

106 SUCCESS STORY

Old Bridge Gets New Life Through Community Involvement

Missouri River at Yankton, SD and Cedar County, NE



“There was some sentiment before the bridge was upgraded to meet trail standards, ‘Why spend money on an old bridge?’ A lot of those naysayers have become users. We’ve created a different type of trail system. It’s quite a different look at the river when you’re standing over the water rather than when you’re standing on the river bank. It’s just a completely different experience.”

— TODD LARSON
Yankton Director of Parks and
Recreation, quoted in *Sioux City
Journal* February 23, 2015



THE STORY

At the beginning of the 20th century, transportation across the Missouri River between Yankton, South Dakota, and Cedar County, Nebraska, relied on ferry service or a seasonally operated pontoon bridge. In 1915, Yankton business interests organized a private bridge company to build a permanent bridge across the Missouri River connecting Yankton with rural Cedar County. Named the Meridian Highway Bridge, it was an important link in the international highway running from Canada to Mexico, traversing the Great Plains in a north-south direction along the Sixth Principal Meridian.

Construction of the bridge languished during World War I, and in 1920 the Meridian Highway Bridge Company retained Kansas City engineers Harrington, Howard and Ash to design a combined railroad and highway bridge, with a span that could rise 27 feet to allow unobstructed river navigation. This unusual moveable span and the six fixed spans were designed alike so the moveable span could replace another span if the river changed course. Completion of the bridge was an undisputed boon for the Yankton region (even though the railroad never arrived), but it proved less profitable for the company’s shareholders, and in 1946, the company sold the bridge to the City of Yankton. Recognized for its engineering and as the only vertical lift span in Nebraska and South Dakota, the Meridian Highway Bridge was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1993.

THE PROJECT

In 2008, the South Dakota Department of Transportation (SD DOT) and Nebraska Department of Roads (NDOR) determined the aging Meridian Highway Bridge was no longer sufficient to carry modern highway traffic, and construction of a new bridge was underway nearby. As the train route on the lower level never materialized, the Meridian Highway Bridge was obsolete and facing demolition.

THE 106 PROCESS

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) provided funding for the project and

Photos: Above, Meridian Highway Bridge (photo courtesy Yankton Department of Parks and Recreation); Right, 1927 views of the bridge (photos courtesy Yankton Convention and Visitors Bureau)

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Photo Above, Yankton, South Dakota, and the Meridian Bridge (photo courtesy National Park Service); Right, Dinner En Blanc on the bridge (photo by Yankton Area Arts)

was the federal agency responsible for conducting the Section 106 process under the National Historic Preservation Act. Section 106 requires that federal agencies identify historic properties and assess the effects of the projects they carry out, fund, or permit on those properties. Under Section 106, agencies also consult with Indian tribes, state and local governments, and organizations and individuals that have a demonstrated interest in the historic property to seek agreement on measures to address the effects.

The new bridge crossing the Missouri River was completed in 2008 leaving the Meridian Highway Bridge abandoned with the expectation it would be demolished. The Nebraska State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) suggested converting it to a pedestrian bridge, but the project was complicated by issues of ownership, costs of demolition and conversion, and the multiple government agencies—FHWA, South Dakota SHPO, SD DOT, NDOR, Nebraska SHPO, and the City of Yankton—involved in the project. Using the Section 106 process, the various parties were able to address the challenges to preserving the bridge and coordinate their roles to successfully evaluate the alternatives, ranging from demolition to reuse as a pedestrian bridge. The pedestrian bridge emerged as the preferred alternative and, using a Transportation Enhancement Grant and American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 funding, the SD DOT spent \$4.1 million for the structural work and conversion.

Consulting Parties:

- FHWA
- ACHP
- South Dakota State Historic Preservation Officer
- Nebraska State Historic Preservation Officer
- South Dakota Department of Transportation
- Nebraska Department of Roads
- City of Yankton

THE SUCCESS

The Section 106 process brought parties with conflicting views to the table and provided a forum for informed consideration of alternatives to the preconceived outcome of demolition. Today, the Meridian Highway Bridge is valued by the citizens of Yankton as an important historic resource saved for public enjoyment as a pedestrian bridge. It links Yankton and its waterfront park and trail system to wildlife preserves on the opposite bank of the river. It has become important for tourism as part of the Missouri National Recreational River, providing access to miles of trails for hiking, biking, and running. The bridge will continue its historic function of connecting South Dakota and Nebraska for the public's enjoyment in the years to come.

For more about Section 106 and the ACHP go to www.achp.gov

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