



## Oral histories may aid Casperkill watershed

Liz Jones and Nadine Souto • For the Poughkeepsie Journal • September 5, 2010

From 1941 to 1968, Vinnie Bihn's family owned a motel with a pond made from damming the Casperkill. Bihn remembers how cars used to clog up Route 9 to come skate on the pond, and how it was drastically affected by changes in the upper reaches of the watershed.

"When they built Hagan Town and Twin Hills and all of that, when it rained, the Casperkill used to run brown for days. It looked like the Mississippi. I mean, days. I used to catch eel and catfish. It ran brown and really silted up our pond quick."

This is one of the stories we have collected this summer through our work on the Oral History of the Casperkill Project. Through interviews and archival research, we hope to collect stories and memories, photographs and maps to tell the story of human experiences within the Casperkill watershed.

The Casperkill watershed, the tract of land that drains into the Casperkill Creek, is almost entirely within the Town of Poughkeepsie. It extends from the wetlands near the base of Peach Hill to the Hudson River southwest of the Poughkeepsie Galleria.

On its way, the Casperkill passes through the Dutchess and Route 44 shopping plazas, is dammed to form Sunset Lake on the Vassar College campus, provides scenery for homeowners in the Spackenkill area and snakes through Tilcon Quarry.

In a widely spread town with many centers, the Casperkill is a feature tying us together.

The idea for an oral history emerged from the Casperkill Assessment Project, a collaborative scientific study on the health of the creek.

From the research, we have learned the Casperkill presents the same symptoms as many suburban and urban streams: contamination by landfills and leaking sewer lines, erosion from stormwater and inadequate vegetation buffers, and sedimentation due to runoff from paved surfaces.

But hope remains for the Casperkill. Despite its degradation, it continues to provide an urban refuge for wildlife and remains a scenic amenity.

If we work together, we can reverse some of the damage that has been done to the creek and ensure the Casperkill becomes the best and healthiest possible community resource.

Our goal is to bring people together in a shared understanding of the role the creek has played in this area's development and continues to play in the lives of watershed residents.

From our conversations with residents, it has become clear that they have a wealth of information about the area, and the creek in particular, that represents an untapped resource for the development of a Casperkill watershed history.

Ed Lynch remembers watching fires burn at the Brickyard Hill dump site before it became the Route 44 shopping plaza.

Fran and Frank Hartenfels from the Spackenkill area often protect the ducks in the stream from turtles and other hungry predators.

Jim Warner remembers riding a horse along the Casperkill when the area was primarily farmland and Route 9 was only a two-lane road.

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We have compiled these and other stories on a blog, which we hope will become a resource for friends and residents of the Casperkill watershed.

Our belief is that by learning more about the land-use decisions that have harmed the stream, as well as the real-life experiences of people along it, readers and participants will be more invested in its future.

We invite you to look at the blog at <http://blogs.vassar.edu/casperkill> and to get in touch with us to share any comments, memories or images you may have.

**Liz Jones and Nadine Souto are students at Vassar College. They are working with professor Lisa Paravisini to compile an oral history of the Casperkill watershed.**



Sunset Lake on Vassar College campus was formed by the damming of the Casperkill. The watershed extends from the wetlands near the base of Peach Hill to the Hudson River southwest of the Poughkeepsie Galleria. (Courtesy of Chris Freimuth)

**On the Web**

- To read the Casperkill Watershed Oral History blog, visit <http://blogs/vassar.edu/Casperkill>
- For more information about the Casperkill Assessment Project, go to [www.dutchesswatersheds.org](http://www.dutchesswatersheds.org)

**The Casperkill half a century ago ...**

Vinnie Bihn, whose family owned a motel with a pond

made from damming the Casperkill, used to catch bass, sunfish, perch, catfish and eel as a child in the 1950s. But there aren't a lot of fish these days, says the Wellbrock family, who moved to Old Farms Road in the 1950s. The Wellbrocks say they've also seen an increase in the number of deer in the area, as well as the number of homes. Read more of their stories at <http://blogs.vassar.edu/casperkill>.

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Your daughter insists on wearing her princess costume to the grocery store. Allow it or not?

**YES, at least she's dressed!**

**NO, I have some rules!**

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