

*Bill Conner at home in 2008 Photo: Ray Smith  
All photos courtesy Bill Conner*

## **BILL CONNER**

By Raymond D. Smith, Jr.

On their arrival in Gardiner, Bill Conner and his family got stuck in the snow. It was 1939 and Bill was nine years old.

Born in Grant Town, West Virginia, Bill's father, William Klein Conner, was a miner with the Federal Coal and Coke Company. At one time, the Federal No. 1 mine was the largest underground coal mine in the world in terms of gross production. As Bill recalls, "We lived in a house owned by the coal mine. They paid my father in scrip [a limited form of currency – in this case metal tokens made up by the mining company in various denominations] and you had to spend the scrip at the company store." In today's terms it amounted to peonage. "One thing my father did was get me out of the mines," Bill says, "Otherwise, I'd probably have been a coal miner today."

Bill's aunt, Beulah Dorsey, had come to New York from West Virginia sometime earlier. She'd met a man from Poughkeepsie who was a boss with the Board of Water Supply (BWS) of New York City, which was then drilling the Delaware Aqueduct. When the BWS man learned that Bill Sr. had been leader of one of the coal company's safety squads, he invited him to come up north to teach safety engineering on the aqueduct. Bill, Sr. also ran a shuttle car in the tunnel during its construction.

And so, the Conner family arrived in mid-winter 1939, driving out in an uncle's 1938 Buick. They got stuck in the snow a half-mile from their destination, the Schoonmakers' camp, which was really a boarding house where tunnel workers without local residences stayed. (The single-story, L-shaped building has since been converted to a private home and can still be seen on Shaft Road, just past its intersection with Bruynswick Road.) The Conner family, parents and four children, of whom Bill was next to the oldest, stayed at the camp for just a few days until they found a home in one of the two small houses which still stand today on the northwest corner of Benton Corners (where Bruynswick Road and Route 44/55 meet).

With his siblings, Bill enrolled at the one-room Benton Corners School on the south side of Bruynswick Road, about a thousand feet east of Route 44/55. The building has since been torn down. Carleton Mabee's book, *Gardiner and Lake Minnewaska* (Arcadia Publishing, 2003), includes a picture of the old school on page 71. Part of the caption reads: "From the 1940s to 1950s, boys walking to the school carried shotguns to hunt squirrels along the way, and students such as



*Bill Conner in the 1940s. Probably a school photo.*



Benton Corners School Student Body, ca. 1940-41. Top row: Grace Coddington, Joan Bayard, Virginia Smith, Gloria MacEntee, Ellen "Skeeter" Conner. Second row: Lorraine Young, Elsie Bayard, Faye Adams, Hazel ?, Thelma Conner. Third row: Mildred MacEntee, Robert MacEntee, Thomas MacEntee, Malcolm Graham, Jimmy Coddington. Bottom row: Roy Tuthill, Billy Keeping, Billy Young, ? Adams, Billy Conner. Missing from photo: Eugene Smith.

the Conner children, Thelma, Skeeter, and Tom, took turns fetching water for the school from Miske's store, nearby at the corner." When I showed the photo to Bill, he cocked his head and gave a slow smile, "Somebody was pulling somebody's leg. We never carried shotguns to school!"

When Bill's class was studying the nomads traveling across the desert, their teacher Mrs. Longendyke sought a current example. "Well you know, children, the Conners came out here looking for work. You might consider them nomads." That remark has stayed with Bill ever since. He's still not sure whether he's been here long enough to be considered a native. "Soon, I guess," he speculates. The Benton Corners School went only through sixth grade, so in 1945 Bill transferred to the Walkkill School for seventh grade.

About this time, John MacEntee, a teacher at the Walkkill Correctional Facility, bought the garage on the northeast corner of

Benton Corners. Its stone ruins remain there today. MacEntee operated an auto repair business and – as a skilled mechanic – taught Bill a lot about auto mechanics.

Meanwhile, the work Bill's father did in the mines and on the aqueduct took a great toll on his health. He was hospitalized with tuberculosis and black lung disease. To help his family, Bill quit school the day he turned sixteen and went to work for Vince Edmunds at his garage in Shawangunk, which was located on Bruynswick Road across from the Shawangunk Valley Fire District firehouse, near Hoagerburg Road. Bill's mother, Hilda May Dorsey Conner, took a job at the small factory at Gardiner Airport making coil windings and his sister, Ellen (Skeeter), left school to take a secretarial position. The family pulled together to take care of itself.

A number of Bill's friends went to work on the aqueduct tunnel while he stayed at the garage. They made a lot more money but Bill knew "it was dangerous work – very dangerous." He had close friends who were killed on the job.

In 1949, Bill's friends, John O'Conner and Thomas MacEntee, joined the Army and suggested that Bill enlist along with them. One attraction of volunteering was the Army's "guarantee" that they would serve together throughout their enlistment. Although Army pay wasn't much, Bill would be able to send a portion home to his mother each month. The three young men were put on a bus to Fort Drum and, as Bill says, "That's the last I ever saw of them." Once he completed his basic training at Aberdeen, Maryland, he was sent by bus to Americus, Georgia, for a six-month course in auto mechanics. He was flown to Washington State and then sailed to Japan and Korea, where he was assigned to a wheeled vehicle maintenance repair outfit in an engineering battalion.

Bill had been in Korea for only about thirty days when he was awakened at three in the morning with news that his father was very ill and that the Army was going to send him home. A sergeant drove

him by Jeep about sixty miles to an airport that Bill thinks was in Seoul. From there, he flew to Hawaii by Army transport and then on to California by commercial airline. Once there, Bill learned he was on his own to get back to New York. In the space of a couple of months, this soldier had gone from Georgia, to Washington, to Japan, to Korea, and back to the States. Not surprisingly, his pay had never caught up with him. Bill had no money and no ticket home. A captain in the airport directed him to the Red Cross, which gave him an airline ticket and a few dollars spending money. "That's why I give to the Red Cross," Bill explains. Arriving home in early 1951, Bill applied for a hardship discharge from the Army.

One morning, shortly after his father's death in March 1952, Bill stopped by to see his good friend Emil Ruoff. At the time, Ruoff operated Emil's Tavern on the lower level of a two-story frame house on Route 44/55 south of Route 299. (The house, which is located next to the small stone building still bearing a LIQUORS sign, has been painted pale blue and divided into apartments.) Ruoff naturally asked what Bill planned to do. Bill figured he might go back to work for Vince Edmunds but Ruoff offered a radical alternative; John MacEntee had recently closed his garage at Benton Corners. Why not buy his business? "With what?" Bill wanted to know. "Why don't you see what MacEntee wants?" Emil suggested.

It turned out that MacEntee wanted \$4,000 – clearly beyond the means of a twenty-two year old ex-soldier with no money and no assets – but was willing to take a mortgage for \$2,000. Ruoff offered Bill another good suggestion; "Come up tomorrow morning and we'll take a ride to the bank. Henry DuBois is our banker at Huguenot National Bank and he'll take care of everything." They went to see Dubois, who listened carefully, then turned to Ruoff and asked, "Will you sign for this boy, Emil?" Ruoff agreed, endorsing the note on the back.

With this signature, Bill purchased MacEntee's business, tools, and equipment. The garage property was actually rented from Gene Ackerman, a local distributor for Tidewater Oil. It did have certain drawbacks, such as no lifts or running water in the building, but it gave Bill a start in a business that would be his life's work.

When the Thruway and Route 299 were constructed in the mid-nineteen fifties, much of the traffic on Route 44/55 disappeared. Bill knew he had to make a move. He described the situation philosophically; "Route 299 was built while I was operating the garage down there at Benton Corners. All the traffic going to Kerhonkson used to come through Gardiner and Benton Corners. With the new roads, we lost that traffic 'cause cars got off the Thruway in New Paltz and started taking Route 299 to go over the hill instead."



*The former garage at Benton Corners as seen in 1999.*

Before Route 299 was constructed, Bill says the road over the ridge was a dirt road, Old Wawarsing Turnpike, running from Sparkling Ridge up the slope to just below the hairpin turn. "It was a back road. That was how they judged the old cars. If you could make that hill in second gear, you had a powerful old car. My dad used to see if he could make it in third gear." Bill chuckled at the memory. Perhaps judging that slope to be too great, the engineers for Route 299 opted for a more gradual and southerly location for that section of the new road.

About the time Route 299 was completed, Ruoff had sold Emil's Tavern and opened The Sugar Bowl, an ice cream stand, on the spot where the Mountain Brauhaus restaurant now sits. When he sold the tavern, Ruoff agreed not to open a liquor business within five miles for a period of years. The Sugar Bowl was his alternative, and the new building included a couple of rooms where he and his wife, Kitty, lived.



Bill's Garage, at the intersection of Route 44/55 and 299, sometime in the 1950s. Parked in front is Bill Conner's white, 1938 LaSalle convertible coupe, which he acquired in the late forties or early fifties for \$35 from Dick Clinton, who owned the Gardiner Hotel. Bill sold the car in the sixties for \$800.

The property across the street from The Sugar Bowl on Route 44/55, facing the intersection with Route 299, was completely wooded at the time, though it had a well. With Ruoff's encouragement, Bill bought the property in 1958 for just a couple of thousand dollars, cleared it, and built Bill's Garage. The building had two garage bays on the ground floor and an apartment above.

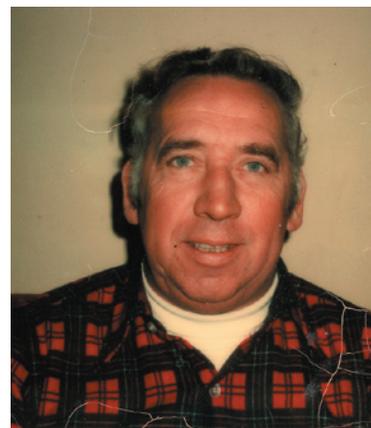
Karen DeWitt, the daughter of Dr. Virgil D. DeWitt, a family doctor in New Paltz, was working as a waitress at Lake Minnewaska in the summer of 1954. On the way home at the end of their shift, Karen and her co-workers would occasionally stop off at Emil's Tavern. Not surprisingly, she ran into

Bill Conner there. Karen and Bill married in 1955. They had one daughter, Cynthia Conner Romano, who now lives in New Jersey with her teenage son, Nicholas.

In his spare time, Bill loved high-speed sports, and not as a spectator. In the fifties, he was a drag racer at Montgomery Airport (now the Orange County Airport). He trained as a race car driver at both Lime Rock in Connecticut and the Skip Barber Racing School in Florida. Racing stock cars at the Richard Petty Driving School, also in Florida, was a pinnacle experience. "I've been down there three times. I took their cars up to the extreme - hit 173.1 miles an hour," he says with pride. Bill was also a downhill skier at Alta, Utah and Vail, Colorado. "Can't do that anymore. I've had my knees replaced and they told me 'Don't do that.' But I keep moving." The action he sees these days comes from moving rocks around on his property with some construction equipment that he owns.

Although Bill's Garage enjoyed a prime business spot, the easily accessed location had occasional drawbacks. One night in the sixties, at about 2 a.m., Bill heard a crash outside. He jumped out of bed and saw the flash of the back-up lights on one of his two Oldsmobiles going on. Grabbing his .38 revolver he told Karen, "If I don't come back, call the State Police right away." He ran downstairs and outside in just the shorts he had been sleeping in.

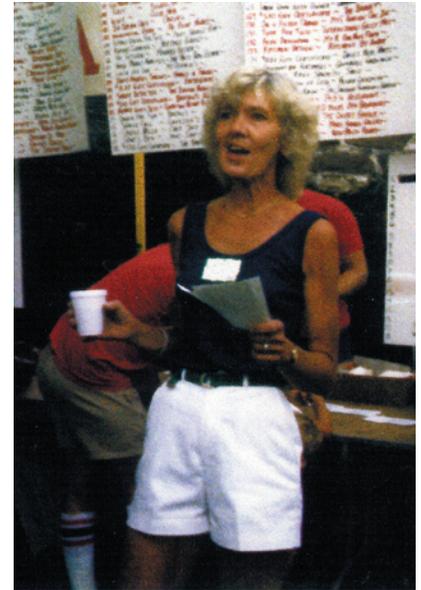
The stolen car took off up the hill with Bill in hot pursuit in the other Olds. Just beyond the hairpin turn the first car came to a halt. Bill stopped his car about a hundred feet back. Six young men piled out of the first car. Bill stepped out, walked towards the car and said, "Okay, boys, get back in the car." "Who the hell are you?" they demanded.



Bill Conner, undated Polaroid, about age 50

Bill picks up the story: “Boom! I shot that .38 just over their heads. You shoot a gun at night, I didn’t realize it, fire comes out of the end of it. So they all piled right back into the car. One kid opened the door and said, ‘Can I talk to you?’ I said to him, ‘You close that door, or you’re gonna be the first one that gets shot.’

“And I’m standing there, with just a pair of shorts on, in the middle of 44/55 at two o’clock in the morning. You know, you hold a gun like that, it gets heavy. And then, all of a sudden, I heard the sirens. The State Police pulled up first and Jerry Mack jumped out. Jerry was a green trooper – just got on the force. He says, ‘Holy crow, Bill’s shot somebody!’ He’d seen the hole in the back window that the thieves had made when they threw a brick to break into the car. Jerry thought I’d shot the window out. Then the sheriff arrived, followed by Bruce Keeping, who’d just joined the New Paltz Police Department. There were so many cops up there. They took over and I could finally drop the gun.” It turned out that all six of those kids had criminal records. They had taken the bus to New Paltz, hiked up the mountain, and then decided to steal a car. That got them a night in jail. Bill got no compensation . . . except for a pretty good story.



Karen DeWitt Conner working at the Elting Memorial Library Fair, 1985.

While Bill was building his business, Karen Conner rapidly became the go-to person for volunteer leadership in Gardiner and New Paltz. She was a lifelong member of the New Paltz Reformed Church and capped her many years of service there by becoming the first female deacon in its three hundred year history. Karen was a founding member of the Gardiner Republican Club; assisted the American Red Cross in many capacities; served on the Executive Board of the Campus School in New Paltz; organized entertainment at the Ulster County Home for the Aged; and took on a variety of responsibilities for the American Cancer Society. In 1971, Karen joined the board of the Elting Memorial Library and later served as president for many years until her untimely death at age 60, in 1994.



A bear taken in 1969 by Al Tobin on 3,843 ft. Peekamoose Mountain, west of the Ashokan Reservoir. It’s mounted on the hood of Bill Conner’s 1969 Ford pickup so that the head moved up and down using the snow plow lift. When the triumphant hunters returned to the Mountain Brauhaus with their trophy, head wagging, “the whole place cleared out,” according to Bill.

In a few words, Bill describes the arc of independent gas stations and the practice of auto repair over the past fifty years: “We built the garage, saved some money. I had a gas station, two sets of pumps, when the property across the street came on the market. At that time, any corner that was empty, they’d build a gas station on it. I bought that corner in the early sixties. I had a \$20,000 check with me and I ended up paying \$30,000 for it. I bought it at public auction. I don’t own it any more.”

“I finally closed the garage. I lost James Coddington, who had worked for me for many years, and then computers [in car engines] came out. If you didn’t have the money to send somebody to school to learn it, you were lost. *I’m* lost today, trying to work on a car. I can find the oil stick and check the oil and that’s about it,” he observed wryly.

About twenty years ago, Bill locked the door and decided to quit the business. He went up to the house and said, "Karen, I've closed the garage." To pay off their mortgage, he sold the vacant lot across the street. Bill bought a tractor-trailer to have something to do and for about eight years transported heavy equipment, such as excavators and bulldozers. One morning, he suffered a slight stroke and decided not to get back into that truck. Bill's Garage had been closed for about three years before it was finally rented, along with the upstairs apartment. Over time, Bill had also acquired other properties in the area and now has five rentals altogether. They bring in income though, as he says, "My tax bills keep going up."

Karen wasn't the only member of the Conner family to serve the community. Bill was Gardiner Magistrate (justice of the peace) for eight years and served as president of the Ulster County Magistrates Association for a year. He was a lieutenant in the Gardiner Fire Department and, though now inactive, has been a member for well over fifty years. Bill belongs to the Marakill Rod and Gun Club and just received a pin honoring his fifty-five years of membership in Masonic Lodge 627 in Walden.

Before Gardiner had a rescue squad, Bill was a central figure in an impromptu but vital rescue service, particularly for emergencies on the mountain, because of the strategic placement of his garage. With a key that could unlock the chain blocking the carriage roads, he had access to the mountain property. "I'd just go up there with a pickup truck. Now, you have to have fire, police, medics . . . We just went up, took 'em out and put 'em in the back of the pickup." Not surprisingly, Bill knew all the climbers – Dr. Hans Kraus, Chris and Wally Robenheimer, and many others.



Karen and Bill Conner in an undated photo, taken probably in the late eighties or early nineties.



The 1981 bus crash at the hairpin turn.

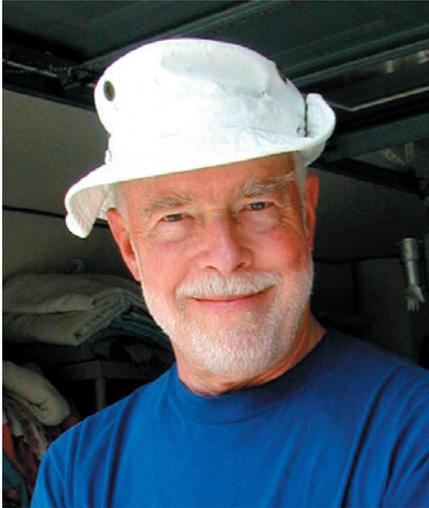
Bill's rescue experiences are the source of many terrific stories. One winter day in 1953, John MacEntee ventured out onto the ice at Heddens Lake in a VW bus. The ice *seemed* thick enough. He was wrong. Bill remembered, "By the time we got the bus out, there wasn't much left of it. In those days, you just put a chain on it and pulled. Now, you could use air bags and float it out."

February 22, 1981 brought another close call. "A busload of people came down the mountain and at the hairpin turn, they just shot off the edge of the road. The bus was hanging there, teetering. I had two small

wreckers, so I went up and just tied it down until a bigger wrecker from Sonny's Garage in Modena could come and pull the bus back on to the road. We got everybody out. Nobody was hurt."

Over the years, Bill's full head of dark hair has given way to a receding hairline and longish white hair. An easy smile and the laugh lines around his eyes tell their own story. His tan suggests someone who has spent a lot of time outside, and still does.

The mountain is still an important presence in Bill's life. His home, on a knoll above the intersection of Route 44/55 and Route 299, is within a quarter of a mile of the sheer rock face of the Shawangunks. The hawks circle the sky between his home and top of the ridge, a thousand feet above sea level. The play of light and clouds on that nearly five hundred foot high eastern face creates an ever-changing mix of earth colors. As I left, Bill said he would "probably go and move some rocks around."



**Raymond D. Smith, Jr.**

**Writer / Editor**

Ray Smith, author of the Dot Decker story and Editor of the Betty Moran, Annie O'Neill and Vivian Beatty stories for the Hudson Valley History Project Gardiner, spent 37 years as an international banker and credit officer at Bankers Trust Company in New York City and London. He retired twelve years ago. Ray and his wife, Anne Allbright Smith, moved to Gardiner three years ago.

Ray was an English major in college and during his undergraduate years was, at one time or another, either editor or managing editor of every student publication on campus except the yearbook. He is an avid reader and enjoys writing.



**Barbara Whitney Petruzzelli**

**Editor**

Barbara Whitney Petruzzelli, editor of the Joe Katz, Gladys DuBois, Burnice Aumick and Bill Conner stories for the Hudson Valley History Project Gardiner, is the library director at Mount Saint Mary College in Newburgh, NY. She has edited a number of books and articles, including *Connecting Campus and Community*, published by the Haworth Press in 2006 and *Strength/Beauty/Spirit* by G. Steve Jordan, published in 2003. Barbara has served as an editor for the Hudson Valley History Project Gardiner since its inception. She and her husband Lou have lived in Gardiner since 2003. Their son, Matthew, attends Keene State College in New Hampshire.