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CELEBRATING THE Bridges OF THE BAY

November 09, 1986 | TRACEY KAPLAN | Times Staff Writer

SAN FRANCISCO — Engineers say it is the superior structure, but the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge has never had the popularity of the Golden Gate Bridge. This rich bridge-poor bridge relationship is particularly apparent this week as San Francisco celebrates the Bay Bridge's 50th birthday—at less than 30 times the cost of the upcoming golden anniversary for the Golden Gate.

When Rialto fireworks manufacturer Robert Souza heard how difficult it was proving to raise funds for the 50th anniversary celebration of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge, he got fired up.

What particularly irritated Souza, his son, Jim, said in a telephone interview, was that the Bay Bridge gala was taking a decidedly secondary role to the much bigger golden anniversary bash planned next May for the Golden Gate Bridge.

So Robert Souza, who was born and reared in the Bay Area and whose grandfather's company shot off fireworks to celebrate the Bay Bridge's opening, donated \$150,000 worth of fireworks—enough to ensure what is being billed as the West Coast's biggest-ever fireworks show to honor the Bay Bridge next Saturday.

"My father decided to donate the fireworks because it just doesn't seem fair that the Bay Bridge has always been the orphan bridge, while the Golden Gate has gotten all the attention," said Jim Souza, speaking for the company while his father was on a business trip to China.

Even with the Souza donation, however, the Golden Gate Bridge celebration still promises to be more extravagant, although neither bridge's fund-raising committees have had an easy time of it.

In addition to the fireworks, the Bay Bridge celebration will include an antique car parade and a host of speeches by local politicians and engineers Wednesday, the actual anniversary of the bridge's opening. A dinner in honor of the 5,000 original bridge workers was attended by about 100 of the men last Sunday.

In contrast, fund-raisers for the Golden Gate are planning an ambitious series of events, including a sports festival, food festival and several rock concerts, culminating in a daylong pageant they hope will be featured on national television.

It has always been thus, ever since the two bridges were completed within months of each other during the Great Depression.

Almost from the day the last rivet was driven in 1937, the Golden Gate Bridge—an elegant span crossing the narrow strait between the Bay and the Pacific—has symbolized what San Franciscans call The City.

The Bay Bridge—which crosses the water in a dog-leg pattern, joined in the middle at Yerba Buena Island—is another story. A national survey conducted this summer by Charlton Research Co. of San Francisco found that less than 1% of those asked to name a San Francisco landmark cited the Bay Bridge, while nearly half listed the Golden Gate.

Even those who jump off bridges favor the Golden Gate. Golden Gate suicides far outnumber those off the Bay Bridge. And even some of those who have leaped from the Bay Bridge have left behind notes indicating that they thought it was the Golden Gate, according to Officer Gary Loo of the California Highway Patrol.

But if the Golden Gate has the reputation, the Bay Bridge has the workload, comparatively speaking. It carries more than twice as many vehicles a day as its more famous kin. Its tolls help finance three major transit agencies in the Bay Area, while the Golden Gate's barely cover its maintenance costs.

Because it can carry more commuters than the ferries that previously carried most trans-Bay traffic, the Bay Bridge also played a central role in the growth of the East Bay suburbs, according to San Francisco archivist Gladys Hansen.

Today, engineers concede that "the Silver Queen" may be less striking to the untrained eye than its colorful cousin, but its beauty, they say, lies its unique design. Composed of a major cantilever bridge, two suspension bridges and the world's largest bore tunnel (through Yerba Buena Island), the Bay Bridge was named one of the seven modern American engineering landmarks by the American Society of Civil Engineers in 1955, an honor never accorded the Golden Gate.

"From an engineering standpoint, it's a much more significant structure," said Wes Starratt, a society member involved in the 50th anniversary celebration.

Engineers being a somewhat limited audience, it is not surprising that the Bay Bridge 50th Birthday Committee Inc. ran into difficulty reaching its initial goal of \$250,000 for the celebration. By the end of the summer, only \$1,570 had been raised, \$1,000 of which was donated by E. R. (Mike) Foley, retired chief engineer of the bridge and committee chairman.

"These are uncharted waters for us; we've never done this before," spokesman Mike Deasy said. "Had we known how tough it would be, we would have started 18 months ago instead of 12."

Deasy said the committee had to scale down its fund-raising target to \$100,000 because of lack of corporate donations. The bridge's center anchorage has been painted to resemble a birthday cake and candle, but plans to keep the suspension section of the bridge permanently lit have been canceled.

About \$40,000 has been donated so far, about a third of which came in donations of less than \$200, said Caltrans spokesman Bob Halligan.

"Ours is a grass-roots deal, which makes sense considering the Bay Bridge has always been the people's bridge, not the tourists'," Halligan said. "It's the little people who are really contributing. Some guy whose dad worked on the bridge will drive through the toll plaza and hand the clerk an envelope with 50 bucks in it."

Like everything else associated with the Bay Bridge, its fund-raising problems--tough as they have been--are small potatoes in comparison to those of the Golden Gate. Bitter feuding between two nonprofit groups vying to sponsor the Golden Gate 50th anniversary festivities has been making local headlines since early summer, apparently scaring away some corporate sponsors.

Donors Confused

"When we ask them for donations, they say, 'We're confused; which group is the real party givers?'" said James R. Bronkema, chairman of the board of trustees of the Friends of the Golden Gate Bridge, one of the groups involved in the controversy.

Bronkema's group has been recognized as the official sponsor of the celebration by the Golden Gate Bridge District, which loaned it \$500,000 in start-up capital toward its \$6-million goal. So far, the committee has banked only about \$200,000 in cash, far less than necessary to repay the loan by the December deadline, Bronkema said.

To compound matters, the chief fund-raiser for the event, Glendinning Associates of Connecticut, dropped out of the picture in mid-October because it could not garner any contributions from major corporations, Bronkema said.

Organizer's Death

Another stroke of bad luck befell the group when public spectacle specialist Tommy Walker died during open-heart surgery Oct. 20. Walker had been hired by Friends of the Golden Gate to turn the celebration into an extravaganza on par with last summer's Statue of Liberty party, which he helped produce.

The rival group competing for corporate funds, Golden Gate Bridge 50th Anniversary Ceremonies and Festival, has always claimed that it could throw a spectacular party for \$3.2 million, far less than Bronkema's group originally proposed.

Friends of the Golden Gate had initially proposed raising \$22 million, including about \$10 million for a permanent bridge museum. It has since scaled down its proposal to about \$6 million.

Tensions were so high at one point during the dispute that members of his organization received death threats, Redmond said. Both parties said they are trying to resolve the dispute as soon as possible.

'Run Him Down'

"There was a point when if we saw Jim Bronkema on the street we would have liked to run him down," said Steven Wright, associate producer for Golden Gate Bridge 50th Anniversary. "But now we realize it would be better for everybody to settle this thing."

Even if they are able to raise only \$3 million in the six months remaining before the Golden Gate's birthday, fund-raisers would still outspend the Bay Bridge committee by 30 to 1.

To John Kergel, 78, a retired engineer who helped build the Bay Bridge, the magnitude of the relatively modest celebration is more than adequate. Kergel said he is looking forward to driving a 1931 black Model A Ford in the antique car parade across the bridge to San Francisco on Wednesday. The car originally belonged to a fellow Bay Bridge engineer and was one of the first vehicles to be driven across on opening day.

"Anything more would be a waste," the gray-haired bridge worker said. "I got to sit with six of the boys (at the commemorative dinner) and talk. . . ."

Kergel and his companions recalled taking turns trying on the bulky suits worn by divers during underwater construction. They remembered how they had lost a rowboat used by engineers in the early stages of construction to inspect work sites. They laughed about how they informed their boss of the loss by saying that they had misplaced the oars--and belatedly admitting that the oars were aboard the boat.

All that--"and the fact that even my dentist said he's thrilled to work on someone's teeth who built the Bay Bridge, is enough for me," Kergel said.

Deaths Construction during period Cost construction Length Golden Gate Jan. 1933 - May, 1937 \$35 million 11 1.2 miles Bay July 1933 - Nov, 1936 \$78 million 29 4.3 miles

Height of Avg. daily traffic lanes Highest traffic above water tower (vehicles) Tolls Golden Gate 250 ft. 746 ft. 120,000 \$1 Sun-Thur., \$2 Fri-Sat Bay 250 ft. 526 ft. 248,000 75 cents

Suicides Golden Gate 822 confirmed*, 362 reported**, 848 attempted*** Bay 108 confirmed*, 58 reported**, 309 attempted***

* (body recovered) ** (no body recovered) *** (successfully restrained)

Sources: Caltrans, Golden Gate Bridge District, California Highway Patrol.*