



The Rise and Fall of the Keithsburg, Illinois Bridge



While the ornate old bridge continues in service, steam cranes prepare coffer dams in preparation for pouring concrete abutments for the new bridge. Collection of Gus Hart.

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ON MAY 5, 1879, THE CENTRAL RAILROAD Company of Iowa emerged from the hands of the bankruptcy court as the Central Iowa Railway. This was the result of financial losses, changes in managements, and insufficient traffic. At the same time, plans were made to build a line from Oskaloosa, Iowa, to the Mississippi River. By the end of 1882, that portion of the Central Iowa Railway was in operation.

On the Illinois side of the river, plans were also being made to complete a through route from Peoria, Illinois, to central Iowa. By late 1883 that line was also complete, but faced the obstacle of the Mississippi at Keithsburg. The obstacle was temporarily overcome by the use of ferries for both passenger and freight cars. One year, at least, a temporary wooden trestle was constructed on the river's ice after navigation had ended for the Winter. The structure looked as if the tracks were laid directly on the ice because the trestle was barely above the water level.

In December of 1881, the Mercer County Bridge Company was formed to build a span over the river. Four years later the name of the Company was changed to the Keithsburg Bridge Company, and the firm existed separately and distinctly from the railroad until it was purchased by the Central Iowa in 1901.

The bridge was finished in 1886 at a total cost of \$600,000, and consisted of eight spans and a 362 foot swingdraw, all of through truss design. Eleven stone piers supported seven 205 foot spans and one 255 feet in length. With the completion of the bridge, the Central Iowa became a unified road, physically as well as corporately.

A few years after the bridge was built, the Central Iowa Railway was acquired by the Iowa Central Railway. Then, in 1912, the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railroad and the Iowa Central were combined. Thus, later years would see the trains of the "Louie" running on the bridge.

Following the turn of the century, it was determined that the bridge was no longer adequate for the increasingly heavy locomotives and trains. Two new bridges were then constructed in 1909 - 1910 by the Union Bridge and Construction Company at a cost of \$725,000. The main channel of the river was spanned by a bridge 2304-feet in length, the span reaching from the Illinois shore to Blackhawk Island. Another bridge, 1506-feet in length, reached to the Iowa shore. To replace these structures in the 1980s would cost at least \$4,500,000.

The Chicago & North Western Railway acquired the M&StL in 1960. By 1967, when the C&NW stopped using the bridge, trains were crossing at Keithsburg only a few times each month.

