

The Hill-to-Hill Bridge: A Story of “Fraternal Cooperation”

Ed Gallagher, The Bethlehem Gadfly Bethlehem Moments, Fun Stuff, Gadfly's posts September 16, 2018

The Gadfly picks October 8, 1916, as our first Bethlehem Moment. On that day fundraising for what would be called the Hill-to-Hill Bridge went over the top, though a World War intervened, and the bridge would not be completed till 1924. There was a gala opening ceremony on November 1st of that year, after which a day full of “merry tooting of horns and sirens” consecrated what the Hill-to-Hill’s first biographer Rollin Keim called “the greatest undertaking Bethlehem has ever accomplished.”

November 1, 1924, certainly is a great Bethlehem Moment, but, still, the Gadfly chooses the earlier date for its pivotal importance and its rather awesome display of civic power. Planning for a “shore-to-shore” bridge began way back in the 1890s, stuttering through various obstacles till it ran smack up against the money wall, the need for a final \$200,000. Contemporary witness Keim recounts “hundreds of citizens” signing petitions and pledging \$5 to cover expenses. This citizen fund-raising crescendo climaxed in the designation of the week October 2 to October 10 for the make-or-break final push.

The Gadfly dates himself by saying it reminds him of those classic hard-not-to-watch Jerry Lewis telethons for Muscular Dystrophy. Listen to this: there were “large clocks . . . on which were recorded the amounts raised daily at noon-day. When the amounts were recorded at a noon-day luncheon, there were scenes of unusual enthusiasm and good-natured rivalry. Songs were sung, speeches were made, and parades organized to turn the hands of the clocks to the new marks.”

As the Gadfly grandchildren would say, “THAT’S AWESOME!” And it didn’t take a full week. The goal was reached October 8!

The Gadfly wonders if we realize how awesome the bridge is. In the 60-second mad dash across it now (rush hours excepted!), we may not even see or sense it. It has become invisible. So the Gadfly encourages you to walk it (God forbid, Gadfly!), or, ok, better yet, get out of your car and stand on the little bridge across the canal next to the Wooden Match heading on to Sand Island. Lean back and take the bridge in from underneath. See how majestic it is. Rather breath-takingly high, isn't it? And so sweeping you can't really capture it without swiveling your head.

Listen to Keim again:

"The story of Bethlehem's Hill-to-Hill Bridge is the story of the unwavering efforts of the eager, far-sighted citizens with a breadth of vision and an unselfish desire to promote the material progress of the city."

"[The Hill-to-Hill Bridge] provides a great highway for our commerce and communication between the North and South sides, and is one of the great factors for unifying us as a city. The story of the bridge has been a long one, but it is the story of magnificent achievement, to the glory of fraternal cooperation."

The Gadfly is sure that many readers will remember how in the 1980s we bought bricks to restore the Statue of Liberty under the leadership of Lehigh grad superstar Lee Iacocca. The Gadfly thinks of that here — how, proudly patriotic, we enthusiastically bought those bricks that will endure as signs of our commitment to something bigger than ourselves.

A lot of "little guys" — hardworking, average Bethlehem citizens — joined with their civic leaders and poured money into the Hill-to-Hill.

The Gadfly can never look at or travel that bridge again without thinking of that "fraternal cooperation" and the whooping and hollering that occurred on October 8, 1916.

Awesome!

R. R. Keim, The Hill-to-Hill Bridge, 1924

<https://historicbridges.org/pennsylvania/hilltohill/booklet.pdf>

History's Headlines: Bethlehem's Hill-to-Hill Bridge

<http://www.wfmz.com/features/historys-headlines/historys-headlines-bethlehems-hill-to-hill-bridge/20897255>