

The bend of the river has had its conflicts, too. Following the Sioux Uprising of 1862, it took on national and historical significance as 38 Indians were executed near the levee. In later years, an Indian march across Main Street Bridge protested a marker to that event; still later came protesters of the Vietnam War. And always in flood years came the intense race to sandbag ahead of the rising Minnesota River, to evacuate families, and to keep the anxious watch on the river.

On July 4th through the 13th of this year, as in the past several years, crowds will again gather for a Bend of the River Festival. In the area's eventful past lies ample cause for celebration.

Inella Burns

SOURCES

Edward D. Neill and Charles S. Bryant, *History of the Minnesota Valley*, 1882; Thomas Hughes, *History of Blue Earth County*, 1909; *History of North Mankato: A Community Profile*, a community and MSU publication, 1977; Donna M. Sandon, *Main Street Bridge*, a commemorative plate brochure, 1985; Tom Zitzmann, *A History of Main Street Bridge*, 1976; *Mankato Free Press*, September 14, 1917; October 2, 1917; April 5, 1937; July 6, 1949; February 21, 1951; February 11, 1952; June 27, 1952; January 3, 1967; February 8, 1973; *The Review*, September 2, 1917.

Wish List

Old window shades—for banners for "Sunday on Broad Street". We still have a need for "retired" bed sheets (especially white).

Exhibit Opening

"Reflections on the Water: A Retrospective Look at the Bend of the Minnesota River" will open on Saturday, July 5 as part of Bend of the River Days celebration.

The exhibit, a collection of photos, examines the importance of the bend of the river on events in Blue Earth County history.

An opening reception will be held from 1:00-4:00 pm on July 5. The exhibit will be on display for the next several months.

Of Interest . . .

The 6th Annual Southern Minnesota Genealogical Conference will be held on Saturday and Sunday, October 25 and 26 at the Midway Motor Lodge in Rochester. The Olmsted County Genealogical Society, Box 6411, Rochester, MN 55903, is the host.

The Midwest Archives Conference, a non-profit organization of archivists, historians, and librarians, will be meeting in Hudson, Wisconsin on October 9-11. Topics will include micrographics, paper making, audio-visual productions, archival displays, disaster planning and microcomputer applications plus a "Basic Conservation Workshop". For more information contact: Cheryl Norenberg Thies, Minnesota Historical Society, 1500 Mississippi Street, St. Paul, MN 55101, (612) 296-6980.

Wecome to New Members

Annual

Susan and Richard Chambers, Good Thunder
Mr. & Mrs. Robert Marshall, Mankato

Couple

Roberta Bartholdi, No. Mankato
Julie Cole, Mankato
Barbara Lamson, Mankato

Memorials Received

Donations have been received during the past few months and have been added to the Endowment Fund. In Memory of Lois Von Drasek from Dr. & Mrs. Donald Meredith.

In memory of Lyndon Opsal from Dr. & Mrs. Donald Meredith.

In memory of Robert Heidel from Mr. & Mrs. Arnold Meyer.

In memory of Mrs. Bruce Blansett (Melva Jean Coulter) from:

Mrs. Richard McCosh
Mrs. J.J. Ahearne
Mrs. L.W. Gooch
Mrs. J.D. Johnson
Mrs. Lee Snilsberg
Mrs. Richard Wood
Mrs. Roland Young
Mrs. Sidney Thomes
Mrs. M.R. Rhoads
Mrs. Lawrence Haberman
Mrs. Lawrence Morris

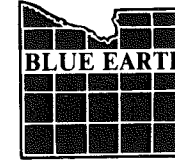
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BLUE EARTH COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

July 1986

Calendar of Events . . .

- July 4-13 **Bend of the River Days**
10th Anniversary Year
- July 4 **Independence Day**, Museum and
Offices Closed
- July 5 **Museum Reception** for "**Reflections
on the Water: A Retrospective Look
at the Bend of the Minnesota River**".
- July ? **Members Only Picnic** (invitations
will be mailed).
- July 31-
Aug. 3 **Blue Earth County Fair**, Garden
City. Make it a point to visit our
booth. Remember, we do something
new each year!
- Sept. 1 **Labor Day**, Museum and Offices
Closed
- Sept. 28 **"Sunday on Broad Street"**, 12-5 pm.

*Sunday
on
Broad
Street*

Plans are moving full speed ahead for the second annual "Sunday on Broad Street". Mark your calendars now and plan to test all of your senses at this community festival on September 28. If you would like to lend some of your talent, either in preparations or on that day, please call Denise at the Museum, 345-4154.

See the enclosed flyer for information about events at BECHS that day.

The Bend of the River

Early explorers, who came by canoe, consistently praised the scenic and luxurious growth of trees and wild fruits along the great bend of the Minnesota River that marks the north boundary of Blue Earth County. But it was not until 1850 when the *Anthony Wayne*, followed by other excursion boats, proved the river navigable by steamboat, and their passengers became captivated by the beauty of the land that the idea of settlement took hold.

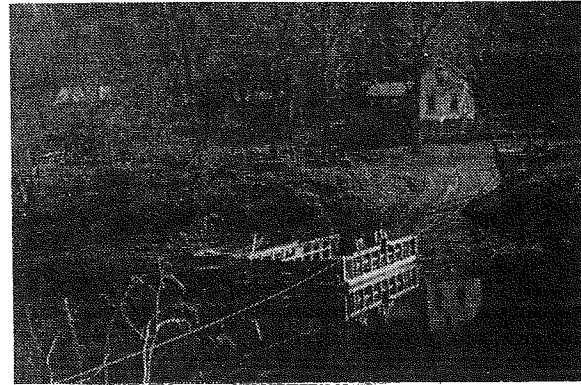
Soon after the Traverse des Sioux Treaty in 1851 opened the Minnesota Valley to settlement, steamboats began bringing settlers and freight to the bend of the river levees. During the summer of 1852, the *Tiger* and the *Black Hawk* in three trips each brought passengers and supplies to Mankato, South Bend and Eureka, a short-lived settlement across the river from Judson. A large Welsh settlement at South Bend vied with Mankato for prominence as a townsite; but the Mankato levee, extending approximately from Main Street to Plum Street and gently sloping to Front Street, proved ideal for loading or unloading regardless of river level. This and the railroad's later choice of Mankato for a station ended South Bend's hopes.

Once townships were established, steamboats plied the Minnesota in increasing numbers. In 1857 there were 292 steamboat arrivals, and 300 the following year at bend of the river levees. In 1859 two barges began navigating on the river; one, the *Minneopa*, was built in Mankato. In addition to passengers, barges and steamboats carried considerable freight. By mid-summer in 1861, they had carried 62,000 bushels of wheat at five cents a bushel. J.J. Shaubut, the agent for all steamboats, checked off the freight in his Front Street store, then unloaded it in a storehouse next door or in his grain storehouse on the levee.

Mankato began exporting products in 1861, but steamboating had already begun to decline and almost disappeared with the arrival in 1868 of the Minnesota Valley Railway, which had reached Mankato from St. Paul. Railway transportation was year round, consistent and reliable, whereas river navigation was seasonal and dependent on river conditions.

By the mid-1870's only local steamboats traveling short distances and an occasional excursion steamer remained on the river. But ferry boats, first licensed in 1854, operated from

landings at South Bend and Eureka, and from two landings in Mankato, one near Sibley Mound and the other near the Hubbard Mill site. These horse-drawn ferries, which operated by means of a heavy cable stretched across the river, were used mostly by farmers



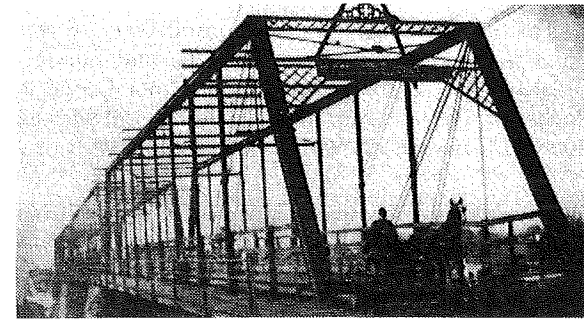
Old Cummings Ferry, probably 1870's or '80's docked on the south bank at Sibley site with operator's home on shore.

in Nicollet County, who brought loads of hay and other farm products to the Mankato market and returned with merchandise from Mankato stores. An account in the *Mankato Free Press* of February 21, 1951, describes the road from the brow of the North Mankato bluff to the river as little more than a trail. It tested the stamina of pioneer farmers, for occasionally chains that were used to lock the wagon wheels broke with disastrous results.

The legislature in 1878 granted the city and county authority to build a bridge across the Minnesota River at Mankato. In spite of a severe crop failure in the county that year, Mankato, Blue Earth County, and Belgrade Township voted funds for the construction of the 810-foot iron truss bridge. The cornerstone was laid on the main pier in October 1879; and the three-span bridge, built on hand-laid stone pillars, was completed the following summer. Centered under the span closest to North Mankato was an additional round support topped with a turntable to allow passage of steamboats. The bridge had a wooden plank floor and served horse-drawn wagons, pedestrians and livestock.

One year after its completion, the new iron bridge proved its strength as the 1881 flood crested at 30-31 feet, the first and worst of a number of floods in the life of the bridge.

As the bend of the river towns grew, increased use of the iron bridge made it unsafe for pedestrians in spite of the traffic warnings posted on the arches at each end: a \$10 fine for riding or driving over the bridge faster than a walk, and a \$100 fine for more than ten head of stock on the bridge at one time.



Iron bridge built over the Minnesota River at Mankato in 1880, showing footbridges added in 1897.

To further protect pedestrian safety, footbridges were built into the sides of the iron bridge in 1897. Here, notes *The History of North Mankato: A Community Profile*, local youths often sat on benches with their friends and watched the river. Some older residents, "less than pleased with the romantic rendezvous," wanted spikes put on the benches, while others favored removing the benches entirely. After much discussion, an ordinance was passed to ban "spooning" on the bridge.

The iron bridge proved adequate through the turbulent floods of 1881 and 1897, but was proving inadequate for the increased population of the twin communities. Talk of a new bridge began in 1907, but not until 1915 were bids let for a new steel and concrete bridge to be built adjacent to the iron bridge. The contract went to Widell Construction Company, with a cost estimate of \$95,140.

The *Mankato Free Press* of September 14, 1917 reported the new Main Street Bridge to have a creosoted wooden block roadway 500 feet long and 34 feet wide, with concrete sidewalks at each side. Streetcar tracks were installed on the bridge with ornate light posts serving as trolley poles. It had required 16 months of labor, 445,000 pounds of steel, and 6,500 cubic yards of concrete at a final cost of \$103,000. Upon its completion it was considered to be the largest steel and concrete bridge in Minnesota.

As with the iron bridge, the Main Street Bridge stood firm through a number of devastating floods, the most serious being those of 1951, 1965 and 1969. In 1965 a giant sheet of ice lodged against the bridge, damming all but a small section of the river channel. The A.C. Scheurer Construction Company had its crane on the bridge ready to drop a two-ton steel ball into the thick ice when the ice sheet broke of its own accord and passed under the bridge. Crowds of spectators who came to see the ice break up caused bumper-to-bumper traffic for three hours.

With increased automobile and truck travel and the complications of a railroad crossing, Main Street Bridge became used to heavy and congested traffic. As early as 1946, traffic counts totaled 12,000 vehicles a day. Its peak use came in the late 1950's, before the completion of the Memorial Bridge a mile upstream diverted some of the bridge traffic. The widening of the roadbed in 1971 brought some relief, but not enough. Soon the old concrete and steel structure will be replaced by the new Veterans Bridge, a 6-lane overpass.

The old ferry boats were washed downriver in the 1881 flood but disposal of old bridges can be more complicated. When the old iron bridge had to be dismantled, there was talk of rebuilding it in Sibley Park, but the plan was dropped as not economically feasible. According to Ken Berg in the *Mankato Free Press* of February 8, 1973, two spans of the old iron bridge were sold to Olmstead County, where they became "The White Bridge" over Lake Zumbro, the oldest bridge carrying traffic in Southern Minnesota until it was replaced in 1974. The other span was reassembled at some point upstream, but no further information is known about it.

The Main Street Bridge, officially closed by city and state dignitaries on April 15, 1986, is scheduled to be demolished despite protests of some residents to keep it as a pedestrian parkway. But engineers contend that the bridge, being lower than the present flood walls, could have such a damming effect that in a major flood, the existing flood controls would be inadequate.

From its earliest settlement to the present, the bend of the river has been a center of activity in Blue Earth County. The whistles of steamboats were met with great cheers. In the spring of 1854, the river was too low for boats to get through. When the *Globe* finally arrived on May 20 with supplies, it was greeted with great joy by settlers who had been living on fish for weeks. Great crowds also were at the levee in the spring of 1897 to see the *Henriette*, a 170-foot-long, 300-passenger, three-deck excursion boat, for by this time the steamboat had become a novelty. In 1863 the first boat on April 3 was met by more than 1,000 cheering people as it carried troops and supplies for the Civil War. In more modern times, crowds have gathered at the bend of the river to cheer presidential candidates, speaking from the platform of campaign trains.