

Wisconsin Rapids

Bridge History



1935

WISCONSIN RAPIDS BRIDGE HISTORY

For many years there stood back of the Witter Hotel on the bank of the Wisconsin River where the east end of the new bridge now rests, a tall rampike towering in the skies some seventy-five feet or more with a trunk about three feet in diameter at the base, with its dead roots firmly fastened to a large granite boulder, a silent, barren and ghostly evidence of a once majestic white pine that stood during its life like a giant green plume overlooking the waters of the Wisconsin River. Hundreds of these giants of the forest, rearing their heads proudly in the skies some one hundred fifty feet above the ground, grew and flourished along both banks of the Wisconsin River from the swimming pool to our Grand Avenue bridge and far beyond.

Back from the East bank of the Wisconsin River a swamp, fed by numerous springs from the hillside, was filled with a thick growth of pine, hemlock, spruce, willows and alders. This once was part of the river basin through which at least a part of the Wisconsin River flowed. Fed by these springs, Arpins Creek, which had its source beyond the Green Bay & Western Railroad Tracks, flowed through what is now the East Side Market Square into the Wisconsin River about where the Daly Drug & Jewelry Store is now located.

From his little log cabin on the river bank, about where the swimming pool is located, a Canadian trapper and fur trader, Louis Les Loud, in 1835 listened to the roar of the mighty river as its turbulent waters battered their way through the large granite rocks. The roar of its current

could be heard for miles as it echoed through the dense forest, and he looked down the river to the place where our new bridge is now located, upon the majestic forest hanging over the banks of the river. As the sun went down it was an inspiring landscape. In his solitude, he was interested only in the furs of the beaver, muskrat, otter and mink and other wild game which his trap and gun could retrieve. Little did he dream of the industry that was to capture and use the great power of that mighty river, and his wildest imagination could not conceive the prosperous and beautiful city that was to enjoy its waters and surroundings. Nor did he dream that the immense forest along its banks and far out from its shores would so completely yield to the woodmen's axe. A demand was rapidly growing for the white pine lumber for building purposes and the lumber industry took possession of the forests and river. The Biron saw mill came into operation in the year 1839 built by Saye and Draper and bought by Francis Biron in 1846, and the Rablin saw mill, built by J. J. and George Cruikshank and Robert Bloomer, where the swimming pool is located, came into operation in 1838. A saw mill at Port Edwards, then called French Town, was started by John Edwards in 1840. The Neeves saw mill, about where the Henry Demitz home now stands, was soon added to the other saw mills, and the Garrison saw mill was built on the west side of the river about where the Consolidated mill is now located. All of these mills were fed from the huge forests that surrounded the Villages of Grand Rapids and Centralia. The droning hum of the circular saw converting the great pines into

lumber could be heard in the small settlement where Wisconsin Rapids now exists throughout the early years of Grand Rapids and Centralia, and in the place of the forest there came pioneer settlers to work in the saw mills and to build their pioneer homes, many of log construction.

Small stores and shops sprung up to supply the new inhabitants, clinging close to the Wisconsin River where the mills were located and where the drives of logs came down the river to the mills.

The log drivers were crews of men, at that time mostly Canadians, who dislodged the logs from jams in the Wisconsin River where they piled up in huge masses. They operated in large boats called batteaus. Their work was hazardous and strenuous and the hours long. They were dressed with heavy boots with spikes in the soles for clinging to the logs which they rode often down the stream with great skill. They had Mackinaw trousers of color with silk sashes of red, blue and green tied about the waist with tassels at the ends hanging down from their waist, Mackinaw jackets of different colors and silk handkerchiefs of various colors tied loosely about the neck. The whole dress was in imitation of Canadian voyagers. At night they swarmed the streets of the downtown area and the wooden sidewalks were ruffled and torn from the pegs of their shoes. Their wages were from \$3.00 to \$5.00 per day which was a tremendous wage in those days, but they worked from sunrise to sundown. They were great patrons of the numerous taverns overhanging the river banks and spent their money lavishly. Brawls were common and the little wooden lockup located on the East side Market Square always housed a number of

the lumberjacks.

There were small settlements on both sides of the river. Communication at first was by canoes and boats. The Canadian trapper from the log hut in 1835 could see down the river the colorful sight of Indians crossing the river in their canoes and dug-outs where the present Grand Avenue bridge is now located. The location of this crossing was logical because it was the first place for many miles of the river that the water rested peacefully enough to allow canoes and boats to cross without great effort, and the high bank where the Rapids Theater is located was the closest to the river and avoided a long swamp and creek crossing.

This fact determined the location of Grand Avenue or what became Grand Avenue later, but which at first was a mere trail to the river bank on each side. Later boats took the place of canoes and then a ferry in the year 1857. Then came a demand for a bridge as the settlements on both sides grew, and business and social communications became a necessity.

The Legislature was accordingly asked for a franchise to build such bridge. Chapter 364 of the Laws of 1856 when Wood County was a part of Portage County granted a franchise to build a bridge to T. B. Scott, who was a pioneer lumberman and who left his name in Wisconsin Rapids by contributing money for the library bearing his name, George E. Neeves who was also a pioneer lumberman, Henry Rablin, who was one of the owners of the Rablin Mill and a brother of John Rablin who came later as a prominent settler, J. H. Compton, Henry Jackson, and Orestes Garri-

son, owner of the Garrison saw mill on the west side, who came to Centralia in 1848 or 1849.

The bridge was to be sixteen feet in width and was to be built so as to allow a free passage at all times for rafts coming down the river and the grantees of this franchise were to be held liable for any injuries or detention of lumber floating down the Wisconsin River. This was to be a toll bridge with the following fees for crossing:

A vehicle drawn by two horses, mules or oxen	25c
and for each additional horse, mule or ox	8c
For any vehicle drawn by one horse or mule	25c
For a single horse	10c
For horses or cattle in droves, each	5c
For hogs or sheep in droves, each	3c
For foot passengers, each	3c
For one horse or a mule	15c

These tolls had to be posted in a conspicuous place on the bridge. Any person crossing the bridge without paying the toll was to forfeit \$5.00. It was a common sight to see yokes of oxen hitched to wagons or sleighs or teams of mules or horses or droves of sheep or hogs crossing the first bridge.

No bridge was built under this franchise. The franchise was amended by Chapter 142 of the Laws of 1859 and named a set of grantees differing somewhat from the first. The licensees were T. B. Scott, George E. Neeves, J. H. Compton, Henry Rablin (erroneously written "Robin"), Henry Jackson, Orestes Garrison, Joseph Wood (after whom the County was named), James McGraw, John Rablin, (a brother of Henry), E. G. Bean, Henry W. Jackson, and J. H. Lang who

was an early surveyor and platted the Lang Plat of early Grand Rapids. This franchise ran to the "Grand Rapids Bridge Company" which was chartered for the purpose of building a bridge across the Wisconsin River at Grand Rapids. The tolls and other provisions remained about the same.

This act was again amended by Chapter 41 of the Laws of 1861 and named only Joseph Wood, Henry W. Jackson I, George Weller, John Rablin and Jessie H. Lang and the bridge was to be constructed "at the foot of Drake Street in the Village of Grand Rapids to such a convenient point on the west side of the river as said Company may select."

The County of Wood had been organized by Chapter 54 of the Laws of March 29, 1856, and this bridge was designated as being in the County of Wood. Joseph Wood, one of the grantees, was a member of the Legislature and caused this county to be set off from Portage County.

This franchise was again amended by Chapter 178, Laws of 1865, or perhaps better to say a new franchise was granted to others to build a bridge in the village of Grand Rapids and is designated as amendment to the other charters. This franchise ran to George Neeves (erroneously spelled Nevis), Thomas B. Scott, Isaac L. Mosher (who later became a County Judge of Wood County), John Edwards, Jr. (the owner of a saw mill at Port Edwards), John Rablin (who took the place of Henry Rablin), and James Meehan (a prominent lumberman who had a saw mill at the Village of Meehan, Portage County). The act created a body corporate by the name of "Wood County Bridge Company." The tolls to be charged were the same,

except for hogs and sheep in droves the charge was only 2c each.

The bridge was actually built under this charter in 1867. The charter provided that the County could take over the bridge at any time and at such time it should be free from tolls. The County did take over the bridge in March, 1873 but allowed it to become in a state of disrepair and dangerous for travel, and in 1876 George Neeves and a number of others brought an action against Wood County to compel it to keep the bridge in repair and place it in a safe condition for travel and transportation of merchandise.

The plaintiff was represented by Powers & Briggs, an early firm of attorneys of Wisconsin Rapids with P. L. Spooner, state-wide known attorney of Madison, as counsel, and the defendant was represented by George R. Gardner, then a prominent attorney of Grand Rapids, and Minor Strobe, practicing at the Village of Plover, which was then the county seat of Portage County and the location of the Federal Land Office, and Gregory & Pinney, of counsel, of Madison. Pinney later became a prominent member of the State of Wisconsin Supreme Court.

The lower court and the Supreme Court held in favor of the applicants and compelled the County to repair the bridge. The bridge was taken out by floods in 1877 and rebuilt by the County that year at the enormous, exorbitant and unthinkable cost of \$8,000.00.

Grand Rapids had been, prior to this time, chartered as a city by Chapter 247 of the Private and Local Laws of 1869 and Centralia had been chartered as such by Chapter 275 of the Laws of

1874. The population of Grand Rapids in 1870 was 1,115 and of Centralia, 800, making a total population of about 1,900, all living from the lumber industry and the labor being all employed in the various saw mills.

The approach to the bridge on the west end built in 1877 was owned by Orestes Garrison and rented from him by the Bridge Company and by the county which succeeded the Bridge Company. Mrs. Bishop, while approaching the bridge, fell off the sidewalk which was quite high and frailty constructed of boards, and was injured. Her case went to the Supreme Court in 1880 in a suit against the City of Centralia and the Court held there could be no recovery against the city, that the action was against the County of Wood, even though the land approach to the bridge where the accident occurred was rented and a part of the street then known as Cranberry Street, leading to the bridge.

By the way, Cranberry Street was named because there was a growth of wild cranberries along the street about where the Wisconsin Theater is now located. The cranberry industry, even as early as 1849, had grown to be a recognized enterprise in Wood County, as evidenced by the fact that the Legislature in 1849 had passed a bill forbidding the sale of green cranberries except by Indians.

On April 11, 1888 a huge ice jam in the Wisconsin River took out the bridge which had been rebuilt in 1877 and a new bridge was contemplated to be built by Wood County at the cost estimated at about \$25,000.00. The County refused to build the bridge on account of the vote of northern members on the County Board and again George

Neeves and others associated with him brought an action against the County to compel it to rebuild the bridge.

Again the firm of Gardner and Gaynor and Geo. L. Williams represented the plaintiff and the defendant was represented by a prominent Wausau firm of attorneys together with J. W. Cochran of Grand Rapids and Frank A. Cady of Marshfield. The Supreme Court decided against the applicants on the ground that no authority had been given by the electors of the county and no tax for the same authorized. It still left open the right of the county board to authorize the building of the bridge by the county. This precipitated a violent civil war between the north end of Wood County and the south end. The City of Marshfield had burned to the ground by a forest fire in 1887 and was rebuilding with great ambition and did not like the idea of being taxed to favor Grand Rapids and Centralia. Democrats and republicans abandoned their parties and divided into two factions, the Bridge Ticket for building the bridge and the Anti-bridge ticket. Each put up a full slate for county offices and each side fought with ferocity and vigor. The anti-bridge faction won a complete and sweeping victory and it therefore became necessary for Grand Rapids and Centralia to rebuild the bridge.

At that time the population of the two cities was about 3,100 and a new wooden bridge was built with an arch suspension. Later the wood was replaced by steel with a bridge of the same type and a narrow road bed of about sixteen feet, which did not leave much room for run-a-way horses crossing the bridge and many accidents occurred

from this source. The new bridge, to replace the old one and which is the present Grand Avenue Bridge, was built in the year 1922. The humble and rural name of Cranberry Street had been replaced by the more dignified name of Grand Avenue. The City was becoming sophisticated and ambitious.

The Consolidated Water Power & Paper Co. was in full operation at the time of this construction and the increased population demanded a better and safer bridge. The cost was quite startling compared with the \$8,000.00 cost of the original bridge.

Now we are compelled to accept, by reason of the growth of our population and industry and travel, a new and second bridge which marks another historical event in the history of our city. Again the cost has exceeded \$8,000.00 but the design and the character and need of the bridge seems to warrant the expenditure.

Since the original bridge was constructed the name of Grand Rapids has been changed to Wisconsin Rapids, the two cities united and this second bridge built as a result of the growth of our industry and population more thoroughly than ever uniting the business and social life of our people on both side of our beautiful river. There is no longer any east or west side in city relations.

Respectfully submitted,
BRIDGE HISTORY COMMITTEE
Theo. W. Brazeau, Chairman
Clara Rablin
F. X. Pomainville
Ray Johnson

Aug. 15, 1955.

Bridge Dedication Committee

Don Dimock, General Chairman

Bill Meier, Co-Chairman

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*Donated July 1998
by Mrs Fey son of
late Frank Fey*