

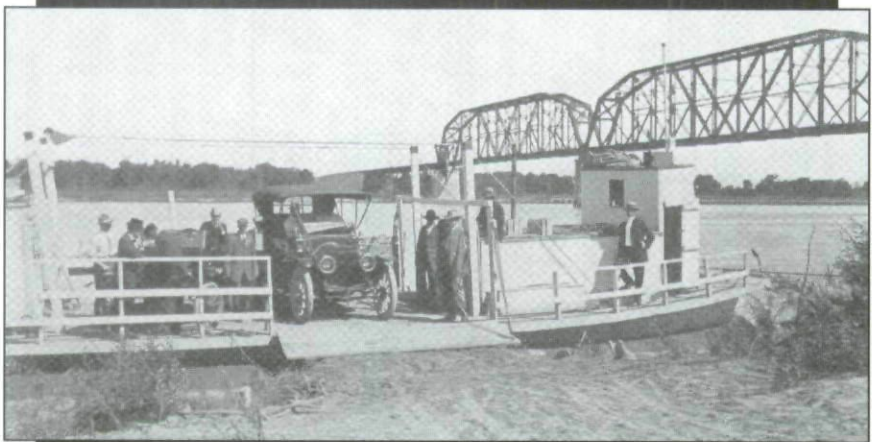
“The East and West Are One”: The Missouri River Bridge at Mobridge

Greg M. Wysk

The opening of the highway bridge over the Missouri River at Mobridge in 1924 was a significant event in South Dakota history. For the first time, travelers had access to a toll-free, permanent vehicle bridge that made it possible to cross the wide, unpredictable river easily and quickly, without having to rely on the railroad, pontoon bridges, or ferries. The community boosterism and political arm-twisting that government and civic leaders had used to ensure that the first Missouri River bridge in South Dakota would be located at Mobridge helped to spark lively debate around the state. In fact, the promotion, planning, and construction of the Mobridge structure and four others under the state's bridge program marked one of the few times in South Dakota history that a dispute erupted between northern and southern counties, rather than along the traditional east-and-west-river division. Despite this fact, the completion of the first Missouri River bridge within South Dakota was a unifying moment in the state's history. People and industries benefited as tourism expanded and agricultural markets opened up, contributing to a general sense that South Dakota was one state, no longer divided by the “Big Muddy.”

The first means of crossing the Missouri River in north-central South Dakota were pontoon bridges and ferries at Evarts and LeBeau, located southeast of the future site of Mobridge. These towns, established on the east side of the river in the late

1890s as railroad terminals, were for a short time two of the world's leading cattle shipping terminals. By 1909, however, both had lost their business to the new town of Mobridge, established in 1906 when the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific Railroad found a better foundation there for a railroad bridge.¹ Completion of the railroad bridge was a vital link between eastern and western South Dakota, but there still was no easy way for wagons and the growing number of automobiles to cross the river. A ferry operated between 1907 and 1922, but



Against the backdrop of the railroad bridge at Mobridge, motorists disembark from the ferry, a seasonal and sometimes hazardous way of crossing the Missouri River.

it became hazardous in the spring when water was high. In winter, it was possible to drive across the frozen river, but changing temperatures and currents could weaken the ice, making the endeavor risky.²

1. Ray H. Mattison, "Report on Historical Aspects of the Oahe Reservoir Area, Missouri River, South and North Dakota," *South Dakota Historical Collections* 27 (1954): 74-75, 79-82. Everts and LeBeau declined rapidly; when they lost all rail service in 1924, both quickly became ghost towns.

2. Julius Skaug, ed., *Mobridge: Its First 50 Years* (Mobridge, S.Dak.: City of Mobridge, 1956), pp. 109-10.

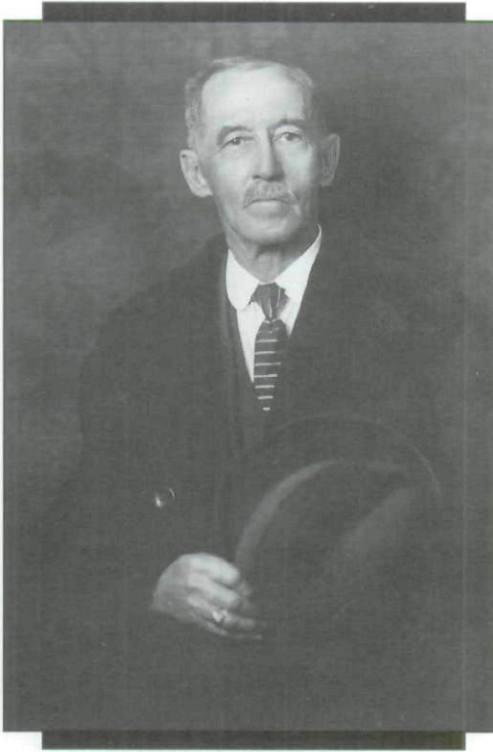
Even though such problems helped to convince area residents that a bridge was necessary, issues of location and financing needed to be resolved. In the early 1900s, Joseph W. Parmley came to the forefront of the cause, actively promoting road and bridge building in the area. As a farmer who had settled near Roscoe in Edmunds County in the 1880s, Parmley realized the difficulties he and other rural people faced in getting to town to do business. State surveys had laid out roads along section lines, but these byways remained largely undeveloped. As in many other rural areas around the country, most road improvements were carried out by private citizens who worked off their taxes by doing road work—an inefficient way to build a transportation system. In many cases, farmers simply ignored their responsibility to maintain the roads adjacent to their land. During this time as well, the Populist movement was sweeping rural America, and one of its goals was the termination of railroad monopolies and their control of shipping prices. As a result, farmers began to realize that development of an efficient road system was a viable alternative to the railroads.³

By 1907, Parmley, a Republican who represented Edmunds County in the South Dakota Legislature, proposed a bill enabling counties to begin substantial road projects by actually collecting taxes and contracting the work. The idea nearly got him laughed out of Pierre, but he persisted. Governor Robert H. Vessey recognized Parmley's efforts in 1910, appointing him as South Dakota's representative to several National Good Roads Congresses held throughout the country.⁴

A local problem that particularly upset Parmley was the poor road between Ipswich, the Edmunds county seat to which he had relocated to run a newspaper, and Aberdeen, an important trade center for northern South Dakota. Parmley promoted a joint venture between the two towns to grade and gravel the road. When this project proved successful, he promoted simi-

3. J. H. McKeever, "How Good Roads Came to South Dakota," *Better Roads* (Oct. 1969): 19; James J. Flink, *The Car Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1975), pp. 8-9.

4. McKeever, "How Good Roads Came to South Dakota," p. 19; *Ipswich Tribune*, 19 Dec. 1940.



A good-roads advocate and booster of the Yellowstone Trail, Joseph W. Parmley promoted bridging the Missouri River at Mobridge as early as 1914.

lar efforts between other towns. "Good Roads" committees were organized in Aberdeen, Mobridge, and Lemmon. By 1912, Parmley had also spread the gospel of good roads into the neighboring states of North Dakota and Montana, and on 9 October representatives of various communities met in Lemmon to propose an ambitious project—an improved road from Minneapolis to Yellowstone Park. Parmley served as first president of the resulting "Twin City—Aberdeen—Yellowstone Park Trail Association," and through his efforts the Yellowstone Trail became an important link in a national road from Plymouth Rock to Puget Sound. The Yellowstone Trail association promoted the road heartily and by 1923 operated thirteen travel bureaus between Walla Walla, Washington, and Cleveland, Ohio, providing more than two hundred fifty thousand summer

tourists with free maps and information about garages, lodging, and restaurants.⁵

One major problem still existed, however. The Missouri River remained unbridged. As early as 1914, Parmley arranged a visit to Mobridge by representatives of cities along the route to "investigate the river with the object of bridging the stream."⁶ Traffic at Mobridge increased steadily from seven hundred cars crossing the river via ferry in the year 1913 to the same number crossing during a single fifteen-day period in August 1922. In October, a new thirteen-hundred-foot pontoon bridge opened, but the fact that it was supported by fifty-two boats meant that it

5. Charlotte Petersen, ed., *Ipswich 1883-1983* (Ipswich, S.Dak.: Ipswich Commercial Club, 1983), pp. 59-60; O. T. Peterson, ed., *First Year Book of the Twin Cities-Aberdeen-Yellowstone Park Trail, the Great Highway of the Northwest* [Hettinger, N.Dak.: Twin Cities-Aberdeen-Yellowstone Park Trail Association, 1914], pp. 6-7.

6. Peterson, *First Year Book*, p. 8.

In 1922, a new pontoon bridge helped to accommodate the growing number of automobiles crossing the Missouri River at Mobridge.



had to be removed before the river froze.⁷ Clearly, a permanent bridge was needed soon.

Meanwhile, a proposed state-owned dam and hydroelectric project had gotten Parmley involved in promoting the Mobridge area for another project related to its strategic location on the Missouri River. In 1920, two years after South Dakota voters approved a constitutional amendment allowing the state to produce public power from Missouri River water, two prominent Mobridge businessmen began pushing their vicinity as the prime location for a dam and generating plant.⁸ Dominick C. DeVany, editor of the *Mobridge Weekly Tribune*, boosted the project in weekly editorials and coined the motto "Mobridge 15,000 [people] in 1925," a reference to the economic activity the project would stimulate.⁹ Joining DeVany was Julius Skaug, a local lawyer, amateur historian, and president of the Mobridge Commercial Club. Both men were personal friends of Parmley and enlisted his aid in promoting the hydroelectric facility, which included plans for a bridge.¹⁰

At the same time, proponents of another site near Wheeler, in the south-central part of the state, also began an earnest campaign for the dam. The editor of the *Platte Tribune* argued that the facility logically belonged in southern South Dakota because from there transmission lines could easily supply electricity to the state's larger cities of Sioux Falls, Mitchell, Yankton, and Vermillion. Mobridge interests countered that a state engineer's study had determined their site to be better, based on construction costs and the potential markets of Aberdeen and Bismarck. DeVany, Skaug, and Parmley spent the next two years campaigning for a dam at Mobridge. Their efforts, combined with the state engineer's arguments, eventually convinced the South Dakota Legislature to support the Mobridge location. Proponents of the southern location immediately began a petition drive to refer the matter to the state's voters. The resulting referendum on the construction of a dam and

7. *Ibid.*, p. 37; *Mobridge Weekly Tribune*, 24 Aug., 28 Sept. 1922.

8. Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 3d ed., rev. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), p. 275.

9. *Mobridge Weekly Tribune*, 12 Aug. 1920.

10. *Ibid.*, 26 Oct. 1922.

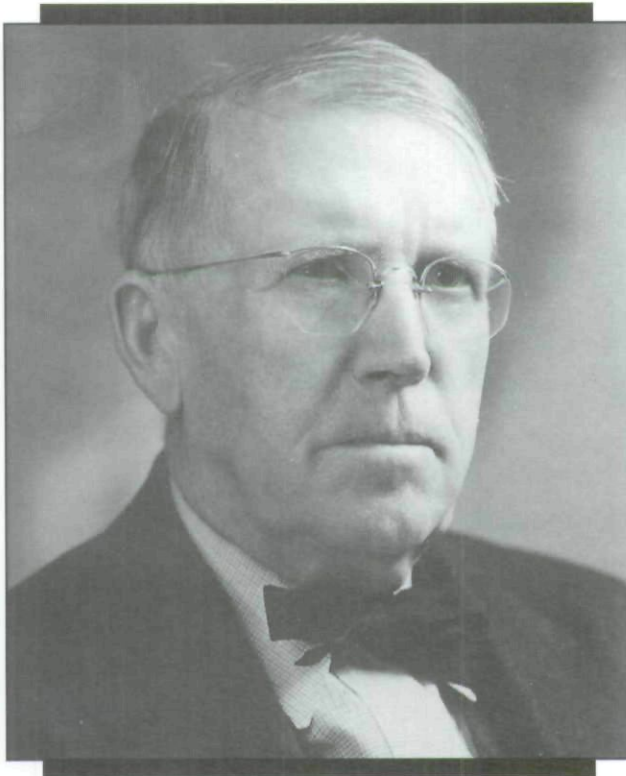


Governor Peter Norbeck, pictured here outside the state capitol, was a practical businessman who recognized that good roads aided economic development.

generating plant at Mobridge became a major issue in the 1922 elections. The ballot issue enjoyed strong support in the northern part of the state (Mobridge voters approved it 1,158 to 17), but the more heavily populated southern counties rejected it by large margins. In the end, the state never built a hydroelectric facility on the Missouri River.¹¹

11. *Mobridge Weekly Tribune*, 5 Aug. 1920; Schell, *History of South Dakota*, p. 275; South Dakota, *Legislative Manual* (1923), p. 351.

Despite their decisive defeat, northern interests had gained a booster of hydroelectric development and bridge construction in the area during Peter Norbeck's two terms as governor from 1917 to 1921. A self-made man who operated a profitable well-drilling business, South Dakota's first native-born governor was a Progressive Republican and an avid promoter of economic development. Under Norbeck's leadership, the state owned coal mines, grain elevators, stockyards, packing plants, and the still-operating state cement plant in Rapid City. Norbeck also presided over the creation of Custer State Park and construction of the Needles Highway and Iron Mountain Road in the Black Hills. With pushing from Parmley, the governor created a fully funded state highway commission and began



South Dakota's first state bridge engineer, John E. Kirkham, met the challenge of spanning the Missouri River with innovative and economical designs.

searching for talented engineers to build roads and bridges throughout South Dakota.¹²

Among Norbeck's potential recruits was a man who wanted to make his mark in a big way. John E. Kirkham was a bridge engineer and structures professor at Iowa State University when he accepted Norbeck's invitation to visit South Dakota in 1919. As he and the governor toured the state, Kirkham explained how South Dakota could save hundreds of thousands of dollars by simplifying bridge design and construction techniques. Impressed, Norbeck hired Kirkham as state bridge engineer, giving him unlimited authority over all bridge construction in South Dakota. Kirkham quickly began hiring employees for his department, among them Kenneth R. Scurr, one of his top students at Iowa State.¹³

Kirkham was, in Scurr's words, "an unusual man, in some ways even eccentric."¹⁴ A small man with a large ego, Kirkham was good at attracting attention to himself and his projects and had been known to introduce himself to strangers as the man who was saving South Dakota millions of dollars on bridges. The fact that he had been given unlimited authority as state bridge engineer and had staffed his department with capable Iowa State graduates, in effect justifying his own unorthodox teaching methods, helped to feed his self-image. Kirkham used every avenue in the engineering world to promote his program. He submitted articles to national engineering publications and got himself and the state's bridges featured in newsreels distributed around the country. In all, Kirkham would preside over the construction of five Missouri River bridges, the "pig-tail" bridges of the Black Hills, and several smaller bridges around the state before leaving in 1928. His first assignment was to build up the smaller bridges needed to support an

12. Robert F. Karolevitz, *Challenge: The South Dakota Story* (Sioux Falls, S.Dak.: Brevet Press, 1975), pp. 241-42; Paul E. Bellamy, "Peter Norbeck: A Biography," n. d., pp. 1-3, Peter Norbeck Biographical File, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre, S.Dak. (hereafter cited SDSHS).

13. Fredric L. Quivik and Lon Johnson, *Historic Bridges in South Dakota: Final Report on the Determination of Eligibility to the National Register of Historic Places for Historic Bridges in South Dakota* (Pierre: South Dakota Department of Transportation, 1990), pp. 39-40.

14. "Missouri River Bridges of South Dakota, 1920-1980" (transcript of interview of Kenneth R. Scurr by Emory Johnson), n. d., pp. 1-3, Bridges Folder, Vertical File, SDSHS.

expanded state road network, but by 1920 the engineer had allied himself with Parmley, Skaug, and DeVany in the push for state funding for Missouri River bridge construction.¹⁵

One of Governor Norbeck's last proposals to the state legislature before he became a United States Senator in 1921 was a funding plan to gather money for Missouri River bridges. With support from Kirkham and the Mobridge boosters, Norbeck proposed the enactment of a special tax of one-tenth of a mill on all taxable property. Authorities projected the plan would generate about four hundred thousand dollars per year. By building each of five proposed bridges as money became available, the entire \$4-to-\$5-million-dollar project would take between ten and fifteen years to complete. Kirkham soon generated more press for himself by insisting that he could build all five bridges for around \$2 million. His critics considered the sum to be outrageously low, pointing out that the Meridian Highway Bridge Company was preparing to construct a combination railroad-highway bridge at Yankton for a projected \$1.4 million and that the recently completed bridge at Bismarck had cost \$1.3 million.¹⁶

While waiting for money to accumulate in the bridge fund, the State Highway Commission compiled traffic data and determined that the four best bridge locations were Mobridge, Pierre, Chamberlain, and Wheeler. Pierre was an obvious choice as the state capital and site of pontoon bridge and ferry operations connecting its rail terminus with the Deadwood Trail since 1880. Chamberlain was the site of another early river crossing, and Mobridge, on the busy Yellowstone Trail, had powerful boosters. Although Wheeler was the least populous of the four communities, a bridge there would serve the needs of the state's south-central counties. Forest City, located midway between Mobridge and Pierre, was added to the list later.¹⁷ This selection of potential bridge sites, and the fact that nearly

15. Ibid.; James Cracco, "History of the South Dakota Highway Department, 1919-1941" (Master's thesis, University of South Dakota, 1970), p. 127; *Mobridge Weekly Tribune*, 4 Dec. 1924; Quivik and Johnson, *Historic Bridges in South Dakota*, pp. 40, 96.

16. Cracco, "History of the South Dakota Highway Department," p. 104; "Missouri River Bridges," p. 2; Quivik and Johnson, *Historic Bridges in South Dakota*, pp. 48-49.

17. "Missouri River Bridges," p. 1; Karolevitz, *Challenge*, pp. 126-34.

eight hundred thousand dollars would be in the state's kitty by 1923 set up one of the most interesting confrontations in South Dakota legislative history.

By late 1922, when it became apparent that the state would have the money to begin one, or possibly two, bridges in 1923, the boosters of each site began to wage publicity campaigns. D. C. DeVany promoted his town's cause in the pages of the *Mobridge Weekly Tribune*, writing in a year-end editorial that a bridge there "would not be built to take care of a possible large volume of traffic that a bridge might be expected to stimulate, but rather to take care of a traffic that already is several times larger than that at any other point on the Missouri River in South Dakota."¹⁸ The editors of the *Aberdeen News* and *Aberdeen Journal* quickly concurred, endorsing Mobridge as the first bridge site. Kirkham soon helped to fuel controversy and encourage Mobridge interests by announcing that a bridge could be built there for only \$283,000.¹⁹

On 31 January 1923, the Committee on Bridges and Ferries of the South Dakota House of Representatives introduced House Bill (HB) 75, an act to fund construction of the five bridges through a combination of the accumulated tax funds and the issuance of \$1.4 million in bonds by the State Highway Commission. Following the addition of an amendment that would have allocated the money year by year, HB 75 was defeated 50 to 47. On 7 February, the House reconsidered the bill, which Representative Garfield G. Tunell of Mobridge had amended to eliminate the bond provision and authorize the legislature to determine the order in which the bridges would be built. This time, HB 75 passed the House 98 to 0 and went on to gain Senate approval by a margin of 31 to 9.²⁰

Lawmakers quickly went into caucus to devise a plan for determining the order of the bridges' construction. In the end, the bodies agreed that each legislator was to vote on all five

18. *Mobridge Weekly Tribune*, 28 Dec. 1922.

19. *Ibid.*, 11 Jan., 1 Feb. 1923.

20. South Dakota, *Proceedings of the House of Representatives, Eighteenth Legislative Session* (1923), pp. 197, 265-66, 337-38, 363-64, 593; South Dakota, *Proceedings of the Senate, Eighteenth Legislative Session* (1923), pp. 459-60; *Mobridge Weekly Tribune*, 1, 8 Feb. 1923.

sites, giving his first preference a value of five points and descending to his least favorite, which would receive only one point. The Mobridge supporters, led by Parmley, were confident that their influence and the popularity of the Yellowstone Trail would prove ample reason for legislators to select Mobridge as the site of the first bridge.²¹

However logical a choice Mobridge might have been, the arguments of the northern boosters did not sway the southern interests, who had pushed hard for a bridge at either Wheeler or Chamberlain following Wheeler's loss of the proposed dam project. Legislators from southeast South Dakota traded votes on other issues to lawmakers from eastern and Black Hills districts in exchange for their support of a southern bridge site. The strategy worked. In the end, Wheeler received 480 points, Pierre 425, Chamberlain 411, Mobridge 408, and Forest City 406.²²

This decisive rejection of Mobridge stuck in the craw of Parmley, DeVany, and Skaug and spurred talk of another state referendum, this one to decide where the first bridge should be built.²³ The Mobridge boosters enlisted the aid of Doane Robinson, director of the legislative reference division and a former ally in the fight for the hydroelectric project, to help come up with a plan to speed the construction of a bridge at Mobridge. Parmley recalled that following the announcement of the site selection "those who had not slept much for several nights were taking deep draughts of artesian water, ginger ale and other liquids" in the bar of Pierre's Saint Charles Hotel, a popular gathering place for lobbyists and legislators. "I was sitting in the St. Charles lobby when Doane Robinson came in to sooth and condole," he remembered. "I said 'Doane, don't you come round here with your sob stuff. We are going to have the first bridge.'"²⁴ Later that evening, Robinson called Parmley with an idea for hastening the construction of all five bridges. Robinson suggested that counties and towns in the area of a

21. *Mobridge Weekly Tribune*, 22 Feb. 1923; Skaug, *Mobridge*, p. 110.

22. *Sioux Falls Press* editorial, reprinted in *Mobridge Weekly Tribune*, 21 Dec. 1922; *Mobridge Weekly Tribune*, 1 Nov. 1923; Skaug, *Mobridge*, p. 110.

23. Skaug, *Mobridge*, p. 111.

24. *Mobridge Weekly Tribune*, 1 Nov. 1923.

In a late-night inspiration, Doane Robinson devised a financing scheme that permitted the simultaneous construction of all five Missouri River bridges.

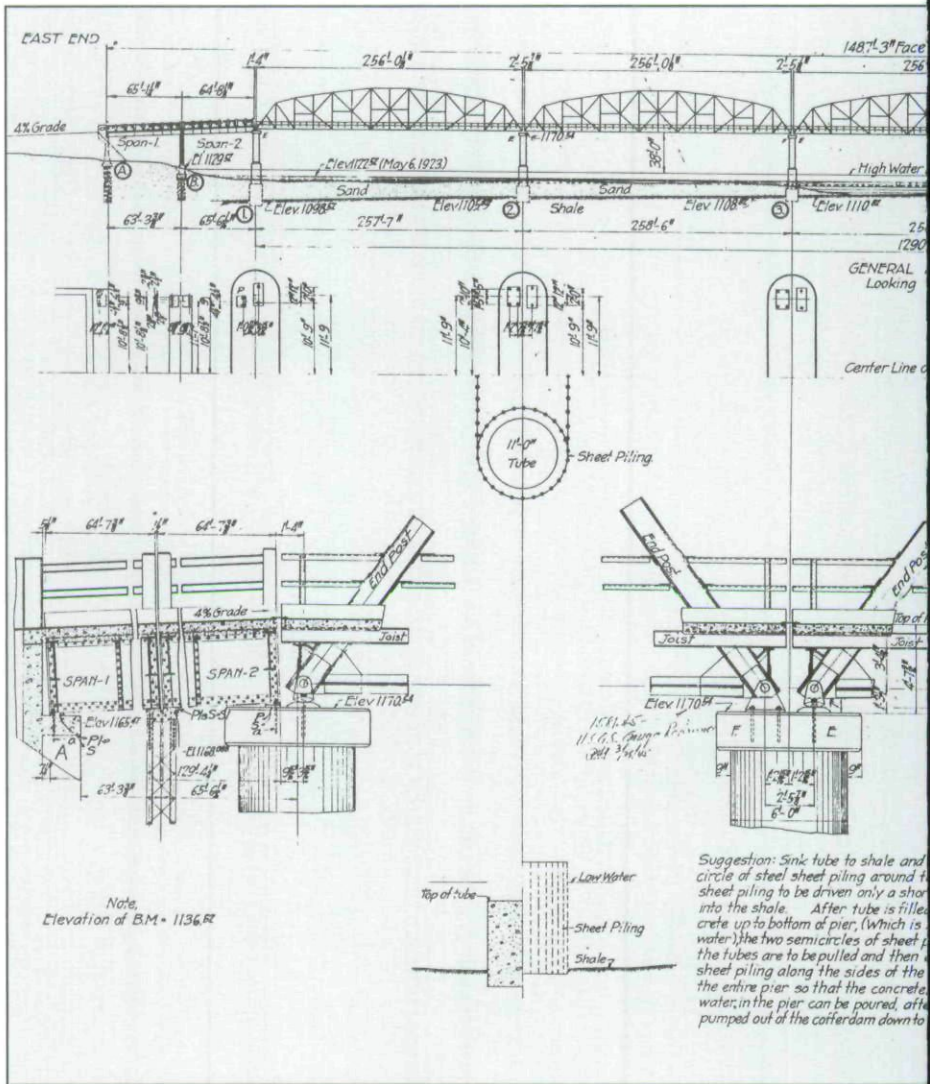


proposed bridge be allowed to contribute to the state bridge fund, build the bridge in their locale when enough money had accumulated, and then be reimbursed as tax dollars from the mill levy came into the state treasury. With money flowing into the treasury faster, construction of any or all bridges could thus proceed at once.²⁵

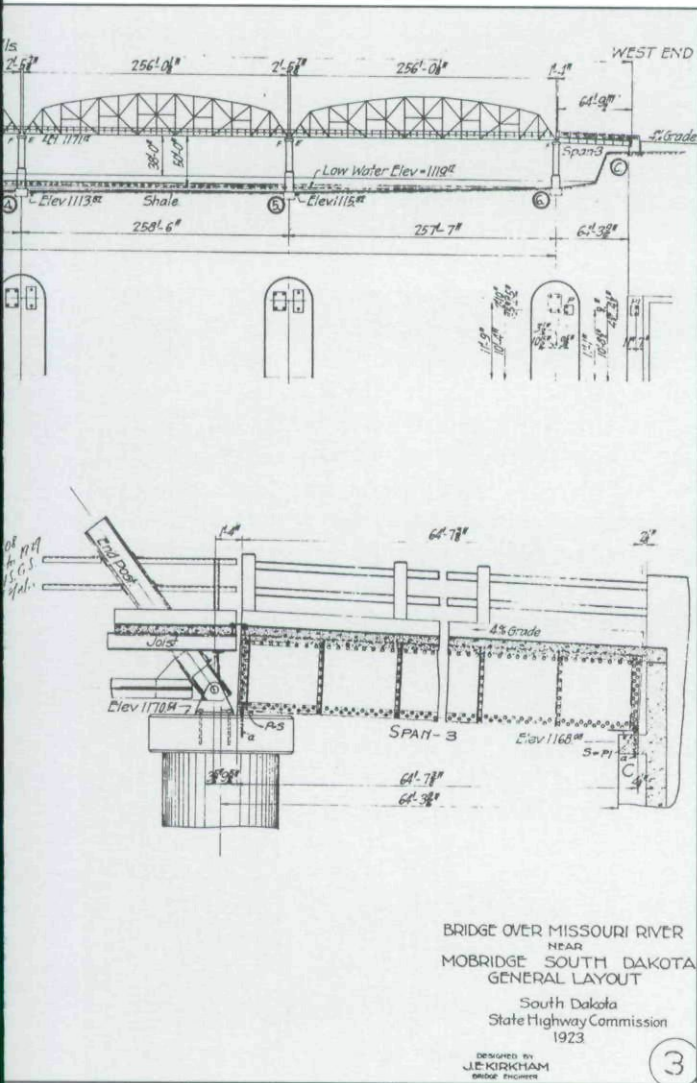
House Bill 321, introduced by the Committee on Bridges and Ferries, specified the bridges' locations and outlined procedures for contracting the work. An amendment by Representative Tunell embodied Robinson's plan by authorizing counties and towns to sell bonds to raise extra funds. The measure

25. Ibid.; "Missouri River Bridges," p. 2.

passed both houses of the legislature with little opposition, and Norbeck's successor, Governor William H. McMaster, signed the bill into law on 6 March 1923. The northern counties of



Walworth, Corson, Dewey, Edmunds, Brown, and Campbell and cities such as Mobridge, Ipswich, and Lemmon quickly took advantage of the new law, passing bond issues to raise



This mechanical drawing was among the specifications sent to construction companies interested in bidding on the Mobridge project.

money for the Mobridge bridge.²⁶ Other areas of the state approved similar measures. As a result, South Dakota would have all of its Missouri River bridges much earlier than expected.

With a financing scheme in place, actual construction planning could begin. Kirkham and Scurr had studied site locations in the Mobridge area after the State Highway Commission had completed its traffic count in 1922. On 28 March 1923, a surveying team arrived in Mobridge to determine the bridge's exact location. More good news for Mobridge supporters came on 4 September when Corson County announced that it had sold its bridge bonds, becoming the final governmental entity in the area to do so. This announcement paved the way for the state to open construction bids. Between 20 September and 2 October, twenty-four companies requested project specifications, and when the bids were opened on 23 October, the Minneapolis Bridge Company was the winner. The company submitted a bid of \$281,956.03 to build a 1,262-foot-long concrete bridge with 38-foot vertical clearance, 256-foot horizontal clearance, and a 20-foot bridge deck. All construction was to be completed by 15 December 1924, ensuring that Mobridge would, as Parmley had promised, have the first bridge.²⁷

By 22 November, the Minneapolis Bridge Company had its equipment in place, and work progressed at a steady pace, aided by mild winter weather. Throughout the spring and summer of 1924, the *Mobridge Weekly Tribune* carried little news about the construction other than to state that it was going well. In August, the State Highway Commission announced the awarding of an additional \$73,435.88 in contracts for approach work and connecting roads to companies from Watertown and Murdo. On 2 October, the *Tribune* reported progress on two fronts. The last of the steel was to be in place soon, and the concrete floor and guard rails were going to be poured within days. Civic leaders had set a dedication date of 12 November 1924. Plans would begin immediately for what would be the

26. *House Proceedings* (1923), pp. 636-37, 948, 979; South Dakota, *Session Laws* (1923), chap. 204, pp. 189-92; Skaug, *Mobridge*, p. 110.

27. "Missouri River Bridges," p. 1; *Mobridge Weekly Tribune*, 29 Mar., 6, 13, 27 Sept., 25 Oct. 1923.

biggest day in the short history of Mobridge and a significant day in the history of South Dakota.²⁸

Slated to begin on 11 November, the Northern Corn Show and Bridge Dedication Festival would kick off with a "historical drama of pioneer days" and end with a dance on 13 November. In between, street attractions, band concerts, boxing matches, and a huge parade of state, county, and local dignitaries would entertain visitors. DeVany and the *Tribune* proclaimed Mobridge the "Wonder City of South Dakota" and heaped praise on Skaug and the Mobridge Commercial Club. The newspaper also lauded former governor Norbeck as the guiding force behind the bridges, Robinson as mastermind of the financing plan, Parmley for his Yellowstone Trail promotion, Kirkham as the genius behind the created bridge's low cost, and Governor McMaster for facilitating the legislation.²⁹

Despite cold and windy weather, the actual dedication ceremony on 12 November attracted about ten thousand people, who formed a procession that would cross the bridge after its formal opening. Governor McMaster rode in the lead car, with other state and local government officials, Yellowstone Trail dignitaries, bands, floats, and other cars following behind. Skaug presided over the ceremonies, at which Parmley, Kirkham, and Reverend E. A. Ashley of Aberdeen gave speeches. In addition, Doane Robinson read a poem he had composed to commemorate the event:

The Song of the Bridge
Chord and traverse, strut and post;
I am the bridge that Kirkham built.
Brawling river, forget thy boast,—
The winds in my rigging croon and lilt.

The world a-wheel, my portals fill;
I thrill with joy in service mine;
My prophet soul assures until
A thousand years I keep the line.

28. *Mobridge Weekly Tribune*, 22, 29 Nov. 1923, 28 Aug., 2 Oct. 1924.

29. *Ibid.*, 30 Oct. 1924; *Aberdeen Evening News*, 13 Nov. 1924.



Formally opened on 12 November 1924, the toll-free, all-weather highway bridge at Mobridge was the first to connect east-river and west-river South Dakota.

In gratitude and reverence bow,—
Sealing the pledge till earth is done,
I am the bond and marriage vow,—
The east and west are one.

Governor McMaster spoke last, declaring the occasion a “victory won over the treacherous river.” At the end of his speech, McMaster opened a large padlock that symbolically secured the bridge approach. Adding a touch of drama, he then threw the lock into the river forty feet below. For the first time, east-river and west-river South Dakota were connected by a toll-free, all-weather highway bridge. Immediately after the formal opening, everyone in the procession drove or walked across the bridge, turned around, and went back into Mobridge to continue the celebration.³⁰

30. *Mobridge Weekly Tribune*, 13 Nov. 1924.

With the opening of the "wagon" bridge, as it was often termed, came a great increase in business activity in Mobridge. Less than a month after the bridge opened, the *Tribune* reported a rise in the number of checks issued by customers from across the river. "Not only are there entirely new people shopping here," the article concluded, "but all west-river people are seen in town more often."³¹ In mid-December, DeVany noted that the number of Christmas shoppers was up from the previous year. Throughout 1925, the impact of the bridge's completion on business in Mobridge became increasingly evident. Skaug reported to the Mobridge Commercial Club in January 1926 that most businesses had seen increases of between 15 and 25 percent during the previous year, even though the area's population had remained the same.³²

Among those who began to do more business in Mobridge were Lakota, or western Sioux, Indians from the Standing Rock and Cheyenne River reservations, many of whom had also crossed the river to take part in the bridge celebration.³³ Before the permanent bridge was built, ranchers who absolutely needed to go to Mobridge would do so, but most reservation residents conducted their business in west-river reservation towns such as McLaughlin and Fort Yates. Completion of the bridge made it easier for these individuals to travel to Mobridge more often and do more business there.

By the end of 1927, work on all five Missouri River bridges had been finished, nearly a decade sooner than originally planned and at a cost of just \$2.1 million.³⁴ Once the celebratory atmosphere wore off, however, Kirkham had to answer critics who claimed that the structures had been built too quickly and too cheaply. Responding to questions about the stability of the piers supporting both the Mobridge structure and the four other state bridges, Kirkham reassured the State Highway Commission of their soundness. "At the Mobridge bridge," he wrote

31. *Ibid.*, 4 Dec. 1924.

32. *Ibid.*, 11 Dec. 1924, 28 Jan. 1926.

33. *Ibid.*, 13 Nov. 1924.

34. "Missouri River Bridges," p. 4. The Wheeler and Chamberlain bridges were completed in September 1925; the Pierre bridge in June 1926; and the Forest City bridge in May 1927. Quivik and Johnson, *Historic Bridges in South Dakota*, p. 50.

in a 10 December 1926 letter, "There are no checks or cracks whatever in the piers, and, like the Wheeler bridge, they have gone through three ice runs."³⁵ Kirkham blamed rumors of problems on malicious gossip spread by disgruntled contractors at the Wheeler and Forest City sites, where he had refused to approve cost overruns. Earlier that summer, Kirkham had defended his decision regarding the overruns in a letter to Governor Carl Gunderson, contending that the contractors "had incompetent superintendents and dillydallied along with the work in their own fashion without listening to suggestions from anyone."³⁶ One can probably assume that the "anyone" Kirkham was referring to was himself. In any event, the dispute marked the beginning of the end for Kirkham in South Dakota; he resigned as state bridge engineer in 1928. While the accusations about his work undoubtedly rankled, Kirkham had also met his biggest challenge in the construction of the Missouri River bridges and "seemed a little lost," one contemporary observed, without a major project to occupy him. After a brief retirement, he returned to academic life as a research professor at Oklahoma State University.³⁷

Kirkham had once boasted that the Mobridge bridge would last five hundred years, but his claim was never to be tested. The construction of Oahe Dam near Pierre, one of four large dams on the Missouri in South Dakota authorized under the Pick-Sloan Plan in 1944, doomed the Mobridge bridge. On 26 July 1959, a new Mobridge highway bridge built under the direction of Kirkham's successor, Kenneth Scurr, opened to traffic approximately two miles north of the original bridge site. In August 1960, the last two spans of the old bridge were dismantled and the piers blown up before the rising waters of Oahe Reservoir submerged the structure.³⁸ The original Mo-

35. Kirkham to State Highway Commission, 10 Dec. 1926, Highway Engineering, Bridge Engineer Correspondence, 1920-1980, Box 482, Folder 40, Records of the South Dakota Department of Transportation, SDSHS.

36. Kirkham to Gunderson, 17 Aug. 1926, Highway Commission, Bridge Engineer Correspondence, 1919-1945, Box 6147, Folder 13, *ibid.*

37. "Missouri River Bridges," p. 6.

38. *Ibid.*; Quivik and Johnson, *Historic Bridges in South Dakota*, p. 51; *Mobridge Diamond Jubilee, 1906-1981* [Mobridge, S.Dak.: Northern Oahe Historical Society, 1981], p. 5.

bridge bridge, the object of intense lobbying and legislative action, had stood for only thirty-seven years.

The story of the highway bridge at Mobridge is more than a simple story of construction. For promoters such as Parmley, Norbeck, and Kirkham, the Mobridge structure was the fulfillment of a dream. Through it, Parmley achieved the final connection in his national highway; Kirkham won notoriety; and Norbeck saw the two separate parts of his beloved South Dakota bound together. The dedication of the Mobridge bridge in 1924 symbolized the uniting of east river and west river, American Indians and non-Indians, and farmers and city dwellers into a single people who celebrated a shared purpose, however briefly.

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