

Conquering The River I

Locally-Funded Meridian Bridge Was A Game-Changer For Yankton

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The Press & Dakotan

When it opened in 1924, Meridian Bridge at Yankton provided a vital link for vehicles to travel freely between South Dakota and Nebraska — and points far beyond.

The double-decker bridge has stood as Yankton's landmark since it opened for traffic. The bridge, the first built over the Missouri, represented the dream of connecting the two states.

The National Park Service provided a narrative of the bridge's origins and history.

Prior to Meridian Bridge, crossings of the Missouri River required a ferry or a seasonally operated pontoon bridge. The bridge was built by a group of private investors known as the Meridian Bridge Company.

The company's initial efforts came in 1915 when the investors gained federal approval to build a permanent bridge across the Missouri River. The effort was sidelined by World War I. The company revived the effort in 1919 under the leadership of Deloss B. Gurney, a prominent seed merchant.

The bridge's completion provided a boon for the area, creating a huge impact on the social and business aspect of the entire region.

The Meridian Highway Bridge was the final link for pioneer travelers using the 3,100 mile International Meridian Highway from Mexico City, Mexico, to Winnipeg, Canada.

When the bridge was officially opened to traffic in October 1924, the total cost stood at more than \$1.1 million. The lower deck had been equipped for an anticipated railroad, which never materialized.

In 1946, the company agreed to sell the toll bridge to the City of Yankton for \$700,000. After recouping the expense through toll collection, the city turned the bridge into a free facility, which was subsequently taken over by the State of South Dakota.

Toll-collecting ceased in 1953, the same year that the bridge's previously idle lower deck was converted into a highway lane, allowing one-way traffic on both levels.

The Meridian Bridge was popular from the moment it opened, according to Kathy Grow, who teamed with Lois Varvel to co-author the book, "The Bridge We Built: The Story of Yankton's Meridian Bridge."

Nearly 500 vehicles drove over the top deck within the first hour of its opening on Saturday night, Oct. 11, 1924, Grow said.

Meridian Bridge was unique not only because of its structure but also because local citizens initiated the project and made the financial investment, according to Grow.

"The investments were made mostly by folks in this (Yankton) area, and during hard times, too. The tolls collected helped pay expenses and dividends, but were never enough to pay off all the debt," she said.

"That required the city's purchase of the bridge, after a public vote on April 2, 1946. It took seven years of city ownership, and the demands made on area transportation by the building of Gavins Point Dam, before it finally was made 'Free in '53!'"

The "Free in '53" motto referred to the time when the bridge became debt free and tolls were no longer collected from motorists.

For many years, Yankton held the local nickname of "Bridge City." The community even considered December 1, 1952, a day of celebration when the wife of former bridge company paid Deloss Gurney the last toll and the bridge became officially debt free.

The bridge has undergone several rehabilitation projects including the construction of new approach spans, deck modifications and several structural steel repairs within its 76-year life. The bridge was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in May 1993.

A section of the bridge was raised for boats, Grow said.

"The mechanism was lifted for a celebration in 1963, and it was also lifted for maintenance purposes, but we (two authors) believe the last time it was lifted to allow a boat to go under was May 9, 1961," she said. "They could have continued (to lift the section) until the left mechanisms were removed in 1984."

Boats were not the only craft passing under Meridian Bridge, Grow said, as planes flew under the bridge.

The Meridian Bridge was closed to traffic Oct. 11, 2008, with the dedication of the Discovery Bridge to the west. The ceremony for the new span came exactly 84 years to the date after the original ribbon cutting for the Meridian Bridge.

Now, three years after it was closed, Meridian Bridge will provide a path for travelers of another kind — walkers, runners and bikers.

Restoration work is nearing completion on Meridian Bridge, scheduled for re-opening in September 2011.

Despite some equipment delays, a South Dakota Department of Transportation (SDDOT) official told the *Press & Dakotan* that the contractor for the Meridian Bridge conversion hopes to have the project complete by early September.

"We're just working through all the issues we have and moving forward to convert the bridge to a pedestrian structure," said Kevin Heiman of the SDDOT.

The contractor, PCI Roads of St. Michael, Minn., uses crane jacks to lift the truss of the bridge one inch in order to replace 12 bearings in six different locations. The crane lifts 610 tons at each location, according to Heiman.

The restoration includes lighting and hand rails, Heiman said. The project calls for a 22-inch rail on top of the concrete barrier on the upper deck. On the



ABOVE: The Meridian Bridge, shown here near its completion in 1924 at a cost of \$1.1 million, provided a key commercial link to Nebraska for the community of Yankton. Prior to 1924, crossing the Missouri near Yankton required either taking a ferry or crossing a seasonally-operated pontoon bridge. BELOW LEFT: Pontoon bridges like this one were used by motorists to cross the river when the weather and tides allowed. In winter, those wishing to cross the river usually drove across the ice. BELOW RIGHT: Approximately 3,000 people turned out for the pouring of the first concrete for the Meridian Bridge project on April 6, 1921. (From the book "Yankton: The Way It Was!" by Bob Karolevitz)



RIGHT: This vintage Janousek photo shows the first boat passing under the "Meridian Highway Bridge," as it was referred to in the early days, on July 30, 1924, about 2 1/2 months before the bridge was formally dedicated. (P&D archive photo) LEFT: The Meridian Bridge in the summer of 2011, with workers nearing completion on a project that will convert the bridge into a pedestrian walkway that will hook up with parkland on the Nebraska side of the river. (Kelly Hertz/P&D)

lower deck, a shorter fence will be inside the existing steel truss.

Approximately 10,000 feet of railing will be installed on the bridge, he stated. Crews also need to do expansion joint replacement and spot painting to complete the project.

Federal stimulus funds, provided by South Dakota and Nebraska, was used for the conversion project. Meridian Bridge measures 1,668 feet long on eight concrete piers.

Work resumed on the \$4.8 million conversion of the approximately 87-year-old bridge into a bicy-

cling/walking trail in the spring after a winter hiatus. The contract called for the project to be complete by Nov. 1, 2010. However, more steel deterioration was found on the bridge than expected, which required additional planning and work.

Heiman said the change orders could mean the project's cost will exceed \$5 million. Currently, he stated that the additional expenditures do not exceed 5 percent of the original cost.

Heiman encouraged the public to stay off the bridge as work continues.

"Periodically, we've found people on the struc-

ture," he said. "We've also seen them breaking through the safety fence and entering it. There are open holes and major hazards on the bridge, and we ask that people stay clear of the site for their own safety and that of the workers."

Before its closure in 2008, Meridian Bridge was occasionally opened for pedestrians, according to Todd Larson, the City of Yankton's parks and recreation director.

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