Life Stories
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PETE SEEGER INTERVIEW
'TIL THE RIVER RUNS CLEAR

Pete Seeger, Folk Singer & Social Activist
October 7, 2004
Interviewed by: Karen Sim
Total Running Time: 24 minutes and 10 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Life Stories Presents
Pete Seeger
Singer & Social Activist

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KAREN SIM:
When did you become aware and involved with sort of problems with the Hudson River? What made you notice that it was having problems and it's getting dirtier and dirtier and in trouble?

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PETE SEEGER:
My thinking got switched around when I read the book Silent Spring in 1963 by the biologist Rachel Carson. A very quiet little book, simply pointing out that the poisons we used, like DDT, were killing off the birds. And, I suddenly

realized, in the space of a few months. That if the world, we're going to be saved. It wasn't just poor people organizing against the rich, but scientists working with a wide range of people, to alert them to the fact that the world is in real danger. And there may not be any human race here in 100 years unless we change our way of thinking. Up till now, you know, the main thing has been money and power and sex, I suppose. Well, about that same time I had gotten interested in sailing. I started earning a little money, and I bought a little plastic bathtub of a boat and took my family out in it. And we'd be sailing along and suddenly look down, and you see lumps of this and that floating by with the toilet paper. And I thought of the phrase, private affluence, public squalor, thought of by the economist Galbraith. I didn't know quite what to do about it. Just about that time, a friend of mine, an artist in Cold Spring, Vic Schwartz, by name. Says Pete, "you know, they used to have big sailboats on the river. Ones with the booms 70 ft long." I said, "oh, don't give me that. Only America's Cup racer. Was that a sloop that big?" He says no, "I got a book about it." And he loaned me a fat little book, written in the year 1907 by two middle aged men, right here in this part of the world, it was called *Sloops of the Hudson*, by William Plank and Moses Collier. Well, I read it and was fascinated by it. These two men were not great writers, but it was a book full of love. They said these were the most beautiful boats we ever knew. When they will never be seen again. Steam had taken over the river. Well, I read it and reread it, wrote a little poem and put it on my wall. Couldn't get it out of my head. And finally, about a year or two later, I wrote a letter to my friend. I said, "Vic. Nobody but a millionaire could afford to build one of these boats. But if we got a thousand people together and we all chipped in, we

could share the expense of building it and share the fun of sailing it. We'd probably have to hire a very professional captain to make sure we didn't make any mistakes. But the rest of us could be volunteers." It was an idea for a little middle class, cooperative sort. Then I forgot about my letter. It was one more pipe dream. But about four months later, Vic Schwartz meets me on the railroad station platform. He said, "Pete, what are we going to get started with that boat?" I said, "what boat?" He said, "You wrote me a letter or I said," That's his foolishness to say, let's build a canoe and paddle to Tahiti." He said, "Well, I've been passing you a letter up and down the commuter train, and we got a couple dozen people who want to get started." I said, "Well, if there's enough nuts, we might do it." Just about that time, Alexander Saunders ran a small business in Cold Spring, and he asked Vick, "Do you know this guy Seeger? Maybe he'd give a fundraising concert for the Scenic Hudson organization." That organization had just started. It was trying to stop a power plant on the mountain just a few miles south of here. Then Mr. Saunders went to the board of directors meeting, and was told, "Oh, don't have anything to do with Seeger. A few years ago, he was sentenced to a year in jail for not cooperating with the House un-American Activities Committee. If we have anything to do with him, we will be tarred with the same brush." So Saunders came back, said, "Well, they turned me down. But I'd like to hear some music. Maybe we can raise money for something else." And Vic said, "Well, Pete and I have been talking about raising money to build a replica of a Hudson River sloop." "Oh. That's interesting." And about a month or two later, on the lawn of the Saunders home, I sang for about 150 people a collection of Hudson River songs and songs they could sing along with me, like "This Land

is Your Land." And in the Saunders living room, some 15 or more people sat around and we set up an ad hoc committee to look into the idea. One subcommittee was supposed to look to see if there are any Hudson River sloops still in existence, and there weren't. And, a lawyer said he would get us set up as a nonprofit corporation. We called ourselves the Hudson River Sloop Restoration, Inc., a nonprofit. And we met once a month. Well, I think we passed the hat, during the intermission, and they got about $150 to start us off. But I gave some outdoor concerts here and there and around. And I think the first year we raised about $5,000. We also found it would cost a lot more than that. Down in New York, they wanted $300,000 to build it. But up in Maine, we found a man willing to build it for 120,000. Old Harvey Gammage, crusty old main fellow. He'd been used to slapping up boats for fishermen, shrimp trawlers and so on. Saunders was the de facto head of the organization. I was chairman, but it was just a figurehead job. I attended the meetings. But, Saunders really, was a very strong leader. He was the president. And he'd look at his watch as I have a meeting and an hour and a quarter. Let's get cracking. And if he'd stopped, somebody said, Joe, you made your point. Anybody else want to comment on it? He ran very good meetings not too long, and we met every month. And, we had an outdoor festival in the garrison, under that beautiful castle that looks like Camelot on the hill. And I think we raised about $1,500. And we had another festival the next year for more like twice as many people and raised more money. The third year, 1968: Arlo Guthrie was our guest star, and 6000 people came. I remember in the morning somebody said, Pete, when is this boat ever going to be built? And I said, oh, at the rate we're going, it will be a number of years. We raised 5000

the first year, 10,000 the second year, and now and the third year—I don't know.My friend said, “Well, won't people give up? Won't they lose interest if it takes so long?” I said, “All we can do is try.” But that year, with 6000 people coming, we raised about $10,000 and a local disc jockey got on the microphone and in half an hour got about $10,000 worth of pledges. And to my great surprise, Mrs. Lyla Atchison Wallace, the co editor of the Reader's Digest, pledged $10,000. If anybody had ever told me she would contribute to something I was connected with, I'd said, “You're out of your mind.” I mean, there were conservative, conservative Republicans who had articles like, “We are winning in Vietnam.” Well, I was singing songs, singing songs against the Vietnam War. Actually, some of the members of the board of the committee resigned. The vice president said, as long as Seeger is connected with this project, it'll never get anywhere. He doesn't know how to work with the establishment. And to a certain extent, he was right. On the other hand, he later on became mayor of Newburgh across the river. And he learned the establishment never can move unless the people push him from one direction or another. He's a good friend now. We've made up. Anyway, up in Maine, Harvey Gammage says, “Let's get started building.” I said, “Wait a minute, we only have $30,000. And, we don't know how we're going to get the rest.” He says, “Well, you'll find when the keel is laid, the money comes in quicker.” And he was right. Once you've actually got started, then you have to go into high gear. So in the month of October ‘68, the keel was laid up there in Maine. I hope you show some of the movies we took of it. All I know is that it was a good experience for me. We're working with a wide range of people, young and old. Different kinds of politics. Different kinds of music. Some were

artists. Some were—well, one was a minor echelon executive at IBM. And a year later, in June 1969, the Clearwater was launched. Since then uh—

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KAREN SIM:
Tell me more about that day when it was launched.

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PETE SEEGER:
Oh, well, Toshi, you got some women here in Beacon to cook food, and they drove all the way up there in, like, a six hour trip or more. And we had a fine potluck lunch at a very low cost.

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KAREN SIM:
So tell me about Toshi and how people will come if there was food—

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PETE SEEGER:
Well, we had a song fest while people who were arriving, they drove in from different parts of Maine and New England and up and down the river. A whole busload of young Black people came from Newburgh. I remember when we were singing "This Land is Your Land," they were on next and they said, "You can talk about the Constitution, but we're here to talk about revolution." Some people said, "What's going on here?" And finally, when about 2000

people were there, they had a bottle of Hudson River champagne whacked against the hull, and it finally broke and it slid in the water. The captain of the Clearwater was on the stern as it slid in and with his head down, watching it splash into the water. Well, the captain, I might say, had golden curls to his shoulder. And when he first came up to Maine and was helping get the boat rigged, they said, “This is a captain?” They couldn't believe it. Up in Maine, they thought, “Oh, this boat is going to be sunk or sold within a year. What do these hippies know about sailing?” But, Captain Aunapu, who was a very good captain. Really very good. And we put together a crew of musicians. At least 2 or 3 knew how to sail. Some of the others. Don McLean slapped the bowsprit and said, “What is this, a boom?” And, I remember Doug—Brother Frederick Douglas Kirkpatrick—he and Jimmy Collier were both singers in the civil rights movement, and they came up to be on the crew. They were wonderful singers, but they had never been on boats before. I remember as we were sailing, going up and down, up and down, Kirk was looking very serious, and I knew he was thinking, “How do we get Seeger to get me out here. Where am I?” Out of sight of land. But it was a great singing crew, and we would sail for 25 miles, and then we'd put on a fundraising concert for us in one little town. And then the next day, 25 miles down the coast in another little town, we hired a young woman to go from town to town, finding locations that we could sing outdoors, usually. And, when we got to New York 35 days later, we'd raised about $30,000, which had to be used to pay off loans that we got. My wife got on the phone to all the musicians we knew, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan and others and said, “Will you loan us some money to get this boat sailing?” Mary Travers of Peter, Paul and Mary says, Pete, there's

a war on. What are you raising money for a sailboat for?" And all I could say. "Well, it's a beautiful river, and we don't we're not aiming just to sail it. We want to clean up the river." The annual membership meeting in October—was it an October—no. No. The annual membership meeting, that's right, it was in December. At the annual membership meeting in December, it was a close vote. Almost half the people wanted to call the boat Heritage and make it a historical project, like the Mayflower: dress the sailors in costume…but by a narrow vote, Clearwater won the vote. And the younger members of the organization—see, anybody could become a member by paying $10. Oh my gosh, now it costs 30 or more dollars, $35 to be a member. And they, a year later, voted to change the constitution of the organization. The charter says the purpose of the Clearwater is to clean up the river and make the shores accessible to everybody. And step by step, we found ways to do this. One of the first big discoveries we made was learning how to take schoolchildren out. The first time we took a group of kids out, a biologist stood up on the cabin roof and shouted, "Kids, now I'll tell you something about the river." But 15 minutes later, he was hoarse and the kids weren't listening anyway. They were looking at this 100 foot mast, and looking at the view. They'd never been on a sailboat before. And about a year or two later, a young man named Steve Stan joined the organization. I trust you're interviewing him—a remarkable man. And he invented a way to teach on the boat. When a bus pulls up with 50 kids, they're immediately split up into five groups. One group goes to the starboard side, and the crew, the teachers—could be a volunteer—hold up a net. Kids are going to put this net in the water and catch some fish. Sometimes they make a joke out of it. One of the other volunteers

pretends to be a nut-nick, and says, “What do you mean? There's no fish in the river. It's too dirty. Will you please help me here? I'm trying to teach the kids something. Hold his net. I got to see if there's any holes in it.” And nets are nothing but holes. It's a little comic dialogue. “Still, carry on.” Kids are all laughing. Well, another group of ten children go to this port side, and the net is put in as fine as a lady's stocking and comes up with some green slime on it, and it's put on under a microscope. “Hey, what's those wiggly things?” And the volunteer crew, who a few years ago was my 12 year old granddaughter, says, “That's called plankton. Plankton is for fish.” What? “Grass is for cows.” Another group of ten goes to the tiller. A big 12 foot stick with a fist at the end. And the captain says, “Push that stick to the starboard.” That means over there. “Now push it to port.” That means over here. “Now hold it amidships.” And the kid says, “We're steering the boat!” And another ten go below the deck and learn how the captain uses his charts and other modern tools to know the depth of the water, and he can communicate, get on the earphones with another ship. So for safety, it's a lot safer than it was 150 years ago. Oh, I should tell you, that little boat. That little book is now reprinted, and I hope you give a plug for it, because it's a wonderful little book. There were 400 boats like the Clearwater in the middle of the 19th century. This river would have been full of sails. Some sloops were as big as 95ft long. Some as small as 50 or 60ft, but the average is what the Clearwater was—Clearwater is 76ft on deck, 105ft from the tip of the bowsprit to the tip of the boom. Well, anyway, the Clearwater system of teaching on deck is now used by schooners, mostly all over the country, because people in other parts of America said, hey, look what they're doing on the Hudson. Why don't we do something like it? A

woman down on Delaware Bay read about the Clearwater. She brought some friends up, and they sailed on the Clearwater as volunteers, and they went back and found an old schooner rotting away in a mud bank. And they pulled it out of the water, and it took ten years, but sooner or later, they had a boat sailing just like Clearwater on Delaware Bay. They have two schooners in Chesapeake Bay, and I think soon we'll have three have a schooner of Sarasota, Florida, two schooners in Lake Michigan, a big schooner in Puget Sound, the adventurous and actually one of the Clearwater volunteer crew, got trained and was captain of the adventurous three or maybe four schooners going up the New England coast. And they all use the Clearwater system of teaching. It's found that, the whole idea of sailing, there's something spiritual in it, I think. Water, wind, wave action. It's hard to put in words. The nearest thing I can think of, of the appeal, is think the wind maybe coming from the north. But if you slant your sails right, you can sail north west, and then you can sail north east, and then you can sail north west. You can use the very power of the wind against you to work your way forward. And that's good politics. Martin Luther King would zig and zag, and he'd get thrown in jail and get more contributions and zag over there and get more contributions. Yes, life is a zig zag.

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