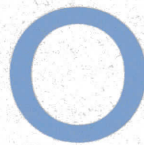




A Bridge to Remember

The first vehicular bridge over the Salt River in 1911 resulted in a record-setting span and opened up south Phoenix to development.



ON THE CUSP OF STATEHOOD IN 1911, Arizona was ready to break free of its Territorial status and assume its rightful place on the national stage – a momentous transition local leaders hoped to consecrate by christening a bridge over the unruly waters of the Salt River, which had long suffocated development of the south Valley.

The debate between Phoenix and Tempe politicians on where to build such a span resulted in one of the most heated political battles in Maricopa County history. Ultimately, it was a fruitful ordeal, yielding a 2,120-foot-long, Valley-unifying artery that leaders trumpeted as the longest reinforced concrete bridge in the world.

That this engineering marvel, dubbed the Center Street Bridge, was funded by a Valley community numbering fewer than 18,000 residents – most of whom traveled over dirt streets in horse-drawn carriages – makes it even more amazing. U.S. Senator Carl Hayden, who represented the state in Washington, D.C. for 57 years, would tell the *Phoenix Gazette* in 1966, “I doubt if there were more than 100 automobiles in Maricopa County when the bridge was completed.”

The road to bridging the Salt River was long and tumultuous. The watercourse varied from a trickle to a torrent and sometimes unleashed devastating floods. Often, it was a huge challenge to cross. Political pressure to span the river dated to the community’s earliest days and spiked in 1903 when the federal government authorized construction of the Roosevelt Dam, located roughly 70 miles upstream.

Beginning in 1900, Tempe and Phoenix jostled vigorously over which township would be the site of the first vehicle bridge over the Salt River. Even a “Harmony Committee” assembled in 1908 failed to agree upon a location. “The Tempe bridge site is boomed on merit, the Center Street site with money,” stated an advertisement in the *Arizona Republican* newspaper in 1909. Limited funds precluded the building of two bridges.

A bridge at Center Street – known today as Central Avenue – would be an engineering challenge. In addition to being longer than the proposed Tempe bridge to span the wider river channel in Phoenix, the structure would be built on unstable sand without footings affixed to bedrock. However, it would also lead directly to a 7,000-acre parcel south of the river owned by businessman Dwight B. Heard, who championed the site. On a fundraising trip to Washington, D.C., Heard learned that if the Valley could pledge half the cost of the proposed \$100,000 bridge, local gov-

ernment money would be available to complete the project, according to a 1966 *Arizona Republic* article. Besides Heard's own \$20,000 contribution, \$15,000 came from assessments on other land owners south of the river, Phoenix merchants donated \$5,000, and \$10,000 was pledged in labor by Juan Sol, the head of the Gila River Indian Reservation. The remaining \$50,000 came from Maricopa County. In 1909, the decision over where to build the bridge went to a hotly contested county election that narrowly decided in favor of Phoenix over Tempe. "The Tempe site was narrower and had bedrock to form a sturdy basis for a bridge," 81-year-old Phoenix resident Jim Wheat says. "But the Phoenix site was championed by Heard. In the end, political influence persevered over better site conditions."

The two-lane Center Street Bridge was built without any bonded indebtedness by the Mercereau Bridge and Construction Company of Los Angeles. Piles were driven 30 feet below the sandy river bed and anchored to concrete pillars 60 feet apart. Given the Valley's poor roads and developing infrastructure, resourceful arrangements were often needed to bring the project to fruition. "When the bridge was being built in 1910, rather than travel several miles from Phoenix each day, the construction superintendent [J.F. Hess] rented a room from my grandfather's family, who lived where First Avenue dead-ended just north of the Salt River," Wheat recalls.

Wheat's father, DeWitt Wheat, became a celebrity during the bridge construction. "To start the concrete pour on the bridge surface, the company had 3-year-old DeWitt push a toy wheelbarrow which had a small amount of material," Wheat says. "He led a line of construction workers pushing loaded wheelbarrows across the bridge. My father actually got to dump the first bit of concrete on the bridge."

Within a year of starting construction, the record-breaking structure was finished. Longer bridges existed at the time, including the 10,054-foot steel-girder Nehru Setu Bridge in India. However, according to a 1966 *Arizona Republic* article, the Center Street Bridge was the world's longest bridge under the category of "reinforced concrete" – a relatively new engineering practice first implemented in 1889. The Center Street Bridge demolished previous record-holders like the Mizen Head Bridge in south

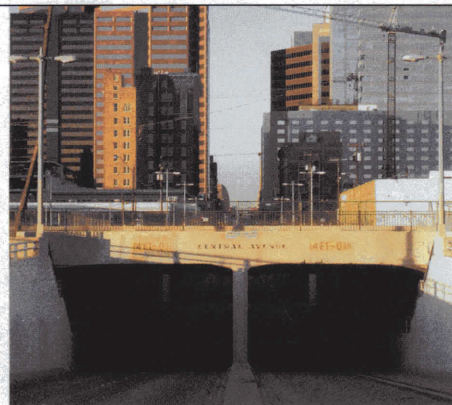
Tunnel Fever

PHOENICIANS WHO ENJOY underground haunts – or merely the opportunity to toot their own horn – savor entering Downtown from the south via the Central Avenue underpass. Built in 1939 to circumvent both the Southern Pacific and Santa Fe railroad tracks, the subterranean corridor has evolved into one of the city's most notable wormholes. "It's a passage from one era to another, from an Art Moderne structure to a modern 20th-century city of tall glass buildings," historian Donna Reiner says. "The effect is even greater at twilight."

Both railways were treacherous impediments for the 10,000 autos that typically passed into south Phoenix on Central Avenue in the mid-1930s. Accidents were common. Reg Manning, the cartoonist for the *Arizona Republic*, regularly satirized the crossing, drawing cars rearing and plunging like bucking broncos over the multi-track traffic hazard.

First proposed in 1928, construction on the four-lane underpass began 11 years later, after the city secured the right-of-way. Despite a labor strike, the underpass opened in 1940 with fanfare – speeches, a parade, and a street dance. Boy Scouts distributed commemorative windshield decals to the first 5,000 vehicles driving through. The streamlined structure featured cast concrete winged motifs and "Central Avenue" rendered in aluminum letters on corbelled pylons. Built with \$250,000 in federal funds, the underpass was a safe and speedy pathway that facilitated development of the warehouse district and south Phoenix.

— Douglas Towne



Ireland, which was completed in 1910 and spanned a mere 166 feet.

Heard and former President Theodore Roosevelt were passengers in the lead car crossing the new bridge at the opening celebration on March 19, 1911. Roosevelt called it a "great bridge," according to a 1966 *Phoenix Gazette* article. "It shows what men may accomplish by working together."

The bridge was an immediate success, though early traffic tended to be of the motor-less variety. "No vehicle shall be ridden or drawn at greater speed than 12 miles per hour over Center Street Bridge," declared a Maricopa County resolution passed July 17, 1911. The structure facilitated the development of south Phoenix and afforded increased lei-

sure opportunities to city dwellers. "South Mountain Park became popular for picnics and horseback riding after its completion," says William Linsensmeyer, a 75-year-old retired history professor who grew up in Phoenix.

Flows beneath the span decreased

with the completion of six upstream storage dams on the Salt and Verde rivers between 1911 and 1946, but fishing reports at the Center Street Bridge were carried in the *Arizona Republic* as late as 1923. The bridge continued being used despite incurring flood damage in 1922, 1938, and 1941. (In the 1922 flood, a section of the bridge settled about three inches, which may have occurred because of unstable alluvium at the site.) A new two-lane bridge was built to the east of the original structure in 1949 to handle increasing traffic. The new bridge served northbound vehicles; the old bridge carried southbound traffic.

In 1966, floodwaters irreparably damaged the 1911 structure, and it was closed. Vehicles were routed onto the 1949 bridge, resulting in traffic congestion to and from south Phoenix for a decade. Both bridges were eventually razed and replaced by the present Central Avenue Bridge, completed in 1976. To open the new span, bands from South Mountain and St. Mary's high schools led Phoenix residents from each side of the Salt River to a dedication ceremony at the bridge's halfway point.

No matter how one qualified the numbers, Phoenix could no longer boast the world's longest bridge. But once again, she was made whole.

— Douglas Towne

"[The Center Street Bridge] shows what men may accomplish by working together."

—PRESIDENT THEODORE ROOSEVELT