

The Bridges of Matlacha

By SueAnn Germani

It was one of those days where I was going nowhere fast. As I sat there in Matlacha, in bumper to bumper traffic, I wondered, A) What boater was messing up my travel plans? B) Gee, how much does that slab of cement weigh? C) WHAT, there is no boat??? There is no boat! Why is the bridge up? It was time to do some sleuthing about the bridges of Matlacha.

In the mid 1920's commerce on Pine Island and The Fill (as Matlacha used to be referred to) began to grow. With this growth came the need to move products quicker than the steam mail boats and commercial ferries. Roads were built on Pine Island to The Fill and a bridge was needed to allow travel over the Matlacha Pass. No longer was it acceptable to walk across the pass at low tide to get to Pine Island or The Fill. In 1926 a used swing bridge was located in Alva, purchased and floated on a barge down the Calooshattee River to The Fill at Matlacha Pass. Sand and shell was dredged from the bottom of the pass to build-up and create the approaches for either



Matlacha bridge 1926-1927

end of the bridge. The barge holding the bridge was then placed in the middle of the pass. All was going well and there was such excitement for the coming of this bridge, until in September 1926 a massive hurricane slammed into southern Florida. The roiling water and intense winds hurled the dredge into the barge, holding the

bridge in place, subsequently causing the bridge to slip its ties and crash into the water, sinking along with the barge. The barge was raised and floated to Fort Myers, where she was refitted and then steamed back to the Matlacha Pass. Another used wooden swing bridge was found (I could not find out where this bridge came from) and in early 1927 the bridge was opened to traffic. The Alva bridge lay at the bottom of the pass for two years until it was raised, cut up and barged out. The wooden swing bridge served our Islands until 1968. By the late 60's cars had gotten much larger and traffic was heavier, as Pine Island and Matlacha became destination spots for watermen and sports fishermen. A wider concrete bascule bridge was built and soon was nicknamed "The Fishingest Bridge in the World". There were times that people would be



Matlacha bridge 1968

shoulder to shoulder fishing for snook, which were abundant around the pilings of the bridge. In 2010, Lee County realized that the Matlacha Bridge once again needed to be updated. There was to be a 5-foot sidewalk on either side of the travel lanes and those lanes would be 11 feet wide with a 5-foot shoulder on either side of them, making the total width of the bridge 42 feet. The bridge was to be 9 feet high at the approach and when the span was raised it would be 50 feet in the air! A state of the art tender's tower was also on the drawing board housing the console that opens and closes the pedestrian gates, traffic gates and raises the roadway to allow sail boats and yachts passage. On November 18, 2012 the present bridge was placed in operation.

The bridge opens on demand. All a captain needs to do is hail the bridge tender over his or her marine radio between the hours of 8am until 7pm Monday through Thursday, or, 7am until 7pm Friday through Sunday. So, I know we still need to answer the question, "Why was there no boat going through when the bridge opened up?" Bridge tender Gary Temp answered this for me. "As with anything mechanical", he explained "You have to test it and do preventative maintenance.



Matlacha Pass draw bridge

You have to make sure all the parts are operating correctly, so I open the bridge every day after the morning rush. That's about 11ish. Then, every Thursday, the maintenance crew comes to check the hydraulics, grease the pins and moving parts of the lift system. They also do a visual check of the side rails and travel lanes. They do their jobs as quickly and efficiently, and as safely as possible, because for every minute this span is open, it will equal about a 20-minute wait for vehicle traffic." Well, call it a nuisance if you want but it sure beats walking across the pass at low tide. It is a lovely walk across the bridge and the view is breathtaking especially at sunrise. There are folks fishing, strolling hand in hand and even a smooch here and there. Please come enjoy a day in Matlacha.

I would like to thank Gary Temp for giving so much of his time and allowing me to see how all those levers and buttons work. It was simply thrilling for me. I also want to thank Betsy Clayton, Communications Director for Lee County Government and her colleague Timothy Engstrom for arranging my visit to the bridge tender's tower and providing me with information. To our readers, I hope you enjoyed this trip down memory lane and please see at least one sunrise from our bridge in Matlacha.



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