

From Ferry Boat to Bridge

One of the first problems confronting the Iowa pioneers was the establishment of ferries — an age-old problem of river towns — how to get on the other side. Flat boats and canoes were used by the early settlers of Keokuk to transport passengers and goods between Illinois and Iowa. These were replaced in 1839 with the more comfortable ferry boats, but even the best of these craft were at the mercy of wind, waves, and shallow stages of water.

In 1839 David W. Kilbourne was given permission by the territorial legislature of Iowa to operate a ferry between Montrose, Iowa, and Nauvoo, Illinois. The same year, John Gaines and Otis Reynolds carried passengers on a ferry between the mouth of the Des Moines River and Warsaw, Illinois. In 1842 Robert Patterson acquired the right to operate a ferry from Keokuk to Hamilton, Illinois, and in 1848 Adam Hine began operation of a ferry across the Mississippi to the Illinois shore opposite Keokuk.

These ferries served the needs of Keokuk until the coming of the railroad era in the mid-fifties. Then a bridge became the topic of interest and the subject of numerous schemes. The first steps were

taken in 1855, when the Illinois legislature gave a perpetual charter to the Hancock County Bridge Company. Depression and Civil War intervened, however, before Keokuk could get her bridge. On January 15, 1866, the Keokuk and Hamilton Bridge Company was incorporated, under the general laws of Iowa, with a capital stock of one million dollars. H. T. Reid headed this company as president; Guy Wells was vice-president; George C. Anderson, treasurer; and J. H. Barker, secretary. Right of way over the islands off the Illinois shore was acquired, and in January, 1867, an agreement was made with the Des Moines Valley Railroad Company to purchase the charter and build the bridge.

The railroad's interest was to consolidate an east-west rail link with the Toledo, Peoria and Warsaw and the Peoria and Logansport railroads in Illinois. Grants were at once made by the city of Keokuk for track space and depots. This plan was more or less upset when a railroad was begun from Keokuk to Montrose, and then to Fort Madison and Burlington, completing a route from St. Louis. However, negotiations continued to the point where the railroads at last purchased the old charter and agreed to build the bridge. Ultimately the Pennsylvania Railroad acquired the interest, and Andrew Carnegie, president of the railroad and owner of the Keystone Bridge Company, became the first president of the Keokuk and Hamil-

ton Bridge Company, with Theodore Gilman of New York as secretary.

In May, 1868, the city of Keokuk granted the bridge company a right of way across the levee. First stone for the piers was laid August 12, 1869. Except for seasonal interruptions, due to high water, construction progressed. On Tuesday, March 28, 1871, the draw span was swung into place and "Keokuk and Hamilton shook hands over the new bridge." The finishing touches were completed rapidly, and plans were made for the first railroad crossing on April 10. "High winds" intervened, however, and it was not until April 18 that a "locomotive and train of cars" crossed from Keokuk to Hamilton. Two passenger coaches were attached to the locomotive, the "Iowa." On one of them was a passenger who must have looked back over the years to 1839 when he used to cross the river many times daily in his ferry boat. David W. Kilbourne, first to operate a ferry in the Keokuk area, was now, after thirty-two years, still in the transportation business. As president of the Des Moines Valley Railroad, he was an honored passenger on the first train to cross the new bridge.

On May 23, 1871, a formal test of the bridge took place. Five engines, an aggregate of 250 tons, were run onto the bridge and placed "in different positions on the various spans until they reached the opposite side"; the test was completed "by running them all over together."

Keokuk was proud of her bridge. Thirteen piers in all, including the pivot one for the draw span, were constructed of Sonora stone. The bridge boasted the longest draw span in the country at the time, and there were ten other spans in the whole structure. The over-all length was 2,192 feet, with railroad tracks down the center, a passage for vehicles on either side of the tracks, and five-foot walks for foot passengers on the outside, the total width being twenty feet. The west terminal was at the foot of Blondeau Street in Keokuk and the eastern one at the Hamilton, Illinois, depot. James S. Smith was the engineer in charge of construction, which employed 160 men.

Official opening to railroad traffic was on June 13, 1871, when the passenger train of the Toledo, Peoria & Warsaw Railroad, drawn by the locomotive "Canton," made the first trip. Messrs. Barry and Browning shipped the first car of grain, consigned to an elevator in Baltimore. The following day the entire bridge was thrown open to the public. On big boards at each terminal, the rates of toll were listed as follows:

Each foot passenger	5¢
Each hog or sheep	5¢
Each head loose cattle	10¢
Each yoke of cattle	25¢
Each led horse or mule	15¢
Each horse or mule and rider	15¢
Each vehicle drawn by one horse or mule	20¢
Each vehicle drawn by two horses or mules	25¢

Each vehicle drawn by three horses or mules	40¢
Each omnibus drawn by two horses or mules	50¢
Each wagon drawn by four horses or mules	60¢
Additional horse or mule or ox attached to wagon or other vehicle	15¢

As late as the day of the bridge opening, the railroads and the city council of Keokuk argued over the location of a depot, but the issue was decided that day when the city fathers, spurred, perhaps, by an editorial in the *Gate City*, granted a tract of land above the bridge for the depot. The editorial pointed out: "The bridge is open; the roads want to use it. Give them a place they ask and let business begin. Let Iowa and western shippers know that when they reach Keokuk, no ferries are in the way, but three railroads are competing for the carrying of trade to and from the east."

On June 20, 1871, the ferry boat *Keokuk* made her last trip. The *Gate City* declared: "Keokuk is the first place on the river to have a bridge across the Mississippi that will accommodate all kinds of travel."

The most serious accident to the bridge occurred the night of November 4, 1881, when the steamboat *War Eagle*, caught in the current of a fall flood, became unmanageable and swung stern foremost into one of the spans, damaging it and causing the boat to be beached just as it sank. The damaged span was replaced with a temporary

wooden one, which, after the rebuilt section was put in place, was taken apart and floated across the river to the slough at the Hamilton end of the dike where it was reassembled and is still in use, the only covered bridge in the vicinity.

With the advent of the automobile and the use by railroads of increasingly heavier equipment, it was found that the bridge was inadequate for all purposes, and efforts were made to have the bridge company improve its facilities. Perhaps to push the Keokuk and Hamilton Bridge Company into action, an independent company was formed in 1912 — the Inter City Bridge Company — and plans laid and Congressional support obtained for another bridge which would use the Keokuk Dam, then in construction, for railway traffic. Naturally, the Keokuk and Hamilton Bridge Company opposed this move, and Andrew Carnegie himself appealed to President Woodrow Wilson, who refused to intervene. The Carnegie forces claimed they had no money to improve their bridge, but C. R. Joy of Keokuk, president of the new venture, refuted their claims.

Finally, a Congressional committee agreed to visit Keokuk. Headed by Judge C. W. Adamson of Georgia, chairman of the House committee on interstate and foreign commerce, a group, which included Congressmen Fred Stevens of Minnesota, John Esch of Wisconsin, Dan Stephens of Nebraska, and Thetus Simpson of Tennessee,

came to Keokuk on January 12, 1914, to look over the situation. They were greeted at the Gate City by Major G. A. Hoffman of the Army Engineers, Congressman Charles A. Kennedy of Montrose, who had introduced a bill in Congress to use the Keokuk dam for railroad travel, and Thomas Wilkinson of the Upper Mississippi River Improvement Association. Despite the almost zero temperature of the day, the committee tramped over the properties in question and at the end of the visit Judge Adamson in a newspaper interview conceded that a bigger bridge was needed. Following more hearings, the Keokuk and Hamilton Bridge Company agreed to reconstruct, employing Ralph Modjeski, a noted engineer on such properties, to draw the plans. This work took more than a year, culminating with the opening of the new structure on August 19, 1916.

Piers had been rebuilt and strengthened to hold the 3,500 tons of steel out of which the thirteen spans were fashioned. A million board feet of lumber were used. An upper deck was built 56 feet above the normal water line, 62 feet above the low water mark. The bridge was lengthened to 3,500 feet, with 2,194 feet of approaches. The new draw span, which swung open and shut for the first time on March 26, 1916, was 382 feet long.

With the bridge modernized and able to handle all types of traffic, the city of Keokuk set about

the task of making it a free bridge. In 1941 an agreement was negotiated between Royall D. Edsell of New York, then president of the company, and Mayor John L. Ward of Keokuk, whereby the bridge would be toll-free after \$775,000 of first lien revenue bonds were retired.

Intervention of World War II, and the imposition of gasoline rationing, was expected to slow up traffic, thus delaying the important day, but despite these handicaps it was found that the bonds would be retired in seven years. The dream became a reality on January 13, 1949, when Mayor Frank A. Willmering cut the ribbon which had been drawn across the entrance, thus symbolizing the freeing of the bridge from tolls. Officials of Hamilton and other Illinois communities joined with Keokuk in celebration of the culmination of years of hope on the part of the two communities. The bridge affairs are now administered by a commission named by the mayor, and the structure has been rechristened the Keokuk Municipal Bridge.

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