

Old Wagon Bridge to be dedicated

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POSTSCRIPT

by FRANCES EDSTROM

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On Sunday, the restored Old Wagon Bridge will be dedicated. It has been renamed in honor of John A. Latsch, the benefactor who bought wilderness land around this area to be preserved for public use.

It's a project that's been a long time in coming, encountering stiff resistance over the years from various city employees and council people. A city councilman once told me that the restoration was dead in the water (sorry, bad pun), because none of his constituents "ever saw the thing." Offers by various people to help raise funds for the restoration were rebuffed.

It wasn't until Anonymous came through with a million dollar gift that city hall sat up and listened, and Don Trester and company were allowed to run a fund-raising campaign to accomplish the restoration. Our thanks to all who had a part in this worthy project.

When we drive over the Interstate bridge once a day or even once in a while, we rarely wonder about the history of crossing the river, but a look downstream to the Old Wagon Bridge reminds us that it wasn't always as easy as it is now to get back and forth over the Mississippi.

When settlers first disembarked from the Nominee, Capt. Orrin Smith's paddlewheeler, the sandbar they staked out was accessible from the east only by water. By 1854, Winona's levee was a regular stop on the steamboat lines. The Winona Ferry Company was begun in 1855, but never operated. In 1865, Samuel Van Gorder got a franchise from the Legislature and began operating a ferry. His first boat was named the "Turtle," built at a cost of \$2,000, able to operate even when there was ice floating in the river and carry four double teams.

That ferry landed several miles upstream, as there was not a passable road over the bottoms directly across from Winona.

The City Council, wanting better transportation for farmers across the river to get to Winona, commissioned a road across the bottoms, but all those bridges were washed out in the spring of 1869. By the way, for you river rats, Van Gorder is the man after whom Sam Gordy's slough is named.

In 1870, after hotly contested railroad terminus battles, a railroad bridge was hastily constructed in four days. That bridge, not surprisingly, collapsed under the weight of a work train loaded with stone five months later, in May of 1871. No one was killed. It was rebuilt the next year.

But for anyone but the railroads, crossing the river, even by ferry, was a dicey proposition. The road came to be called the Death Road, as so many people perished in accidents there.

Then on December 7, 1886, the council approved plans for a bridge, at a cost of \$9,500, from Island 72, which we call Latsch Island, to the end of the Wisconsin road. This was called the ferry bridge. On July 4, 1892, the High Wagon Bridge was opened, and operated until the

Interstate Bridge was completed in the early 1960s.

After the opening of the Interstate, the Old Wagon Bridge was abandoned, used only to gain access to the island between Wisconsin and Latsch, and the boat harbor there. It languished, and was threatened with demolition until the recent surge of interest led to its reconstruction and preservation not only of a pile of stones, but of the history of the connection of Winona to the rest of the United States to our east.

The dedication is scheduled for Sunday, September 25 at 2:00 p.m. at the foot of the Wagon Bridge on Latsch Island. Bring your own chair.

