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By Omar Sadowski

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The one thing that really changed Peoria the most would be the bridge. Nothing comes close. It exposed millions and millions of people to the heart of our city," said Dr. Peter Court Jr. of the Peoria Historical Society.

"The bridge carrying Interstate 74 through the heart of Peoria will celebrate its 40th anniversary of its dedication, which opened the way away from central Illinois to the rest of America.

"Through the years, we've had fires. We've had floods. We've had tornadoes. But the only thing that really changed Peoria the most would be the bridge. Nothing comes close. It exposed millions and millions of people to the heart of our city," said Dr. Court.

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

the interstate to come through Peoria, it was a big deal," said former U.S. Rep. Dave Loebs, who, like Keen, Wilson, who was a dignitary at the bridge's dedication.

"And the bridge was a symbol of a better world, a symbol of the kind of things that we could do together. It was a symbol of what Peoria was all about. When we finally got..."

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.

Residents largely stayed to their ends of the waterway. And bridge choices were poor, such as the Cedar Street Bridge and the Upper Peoria Bridge, which Wilson called "an old single-lane thing.

"They said Peoria, we had that gorgeous brick bridge that replaced the Bob Michel Bridge, with the crook in it. I think that bridge was replaced by the new-I mean new bridge, all that traffic by Caterpillar (Inc.)"

Photo courtesy of the Peoria Historical Society (c) and Bradley University Library

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 factor works. It was mainly for work," Michel said.

Caterpillar's former vice president — Murray Baker — had different ideas. Renowned "God's businessman" helped build businesses to Peoria and gave the people in the area what he called a "bridge of the people for the people in the area.

"He was quite a leader," Court said.

Peoria leaders largely used federal aid dollars for the new interstate system to finance the new East Peoria link and the $3.5 million bridge. Those dollars were needed for what was the greatest Peoria area earth-moving and homeland project ever.

More than 1.4 million cubic yards of dirt were dug from Pond Hill in East Peoria and almost 400 structures — including century-old homes in the city's original 31-acre residential district on Adams Street — were demolished in the four years, 1964 to 1967, which did not run along any existing road.

"You just don't run roughshod to making great changes. It affected downtown, 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 rigid Dec. 12, 1968, few could foresee the broad interactive changes that would result locally and nationwide.

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

How it changed Peoria

Even before the bridge was open, it was eclipsing the city. A 1967 property-browsing spree along Knoxville Avenue was triggered, in part, by the bridge. The bypass 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 it more popular for shopping and recreation and creating a true Greater Peoria.

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

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

It even made the 40-old miles to Bloomington-New York seem closer. When Mitsubishi Motors opened its normal car plant in the late 1960s, 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 "commuter corridor" by state officials. That road essentially merged and quadrupled the commuter base for Peoria. Hartgen said.

Years later, downtown grew upward, greatly aided by the nation's first interurban interstate road."

"In 1968, downtown Peoria's skyline consisted of the Hotel Pere Marquette, the Commerce Bank Building and Illini. After I-74 opened, Caterpillar moved its headquarters to Peoria and sparked a building boom there that set the skyscraper-strewn city center.

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

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