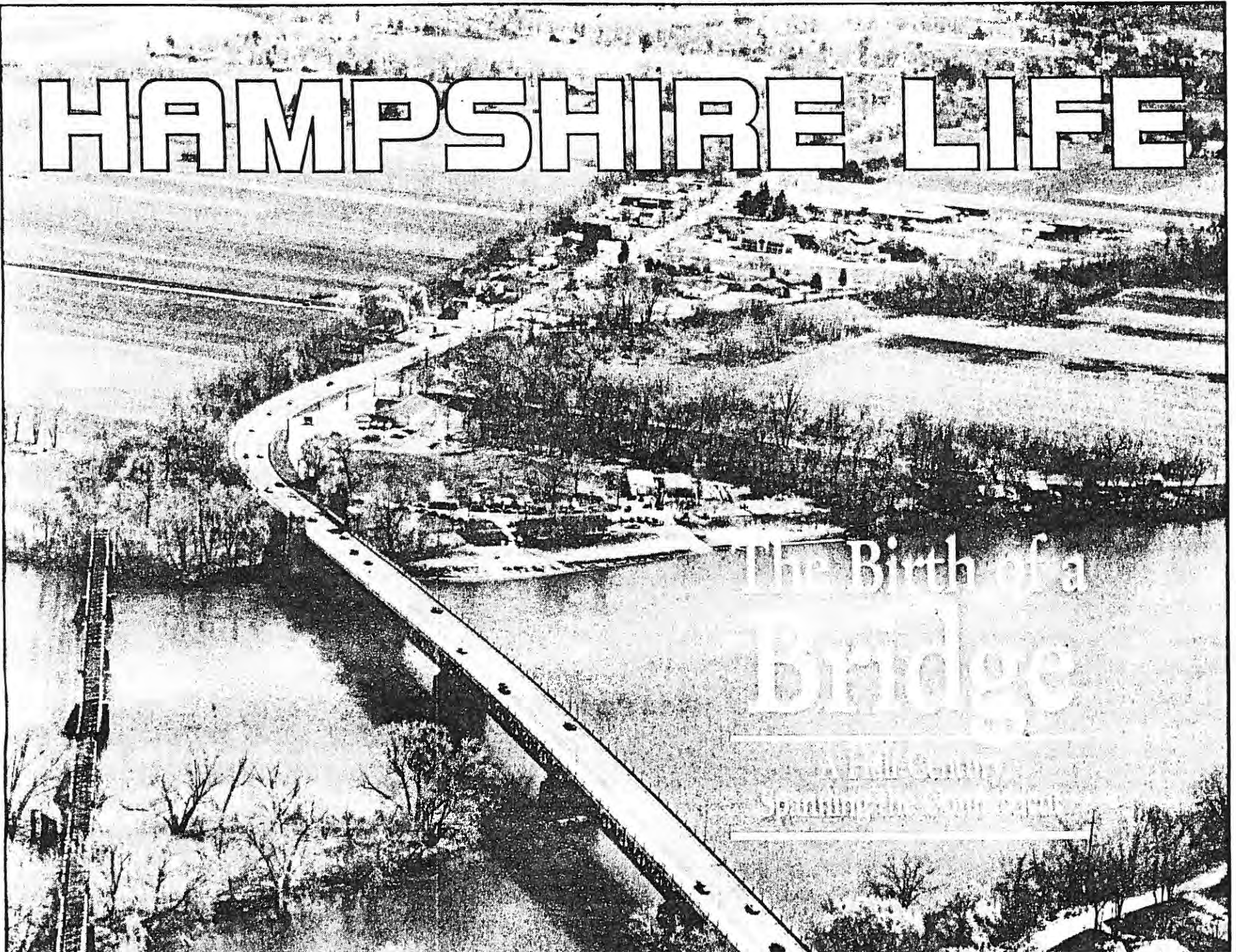


HAMPSHIRE LIFE



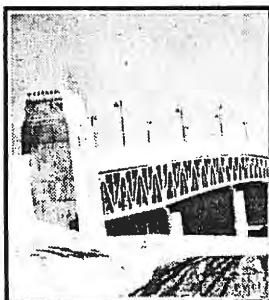
The Birth of a
bridge

By Bill Gault
Special to the Gazette

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COVER: Photo of the Calvin Coolidge Memorial Bridge taken from the air by Gordon Daniels. Graphics by Bev Wah Cesario.



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Like most of us who live in the Northampton-Amherst area, Allison Lockwood drives over the Calvin Coolidge Memorial Bridge often. But unlike many of us, she does not complain about the traffic tie-ups she encounters there.

"You don't know what traffic is," says the former resident of Washington, D.C., with a laugh. "After the Washington beltway at rush hour, this is nothing."

It's true that everything is relative. Route 9 gridlock may seem insignificant next to a big city's. But then again, it doesn't fare so well when compared to its own past, not all that long ago, when the Coolidge Bridge was a tranquil crossing leading to a verdant farmscape. How things have changed.

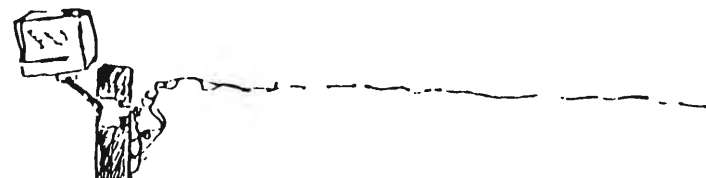
If Allison can remember worse roadways, she can also remember the Coolidge Bridge at its finest. She was a student at Smith College when it first rose gleaming above the waters of the Connecticut, symbolizing hope for the Depression-weary residents of Northampton. "I can remember my first trip across," she says. "We flew across it on our bikes, heading for Amherst," to visit students at Amherst College, many of whom would soon be leaving, as Allison did, to serve in World War II.

These days those of us who drive grumbling over the bridge, usually glaring only at the back of the car in front of us, might be surprised to realize that when it was built in 1939 it was considered a marvel of modern technology and design. In fact, Allison remembers that people would come from miles around just to see it, and she recalls making pilgrimages herself to the French King Bridge on Route 2, built at about the same time, to admire and compare.

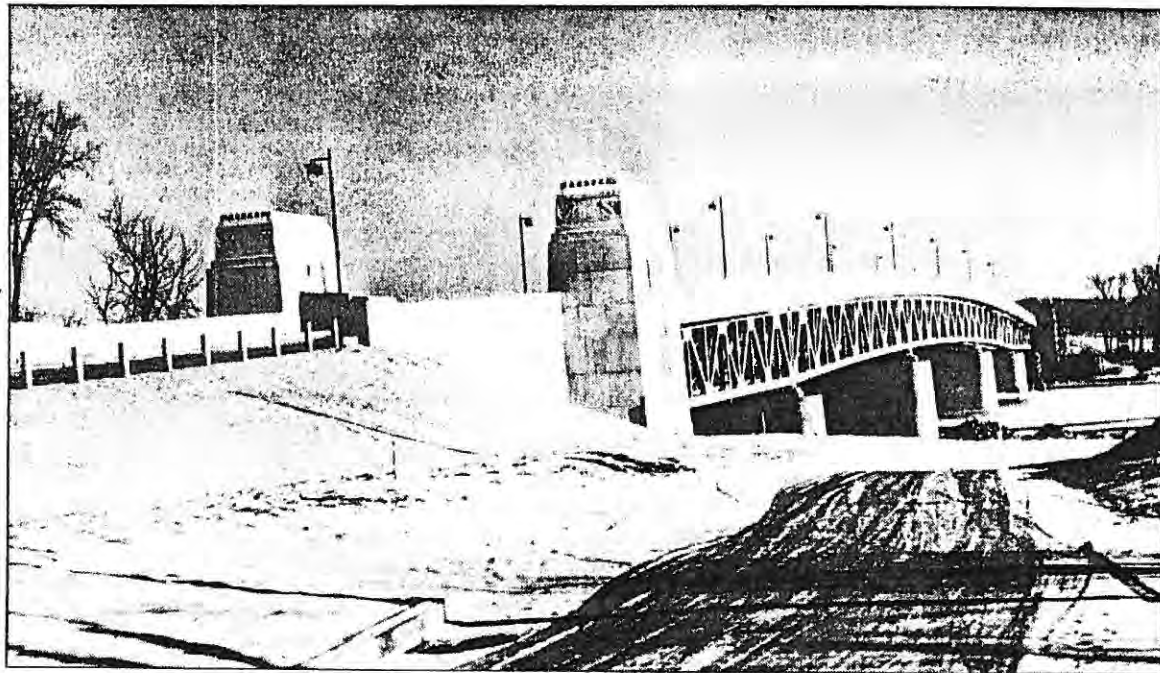
Partly because of those memories, when she starts across the Coolidge Bridge nowadays, Allison says, "I still have that feeling of exhilaration; I still look down the valley at the hills and mountains and feel a great thrill."

The Coolidge Bridge turns 50 this year. To remember the year it was built is to remember a different time, a different mood: one full of optimism and promise just before the clouds of war were to descend. Allison's story begins on page 6.

MARCY LARMON

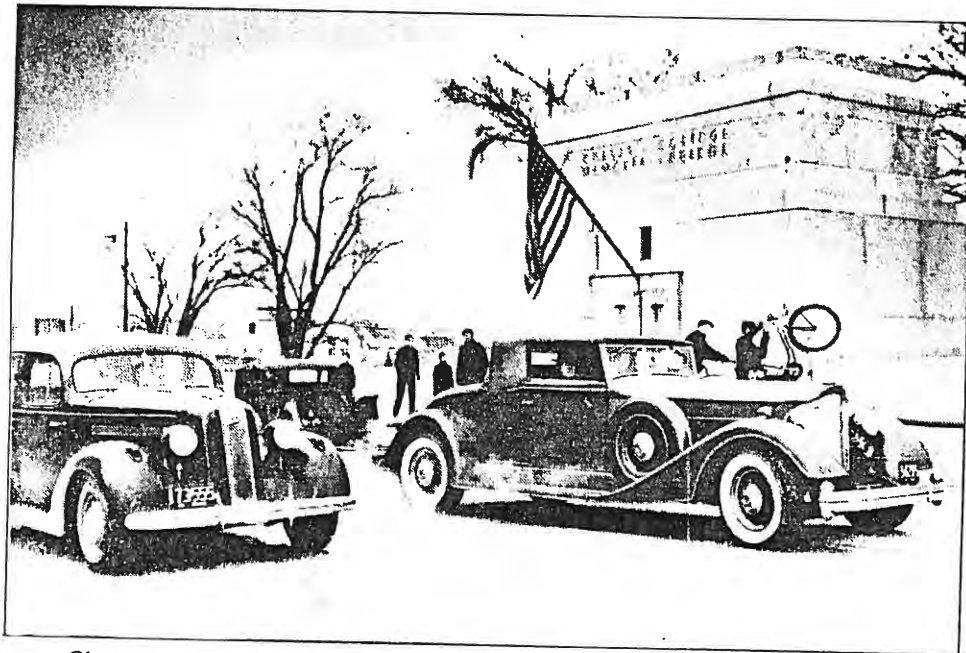


A Span Of
50 *Years*
1939 — 1989



Photos courtesy of Forbes Library

The Calvin Coolidge Memorial Bridge



Clarence Hodgkins' Packard led the first cars across the bridge, Jan. 21, 1939.



On Oct. 12, 1939, 40,000 people gathered for the ceremony dedicating the bridge.

The Coolidge Bridge took 437 working days to build, between November 1937 and January 1939. It cost the American taxpayer \$1,193,230.95 — half of that paid for with federal Public Works Administration funds and half by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Hampshire County provided the \$30,000 that reimbursed the 27 property owners, in sums ranging from \$1 to \$12,000, for land acquired by eminent domain to provide access to the new bridge.

Designed by the Boston architectural firm of Desmond and Lord, the bridge was constructed by T. Stuart and Son of Watertown. Early in November, a call went out for over 300 laborers, who were to apply at the National Re-employment Office in the Courthouse Annex — big news for the army of unemployed in 1937. Work on the bridge began Nov. 10, 1937.

shillings sixpence for doing so.

The first bridge over the river was built in 1808, and historical accounts tell us that "an immense concourse of people gathered" for its dedication. The plank floor of that "trussel" bridge followed arches resting on abutments, so crossing it involved a series of ascents and descents. The cost to build it was \$14,500, and was in use until 1817, when it was reconstructed by Northampton's legendary master-builder, Captain Isaac Damon.

In 1826 a new bridge, costing \$33,000, was built under the supervision of Captain Damon. This was a wooden covered bridge built

"without the aid of iron work of any description." In the daytime it was lit by 22 deadlights and 20 glazed skylights in the roof; at night a number of lamps suspended from the center of the overhead beams provided illumination.

A flood in 1859 carried off the western half of this covered bridge, but it was replaced and the bridge used until a hurricane in 1876 destroyed it altogether. Eleven teams and 13 people were on the bridge at the time. Fortunately, only one person was killed and three injured.

These two early bridges were both toll bridges, with only ministers

exempt from the fee.

In 1877 the covered bridge was replaced by a modern iron bridge costing \$20,000. A so-called "whipple," or double intersecting-truss bridge, this one boasted eight spans resting on masonry piers and two masonry abutments. It was 1,219 feet in length — and only 18 feet wide between the guard rails!

This stood until 1936, and is the one remembered by older Northamptonians. It did not seem possible that two cars could meet on that bridge without sideswiping each other, but somehow they did. I can remember dreading to cross the narrow span with my family in our 1927 Whippet, headed for a summer's afternoon of swimming at Sandy Beach in Hadley.

The view as we reached the Hadley side was quite unlike what



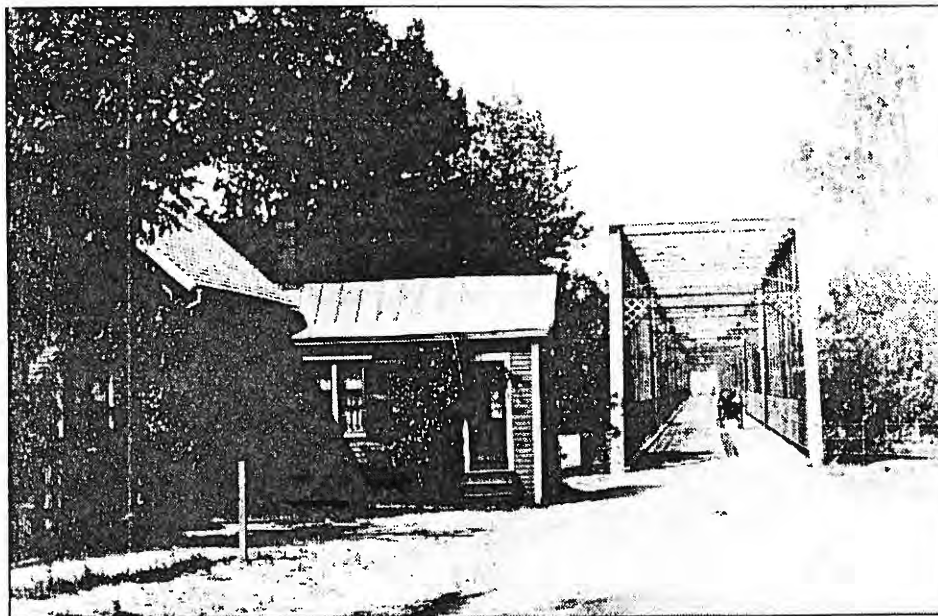
miles per hour. The impact broke a part of the upright that rose on an incline from the abutment, causing the old iron girders to sag and throwing the whole end of the bridge off balance. For several days the luxurious automobile remained trapped in the wreckage while engineers figured out a way to extricate it without toppling the bridge. The road across the river was closed for about three weeks, and the repairs cost \$15,000.

It took the severe March flood of 1936, however, to finally put the old iron bridge out of commission, so weakened that it simply had to be replaced now for the sake of public safety — Depression or no Depression.

When work began on the Coolidge Bridge, there were three 19th-century iron bridges still in place. One was the railroad bridge still to be seen today. This was built in 1887 as part of the Central Massachusetts Railroad linking Northampton with Boston. The second was the bridge about to be replaced, and the third was a trolley bridge belonging to the Northampton Street Railway Company, which would also be demolished upon completion of the Coolidge Bridge, with the metal sold to scrap dealers — “probably to be made into war materiel,” a report in the Gazette reported at the time.

One of the first pre-construction acts at the site of the new Coolidge Bridge was the removal of the iron horse-watering-trough that stood at the Northampton end of the old bridge, as it was deemed “a menace to the increasing flow of traffic.”

Soon crowds were gathering to watch steam shovels scoop away earth from the area where the new bridge abutments were to go. Adding to the excitement of the spectacle, their digging uncovered a human skeleton at first thought to be that of Alice Corbett, a Smith College student who had disappeared in



The Coolidge Bridge replaced this one, built in 1877 and only 18 feet wide.

of Smith College.

Work on the bridge began in earnest when four dams were built in the river to permit construction of the four concrete piers. A plant was set up both to mix and to force the concrete into these piers. A floating barge dubbed “The Nonotuck” served the team of divers who worked on them. Stringing of the steel framework was done by the Bethlehem Steel Company, and the 24-ton steel “stringers” were brought by train to the Boston and Maine freight yards, where they were loaded onto trucks and hauled to the site.

Total length of the bridge would be 1,223 feet from abutment to abutment, with a roadway 40 feet wide and an upstream sidewalk 8 feet wide. With a high-water clearance of 11 feet and 4 inches, based on the high-water mark of 1936, we were now promised relief from the periodic flood rampages of the Connecticut. The new bridge

had lived the old New England maxim “Use it up; wear it out; make it do; go without.” There had been little construction of any kind during the Depression, and we were fascinated by the building of the new bridge. The Gazette carried detailed articles and frequent photographs to satisfy our curiosity, but townspeople wanted to see for themselves and the newspaper reports described the “ever-present civilian watchers” gathered to marvel, especially at “the unerring accuracy of workers as they toss red hot rivets from the heating forges into the waiting ‘buckets’ of other workmen some distance away, where the rivets are driven into place by the chattering hammers.” Some 80,000 of these rivets went into the Coolidge Bridge.

There were some accidents among the workers, and there was, sadly, one death — that of Michael Renaccio of Watertown, a 58-year-old assistant crane engineer, who fell

of a banshee — around the bridge at night. Scoffers, however, attributed this merely to the wind sighing in the steel framework.

Not long before the formal dedication of the bridge in October, a Hadley resident sued the contractors for \$12,000 in damages based on a broken leg he suffered when Fourth of July fireworks at the Sportsman’s Club of Hadley ignited a barrel of explosives left over from demolition of the stone piers of the two old bridges.

On a happier note, a member of the painting crew at the bridge, young Gabriel Vogt of Cottleville, Maine, won local renown in May 1939 by executing — as the Gazette reporter described it — “a graceful swan dive into the muddy water near the Hadley end of the bridge.”

The long-planned formal dedication of the bridge took place on Columbus Day — Oct. 12, 1939. In the bright autumn sunlight, the gleaming white “modernistic” (a term we used before we learned to say art deco or art moderne) pylons made of Chelmsford granite literally dazzled our eyes. As William L. MacDonald would point out nearly four decades later in his book on architecture and buildings in Northampton, these pylons of the Coolidge Bridge signaled “what was to come in the sense of modern attitudes toward the expression of mass and volume. They are largely free of historical detail, a kind of engineer’s modern architecture quite common in the 1930s and rooted in part in a functional, no-nonsense attitude which is one source of modern design.”

On the right-hand pylon at either end of the bridge was affixed an 1,800-pound bronze plaque with a bas relief bust of President Coolidge and a list of his dates and accomplishments. These were designed by James F. Palmisano of Wallesey Hills. The doors in these

THE BRIDGE

(continued from page 8)

like those on the bank building at the corner of Main and King, which was built in 1928, also in the art deco style. These pylons also seemed to reflect the dazzling white structures, including the now legendary "trylon and perisphere" at the New York World's Fair that many of us visited in this period.

On the day of the dedication, 40,000 people lined up along the parade route and clustered around the grandstand at the Northampton end of the gleaming new structure. President Franklin Roosevelt had declined his invitation to appear due to pressures stemming from the recent outbreak of war in Europe. But every state and local official for miles around made the scene that day, including Governor Leverett Saltonstall and Senator David Walsh. President Stanley King of Amherst College, Calvin Coolidge's alma mater, presided over the dedication that cost, according to the Gazette, a grand total of \$678.

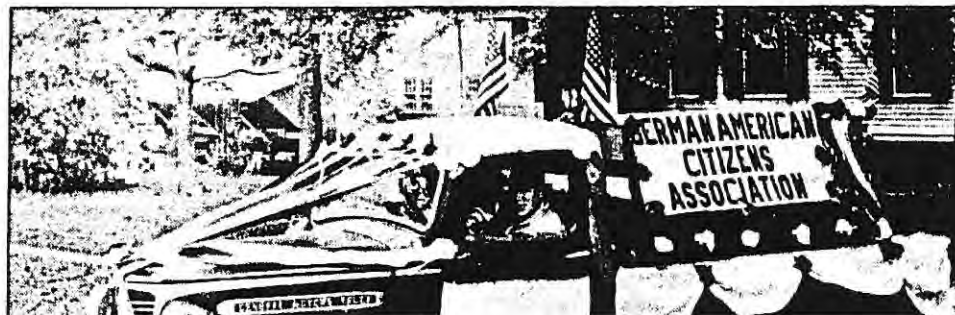
An invitation had been extended to Mrs. Grace Coolidge, wife of the late president. She was indeed in the city, but she chose instead to attend the wedding of the daughter of her close friend, Mrs. Florence B. Adams, on Washington Avenue. At a ceremony to dedicate the Portia College of Liberal Arts in Boston to her husband two weeks previous, Grace Coolidge had deemed this educational institution an honor, she said, "more fitting than any memorial of stone or statuary." It is possible that she felt the mere naming of a much-needed bridge to be a second-rate way of honoring the late president. Indeed, over a decade later Judge Walter Stevens, who as a young man had followed Calvin Coolidge as a student in the law



In 1929, two Yale students rammed this car into the old Hadley bridge, nearly toppling the structure into the river.

Division Veterans, Polish War Veterans. One of our last two surviving Civil War veterans, Alphonso Witherell, age 96, rode in a car driven by Attorney Kenneth Hemenway, the son of Calvin Coolidge's law partner, Ralph Hemenway.

Lieutenant Detective Maurice Nilligan and his team of six plainclothesmen had for days been studying photos of "known dips" in





Richard Carpenter

Joseph Zgodnik, born the year the bridge was built, has watched it become a traffic bottleneck.

The Bridge Today: Troubled Times

By MARGOT CLEARY

The hoopla attending the official opening of the Coolidge Bridge back in 1939 included a parade so long it took marchers nearly an hour to pass the grandstand on the Northampton side. Half a century later, it sometimes seems that it can take that long just to get from one side to the other — even with a set of wheels. Just ask any commuter.

Joseph Zgodnik, who's been around exactly as long as the bridge has, moved to Hadley from Hatfield when he was barely a

University of Massachusetts in the 1960s, students roared into town. And more students meant more cars. Lots more.

In 1976, 22,000 vehicles were passing over the Coolidge Bridge each day. In 1984, that had grown to 25,000. And now, says Herrick, "it's building up to around 30,000."

The result has been traffic jams that seem out of sync with the bridge's bucolic setting.

"Back in the '60s, a second bridge was proposed," Herrick says, "but it never got

reduce traffic turning into fast food restaurants, gas stations and the like.

The Five Colleges should bar freshmen and sophomores from driving cars. Buses are available, Zgodnik says.

Pedestrian traffic should be relocated to the railroad bridge just to the north of the Coolidge Bridge, and the sidewalk turned into a lane accessing Damon Road, the heart of the bottleneck.

The University of Massachusetts should stagger its work with the