

OUR

ROCK RIVER HIGHWAY

BRIDGES

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Bridges

by

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## Introduction

Bridges. They are not something we give much thought to, except in special circumstances. Take the new “basket handle” bridge over the Mississippi. I thought a lot about that one. Tristan, our youngest grandson, and I rode the Channel Cat every summer for years and watched the its construction, as we passed under the old Interstate 74 bridge. It was a wonder to watch and fascinating.

Closer to home. Our bridge that was replaced in the mid 1990’s was a cause for some concern. For 20 years I drove over it on my way to teach at Lyndon Junior High and never gave it much thought until the Echo went beneath it, took pictures and published a story about its decay. It was 60 years old and the undercarriage was not at all in good shape.

The early settlers in our area, of course, found no bridges here. Nor were there ferry boats in the very early years. That meant you had to find a spot in the river or creek you were attempting to cross that was shallow enough to get you and your wagon over. Not an easy task and, in fact, quite dangerous.

Here is an example of what could happen on one of these crossings, as written in A View from Thunder Bolt, 1859 – 1959:

*Stephen Crook came from Vermont and made a claim above Coon Creek in 1837. He returned east for his family in 1838. In that winter he froze to death while coming home from Dixon's Ferry where he had gone to sell a butchered beef. When he and Robert Smith started for home it was almost dark and a light snow had obscured the track. They lost their way and took the Peoria Trail. After they had traveled well out on the prairie, they discovered their mistake and struck across Hawley's Point. When they came to the creek it was partly frozen. In trying to cross it, they lost one of their horses and became thoroughly drenched themselves. It seems that the people of Dixon had become alarmed about them, as the weather had turned extremely cold and the next morning started on their track. When they reached the wagon they found the two men frozen.*

Then there was this account left to us by Nathaniel G. Reynolds:

*“It was 18 miles to the first house or cabin, we crossed the two creeks in safety without any difficulty, altho the weather was excessive cold. Edwards River had fallen in consequence of the freeze that we thought we could ford it. The banks were so steep and frozen that one pair of horses could not hold one load down nor draw it up on the other side, so we coupled six yoke together and made fast to the hind ox with sufficient length of chain and they eased the load down into the stream. Then we took the cattle across and they drew it up the other bank. In this way we succeed in getting all over safe, except my load.*

*“In raising to the bank about half way up, the cattle broke the chain and my wagon ran back and upset my load into the river. We soon righted up the wagon and I put into the river and collected my load, (which was principally in barrels). I offered a good price for help, but they refused and advised me to let it go downstream, that I should get my death by such exposure, but I could not spare the articles. I floated them to shore and put a chain around them and ran a pole through. Those on the shore with my help in the rear pulled them up the bank and we loaded up again and went on. It was three and a half hours from the time I went into the water before I reached a fire and what is somewhat remarkable I did not freeze in any part, and everyone that was on the bank was frozen, some badly, but we succeeded in getting along finally, but had often to put all teams forward on one wagon.*

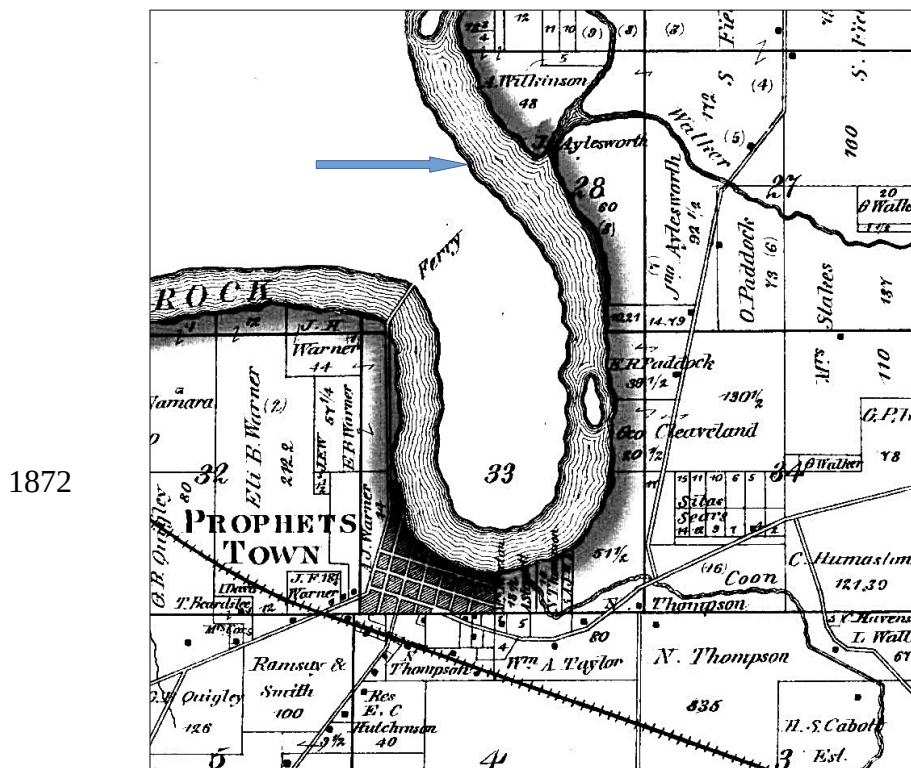
*“Came to Green River we had to unload and take our stuff over in a trough or canoe, swim our teams and fasten a rope to our wagons and pulled them over as a seine is hauled. Then we had good going on the prairies, the sloughs all frozen solid. Arrived*

*home well and hearty, having been about twenty-one days going seventy-five miles and back. Found at our cabin thirteen out of nineteen down with the measles: no doctor within thirty miles. All lived and got smart soon."*

Then along came ferry boats and they were a big improvement. But they had their drawbacks. They were few and far between. They cost to use. They were very slow and could not always be used, depending on the condition of the water.

Quite early in the history of our town we had entrepreneurs who ran ferry boats. This is from the same source:

*On the 4<sup>th</sup> of June, 1834, Asa Crook and his family, consisting of his wife, four sons and five daughters, and Norman Seely and Alexander Seely, arrived at the mouth of Coon Creek and made a claim where Wm. A. Taylor's farm is now. About the same time Samuel A. McClure located at the mouth of Walker's Slough. McClure sold out that fall to John W. Stakes, and moved to Dixon, where he kept a tavern for a time, but at present nothing can be ascertained concerning him. Mr. Crook lived in his wagon for three weeks and then made a lodge, covering it with hickory bark, in which he lived all summer. In the fall he erected a log house, calling on his neighbors, the Indians, to assist at the raising. Mr. Crook had come early in May on an exploring tour, and then went back. On his return he passed through Knox County where he hired one Benjamin Brown to come up and do some breaking. This was done and a piece planted to sod corn. The Indians were quite numerous, but friendly. Their chief was called "The Crane." John W. Stakes and wife arrived on the 14<sup>th</sup> of September. It is claimed that McClure, whose claim he had bought, had built a small ferry boat which could take a wagon or a span of horses across the river. It is certain that Stakes did some ferrying the next year at his place, and the ferry was kept there for some time.*



The arrow points to the location of the McClure and Stakes ferry. You can see a later ferry listed. It lay about where our present bridge is. We know there was one at the end of Ferry Street, also.

But there was pressure to get a bridge.

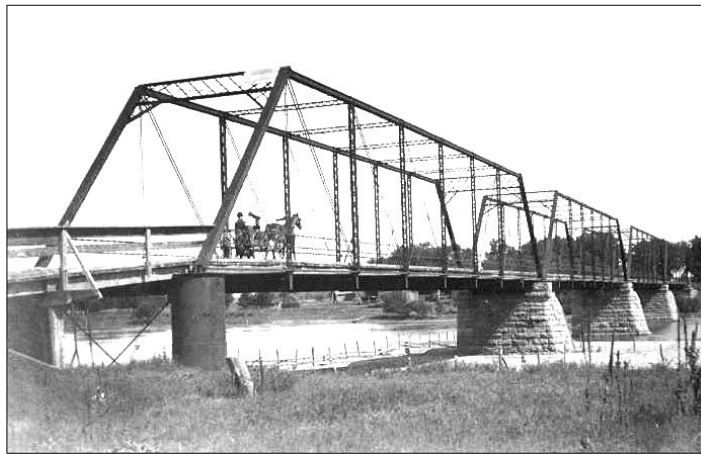
## The Old Supervisors' Bridge

On December 16, 1891, at the regular meeting of the board of supervisors of Whiteside County, Mrs. Nevitt, Potter and Hall were appointed as a Prophetstown bridge committee to survey the prospective highway bridge site over Rock River and advertise for bids.

The contract for the new bridge was let on October 13, 1892, to the Detroit Bridge and Iron Works on the site which is approximately the same location as the present bridge on State Route 78.

The price was to be \$25,979.00 [*\$845,519 in 2022*] and the cost was to be born equally between Prophetstown Township and Whiteside County.

The huge stones for the piers and abutments were shipped in by freight and cut and dressed on the ground where the west end of the Eclipse Plant No. 1 borders Washington St. at Railroad St. Both the piers and the super structure of the bridge were hauled to the bridge site by teams. This bridge was replaced by another one in 1934.



The Old Supervisor's Bridge.  
Our first Rock River Bridge.

## The 1934 Bridge

**STEEL WORK ON NEW BRIDGE IS STARTED**

Work on Second Cofferdam is Under way;  
Many Watch Steel Workers  
From the Echo, June 5, 1935.

The new bridge across the Rock River north of town is commencing to take shape with the iron work of the first span on the south side of the river in place. This span, approximately 150 feet long, does not reach the water. Work on the cofferdam for the fourth pier, which is well toward the center of the river, is underway and one pier will remain to be built after this one is completed.

Many people go daily to watch the workers on the bridge and it is an interesting sight to see these men climbing about the high steel girders apparently with very little concern.

The bridge was started last December [1934], the first concrete being poured on the fifth of that month. The specifications called for a structure 475 feet long including approaches and with three spans of 148 feet each. This is 117 feet longer than the old bridge.

## **ONE-WAY TRAFFIC ON 78 AT NEW BRIDGE**

Work on Last Span is Started;  
Bridge Will be Opened Next Month  
From the Echo, August 14, 1935

There is one-way traffic at the bridge on Route 78 as the work of grading the approaches is under way. Complaints of the dangerous condition of the road were made to Mayor Brydia and he notified the state highway department Monday with the result that an inspector was sent here who advised the placing of a traffic officer on the job. Frank Roman assumed the duties of traffic officer Monday evening and it is likely that it will be necessary to have a man at each end to direct traffic during the 32 day period which will elapse before the new road will be opened for traffic.

Steel was unloaded Monday and Tuesday for the last span of the bridge, which is the second span from the north side of the river, and the work of erecting the girders is now under way. The steel work on this span will be completed this week; the cement covering for the floor will be poured next week, and it is expected that the bridge will be opened for traffic about September 15th. Upon its completion the structure will be given two coats of white lead paint and as soon as the new bridge is opened the old bridge will be dismantled. It is planned to burn through the iron of the old bridge, drop the sections into the river and drag them to the shores.

The center stone pier of the old bridge will be left for the convenience of the utilities company for crossing the river as the state highway department has ruled that the electric line cannot cross the river on the new bridge. The utilities concerned will erect a steel H frame 40 feet high on this pier on which a light will be mounted. Lights will also be mounted on poles at each end of the old bridge site. These lights are required on account of air traffic. It is not yet known how strong lights will be required or whether in their designated location they will light the new structure.

The opening of the bridge will be celebrated by a two day carnival according to plans now being made, the celebration being sponsored by the American Legion post with the co-operation of the Booster Club. A special meeting of the Legion was called Thursday evening for the purpose of making plans for the celebration and the following men were selected to act as the committee to set the date and make all arrangements: J. B. Mosher, chairman, Dr. S. B. Goff, Glenn Wheat, L. M. Fadden and J. J. Woolums.

[Keep in mind that Chet Sutton, from Lyndon helped erect this bridge.]

## PLANS UNDER WAY FOR BRIDGE CELEBRATION

From the Echo, September 25, 1935.

A decision to celebrate the opening of the new bridge across the Rock River here was reached at a joint meeting of the American Legion and the executive board of the Booster Club held at the city hall Monday evening. The big day will be known as the Prophetstown Bridge Opening, it could not set the date definitely because it is not yet known who will be the speaker and when he can be secured, but it is tentatively agreed that the celebration will probably be on Columbus Day, Saturday, October 12.

The committee at large is composed of five members of the local post of the Legion, selected by the President C. A. Conrad of the Booster Club. The membership of the committee is as follows: J. B. Mosher, Leslie Fadden, Glenn Wheat, Dr. S. B. Goff, and J. J. Woolums for the Legion and R. C. Mathis, Karl Morath, E. J. Diehl, Frank Cleaveland, George S. Brydia and F. J. Perrin for the Boosters. This committee will meet and select sub-committees and workers.

## NEW BRIDGE IN USE AS OLD ONE IS WRECKED

Celebration of Opening is Called Off

Because of Lateness of Season

From the Echo, October 2, 1935.

The new bridge across the Rock River north of town has been open to traffic for about a week and with the completion of the painting the job all is done except the work of clearing out the debris of the old bridge, which has been dropped into the river and is being cut up by electric torches and dragged out. The "I" beams which supported the floor and other iron work are being hauled to the county highway warehouse at Rock Falls. The planking goes to the state. The old structure was dismantled as far as possible and then dropped into the river by the simple process of hooking a caterpillar to it and pulling the ends off the abutments. Two spans remain to be wrecked.

The history of the old bridge begins September 8, 1892, when notices were posted calling for an election on the 15th to vote on the raising of \$13,000 by the taxpayers of Prophetstown for the purpose of building a bridge at the site of the old ferry crossing at the north end of Ferry street, which extends from Second Street to the river. The county was to match this sum. Opposition to this location arose and eventually the site was changed to the present bridge location.

Bids for the new bridge were opened on November 2 with representatives of 25 different concerns present. Eighteen sealed bids ranging from \$20,000 to \$36,000 were opened and the contract was awarded to the Detroit Bridge & Iron Works for the sum of \$22,000 we believe. The new bridge, 640 feet long, standing three feet above the high water mark, was built and was opened to teams Wednesday, August 16, 1893. It was formally accepted on September 1. This structure has stood the test of time for 42 years.

The new bridge, built to meet modern traffic requirements, is 755 feet long - five spans of 151 feet each. The width is 24 feet with concrete floor and concrete buttresses 18 inches high at the sides. These are surmounted by wood and iron railings to a height of four feet. The approaches at each end are 400 feet long. The bridge clears the high water mark three feet. The abutments are of concrete reinforced with steel. The entire work of construction has been in charge of G. K. Ladehoff of the Clinton Engineering Co. The painting was sublet to the S. W. Burks Co. of Peoria, which concern also painted the new bridge at Joslin.

The total cost of the structure was \$98,222.20. Bids were opened October 10, 1934, and work started November 1. The successful bidders: for building of the super-structure, McClintoc; approaches, Clinton Engineering Co., \$38,838.48; for fabrication the super-structure Marshall Corp., Chicago, \$33,190.91; for erection of super-structure, Clinton Bridge Works, \$26,190.91.

At a meeting of the committees of the American Legion and Booster Club held at the Legion hall Monday evening it was decided to abandon the project of staging a celebration of the opening of the new bridge. This



action was taken because a majority of the joint committee were of the opinion that it would not be wise to set the date later than Saturday, the 12th, and it was felt that the time was too limited to prepare attractions and to properly advertise such an event. Also the uncertainty of the weather conditions at this time of year and the fact that the bridge would have been opened to traffic for about three weeks previous to that date would rob the event of some of its significance.

Even though the official celebration was called off Babe Lawrence told me that the high school kids held a dance on the highway south of the bridge to celebrate.



The 1934 bridge.

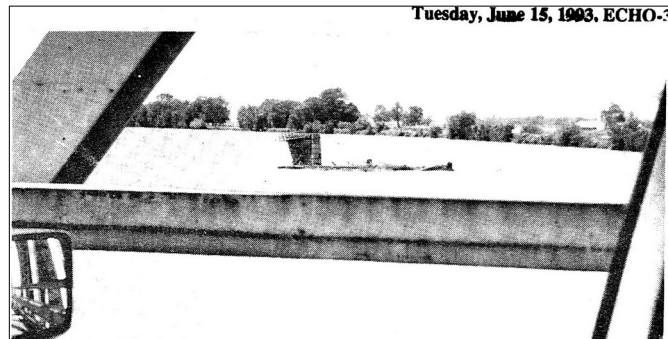
Normally, when an old bridge is taken down the pilings on which it stood are removed, as well. There was one of them left standing in the river when the Old Supervisors' Bridge was destroyed. Later, a tower holding electrical lines was placed on it. Back then the Rock River usually froze over during the winter and it was common for ice jams to build up upstream from the bridge. Given the danger this presented to that one old piling still standing, it was removed.

## **Old Pier Being Removed**

From the Echo, January 2, 1955.

A contract crew from Freeport employed by the Public Service Company of Northern Illinois is busy this week removing the old stone pier in the Rock River just above the Route 78 bridge which was originally one of the supports of the old bridge across the river and later served as the foundation for a steel power line tower for the utilities company. The tower was removed a few years ago after ice had threatened to take the pier out and since then the pier has been unused.

## The 1993 Bridge



### Bridge over troubled waters

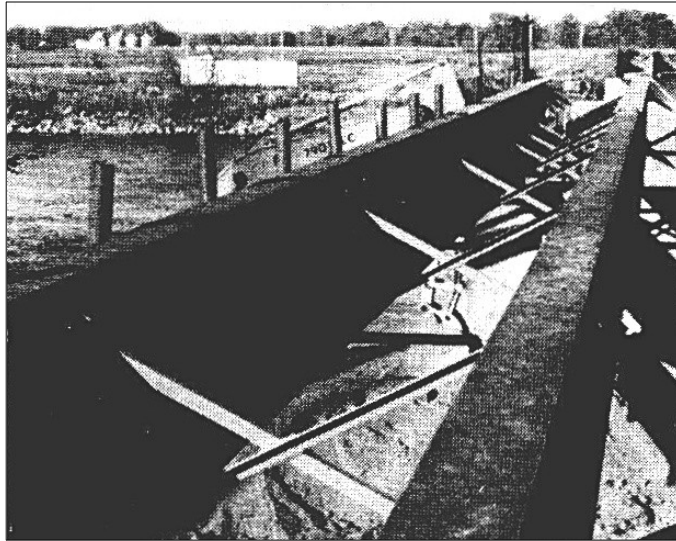
It looks like a German submarine surfacing in the middle of the Rock River where the new bridge is supposed to be. Some may think it fired torpedoes and sunk the temporary bridge that was at the same point in the river last fall. That isn't the case however. What is the case is that that old bridge was about to be closed due to its lousy condition. Some people, including former Sen. Cal Schuneman, went to work and got approval for a new bridge ahead of when it would normally have been built. They put speed and weight restrictions on the old bridge in hopes it would hold together until the new one was completed. Civil Constructors of Freeport got the contract and went to work. They got the approaches ready and started the cement support work. And then things began to happen. They had trouble with the footings having to go deeper than anyone thought...and that slowed them. Secondly, because it was a rush job, the temporary work bridge they built got run down by ice and the abnormally high and continuous water...as many locals suggested would happen.

And finally, the water is staying high and they STILL haven't been able to go back to work. According to Ken Schrock of Civil Constructors, they are "prepared to start whenever the waters goes back down." He notes the heavy rains of a week ago truly set them back again...but that they are ready to go when the river cooperates.

As for the rumor that the present Rt. 78 bridge is so bad now that it will be closed before the new bridge is completed...a spokesman for IDOT says he knows nothing about such a rumor.



The old 1934 bridge with the new 1990's bridge being built down stream.



## Steel going up

Chunks of steel 100 feet in length are now starting to span the Rock River where the new Prophetstown bridge will be. Civil Constructors of Freeport, the construction firm building the new \$3.2 million bridge, has had major weather setbacks in attempting to get the project completed. However, now that the structural steel is going on the completed support piers, the plywood forms won't be far behind.

According to Bruce Helm, president of Civil Constructors, the epoxy-coated rebar will be put in place as the final work on the bridge before winter stops the work until next spring.

"The bridge project will probably end for this year about mid-December," said Helm Tuesday morning. "About mid-April of 1994 we should be back at work and actually pour the concrete bridge floor."

When will the first car or truck roll across the new bridge" Helm knows that dates in his business can never be exact but estimates somewhere around the end of August.

According to Helm, the state is confident the old Rock River bridge, especially with a portion of the bridge deck having recently received a coat of asphalt, will last until the new one is completed.

From the Echo, October 26, 1993.



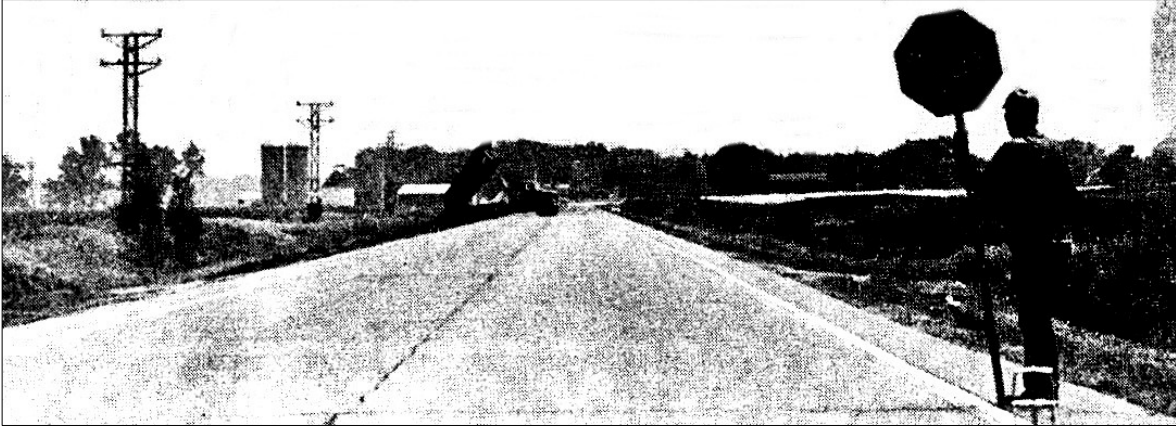
Say what you will, building a bridge can be frustrating in northern Illinois what with the high water, ice, etc. Still, according to Dennis Heer of Freeport Constructors, the contractor on the Rock River bridge at Prophetstown, the company came through the winter relatively well and should be finishing the bridge by

Labor Day or late September.

At present workers are installing the deck forms and will shortly be pouring the concrete roadway across the bridge. We'll keep you posted through the summer.

From the Echo, March 27, 1994.





## Bridge building done by August

A lone flagman stops traffic long enough for a dump truck to bring more fill to the approach end of the new Rock River bridge north of Prophetstown.

The Echo talked with Bruce Helm, president of Civil Constructors of Freeport, the firm building the bridge, at Mr. Helm notes that things are really flying now after a couple of years where high water, ice, etc, slowed progress disastrously.

The contractor had expected the new bridge to be completed by early summer in 1993.

"With all the delays, etc., do you expect to make any money on the contract?," asked the Echo. "We certainly do NOT," said Mr. Helm. "We don't even want to KNOW what the contract has cost us," he said in the voice of a man who is experienced in the ups and downs of such things.

Anyway, dirt is now being moved around and the new roadway onto the bridge is quickly taking shape. The bridge itself is done and the asphalt for the approaches will be put down in July. The guard rails will then go up and seeding will take place. "The first traffic will go across the bridge in late August," said Mr.

Helm. Shortly after that the old bridge will be torn down.

If you've wondered about an official opening ceremony...don't. According to Mr. Helm the state is not very formal about such things. "They will simply pull the barricades and cars and trucks will just drive across. That will be it."

A very brief history of the bridge situation is that the old bridge was built in the 1930's and served until now. However, the state checked it in 1992 and decided it was now longer safe. Former Sen. Cal Schuneman stepped in and helped prevent the bridge from being closed and also got the NEW bridge priority moved-up from its mid-1990's position in state priority.

Although weight and speed restrictions have been imposed over the past couple of years, at least the old bridge has been holding and usable...with constant patching, etc.

In two more months the new bridge will be moving the traffic and the old bridge will be but a memory.

From the Echo, June 21, 1994.



Civil Constructors of Freeport is coming down the home stretch. The construction firm building the new bridge north of Prophetstown started putting down the asphalt to make the roads leading onto the bridge.

According to Bruce Helm, president of Civil, they should be done with that phase in a few days. They will next put up some guard rails and prepare the shoulders.

"I told you the last time we talked that the bridge would be completed by Labor Day," said Helm. "It's going to be very, very close."

Pictured is the first application of asphalt being put down Monday morning.

From the Echo, August 2, 1994.



## Bridge opens Thursday

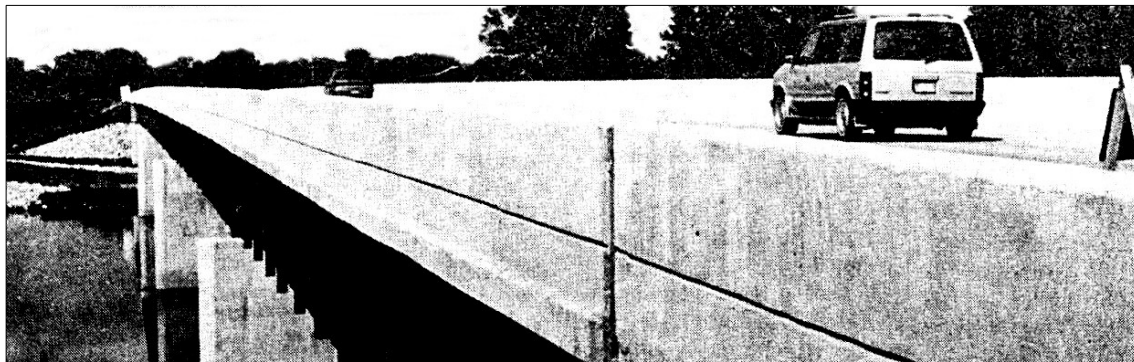
William D. Ost, District Engineer for the Illinois Department of Transportation, located in Dixon, announced August 8, 1994 that the routing of IL 78 traffic over the new Rock River bridge at Prophetstown is scheduled for Thursday, August 11, 1994. The remaining work will be completed

under traffic with signs, barricades, and flaggers being used to control traffic through the work areas.

Civil Constructors, Freeport, is the contractor on this \$3.3 million project which is approximately 80% complete. Work remaining includes the final

bituminous surface, pavement marking, landscaping, and removal of the existing pavement and bridge.

The old Rock River bridge will be removed at a later date.



## New bridge opens without fanfare

It is probably a compliment to say that last Thursday's Rock River bridge opening was a **NON-EVENT**. The state just moved the barriers over and opened the access roads while flagmen controlled traffic to allow work to continue (the bridge is more than 80% complete).

The \$3.3 million dollar project has been under construction for the past couple of years and would have been finished earlier had it not been for higher-than-normal problems with ice and water. Civil Constructors of Freeport contracted the job and will later remove the old bridge built back in the late 1930's.

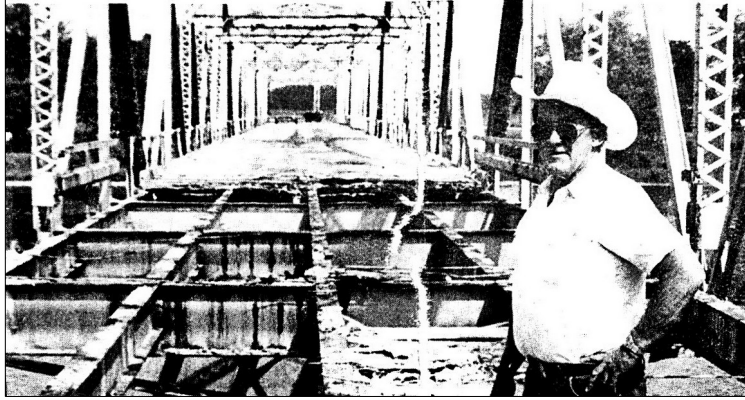
The reason it was a non-event is that there was no special fanfare involved in the opening...and driving across the new bridge was uneventful. Without going under a superstructure, as on the old bridge, its just like driving down the highway. Some of the charm is gone from crossing a bridge in the new era of bridge building. However, there is probably something to be said for the assurance that the bridge probably isn't going to fall out from under you...as was the worry before.

It is unlikely you'll see many more stores or pictures of the new structure since it simply moves traffic, and for all practical purposes, is just rather boring as bridges go.

From the Echo, August 9, 1994.

## After more than 50 years, bridge coming down South Dakota rancher bringing it down

From the Echo, September 13, 1994.



At 72, Don Carney leads the kind of life that would be the envy of every young man in America. He lives on a ranch in South Dakota and since getting out of the service at the end of World War II, has been involved in just about anything that looked like it might turn a profit.

"I'm like a sparrow who goes wherever there might be a kernel of corn," says the personable Carney.

After the war he started in railroad salvage. That led to contracts removing old railroad ties. That led to bigger contracts. "When I would get jobs removing the rails, they would also suggest I should remove the bridge," said Carney, "and therefore I had to learn how to do it."

As his company grew, so did his family. Son Pat went off to Northwestern University and got an engineering degree and began working with his father as the expert on explosives. That meant they could remove bridges or buildings or whatever with explosives...and they do so all the time...which is why Don Carney and his crew are back in Prophetstown. They are here to remove the old Rock River bridge on the north side of town now that the new one has been finished. They started the work last week and in the very near future will be attaching explosives to sections of the bridge, bringing them down...and dragging the debris out of the river.

When the job is done they will sell some of the bridge for scrap and some of it as structural steel. When he was younger, Carney used to buzz around the country in his own airplane with his own pilot. Now that he's older he likes to drive and puts thousands of miles per month on his car. He says he'll work till the day he dies and enjoy every minute of it.

Incidentally, Don Carney and his crew are the ones who removed Prophetstown's old railroad bridge back in the mid-1980's.

Right now you can find Don Carney out at the job site conferring with Chet Sutton most days. Sutton worked on the bridge when it was erected in the 1930's and is probably the only fellow around who can say he helped build...and then tear-down...a bridge that's more than half-a-century old. Chet would probably say that's a dubious distinction at best.





## **Falling Down**

Prophetstown, residents said goodbye to an old friend Wednesday as precision blasters brought down the Illinois 78 bridge built in the 1930's. A new \$3.2 million bridge, built just west of the old one, has been open since September and ends the need for load and speed restrictions on the roadway.