

JOHN OLIVER 07.25.03

- Amber Lilly:** One of the questions that nobody has really been able to answer for me is where did the idea for the bike trail actually come from? Did it come from the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy or did it come from – with the person that heard of the abandonment and thought that that would be a good idea? Or...?
- John Oliver:** It actually emanated from the Conservancy.
- Amber Lilly:** The Conservancy?
- John Oliver:** Yeah. It was just a question of common sense. You looked at abandoning a level of linear strip of land running through Ohiopyle State Park and it didn't take a genius to figure out it could be used as a bicycle-hiking trail.
- Amber Lilly:** But, did the original offer to buy the corridor – did that come from the Conservancy also?
- John Oliver:** Mm-hmm. Yep.
- Amber Lilly:** Now, I know on May 21, 1975, there was the last passenger train went through on that.
- John Oliver:** Right.
- Amber Lilly:** Who were some of the important figures or public people that went on that train ride?
- John Oliver:** Well, the Board of the Directors of the Conservancy, foundation leaders, and supporters...
- Amber Lilly:** Now, was that train ride just to show...?
- John Oliver:** ...as well as Chessie System officials.
- Amber Lilly:** Okay. Now, was that the train ride to get support for the idea – just to show how wonderful the scenery was and everything?
- John Oliver:** Absolutely. And, it certainly achieved its objective.

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Amber Lilly: Yeah, it did. What kind of media coverage was there? Were there radio stations, television stations? I know there were newspapers because I've read the articles. But, was there...?

John Oliver: To be honest with you, I can't remember. Yeah. You'll have to look at the archives at the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy.

Amber Lilly: Now, I'm curious – the transaction was very lengthy and I've gone through the timeline and read some of the letters and things from the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy. But, could you give me an idea of the details and things that went into [inaudible 0:02:37.8] the transaction itself?

John Oliver: Okay. Well, it was a very interesting negotiation and involved some key people. First of all, the general counsel for the Chessie System. And, I can't remember his name. It's in the- his last name was Allen. Also, a supporter at that time – which is of interest now – was John Snow of the Chessie System, who's now Secretary of the Treasury under President Bush. It involved the Conservancy employing an expert on railroad rights-of-way.

Amber Lilly: And, who was that person?

John Oliver: I don't remember.

Amber Lilly: I'll have to look that up, okay.

John Oliver: A person that you should talk to, who is no longer with the Conservancy, is Tony Suppa, S-U-P-P-A.

Amber Lilly: And, he was the- that name sounds...

[Crosstalk]

John Oliver: Director of Land Acquisitions.

Amber Lilly: Okay. All right.

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- John Oliver:** And, he found this person. I think this guy did a lot of rights-of-way in the past for the Port Authority of Pittsburgh.
- Amber Lilly:** Okay.
- John Oliver:** I can see him right now. I can't remember his last- Bob was his first name. Anyway, so that's just a lot of work. We found – much to our delight – that most of the right-of-way was owned by the Chessie System outright.
- Amber Lilly:** Right.
- John Oliver:** And, it was not subject to reversionary interest, which would make it that much harder. Because we had to negotiate with other people.
- Amber Lilly:** When did the negotiations start? Around what year? I know it was in the 70s, but was it the later 70s or...?
- John Oliver:** I can't remember. You'll have to check the archives. I mean, it was long. I'd say it took a good year. I remember we had two meetings. One took place at the Chessie offices in Cleveland and one took place at the Chessie offices in Baltimore.
- Amber Lilly:** And then, after the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy received the land, you turned it over to the Commonwealth, right?
- John Oliver:** Right. Well, we bought the land.
- Amber Lilly:** Right. And then, did they buy it from you for the state? Okay.
- John Oliver:** Mm-hmm. Right.
- Amber Lilly:** I recently spoke to Larry Adams about the Ohio pyle to Confluence. And, he said you were the speaker at the dedication of the trail.
- John Oliver:** Right.

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Amber Lilly: How was that experience – just personal...?

John Oliver: We didn't think, frankly, there was anything out of the ordinary. It was very obvious that the section of the trail that went through Ohio State Park was going to get a lot of attention, a lot of use. Our hope was that someone would have the foresight to look at the whole concept of a trail from Washington, D.C. to Pittsburgh.

Amber Lilly: Right.

John Oliver: And, the Conservancy could not take – the main reason the Conservancy couldn't take on those additional responsibilities was the huge liabilities – bridge crossings and so forth. We were just hoping that we got the section within the confines of Ohio State Park. But, it was just apparent that it had a tremendous opportunity for the use of an expanded trail. So, it was an exciting day that we all realized it's just a start- it's just a beginning.

Amber Lilly: Right. What was the biggest challenge and the biggest reward of this project for you and the Conservancy itself?

John Oliver: Well, the biggest challenge was determining the joint- actually, the title work itself and determining what was for sale. And then, the negotiating challenge was convincing the Chessie System to sell an important asset at what we would consider a very reasonable price. But, they could see other uses – other uses which would probably demand a higher price. So, we had to convince them that this asset had tremendous recreational benefit to it. But, we couldn't pay development prices for it. So, we could pay some cash, but we would need a large portion of it as a gift.

Amber Lilly: Correct. And, they did do that?

John Oliver: Yes, they did. And, much of the credit goes to them and this particular- you should recognize the name of the lawyer – who I don't remember his name. But, it's in the correspondence at

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the Conservancy's archives. But, he was the guy that we regularly – we were in contact with him regularly.

Amber Lilly: Yeah. I remember reading- I remember seeing a name over and over again. And, I just don't remember what his name was right now, yeah. I know who you're talking about. I'll have to look up the name. I guess the biggest reward for the project would be the actual end- when you actually obtained everything and was able to...

John Oliver: Well, remember, we just obtained a section of it within the confines of Ohio State Park. But, we knew the greater long-term benefit was the expansion of the trail east and west. We just took a segment that we could afford in the park. But, we knew, hopefully, someone would be able to take it and expand it east toward Pittsburgh and west toward Cumberland and eventually hooking with the C&O Canal to take it all the way into Washington, D.C.

Amber Lilly: So, the different sections were acquired by different people?

John Oliver: Oh, yeah.

Amber Lilly: That's why there's seven different trail...?

John Oliver: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

Amber Lilly: Okay.

John Oliver: A lot of credit for this goes to Hank Parke from Somerset County. And, I'm sure Linda told you about him. He saw it right away and was able to convince Somerset County to pursue this in Connellsville area. Every project of this magnitude takes people living in the community where they're located to see this...

Amber Lilly: Right.

John Oliver: ...see the future of this right-of-way. So, if, when you do this, you recognize the leaders – there was a guy in Connellsville –

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I can't think of his name. Hank was in Somerset. And, there were just...

Amber Lilly: If you don't have the support from the community, it's not going to happen.

John Oliver: It's not going to happen.

Amber Lilly: Yeah.

John Oliver: Because I've dealt in right-of-ways of linear parts and rights-of-way and bicycle trail in other parts of the state where they didn't have local support. And, it's been very, very difficult.

Amber Lilly: Yeah. And, Mr. Adams was telling me about how the outfitters for the whitewater rafting and things in Ohiopyle didn't want it because they thought it would take away from their process for the whitewater rafting and things. So, that's why they started in Confluence and worked their way back to Ohiopyle.

John Oliver: Right.

Amber Lilly: I thought that was interesting, because...

John Oliver: Well, that was initially. And then, they got their own take-out, and then they got into the bicycle business. And so, it's evolved.

Amber Lilly: They now see, I'm sure, because it was a better...

John Oliver: Oh, yeah.

Amber Lilly: ...that it was a good thing that this came through. But, I was just surprised to hear that they didn't do that to begin with.

John Oliver: Well, this was – in terms of recreation trails – this was a fairly new concept. The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, national organization, was founded about that time.

Amber Lilly: Really?

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John Oliver: Yeah. So, it was just a fairly new idea.

Amber Lilly: It certainly spread.

[Chuckle]

John Oliver: Oh, yeah.

Amber Lilly: I took a trip up there last weekend – my first trip on the trail.

John Oliver: Oh, yeah.

Amber Lilly: From Ohiopyle to Confluence and back. And, it was beautiful. It's amazing. I got some amazing pictures. Because I'm sort of a photographer. I love to take nature pictures and things like that.

John Oliver: Mm-hmm.

Amber Lilly: I took black and white pictures and color pictures both. And, I can't wait to develop them – or get them developed. But, I think the best thing about the trail – in my opinion – is the fact that it's not – like, you can see the nature around you happening. We ran into a bear and...

John Oliver: You saw a bear?

Amber Lilly: Yeah.

[Chuckle]

John Oliver: No kidding.

Amber Lilly: It wasn't a fully-grown bear, thank goodness. But, it wasn't a cub either. It was sort of in the middle.

John Oliver: Mm-hmm.

Amber Lilly: But, where else are you going to see on a trail...

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- John Oliver:** Right. No, that's great.
- Amber Lilly:** ...you see bears. And, we saw a few deer in the summer. It was breathtaking.
- John Oliver:** It is. It is. There's nothing like it. And, I have said many times that once this trail opens up all the way, it will be the most unique and impressive rail-trail in the world.
- Amber Lilly:** Yes, it will be.
- John Oliver:** There's nothing like it.
- Amber Lilly:** It'll go from the Pittsburgh – well, the airport – to Washington, right? Eventually.
- John Oliver:** Well, eventually. But, it'll go from Pittsburgh to Washington, yeah. It'll be world-class – it will be the tunnels, the viaducts.
- Amber Lilly:** Right. I saw the Big Savage Tunnel being constructed [inaudible 0:15:27.1]. And, it's just an awe-inspiring thing. I was just standing there with Mr. Adams. I couldn't say anything because it's so large. And then, he told me how they took the water that was in the tunnel and rerouted it and all of that.
- John Oliver:** Well, it's big – it's a big project.
- Amber Lilly:** Yeah. He said it should be done in September. [inaudible 0:15:55.2] were saying around September. I don't have any more questions right now. Through my research – if I run into more things – could I contact you again?
- John Oliver:** Oh, absolutely.
- Amber Lilly:** And again, I apologize, it seems late.
- John Oliver:** No. I don't care. I don't care.

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Amber Lilly: But, I felt so horrible when I was driving around. Oh, crap, I can't find it.

John Oliver: Well, Pittsburgh is a tough place to find.

Amber Lilly: It really is. Especially when you don't drive in town from Pittsburgh very often.

John Oliver: Oh, no. It's...

Amber Lilly: The furthest I've gone is the Mellon Arena or PNC Park.

John Oliver: Yeah.

Amber Lilly: Seeing downtown is very interesting. I can't wait to see how I'm going to get out.

[Chuckle]

John Oliver: Well, the thing to do is just head out east. All the major drags go over to the Parkway East. Now, there's certain ways you get on it. But, you'll see. Go just Parkway East to Monroeville.

Amber Lilly: Follow the signs?

John Oliver: Well, unless you want to get on Route 50.

Amber Lilly: No, I'm going to go...

John Oliver: Oh, you're going to Latrobe? Okay.

Amber Lilly: Yeah. I'm going Parkway and then...

John Oliver: All right. Okay. But, make sure that you check- I mean, if it wasn't for the Chessie System supporting this, we wouldn't be here today.

Amber Lilly: Right.

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John Oliver: I mean, it was a great partnership between a very influential railroad system and [inaudible 0:17:33.0]. And, there's one guy that – and Allen was his last name – who really stuck with us and was able to convince the executives at the Chessie System that this was a good deal. And, one of them was John Snow.

Amber Lilly: Okay. I'll have to- great. Well, I'm not going to take up any more of your time.

John Oliver: Well, that's okay.

[end 0:18:02.8]

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