

I-90 Floating Bridge

The Biggest Thing Afloat

The floating bridge, designed by the engineer Homer Hadley (1885-1967), opened on July 2, 1940, to public acclaim and amazement. Many people thought that a concrete structure of this size (1.25 miles long) could never float, let alone handle traffic. At the time, *The Seattle Times* called it "the biggest thing afloat," easily larger than the ocean liner *Queen Elizabeth*, the giant of its day. On opening day, Governor Clarence Martin called the bridge "original, distinctive, striking and graceful -- a product of this great state's vision and constructive spirit."

The bridge, called the Lake Washington Floating Bridge or the Mercer Island Bridge, was in 1967 renamed the Lacey V. Murrow Memorial Bridge in honor of the state's highway director. It was a marvel of engineering. Planners originally expected the bridge to carry 2,000 people a day, but from the start more than 5,000 people used the bridge on a daily basis. When tolls were taken off the bridge in 1946, this number skyrocketed.

The bridge did more than carry traffic. It turned Mercer Island from a summer resort into a suburban community. The bridge also turned Bellevue from a collection of berry and chicken farms into the fourth largest city in the state.

Slow Motion Titanic

After 50 years of service, the bridge was in need of repairs. Starting in 1989, a twin span had been completed parallel to it to handle the tens of thousands of new commuters who now inhabited the burgeoning Eastside. Prior to the Thanksgiving holiday in 1990, workers for Traylor Bros., an Indiana-based construction firm hired to do the renovation, had cut six-foot-high holes into the hollow concrete pontoons to facilitate work. Unfortunately these holes had not been closed before the weekend of unusually high winds and rain.

On Saturday, pontoons in the center of the bridge were inspected and found to be dry, but when workers returned to the bridge on Sunday morning, they found them nearly submerged. Efforts were made to pump them out, but it was too late.

By this time, news organizations had gotten wind of the situation and, within a short time, helicopters hovered over the bridge. As viewers looked on, the bridge began to sag. By the afternoon, it began to break apart. One by one, sections of the bridge broke off. In *Titanic* fashion, the pieces upended themselves and then tilted, slicing their way to the bottom of the lake. By the end of the day, the bridge was gone.

Sources:

The Seattle Times, November 26 and 27, 1990.

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By Alan J. Stein, January 01, 2000

