

Bridge's history spans nine decades

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Last summer, I was fortunate to be able to take a boat ride from Vallejo that explored the underside of both the present and the new Carquinez bridges. Seeing those massive pylons and huge spans of metal construction was an incredibly impressive sight.

Before the current Carquinez Bridge opened in 1927, Solano County truly was an isolated county. Travelers had to go through the East Bay and via Stockton to reach Sacramento.

Eventually two Vallejo merchants, Aven J. Hanford and Oscar H. Klatt came up with the idea of a ferry service. Hanford owned grocery stores in Vallejo, Oakland and Alameda; Klatt was a traveling salesman. Tired of the detour through Benicia, Martinez and the Tunnel Road (I-24), they founded the Rodeo-Vallejo Ferry Company in 1918.

By 1919, cars were becoming the preferred mode of transportation; California counted more than 600,000 cars that year. The ferry service proved very popular. Often travelers had to wait in long lines for ferry service. Hanford and Klatt began to think about a bridge spanning the Carquinez Strait.

They were not the only group eventually applying to the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors for a franchise to build and operate a toll bridge across the Carquinez Strait. The Dillon's Point Development Company and the San Francisco Transit Company pursued the same goal.

Solano County supervisors had "no authority to grant the franchise or to designate where the bridge shall be located, as the state law provides that location shall be determined by the county on the left bank of a stream," explained the Vacaville Reporter in an article in December 1922.

But eventually Hanford and Klatt won the franchise and, on May 28, 1923, incorporated the American Toll Bridge Company of California.

Building the bridge began soon thereafter. It would take four years and huge sums of money. The difficulties and dangers were enormous. Several people lost their life during construction, among them 38-year-old Joseph Smith. On Nov. 19, 1926, the Vacaville Reporter wrote: "Joseph Smith ... employee of the United States Steel

Products Company, which is doing the steel construction work on the Carquinez bridge, fell 200 feet to his death from the structure at the Crockett end Saturday. In spite of the height of his fall, it is believed that Smith might have hit the water alive, but he struck a girder on the way down and his skull was crushed.

"Smith is the sixth workman on that job to lose his life since construction of the great span began some months ago."

In October 1926, Solano County supervisors passed two resolutions for the formation of a joint highway district with Napa, including the building of a new road from the Carquinez bridgehead to the existing highway, at the estimated cost of \$77,125.

Finally, construction was completed. On May 19, 1927, the Solano County Courier hailed the bridge as "the world's largest highway bridge representing an investment of \$8,000,000 and requiring four years to build, the bridge that links British Columbia with Mexico, uniting three flags."

On May 21, 1917, the new bridge was formally opened. A spectacular program of yacht and boat-racing with more than 250 boats set the stage. William J. Buchanan, chairman of the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors, gave the welcome address. C. Derleth Jr., chief engineer of the project and dean of the College of Civil Engineering at the University of California, spoke about the construction process. At 2:30 p.m., the bridge was officially dedicated and christened.

"President Calvin Coolidge will press a golden key in Washington, which will release bombs on the central pier and unfurl the stars and stripes over the highest tower," wrote the Vacaville Reporter the day before, on May 20. "Mrs. Aven J. Hanford will break a bottle of champagne on the north main tower. Carrier pigeons from the Sperry Flour Company's loft will be released, each feathered messenger carrying a brief note announcing to their home lofts from Vancouver, B.C., to San Diego, Cal. that the bridge is opened."

The governors from California, Washington, Oregon and Nevada presented speeches.

The toll had been set at 75 cents per car and 15 cents per passenger, but passengers were allowed to cross for free on this first day.

Toll booths were staffed with toll collectors. One of them was Bill Alonzo, who worked on the bridge during the 1930s. While traffic quickly increased, there still was time to take note of individual travelers and sometimes even to chat with some of them.

"I met many California state legislators," Bill Alonzo remembered. "We recognized

who they were immediately because of their license plate. Those from the Senate had a license with a red S followed by the number of their district and those from the Assembly had a blue A with the number of their district.”

“Work on the Carquinez Bridge was always pleasant and very often exciting when celebrities came through, such as Andy Devine, Skinnay Ennis, Max Baer, Clark Gable and Carole Lombard, and Gov. Frank F. Merriam. His car was driven by a CHP officer and had two small blue lights in front and back of the limousine, so we recognized it easily. When President Roosevelt came through, bridge traffic was stopped for about 20 minutes in order for the Secret Service to check out the safety of the crossing. As the president’s car came by, it pulled over and stopped close to my lane to wait for the Secret Service to regroup before going on to Mare Island Shipyard. Congressman Frank H. Buck from Vacaville was in the car with Roosevelt and as Mr. Buck recognized me, he said “Hi, Bill,” and the president waved and echoed, “Hi, Bill.”

Bill Alonzo actually met Clark Gable and Carole Lombard when they drove across the toll bridge one night.

He said “The film ‘They Knew What They Wanted,’ starring Carole Lombard and Charles Laughton, was being made in Napa Valley in 1940, when I met and had a nice chat with Clark Gable and Carole Lombard. I asked them where they were traveling to this late at night (midnight) and Gable answered that there was no filming that day, so they spent the full day in San Francisco. Carole said San Francisco was her favorite city, they toured all their favorite spots, had dinner at the fabulous Fairmont and had to get back to their hotel in Napa early. ...”

“I asked if they still lived on their ranch in the San Fernando Valley, and Lombard answered ‘Yes, Clark won’t eat store-bought eggs, that’s why we bought a ranch.’”

Not everybody was happy with the toll they had to pay. “Ex-President Herbert Hoover was the only celebrity who was full of scorn. He had a mad-on toward the Bridge Company and wanted to make an issue of a private company charging an exorbitant toll (60 cents per car and 10 cents per passenger) when the taxpayer paid for the state roads leading up to the private company’s bridge. He made a futile attempt to deride me, but I stated that the toll was 80 cents. He gave his chauffeur a one dollar bill, then I gave back 20 cents in change and said thank you.”

The American Toll Bridge Company of California operated the bridge until 1940. On Sept. 16, the state of California took over the operation of both the Carquinez and the Antioch bridges. California Highways and Public Works magazine said in its September 1940 edition: “Promptly at 11:30 a.m., Gov. Culbert L. Olson, as chairman of the California Toll Bridge Authority, severed with a blow torch the golden chain stretched

across the Carquinez bridgehead on the Vallejo side of the Carquinez Straits, and personally purchased the first toll ticket at the new rate of 30 cents per automobile and passengers, thus formally dedicating the structure as a state-owned span.”

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