

# THE END OF THE LINE? THE INVER GROVE TOLL BRIDGE

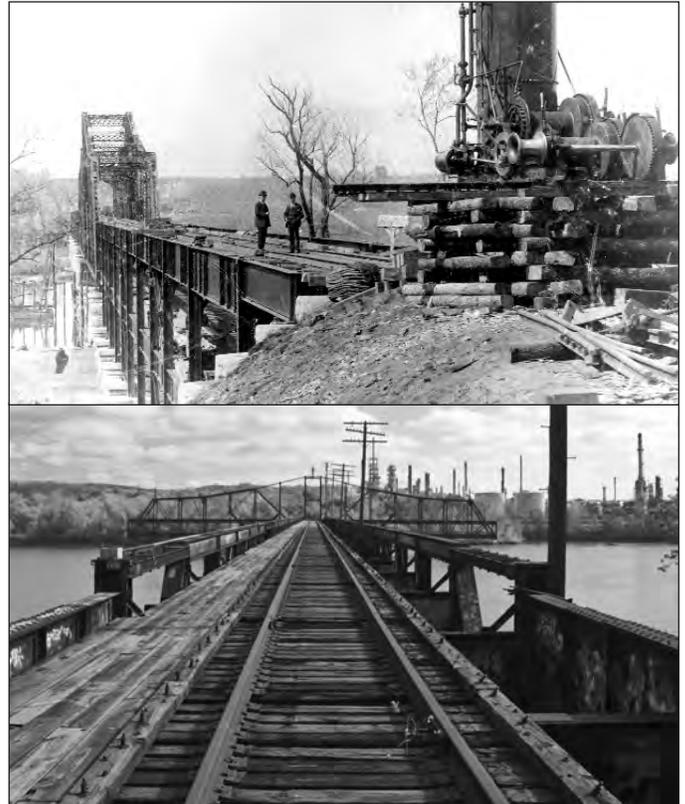
*by Chad Roberts*

Unusual in design, a true example of function shaping form, and a vital connection between eastern markets and Minnesota, was broken forever this spring. In February 2009 Veit Specialty Contracting began disassembling the 115 year old JAR Rock Island Railroad Bridge in Inver Grove Heights.<sup>1</sup> Despite the efforts of the National Park Service, City of Inver Grove Heights, Preservation Alliance of Minnesota, and others, all possibility of preserving the once critical link between Minnesota and points east has been removed along with all but two spans of the bridge.

We are left with newspaper accounts, a great many personal memories, photographs, and two relatively intact spans with which we can share the story of this unusual bridge. Even so, this isn't the final chapter of the bridge's life. At this time plans call for the site and two remaining spans to become part of a yet-to-be-built Heritage Riverfront Park sometime in the next decade.<sup>2</sup> All involved parties have expressed a strong interest in ensuring that the history of the bridge is incorporated in the park.

What follows here is a quick sketch of the long history of the bridge, the process that led to its removal, and a look to the future of what remains.

In the late 1880s and early 1890s area residents, business owners, and politicians began advocating for a new river crossing to replace the ferry that was the only crossing option in the area. The idea for a bridge evolved from a popular idea to action in earnest on May 29, 1891, when the City of South St. Paul voted to issue bonds for \$75,000 to help underwrite the construction cost. The city's vested interest was in establishing a rail link to eastern markets for livestock from the new St. Paul Union Stockyards in South St. Paul. In 1894 Newport committed \$20,000 and Cottage Grove followed with \$5,000 – all to assist in the construction.<sup>3</sup> The St. Paul Belt Line Railway Company would own the bridge and supervise its construction. The contract



*Top - Bridge nearing completion in 1895  
Bottom - Bridge as it appeared in the fall of 2008,  
photograph by Brandon Stengel*

was let to the Pittsburgh Bridge Company in July 1894 and work began shortly thereafter.<sup>4</sup>

The crossing was completed in less than 12 months, the result of the efforts of 1,600 workers. The bridge featured railroad tracks on the top deck and an 18-foot-wide wagon/pedestrian roadway passed underneath. In total, the bridge spanned 1,661 feet. In order to accommodate river traffic, one of the spans was designed to open by rotating on a central pivot in the middle of the navigation channel, allowing boats to pass on either side of "swing" section. With the swing design, the bridge had to be staffed at all times in the event of river traffic. Because of this, the cost to operate and maintain the bridge would have to include salaries

## TIMELINE

### Pre-

- 1891** Local residents, business leaders, and officials identify need for a bridge crossing to replace existing ferry service.
- 1891** City of South St. Paul issues \$75,000 in bonds to assist construction of bridge.
- 1894** Newport and Cottage Grove commit \$20,000 and \$5,000 respectively for the bridge. City of South St. Paul reaffirms its commitment of \$75,000 with the condition that the bridge be completed within five years.
- In July the Pittsburgh Bridge Company signs contract to build bridge, work begins almost immediately.
- 1895** April 9, the completed bridge is opened to the public. The issue of tolls is immediately controversial.
- 1915** St. Paul Belt Line Railroad Company purchased by Rock Island Railroad.
- 1938** After decades of effort, tolls are eliminated when State of Minnesota rents the passenger roadway and agrees to pay maintenance costs. August 31, 1938, was the last day tolls were collected.
- 1960** State stops renting bridge, Dakota and Washington Counties step in to keep bridge open.
- 1980** Rock Island and Pacific Railroad Company goes bankrupt. Bridge closes to all traffic.
- 1982** A.E. Roman purchases, repairs and opens the bridge as a toll bridge for passenger vehicles. Toll of 60 cents charged.
- 1999** Bridge closes to all traffic due to safety concerns.
- 2003** The bridge is forfeited for failure to pay property taxes, leaving Dakota and Washington Counties responsible for its repair and operation or removal.
- 2007** In April public meetings begin to be held to discuss options for preserving or removing the bridge. Included are the results from structural surveys and several adaptive reuse options.
- 2008** In November a 200-foot span of the bridge on the Washington County side of the Mississippi collapses, leading the county to declare a bridge emergency and accelerate demolition plans that had originally been planned for June 2009.
- 2009** In February, Veit Specialty Contracting wins bid to tear down bridge for \$1.4 million. All but two spans of the bridge are removed by the end of April. The removal is completed before the state legislature passes a bill to prevent the bridge's demolition.
- In May the bridge is named one of the 10 most endangered historic structures in Minnesota by the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota.

for attendants, not a large sum when the bridge was built but this cost would become a serious liability in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As the bridge opened, the topic of tolls emerged and was instantly controversial. When the taxpayers on both sides of the river had agreed to pass bond issues to support building the bridge, the common

understanding was that the new bridge would be free to use. Review of the original agreement between the Belt Line and the City of South St. Paul is quite clear though, tolls would be allowed as long as they were reasonable and lawful. Nevertheless, the public outcry was immediate and didn't relent for decades. An editorial in the *West St. Paul Times* on

July 31, 1897, summed up the paper's position. "When the people of these townships were voting for these bonds the toll feature of the proposed bridge was carefully kept in the background. It was not until the bridge was completed and opened that cloven foot of toll was sprung upon the taxpayers who had burdened themselves with bonds and interest accounts. They were buncoed completely."<sup>5</sup>

Complicating matters for the public, the toll rates varied by the user. For example, pedestrians paid 3 cents, automobiles with two persons 20 cents plus 3 cents per additional passenger, a wagon with one horse and driver paid 10 cents, and so on.<sup>6</sup> Efforts by civic and commercial groups as well as politicians finally resolved the issue in 1938 when a state law allowed the highway department to rent the bridge. The total cost to the State in 1938 was \$17,500. The local celebrations of the lifting of the toll included speeches by Governor Elmer Benson and a dozen other political and civic leaders.<sup>7</sup> The State stopped leasing the bridge in 1960 when the Wakota bridge was completed three miles upstream.

Dakota and Washington Counties agreed to keep the bridge open and split the rental costs (\$4,000 each in 1961) and also agreed to pay for maintenance of the roadway.<sup>8</sup>

In 1980 the Rock Island and Pacific Railroad, then owner of the bridge, went bankrupt and all traffic across the bridge stopped.<sup>9</sup> Two years later, A.E. Roman, a contractor from Illinois, purchased, repaired and opened the bridge once again, this time only for automobile traffic.<sup>10</sup> When the bridge reopened it was again a toll bridge, the cost a flat 60 cents per vehicle. Over time the toll rose to 75 cents and thousands of cars still crossed the bridge until 1999. In that year inspectors determined the bridge was unsafe and it was closed, this time for good. Four years later the property was tax forfeited, leaving Dakota and Washington Counties to determine its fate.<sup>11</sup>

The counties hired contractors, studied the bridge, and held public meetings. There was public interest in saving the bridge, or at least part of it. However, no solution was found that could preserve the entirety of the bridge. In the end, officials felt the costs were too high, and the immediate danger of collapse too severe, to justify repairing the bridge as a river crossing or to delay its demolition.

Preservationists were starting to make headway in securing funding to retain and reuse the western (Dakota County) end of the bridge in early 2009 and State lawmakers introduced legislation to prevent the bridge from demolition. But they were too late. Following a partial collapse in November 2008, the counties moved up the removal timeline and all but two spans were removed before the shipping season started.



*Bridge being dismantled, note the missing spans*

The future of even these spans is not yet secure. \$1.3 million has been granted to help preserve and reuse the remaining pieces of the bridge as a pedestrian and fishing pier, leaving at least \$400,000 more to be raised. In addition, access will be limited until Inver Grove Heights' Heritage Riverfront Park is completed and as of today we don't know when that will happen.

In the end we expect the City of Inver Grove Heights will be successful in working with other stakeholders to create an attractive public space on the bridge site. Your Historical Society will be working alongside them to ensure the history of the bridge is preserved and presented for everyone who visits.

#### Endnotes

1. *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, February 10, 2009
2. Dakota County Planning Brief, *What to do with a 120 year old bridge?*, April 19, 2007
3. *South St. Paul Reporter*, April 10, 1894
4. *Over the Years*, October, 1974
5. *West St. Paul Times*, July 31, 1897
6. *South St. Paul Sun*, June 30, 1976
7. *West St. Paul Booster*, September 2, 1938
8. *Dakota County Tribune*, November 30, 1961
9. *Dakota County Tribune*, February 28, 1980
10. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 6, 2006
11. IBID