon Foundation, which was very, very, very, very, very helpful. I couldn't say "very" enough.

And, ironically, it was helpful enough that with that relationship, I was also involved, and still am involved, in a lot of other organizations. Laurel Arts is a rural arts program and they were in the process of moving into or figuring out if they could purchase a new facility for a dance center. And, we got, oh gosh, I think \$150,000 from the Mellon Foundation for that project. So, it wasn't just- you know, they were trail-oriented. They were really community-oriented. And, once you develop that relationship, it's there. As long as you don't piss them off.

Eric Lidji: But, they trust you as a person?

Hank Parke: Yeah, exactly, and that's where the relationship is.

Eric Lidji: You had mentioned before that you had this idea of sending out 50 requests and getting everyone to sponsor a mile.

Hank Parke: Yeah.

Eric Lidji: Does that not work in the foundation world?

Hank Parke: Well, it did work, actually. We figured \$4,500 a mile. So, the smaller foundations, we asked for \$4,500. I think we asked the Pines Foundation for \$90,000, which was 20 miles, 20 times 4,500. And, I can remember meeting with Hank Gukima. Do you know him by any chance?

Eric Lidji: He's on the list, but I haven't met him yet.

Hank Parke: I was new at this. I had never done any foundation work before. But, we had a very serious conversation – and I think it was over the phone. So, "I'm in receipt of your request. Here's

the total that you want...” and I think it was \$350,000 – just throw that out. “You have a promise of \$150,000 from the Mellon Foundation, and you have X number of dollars.” I think we had \$2,000 from recycling efforts. We had some other small- a couple of the foundations that we sent that letter to, they gave us, like, \$500 or \$1,000, or whatever. And he said, “Well, it sounds like if I’m figuring is right, it sounds like you need \$119,755.” I said, “Yeah, I think that’s right.” He said, “Well, that’s what I’m going to go to my board for.” I was thinking, “Holy shit!”

[Laughter]

Hank Parke: Here’s a kid that had never really even talked to a foundation in person before.

Eric Lidji: Yeah.

Hank Parke: But, the neat thing was, I think they were getting the buzz in Pittsburgh at the same time that this trail- there were groups working on the trail in Pittsburgh, and they probably were talking to Linda Boxx even before the ATA was started. But, it all worked.

Eric Lidji: Do you think, in a way, that it was easier to get the Somerset County section done as part of the bigger trail than it would have been if you guys had just said, “We want to have it...”

Hank Parke: Oh, if we wanted to just have a trail in Somerset County?

Eric Lidji: Yeah.

Hank Parke: We couldn’t have gotten the foundation folks in Pittsburgh interested, I don’t think. I really don’t think. I mean, they’re great people, but why the hell would they care?

Eric Lidji: Yeah.

Hank Parke: This is one of the longest rail trails in the country and it may even be the longest. I think we’re number two or number

three. You have Pittsburgh and D.C. You know, these aren't one horse towns. And, Congressman Murtha was, in the early days, was definitely an advocate. I can remember being in Rockwood – we had the Rockwood High School band play, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, when he arrived, and he announced money for a study. Obviously, I'm getting things out of sequence. But, you know, if somebody from the private sector's like, "I'll study, Jesus." [?] [0:06:04.0]

[Laughter]

One of those words that's sort of it's like fingernails on a glass.

Eric Lidji: Committee is another one?

Hank Parke: Yeah. Oh, God. Yeah. But, he came through. He came through with that money, and again, Dave Mankamyer might have mentioned other funding we got from him. But, having him on our side, just that part, is phenomenal. And, he really liked what he heard. It made sense. His big thing at the time was The America's Industrial Heritage Project. I don't know if you've run across that.

Eric Lidji: Yeah.

Hank Parke: And, this was a perfect piece of that. It really preserved the railroad – not as a railroad – but it preserved the railroad for bicycle transportation. I mean, it's a new age and it worked. And, again, having him on our side was essential. I got to do the warm shower thing.

Eric Lidji: Okay.

Hank Parke: The road in Garrett, what PennDOT had done- when the railroad was out of business, it went under, well, for years, it went underneath of a highway bridge. When the railroad was, basically, done for, and the bridge was in disrepair, PennDOT decided, "We're just going to fill this in. It doesn't make any good sense to spend five times the money to build another

bridge when we don't need a bridge there." So, there we were, "What do we do now?"

Eric Lidji: Filling it in would have covered the trail?

Hank Parke: Yeah, and they already filled it in.

Eric Lidji: Oh.

[Chuckle]

Hank Parke: It was done. So, when we came along, it was, "Hmm, well, why can't we do some sort of tunnel?" And, we got the bids and did a tunnel. The day we had the ribbon-cutting ceremony, there was a hub-bub around a couple of people that had just ridden through – I couldn't even tell that they were on bicycles, to tell you the truth because there were all sorts of people around. They were from Germany. They had been away from home for 2-1/2 years, they were bicycling around the world, and they just happened to be there that day.

[Chuckle]

I'm with a reporter from the Johnstown paper. He looks at me, he said, "Come on, do you really think I'm going to believe that?" "I don't know what to tell you. I didn't make it up." But, that's the kind of thing that happens on a semi-regular basis. We have people who sign in at either the train station in Meyersdale or in Rockwood at the little visitor's center. They're from all over the country, and some globally. Did I ever think that would happen? Absolutely not. I figured people would come throughout eastern United States. I didn't think we'd have any more of a draw than that. But, pretty much every year they come from every state, and usually six, eight, ten foreign countries. We did something right. I mean, "we all," we collectively did something right.

Eric Lidji: Right.

Hank Parke: And, who knows how many trails have started in different parts of the country, and, possibly, different parts of the world because somebody rode on this trail and said, "Why the hell can't we do this in our town?" You know, there are a lot of countries that will make more government dollars available than- I mean, we fought tooth and nail to get funding for this. And, really, there wasn't a huge amount – when you look at what the whole thing cost – it wasn't a huge amount that came from public funds. It was nowhere near half, I don't think. I probably shouldn't throw things out that I don't really know for sure.

[Chuckle]

But, everybody has a railroad within their neighborhood somewhere that's either operating or not operating. If it's not operating, some of them have the tracks. There were other railroads in Somerset County that have had tracks pulled up over the years.

Eric Lidji: And, it's just turned into nothing?

Hank Parke: Yeah, that's a problem. We looked at one, it's in Salisbury, which is south of Meyersdale, and there's a really beautiful meandering stream and bridge, bridge, bridge, bridge.

Eric Lidji: Yeah.

Hank Parke: And, this is only from there to there isn't even a mile. And, we looked at this and said, "How are we going to raise money for that many bridges in three-quarters of a mile?" I don't even think it's three-quarters of a mile, because these are just... It's real soft, kind of sandy soil, so it just pushed through.

Eric Lidji: Is that the Salisbury Viaduct?

Hank Parke: No, no. No, these would be small bridges.

Eric Lidji: Okay.

Hank Parke: But, we just finally threw up our hands and said, “Let’s stick to this one big mama of a trail, and then if we have any energy when we’re done with that – which we didn’t – then we’ll go do it.” Once you build a trail like that, like the Great Allegheny Passage, I mean, it’s just such a mammoth thing. This whole thing just didn’t quite look as interesting as it had before.

Eric Lidji: Yeah. Speaking of the name Great Allegheny Passage, what was your involvement in that name?

Hank Parke: We met down – if I remember all this right – we met down in Confluence, at the community center, and this was a meeting, I’m pretty sure, Linda Boxx would have called. And, Linda was the chair of the Allegheny Trail Lines. And they said, “We’ve got to come up with a name. You guys are marketing...” We called it – what did we call it – The Connellsville-Cumberland Trail. Then, in Cumberland, they called it the Allegheny Highlands Trail. You know the different names. People are confused. You know, these are totally different trails, but we really need to say it’s the “whatever.” And, I think Great Allegheny Passage came out of that meeting that day.

Eric Lidji: Do you know who was responsible for it?

Hank Parke: Not really.

Eric Lidji: It wasn’t you?

Hank Parke: No, no. I’d like to take credit, but that wasn’t me.

[Chuckle]

Linda Boxx should remember.

Eric Lidji: Okay.

Hank Parke: Linda Boxx or – oh, from Peter...

Eric Lidji: Sanderson?

[Crosstalk]

Hank Parke: Sanderson. I think one of those would have that.

Eric Lidji: Okay. What was the breakdown between you and Dave Mankamyler, like, responsibilities?

Hank Parke: We just all worked together to get it done. I don't think we ever really talked about that.

Eric Lidji: But, there wasn't something that- I mean, you guys have different personalities. It wasn't something that you did – the kind of thing that you did and the kind of thing that he did?

Hank Parke: Well, I was working full-time as the Executive Director of the Chamber of Commerce, and I became, for our part of the trail in Somerset County, kind of became the front guy. Because it was a county Chamber, we wanted to get people in Meyersdale and Salisbury interested in our organization because it wasn't just a Somerset business organization, it was...

[Crosstalk]

Eric Lidji: Meaning not Somerset [inaudible 0:14:47.3]?

Hank Parke: Right, right. And, there's always that thing that's out there, because Somerset is the county seat. The people in Windber, the northern part of the county, and Conemaugh Township, "Nah, that's just a Somerset thing." And, the people in Salisbury and in Meyersdale say the same thing, "Oh, that's just a Somerset thing." And, you constantly fight that.

Now we're working on this trail, and I'm associated with the Chamber and I'm associated with the trail organization. We're coming into your community in Meyersdale and saying, "Hey, this is what we think this could be." And, people are starting to get excited – excitement is good – and started to get behind it. And, I can remember, it was an older lady, who, I think, has since passed away, Mary Nimiller. And, Mary was sort of a

queen-pin, maybe I could call her, in Meyersdale – involved in a lot of different things – and she really liked this idea. Boy, we would get together for our monthly Rails-to-Trails meeting, which would kind of be an update on what’s going on and how our funding was coming along, that kind of thing. “When are you going to start to build into Meyersdale?” I mean, she really rode herd on all of us. And, that’s why she was sitting on that board. She had Meyersdale’s interest in mind.

And, that’s how we put that Rails-to-Trails group together. Larry Jarvis was from Confluence. We had folks from Rockwood – basically all the way along the trail, and then several of us from out of the trail corridor. But, everybody, even though they represented their little town, they were in it – in this big thing – together, and that’s why it worked, I think. And, it was really a little Allegheny Trail Alliance. Allegheny Trail Alliance was all the big trail groups – including us – and this was just all of the little pieces of the Somerset County group.

Eric Lidji: How much of your time at the Chamber were you spending on this on a given week?

Hank Parke: Probably, maybe about a quarter of my time.

Eric Lidji: For years and years? Wow. Did they ever push back?

Hank Parke: It’s funny you ask that because I got both. I had one board member, who I will not mention for fear he would read this. He was like, “What are you doing working on this bicycle trail? You know, that’s kind of pie-in-the-sky.” And then, another guy who actually had an engineering firm said, “I can see this thing making a big difference in the southern part of the county. I think we need to formally encourage Hank to continue this and keep us in the loop on how it’s progressing.” And, the other guy really shut up pretty quickly, which felt really good.

[Chuckle]

Because, you know, you could smell it, you could taste, you could feel it. This was going to be a really good thing. I mean, looking at the trail in Ohiopyle State Park, you could already see what was happening. The parking lot on the Ohiopyle side was full definitely every weekend. And, a lot of times during the week – there were a lot of cars in that parking lot. And then, the **Ramcat [?] [0:19:02.5]** was the Confluence end of it, and that started getting more and more people. There is a couple, Annamarie and Robert, who were- Robert had- his family had interest in some radio stations in Pittsburgh, and that's all I really know. And, they were talking about moving to Colorado. But, the problem was, how do you take care of your business interests in western Pennsylvania when you're in Colorado? They just wanted to be out away from the city. And, they came up one day and I think they rode on the trail, and they made a commitment to buy a piece of property that day, and that's River's Edge Cafe.

Eric Lidji: Huh.

Hank Parke: If you get a chance – she's just one person who has one business, but that was the first trail business that I can remember in Somerset County. Great food – oh, my God – it's still great food. Robert has since died, but God, that was 19- I don't think it was 1990 yet. So, that was a while ago. And now, there are at least a dozen, probably more, trail businesses in the little town of Confluence, and I mean little. The population's a couple hundred people.

Eric Lidji: Wow.

Hank Parke: People have seen this opportunity. And, Confluence had its share of challenges, like any little town. There were a lot of really nice people down there. There was sort of a rough element in the hills that come down for Friday night and drinks. But, it's interesting to see how the trail has influenced that town. And, in some of the business, buildings that have sat for years – same way in Rockwood. Rockwood Trail House is a good example. Somebody was looking at that to buy it and before they really made a commitment, the front porch

collapsed and is laying on the floor of the front porch. It was, like, “Oh, man, this is right by the trail, and this just doesn’t look good.” Well, sure enough, a fellow who had a farm just up the road, who’s also a township supervisor, he and his family bought it, fixed it up, and it became Rockwood Trail House. I mean, it’s right by the trail. There’s a driveway beside it and the trail parking lot is on the other side. It’s an ideal location, absolutely ideal.

If more people saw that kind of stuff- what do you do when you have a hundred-year-old house, it’s too big for you, your kids have moved away and what do you do? That’s where a lot of these bed and breakfasts have gotten started because you need some room. People don’t want to be crammed up in a dorm-type setting. They want a little bit of room. And, there are a lot of people that just, wherever they travel, they’ll get a bed and breakfast. It’s just that atmosphere that’s kind of inviting and homey. If you want to learn about the area, stay at a bed and breakfast. You’ll find out a lot, maybe more than you wanted to know.

Eric Lidji: Let’s see. What about the big infrastructure – the bridges, and the tunnels, and the viaduct?

Hank Parke: Yeah. Well, the Big Savage Tunnel, that was really an ATA project. The details you can get from either Linda or – I forget what I mentioned...

Eric Lidji: Sandra?

Hank Parke: Sandra.

Eric Lidji: Yeah.

Hank Parke: I’m trying to think how we did the Salisbury Viaduct. Let’s see – and that is 2,400 feet? These things are really foggy. It’s the major- I think it’s probably the longest one on the whole trail. To tell you the truth, I can’t remember how we funded that.

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Eric Lidji: Okay. Let's talk about the – was it Big Savage or Pinkerton that had the bidding?

Hank Parke: That had what?

Eric Lidji: The bidding.

Hank Parke: Oh, the Big Savage. Yeah.

Eric Lidji: So, tell that story.

Hank Parke: Had to think for a while. Yeah, it was George Cook, and myself, and Ed Cook. Ed's one of the Cook brothers that lives in Pittsburgh – George is the dad. We're bidding against Donny Cook, who lives in Colorado. I think he was the mastermind.

Eric Lidji: The idea was that you were going to put the first ride on eBay, right?

Hank Parke: Yeah. Well, we did put the first ride on eBay.

Eric Lidji: And, anybody could bid on it?

Hank Parke: Anybody could bid on it. I don't think most people would have had a clue. Like, "What is this? What are these people talking about?" I had no idea who was bidding against us. I can't remember now, at this point, if we won or lost. But, we found out, maybe before it was really over, who we were bidding against. But, we all rode through together. It was something. You couldn't have put that together again if you would have tried. I still can't figure out- like I said, I think Don was the mastermind, he's into commercial real estate out in Denver – and probably Don and Henry. Crazy stuff.

Eric Lidji: All right. Was there anything else we should talk about?

Hank Parke: Yeah, there was one thing. Early, early, early on – I had a real good relationship with Bob Huffman. He ran Laurel Ridge State Park and Laurel Hill State Park, and I actually leased the cross country ski center out to Laurel Ridge State Park; I

leased the cabins in Kooser State Park as a private concessionaire. They hadn't really done anything like that before. But, through all that, Bob and I developed a really nice relationship. And, one day I was over at the park office, he said, "I need to show you something," because I think I had talked to him about the trail, "Hey, we're working on this idea of connecting Pittsburgh with Cumberland on an old railroad bed." He liked history, there were a lot of old railroads- narrow-gauge railroads that were used for logging, through the state parks. There's a real neat display over at Laurel Hill State Park that shows some of those photos. He said, "I've got a report that a college student did. It was kind of a 'What I did on my summer vacation.'" The guy's name was Joe Koopek. Has Joe's name come up? Okay.

So, Joe wrote this several-page thing and talked about what he saw along the way, and wouldn't it be a great idea if this would connect? That was one of the things that really gave us an initial- I can't really remember how those things- because I don't think- I don't know if we were talking about it or we'd already done that ride, but it all just sort of fell together time-wise. And then, what we did at one point, through Hidden Valley, I knew the mayor of Cumberland, Maryland, George Wyckoff. He had a steel company in Maryland. And, I told him about the whole concept. He said, "Boy, we get a lot of people in town from the C&O Canal. It's a really popular tourist attraction, it's been great for our city."

So, we got Joe Koopek, who had tons of slides. We got everybody who had been to any meeting whatsoever for our trail group, and Wyckoff, the mayor of Cumberland. We had the county commissioners to really talk about this concept and try and solidify it a little bit and see – were there issues that people had out there that we hadn't thought- because sometimes when you get a good idea, you've got the blinders on. And, over a couple years, we did get some feedback like, "Oh, this is going to bring in riff-raff from the city." Like, people like you. Riff-raff from the city.

[Laughter]

But, it's just amazing. People have their own little slice of heaven, and they're not necessarily willing to share that. But, we had some of that, but very little. I think people could really see that this could be something that made sense, but it wasn't something that every community had in the backyard. People had railroads, people had highways. People understand railroads and highways. They don't necessarily understand the rail trail and what, potentially, it could be. And, like I told you, the international stuff – I never dreamt that. Even as pie-in-the-sky as I was, and as positive as I was, I didn't go far enough in my imagining what this could be. It's been pretty incredible.

We were involved with a church group a couple years ago, did some local mission work – people that needed help with their houses and that kind of stuff. And so, a couple of church groups got together in the little town of Scullton, which is sort of near Confluence and Connellsville, over in that direction. And ironically, a group from one of the churches had just come back from doing a trip on the C&O Canal. Either the C&O- yeah, it was the C&O Canal. But, the same sort of enthusiasm that our group had the first time we rode on a piece of the Great Allegheny Passage – they talked about where they stayed, and how they camped, and what they ate, and everything, and how they were planning on going back. And, this was a mixed group...probably the youngest person was 10, maybe 12, and the oldest one was late 70s. The neat thing is, it's not the hotshot Spandex-outfit-type people that ride this trail. Yeah, there are some – not me. I don't look so good in Spandex. It's for moms and pops, and grandmas and grandpas, and grandchildren. And, it's just such a hodgepodge of people. And, because it's a railroad grade, it's not steep. So, you have people of all different abilities. The hotshots go like a bat out of hell and the rest of us just kind of codger along.

Eric Lidji: All right. Well, thank you so much.

Hank Parke: Sure. I probably rambled more than you had planned on.

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Eric Lidji: No, it was exactly the amount I planned on. Let me give you this to sign.

Hank Parke: So, it's like a list of 97 people – this thing that I got?

Eric Lidji: From?

Hank Parke: Day in the history of building the Great Allegheny Passage Project.

Eric Lidji: So, if you want to print, and then sign, fill out that top part.

Hank Parke: Print at the top?

Eric Lidji: Yeah.

[End Audio 2 – 0:33:01.7]

jvh-t/cr-p

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