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BRIDGE'S SHUTDOWN RETURNS 3 TOWNS TO A HARSHER AGE

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MARQUETTE, Iowa, Jan. 31 -- The great arc of the bridge, a modern steel giant softened by the sunlight and shadows of a bright winter's day, dwarfs the aging buildings and the people who dwell in the narrow places between the bluffs that rise abruptly from the water's edge in this old Mississippi River town.

"There's always been a bridge there," say Mayor Donna Kinley, who works the overnight shift at the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company's plant across the river in Prairie du Chien, Wis. "Our lives have kind of centered around that."

But now the bridge is closed and will remain so, perhaps for a year, maybe for 18 months or longer, the outside experts say.

And the relatively unchanging lives of the river people of Marquette, of its near neighbor to the south, McGregor, and of Prairie du Chien have been changed with little warning. Crack in Steel Girder

"It's really kind of hard to believe," said Mrs. Kinley, still somewhat bewildered that what she and others took for granted for so long has been taken away.

Residents of the local river towns struggled for a decade to obtain the \$4.2 million six-year old bridge, to replace its fragile predecessor. Now a four-inch crack in a huge steel girder that supports the roadbed has thrust the people here back into a harsher age, one alien to life in late-20thcentury America.

From the cold half-light of the predawn hours into the late-evening darkness, small knots of shivering townspeople huddle on gravel landings on either side of the river waiting for a battered 18-passenger aluminum ferryboat to shuttle them across through a crooked channel carved by chain saws from the Mississippi's ice.

It is about two miles from Marquette and three miles from McGregor to Prairie du Chien across the stricken bridge. In addition to shopping on the Wisconsin side, several hundred Iowa residents work there. A smaller number commute the other way to jobs in Iowa.

"The shortest way around is 167 miles, round trip," by a bridge farther north at Lansing, said Mayor James R. Bittner of Prairie de Chien. His city of 5,500 people is the principal shopping center for a wide area, especially for the residents of Marquette, a village of 500, and McGregor, about twice that size. Ferry Ride Costs a Dollar

The little ferry that makes a one-way trip in five minutes for a dollar a person was set up to spare those who did not want to spend the time or gasoline to drive around. Free shuttle buses are provided on both sides of the river to take riders to downtown destinations.

But some of those who do not want to spend up to \$10 a week, a stiff commuting charge for rural workers unaccustomed to such costs, have come up with their own alternatives.

Flat-bottom boats equipped with steel runners and "scratchers," pronged wheels turned by conventional outboard motors, take some across the ice. Others use air boats driven by rear propellers. Some pole their boats over the ice. A few walk, chancing the random soft spots that could plunge them into the frigid waters.

The crack in the bridge was discovered Oct. 2, 1979. But it was not until Jan. 16, after more than 15 months of testing, that the immediate closing of the bridge was ordered. The last tests had shown that the steel had an especially high carbon content and could be too brittle to be safe. The bridge, the laboratory technicians said, might collapse at any moment. Aid From Washington Sought

Gov. Lee S. Dreyfus of Wisconsin and Gov. Robert D. Ray of Iowa signed a "declaration of highway emergency" and on the basis are applying for funds from the Federal Highway Department. Wisconsin, which built the bridge, the cost shared by Iowa and the Federal Government, has ordered a \$125,000 study to determine whether the bridge can be repaired or must be rebuilt. The study will take up to four months.

Despite the frustration of local officials who want outside help to pay for their ferry, shuttle buses and other expenses, aides to the two Governors privately acknowledged that they had received little encouragement from Washington.

"The Federal Government has said what we have here is a detour, not a disaster," one Wisconsin official said.

Mayor Bittner, among others, is not happy. "The Federal Government has told us that since the bridge hasn't fallen into the river we don't qualify as an emergency," he complained. He said a Chamber of Commerce survey of Prairie du Chien had estimated a loss of \$80 million, or "50 percent of our business," if the bridge was closed for a year.

Whatever it is, disaster, emergency or just a detour, the closing of the bridge has disrupted the daily lives of thousands of small-town people in these isolated parts of northeastern Iowa and southwestern Wisconsin.

Some doctors live on one side of the river but have their practices and patients on the other. The only hospital is on the Wisconsin side. An airboat ambulance has been made available for emergencies, and Iowa has promised a helicopter for back-up ambulance service.

"I've driven around twice and it's a real pain," said Laurie Hollberg of McGregor. "The main reason I still go, and people laugh at me, is that the jackpot at Piggly Wiggly is up to \$2,000," she said of a supermarket contest. "I wish someone would win it so I could quit going." "It Seems Like 6 Months"

Russ and Marlene Bernhard have worse trouble. They live in McGregor and own a bakery in Prairie du Chien. Their customers are on both sides of the river. Every morning since the bridge has been closed they have had to get up at 3 A.M., drive to the river, take a "scratcher" across, use a truck on the Wisconsin side to pick up their baked goods, drive back to the river, load them into the boat, cross the river again, put them in another truck and make their rounds.

"It's only been two weeks," Mr. Bernhard said wearily, pausing at a delivery stop, "but it seems like six months."

John G. Adney, editor of the North Iowa Times in McGregor, is the organist at Holy Family Episcopal Church in Prairie du Chien.

"Even a religious man isn't going to drive that many miles to go to church," he said. "There are five of us in the family, and it would cost us 10 bucks a Sunday to go to church on the ferry. That's more than we put in the collection plate. They're going to have to get themselves another organist."

Illustrations: photo of ferry photo of flat-bottomed boat map of Mississippi River between Wis. and Iowa

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