

Michigan Every Day

By Patrick Sullivan and Carole Eberly

November 1, 1957
Mackinac Bridge opens to traffic

Five miles of open water between Mackinaw City and St. Ignace meant the two peninsulas were united only in theory. In reality, they were separate lands. Then, on Nov. 1, 1957, an astonishing feat of engineering was completed - the Mackinac Bridge became the world's longest suspension bridge. The first passengers actually crossed a day earlier when busloads of students traveled to Mackinaw City so they could be part of the opening day ceremony. A formal, official opening day ceremony also had to wait until the following spring, when organizers believed they would have a better chance at good weather. That turned out to be a bad bet. The following June 25th, the grand opening was marred by rain and cold. But on Nov. 1, 1957, unseasonably warm and sunny weather greeted the hundreds who turned out to be the first paying customers of the Mackinac Bridge. (Michigan weather! Go figure.) The first to pay the toll heading north was the state's governor, G. Mennen Williams. The link between the state's peninsulas was one of the most important days in the state's history. It put an end to talk of Wisconsin taking the Upper peninsula, or statehood for the remote, and cutoff region of Michigan. It also meant that traffic would no longer have to back up for miles from Mackinaw City during hunting season, when thousands of vehicles waited to board ferries.. Talk of connecting the peninsulas had been going on for decades. Horatio Earl, the state's first highway commissioner, proposed a floating tunnel across the straits. Others thought a bridge between Mackinaw City and St. Ignace impossible, so they proposed a series of bridges that would hp traffic from one island to the next – from Cheboygan to Bois Blanc Island to Round Island to Mackinac Island and finally to St. Ignace.

It wasn't until the 1950's that serious work began on the bridge, led by Senator Prentiss Brown and Governor Williams. The massive project was studied

tirelessly before construction began. It took 2,500 workers, 85,000 pages of blueprints, 71,000 tons of steel, 466,000 cubic yards of concrete and 41,000 miles of cable wire to build the five-mile-long bridge. Remarkably, the massive construction project only claimed the lives of five workers. The bridge took 42 months and nearly \$100 million to complete.