

Duluth's Aerial Lift Bridge immortalized

Matthew R. Perrine | Budgeteer News | Published Thursday, October 30, 2008

Make room on your bookshelf, Tony Dierckins has done it again.

“Crossing the Canal: An Illustrated History of Duluth’s Aerial Bridge” is just the latest from the Duluthian’s publishing house, X-comm, to be all but required reading for anyone who loves this fair city. Not only is it an informative read (sometimes overly so), but a fascinating one as well. “Crossing the Canal” traces the history of the Aerial Lift Bridge from John Alexander Low Waddell’s initial steam-powered lift bridge concept — after being rejected in Duluth, Waddell took his idea to Chicago, where it was built two years later — to its original incarnation as a transfer bridge and, finally, to the structure we’ve all known and loved and/or bemoaned since 1930.

But the book is as much a history of Duluth’s shipping canal as it is about its famous bridge. The most intriguing segment of the pre-bridge coverage in “Crossing the Canal” was Superior and the state of Wisconsin’s attempts to thwart Duluth’s work on its shipping canal. (Before the canal was widened and deepened, it was nothing more than a portage, so all ships entering the harbor had to use the Superior entry. As Dierckins explains, Superiorites believed diverting the St. Louis River would cause their entry to fill in with silt. While this didn’t happen, something almost as bad did: After Duluth’s shipping canal was equipped to handle large ships, the industry all but dried up in Superior. In fact, in one of the feud’s early years, exactly zero ships used our neighbor’s entry.)

The book also follows the lead of my favorite (up until now) Dierckins product, “True North,” and examines a number of off-beat anecdotes from the area’s past. These “companion stories” range from daring exploits, like biplanes barnstorming the iconic structure, to Canal Park’s misbegotten Neptune statue, the Duluth Boat Club and, most informative for me, Park Point’s White City amusement park.

Of course, none of this would work for the ADD-addled masses without a visual component. More than 250 images supplement the exhaustingly researched text, from paintings of a fledgling city (whose residents only numbered in the hundreds) to meticulously detailed blueprints.

The highlight for those only buying this as a souvenir and/or coffee table conversation piece, however, would probably be the book’s midsection. This is where Dierckins’ narrative is pre-empted for two photo essays that examine the Zenith City’s most-photographed landmark. While I preferred Janet Karon’s black-and-white study to Dennis O’Hara’s postcard-ready color photos, he did have one spectacular midwinter aerial shot with Bayfront Festival Park’s light extravaganza in the foreground.

As you can tell, I could go on and on ad nauseam about all the wonderful things Dierckins and crew unearthed for this project, but there’s a much better reason for wanting to read this book and learn the bridge’s history.

“Without the aerial bridge,” Dierckins writes in the preface, “the city would be incomplete. It’s as simple as that.”

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