

Gala Celebration Honors Mighty Mackinac Bridge and Its Builders

*Continued from page 9

From a Friday night banquet in St. Ignace to the parade, fireworks, and other events, Ms. McFarland said the MBA and the events committee did a great job.

"It was just a class act all the way," she said. "It was fabulous."

The celebration added to the area economy by bringing in visitors, said Ms. McFarland.

"It was Labor Day all over again," she said. "It came early this year."

Mackinaw City hotels were full and the Visitors Bureau received calls from people telling them all campgrounds were full north of Alpena.

"We were just bursting at the seams," she said, adding that it was about 2 a.m. before traffic cleared and most people were able to leave Mackinaw City after the fireworks.

Community cooperation helped to ensure the success of the weekend, said Bob Felt, from the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) office of communications.

"MDOT worked very closely with local communities and the MBA, and indications point to an event that exceeded our expectations," he said. On a personal note, he added, "It was the best fireworks show I've ever seen."

Concerned that more people were going to attend the events than initially expected as area hotels filled rooms and with limited parking at Bridge View Park, the MBA set up a last minute shuttle service of school buses to reduce congestion at the Bridge View Park activities area. Off-site parking was made available from Little Bear East Arena and Convention Center in St. Ignace. The MBA also uses school buses during the Labor Day bridge walk. About 155 people took advantage of the service.

The MBA also made the toll booth canopy available to Bridge View Park visitors walking from St. Ignace and the Straits State Park. The canopy allows passage over I-75. Others parked near Bridge View Park and along Boulevard Drive.

Events began early in the week, when the Budweiser Clydesdales arrived in preparation for leading the St. Ignace parade Saturday. Informational talks about the bridge by Chief Engineer Kim Nowak were held at the St. Ignace Library and Little Bear East Arena.

A new bridge commuter token was dedicated to bridge designer and engineer David Steinman in a special ceremony Thursday.

Ironworker stories were told at the arena and at Bridge View Park, along with demonstrations of their work on I-beams that towered over the gathered crowds Saturday. A bronze statue honoring the men who built the bridge and the five who died during its construction was unveiled in an emotional ceremony at Bridge View Park Saturday.

A 101-foot-long Erector Set model of the bridge by Forrest Wyrick was on display there, complete with toy trucks and cars on the bridge deck. Authors signed books about the bridge, and commemorative tokens, posters, and T-shirts were sold.

The Oral History Association of Michigan recorded memories of persons involved in the construction and 1957 dedication of the bridge, and amateur radio operators broadcasted from Bridge View Park



A member of the High 5 Guys Michigan stilt-walking group make a big impression on children at the St. Ignace parade. Following close behind are the Portage Players from Curtis.



The Newman Navy League Cadet Corp. of Sault Ste Marie, Ontario, entertains crowds lining State Street in St. Ignace Saturday, July 28. Under the direction of Lieutenant Sue Demary-Elliot, the group has won the Ontario Band Competition for 11 consecutive years and is the largest of its kind in Canada.

Saturday afternoon.

A banquet was held Friday night at Kewadin Shores Casino in St. Ignace, featuring a nearly seven-foot-long cake replicating the bridge. The next day, renowned cake makers James Aslanian and Kevin Pavlina, who made the bridge cake, judged a cake contest, with creations made by local and downstate chefs. Gloria McLennan of TasTCreation of St. Ignace won the event.

Boat lines offered cruises to view fireworks. The traditional amber bridge lights twinkled as an almost-full moon lit the sky, and the weather was warm and calm as spectators climbed aboard boats and stood on the shoreline viewing the simultaneous fireworks display.

"From my vantage point, all local

participants and visitors appeared to be having a great time," said Barbara Brown, a Bridge Authority member who chaired the three-day celebration. "It exceeded

all of my expectations and hopes for this event. Everyone was so cooperative and happy, and appeared to be so proud to be a part of this event."

Ironworkers Who Built the Bridge Honored With Lakeside Monument

By Karen Gould

Last year, Patrick "Shorty" Gleason, a member of the Mackinac Bridge Authority and an ironworker for 35 years, championed an effort with Ironworker Locals 25, 8, and 340 to commission the ironworker sculpture now standing in Bridge View Park.

Mr. Gleason is the son of an ironworker who worked on the bridge during its construction.

"I don't know of another monument of this magnitude anywhere in the country" Mr. Gleason told *The St. Ignace News* Friday, July 27. "This is very, very unique in nature because of the exact details of those old time bridgemen."

Two ironworker retirees, Mark Morton and Rick Whitson, worked with sculpture Janice Trimpe on the project.

"She transformed 600 pounds of clay to come up with this replica of a bridgeman," said Mr. Gleason, whose son, Shawn, also is an ironworker.

The sculpture was dedicated July 28 during the Mackinac Bridge 50th anniversary celebration. Prior to the unveiling by

some of the men who helped build Mighty Mac, the St. Ignace Coast Guard Honor Guard stood by as taps was played by Captain

Jim Bishop. The St. Ignace resident was the tugboat pilot who transported the ironworkers from St. Ignace to their bridge work stations each day. Father Jim Williams of Mackinaw City offered a blessing for the statue and prayer for all the ironworkers involved in the construction of the bridge "for those common men who did an uncommon thing."

A plaque at the base of the sculpture recognizes the five men who died while building the bridge.

"Always, the dream of every ironworker is to work on a bridge," said Mr. Gleason. "A bridgeman is the ultimate compliment to give to that individual."

The sculpture, he said, is meant to symbolize those men who worked under dangerous conditions 20 years before safety standards were set by the federal government. Fortunately, contractor American Bridge had a good safety policy, and each day they held safety meetings, he said.



Thomas Ronczy and son Scott of Park Ridge, Illinois, watch as four F16 fighter jets fly parallel with the Mackinac Bridge as part of the 50th anniversary celebration Saturday.

Fighter Planes Trace Bridge's Path

By Karen Gould

Maybe in 50 years, when the Mackinac Bridge is 100 years old, six-year-old Scott Ronczy will return to the Straits of Mackinac and retell his stories of the bridge's 50th anniversary celebration.

Scott and his father, Thomas Ronczy, who were staying in Mackinaw City, took a morning bicycle ride to the Alexander Henry Park on North Huron Avenue Saturday, July 28. The park sits just east of Old Mackinac Point Lighthouse on the Lake Huron shoreline and offers sweeping views of the bridge, St. Ignace, and Mackinac Island.

The Ronczy's arrived at the park in time to view four Michigan Air National Guard F16 fighters salute the Mackinac Bridge on its anniversary.

While waiting for the fly-over, Scott gathered rocks from the shoreline and waded into Lake Huron to build stone castles in the water. They were tapped by tiny waves as temperatures climbed into the 80s and winds were nearly calm.

"It's beautiful," said Mr. Ronczy, looking out over the Straits.

From Park Ridge, Illinois, they had visited the Western Upper Peninsula, but had not been to the Straits area before this weekend. Later in the day, they planned to take their bicycles to Mackinac Island before attending a wedding there.

Just after 10:30 a.m., Mr. Ronczy spotted the aircraft above the tree line in St. Ignace and he joined his son at the water's edge to watch them.

The planes flew from St. Ignace south to Mackinaw City, parallel to and approximately 1,000 feet east of the Mighty Mac, reported the Michigan Department of Transportation.

Lieutenant Penny Carroll, public affairs officer at Selfridge Air National Guard Base, where the F16s are based, said the jets were flown by Michigan pilots from the 107th Fighter Squadron. The pilots included flight leader Lt. Colonel Ross Dickinson, Captain Jon Rubin, Lt. Colonel John Nyquist, and Captain Erik Simpson.



The St. Ignace Fire Department clowns get two young Mackinaw City parade watchers to help them with their breakaway gurney skit in Mackinaw City Saturday, July 28.

She was assisted in the preparations by event organizer Anne Ottaway, who has a summer home in Cedarville.

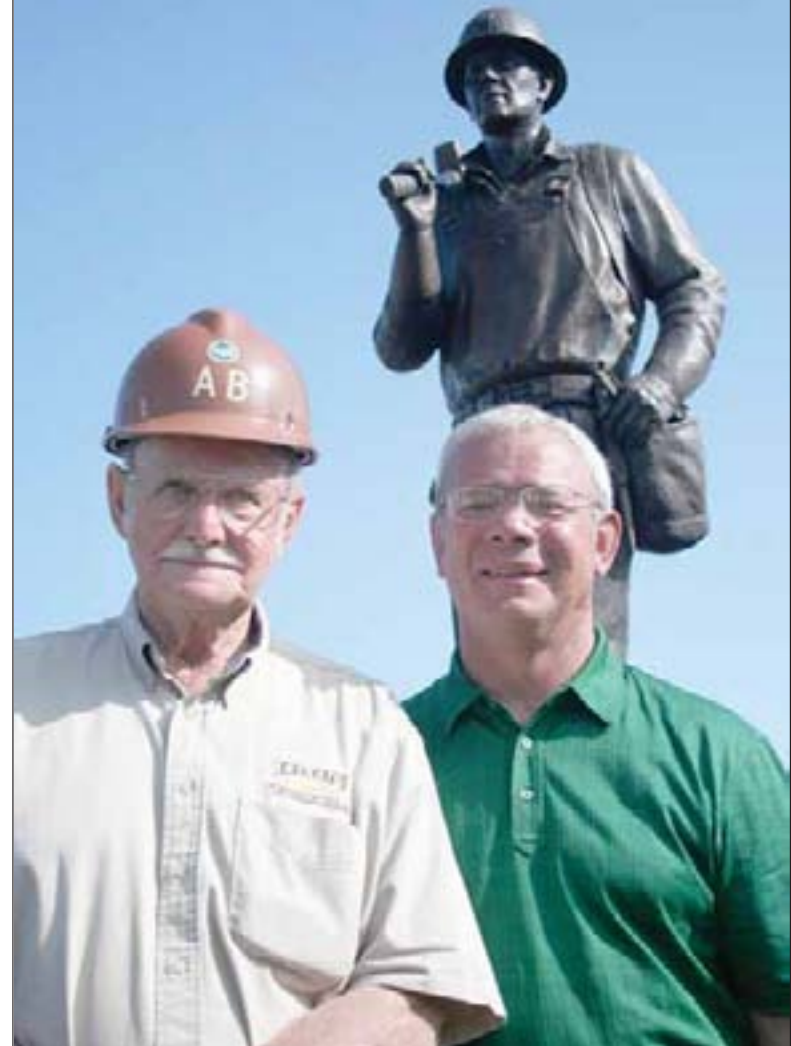
Congressman Stupak brought from Washington a leather-bound Congressional tribute to the

Mackinac Bridge from the Congressional Record.

Now, at the MBA's request, Ms. Brown will begin planning a small ceremony to mark the historic opening of the bridge, which took place November 1, 1957.



Fifty convertibles carry honored guests across the Mackinac Bridge Saturday. (Photograph courtesy of Michigan Dept. of Transportation)



Mike Gleason (left), a Mackinac Bridge ironworker, and his son, Patrick "Shorty" Gleason, a Mackinac Bridge Authority board member and ironworker, spearheaded the commissioning of the ironworker sculpture now standing in Bridge View Park at St. Ignace, a permanent monument to the men who built the bridge. The statue was dedicated Saturday, July 28. The elder Mr. Gleason worked on the bridge during its construction and came out of retirement in 1999 to return to the bridge to work on the underdeck traveler replacement project.