

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

FRED CONNER

RESOURCES FOR EDUCATION AND ACTION FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH
IN AMBLER (REACH Ambler)

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

Lee S. Berry

at

Whitpain Township Building
Blue Bell, Pennsylvania

on

14 September 2014

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

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ABSTRACT

Fred Conner, Jr., grew up in Northeast Philadelphia. Having majored in economics at Upsala College, Conner served in the Marine Corps for twelve years and then as a defense contractor in the Balkan countries and Kuwait. Marriage brought him back to Pennsylvania. He and his wife settled in Whitpain Township, and Conner became Director of Facilities and Economic Development Officer at Rosemont College and then took an MS degree in Community and Regional Planning (CRP) from Temple University. There followed a natural progression into local volunteer work and public service.

Conner first became aware of the asbestos-containing waste of the White Mountains and the BoRit site through an Open Space study he developed at Temple CRP, a study that brought together the five affected municipalities, two school districts, and Montgomery County for the purpose of open space planning and remediating Wissahickon Park. Eventually this led to his involvement with a community advisory group, the BoRit CAG. Conner, who had been on the Planning Commission and Zoning Hearing Board of Whitpain Township and was now chair of the Township Board of Supervisors, was considered by some to be Whitpain's unofficial expert on BoRit, and he became the first co-chair of the CAG. The CAG, which had twenty-six stakeholders, was overseen by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which put BoRit on its National Priorities List (NPL). Conner says that many of the original recommendations of the CRP study have been implemented successfully.

Now that BoRit has been mostly capped what to do with the area is the question, and a feasibility study is underway. Because it is at the confluence of the Rose Valley, Tannery Run, and Wissahickon Creeks, West Ambler bears the brunt of serious flooding with contaminated water. Conner says the situation has been ameliorated somewhat, and while they wait for the results of the feasibility study, they have made some improvements to West Ambler's general quality of life: road paving, sidewalks, stop signs, and some new residential construction is underway. Conner believes that complete removal of the asbestos-containing material from the site is probably not practicable, but he thinks that a green and open space park could do quite well there. Perhaps the park could even include athletic fields and playgrounds and some other uses.

Conner suggests that other communities facing contamination problems should establish a multijurisdictional organization and convene a forum with a neutral facilitator to help them consider all views. They should seek and use expert advice. Conner feels that there is no longer a health risk because the EPA and the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection monitor the site, continuously checking the air quality. The EPA involvement has made residents less fearful. The quality of life in West Ambler and nearby communities is better now but much more needs to be done.

INTERVIEWER

Lee Sullivan Berry earned a master's degree in medieval studies from the University of Notre Dame, and a bachelor of arts degree in religious studies from the University of Pennsylvania. As a staff member in the Center for Oral History, Berry conducts background research and oral-history interviews, edits transcripts of completed interviews, and coordinates with interviewers and interviewees to finalize transcripts. She was the lead interviewer for the REACH Ambler project and has presented her work at meetings of the American Society for Environmental History and Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region.

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