

View of construction of the superstructure on the Tappan Zee Bridge in the early 1950s. LOCAL HISTORY COLLECTION/ NYACK LIBRARY

TZ BRIDGE, CREATED IN THE AGE OF IKE, BROUGHT ERA OF PROSPERITY, GROWTH

Original span had its foes, but forever changed river towns; new, larger bridge holds similar potential for economic impact

By Michael Risinit
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The Tappan Zee Bridge today can be nearly synonymous with traffic, from spectacular jams on the steel superstructure to residual delays clogging streets in Tarrytown and Nyack.

But the first bridge-related congestion happened on opening day, Dec. 15, 1955. The cause? A famous chimpanzee.

Dressed in a Santa suit, the chimp — J. Fred Muggs, then co-host of the “Today” show — rode through Tarrytown’s streets in the kickoff parade.

“Clamor of children and photo-snapping adults on the sidelines forced a slight slowdown now and then while Mr. Muggs waved amicably at his cheering audience,” The Daily News of Tarrytown reported.

The bridge almost 60 years ago was heralded for linking two villages, two counties and carrying “possibly (the) most modern super highway in the world,” according to the Rockland Journal-News.

As the region and its residents ready to watch Tappan Zee 2.0 cross the Hudson River, The Journal News looks at the beginnings of the first bridge and what the second one may bring.

Pomp, circumstance and first accident

The opening-day parade assembled in the Philipse Manor section of what was then North Tarrytown, now Sleepy Hollow. Led by an Army band, marchers stepped off at 9:45 a.m. and headed south to the bridge toll plaza.

The day was chilly, said Gloria Verrone, 87, one of seven women chosen by their employer, the battery company P.R. Mallory in North Tarrytown, to ride on its parade float dressed in donated finery.

“I had long underwear on under that gown,” she said. “We could keep the gown but everything else had to go back: the fur coat, the jewelry.”

“The long-awaited dream of a vehicular link across the Hudson River to give Westchester direct access to its neighbor Rockland, upstate New York and the West became reality today,” reporter Joseph W. Shannon wrote in The Daily News.

The bridge opened to the public on a Thursday. At 4 p.m. that Sunday, au-

thorities handled the first accident. Four cars driving from Rockland to Westchester managed to get in each other’s way as daylight faded over the river. Marie Tesone, 27, of the Bronx received a small cut over her right eye. She was treated at the state Thruway Authority building in Tarrytown.

Traffic: From a trickle to a flood

The new bridge had six lanes with ample room. In its first two hours, 2,162 vehicles crossed the Hudson River.

Today, it carries 138,000 daily — and there is nowhere to run when an accident happens.

The median — an island of asphalt between the two directions of travel where cars could pull over — was removed in the mid-1980s to make way for a seventh lane. It can be seen in the final scene of “Butterfield 8,” the 1960 film in which Liz Taylor earned her first Oscar. As Gloria Wandrous, Taylor drives her red sports car over the bridge from the Westchester side in a deadly attempt to flee the married man she’d been seeing.

The new bridge will have eight lanes plus an emergency-vehicle lane and breakdown lanes for each direction — which should be a relief to drivers.

Laura Jacobs, a psychotherapist from West Nyack who often commutes to Yonkers, said flying debris has twice cracked her windshield.

“You hear this big smack,” she said. “At first you’re scared. (But you can’t stop) — not unless a wheel falls off.”

A span to connect communities

Before the bridge, crossing the river meant riding the Tarrytown-Nyack ferry or driving to other spans. Bear Mountain Bridge opened in 1924, and the George Washington Bridge opened seven years later.

Formal ferry service between Tarrytown and Nyack began in 1840. Until World War II, the ferry carried cars. After the war and until the bridge opened, only people boarded.

For Armando “Chick” Galella, 92, of Sleepy Hollow, the boat ride was a place to take your gal on a date. “They had a guy who played an accordion. You didn’t have to pay (again) if



Tappan Zee Bridge under construction. WESTCHESTER COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



New York Gov. Averell Harriman waving, center, and Helen Hayes MacArthur, holding a bouquet at the far left, at the ribbon-cutting that opened the Tappan Zee Bridge in 1955. HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF ROCKLAND COUNTY



Morning rush-hour traffic on the Tappan Zee Bridge as seen from Tarrytown on Oct. 8, 1996. JOURNAL NEWS FILE PHOTO

you didn’t get off (in Nyack),” he recalled.

Win Perry said his father at first took the train from Nyack or West Nyack to Weehawken, N.J., then hopped a ferry to Manhattan and walked to his law office on Wall Street. The bridge changed that.

“Finally, he went in a carpool to Tarrytown and rode the Hudson Line,” Perry said.

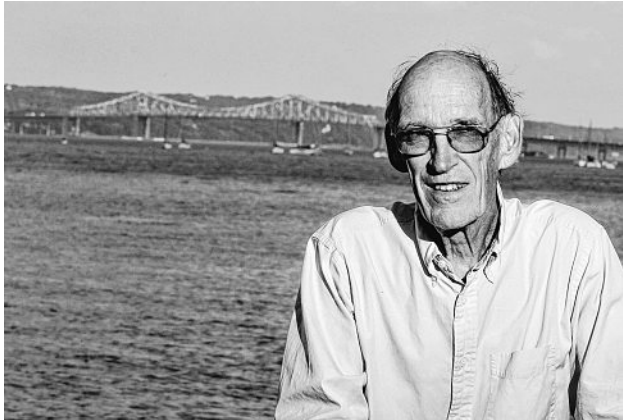
When the younger Perry, now 79, attended Yale,

his drives to college started with the car pointed south. “There was (still) a car ferry from Alpine, N.J., to Yonkers,” he said. “We had to drive through the Yonkers city streets to get anywhere.”

Perry, an architect, is also president of the Historical Society of the Nyacks. On a recent afternoon, he sat at the Hudson’s edge. He pointed to the small beach below him, where his father had



Elizabeth “Betty” Zivica and Gloria Verrone, in front, with Armando Galella and Marian and John Ragusa reflect on what it was like when the Tappan Zee Bridge was built. Prior to the bridge, they had to cross the Hudson River by ferry. They are photographed July 22 at the Ragusas’ home in Tarrytown. MATTHEW BROWN/THE JOURNAL NEWS



Win Perry, a lifelong resident of Upper Nyack, was a college student when the Tappan Zee Bridge was constructed in the 1950s. Perry took a ferry that carried automobiles from Alpine, N.J., to Yonkers in order to drive to college at Yale University in Connecticut. SETH HARRISON/THE JOURNAL NEWS

learned to swim in 1910. Behind him, the Tappan Zee stretched across the river, where construction of its replacement is already under way.

“I guess I assumed, like the Bear Mountain or the George Washington, it would last a lot longer than me,” he said.

‘Horn’s Folly’ takes shape

Like any major project,

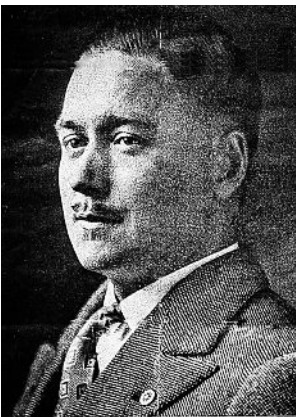
the first Tappan Zee Bridge proposal garnered its share of complaints.

The first to lobby for a bridge between the two counties had been Assemblyman Ferdinand R. Horn Jr., a farm boy who became a leader in Rockland’s real estate industry.

“To me he was kind of the Gov. (Andrew) Cuomo of his day but without his results,” Rockland county



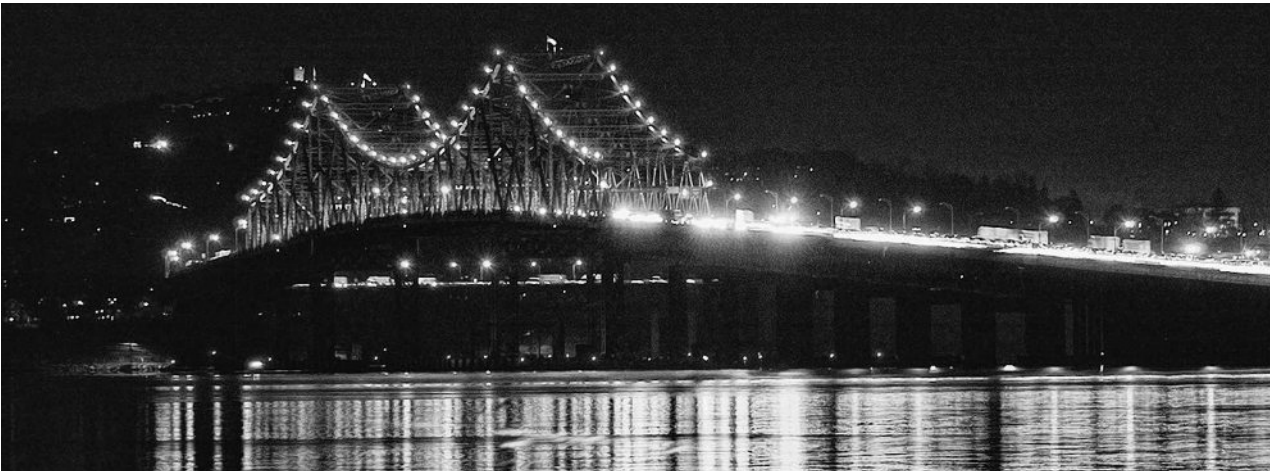
Construction barges carrying cranes and other heavy equipment are visible Oct. 3 as work progresses in the construction of the new Tappan Zee Bridge. The work includes dredging for platforms and the driving of pilings. JOE LARESE/THE JOURNAL NEWS



Rockland businessman and Assemblyman Ferdinand "Fred" Horn is known as "The father of the Tappan Zee Bridge."



From left, Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino, Rockland County Executive C. Scott Vanderhoef and Putnam County Executive MaryEllen Odell hold a news conference Aug. 16, 2012, about the Tappan Zee Bridge while at Kingsland Point in Sleepy Hollow. FRANK BECERRA JR./THE JOURNAL NEWS



View of the Tappan Zee Bridge, Dec. 18. JOURNAL NEWS FILE PHOTO

Bridge

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historian Craig Long said. In 1930, Horn introduced legislation calling for a bridge to connect Piermont and Irvington. Called "Horn's Folly" by some, it was to be privately financed. In 1936, 400 residents signed onto a protest telegram sent by Elmer Hader, a famous illustrator who lived in Grand View. Horn's plan, buoyed by the creation of a Rockland-Westchester bridge authority in 1935, was moving forward. "Very weighty reasons exist for relocating the bridge, if it is to be built at all," the telegram stated, according to a published report. His plan was shelved, but nearly two decades later, Gov. Thomas Dewey put his political muscle behind the project. With World War II over, officials wanted to proceed with plans for the new Thruway. They decided it needed to be self-sustaining through tolls, so its route had to go to New York City and, therefore, had to cross the Hudson. Politics as much as engineering influenced the bridge's ultimate location. Dewey nixed building a bridge just south of Dobbs Ferry. Crossing the river at Tarrytown, north of Dobbs Ferry, kept the structure and the toll revenue out of the Port Authority's control and available to support the Thruway plan. Grand View worried about losing its view; South Nyack and its neighbors worried about losing their homes. An accounting in 1954 cited 138 homes moved or bulldozed in

Rockland to make way for the bridge. In Westchester, at least one riverside estate was razed in 1953 to make way for the toll plaza. Construction started in 1952, as piles and other materials were stockpiled on the shore. The bridge cost about \$60 million, or more than \$520 million in 2013 dollars, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. When Horn died in 1987, a headline in this paper marked the passing of the "father of the Tappan Zee Bridge." "Rockland had to grow. You can't expect things to stay the same. You have to anticipate the future and plan for it," he said in a 1980 interview marking the bridge's 25th anniversary. Until 1970, drivers paid a toll — then 50 cents — each way. The cash toll, now collected eastbound only, is currently \$5 a car. **Bridge brought building boom** In the years after the bridge's opening, new residents flocked to Rockland and houses sprouted there like never before. About 3,500 went up in the 1940s; more than 10 times that figure went up in the next two decades. "You used to see a lot of farms or former farms, vacant land, meadows with stone walls around them," said Perry, the historical society president. "They've almost all been carved up for subdivisions." As a kid, five-term County Executive C. Scott Vanderhoef watched bulldozers pushing soil around to build the Thruway. "I'm not sure anybody envisioned the explosive growth after the bridge," he said. Rockland's population more than doubled from

1950 to 1970. Westchester's increased by just over 40 percent. The influx was a dramatic shift for Rockland's longtime residents, said Long, the county historian, who was born in 1958. "My parents used to go shopping and say, 'I didn't see anyone I knew,'" Long recalled. "I was used to seeing people moving in. Their world was so much smaller." Orange County's population grew, too. But the trend there was similar to Westchester's. Without the bridge, Mimi Elfenbein might call New Jersey home. She and her husband, an electrical engineer, settled in Rockland in 1967. They had moved from Queens to Binghamton and returned south to be near family. "When we came to Rockland years earlier, it was a very circuitous route with lots of highways and byways," she said from her Pomona home. "The Tappan Zee Bridge was a big help." **A new span takes shape** In 2000, a state task force recommended replacing the bridge. But the process didn't gather momentum until October 2011. A 38-member state review panel and the Thruway Authority in December picked contractor Tappan Zee Constructors and its \$3.1 billion design. The new bridge will consist of two spans held up by cables. "To get a bridge to this point in a year was really a fantastic accomplishment," Gov. Andrew Cuomo said then, during a presentation at the Capitol. Cuomo has been a strong proponent of a new bridge, lining up supporters and pushing the

idea even as critics called for trains on it and environmentalists worried about its effects on the Hudson River's ecosystem. No homes are being taken this time. But Tappan Zee Constructors is contractually obligated to make offers for six sitting on top of the construction zone. Concern-laden telegrams are gone, replaced by emails. About 700 were sent to the state with comments about the new bridge's draft environmental study. Many called for mass transit, including light rail, to be added to the structure. Pile driving for the new bridge has begun. Barges and other vessels are lining up on the water. John Gliniski, a health and safety manager for Tappan Zee Constructors, said there will be up to 30 cranes on the water, along with 400 workers, during peak construction. Three people were killed building the original span: Capt. Fred Leach of West Haverstraw, Lloyd M. Law of Stony Point and Dewey Phillips of Haverstraw. Leach, a tugboat captain, drowned after jumping into the Hudson to escape a gasoline fire. Law, a steelworker, fell while placing part of the span across the railroad tracks. Phillips, also a steelworker, plummeted 200 feet into the Hudson. This time, "Our first priority is safety of all the people working here," Gliniski said. "Everybody comes in, everybody goes home." **Hopes for tourism, fewer snarls** No one is predicting major housing jumps when the new bridge is finished in five years; the empty, former farmland isn't



Thruway workers get ready to place a large steel plate over a hole on the deck of the Tappan Zee Bridge on June 1, 2005. A hole, three feet around, broke through the deck the day before; the crew cleaned the area, placed new rebar on top and filled the hole after rush-hour traffic. JOURNAL NEWS FILE PHOTO

TAPPAN ZEE BRIDGE EFFECTS BY THE NUMBERS

Housing in Rockland by year built				
1940-49	3,496			
1950-59	14,333			
1960-69	22,934			
1970-79	18,912			
Source: Rockland County				
Population 1950 1960 1970 1980				
Rockland	89,276	136,803	229,903	259,530
Orange	152,225	183,734	221,657	259,603
Westchester	625,816	808,891	894,104	866,599
Source: U.S. census				

there. Orange County planner David Church said he wasn't expecting a boom of residents to his county. Interest in a big house on a big lot with a big drive to work is waning among newer generations, he said. Still, "The congestion at the bridge can affect travel and location decisions, so a new bridge keeps us accessible to the core of the New York metropolitan area," Church said. Business leaders hope the upgraded bridge will bring more jobs, more tourism and more corporate dollars. The narrow bridge and its tendency for backups often dissuade companies, like warehousing, transportation or distribution businesses, from relocating in the region, real estate experts said. "This is a five-year project that's going to touch so many different industries in the region," said John Ravitz, executive vice president and CEO of the Business Council of Westchester. "This region is now going to have a new, state-of-the-art bridge that's going to make it easier to connect between New York City and the Hudson Valley."

The twin spans will include paths for bicyclists and walkers plus six belvederes — small areas with benches providing a view of the Hudson. Congestion, many hope, will be eliminated. "If right now you are sitting in Mamaroneck and you're thinking about coming to the Nyack street fair, you might say, 'Wait, I don't want to deal with the bridge,'" said Scott Baird, president of the Nyack Chamber of Commerce. In the future, "It will feel more like a bridge, less like a wall." Peace, prosperity and progress was the generational theme when the bridge opened during the Eisenhower administration. What was once hailed is now despised by some. "There's just a lot of fear about that bridge," said Matt Rand of the Rockland-based Better Homes and Gardens Rand Realty. "I think it (the new one) solves the congestion problems. I think it does open up the region to become fully a single coherent region." Staff writer Khurram Saeed contributed to this report.