



William “Bill” Micks

Life Along the Rappahannock: An Oral History Project

This interview was funded in part by a grant from The Virginia Heritage Fund of the Community Foundation of the Rappahannock River Region, and with the support of the University of Mary Washington and other community partners.

Interview conducted by
Nancy Milroy
Oct.17, 2016

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Since 2016, Friends of the Rappahannock has been interviewing individuals with unique knowledge related to significant events affecting the Rappahannock River watershed, and the communities that inhabit it. This project's goal is to collect and preserve significant and endangered oral histories of people living along the Rappahannock River, from the Blue Ridge Mountains to the Chesapeake Bay. These audio-visual documentaries will be available for generations to come.

Oral history refers both to a method of collecting information through recorded interviews of informed narrators with singular perspectives on significant historical events, and to the product of that process. Recordings are transcribed, and reviewed by the narrator, to provide researchers with primary source material. These accounts reflect the narrator's experiences, perspectives, and historical understandings rather than a definitive account of history.

Friends of the Rappahannock is a non-profit, grassroots conservation organization based in Fredericksburg, Virginia. It works to educate everyone about the river and to advocate for actions and policies that will protect and restore the Rappahannock River. This project is a collaborative effort with the University of Mary Washington Department of History and American Studies.

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Please cite this oral history as follows, contingent on any guidelines specific to a discipline or publisher:

William Micks, "Life Along the Rappahannock: An Oral History Project," interviewed by Nancy Milroy, Oct. 17, 2016, at Friends of the Rappahannock office in Fredericksburg, Va. Friends of the Rappahannock and the University of Mary Washington. Digital transcript and recording at <https://www.riverfriends.org/oralhistory/>, physical transcripts at the Historic Fredericksburg Foundation Inc., Central Rappahannock Regional Library Virginiana Room, Fredericksburg Area Museum, and the University of Mary Washington Special Collections and University Archives.

Friend of the Rappahannock requests that researchers submit a bibliographic citation of any published work in which "Life Along the Rappahannock" interviews are used, and, if publishing in a digital medium, include a link back to the project's homepage.



William “Bill” Micks

Bill Micks has promoted river safety and conservation along the Rappahannock River for more than five decades. Inspired by his Boy Scout experiences, in the early 1970s Bill began teaching canoeing classes in the Fredericksburg area through the American Red Cross. His outfitting businesses helped establish the recreational paddling scene on the Rappahannock, and today Bill is co-owner of the Virginia Outdoor Center. On the conservation front, Bill and his wife, Denise, helped found Friends of the Rappahannock in 1985. Bill was an important voice in the effort that led to the removal of the Embrey Dam in 2004, and assisted with the establishment of the City of Fredericksburg Watershed Management Property in 2006. He continues to be a conservation leader throughout the Rappahannock watershed.

00:00:34

Milroy:

It is October 17, 2016. I'm in Fredericksburg, Virginia at the Friends of the Rappahannock building and we are doing an oral history interview with William Micks about the history of the Rappahannock River. My name is Nancy Milroy. I'm going to begin by asking you about your earliest experiences on the Rappahannock River.

00:00:54

Micks:

Okay. I was in the Boy Scouts and, at the age of about 12, we had an adult leader that taught for the American Red Cross but he was also one of our Scout leaders, and his responsibility was to teach the kids in the Boy Scout troop how to canoe. So, he put a canoe paddle in my hand, probably at about 12 or 13, I got my canoeing merit badge on Dickey Payne's pond out in Spotsylvania County, locally. And then we did, this particular Boy Scout troop, instead of hiking a lot, they did a lot of canoeing. So, George Brumble, Dr. Brumble, had acquired canoes for our Boy Scout troop, and my first paddling experience, other than on a pond, was on the Rappahannock River at a very early age. And I guess for the next five to six years, through my Scouting experience, that's where all my experiences were; my first day trips, my first overnight trips. I think the thing that really got me hooked on this river was this particular adult leader, Dr. Brumble. When I got out of high school and went to college, he never forgot the kids that he taught. He always invited them to come back for another trip on the Rappahannock. Sometimes he would take us to the Shenandoah, sometimes he would take us to the James, different rivers in the state. And when I got out of school, I just felt it was important for me to somehow continue doing what he used to do, and that's how I got started.

00:02:44

Milroy:

Where were you born?

00:02:46

Micks:

I was born right here, in the Fredericksburg area.

00:02:52

Milroy:

So, you mentioned some experiences from your childhood that influenced your interest in the Rappahannock River. [00:03:00] Did they also influence your interest in the natural environment?

00:03:04

Micks:

Well, I think in a Scouting program there are lots of merit badges and your experience on a river, or for other Scouts, maybe hiking or doing different things. The seeds were planted a long time ago for me. I fell in love with this river, as I just mentioned, at a very early age, and I knew right out of college that I wanted to spend the rest of my life sharing it with other people.

00:03:39

Milroy:

How might the Rappahannock River have looked differently in your childhood than it does now?

00:03:45

Micks:

The exciting part of all of this is that it doesn't look very different. It's one of the few things I think, in the Fredericksburg area, that has never changed. In fact, I think it's better. In my early days, what I remember in Scouting, there were places, there were farms along the river that farmed right up to the edge of the river. There were farming practices back then that people didn't realize that were harmful. I lost my train of thought there, sorry.

00:04:22

Milroy:

We were talking about how the Rappahannock River might have or might not have looked differently than it does now.

00:04:28

Micks:

Okay. So, for me, the river has not changed very much in my entire life living in the Fredericksburg area. In fact, I think you see it's even gotten better. And that's due to the environmental group, the Friends of the Rappahannock, and the magic they work with the community upstream and downstream.

00:04:47

Milroy:

Can you describe the Friends of the Rappahannock a little bit more?

00:04:50

Micks:

Wow. That'd take a long time. But, the short version is, I think back in the, it's been 30 or 40 years ago. There was a group of locals, all of them were paddlers, who would organize and do a yearly clean up on the Rappahannock. And the Free Lance-Star, our local newspaper, was gracious. They would always advertise that people were meeting down near the Rt. 1 bridge, at the fall line, and would get organized and we would spend the day cleaning up the river. Finally, the Free Lance Star said, "You guys are doing this every year, you need to come up with a name." So, it was just a mutual agreement that these are all friends of the river, friends of the Rappahannock, and that's where the name started. [Chris Derekson], who was an environmental lawyer on the City Council during that period of time, was a participant to help with cleanups. He felt [00:06:00] that it was important for this group of volunteers to become organized, and he helped do the legal side of it, for them to become a true non-profit. That sort of was the birth of this organization. Just a group of local paddlers who wanted to make a difference to help clean up the river. There were people in the community that wanted to make it official, so to speak, so, that's how it got started.

00:06:25

Milroy:
Were you one of these individuals?

00:06:27

Micks:
I was proud to be one of the individuals, yes.

00:06:32

Milroy:
What decade was this?

00:06:34

Micks:
Oh my gosh, it was in the 70's. The clean ups, we were doing cleanups in the early 70's. In the 60's our Scout troop was doing clean ups on the Rappahannock. But in the 70's I had gotten out of college and had come back and had started, along with teaching, a little canoe business on the side. So we were doing clean ups in the 70's, and in the 80's it became official. I think FOR was born, I lose track after a while, maybe the mid-80's? You know, somewhere in there.

00:07:09

Milroy:
Earlier you had mentioned farming practices that were detrimental to the Rappahannock River. Can you describe those?

00:07:16

Micks:
I think, you know gosh, there have been farms spread out all up and down this river, on all rivers always. I think not realizing the impacts that cattle have, or the impact of trying to create a field all the way over to the bank and disturbing the actual corridor, the tree line itself. I don't think anyone realized that those were harmful and had negative effects for any and all streams or rivers. That's one of the biggest changes that I've seen, especially with the environmental group, the Friends, is they have spread the word. Almost everybody from top to bottom on this river now realizes the importance of a green 100 foot buffer or 200 foot buffer and how important that is for the water quality. I think things have really taken a step in a good direction.

00:08:17

Milroy:
When you were initially doing clean ups with your Scout troop in the 60's what kind of things were you looking for?

00:08:24

Micks:
We would put in, our adult leadership, we would put in at places like Ely's Ford or Kelly's Ford. The adult leadership had connections with private landowners, so the trips were usually short 6 mile trips, 5-6 mile trips. The city of Fredericksburg or our Scout troop would provide trash

bags, and almost always most of the litter, all-most of the trash was the first 2 miles below a bridge. I think traditionally people would, they'd pull up on a bridge and toss their trash out or tires over the edge. [00:09:00] That's where you would find most of the litter, but I'd say 80% of this river was litter free. I would say that this river has been pretty much, compared to other rivers in the state, litter free most of its life. There are not very many access points, which is good, in some respects, especially when it comes to that if you can't get your car close it's hard to throw stuff out. I think it's traditionally been a really clean river most of its life.

00:09:38

Milroy:

Do you believe that the river's identity as a clean river was incentivized as a community effort to keep it in that state?

00:09:55

Micks:

Yes, I agree with you 100%. I think that everybody who cared and fell in love with this river realized how precious this river was, and how clean it was. You get hooked you know, you want to make sure that that doesn't change and you want to help on a yearly basis to help keep it clean and do the right thing. You want to make other people aware of how special this resource is, in many ways. Not only for our drinking water but for our recreation and for the history and how it played a role in the settlement of the Fredericksburg area. It's really cool.

00:10:36

Milroy:

So as a young adult in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the beginning of the modern environmental movement, what were some of the events that you remember that had an effect on the national discourse?

00:10:50

Micks:

International discourse?

00:10:54

Milroy:

On the national discussion towards the environment and the efforts to create a movement.

00:11:00

Micks:

Back then there was a lot of talk you probably will eventually do a little bit of research for part of this presentation, or this information that you are gathering will talk about the Salem Church Dam. That was a really hot issue and that was funded, it was going to happen but there were a lot of people, this is a group of people that I would say were on the front end of the environmental group, the Friends of the Rappahannock, people that were born and raised, lived here, had property on the river, they did not want not see this river dammed. The Salem Church Dam was going to back water up 20-30 miles. So that was the initial first hot issue that I can remember, especially in the late 50s and 60s, that this community kind of gathered around each other and

gathered around the support of this river to protect it. [00:12:00] They felt that a dam on this river was not necessary. Therefore, I think part of that is, a lot of these people became part of the Friends of the Rappahannock and a lot of these people had a lot to do with supporting both dam removals that took place not that long ago.

00:12:25

Milroy:

So in the 1960s and 70s and even the mid-80s when Friends of the Rappahannock was started; did you notice a change in the sentiment from the community towards the Embrey Dam?

00:12:37

Micks:

Once the environmental group, the Friends of the Rappahannock, got its feet on the ground, it took a year or two. And they started their outreach programs, especially to schools and youth groups and to kids. That's where I really noticed the community, Stafford county, Spotsylvania county, Fredericksburg county, all the local schools that were touched by this environmental group. That's when I really began to notice an awareness that you could run into anybody, everybody, you talked to parents, you talked to other paddlers, you talked to politicians. Everybody knew who the environmental group was, and knew what their purpose was and how important they were as a non-profit, and how they touched this community. I think that's one of the reasons this river has remained, and is, and will continue to be the cleanest and probably one of the most protected rivers in the state of Virginia.

00:13:32

Milroy:

So earlier you had mentioned your work, leading canoe trips out and as an educator in the region. Can you describe any type of, well, your best experiences as an educator in the area?

00:13:50

Micks:

In 1972 I got my first teaching job, I taught in Stafford, my wife taught in Spotsylvania. It's also the same year I bought 3 canoes from an outfitter up in northern Virginia, 3 aluminum canoes. My goal then was to teach for the American Red Cross, offer classes, which I did. Then starting realizing that there were people in the community that would want to rent the canoe and have a recreational experience similar to the ones that I had had in the Scouting program. So we bought canoes and we were in our backyard from the 70s til the mid 80s, and then in the mid 80s we made a commitment here on this piece of property to build and relocate. My greatest satisfaction, I think one of my, gosh there are a bunch. Being able to offer and teach classes for the American Red Cross, back then, connecting people to the river and how to use it safely and wisely. [00:15:00] Then being and staying connected with the Scout troops in the area, providing an opportunity for these other troops, who didn't have a lot of canoes, but having an opportunity for these kids to experience this river. Those two areas are probably the most special for me. Alright, got to add one more of course. When the environmental group was formed and people kind of all came on board and it started to grow and it became official; being able to provide support for them, kind of quietly behind the scenes in a way, has probably been number ten on my list.

00:15:45

Milroy:

So I'm here with you today to learn more about your role with Friends of the Rappahannock, and the removal of the Embrey Dam. Can you describe Friends of the Rappahannock's origins? I know we talked about it was a group of paddlers who came together and wanted to focus on conservation and recreation. I guess we will get at the who, what, where, when and why. In particular I'm interested in how Friends of the Rappahannock attained the property that it is on, especially the, who-where did the property come from? Who paid for it? How is it protected?

00:16:20

Micks: That is a great question. When I was teaching American Red Cross classes I had a young lady, her name was [Bess Sterk] , and her mother was Mrs. Butler-Franklin of Fall Hill. And that family owned the entire south side of the Rappahannock River, all the way up the hill to where Fall Hill is located, all of this property and in present day owned the property now called Old Mill Park. They owned a huge amount of property back then. Their family had always been supportive of protecting the river and its corridor and Old Mill Park is a good example of that. That property became, and belonged, now belongs to the city of Fredericksburg and is a well used park. Bess I had in a class, her husband Fred, we were having lunch in the middle of the river and I said Bess I've been in my backyard, I opened a little business, I would love to find a place on the Rappahannock River where I could move, find some land and build and continue doing what I'm doing-offering recreational experiences on the Rappahannock. She said go talk to my mom, which I did, Mrs. Franklin, and my wife and I signed a 30 year lease on the property. We borrowed money against our house to build the building and [00:18:00] magically later, Uh-oh, you can cut and paste right? Can I get it back? And magically later, the young lady- hold on let me start over. So we had a 30 year lease on the property and we mortgaged our home to borrow money to build this building and that was in the mid 80s. Mrs. Franklin passed away, who owned all this property, who I had the lease with, and this particular piece went to her granddaughter. So we continued the lease with Petra who lives in Seattle, Washington, and she decided that she wanted to sell the property. I don't want to be too complicated, but she decided that she wanted to sell the property, but having a right of first refusal and having a lease, that complicated the sale. So the community got together, came up with the money, not just me, it was a lot of money. This wouldn't have happened without the financial support of this entire community. Came up with the money to purchase the land from the Franklin family and conservation easements were put on the property and everything was at that time gifted to the Friends of the Rappahannock. So that's how the Friends of the Rappahannock got the property and got the building. That's the short version. I know Woodie's over there and I know you can cut and paste so Woodie if I say something you can, alright.

00:19:56

Milroy:

So the building that you're talking about, the one that we're in now, it's a beautiful building, how long did it take you to build?

00:20:04

Micks: A year and a half.

00:20:05

Milroy: Really?

00:20:06

Micks: It took, my wife worked her magic and penciled out on a piece of paper, she did the drawings for it, how we wanted the building to look and to function. We're on a flood plain so we had to get special use permits, the city of Fredericksburg at the time was under a sore moratorium, so there are a lot of things going on especially if you wanted to build a new building. The, I guess in 84, late 84-85, we started the process and in 86 I think we got our occupancy permit, so it took about 2 years to get it all done. Friends of the Rappahannock moved in. They started in a little office downtown on Wolfe Street. [00:21:00] I was involved in many different ways with the environmental group at that time, and I offered them, would they like to move from their office downtown, and move into the upper level of this building and have a new home, and they said yes. So Friends of the Rappahannock relocated here and they have not stopped growing since. They've just really done wonderfully. Having the property and having the space and having the facility and having the building and everything that went with it was the perfect match for them to expand all their educational programs and work the magic that they work for this river. That might be number four on my list of special things.

00:21:48

Milroy:

So your involvement with Friends of the Rappahannock has been around 30 years?

00:21:56

Micks:

At least, you lose track after a while. Whenever FOR was formed, I guess mid-80s. So that would be what, close to 40 now? 95, 2005, 2015, 30 plus, 30 plus.

00:22:11

Milroy:

And the [Embrey Dam] was removed in 2004, and were talking about there was community involvement and support for this project. Could you tell me a little bit more about the beginnings of that discussion to remove the dam?

00:22:25

Micks:

I think the removal of the- there were 2 dams, the concrete [Embry Dam] and then the wooden [inaudible] dam, they were really close to each other. The removal of both those dams had been talked about for a long time. There was a gentleman who served the Friends of the Rappahannock, he was on the board, named [Tom Vanarsdale] and you're probably going to do an interview with Tom eventually. My version which, he is very modest so he probably won't tell exactly the same version. Tom was a lobbyist in Washington, D. C. for the [B people], wonderful person, but a hard and heavy strong advocate for this river, but he rubbed elbows with Senator Warner on a pretty regular basis. He knew that Senator Warner liked to fish so he invited the Senator to come down. I can remember the first time they pulled in, there were black cars, you know you have a U.S. senator you've got all the escorts that go with it. The first time he

actually had security people with him on the river for his first float trip, it was pretty cool. The newspaper caught wind of it and so on. So I really think at that time he fell in love with this river. If you can imagine being in your office in Washington and within less than an hour you can be sitting in a canoe, on a river, fishing. You could almost do it in an afternoon. [00:24:00] So this became fairly regular and over a period of time he was comfortable enough that he would simply make the phone call to the Friends of the Rappahannock and say "I'm on my way". He would not show up with an entourage of security people and the rule was the Free Lance Star wouldn't know about it, it was no PR related and he could actually get out of town and spend a little time on this river, quietly, and peacefully, and reenergizing and all the things that our U.S. senators have to do with stressful jobs. He realized that there were only 2 dams on the river, and they were the only 2 blockages, and being a fisherperson he realized how special and how important it would be to restore this river. Especially for the many different species of migratory fish, and he started to, you know that button was pushed, and he started that ball rolling and it started with [Tom Vanarsdale] and with the senator and then with the local support of everybody else getting involved. That's my version of how that happened, I'm sure Tom will give you a different version and it might be a bit more modest version but Tom was instrumental in connecting Senator Warner, who came up with the money to make it happen.

00:25:29

Milroy:

So while we're talking about state level support for the removal of these dams, you were the one leading these trips with Senator Warner on the river?

00:25:42

Micks:

I provided support for all, back when things like this really started to, keep in mind Senator Warner was a United States senator, he wasn't a state senator. When the environmental group, when the Friends of the Rappahannock started reaching out to different groups, trying to get them connected and supportive of this river, my goal has always been and will always be providing support to make that happen. I have always relied on smarter people than myself to talk about the history and the importance of it as a resource from a scientific viewpoint. I've always enjoyed that we've got the canoes, we've got the trailer, we can find some help, we can put you on, we'll get you off.

00:26:41

Milroy:

So with creating state level support, did you use migratory fish as a framework for receiving the alliances you needed or what was the incentive for protecting the Rappahannock through the removal of the [Embrey Dam]?

00:26:58

Micks:

Well I think [00:27:00] in Senator Warner's case it was absolutely about the removal, there were only 2 blockages and it would restore this river from top to bottom, a hundred and eighty some miles, from the mountains to the bay it would restore it back to it's original state and would allow all the migratory fish to, the river would become healthier because of the removal. The

local involvement, the local support at a government level, local, federal government, city council, and at a state level, by then everybody realized that if you can take a dam out, if it no longer serves a purpose, then it's a good thing to do. People really started jumping on the bandwagon and supporting it.

00:27:49

Milroy:

And when you people were jumping on the bandwagon do you mean both the community and the state wanted a holistically healthier river?

00:28:00

Micks:

At a local level, absolutely. At regional level, absolutely. And at state level, everybody was, the project was simple in that out of 180 miles you have 2 blockages that are really close to each other and it could be done. As we know there are a lot of other river in the state that have multiple dams over the course of all their many miles before they hit the bay. So it was a project that people realized right up front that if there was going to be funding, this could really happen. So at all levels everybody was very supportive. I'm not sure if I'm answering your question but we're getting there.

00:28:49

Milroy:

Can you talk more about the grassroots involvement of the dam removal? So, you have Friends of the Rappahannock working towards that, you have Senator Warner enjoying his leisure time on the river. What other factors played into the community consciousness?

00:29:07

Micks:

The Friends of the Rappahannock had, in its beginning, the [Marsha Keinas] of the world, the [Chris Derricksons] of the world, these are people in this community who are really actually very connected, not only at a local level, but at a state and federal level. And they provided all their, I mean these were people who were in their 50s and 60s and have established careers, they provided their support to bring the support at all levels, local, state and federal to make this happen. I can't, I just can't remember any negative feedback, other than a few people were a little bit worried that, "gosh what would the river look like with the dam gone". [30:00:00] I think they all have been pleasantly surprised how the removal of the dam has created almost a mile and a half of river that no one has ever seen since the mid 1800s, so it's pretty special out there.

00:30:17

Milroy:

Do you remember any concerns from property owners on the Rappahannock river?

00:30:23

Micks: Property concerns of people that lived on the river. Upstream, no. Downstream, maybe in the immediate Fredericksburg area there might have been a few that were concerned about,

“wow you know, the dams gone, what does that mean, what happens if we have a flood event? You know, will that increase flooding in the tidal section?” The core of engineers, and probably [Mr. Wiggins] who you’ve I think interviewed, put all of those concerns to rest, that this was a good thing and a win-win for everybody.

00:31:00

Milroy:

What were potential complications and considerations that you or Friends of the Rappahannock faced in getting the support you needed to remove the dam?

00:31:07

Micks:

I don’t remember any. I really don’t remember. There were massive logistic concerns, you know, there are gonna be the core of engineers is gonna be, I think the project took about, [Howard] probably explained it better than that, but I think the project overall, physical project, was about a year long. That included, getting set up, that included all the surveying that was needed, that included the removal and that included, once the breach was out of the river, cleaning up the river afterwards. Which I think took about a year, a year and a half total.

00:31:56

Milroy:

What were some of the complex issues that we haven’t talked about, getting to the point where the dam is going to be breached and the dynamite is going to breach it?

00:32:04

Micks:

There were a lot of concerns up front, I think, about you know, once the dam is removed, both dams removed. Where the concrete and where the steel and where the rebar and where all the iron that was used to secure this dam in and on the Rappahannock, would the river be good and clean and safe afterwards? That was a concern of course, every, there were 50 to 100 people, after the removal, these were local citizens, anywhere from 50 to 100 different people all over the years following the removal of the dam. Especially during periods of low flow, like in August and September. They would go out and they would be looking for rebar and pieces of wood. [00:33:00] There was continuous local support of making sure that the river was clean and safe once the dams were breached and most of the debris was taken out. Pretty phenomenal.

00:33:18

Milroy:

So does Friends of the Rappahannock, do their clean up initiatives, I think it’s maybe bi-annually that they go out and do river clean ups. Were these inspired by the [Embrey] dam removal or increased in production?

00:33:37

Micks:

The environmental, the Friends of the Rappahannock were doing cleanups way before dam removal. A local newspaper would put out the word, and then people would show up, and then everybody would be divided into teams. There would be a team that would cover a six mile segment of this river, including the [rapidan], from about 30 miles upstream, down through below Fredericksburg. It was pretty thorough, and the city of Fredericksburg provided trash trucks and a tremendous amount of local, everybody that was a canoeist or a kayaker, almost all, and there are a lot them in this area. All the paddlers, all the fisher people, all the people that love this river, from birders, to hikers, to fishermen, to boaters, helped with those clean ups.

00:34:36

Milroy:

Do you believe that after the removal of the dam, the Rappahannock river's identity as a recreational river increased or was in a new light?

00:34:36

Micks:

It exploded. People that, it became a destination, if you wanted to talk about the importance, one of the most important benefits that the recreational community received from the removal, I'm not talking about fish, the fish are happy too but, it became a destination. People in Washington, within an hour, would now come to Fredericksburg, they would put in at Mott's Landing upstream, and they knew that they could paddle downstream and through the fall line section, which is really exciting, it's got some class 2, 3 rapids on it, down to Old Mill Park area for the take out and not have to carry or portage around a dam. It is without question from a recreational sense, it created, it became a destination for so many people from across the state for paddling. Carrying around that dam was not a lot of fun. The Boy Scouts had built, the Boy Scouts had completed an Eagle project out there, and created a nice portage around the Stafford side, and it could be easily done. [00:36:00] But people who were camping and had lots of gear, they just didn't like that section of the river because of the portage.

00:36:12

Milroy:

So we talked about the river's usage changing since the removal of the [Embrey] dam but how else has the river changed since its removal in 2004?

00:36:25

Micks:

Well the, alright so your question is, how has the river changed since the removal of the dam? If you can imagine a 22 foot wall that's been taken out, and over a period of 100 plus years when the river gets high and muddy and you have sediment loading in the river itself, when it got downstream, the wall slowed down, slowed down, stopped and sediment dropped out. There was many many feet of sediment that was removed by the corps of engineers, thankfully, before the dam was taken out, and after the dam was taken out. But now, which is normal, this would happen on any river when you have heavy rain events in a watershed, the river gets muddy, but really the first place the river's gonna slow down is in the tidal section. It's where that fast moving water hits that slow moving part of the river which is truly the fall line. So you have sediment loading taking place in the Fredericksburg, from the Route 1 downstream, which would

have happened and has happened forever, but is more noticeable now I think for people. And some people think that's a concern. On a personal level, I think the sediment loading that has taken place naturally now is, some people are going to disagree with me, but from the stretch from the Route 1 bridge down past the city dock there are beautiful beaches, the river is not as deep, it's spread out a little bit more and it has, in my opinion, reduced the number of drownings, because the river is shallower. We were having 2 and 3 drownings a year down there, and there were deep holes, and it was a little bit treacherous, and the tide would come in and out. Since the dam's been removed we're getting natural sediment loading taking place in that area, it has become a very, a much safer recreational area for the general public than what it used to be. But that's my two cents.

00:38:46

Milroy:

I wanted to ask you about your memory of the day that the dam was removed. What was the feeling? What were people looking to see? What happened?

[00:39:00]

Micks:

I had been teaching school for about 31 years. I knew that the next year they were going to start, they were physically going to come, the corps of engineers, the army, was going to come in and start dismantling this dam. I decided that I'm going to teach one more year and then I'm going to retire so I can watch all of this happen. So I was able to, my first year of retirement, come down here every day and see from beginning to end the deconstruction and the removal of this dam. One of my greatest hopes was to be somewhere, the day they, when they actually did the plunger and blew the dam up, to be in an area where I could see it really up close. Of course they wouldn't let us do that, so the anticipation, the excitement, the awe of it, is something you'll just never forget. So I gathered along with thousands of other people downstream, they actually wouldn't let us stay on the property here at Friends of the Rappahannock. People had to leave this property, but they would let us gather along the banks about 200 yards downstream. There must have been 100 people thick for that entire quarter mile stretch where they could physically actually see the explosion take place. You probably know the story or have heard the story, it took 2 times to blow it up, but I think that even made it even more exciting. The first time it kind of fizzled out, there was an explosion; it wasn't what they had hoped. So we had to wait a little while for the second one, it was impressive. It was exciting people cheered, I don't know it's one of those highlights of your life that you won't ever forget. It's certainly top 10, for me.

00:40:58

Milroy:

Was there as much excitement and community presence for the second attempt to remove the dam?

00:41:03

Micks:

I think that at first some people thought it was over with, they thought hm there wasn't much to that. So I think the anticipation grew, there were people who trickled off and then came back. I think the word started to spread there would be a second explosion and I think it made the day

more memorable for some reason. You know you anticipate and then oh gosh that was a fizzle, and then you have a wait a little while, and then when it actually happens, I think probably the most impressive part of that was, aside from the noise and the explosion, was the wave of the water coming down and with that second explosion there were a lot of birds, it was almost like a movie, flying downstream overhead of everybody. [00:42:00] Descending away from where the explosion actually took place, it was pretty cool.

00:42:13

Milroy:

Did you see immediate changes in the ecological health of the river? I guess in respect to the migratory fish?

00:42:19

Micks:

I think that was, the immediate ecological change I think would have been, there was not only debris but you had sediment coming through, and people noticed that. The, what was the question? Sorry.

00:42:40

Milroy:

Did you notice any immediate changes in the rivers health? We had talked about migratory fish in the beginning.

00:42:51

Micks:

I think, you know, we noticed the Game and [inaudible] fisheries coming in with their boats and they were doing shocking. They were finding some species and then they started testing our river, and within the first mile or two up the Rappahannock during that next spring season, they were finding migratory fish. And then over a period time these fish, they were finding them further upstream and further upstream each year, so that was exciting. I think hopefully the Game Commission, I don't know if they'll be a part of this, but somebody out there can give you the true facts on how has that made, as far as migratory fish species, the change, the positive impact that its had.

00:43:45

Milroy:

You had mentioned a Top ten list of important experiences to you on the Rappahannock River. Are there a few that you would feel comfortable telling me more about?

00:44:00

Micks:

Well lets see, there are a lot of them. Some of them are scary, some of them are exciting. I guess my first overnight trip, which I'll never forget on the Rappahannock River, with the Boy Scouts in the late 60s. I just happened to have a canoeing partner that, I have to blame him, that we must have turned over 4 or 5 times, of course it was in October, it was the fall colors overnight trip.

We had to build fires to get warm, the same story that a lot of people had experienced, right up there where the two river come together. I probably can not overemphasize how much the Scouting programs, in offering me that experience, really did put me in a direction that I feel changed my life. [00:45:00] Number one, changed my course of what I was going to do with my life, aside from teaching and coaching, everybody has a little passion on the side. Things just really sort of fell together over the years. There were, gosh in the 80s and 90s there were more and more groups that wanted to get on the river. Friends of the Rappahannock's programs were connecting people. We had a calendar of events that started early, which is just incredible now. Woodie does a wonderful job with that, offering these experiences for people, for members and non-members. As these numbers grew, and they have grown over the years, the number of youth groups, the number of nonprofits, the number of supportive groups, the environmental groups, the number of schools that are now experiencing this river has got to be in one of the top ten for me. I just get these big, warm fuzzies every time I see 2 and 3 and sometimes 4 school buses pull up in front of the building and all these little kids are hopping out and FOR's educational people are working magic. Probably, absolutely, the best staff this environmental group, they keep growing and they keep getting better, but right now, it's the perfect package and they're invested and they care.

00:46:39

Milroy:

So to conclude this interview, is there anything coming back, that comes to mind that is an important part of the [Embrey] dam removal, or the Friends of the Rappahannock, or your own personal story that we didn't talk about today that you would like to make sure that we record?

00:46:57

Micks:

Wow that's a tough question, I'd have to think about that a little bit. I mentioned earlier that when we had these big groups, it would take probably 5 minutes to carry a canoe around the dam. I think one of the most exciting things for me on that level is that once the dam was gone, you didn't have to do that anymore. There were days when we were portaging 10, 15, 20 canoes around the dam, so that's a highlight. Along with all the good things that the dam removal, it's just now a free flowing river from top to bottom. People are able to experience this river without having to be concerned about, as a safety feature anyway, you know the dam being there, and not having to worry about portaging around it. Sorry that wasn't a real good one, anyway.

[00:48:00]

Milroy:

Okay, well thank you Mr. Micks. That was a fantastic place to end, I appreciate your time and this interview.

00:48:09

Micks:

You've done a wonderful job young lady, you make this very easy.