

The Meridian Bridge

Prior to the construction of the Meridian Bridge, travelers would cross the Missouri River via ferries, rafts, walking on ice, and a pontoon bridge that could only be used during certain months. Deloss B.

Gurney, a prominent seed merchant, was motivated by a desire to ensure Yankton's economic future as a center of trade. Gurney wanted a bridge to replace a ferry and a seasonally operated pontoon bridge that limited transportation south from Yankton to markets in rural northeastern Nebraska. In 1919, Gurney led Yanktonians in forming and funding the Meridian Highway Bridge Company. Gurney's efforts aided in a final link of the

Continental Meridian Highway, now known as US HWY 81, an early North-South route from Winnipeg, Canada, to Mexico City, Mexico. Two years later, construction of the Meridian Bridge began. The bridge was built with a double-deck in anticipation that the lower deck would be made available to a railroad.

Officially dedicated on October 11, 1924, the completed \$1.1 million Meridian Bridge was a symbol of local pride, in large part because it had been built under local leadership. Yankton hosted an 8-day celebration full of food, entertainment,



underway to allow for continued pedestrian and bike use, including structural repairs, spot painting, lighting, and railings. In November 2011, the Meridian Bridge reopened for recreational use and is a popular outdoor activity enjoyed by both locals and visitors. This project is expected to extend the lifespan of the bridge by at least another 25 years. The newly constructed Discovery Bridge opened for traffic on October 11, 2009, exactly 84 years after the dedication of the Meridian Highway Bridge. Yankton continues to hold a local nickname of "Bridge City."

parades, and fireworks. More than 100,000 visitors from around the region traveled to participate in the festivities. Community pride and hospitality continued as local churches and organizations opened their doors to feed guests, and the local legion organized "tent cities," a twist on modern day hotels where visitors could rent a tent for the night. In order to reimburse investors, a toll booth was implemented after the bridge's opening with rates of 50 cents per car and driver, and 10 cents for each additional passenger. In 1953, the wife of D.B. Gurney paid the last toll, and the bridge was converted into a free facility.

Since its initial completion, the bridge has undergone several rehabilitation projects within its first 76-years of life. The most significant alteration to the bridge occurred in 1983 when the lift span ceased to be movable. The towers remain, defining what was the vertical lift span. Added to the National Register of Historic Places in May 1993, the bridge retains its original configuration and is today distinguished as the only vertical lift span in Nebraska and South Dakota.

After a 10-ton gross weight limit was placed on the Meridian Bridge, a nearly \$5 million dollar conversion project went

As we celebrate the Meridian Bridge Centennial Year, we reflect on the rich history and significance of this iconic structure. Standing as a testament to the resilience of our community, the Meridian Bridge has connected generations and served as a symbol of unity. This milestone year is an opportunity to honor the bridge's legacy, acknowledge its role in shaping our city's identity, and envision a future where it continues to be a vital link between people, places, and memories.

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