

Eric Lidji: Today is February 26, 2018. I'm Eric Lidji with Linda Boxx and we are interviewing John Oliver at his office, downtown. One of the first things that we've talked to people about is trying to get a sense of their interest in the outdoors generally because it does seem like a lot of people came to this project with a love of the outdoors. So, I was wondering if you could start by talking just a little bit about, maybe, your childhood in terms of hunting, fishing, being outdoors, biking, any of those sorts of things.

John C. Oliver: Well, I've been an outdoors person as long as I can remember. Both my parents were and- so in all aspects of the outdoors, that's my passion, whether it's hunting, fishing, or camping, or canoeing, or, in the old days, white water rafting. It's what I enjoy most of all in life.

Eric Lidji: Did you enjoy on this side of the state?

John C. Oliver: Yes, I grew up about 15 miles north of here. I went away to school – college – and the service, but other than that, I've been here.

Eric Lidji: So, is that how you ended up at the Conservancy?

John C. Oliver: Yeah. In 1970, I heard about the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, and through some friends, I was able to get a job. There was a new president came on board, Josh Wetzel, who was a good friend of Linda's and mine. Just came on board, he was looking for some help and I happened to be interested and around.

Eric Lidji: What was the state of the Conservancy at that time?

John C. Oliver: Well, it was a highly regarded land and water conservation organization that had created several state parks. It had a great working relationship with the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. But, the founder was getting up in years and they needed new leadership and Josh Wetzel, who was from here, had strong conservation credentials and came aboard and took the reins, and ran with it.

Eric Lidji: Were you guys contemporaries in terms of age?

John C. Oliver: No. Josh was about 15, no, I'd say 18 years older than I was, but he was my mentor. We worked together for 25 years. And, even after I left the Conservancy, we were always close friends – did a lot of backpack, hiking all over the country.

Eric Lidji: And, you guys were like-minded?

John C. Oliver: Very, very much. Very much.

Eric Lidji: Was there a new thought process for conservation at that time? I mean, was it a new generation? You're talking about an older president, leader.

John C. Oliver: No, not really. The common tie to previous leadership and when Josh came aboard was, at that time, land and water conservation was really coming into its own. Richard Nixon was the President of the United States and he was responsible for some of the major environmental laws – we had the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, and a very strong interest in our National parks. And, because of all that, there was just a strong bent, enthusiasm for outdoor recreation and places to go enjoy the outdoors.

Eric Lidji: So, what was the first moment that you remember hearing about anything that his now considered part of the Great Allegheny Passage?

John C. Oliver: Well, I've known about Ohiopyle State Park forever, it seems. And, I've spent a lot of time on the water, and then it was just obvious that there were these parallel tracks used by trains that went up and down the river. And, a couple times I said, "Why do they need tracks on both sides of this river?" but never thought much about it until- in the early '70s we had heard that the Western Maryland company, which was part of the Chessie system was interested in abandoning their right-of-way, and it didn't take a genius to figure out there may be an opportunity to create a wonderful trail for multiple uses.

Eric Lidji: When you say you heard, was it something that was just in the air, or did they actually come here?

John C. Oliver: We had heard about it, and then, actually, someone from Western Maryland contacted us from their Baltimore office and said, “We are planning to abandon our entire right-of-way,” which went into Frostburg, Maryland, I think, at that time, and would we be interested in acquiring it? And, we set the wheels in motion, we did a lot of research on the right-of-way itself. Some of it they owned in fee, some of it was in- they only had the railroad rights to it, which reverted back to the adjacent owners, so we had to start a very complex land ownership research on this. And, from that, we determined that the part that was in Ohiopyle State Park was in fee and that they could, in fact, sell us something of value, and we bought it, and eventually conveyed it to the state.

Eric Lidji: Was it surprising that they came to you?

John C. Oliver: Well, I don’t think it was a surprise. I think they looked at the right-of-way and saw it went through 12 miles, went through Ohiopyle State Park and it was scenic, and so forth, and we were in that business, so to speak. So, I don’t think it wasn’t that much of a surprise.

Eric Lidji: The reason I ask is because one of the themes that keeps popping up when we talk to people is that there’s some altruism and there’s some business decisions that serve the greater good almost incidentally. And, for something like this I’m trying to understand – was there a business case to be made by selling or donating it to you, or was it just a company that was just in the region that saw a chance to be a part of something special?

John C. Oliver: I think it was a combination of both. The attorney for the Western Maryland right-of-way definitely saw something that could be of interest in outdoor recreation. But, at the same time, it was an asset of the railroad, and he wanted to benefit from a sale. So, it was a combination of both.

Linda Boxx: Do you remember his name?

John C. Oliver: I knew it when you and I were sitting...

Linda Boxx: It’ll come to you, then.

- John C. Oliver:** Yeah, it'll come to me.
- Eric Lidji:** This wasn't Bob Hence or Robert Allen?
- John C. Oliver:** It was Robert Allen, that's it. But, Bob Hence was also involved. That's good.
- Eric Lidji:** What was his involvement?
- John C. Oliver:** He was a VP, Senior VP.
- Eric Lidji:** So, these were just people inside who had the same vision and were helping the organization?
- John C. Oliver:** Well, I think they saw, here's an opportunity- the Conservancy – they talked, I'm sure, to other entities, too. I don't know whether fiber optic companies were around or not. Anyway, they contacted us and we indicated an interest and started to work with their real estate folks, and I remember just getting piles and piles of documents. We found an attorney here that worked with the Port Authority of Allegheny County, a right-of-way expert.
- Eric Lidji:** Was that McKenzie?
- John C. Oliver:** Yeah, Bob McKenzie. Very good! I'm very impressed. Bob McKenzie and he poured over all this stuff and said, "Yes, they own this piece. No, they only have a right-of-way, reversionary interests apply," and so he laid it all out for us.
- Eric Lidji:** And, that allowed you to identify that there was a chunk that could be dealt with simply?
- John C. Oliver:** Yeah. Yeah, and then if we got together with adjacent landowners, and they had no problem with it, they'd sign off on the reversionary interest. So, we did that, too.
- Eric Lidji:** Was there ever any thought, at the Conservancy, of taking the whole thing?
- John C. Oliver:** Yeah, that's what we would have liked to have done. But, then we looked into the structure liability, particularly the bridges

and tunnels were just overwhelming. The overpasses – we couldn't accept that degree of liability.

Eric Lidji: Was there a debate in-house about whether to go that route or not?

John C. Oliver: Yeah, we looked at it in every which way because it was intact. The whole right-of-way was there, but we just couldn't justify the expense in assuming the structural liabilities.

Eric Lidji: Was it the expense or the risk?

John C. Oliver: Both. I mean, to get insurance coverage to cover our risk was too expensive.

Eric Lidji: Was it so expensive that it would have been a threat to the viability of the Conservancy?

John C. Oliver: Yes, no question about it. We're talking millions and millions of dollars worth of liability.

Eric Lidji: At the time, did you think that that was the right choice to not take it?

John C. Oliver: Yes. Right. Right. If we would have had a chunk of an overpass fall on a vehicle when we owned it, and they sued us, that would have done us in.

Eric Lidji: Linda, you can correct me if I'm wrong, but my understanding was that them not taking all of it, in some ways, actually helped the trail in the long run because it fostered the rise of these smaller groups. Is that correct?

Linda Boxx: Well, that's just the silver lining. That's what happened and it probably turned out for the best, I would say. Because if it had all been a state park, it would have not been developed the same way. It was developed with a very entrepreneurial spirit the whole way from Cumberland to Pittsburgh. Even Larry Adams' own work- so, I think if it had been acquired and then turned over to the state, it probably wouldn't have been finished right now, and it wouldn't look the way it does.

- John C. Oliver:** Yeah, and the state wouldn't have touched it with a 10-foot pole. We made overtures to the state and they shied away from these from the same liabilities. So, the fact that, when it was broken into pieces, then different groups could assume that liability, and deal with it a lot better, whatever we could.
- Eric Lidji:** So, when I was going through the newspaper records and some of the other records, it looks like there was a fair bit of time between that initial conversation with Chessie and the actual turnover. And, I'm wondering, was that just that right-of-way research during those three years, or was there other issues that were being hammered out?
- John C. Oliver:** It was the right-of-way, and, they weren't going to give it away. They would have given it to us lock, stock, and barrel, but we had to assume all the liabilities. So, we couldn't do that, so there was a question of can we find areas where they own fee simple and they would, essentially, sell to us at a bargain, which they wanted to do and still justify to their stockholders that they sold it for a reasonable cost. So, that was in the mix.
- Linda Boxx:** Do you remember the cost? Ballpark?
- John C. Oliver:** You mean what...?
- Linda Boxx:** What did the Conservancy pay to the Chessie System for the...
- John C. Oliver:** You mean for the cost in Ohioypyle State Park?
- Linda Boxx:** Well, just the- yes, the railroad...
- John C. Oliver:** I don't even remember- was it \$25,000? I don't know. I honestly can't remember.
- Eric Lidji:** I remember \$50,000 from something I read, but...
- John C. Oliver:** It could have been \$50,000.
- Eric Lidji:** And, it seemed like from what I'd read, that, maybe, part of it was \$50,000 and there was a part of it that was donated. Does that sound right?

- John C. Oliver:** It could have been, Eric. I just honestly can't remember. The person who would know this is the person who we haven't interviewed, and that's Tony Suppa, of the land manager, who worked daily on this stuff. And, his recollection is much better than mine.
- Eric Lidji:** What was the difference breakdown in responsibility between you, and Josh, and him on the prospect?
- John C. Oliver:** Well, Josh Wetzel was the president, I was in charge of land acquisition, and Tony Suppa was our in-house real estate broker.
- Eric Lidji:** So, he was more involved in the day-to-day work?
- John C. Oliver:** On the day-to-day. He worked with Bob McKenzie. They'd come in, lay out maps, and just pour over all the stuff.
- Eric Lidji:** One thing we haven't talked about yet is the train rides.
- John C. Oliver:** Right.
- Eric Lidji:** The one in '75 is well-known, but apparently there was one that the Conservancy put together in '73, just for its own board. Do you remember anything about that?
- John C. Oliver:** I only remember one train ride, and that was the big train ride that we went all the way to Frostburg.
- Eric Lidji:** What do you remember about it? What was the point of it?
- John C. Oliver:** Well, it was just to show the board and other interested parties. I know we had Henry and Elsie Hillman – they were on it, and some prominent folks in Pittsburgh. It was to show what the potential of this wonderful rail trail with a less than – was it less than 3% grade?
- Linda Boxx:** Right.
- John C. Oliver:** And, there it is in Western Pennsylvania going into Maryland, and the potential was just very obvious.

Eric Lidji: For people who weren't outdoors people, was there a need to get them out there so that they could visually understand what this ribbon of relatively flat land could be?

John C. Oliver: No. It was there. They could see it. All the railroad history buffs were there all along taking different pictures of the overpasses, and so forth. They all had their cameras. It was the last train ride for the rest of Maryland.

Eric Lidji: Right.

John C. Oliver: Yeah, but I don't remember another one.

Linda Boxx: An earlier one – I don't remember seeing...

Eric Lidji: I'll have to show you what I found about it.

Linda Boxx: Okay.

Eric Lidji: It sounded like before there was any public announcement, the Conservancy wanted to get its board onboard, and so there was- I don't know if it was on that particular line, or what, but it was in 1973. And, I don't know- were you doing any public relations or anything like that during that time? Your stuff was all internal?

John C. Oliver: Yeah. In '73- when did we convey it to...

Linda Boxx: '78.

John C. Oliver: '78, yeah. I don't know. In '73, I don't even know we were working on that.

Eric Lidji: Okay. I'll have to go back and look through.

John C. Oliver: Okay.

Linda Boxx: There was another train ride that I always get mixed up because there was a train ride that took people to Ohiopyle for a Fallingwater event.

John C. Oliver: Fallingwater, that's right, there was a Fallingwater train ride.

Linda Boxx: That was much later.

- John C. Oliver:** Yeah. And, I wasn't even involved in that one. But, they stopped at Fallingwater and then they took- maybe I was involved. And, they took people up. But, that would have been- if it was Fallingwater, then it would have been on the wrong side of the...
- Linda Boxx:** Right. It would have had...
- John C. Oliver:** Yeah. It would have been on the other side.
- Eric Lidji:** When you guys were doing this work on that stretch, was there ever any talk or thought that there was a potential to take this from Pittsburgh all the way to D.C.? Not for you, but just was it something that you...
- John C. Oliver:** Oh, yeah. It was there. All you had to do was look at the mess in the C&O, and yes, it was very obvious the long-term potential existed.
- Eric Lidji:** Did it seem realistic?
- John C. Oliver:** Well, for those of us who always see the potential of this very unique abandonment and its potential use as a trail, yes, it was quite obvious. Now, in trying to work out all the mechanical difficulties and the risks and all, that was the major challenge. But, it was, I think, quite obvious to everyone the potential of going all the way to Washington, D.C. was there right at the onset.
- Eric Lidji:** One of the things that I find remarkable about this project is that if any point along the line it doesn't work, it kind of gets screwed up, and there's really only one chance because you can't have another right-of-way that's flat through this area...
- John C. Oliver:** Right.
- Eric Lidji:** So, as I've been talking to people, I am continually struck by how many things had to go right. And, it seems like that starts, really, at the beginning with what the Conservancy was doing.
- John C. Oliver:** Well, I think that's right. And, fortunately, the staff had the total support of the Board to pursue this thing. So, we could spend resources, which we did. We had to hire Bob McKenzie. He

didn't come for free. And, he had to fit it in with his other work at PAT. But, yeah, the Conservancy, as I'd said, all of us felt, "Here's something really special, and let's go with it as far as we can."

Eric Lidji: Before the abandonment was approved, do you remember any pushback from either Harrisburg or from the ICC about the abandonment?

John C. Oliver: No. At that time- when was that act passed that...?

Linda Boxx: The RRR?

John C. Oliver: Yeah.

Linda Boxx: '75 or so. The Regional Railroad Reorganization, whatever...

John C. Oliver: Right, which allowed for those interested in rail trails to intervene in the ICC during the deliberations to see if there's potential for a trail before the railroad would put it on the block for auction.

Linda Boxx: Okay. I'm sorry. You're talking about the railbanking act?

John C. Oliver: I'm sorry. I'm talking about the railbanking act, right. When did that come in?

Linda Boxx: Well, that was later. I should know these dates, too. But, I think...

John C. Oliver: Was that in the '70s?

Linda Boxx: I think it was 1983. I think it was part of the National Trails Act Amendment of 1983, but...

Eric Lidji: Are you talking about the Rails to Trails Act?

Linda Boxx: Well, yeah, the railbanking act.

Eric Lidji: Was that '81? We'd have to look. But, that would be after...

Linda Boxx: One son was born in '81 and one was in '83, and that's how I remember it. It was one or the other.

[Laughter]

John C. Oliver: All right. Okay, but that's...

Eric Lidji: But, that would be after what you were doing.

John C. Oliver: It was after. But, at that time, there was a sense of the ICC that the trails were starting to enter the picture in their decision-making. And, the Western Maryland executives felt strongly about the potential for this addendum to be used as a multipurpose recreational trail. They saw the potential, and I think they helped convince the ICC to agree to the abandonment.

Linda Boxx: May I comment? So, I downloaded the 1971 testimony by a gentleman named George Leland. Does that name ring a bell?

John C. Oliver: No.

Linda Boxx: But, he was a Western Maryland Vice President or official of some sort, and in his testimony, he indicated that this corridor could be used for recreational trails.

John C. Oliver: Right.

Linda Boxx: And, I never knew, you never know – and I think this is, maybe, your question – did they want to get it into public hands so it wouldn't be turned back into a railroad and compete with their line on the other side of the river? There's always that aspect, too.

John C. Oliver: Right, right.

Linda Boxx: But, certainly, without putting thoughts in their minds, they did use the recreational opportunity as part of their testimony.

Eric Lidji: Another thing I'm sort of wondering is now that the trail is done and we've seen the benefits of it, it's easy to see it a public good, even economically and not just recreationally. But, I'm wondering if, at the time, there were any public figures who looked at the abandonment of a railroad as the loss of industry, the loss of jobs, and a trail as a passive thing that sits there and expressed any hesitancy about...

John C. Oliver: I don't recall any. I don't recall any outside opposition to the trail.

Linda Boxx: There's one philanthropist in town who was not for it because it should stay as a railroad. He's since deceased.

John C. Oliver: Dick Scaife.

Linda Boxx: Mm-hmm.

Eric Lidji: But, he was a big train person, right?

Linda Boxx: Yes, yes.

John C. Oliver: Yes he was. In fact, he went on the last train trip.

Eric Lidji: So, that might have been part of that.

Linda Boxx: Well, he thought railroads should be used for railroads purpose and not for trails.

John C. Oliver: Right. But, I think he came around.

Eric Lidji: He didn't.

John C. Oliver: He didn't? Well, he was still on that ride.

[Chuckle]

Eric Lidji: Is there anything else from the WPC portion of this before we get to the DCNR portion?

Linda Boxx: Well, so the time period, I just want to recap a little bit. So, in 1971, they started abandonment proceedings. By 1975, they'd made contact with conservancies, had lots of dialogue and, as you said, I think that it was their idea to do this train ride, correct?

John C. Oliver: Right. Right.

Linda Boxx: And that was as a public relations event, because if I remember- because I had the list from Cynthia...

John C. Oliver: Okay.

Linda Boxx: ...who was on the train ride, and they really invited the media. They were trying to get the media, as well as the Board, and supporters of the Conservancy to really start promoting this. So, that was '75, and then it was three years until the Conservancy was able to acquire this 16-17 miles that it did in Fayette County.

John C. Oliver: Right.

Linda Boxx: So, I guess from '75 to '78, that was the pouring over the maps and trying to figure out what the deal was going to be done. The other thing is you had talked about John Rex at DCNR...

John C. Oliver: Right

Linda Boxx: ...so it was acquired by the Conservancy in June, and then turned over to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in November-ish of that year.

John C. Oliver: Right, that's right.

Linda Boxx: But, when we were with Brian Hill, you were talking about John Rex, and what a supporter and great colleague he was at DCNR.

John C. Oliver: Yeah, and John Rex should be mentioned. John Rex was a fascinating- he was in charge of land acquisition for the Department of Environmental Resources. And, Maurice K. Goddard was the Secretary, and Rex had worked directly for him. Even though he was down and worked in the Bureau of Forestry offices, his boss was the Secretary. And, Rex was given the orders by Goddard to create a state park system within 25 miles of every resident of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. He got that charge. So, he was in charge of that. We had a wonderful working relationship with John Rex. And, of course, he saw the potential of this and we took the proposal to Secretary Goddard and, of course, he loved it, too, so all systems were go as far as the Department of Environmental Resources.

John Rex was a fascinating guy. He's probably one of the Commonwealth's most experienced and adept fly fisherman. He and there was another guy, I can't remember who's-nationally-known, but lived in Pennsylvania. He, also, worked for me. I had two fly fishers that worked there. So, he loved to come out here and talk about this project while fishing on the Rolling Rocks stream, where we would take him. Just a side note.

[Chuckle]

Eric Lidji: Why did the state need the Conservancy to be a go-between? Why couldn't they deal directly with the railroad?

John C. Oliver: Because the state is the state. Government has all these bureaucratic hurdles. Why didn't they buy all the parks that the Conservancy bought and then convey the cost to the state? Because they have all these- it's bureaucracy and it's very difficult to buy land if you're a public agency. You have to go through all this rigmarole of appraisals and approvals. It's a terrible process. And Goddard, right away, saw the benefit of a private nonprofit land and water conservation organization doing this. And, he did this not only with us, but others throughout the state.

Eric Lidji: Right. So, they still paid what you paid?

John C. Oliver: Yeah, that's right. That was the deal.

Eric Lidji: But, it's just by arranging it this way, it reduces the bureaucratic...?

John C. Oliver: Yeah. Plus, not only did they get it done – the project got done – but it was at a lot less cost compared to what they would have to have paid if they did it.

Eric Lidji: That's interesting. So, did you have any involvement in the trail between the '78 transfer and when you started at DCNR in '95?

John C. Oliver: Yeah, we did. We spent a lot of time. I remember working in the Connellsville area and the Dunbar area. There was

tremendous interest in expanding it. And, I think that's where we concentrated our efforts. I think when we went east, I think Somerset County and Hank Parks sort of took over that effort. We had good folks, but we didn't have any right outside of the boundaries of Ohio going west. And, we spent a lot of time going down, trying to find the routes, and around the water authority, there was sewage authority – I can't remember – in West Connellsville or Dunbar. I can't remember where, but, yeah, we worked on that.

Eric Lidji: Was this is an advisory capacity, or were you acquiring land?

John C. Oliver: We wanted to acquire it. And, I think we did. But, I can't recall, specifically, if we took ownership.

Linda Boxx: There were some issues, I should say, around where they have the water facility...

John C. Oliver: Right, right.

Linda Boxx: ...and the trail jogs a little bit. And, there's an access road toward the water authority to get down in there. So, that might have been a little bit of an anomaly. I don't know if the Conservancy acquired the two bridges, Bow West and Greenwood, in the first round, or whether you stopped there. I know DCNR at Deaton...

John C. Oliver: Right, right.

Linda Boxx: ...had re-decked those bridges as part of the state park work. So, I don't know if you acquired that piece from where the Sheepskin Trail splits off at the west junction.

John C. Oliver: Right. I know. Yeah, right. I remember, we spent a lot of time. I was down there a lot, so was Tony Suppa. Somehow, we got to get him into the mix, here.

Linda Boxx: He said yes, and then he says no.

John C. Oliver: Yeah, he said no. I know. I'll try to talk to him. I don't know why, well, I did know why, but, anyway, he would remember that.

- Eric Lidji:** So, you started at DCNR just a little bit before some of the big infrastructure projects started, if I'm not mistaken?
- Linda Boxx:** He's the reason they started.
- [Chuckle]
- Eric Lidji:** You were?
- John C. Oliver:** She's the reason. Yeah. When I went to DCNR in '95, it was obvious that we had some big-time structural projects to deal with – bridges, tunnels, overpasses, aqueducts, viaducts, whatever. And, that's when Linda and her gang really got into high-gear. And, of course, Governor Tom Ridge immediately saw the benefit and gave me the green light to work with Linda. So, that's when most of the big tough projects got done.
- Eric Lidji:** And, as far as the state's involvement, was it mostly financial, or were there regulatory help that the state provided?
- John C. Oliver:** I think it was primarily financial. Yeah.
- Linda Boxx:** It was. There were a few cases where we had sympathetic people in different departments who could help shortcut some of the processes for us, lead us in the right direction, but, basically, it was the strong financial commitment.
- John C. Oliver:** Yeah, it was a partnership, there's no question about it. And, Linda had allies in the state. She had the chair of the House Transportation Committee, Representative Rick Geist, who was a bicyclist, and, he was for it. I don't remember any hurdles except financial hurdles. Linda wanted all of our money. And, of course, we had to spread some around. But, she wanted as much as she could, and she got it.
- Eric Lidji:** You know, one of the things that's really interesting at this time is that you and Governor Ridge, and Representative Geist, are all outdoorsmen. And, I don't know about you, but the two of them were avid cyclists. It's an amazing coincidence. Do you think that the project would have proceeded had there been couch potatoes in those offices?
- John C. Oliver:** No. I can't imagine it happening today.

Eric Lidji: Because...?

John C. Oliver: Governor Wolf, I don't think he has any interest at all. Now, the Secretary of DCNR was a good friend of Linda's and mine, Cindy Dunn. She is an avid bicyclist and went on the governor's bike ride every fall or a number of falls. Anyway, I don't even know who's head of the House Transportation Committee.

Linda Boxx: Well, I think you're right. I've talked about this many times, of good luck miracles and secret weapons. And, the good luck was if Tom Ridge, as you say, was an avid cyclist. When Governor Rendell followed him, and I was still needing some money, he basically said, "A bike ride, plus bicycling? You've got to be kidding me." He, basically, shut me down immediately. But, we didn't really need big money at that point. We had received the state capital budget funding, that you directed me to go see Rick Geist, and within 15 minutes of being in his office – meeting him for the first time – he had a \$10 million line item and a \$6 million line item within the state capital budget for the trail, which we used for Big Savage Tunnel, and then the mileage outside of Confluence toward Harnedsville.

John C. Oliver: Right.

Linda Boxx: I went to see you and you said, "Go see Rick." I went and met Rick, got the money, and then it was start finding out how to get the money released from the governor's office.

John C. Oliver: The political stars were definitely lined up. There's no question. Rick Geist, he started the Tour de Toona, for example. He's from Altoona. He was an avid bicyclist, and, an outspoken tough individual. So, he just, as Linda said, he got the money in the capital budget. But, it still took- Linda camped out in Harrisburg. There's a lot of competing interest for that for a rather limited amount of money. But, this one had so much appeal to it. I don't remember anybody who couldn't argue against it. The only thing they could say was, "We'd love to have something for our project. Why are you taking it all?"

Why does the capital budget have so much in there for this project?" But, the project sold itself.

Eric Lidji: One of the things that also started to happen right when you took that position was the coalescing of the different groups under the umbrella of the ATA. Did you have any involvement in that?

John C. Oliver: No.

Eric Lidji: Not even...

John C. Oliver: Well, no, I can't- the more local partners that the ATA came up with, the better off they were politically, because what we'd like to do, and DCNR still does, the more local partners you have, the better chances are that you're going to get funded. So, my colleague in DCNR, Larry Williamson – and he saw the benefits of more partners. Plus, Larry was totally onboard with this.

Eric Lidji: But, it was still necessary to have some umbrella group that you could deal with one-on-one?

John C. Oliver: Well, absolutely. But, the more components they had, when they would come to see us, the better off their project was.

Linda Boxx: John, I don't want to put recollections in your mind.

John C. Oliver: Go ahead.

Linda Boxx: But, I can remember being in John's office in Harrisburg, and you telling me, "You've got to come up with a name for this. You can't be talking about the Yough, nor the Allegheny Highlands put together. You can't have this string of names. You have to come up with a name to describe it." Because, at that time, we had this letterhead that just went on for four lines with all these different trail names. So, we knew the organization was called the Allegheny Trail Alliance, but we hadn't named the name, the trail with one single name yet.

John C. Oliver: Right.

Eric Lidji: So, that was the impetus to try and come up with...?

Linda Boxx: Well, I would say, from my perspective, I knew it in my heart, but when I had the secretary of DCNR, basically, demanding that we come up with a name, it gives me something to go back to my trail groups and said like, “John Oliver is definitely supportive, but he’s encouraging us to come up with one name so we can market this trail as one thing and not three or four lines of trail names. You’re a genius.

John C. Oliver: Yes, right.

[Laughter]

Eric Lidji: One of the things that keeps coming up in what we’re talking about today is how understanding the way that things work can allow you to take a good idea and actually make it happen. It seems like that’s something that came up at the Conservancy with understanding that you guys needed to be the middleman, it seems like, understanding how the state is going to relate to these local groups. It just seems like understanding the mechanisms or the way that the system operates is one reason why this happened and didn’t just fall apart, it’s a good idea that could have been.

John C. Oliver: You said it very well. I couldn’t improve on that. No, I think you’re absolutely right. But, all you had to do is take a map of Pennsylvania and draw the line from Pittsburgh all the way to- and say, “Wow, this is something special.” And, we had- Governor Ridge was out there a lot, Larry Williamson. We had the Bureau of Facility Design and Construction – a guy by the name of Gene Comoss and his folks, his engineers, who were very helpful, particularly after they retired and knew how the system worked. So, I mean, there it was. It just needed help. But, everybody was in favor of making it happen, and we all came together just- I don’t know, was it happenstance? It was so obvious, the potential of the Gap.

Linda Boxx: And John, I think you brought PennDOT to the table, too. Fred Mallory was the secretary...

John C. Oliver: Right, right.

Linda Boxx: ...and he became a great supporter. As an example, I think how it was ever negotiated, the DCNR gave PennDOT money, and PennDOT gave DCNR money – swapped money – so that we could use Land Water Conservation Funding which didn't have as many strings. And, the Pine Creek Trail was already using PennDOT Transportation handsome[?] [0:44:49.9] money, so more Transportation handsome[?] money didn't matter, because it was already encumbered by all the bureaucratic strings. But, we did a dollar-for-dollar switch, and used Land and Water Conservation money in Big Savage Tunnel and did not use a dime of PennDOT money in Big Savage Tunnel, or else it would have been twice the cost, and it was already very expensive. But, that was the kind of, as you're saying, an example of how knowing how- two secretaries sitting down and making this deal happen was just one of the many miracles that allowed it to happen.

John C. Oliver: Yeah, but it starts with the top. And, Tom Ridge, and also the head of the Secretary of Community Economic Development, Sam McCullough – he got us together and was obviously- he's felt very strongly about it. And, we had Brad Mallory out to some of our announcements. Linda was great. Every time we announced one additional foot added- we had a big thing about it, and politically it was well-received. People were just- every time they would go to the end and see the potential down the trail, but it was an unimproved trail, they kept pushing, pushing, "Let's get it done." And so, every time we had an opportunity to improve a piece, even if it might not be connected, like at the Meyersdale piece, we had a big event with publicity and all that stuff that goes with it.

Linda Boxx: That was completing 100 continuous miles. That was a big deal.

John C. Oliver: Right.

Linda Boxx: And, I've probably have said this before, but that was August of 2001, and Jack Murphy was there, and you were there.

John C. Oliver: Right.

Linda Boxx: We had a wonderful. It was a beautiful, sunny day. The communities were all- everybody was so happy, and less than two weeks later it was 9/11 and the world changed.

John C. Oliver: Yeah, I forgot about that. That's a very good point. Yeah, that's another thing – we had the U.S. Congressional delegation in favor. And, Jack Murtha who was the senator...

Linda Boxx: Well, Bud Shuster was on our side, as well.

John C. Oliver: Yeah. Although Bud didn't get along well with the governor. Because we had a bike ride up in the northeastern part of the state and we used part of Interstate 79 – we had to shut it down. And, Bud did not like that at all, so he got real mad at Brad Mallory. But, that's another story. They weren't all- but, overall, everybody was in favor of it. Who were the senators then? Santorum?

Linda Boxx: No, I remember going to Senator Casey's office.

John C. Oliver: No, he wasn't- yeah.

Linda Boxx: But, that was later.

John C. Oliver: Yeah, that was later.

Linda Boxx: And, Senator Heinz was already deceased. So, Santorum was later. I'll think of it.

John C. Oliver: I can't remember who it was either.

Linda Boxx: The other thing that John did was once we got the two-line items in the state capital budget and then that capital budget bill was passed, John waggled his finger at me at one of my weekly visits, and he said, "You have to hire a lobbyist. You have to figure out how to get this money released." I didn't know that there was a part two to the state capital budget money. I thought, "Yahoo!"

Eric Lidji: Wait. So, the part one and part two meaning it gets put in the budget, but then that doesn't mean that you're going to get it?

Linda Boxx: Exactly. It's authorized, but it's...

- Eric Lidji:** It hasn't been appropriated.
- John C. Oliver:** Exactly.
- Linda Boxx:** It hasn't been appropriated. Right. So, getting it appropriated, we hired Delta Development, to not do the lobbying for us, but to help us develop a political strategy. So, they were very good at preparing these great packets of information. We spent time in Harrisburg, and time in Washington, D.C., knocking on doors of southwestern Pennsylvania delegation, and so forth, and talking to- going into Murtha's office and Shuster's office. That's what I'm trying to think, who else was there? But, I'll think of- just did the rounds, and dropped off the books, and have your 15 minutes.
- John C. Oliver:** You sure it wasn't Santorum? Because, in my last three or four years, I went to see Santorum a lot on different matters.
- Linda Boxx:** Mm-hmm. This would have been like '98, '99...
- John C. Oliver:** Maybe this is before.
- Linda Boxx:** ...2000, 2001, that era. I'll look it up.
- John C. Oliver:** Okay.
- Eric Lidji:** Was there any particular moment – you've been involved in this project for 45 years – are there any particular moments when you remember the nature of the accomplishment really standing out to you, or when it seemed to coalesce what was being done, as opposed to the day-to-day work?
- John C. Oliver:** No, not really, because, even when I got out and came back here in 2003, Linda was trying to find their way to the U.S. Steel property and Sandcastle, and stuff. And, I'd go visit her and we'd ride, and then we'd come up with the blocks [cell phone ringing] excuse me. Sorry. So, no. Then, I was on Riverlife and Task Force and Linda was on it for a while, and then off. We're still working on the Mon Wharf switchback. That's not completed yet. So, until that gets completed, and is it completed once you get on the Mon Wharf out to the park?
- Linda Boxx:** No, then there's a little connector underneath Fort Pitt Bridge.

- John C. Oliver:** Okay. So, it's still not completely intact, there's always some work to be done.
- Linda Boxx:** But, how did you feel when you biked it the first time end-to-end?
- John C. Oliver:** I loved it. My wife and I biked it. I can't remember how many years ago it was, six or seven years ago. What was really special – it was sort of a rough ride from Georgetown to Cumberland, and then we got on the Gap and it was beautiful. It was smooth, and you could look around. Before, we had to watch you didn't get out of the rut, or either you'd go into the Potomac River or you'd go into the canal. But, after that you could look around and see it, and that was very special. We went through Georgetown into Pittsburgh. So, we went to Cumberland and got on the smooth trail and went up to Mountain very slowly and looked around Big Savage. Linda and I have some wonderful stories about that. What was the name of that engineer?
- Linda Boxx:** Jim Appaly?
- John C. Oliver:** Yeah, Jim and...
- Linda Boxx:** ...and Roddy Rodamill.
- John C. Oliver:** Is Roddy still around?
- Linda Boxx:** Well, he's in eastern PA.
- John C. Oliver:** Okay. We have wonderful stories about that, too. But, it was very satisfying, to say the least.
- Eric Lidji:** As a rider, do you have a part of the trail that was your favorite?
- John C. Oliver:** Well, I still like the section in Ohiopyle, starting in Confluence, going down through the park. That's still, especially, but I love the viaducts. I really like the Salisbury Viaduct. I can't think of other rail trails that have such an extensive and variety of structures – the long tunnels, viaducts, aqueducts – just all these different things, the diversity of structures and the scenery. The Casselman is improving. So, instead of being an

orange river, it's starting to look like a real river. All of that was coming together while we worked on it.

Eric Lidji: Can either of you think of anything else we should talk about?

Linda Boxx: Well, we skipped over it, so the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania acquired the mileage, the abandonment, and then Larry – and it's so sad – there was nothing going on from 1978 to about 1983. And, then the '83, '84, '85, '86, in that period, Larry Adams was stockpiling material and building a couple miles with summer help and then building another couple miles with summer help. And then, finally, in 1986, there was an event – opening the first section of completed trail. We can't find- I don't know if you remember being there.

John C. Oliver: Yeah, I do.

Linda Boxx: We don't have any photographs. Surely, there were newspapers there taking pictures, or individuals, but we haven't found a single picture of that 1986 event.

John C. Oliver: Doesn't Larry- Larry must have it.

Linda Boxx: And, I asked Larry and he said, "Oh, I think somebody borrowed those at some point."

John C. Oliver: Have you talked to the state parks folks?

Linda Boxx: Yes. Yeah, I talked to the Ohio State Park people. They said, "Well, we can't find anything, but Larry might have something." And, I've talked to Larry and he doesn't have anything.

John C. Oliver: It's a wonderful story because we didn't know how to build a trail. And, he tried different things and some of the bicycle tires would sink in. And, they had to figure a way to design it to get the runoff. And, there were some false starts involved, but Larry kept trying stuff and we kept using the engineers to work on it. I can't believe there's nothing, because we would spend a lot of time up there working with him on that. Not necessarily me, but somebody in our office.

Linda Boxx: Yeah, and I'm sure that the Conservancy would have been there at the event.

John C. Oliver: And there's nothing? Cynthia can't find anything?

Linda Boxx: No, and we even went to the archives. The University of Pittsburgh has those great archives center – poured through that and couldn't anything.

John C. Oliver: Hmm. Well...

Linda Boxx: Yeah.

John C. Oliver: But, there was a lot of attention. How do you build a trail that can take bicycle traffic?

Eric Lidji: So, there was no standard at the time?

John C. Oliver: No. No, there wasn't. In fact, I was out on a trail – the Panhandle Trail, which is one of our rail trails around here – Burgettstown, going into West Virginia last fall and riding around it, and all of a sudden my tires just sunk right in. My wife was with me, and you couldn't move. It's like going into a quagmire. You've got to have a very strong base. So, they were still experimenting with it.

Eric Lidji: What did they end up doing? This is rolling down the ballast and putting the...?

[Crosstalk]

Linda Boxx: Well, they took a lot of the ballast off...

John C. Oliver: Right.

Linda Boxx: ...and I think what Larry did- did you interview Larry?

Eric Lidji: Ridenour?

Linda Boxx: No, Larry Adams.

John C. Oliver: Adams.

Eric Lidji: No.

Linda Boxx: Okay. But, I think he gave it to Stewart Township because there was way too much ballast, kept a certain amount of ballast and then put different grades of stone on top of it, and that was his trial and error aspect, I think.

John C. Oliver: Yeah, but up to that point there was no standard on how you construct a bicycle-friendly trail, and, he kept experimenting. That's right, he used the township supervisors, and they'd give him ballast, and they'd come over with their backhoes and try to round it out, and so there was a lot of work in that regard.

Eric Lidji: Did there start to be communication between trails in different parts of the country as people were figuring this stuff out?

John C. Oliver: Well, at that time, the Rails to Trails Conservancy – when did that start up?

Linda Boxx: It started in '86, and that would be the answer. They were very much trying to promote this whole exploding movement of building rail trails, and they did put together different manuals on how to organize an organization to build a rail trail. And, I don't think they ever came up with a technical standard.

John C. Oliver: I don't think so.

Linda Boxx: Because that's one of the things that we tried to work on with Larry Williamson because that was one of my concerns. Why do we have to engineer every little thing all over again? Why can't there just be a pre-set design that everybody signs off on, so every trail group isn't paying an engineer to redesign the trail surface and the drainage. Just have a standard. But, that never got anywhere.

John C. Oliver: No, no.

Linda Boxx: The engineers bought it.

[Chuckle]

John C. Oliver: Is there one now?

Linda Boxx: No, we have our own...

- John C. Oliver:** Does Rails to Trails Conservancy have- if you sent for, could they say, "How do you build a trail?"
- Linda Boxx:** I'm not sure, John, but the Allegheny Trail Lines has a manual.
- John C. Oliver:** Oh, you do have that. Okay, good, good.
- Linda Boxx:** We were trying to take that, sort of codify it to some extent, but we were not successful. And, we were just trying to make it more efficient for everybody.
- John C. Oliver:** Yeah. And, that's what's needed, I think. There are rail trail groups all over, everybody's working on rail trail. But, having said, "This is how you build it. This is what you do. If you have ballast, you get rid of some of it, or you add it, or you crown it, and how do you crown it, and what do you use – a mix of crushed limestone and something else." I can't remember how they finally did it, but it's needed.
- Linda Boxx:** Well, we're very fortunate that we have Loyalhanna Limestone because it makes an outstanding top surface. And, other stone is not composed the same way and it's not going to bind like our limestone does. So, that's another one of our good luck pieces.
- John C. Oliver:** Yeah, and I'm involved in the trail up at Goddard State Park, and it's a macadam trail all around. The problem with it is that if it's not open, then the moss starts growing on the sides and starts coming toward the middle, which makes it extremely slippery. And, people have had accidents – really bad accidents – where they go down, and then they slip, and crash, and really hurt themselves. So, that's a need that's still out there.
- Eric Lidji:** Can you think of anything else, Linda?
- Linda Boxx:** Well, I feel, John, you were so important to this whole process. You were in the right place at the Conservancy early in your career there to be working on this project, and helping it come to fruition at the state park level. And then, when you went to Harrisburg, you had a complete knowledge of this and really helped us so much.

I don't think that has been said enough, what a great counsel and supporter you were to me and our whole group in terms of pushing us forward because I didn't know what the next steps were. But, you understood what the next steps were. You would say, "Go to this door. Go to that door." And, really, I couldn't have been successful if you hadn't been there guiding me, really.

John C. Oliver: Well, it's very nice of you to say that. But, at the same time, it took someone who had a lot of gumption and motivation, passion, and that was Linda. She came to town – we, as government bureaucrats, had to be ready for her answers. She had the political support, she knew her way around the Hill. She had the support of the governor so it's a combination of a lot of these forces which made it happen.

Linda Boxx: It didn't hurt that the chairman of the state Republican party was Christine Toretta...

John C. Oliver: Right.

Linda Boxx: ...and then the vice chairman was Eileen Melvin...

John C. Oliver: Right.

Linda Boxx: ...who was from Somerset County, and who was very interested in making sure that the Big Savage Tunnel was done. And so, every time she and the governor would be traveling, she would be asking him, "How were the releases coming – as I'm raising money for you across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania?" She was really instrumental, Christine and Eileen – both of them.

John C. Oliver: I agree. What's Eileen- do you ever see her?

Linda Boxx: I don't. I know she still works- or things in Somerset...

John C. Oliver: Somerset County, yeah. No, you're absolutely right. Eileen was very helpful and didn't hesitate to call or show up whenever there was an opportunity.

Linda Boxx: Right.

John C. Oliver: So, the stars were aligned. We took advantage of it and ran with it, and the result is a- I keep telling everybody, I've had an opportunity to go all over the world. And, almost every place that has a significant rail trail – certainly in the United States – and there's nothing like the Gap. The Gap, Cumberland to Georgetown. It's in a class all by itself. There's nothing, nothing like it. So, I think everybody that's been involved – and there's been hundreds and hundreds of people have been involved in it – can all be proud of the success that it's created, because it really is world-class.

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

John C. Oliver: Okay.

[end 1:06:35.6]

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