

1957 Miss Michigan Shares Journal Highlights From Mackinac Bridge Opening Events

By Karen Gould

Valerie Strong Agresta rode in the first car that crossed the Mackinac Bridge when it opened to vehicle traffic November 1, 1957. She was Miss Michigan.

"What better place to be?" she asked rhetorically of the event that took place 50 years ago. "I was to be in the first car going over this magnificent bridge, and all the county queens were behind me."

To actually see "this crowning achievement, the technology, and Dr. Steinman with his vision to foresee it could be done" was an experience she will never forget. She even remembers the early controversy over whether the bridge would even be built.

Mrs. Agresta also had a vision of the future, and kept a journal of her experiences that included a list of the names of all the people she met at the bridge opening. Actually, she kept a journal of her year's reign as Miss Michigan.

Shaded from the sun, sitting under the white tent in Bridge View



Park following the bridge token dedication to Dr. Steinman

Thursday, July 26, she produces her journal, carefully organized with the

At left: Miss Michigan 1957, Valerie Strong Agresta, and Larry Rubin, first executive secretary of the Mackinac Bridge, reunite Thursday, July 26, 2007. They first met June 28, 1958, when the bridge opening was celebrated.

events she attended that opening day.

As part of the celebration, in a journal entry dated June 26, 1957, she was driven to Cheboygan and was made "Princess of the Chicamauga Tribe."

"They gave me a beautiful beaded headdress," she remembers.

She is now a Palm Harbor, Florida, resident, and the headdress was long lost in one of her moves. She still has many mementos from her reign, including her green and gold Miss Michigan sash, which she had with her last weekend.

While Miss Michigan, she was on the Court of Honor to Miss America, Marilyn Van Derbur of Colorado. After completing a year as the state queen, Mrs. Agresta

began work on her doctorate and has taught piano for the last 21 years.

Returning from a research trip to Germany, she found a message on her answering machine, telling her about the Mackinac Bridge celebration. With hardly time to unpack, she made plane reservations for Michigan and arrived at the Straits Tuesday, July 24.

"Yesterday, as I approached the bridge, it was *deja vu*," she said. "Oh, I remember it so well."

She also remembers being part of a fashion show where furs were modeled at Fort Michilimackinac. It's in her journal.

She turns the pages of her journal

and comes to the page containing a list of names, including Dr. Steinman and Larry Rubin. Today, she is on a mission to find some of the people she had met so many years ago. She knows Mr. Rubin is at the other end of the tent, and heads in his direction. With greetings and hugs, the reunion bridges 50 years.

Attending the bridge opening and being a part of the ceremony were important to her, she said.

Looking back, "This was probably the crowning achievement of my year as Miss Michigan," she said. "It just held so much meaning for me."

Michigan Politics

By George Weeks



Mackinac Bridge Museum To Reopen in Mackinaw City

For more than three years, from May 7, 1954, to November 1, 1957, ironworker J.C. Stilwell was one of 11,000 men employed to build the Mighty Mac.

"I could talk all day about the bridge," said Mr. Stilwell. "It was kind of the love of my life."

Mr. Stilwell was one of 30 men riding on the Michigan Building Trades Council float in the Mackinaw City parade Saturday, July 28, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the span's construction. The men on the float represented the tradesmen who built the bridge.

In 1981, Mr. Stilwell launched the International Ironworkers Festival, which is held each summer in his hometown of Mackinaw City.

Now retired after 52 years on the job, he said, "I'm proud to be an ironworker."

Mr. Stilwell built the Mackinac Bridge Historic Museum, which he first opened in 1979. The museum also housed MaMa Mia's Pizzeria and Restaurant and stood on the corner of Central Avenue and Henry Street in Mackinaw



Retired Mackinac Bridge ironworker J.C. Stilwell of Mackinaw City, who worked on the construction of the span, attended 50th anniversary events at Bridge View Park in St. Ignace Saturday, July 28. Mr. Stilwell built the Mackinac Bridge Historic Museum in Mackinaw City.

City, until it was completely destroyed by fire August 28, 2005.

Since the fire, Mr. Stilwell, 78, said he has been working to rebuild the business and the museum, which he hopes to reopen in August.

Bake Sale Planned at Engadine Library

Engadine Library's summer reading program will hold a bake sale Monday, August 6, from noon to 4:30 p.m. at the library in Engadine. Proceeds will benefit the summer reading program.

Ironworker Recalls Days on Bridge

By Karen Gould

"No job intimidated me after that," said Mackinac Bridge ironworker Basil Miller, 73, a member of Local 25, who visited the site of his former job to attend a dedication ceremony for a new bridge token Thursday, July 26, at St. Ignace.

In early May 1956, Mr. Miller, then 22, went to work compacting, or "spinning," the main cables of the bridge.

"That was my first job," he said. "It was really quite an experience."

The catwalk already was in place when Mr. Miller began working on the bridge. More than four months later, he was drafted into the U.S. Army, where he spent the next two years.

He worked with the afternoon shift crew laying the single strands of cables. Weather permitting, bridge construction continued around the clock, with two shifts lasting 12 hours.

Getting to the job site was a challenge, he said, as it took him about two hours. Since he came from Cheboygan, first he traveled by ferry from Mackinaw City to St. Ignace. Once in St. Ignace, he sailed on a barge with other crew members to an anchor pier. From there, the crew walked up to the tower on the catwalk.

"I had no fear at the time," he said.

After serving in the Army, Mr. Miller continued to work as an iron-



Ironworker Basil Miller worked on the Mackinac Bridge the year before it was open to traffic. On Thursday, July 26, the Cheboygan man visited Bridge View Park in St. Ignace during the bridge token dedication ceremony to honor bridge designer and engineer Dr. David Steinman. Mr. Miller stands by the fog bell that once hung at the base of the south tower and served to guide vessels during reduced visibility. The bell was replaced with a foghorn in 1961.

worker until he retired in 1999, after more than 35 years on the job.

As the temperatures reached into the 70s Thursday and breezes were mild, Mr. Miller said on days similar to this, stringing the cable more than 500 feet above the water brought completely different conditions.

*Please turn to page 9

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Historical Information Is Appreciated

To the Editor:

I just got my copy of *The St. Ignace News* and the great pictures in it of the days gone by. The two that I sent in really paid off, as I got a letter from a Karen Pierson from East Leroy. In it she asked if I was related to a Matt Furlott. She said that she had his prayer missal she got from her husband's grandmother, Florence Sharbanaw. I called her right away and met her in Barryton and she gave it to me. She got it about 20 years ago at the Old Mission Hall, so it just shows how one thing will lead to another.

Lawrence "Ashcan" Furlott
Farwell

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Letters:

All responsible letters will be considered for publication and may be edited. They must be signed and a telephone number must be included for verification. Personal thank-you notes, personal attacks against other people, form letters, and letters promoting political candidates are not accepted, although letters for or against ballot proposals are welcome.

Obituaries:

The St. Ignace News maintains a policy of not charging for obituaries and we do often add information or rewrite them for clarity and reader interest. Obituaries that the family wants published exactly as submitted can be placed in the newspaper for \$75. Photographs are welcome at no charge.

Weddings:

Weddings with photographs are published without charge within 45 days of the ceremony. After 45 days, a photograph can be included for \$35.00.

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The quotation under the flag of *The St. Ignace News* on Page 1 is from the 10 triads written by Dr. Fred Newton Scott, creator and teacher of the first continuous course in journalism in the United States at the University of Michigan in 1890. The 10 triads are chiseled on the parapet of the Detroit News Building at 615 Lafayette Boulevard, Detroit. They were headed "Ideals of the Press" or "The Newspaper in a Free Society," and serve as a reminder of what a free press means to us.

Michigan High Court Cripples and Ridicules State Environment Act

Environmental champion Joan Wolfe was not crying wolf when she warned that the legal showdown over Nestle's Ice Mountain bottling operation in Mecosta County put the landmark 1970 Michigan Environmental Protection Act in jeopardy.

Subsequently, MEAP's authority for "any person" to bring a suit was crippled – and in fact ridiculed – last week in a 4-3 decision by the Michigan Supreme Court crafted by the Engler Four, justices elevated to that bench or the Court of Appeals by ex-Governor John Engler.

In striking down the Court of Appeals' embrace of an "ecosystem nexus" that gave plaintiffs in this case standing, the high court said this "would justify the standing of anyone but a Martian to contest water withdrawals occurring in Michigan."

On Friday, spokeswoman Michelle Begnoche said Governor Jennifer Granholm "is deeply disappointed that the Supreme Court would diminish the rights that Michigan citizens have enjoyed for more than 35 years."

Wolfe, founder of the West Michigan Environmental Action Council and first woman appointed to the Natural Resources Commission in 1973 (by Governor Bill Milliken), noted in commentaries for newspapers that Michigan's Constitution declares protection of natural resources are "of paramount public concern" to be addressed by the Legislature.

Traverse City attorney Jim Olson, representing Michigan Citizens for Water Conservation in action against Nestle, branded as "absurd" the Nestle position, embraced by the court, that the individual plaintiffs lacked standing because some of their property was not directly impacted by Nestle. He said, "It would mean any company could destroy the environment on its own property and no one could do anything about it."

Justice Betty Weaver, long at odds with her four fellow Republicans, said that with this and previous rulings they have "taken the power to protect the state's natural resources away from the people of Michigan, despite the people's stated belief that the natural resources of this state are of paramount concern." She said plaintiffs had standing to bring it because they "allege that the defendant's water pumping and bottling activities will irreparably harm Michigan's natural resources."

Justice Robert Young said Weaver's "bleak, apocalyptic visions are false. Our holding today does not strip the Legislature or Michigan residents of their ability to protect this state's natural resources." Chief Justice Cliff Taylor, and Justices Maura Corrigan and Stephen Markman joined his opinion.

Maybe not strip – but certainly erode.

In her dissent, Democrat Justice Marilyn Kelly said the decision "extinguishes a valid cause of action for no reason other than its belief that the cause of action granted by the Legislature is too broad. Sadly, the majority does not

recognize that this decision is not its to make."

So much for judicial restraint so relished by conservatives.

In his dissent, Democrat Justice Michael Cavanagh, like Weaver, a former chief justice, said the decision ignores "the interconnectedness of people and the environment in which we live."

Concerning environmental nexus, Milliken, who touted and signed MEPA, once quoted to the Michigan United Conservation Clubs what Suquamish Chief Seattle said more than 150 years ago: "The earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. This we know: All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected."

"Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself."

EPA on Great Lakes

At last week's National Governors' Association meeting in Traverse City, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Stephen Johnson said the multi-agency Great Lakes Task Force that he chairs has made "very good progress" in collaboration with states, cities, and tribes. (Chief Seattle would be proud. Great Lakes tribes are heavily involved in broad environmental efforts, although in conflict with some states on fishing and hunting issues.)

"What progress?" challenged Granholm, who said Johnson was not specific when he told her, as he did the press, that of 48 near-term objectives, 12 had been met. Later the next day, EPA sent me its list. Four of them involved aquatic invasive species, including "an action plan to develop inventories, mapping and treatment;" listing the silver Asian carp "as injurious," and creating a document and task for "rapid response" to the problem.

The list included something Johnson cited at his NGA press encounter: commitment of \$25 million to clean up Ohio's Ashtabula River, under the Great Lakes Legacy Act.

Steps also were cited for handbooks and survey forms for sanitary and wastewater treatment systems, as well as convening of a 2006 State of the Lakes session, as well as other conferences.

The EPA said it supported efforts of Great Lakes Sport Fish Advisory Task Force to develop new fish consumption advisories. At least the Great Lakes are on the Bush Administration's radar screen; Johnson seems committed to a priority effort, and he talks an even better game than the administration's two previous chairs of the task force.

But the \$500 million currently spent by the federal government on Great Lakes projects is well short of expectations.

George Weeks retired last year after 22 years as political columnist for *The Detroit News*. His weekly *Michigan Politics* column is syndicated by *Superior Features*.