

Henry Marciano

Mashapaug Pond Oral History Interview

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Knight Memorial Library, 275 Elmwood Avenue, Providence, RI

Interviewee: Henry Marciano

Interviewer: Elizabeth Landau, Anna Wada

[Bracketed words] indicate action. **[Numbers]** are time-codes corresponding with the audio.

Henry Marciano: ...at Mashapaug pond, were 13 of them built, and unfortunately they're collecting dust right now, although I take the kids to Narragansett Bay and teach them how to sail. And the sad part is they all say to me, because they're inner-city kids, "Is this the ocean?" I say "yes." First time I've seen it, in the ocean state. This group called the Trust for Public Land assisted the Parks Department in getting the land and the pond, the Mashapaug Pond. And they had this nice little letter by their president stating that, you know, they do wonderful things to improve their environment and everything else. And I wrote back to those people saying that, quite frankly, the picture of our boats that was used by a lady by the name of Susan Lapides to take the photograph is deceiving. It makes it appear as though the pond is an idyllic place, but it's polluted. It has arsenic, dioxins, PCB, it's no place for anyone to go. And it's sad because it could be a viable habitat for the animals, as well as a nice recreation site for the people in the city. It's a jewel in the city and most people don't even know it exists. And the last thing was, with the help of Brown students, my students, they were middle school students, developed this help pamphlet. And they won a Trisdale grant for this work, this was written back in 2005, warning of the toxic substances at the time they were talking of building a new high school. We advocated that the new high school not be built until the toxic substances be removed. We also warned about the toxic substances and the harm they cause, most of them being carcinogens, and we also gave numbers that they could call to various political officials, government officials, EPA representatives and so forth to try to resolve this problem. So I give this all to you guys, this is going to be revised, going to update that. And my other plan is, with all the factual information I have, I'd like to have the kids, even though I'm retired I work after school with the Providence After School Alliance, to have them gather the facts again maybe with the help of Brown students, and write a book, 'The Tragic Tale of Mashapaug Pond', where it's been, and what's happening now to try to remediate things. And if we could get to sell that book, maybe through Scholastic Magazine, the proceeds would go to fund cleanup. Maybe help to promote the sailing program [laugh] develop too. So that was it.

[2:36]

Elizabeth Landau: That sounds great. How old are the kids usually that you work with?

Marciano: Well, they're middle school so they range anywhere from 10 to 14 years of age. Many of the students work on this project now in high school, but I still work with the middle school students. We are now trying to develop a new program to get them to improve their communication skills. In the past they also ran a program on the public television network, where the kids would actually run the camera

equipment in the engineering department, and we would interview people about various topics of interest and concern. The idea is to make them become environmental stewards, and to make them aware that their education is not strictly learning out of a book, regurgitating information on a test, but the knowledge gained should be used to solve problems, especially those they find in their own communities, because they will be the future leaders. That's the way education should be, instead of all this unfortunate standardized NECAP testing that's taking over. Somebody's making a lot of money on that. [chuckle] And I don't know if it's improving anything.

[3:45]

Anna Wada: Could you repeat your name again?

Marciano: Yes, my name is Henry Marciano. I retired from teaching, I taught in the Providence School system for 35 years. I was a social studies teacher, history teacher predominantly, and I was involved in many, many civic projects over the years with my students. I like to do hands-on projects to make history come alive, so to speak. And I also am involved in environmental issues. I feel that unless we maintain this planet, it might die before we do. Unfortunately in the past, there wasn't much consideration over environmental issues. For example when Gorham had its silver plant there, they used the pond as a dumping ground for any by-products of the silver manufacturing process. And then later on in the 70s, I think it was 1976, Textron took over the property, and used it for their personal dumping ground. As a result, the pond is unhealthy. But it's also unhealthy due to the storm drains that cause all pollutants to flow into the pond, auto transmission fluid, anti-freeze, and other things which I won't mention. Too nasty. I really think the issue could be addressed with a lot of involvement by people. And not just talk about it, and not just do another study, but actually doing the nitty-gritty work that's needed to clean up the pond. Selfishly, I'd like to see it cleaned up in my lifetime.

The first time I saw the pond, I was a child. I lived on Adelaide Avenue. My father worked at Gorham's for a short while. Because after the war, coming back from WWII, there were no jobs, so he took on any job available, and he worked in the...I believe the smelting department, where they had to pour silver into lead containers as to serve as molds to fabricate the silverware that they were making. And I don't know if that had any connection to what he died of in the end, which was Parkinson's disease, complications of Parkinson's. But I know that lead causes brain damage, and Parkinson's does cause brain damage, so there must be some connection. And when they tore down the facility, I toured the remains of the site, I was just a little boy at the time, we lived on Adelaide Avenue. And I tried to wonder what part of this plant my father worked in. And I'm looking all around, and then some old-timer told me that it was towards the coal [inaudible] where Textron is trying to clean up now. And I started to cry. Because right next to the cove area there was, there is a Stop-and-Shop but it's closed down, and they found a slag pile of lead that the contents under the soil, in terms of particles per thousands I think, 500 times more than any human should be exposed to. And the other sad thing, I remember my father saying that he took on the job because the previous guy who had it dropped dead of a heart attack because every minute, 8 hours a day, he had to lift 35 pounds of silver, and pour it into this lead container, so. And I also talked to an old-timer who said that if they worked for Gorham's, they had to sign a release that said if they got sick in the future they wouldn't lead any kind of legal action against the company. Of course, in those days nobody took any legal action anyway, they just accepted whatever jobs they could get. You know, they weren't quite as sophisticated as our times. But I often wonder about those poor people who worked there, and I know that a lot of them died

of cancer. I was told that by an old-timer, so it's a kind of tragic, the legacy of the industrial revolution. And I also, when I saw the pond for the first time, I cried because I could only, I was trying to think back to the Native Americans, Narragansett Indians, occupied the land and they used it as a prayer site, and I know they wouldn't pollute it or destroy it in any way. They would pass it down in a healthy condition from generation to generation, and I'm saying, why. [Tapping table] Why the need to destroy this beautiful, you know, piece of land and water that surrounds it. It would be such a great place, especially for young people today, especially in the inner-city, instead of playing those stupid video games [chuckle] all the time on a hot day in the summer, they would have something to do. And they could provide jobs for people. Teaching how to fish, how to swim, how to canoe, how to sail, things of that nature. So I hope to continue with the project. I'm working now with the Urban Pond Procession group. And we're concentrating on the man-made ponds at Roger Williams Park. But we've addressed the issue also, the need to clean up Mashapaug and Spectacle because the debris and the sediment and the toxic substances from those ponds flow into the man-made ponds at Roger Williams Park. That's about it. Do you have any questions?

[9:12]

Landau: I mean it's great work that you're doing with the kids, especially to promote awareness. I know one of the things that shocks me always is that the kids at the high school aren't taught about it either. You know, the high school that's right there.

Marciano: Right. The Alvarez High School. Yes, as a matter of fact we dropped some of those health pamphlets off there, I don't know if they ever distributed it to the students. Some of my former students from Hopkins now attend there, and they were made aware, but quite frankly, I don't understand why they would attend that high school given the fact that even though they check on the soil and the air quality around the building, you have this big pile of dirt behind the school with all kinds of signs saying, warning, debris, hazardous debris. If I were a parent and I saw that, I'd question why they built a school there. As a matter of fact, I got myself in a bit of a jam. When I was part of the Reservoir Triangle group, they had the school department officials and they called on the public to speak. And they had one assistant superintendent saying, "Well, we need the schools because we have a large increase in high school population." And I looked at that assistant superintendent and I said, I won't mention names but I said, "If you had a child out in the district, would you send them to a school built on a toxic waste dump?" I said, "I understand the need for schools, but not built on toxic waste dumps." And sad to say, but this is a common problem across this country now. They're building a lot of schools on toxic waste and former toxic waste sites. There's another one in the, near the Johnston Line there, the Del Sesto school, that's also built on a toxic waste dump. Then they talk about equity and equality for students, and that's another story for another time. But it sure tells me that there is no equity, you know it's just a bunch of words on paper.

The other thing in terms of the high school, I can tell you this much. I'm working to develop and promote a marine trades composite technology program at the Technical High School, the Providence Career Technical Academy which is part of Central High School. And part of that is going to be an environmental piece. And I'm working on that with the After School Alliance, Providence After School Alliance. It may take another season before we get it under way, but we're still working on it. So we'll see what happens. So, we will make sure that the high school students are informed, and get involved. You see, one of the problems right now in Providence, is that they're so concerned with closing the achievement gap and these NECAP test scores, that that's their only emphasis. They don't see that education is not just about

standardized testing. It's to educate to solve problems, you know. Project-based learning is good, because it's cooperative, they learn to communicate, and they have to figure out or come up with solutions. When they talk about creative thinking, that to me is more creative than filling out bubbles on a standardized test. [chuckle] But that's my take on that.

[12:22]

Wada: How are the responses from your students?

Marciano: Well they agree with me, but unfortunately now I've been out of the loop for about two years, and I still take an active role with students after school, but it's not like I'm in the classroom teaching anymore. And what I teach now after school is about Maritime history. And we make like nautical objects that sailors used in the 15th century during the age of exploration, like barometers to determine the weather, quadrants to determine latitude, and things of that nature. I teach them math that they're not taught in school. Well they're taught in high school, hopefully. But not in middle school. I try to challenge them that way. But it's not always looked upon as appropriate by the so-called establishment. [chuckle] But the kids tell me all the time that it's interesting. I know if I were going to school today, if I was a young kid and all I had to do was prepare for standardized tests I'd be bored out of my mind that I'd stay home a lot. Tell my mother that I'm sick. [laugh] But you people being young, the younger generation, and I think the planet will be in good hands with people like you. You can carry on, and I'm sure that you can see what needs to be corrected. I don't have to tell you.

Landau: So you mentioned that your dad worked for Gorham. Did he ever tell you stories about working there, aside from the pollution, or he didn't like to speak about it?

Marciano: He really didn't talk about it, the poor man at the time had three jobs. You know, I was little. I didn't know how he found the time, with three jobs, to take me as a little boy to Roger Williams Park all the time, but he did. He was a very intelligent man, but he wasn't given opportunities. He grew up during the Depression, he skipped three grades, and then at age 16, his father, they were Italian immigrants, told him, "Joe you have to quit school, as much as you like it, because the banks are about to foreclose on our house. So we need every able-bodied older brother or sister to work." So that's what he did. Interesting enough, he met a professor from Brown University, Professor Green. I don't know how they met, but the Professor invited him to sit in on his class and he said, "Joe you should be going to college, you're bright enough to go to college." And he said "Well, that's easy for you to say Professor, no money, no college." But he sat in on his lectures, and I found a letter that Professor Green, that my father wrote to Professor Green. And he said to him, "I want to thank you very much for providing me that used suit. It's the only suit I've ever owned," okay. And then the war broke out, and he was under General Patton in North Africa, and he was in army intelligence. And then from there he was under General Clark. He met my mother, was a war bride from Genoa, Italy. After the war he served as army of occupation, and after army of occupation he was a director of a displaced person's camp for Jewish refugees from the concentration camps. In both Bagnoli, in Naples, Italy, and also in Cremona which is up North. And recently, I ran into a Jewish rabbi who said he was in that camp in Bagnoli when he was a little boy, so I showed him a picture and an article of my father, and he said, "I know that man." He said, "I don't remember his name." I said, "Joseph Marciano" He says, "he was the Commandant. He was responsible for getting me to come to the United States," he says, and he gave me a big hug, and he said, "God bless your father." You know, put a few tears to my eyes, understandably. So

that's the kind of people I come from. We basically care and we want to see, help other people and see this planet a better place than when we entered, you know, when we leave. That's it.

[16:32]

Landau: That's really nice.

Wada: Did your mother do anything?

Marciano: My mother is a war bride, she lived under Mussolini. She ... her father was a sea captain who was forced to transfer Italian and German troops to Tobruk in North Africa. He was anti-fascist, in fact the whole family was anti-fascist, but they put a gun to his head and said 'you will do so' just like Captain von Trapp. So he was stuck, unfortunately he didn't get a chance to escape like Captain von Trapp [laughter]. But he heroically, they sank the ship, the British did, but he heroically made sure that all the sailors got off the ship. My mother was a teenager at the time, going to school, indoctrinated by the fascist type of educational system, which kind of reminds me of our present educational system in some ways. They would have math problems like if the fascist army produces 500 more tanks than it had the day before and it had 1000 tanks what is the percentage of increase? They did everything to get the mind regimented towards war. In some ways I think our minds have been warped under the present system, it seems like there is a lot of regimentation so I see a connection. My mother has a different view of Mussolini she thinks that although she didn't like fascism completely, she looks at the way Italy is run now and she says at least there was a little more order back then than there is now. She says maybe there wasn't as much freedom but you know freedom without any kind of discipline is chaotic in her mindset. But then again you got to forgive her because she was raised in the mindset; she was just maybe 13 or 14 years of age at the beginning of the war. She met my father when she was 19. My father was a bit older; he was like 28 [laughter]. But they met in a nightclub after the war. My father said something to the effect of 'Now that I have met you, I will never let you go' [laughter]. But they fell in love and they corresponded for six months because he had to go back to Naples. He met her up in Genoa, up North in Columbus' town and the rest is history.

[18:50]

Wada: Does she work anywhere around...?

Marciano: She's retired. She used to be a bank teller. Funny, because she was very bad at math. And while she was in Italy she was studying to be a pharmacist. She completed two years of college. She didn't want to be a pharmacist. She wanted to be a lawyer. But her father insisted 'oh no no no. No you should become a pharmacist' because her brother was studying to be a doctor so he figured there'd be a good fit there. So I guess she didn't like pharmacy so much and when she met my father she figured 'that's the end of pharmacy' [laughter]. As far as coming to America she thought it was a nice country and everything. When she saw New York skyline she said, beautiful buildings in terms of length and size but they don't speak, they don't say anything. They lack character. She's never adapted to the cold weather of New England. You

know, she comes from a warm climate. And she's there right now in Italy visiting her brother. My father has since passed away. But yes, she comes back and forth. But she likes this country it's just that, once you're born in another country it's always your home you know? People have a hard time understanding that. If I were born say in New Hampshire and I lived in Rhode Island all my life, I'd still have a connection to New Hampshire. But I found it funny that she became a bank teller because she was horrible at math [laughter]. Good at financial affairs, but in terms of like calculus or trigonometry or things of that nature, forget it. My father was so good in calculus that he could figure out problems in his head while other people required paper and pencil—no calculators back then. Sad to say that the Parkinson's, towards the end of his life, depleted his mind to the point where he couldn't add subtract multiply or divide. And I'd say what does this disease do to the human mind? It even robs you of your personality. You're no longer that person you're just a shell of that person. It's a horrible disease; I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy. And I wish that someday that they find a cure for it. Not for my father but for future generations and those still living today, you know. Muhammad Ali has that disease and I saw a picture of him recently. I feel sad. I mean he's a guy who was vibrant, reduced to a shell of a man [clanging in background]. But that's where you guys come in, that's where education comes in [laughter], and you're going to a good school.

[21:19]

Landau: Did your parents encourage you to become a teacher, or how did you end up in education? It sounds like there was a lot of precedent for it

Marciano: Well originally I started studying pre-med. I was influenced by my uncle. I was doing quite well in the pre-med program but there was something; I had to find out if I was really made to be a doctor. So I went to work in a hospital and I started seeing people dying and the sight of blood and all that. That really bothered me. I hated to see people die so I said, you know what this isn't for me. So then I went into pre-law, I studied that, I was accepted to go to law school. The day that I received my acceptance to George Washington University, my father had a massive heart attack and had to go through triple by-pass surgery, they saved his life. But my mother doesn't drive. My father was the only one. So I figured well somebody's got to stay home to help out the family. So I gave up my dream of becoming a lawyer and said what else do I like to do? I like to teach, and I don't regret it. I am so glad I ended up becoming a teacher as opposed to a lawyer. I think I reach more people in a more productive manner. I don't think being a lawyer in a courtroom all the time would be such a good idea. [chuckle] Not for me anyway.

[Interruption in interview]

David Kennedy: Good afternoon

Landau/Wada: Hi

Kennedy: I have another name. The girl from Brown came over and talked to me at my house, she wanted to know if I could give her any more names that were involved in the original groups. And I was a little weary you know without asking them. So my friend Mark down the street he and I are at least three houses apart right on the pond. He said he couldn't make it today but—

Jen Lawrence: Are you here for Mashapaug Memories as well?

Kennedy: Yes

Lawrence: Awesome, okay cool. [inaudible]

Kennedy: don't make me go through that schpeel again...

Landau: I know they may make you say it again I know [laughter]

Lawrence: Do you mind if we record you?

Kennedy: Yes, yes no.

Lawrence: Would that be all right?

Landau: He has some more names for us as well

Lawrence: Oh awesome, that would be great. I don't want to interrupt this so maybe do you want to come outside and we can talk a little bit and you can give us the names.

Kennedy: I only brought one more name with me

Lawrence: Let me ask Annie if we can do two at once.

[Talking outside]

Lawrence: do you have a couple minutes to wait?

Kennedy: Yes

Lawrence: thank you so much

Kennedy: It will take me that long to find it. Oh, here it is.

Lawrence: Perfect, so maybe if you want to step outside with us for just a second while they finish up here—

Kennedy: Okay

Lawrence: And then we could switch that would be so helpful

Kennedy: Okay I'm going to leave this right here, for approximately how long?

Lawrence: five minutes? Is that all right?

Kennedy: Cigarette time.

[Laughter]

Kennedy: Some things you do for the health of the environment but you know... [laughter]

Lawrence: Thank you so much. Sorry guys.

Wada: It's fine

Landau: Sorry about that.

Marciano: It's fine

[Interview resumes]

[25:17]

Landau: So you were telling us more about how you ended up in teaching...

Marciano: So I ended up in teaching because—

Landau: the law wasn't for you—

Marciano: after those events, yes, so I decided that even though I had graduated from college with a degree in political science and history, to go back and take the necessary credits to become a teacher. And that's what I did. And I don't regret it. I enjoy teaching history. But like I said, I like to do a hands-on type thing, not just out of the book regurgitating dates and names and facts. That puts people to sleep, puts me to sleep. So I try to bring the characters from history to life and the events, and I try to stress the importance of the events, how the events from the past affect the present. You know, and what do we learn from the mistakes of the past so that we don't end up repeating them in the present or the future. That's the key to history, not so much who did what or when because that can be fabricated very easily, you know, in terms of information.

The other thing I just wanted to mention was that I want to try to get together with Mr. Phil Brown and his students in the sociology department to assist in the writing and the revision of the health pamphlet as well as possibly putting this book together with kids. I just want to stand back and let them create the process, you know and if I can offer any advice fine, but my days of being the person in charge are over. I just want to take a back seat so to speak. I still want to get involved but let it be their progress and what they create, as opposed to what I did in the past with my students. I'm not interested in the glory so to speak [chuckle]. Doesn't matter. But I want to leave you with this information so if its helpful you can review it. On one of them I left my phone number and email address. I believe it's on this one. Yes, I left my email but not my phone number. If you have a pen I'll write that down.

[27:33]

Landau: Thank you, that's very helpful. I'm sure Holly's told you also, but we're having our exhibit opening on December 9th—

Marciano: Yes, yes, I'll be there

Landau: Terrific. We look forward to it.

Marciano: I was supposed to go to two events that Holly invited me to yesterday on the Gorham site, but I couldn't make it. I had a scheduling problem with two other meetings I was supposed to attend at the same time [laughter]. I can't split myself in half. This is the consent form?

Landau/Wada: Yes.

Landau: It's funny, you think after retirement life calms down. It doesn't, it just gets busier. [laughter]

Marciano: No, I try to get active, and I'll tell you why in a second...[pause]... Okay and I guess the rest you guys have to sign, and I hope I signed that right because I don't have glasses on. I'm sorry?

Landau: We were saying you just get more busy after retirement—

Marciano: There's a reason for that. If you don't stay active you will lose your mind in life unkind as the Rolling Stones used to say. But beyond that it's just very depressing how they treat people who retire. I'm 61 now and I remember when I was your age starting out in teaching, I'm saying wow how did all those years go by. But here's what happens, if I stay home I turn on the television and the first thing I see is 'hi, this is Robert Wagner. Perhaps you should consider a reverse mortgage' and I'm saying 'yeah, I worked all my life so that the government takes over my house and I get to live in it till I die and then they take it over. Wow that's wonderful' And then you get 'the cost of burial is very expensive these days, perhaps you should consider cremation' and all I can think of is in the Grapes of Wrath and in Of Mice and Men by Steinbeck how people are treated. You know, the Okies going to California, they are exploited when their truck breaks down and they have to buy the tires and they overcharge them, And then in Mice and Men when Lennie, who is slow, he doesn't mean what he's doing and he doesn't know his own strength, but they kill him, they kill the bunk hand they kill the dog and all I can think of is Steinbeck was absolutely right. In other words, you're no longer useful, you're no longer a productive member of society so by the wayside.

Sad to say, and it's not your fault, your generation, but somewhere along the line youth is the most important thing. Youth is going to get old someday, okay. Wisdom is no longer appreciated. But people who have lived before must know something [laughter] that they can pass down. Even if they just advise and the younger generation doesn't want it at least they have that to be thankful for, that someone was looking out for them saying watch out for this watch out for that. It's the world we live in. It's very fast paced, especially in the electronic age [laughter].

The last thing I leave you with, which I kind of find really funny. I was at a Dunkin Donuts watching a young girl and a young boy apparently boyfriend and girlfriend sitting at table having coffee but not talking to each other. Text messaging. So I stepped up to the table and I said 'excuse me, I know it's none of my business you can tell me to take off' I said 'but' and I looked at the young lady and said 'how can you stand him doing that?' I said 'If I were in your shoes I'd give him a slap right across the face. He's showing you no respect.' I said 'you have a young lady here, can't you talk to her directly to communicate? Are you attached with these things to your umbilical cord?' You know, they just gave me a look like I was from outer space. My daughter, she graduated from Fairfield and then from CUNY in New York graduate school, she's still out there now. And she wrote a play, she's a playwright, about that and she called it 'Disconnect'. And I said yeah, that makes sense, Disconnect. There is a disconnect. But it's not your fault because that's all that they want. The electronic age. You know, I have the solution to all these standardized tests. Just put a microchip in the brain. Instant knowledge, you don't have to go to school. [laughter]

Landau: well thank you--