



The Art of Bridges

by Karyn Huskisson

Downtown Chicago, Illinois, is home to eighteen bridges. All the bridges cross the Chicago River. The Chicago River is a 156-mile system of rivers and canals that link Lake Michigan to the Mississippi River. All eighteen of the bridges are within a 2-mile radius of where the river winds through downtown Chicago. These bridges are unique because they all move. The bridges close to allow road traffic to move easily on the streets and open so ship traffic can flow along the river below. Twelve of the eighteen bridges

were built between 1913 and 1930. In the early 1900s, the city was heavily populated. With this increase in population came heavy congestion of people and public transportation, such as the trains. So in 1909, city officials published a plan describing what they wanted the city to become. The people who developed this plan wanted to create a city that would do two things: be free of congestion but also be a pleasant environment for the residents of the city.

Chicago grew in both size and population largely because of its importance as a major port city. The Chicago Loop is the historic commercial center of downtown Chicago. The Chicago River borders the loop on the west and north. Lake Michigan borders Chicago on the east. As you can see when you look at the map, the two bodies of water loop around and form a small half-mile area. This loop became Chicago's central business area.



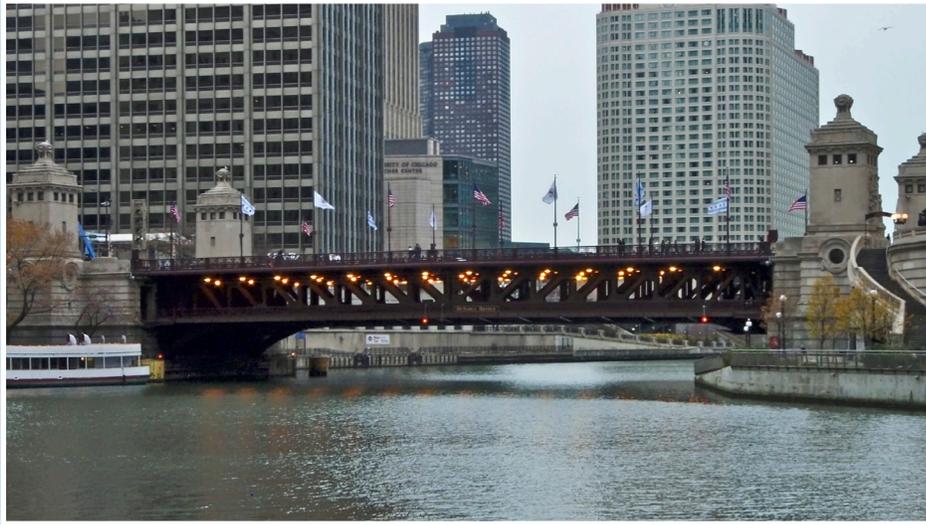
The city needed to make sure there was efficient movement of people and goods into and out of the loop. Because of this, the locations of the bridges were carefully selected. All eighteen of the bridges have the capacity to be raised and lowered at any time. This is done through a series of gears and pulleys. When first built, the bridges

were operated by bridge tenders. Bridge tenders were men who lived in small houses near the bridges. The bridge tenders would manually work the gears to raise the leaves upward and away from the center of the river. The older bridges (1913–1949) needed two houses. One house was on each side of the river: one to operate each leaf. The modern bridges, those built after 1950, only needed one house. These bridges are still raised and lowered today, but it is all done electronically. It only takes about 8 minutes to raise and lower a bridge. From April to November, the bridge along Michigan Avenue is raised and lowered approximately 40 times to allow ships to travel down the river.

DuSable Bridge at Michigan Ave. The bridge-tender house is currently home to The McCormick Bridgehouse and Chicago River Museum. The museum occupies one of the four houses at this bridge.



Franklin-Orleans Bridge during the fall lift season



DuSable Bridge at Michigan Avenue showing the four bridge-tender houses.

In addition to creating smooth flow of traffic on the water and throughout the city, the officials wanted to add beauty to the city. When the bridges were designed, they paid careful attention to the bridge-tender houses, staircases, and railings. Some of the bridge-tender houses are very ornate. The bridges on La Salle Street, Michigan Avenue (DuSable), and Lake Shore Drive all have four houses because they are gateways to the city. The developers wanted to make a grand statement to ships entering the city. Two of the four bridge-tender houses are strictly ornamental. These bridge-tender houses are

decorated with sculptures and carvings. Many of the sculptures depict important events in Chicago history. The railings and stairways along Wacker Drive are also decorated with impressive columns and stairways leading to the river walk.

As a result of careful planning and a desire to add art to the city, Chicago is an impressive city. These bridges have created a magnificent historic center. Natives and tourists enjoy these artful bridges today, and so will future generations.



DuSable Bridge-Tender House



La Salle Street Bridge showing walkway along Wacker Drive and stairways leading to the river walk