

Frank Wojewodzik
Toll Collector, Lake Champlain Bridge
Interviewed for Mountain Lake PBS on August 30, 2011

"My name is Frank and the last name is Wojewodzik. I started out as a maintenance man. The grounds, mowing the grass and doing maintenance work on the bridges, odds and ends, shoveling snow in the wintertime; keeping the place up. I wasn't on that very long and I went in as a toll collector. They needed a man in the booth, so I went in there as a toll collector. Collect toll, serve the public as much as I could. A lot of people come through, want to know directions and stuff like that; especially in the wintertime, skiers. And there were different times – it was busy when the Olympics were up here in Lake Placid. They used to want to know how more of less how to get there. And in the winter time there was a lot of traffic; mostly skiers. They used to come up from the cities and go over there and ski in Vermont, which is noted in the wintertime for skiing.

All kinds, farmers and any kind and any type of vehicle that there is on earth went across that bridge at all times. Sometimes the trucks would hit the bridge and you'd have to report that in; whenever the bridge was touched in any way by a vehicle, or anything, it had to be reported. There was a guy; he was an engineer out of Massachusetts that was in charge of the bridge, the structure of the bridge and everything. When an occasion arise for a truck or some log truck, which usually did, or any kind of a truck hit the bridge, he had to know right off quick, and he'd be right there to check the structure and everything of the bridge, to make sure it's safe.

Trucks hit bridge

Well, every once in a while it would, yeah, log trucks; they'd be loaded too high and they'd hit it. And the big scrap trucks that used to go over and pick up scrap over in Vermont and sell it. They worked out of – well, the only one I knew was out of Keeseville – and they loaded too much scrap high, and banged that bridge and that was it. I'd report it, and that engineer, he made sure – he'd even tell us, toll collectors, "if anything hits that bridge, you notify us, notify me, right off quick." And he'd come up quick, too.

Yeah [truck drivers with tall loads], they'd radio ahead, especially the out-of-town truckers. They'd see they had signs posted – heights of the bridge, the limit of the heights of the bridge. Some of them were pretty close, and they'd call in, and ask if they could – 14.7, but they'd have to stay in the middle of the bridge; right in the middle of the highway, otherwise, 'cause there was a couple of angles from the structure of the bridge that would come off from the top of the bridge, right down on the sides, and a lot of times if they were over too far on each side, going over or coming back, they'd hit that angle. That's where most of the time anything happened up there was on the – it's 14.7 in the middle of the bridge, but it wasn't posted like that for the side of the bridge. And they'd hit it. Oh yeah, they'd hit that bridge, and there'd be logs on the road up there; and oh, boy; scrap metal.

You'd report it to the troopers, and the troopers would take over from then. Get a hold of the guy that was responsible for the truck, and he'd have to take care of the mess, because we didn't have nobody over here that could do that; take logs off the road. Oh yeah, them big logs that they'd take down to Ti Mill [Ticonderoga paper mill] to pulp wood and everything, a lot of trucks from there go down to Ticonderoga with – they bring a lot of wood over for the mill. Or them big tractor-trailer trucks; there's different sizes, and some of them are just about skim-thru, but every once in a while they'd clobber it.

Automobile [tolls] would be – towards the end it ended up 50 cents, and the trucks in the end, all depends on the axles, how many axles the truck had. An 18- wheeler, it would be \$2.50 to cross over, and pick-up trucks were the same as a car, but anything else bigger you'd go by the axle. And there were some that went across that bridge was automatically recorded in the – they had what was called a treadle that was in the surface of the road on both sides coming and going out of, over there, and the treadle has an axle hit it and record it. At the end of the shift, or when you turned in your report, errors that had to be accounted for, no matter what. The only thing is they had special deals on you could buy a book of tickets – I forget what it was – I think it was \$10.00 a book – and that was to save money – the daily commuters; they could purchase them books, especially if they worked over at Simmons, or down at Standard Register they'd buy a book and they'd save money that way. The local people that worked over here every day; they'd go over and come back; oh yeah. A lot of people worked over there, too; Simmons, Standard Register, and IBM. They traveled back and forth all the time, used the bridge.

Made a lot of friends

You made a lot of friends and you met a lot of people. They're a lot of people that I know, but I don't know their names. I go to these shopping places, over there in Vermont, and I run into people – they'll holler, "Hello, Frank." And I know who they are, but I don't know their names, what to call them. You meet a lot of people, yeah. You meet some enemies too, because they're mad, in a way because they have to pay the toll; why should they have to pay the tolls, they always wanted to know. But – and some of them, they were – there were a lot of good people too; lots of good people. But if things got on the rough side when you were in a booth, if somebody comes by and gives you any trouble, that's you had to do was buzz the buzzer in the house, that's where the boss lived, and he'd come out and he'd take care of the matter, and that would be the end of it. He'd make the decisions on – if they should – a lot of them, they didn't want to pay the toll. They couldn't see paying the toll, and they'd make a big fuss over it and that would be it.

Everybody has to pay, everybody. Anything that hit that treadle there, like I say, across that road, had to be accounted for; that toll collector was a – he had to be accounted – because he had to sign that report and was – along with the money counted and everything. He brought it in everyday into the house, where they kept the – they did all the bookwork and everything, and made out the daily reports. And the boss did that and he'd have to go to the bank everyday and deposit the money, down at Crown Point. The only thing that went over free

would like an ambulance, state police, or state trucks like snow plows and stuff like that and we had a special button in on the machine that recorded all the things that went over the treadle that you were account for – you had to be accounted for. They had a button on that machine that you pressed, it was called a step-on, and when a state police, or an ambulance, or whatever went across that, you'd push that step-on button, then on your report you'd put what it was, an ambulance, state police, or whatever; everything had to be accounted for when they touched that treadle.

Recalling co-workers and routines

It [started the bridge job] happened when I got done with Republic Steel up here [locally] and I had to go out to Buffalo for two years to be eligible for my pension. And when I become eligible for my pension, I come home and I wasn't home a couple of days and the telephone rang, and it was the boss over here, Robert Clarke [Superintendent of Lake Champlain Bridge]. He was the supervisor over there then and he wanted to know if I – he says, "I need a man." He says, "Would you like to come to work?" I says, "Yeah, when will I start?" He says, "In the morning." So I went right over and I started on maintenance and that was it. Then when the tolls went off – they took the tolls off. They took all the toll collectors from Vermont and from New York State and put them in a – well, over here, they mostly went into the DOT, Department of Transportation, that's where they sent us. So I went into the – they took me off over here, all of us – I went into the Department of Transportation. I worked there for two years and I become 62 years-old, so I was eligible for my social security, so I called it quits, after 30 years with the Republic Steel and 13 there [Lake Champlain Bridge], I called it quits; and I come home.

[At the DOT I did] All the maintenance, roadwork and stuff like that; whatever had to be done. You were on a crew and whatever work had to be done, the crew went and done it. From the bridge commission we went to [work for] the state of New York. I don't know if you know this or not, but the commissioners were the ones that did all the – in other words, they were the higher-ups. There was two [bridge] commissioners from Vermont and two from New York State, and the fifth commissioner was the chairman of the commission. They used to hold their regular meetings over there [at toll house] and everything pertaining to the bridge. They made all the decisions from Port Henry, I mean from Crown Point. They had their meetings and the engineer would come up and he'd inspect that bridge every once and a while, and if anything needed to be fixed, that was big, they'd have a contract out and the contractor would come in, take care of the – and Freddy Row, he did a lot of the work, small jobs that would have become big jobs if it wasn't for him.

Fred Rowe, he used to be a – he knew that bridge inside out; let's put it that way. And in the winter time, even 40 below zero, I see him come over there and park his truck on the top and go over the side of that bridge, and go down just to check the bearings, see that bridge worked on bearings, and it moved. A lot of people didn't know that but, it had to move otherwise it would fall down. And he'd have to go down there and check them bearings. He'd let you know; like I was in the booth, he'd come over and tell me he's going over the sides, so I'd more or less

keep an eye on him. I mean he'll go over them frozen beams and everything; he had to hang on to going down. A lot of times he's over the side for quite a while and I got kind of nervous. I'd walk up there and see if he was all right. He was a good man, though. He knew his stuff, so that was it.

Then I worked with Warren Lee. Warren Lee, when I first went on maintenance, the maintenance guy used to help him. He used to come over probably once a week, and check everything out, the lights. Then they had a generator over there that generated power in case the power went off, because they had navigation lights on the bridge for navigation purposes, and them had to be on – working all the time; especially when the big barges used to come up through, and they used to go by them lights in night time. So I worked with him, too. He was a good 'ole man, Warren Lee. I liked him.

They had contractors come up. If they had to work on the surface of the bridge, they'd close off one lane and do it. But, I guess everything worked out good enough.

You had traffic from both ways and usually they had two men on. But on the night shift when things slowed down there was no people going back and forth to work. One man could take care of it on a night shift, 11 to 7. But on the – during the daytime it was – it got busy at times, and you had two men, so the guy could take a break, eat his lunch and stuff like that. They made it good. There was a door on each entrance from both sides. They'd pull up, and you'd just grab their money and just ring it on the machine and that was it. But everything, like I say, had to be accounted for. That was – that machine, that treadle across the road had to jive with what your report was put in.

A loaded gun

Well, I'll tell yeah, I was in a booth one – it was in the afternoon – 3 to 11 shift I was on, and this guy that runs the store over there on the big turn over – WAGS store is it? He owns that now. But his father owned a farm just a short ways off the bridge, and when his father retired from the farming business he left it over to the boy, which was a – he took over, but the lived in Crown Point. He lived in Crown Point and he traveled back and forth. He'd come home to sleep and his wife was a schoolteacher, too. But in the morning, he'd go over early in the morning and take care of the farm over there and work the farm. In the late afternoon, after all the chores were done on the farm, he used to travel back home.

This one day – and when he come down, it would be the latter part of the day, you know what I mean, before dark. Things were slow at that time and he liked to shoot the breeze with me, and we'd sit there and talk. I happened to look up on the bridge and there comes this car – and he's parked right off side the tollbooth over there – we're talking. And over there, the booth was right in the middle of the highway, and there was a curbing on both sides of the road going in and out over there. They had a six inch pipe, there was a stop sign on it, pounded in the ground right there, just next to that curbing that was next to the bordering the edge of the road,

and he's sitting there talking – standing there talking with me, and all of a sudden this car come down through and it goes right by.

To this day I still can't figure out how the hell he got through there, but he got through. So anything like that you have to report it to the state police, anybody run the bridge or anything you were supposed to call the state police, and report it. – I says to the guy, I says I'm gonna call the – I have to call the state police on that, right now. And he sat there, and after I got done calling the state police, he says, "I'm gonna follow him." He says, "And if I come to the end of the bridge road" he says, "If I get his license number, I'll call ya." So I says, "All right." He did, he called. I called the – after he give me the license number, the car was from Connecticut. I called the state police back and they apprehended the guy down on a street down, down in Ticonderoga.

And after it was all over with, what they did with the guy, I guess they locked him up for the night or whatever they did with him, but anyway, the trooper come back with a paper for me to sign, because I was the one who reported it, and the trooper told me, he says, "You know", he says, "that guy – there was another fellow with him" And the trooper had that fellow with him in the car, when he come over to the bridge there for me to sign the paper, and they had a loaded gun right in that car, and he come back and he signed the paper and that's what he told me. He says, "He had a loaded gun." He says, "So that's why you never argue with anybody that" you know that had a complaint about the bridge; paying the tolls and all that because you never know what you would come up with. So like that for an instance. He had a loaded gun and you don't know. Nowadays they kill you for 50 cents, which was the toll.

“Oh, there was a lot of incidents over there. They used to – you have to report. And the police, they had to know everything, too. They made sure that you reported anything out of the way to the police. Like one time I – there was a small airplane flying around over there and he'd go under the bridge, and come up on the other side and go over the top of the bridge; and he kept doing that, five six times, which is illegal. It's against the rules for any aircraft to attempt to do anything like that.

Anything pertaining to the bridge was supposed to be reported. But then there was different incidents that – people that, I don't know.”

Campers, celebrities and revelers

That was a historic place over there, you know. There was two forts and a museum over there, and a lighthouse, and there was campgrounds that were the people – especially when I first started over there, the campgrounds used to be a busy place. The people that were camping over there and they had a beach over there; over on the museum side. They used to walk from wherever they had the campsite, wherever they were camping, walk across and they used to come right by the booth. A lot of times they used to stop and talk; ask questions and stuff like that. You try to help them out, you know, with questions, but that was very – that was a busy

place, over there. And like I say, you meet all kinds of people, all kinds; you name it and it was the – it happened over there.

The ruling was over there they didn't want nobody going up and what they call loitering on the bridge. They didn't – you walked across and you walked back. You didn't – you were told not to stop; to do anything. But that was it, they – in other words, they were under tight ship. But it was a good place. I enjoyed working over there.

Well, the regular uniform, the winter uniform you wore it whenever you went to a funeral or something like that; anybody connected with the bridge they more or less went to the funeral. And it was a heavy uniform, heavy material, you know what I mean? The jacket and the pants, and the hat was regular, with a brim on it. Then the summer uniform – this was the hat for the summer uniform. The pants was just an ordinary pair of pants. I guess they bought them in the stores over there and wherever they could buy them. Blue, dark blue bottom pants and the shirt was sort of light – very light blue and that's what you had for a uniform. You had a badge where you had to wear everyday to put on there, so they know who you were. But that was the uniform.

Every once in a while you got a little [pay] increase, but it wasn't the greatest amount of money you were getting over there. I forget what I ended up with. And that was it. You remember the – do you remember the Grateful Dead? Well, they come across on me one time over there. Celebrities. Yeah, and they had a big – one of them big, oversized motor homes and they come through. Every once in a while you'd meet somebody that was supposedly important.

Then, there used to be a bar room over there on the bridge road. You could see it; almost see it from the bridge. Especially on a Saturday, them Vermonters would come over there and they'd get tanked up pretty well, and raise hell. And when they got ready to leave, they'd all get together, get out in their cars, they had it all made up – they get out in their cars, start the motors up; you could hear 'em from where the booth was – you could hear 'em starting them cars and revving them up and everything. And when they start over towards the bridge, they wouldn't turn their lights on. And that's all just a roar going passed that booth over there. When I used to hear that, every once in awhile I'd be there on that shift, when I heard that, I used to step out the other door and go around to the – right away from the booth and let 'em go. Then you had to turn the cops over on it, you know what I mean? But that's the way they'd do it; speed going by there. Man, that's all you'd hear is a roar and no lights or anything. They wouldn't pay the toll, no. When they left that trader post, boom, that was it. They were in Vermont before the lights come on.

Bridge an asset

It was a big asset to the people that lived around this area, I tell you, because – well, you could see when they knocked the old one down and we didn't have nothing, people were up in arms about the bridge and everything; and had to go down around Whitehall and go up through to get into Vermont and things like that. Well, they realized how important it was. But when it

was there, they took everything for granted, and just paid their toll and that was it. They worked there and it was a living and that was it.

But it was – but it went fast after they took them tolls off. I don't know if you people noticed it or not, but you could see where the rust was just falling right off that bridge when the – and it was turned over to the state. And a good thing they did go down to check them piers down underneath, below the surface of the water, because who knows? Look at out in Minnesota, or someplace where that bridge caved in, people were killed on it. And me and my buddy here – from over here – we went over – oh, we went over to pick up apples over at Shoreham Apple Orchard and that was just the day before, they wouldn't allow anybody else to across the bridge, shut it right off completely. In fact, when they shut it off, he called me up the next day. He says, "Boy, me and you were kind of lucky." He says, "That bridge was ready to fall down." I says, "Tell me about it." Yeah, so that was it, it was shut and it went fast. I don't remember, I guess there was – I don't know if they could check things like that out or not, below the surface. The guy that checked the upper part, everything was okay and it was passable.

The bridge, as old as it is, and the money that they were getting from the tolls helped for the upkeep of the bridge, because we didn't know if they were going to build a new one, and knock that one down, or what they were going to do. So we had to have the money for the upkeep of the bridge. That was the purpose of it in the first place." But you could see, like I say, the minute them tolls were taken off, the bridge started to go the other way. Yeah, you could see the rust.

He [Fred Rowe] ended up with us in the DOT. Yeah, me and him went up to Elizabethtown in the Department of Transportation and worked there. I don't know how long he – but he passed away since them. He was a good man. Freddy was a damn good man and so was Warren Lee. Warren Lee was an electrician and good man.

The work wasn't hard you know what I mean, it was just, for an older person it was – you went to work in the morning and did your eight hours, yeah. But that was it. But I hated to see it shut down, because I was two years old when the bridge was – the old bridge that they knocked down, I was two years old when it was opened to traffic. And they knocked that down and I'm going on 84 right now, in October, and I'm able to see the new bridge come in. 84, yeah, so I was two years old. 1927 I was born and they opened it up in 1929.

I could vaguely, vaguely remember when the opening of the bridge was, because the governors of both states' were there and there – people from friends of my parents' they come up to visit, because you see the bridge, what was going on over there, from their house; and they come up to visit and I remember all them people sitting on our front porch over there and looking over there to see what was going on. And that's how I vaguely remember, but I was two years old.

It [Lake Champlain Bridge] was a big thing between two states. If you didn't have that bridge you know where you'd have to go around, both ends. Then they had the Ross' Point Bridge up there too, that they did the same thing. They built a new bridge up there, but they never put

the tolls on. Somebody was saying that they were thinking about putting tolls on over there, but I didn't know if they will or not. But they didn't up there. It's a new bridge and ever since it's just toll-free, which is very unusual, I think, if they – something like that, you know, for the upkeep of it and everything. And especially at these times when money is awful scarce and – but, I don't know.

Snowstorms

You get a heavy snowstorm over in Vermont. Like the snow would drift over there, so traffic was just impossible to get through, they'd shut it down. They'd just put up barricades or something. I remember one toll collector, when we got a snowstorm over there, he was three days getting home and what he did – it was snowing so hard at the end of his shift, he waited for the snowplow to come through. And when the snowplow – Vermont used to plow the bridge, and when they used to come over the bridge and they'd gone in the parking lot to turn around to go back into Vermont, he waited until they'd turned around and he got right behind them and the wind was blowing so hard, and everything. He followed them as far as he could and that was it. He lost track of them and it was hard because you never know when you were going run into the hind end of that thing, if you can't see that snowplow. So he was out of east – he was right near a farmhouse and that was where he stayed for three days, until they got the highway opened over there on Route 17. And over there – see when you got off the bridge, there was an intersection right there, [Route] 125 went to the right off the bridge, and 17 off to the left-hand side, you went over into Vermont. And if you wanted to get to Route 89, the interstate over there, you have to know if you want to go north or south, you have to know which one to take, because it was quite a span over there if you took the wrong one, you know what I mean? And especially the skiers and that was it. Going into Burlington, they want to know how you get to Burlington, how you get to here, and how you get there.

The toll house

Well, the [toll collector's] supervisor, he lived right there. Him and his family, or his wife, or what have you. And there was a garage underneath the house where they drove in, and then there was – it was in the basement. And they did have a good-sized vault in there, that where they kept all the reports that were made and they stashed them away in there until a certain day – date on them, they were allowed to burn. They'd taken them the hell out of there to make room. In fact, I did some of that when I was on there. They'd burn to make room for others. And upstairs, they had what they called a conference room. It was where they did – the bridge commissioners would have their meetings, and hold our meetings and what have you, and the toll collectors had a place to go in there; that was our room to eat their lunch and stuff like that. And that's where they kept the money and stuff like that; the transactions of different day – things.

Then the house – the supervisor had a little, there was a little office facing the highway over to the booth where he could look right over and he could see what was going on outside on the booth, and that's where he did all of his book work, or what he had to do; keep reports up and

everything like that. And then, the other part of the house was living quarters, and like a living room, and a kitchen, and they had a nice all-window porch. It was nice over there.

After they closed the bridge down, they made that into an information place. The state took it over and they had the – then they got one on the other end of the bridge, too, in Vermont; information. And over here in Vermont side, too, right next to the bridge, you could almost touch the bridge from that, there's a museum there. I don't know if you knew that or not, but there was a museum there.

There was one guy; he had his kid with him on the Vermont side of the bridge, he jumped off and he hit bottom. I guess he never recovered, as far as I know. But they tell you, don't stop up on the bridge, walking or with a car, because that was the ruling. If you happened to see anybody up there, you were supposed to go up and get them down, get them off of there. But nobody's there to supervise or check on anything. Steady like it used be, you know what I mean? Freddy was there eight hours and anything come up after his eight – after he went home, if anything come up that he could take care of, they'd call him out, and he'd come over there and take care of it. And night time, especially, anything come up that he could do.”