

MURRAY BAKER
TURNS 40

Key bridge has changed face of a city

Span that carries I-74 over river helped shaped Greater Peoria

By OMAR SOFRADZIJA

of the Journal Star

PEORIA — It's just a pile of rust-colored steel and concrete that carries a long ribbon of asphalt over the Illinois River and into downtown Peoria. But the Murray Baker Bridge also has been a gateway to changing times for four decades.

Peoria's downtown grew up around it. East and west river banks seemed to draw closer from it. Homes were torn asunder in its path.

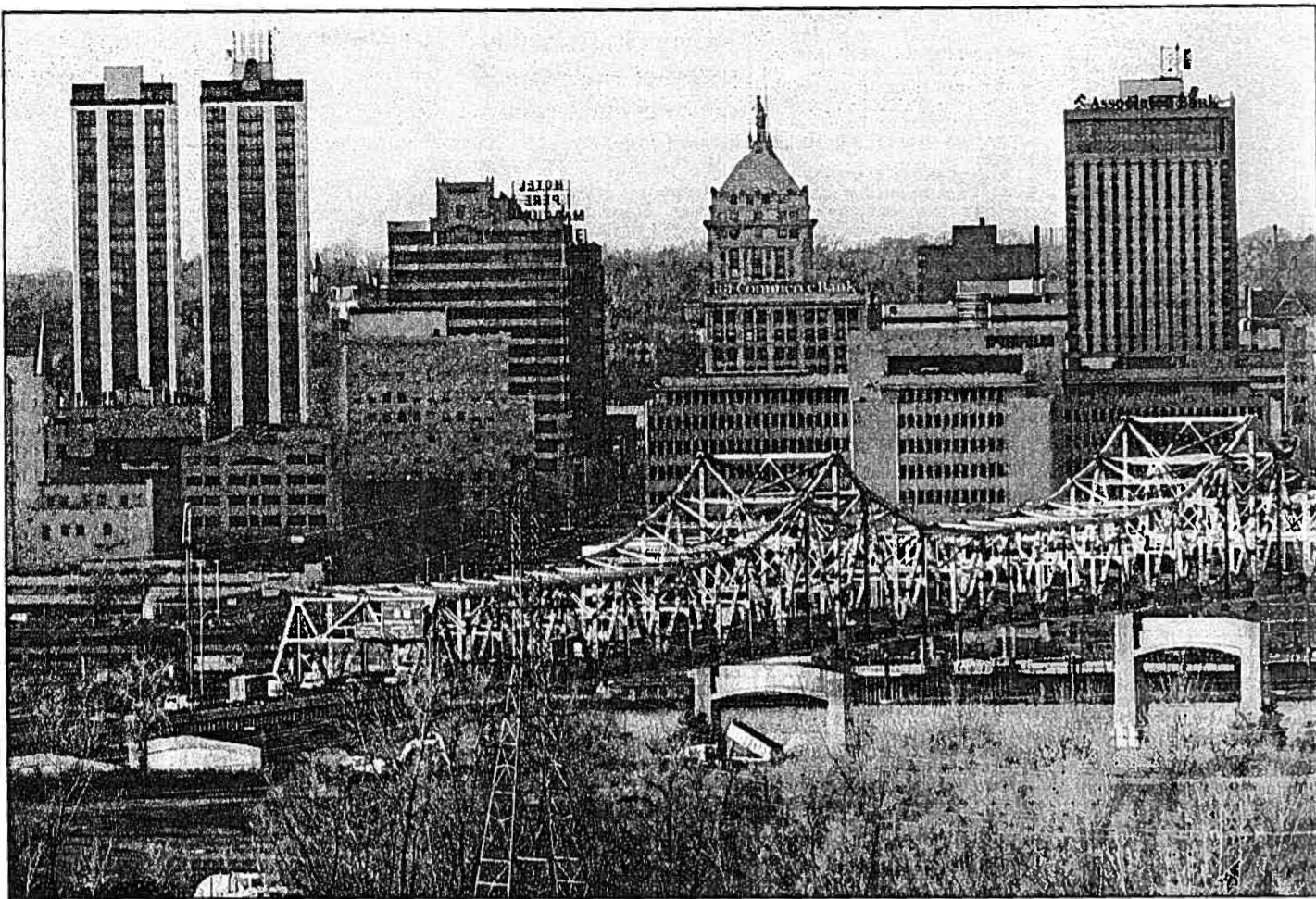
And it has become a daily part of the commute for thousands of workers.

Today, the bridge carrying Interstate 74 through the heart of Peoria will celebrate the 40th anniversary of its dedication, which opened a roadway artery from central Illinois to the rest of America.

"Through the years, we've had fires. We've had floods. . . . The one thing that really changed Peoria the most would be the bridge. Nothing comes close. It's exposed millions and millions of people to the heart of our city," said Dr. Peter Couri Jr. of the Peoria Historical Society

When the 3,114-foot-long bridge opened in 1958, Interstate 74 — briefly dubbed the "Illini Expressway" — ran only from Glendale Avenue in Peoria to Caterpillar Trail in East Peoria. Seven years later, it was fully linked to the nation's 42,000-mile-plus interstate road system.

"I don't know if there was a realization of what that was all about. . . . When we finally got



FRED ZWICKY/Journal Star

The setting sun spotlights the Murray Baker Bridge, which today marks its 40th anniversary. The bridge carrying Interstate 74 across

the Illinois River at Peoria foreshadowed the development of the city's downtown and made commuting to work more commonplace.

the interstate to come through Peoria, it was a great asset to us," said former U.S. Rep. Bob Michel, who was a dignitary at the bridge's dedication.

The bridge and road kept Peoria economically viable, with the 30,000 cars that pass through the city each day on I-74 and another 25,000 that skirt the area daily on Interstate 474, completed in 1979.

"Interstate highways are second (in importance) only to a high-quality labor force," said Tri-County Regional Planning Commission Executive Director Terry Kohlbuss.

Peoria might look like a neighboring Fulton County factory town now struggling to gain four-lane access and new life. "It would be like Canton," Kohlbuss said. "You'd have no growth and gradual decline."

Before the bridge
Prior to the late 1950s, crossing the river was something usually done for work, not for play.

Residents largely stayed to their ends of the waterway. And bridge choices were poor, such as the Cedar Street Bridge and the Upper Free Bridge, which Michel called "an old rattle-trap of a thing."

"Then in Peoria, we had that doggone Franklin Street Bridge (since replaced by the Bob Michel Bridge), with the crook in it. I think that's what brought it up (getting a new bridge), all that traffic by Caterpillar (Inc.)

Please see **BRIDGE**, Page A4

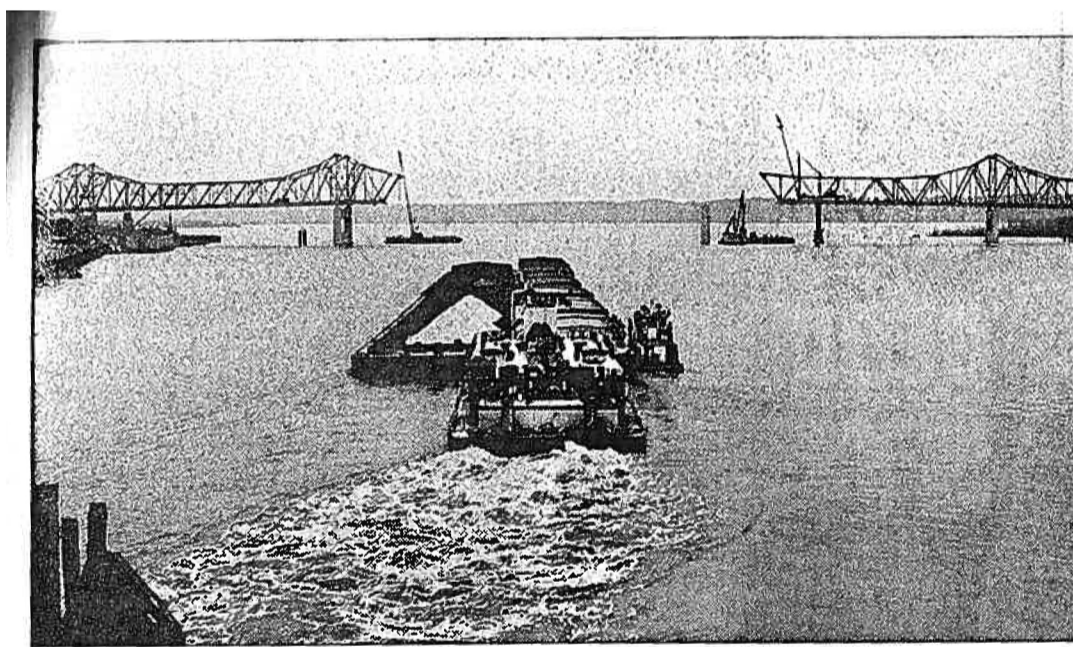


Photo courtesy of the Peoria Historical Society Collection/Bradley University Library

A barge slips silently down the Illinois River as construction work continues on the Murray

Baker Bridge in the late 1950s. The bridge was dedicated in 1958.

BRIDGE

workers who had to put up with that old bridge," Michel said.

Those older bridges were for "getting people from Peoria to Cat" and its East Peoria tractor works. "It was mainly for work," Michel said.

Caterpillar's former vice president — Murray Baker — had different ideas. Nicknamed "God's businessman," he helped lure business to Peoria and spurred new road plans in the area. "He was quite a leader," Couri said.

Peoria leaders largely used federal aid dollars pegged for the new interstate system to finance the new East Peoria link and the \$5.5 million bridge. Those dollars were needed for what was the greatest Peoria-area earth-moving and home-raising project ever.

More than 1.6 million cubic yards of dirt were gouged from Fondulac Hill in East Peoria, and almost 400 structures — including century-old homes in the city's original high-brow residential district on Adams Street — were torn down for I-74, which did not run along any existing road.

"You just don't run roughshod in making rapid changes. It could affect downtowns, small towns, rural areas. We tried to get the job done to meet with the changing times without disrupting the way things were," said former Illinois Gov. William Stratton.

Nonetheless, Michel said: "Whenever you've got something of that magnitude, you're bound to have to displace people."

When the bridge finally opened on a frigid Dec. 12, 1958, few could foresee the broad interactive changes that would result locally and nationwide.

Interstate roads "broke the bounds we used to have to live with — the bound of geography. It expanded the growth boundary of the city. It allowed people to commute," said Professor David Hartgen, director of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte's transportation studies center.

How it changed Peoria

Even before the bridge was open, it was reshaping the city. A 1957 property-buying spree along Knoxville Avenue was triggered, in part, by the bridge. The buyouts turned that strip from a residential neighborhood to a major commercial district.

The bridge also cut the perceived distance between Peoria and Tazewell County, making each more popular for shopping and recreation and creating a true Greater Peoria.

"What it did was to make Peoria into a two-sided (river) town from a one-sided town. There was much less interaction than there is today. It created an emerging regional economy in the Peoria area," Hartgen said.

Michel agreed. "It had an effect in tying Caterpillar and Tazewell County to Peoria."

It even made the 40-odd miles to Bloomington-Normal seem closer. When Mitsubishi Motors opened its Normal car plant in the late 1980s, almost 30 percent of its workers drove in daily from Peoria, Tazewell and Woodford counties.

Interstate 74 between Peoria and the Twin Cities has been designated a "commuting corridor" by state officials. "That road essentially tripled and quadrupled the commuter base for Peoria," Hartgen said.

While the city grew outward, downtown grew upward, possibly aided by the nation's first interurban interstate road.

In 1958, downtown Peoria's skyline consisted of the Hotel Pere Marquette, the Commerce Bank Building and little else. After I-74 opened, Caterpillar moved its headquarters to Peoria and sparked a building boom there that left a skyscraper-lined city center.

"Peoria has a uniquely strong downtown. The interstate is a major reason. Very few communities of Peoria's size has an interstate through its downtown," Kohlbuss said.

All that from a road some taxpayers saw as a waste back in the 1950s.

"Folks weren't always supportive of the program. A few years later, the criticism was why we didn't build more," Stratton said.