

New book gets lift bridge story right

Matthew R. Perrine | Canal Park Times | Winter, 2008

It's reassuring to hear that, after all these years of research, Tony Dierckins still finds gee-whiz tidbits to share with his readers.

"You keep stumbling across more and more interesting stories," the author and publisher said. "If you stop to think that, Wow, probably every town has this many interesting stories behind it, it's really fascinating. You can really blow your mind with that. Those are the kind of things that I love; I would hate to think every conception I have about Duluth history is verified when I look it up."

Dierckins was discussing "Crossing the Canal: An Illustrated History of Duluth's Aerial Bridge," the latest Zenith City-centric title to emerge from his Duluth-born-and-bred publishing house, X-communication.

The book follows the lead of other Dierckins products, like "Zenith" and the two editions of "True North," and examines a number of off-beat anecdotes from the area's past. From daring exploits — like biplanes barnstorming the iconic structure — to Canal Park's misbegotten Neptune statue, the Duluth Boat Club and Park Point's White City amusement park, chances are even die-hard Duluth enthusiasts will learn a thing or two about their favorite city.

"I like the Paul Harvey rest-of-the-story stories, like the gentleman who claimed to have owned the land that was once Porter Street that is now the canal, Wilhelm Boeing," Dierckins said. "He died while the lawsuit was still active, but it was dropped. He gave all his money to his kid, who moved out to the Puget Sound area and started Boeing Airlines.

"... I love these little added connections that go beyond Duluth, that put us on the bigger game table, that show us as a player back then — which we were. Those are the kinds of things that fascinate me."

But it's not all fun and "companion stories." As its name implies, the book 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 Northlanders and visitors to the area have all known and loved and/or bemoaned since 1930.

"Researching a book is so much different from the research you did in college," Dierckins said, "because you were just trying to get the paper in and you were mostly going off secondary sources — because there weren't any primary sources to find."

By and large, "Crossing the Canal" avoided those pitfalls because of some seeds planted years ago by Jerry Sandvick, a (then) Park Point resident and recently retired teacher who had already been researching a similar project for years.

"We struck on the idea to expand [articles on the bridge's construction Sandvick had written for the Nor'Easter] into an illustrated history of the bridge; Jerry would write the central narrative, and I would gather images and write vignettes on the history of the lighthouses on the canal's piers, the old foghorn,

legends and tall tales and other bridge-related items,” Dierckins wrote in the book’s preface. “But retirement turned out to have far fewer hours for research and writing than Jerry had anticipated. Sorry to step back from the book, but happy to focus on the needs of his family, Jerry graciously turned his research over to me to keep the project moving forward.”

For Dierckins and the X-communication research team, Sandvick’s sizable box of research was a veritable treasure trove.

“I’d still be working on the book if I didn’t have all the help with the research I had. ... It was full of city council meeting minutes, correspondence — well, if you look at the reference section, it goes on for *nine pages*,” Dierckins said excitedly. “As you go through and read this stuff, which is great primary source material ... it was fantastic.”

Too many times, Dierckins said, you end up with newspaper reports not from the following day — a document of the event — but retellings published years down the road.

“Some old-timer’s telling a story — ‘Oh yeah, I remember...’ — or it gets embellished in a way that people go, ‘Yeah, that’s how it went,’” he said. “And it gets away from us.”

In fact, a large chunk of “Crossing the Canal” is dedicated to dispelling the myriad rumors and myths surrounding the bridge and, perhaps most egregiously in historical accounts, the digging of the canal.

“It was amazing to me because even in some previous works I’ve done, I had parts of the story of the canal wrong,” Dierckins said of the “mushroomed-up” accounts accepted as truth by many. “And, as I dug and uncovered and tried to find every canal legend possible, I think I found what is the source of the *legends* in R.S. Munger’s quote.”

While it’s probably hard to pinpoint the ultimate cause of the mass confusion, Munger’s words, which were widely circulated by historians, are indeed likely candidates: “I was engaged by the citizens of Duluth to dig the channel. We began work on a Saturday and, by night, Superior knew what we were about. At once the people over there began to scurry around to get a federal injunction restraining us. I hired a gang of several hundred men ... and we worked all that day and far into the night. ... When the Superior people came over Monday morning [with the injunction], there was the channel open and they couldn’t do anything.”

Of course, that’s not the way it happened at all.

“If Munger’s tale has any truth to it, the government courts once worked quickly — and on weekends,” Dierckins wrote in “Crossing the Canal,” explaining that the truth “involved more lawyers than shovels”; a seven-year effort by Wisconsin on the behalf of Superior that “never once stopped dredging and [canal] improvements.”

But don’t let that get you down — unless you would rather see all of the ship traffic using the Superior entrance to the bay, of course.

“I don’t think it diminishes the story of the ship canal *one bit*, the fact that it was dug by a machine 95 percent of the time and there was no last-minute rundown injunction and all that,” Dierckins said. “I

still think the fact that we just went out and dug it in as short a time as possible is a pretty great testament to Duluth. The legend underscores that Duluth used to have this can-do attitude, that we could do anything and nothing could stop us.

“That legend of the hand digging kind of defines a lot of Duluth’s self-image as a hearty folk. We don’t shy away from the cold, and we get work done. I think legends like this help strengthen those kind of ideals. There’s room for ’em.”

A book like no other

Despite all of the research Sandvick and the X-comm team were able to dig up, “Crossing the Canal” is the first book of its kind — which is as much of a surprise to Dierckins as anyone else.

“I couldn’t believe there wasn’t already one,” he said. “Maybe it’s because it took me awhile to wrap my head around, How are we going to do a history of a device that’s mechanical, made of steel and wire and cable and all that? Because, when you get down to it, once the bridges are built, their story is of incidence and maintenance. It’s how they were repaired or altered, or who got hurt in and/or around the bridge — or the canal.

“Unfortunately, history isn’t always comfortable and pleasant. We tried to address it all in the book without glorifying the gore as much — especially with that poor woman who was cut in half. The newspaper accounts of that, if you ever look back, are pretty gruesome. We tried to avoid that.”

Another obstacle for Dierckins: making a localized product with broad appeal.

“One of the things I’ve learned is that I have two audiences here,” said Dierckins, a Saint Paul native who has called Duluth home since the ’80s. “I have Duluthians, who know and love this place; I have the people that visit Duluth, who also know and love it — but they’re looking for different things. There are Duluthians who will go through this book and read everything. There are a lot of people who will own this book and read nothing but the captions and sidebars. Some people are going to buy the book just for [Dennis O’Hara and Janet Karon’s] photos in the middle, because it’s the same as getting a book of postcards.”

O’Hara and Karon’s photo essays notwithstanding, the book’s main text will probably be read by a broader audience because of its significant 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.

“If you look at history books, there’s a lot of text and a few black-and-white photos,” Dierckins said. “What I’ve learned is that our attention span isn’t what it once was. We don’t want a book that reminds us of a course. We don’t want to feel like we have to be there three days a week for an hour and a half with the accompanying lectures.”

Above all else, putting together “Crossing the Canal” was a reassuring act for Dierckins, who finds that projects like this make him feel that much better about all the time and money it took to earn his master’s degree in English.

“It’s fun, and it’s nice to do something that is an asset to the community — I’d like to think it is, anyhow,” he said with a laugh.

NEWS TO USE_Visit www.x-communication.org for more information on “Crossing the Canal” and its author, Tony Dierckins, who has many Northland signing events scheduled throughout the year.

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