

There is no better view of the Duluth Harbor than from the top span of the Blatnik Bridge as you look down onto the deck of a freighter gliding below on a crystal clear day with a warm wind wafting across the bay. The view is just as good on a fiercely cold winter morning with sea smoke rising off the lake and the bow of a ship crunching through the ice-packed river.

Driving across the Blatnik Bridge between Duluth, Minn., and Superior, Wis., is a Twin Ports given today, a toll-free convenience we all enjoy.

It is almost impossible to remember back to when the bridge was all but a dream and the point of contention of years of struggle.

In the process of creating the National Interstate Highway System, more than 40,000 miles of roadway connecting all corners of the nation,

Duluth was chosen as the northern terminus for Interstate 35, the second longest contiguous north-south highway in the country. For its part in the project, the federal government would pay for 90 percent of the cost, with the remaining 10 percent financed by the state.

Minnesota Congressman John Blatnik, as a member of the House Public Works Committee in the 1940s, helped write the legislation that created the Interstate system. The highway system was a boon to the nation, its impetus driven by the vision of President Dwight Eisenhower and the rise of the automobile as the ultimate expression of personal freedom in the post World War era. However, for civic leaders in the Twin Ports, the Interstate sys-

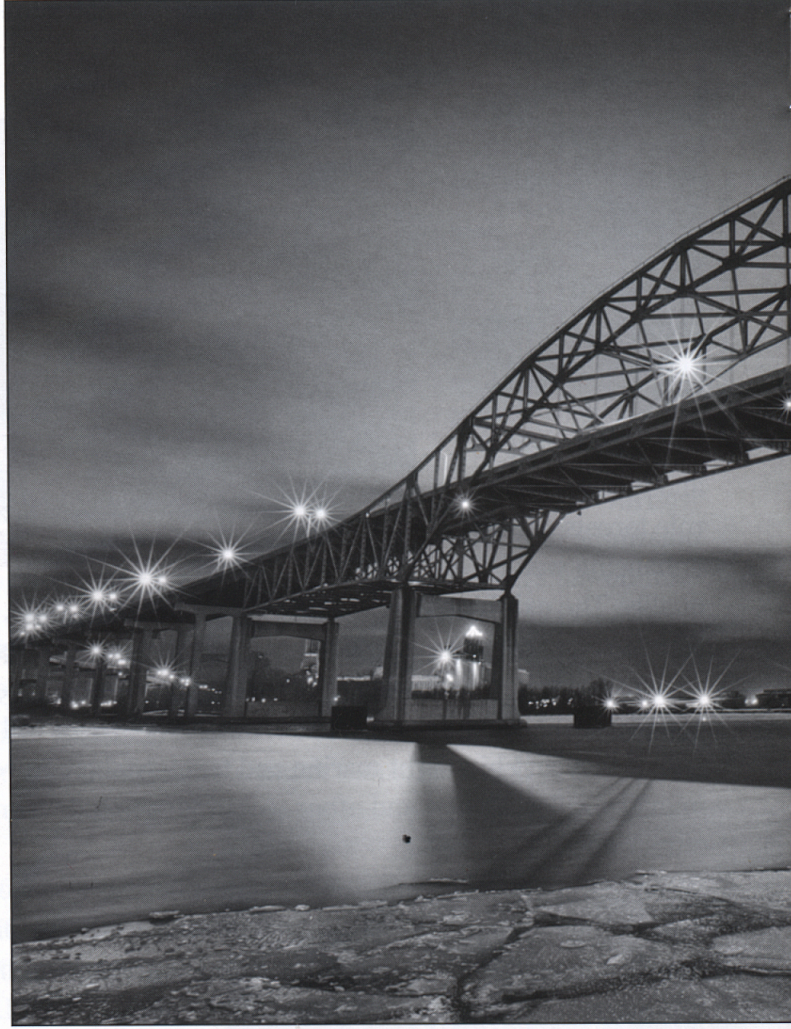
tem fell a few miles short of their expectations. Because northern Wisconsin was not part of the Interstate plan, I-35 terminated at Duluth, thus excluding a high level bridge linking the two cities.

Two bridges were already in place, but both were privately owned and charged tolls for autos to cross. From the rusting metalwork of the Interstate Bridge to the nail-encrusted wooden draw of the Arrowhead, neither span allowed for unimpeded access to Duluth or Superior. To further incense the average automobile-driving citizen, vessel traffic in the Duluth-Superior harbor all but assured that any driver crossing these waters would yield to the authority of waterborne commerce. Simply put, that meant waiting for ships.

The respective port cities, rivals in commerce, were united in their mutual necessity to linking the communities with a more convenient, toll-free means of transportation. Can you imagine a tunnel connecting the Twin Ports? This was one of several the ideas bantered about for years as a means of closing the gap between the cities. The tunnel proposal gained considerable head-

way during the 1930s but was declined funding by the WPA. Blatnik later conceded that "this notion of putting underground and burying what could be a beautifully lit-up

Vital link between



The John A. Blatnik Bridge dominates the sky in this

structure" nearly brought tears to his eyes.

At the start of the 1940s both sides were hopeful that plans for a high level bridge from Garfield Avenue in Duluth to the foot of Banks Avenue in Superior would finally be funded. The new design, calling for three 130-foot spans across the St. Louis River, was all but a done deal until World War II caused a shortage of construction materials. While the



The Port's Past
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delay was a blow to the area, the idea of a high bridge had gained traction, and with considerable push from local and national officials, funding for a toll-free bridge was appropriated in

The local citizenry, being not inclined to observe formalities, promptly dubbed the span the High Bridge, and it was immediately judged an unequivocal success. Also, a new

widened eight feet on either side of the bridge, excluding the center span, and a high center median was installed. The cost of this portion of the project was nearly equal to the amount spent on the initial construction of the bridge.

Highlights of the final phase involved completely repainting the bridge's structural steel, including the removal of the original lead-based paint, and the installation of safety lighting on the median.

generation of white-knuckled drivers was created from those who braved the bridge in ice, fog and high winds against oncoming headlights. As the critics would have it, the bridge was not without its faults, foremost among them was the low center median and the lack of shoulders for emergency stopping and snow removal.

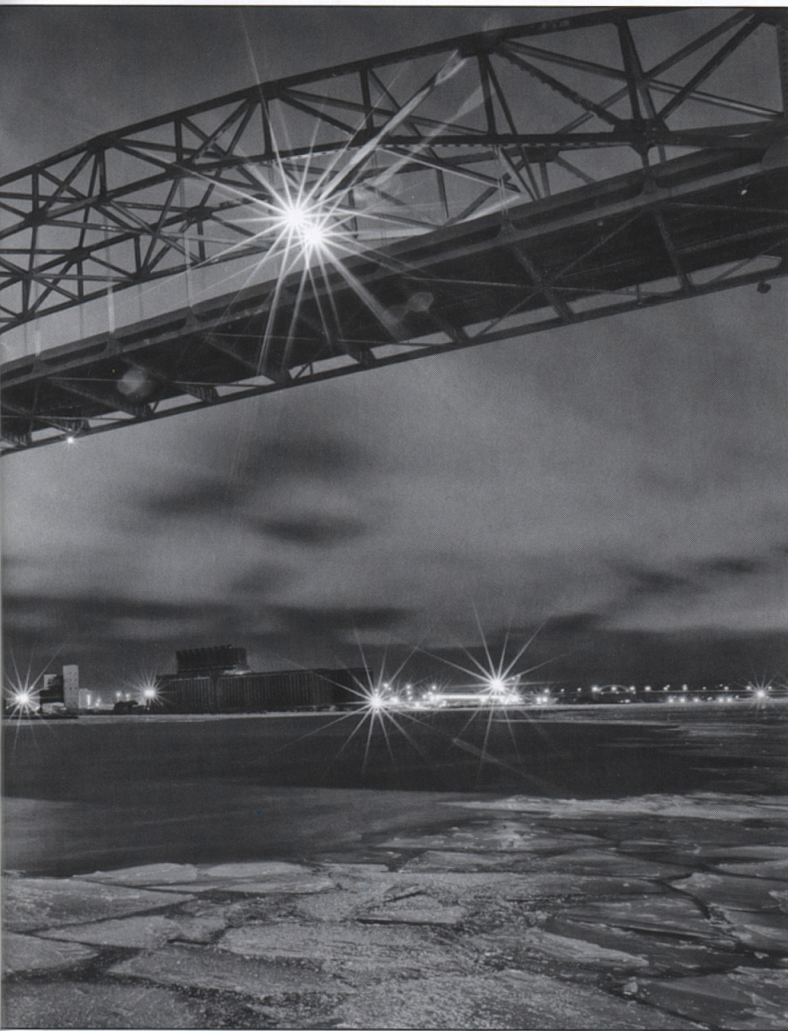
The finishing touch would be the installation of decorative lighting to show off the bridge's architectural lines. The idea of the lighting came from Duluth's Manley Goldfine, who felt that a lit bridge "would be a symbol of uniting Duluth with Superior and would serve as a sign that we welcome visitors." The idea was enthusiastically received and the internationally renowned firm of Hornton, Lees Lighting Design of New York City was hired to design the ornamental lighting outlining the bridge's center span. On November 21, 1996, the Blatnik Bridge was lit up in time for the holiday season, marking the conclusion of the \$40 million makeover.

To correct these flaws, and to incorporate newer roadway innovation designed to deal with cold-weather road wear, the bridge under-

Ten years after it was opened to traffic, the bridge was renamed to honor Congressman John A. Blatnik. Helping to get the bridge built "was among the key highlights of his career in Congress," stated his daughter Valerie.

Locals of the Twin Ports, being generally not inclined to observe formalities, mostly still call it the High Bridge. By any name it most certainly serves as a vital link between two cities, and two states.

rival communities



striking photograph by Chet Ellingson of Rosemount, Minn.

the 1950s, coinciding neatly with the advent of the St. Lawrence Seaway.

Construction began in November 1958 on the \$16.5 million dollar bridge. Three years later, and a few million dollars more, the governors of Minnesota and Wisconsin, along with dignitaries at the local, state and federal levels took part in a ribbon cutting ceremony on December 2, 1961, officially opening the High Bridge to vehicle traffic and ships.

went its own version of an extreme makeover. A three-phase project began in the spring of 1992 with the extension of the bridge's sub-structure and pier caps in preparation for widening the road surface.

The most publicly visible portion of the project was Phase Two. From September 7, 1993, to June 29, 1994, the bridge was entirely closed to traffic for repair. During this phase the road deck was replaced and

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