

Lisa Cloutier, owner of The Bridge Restaurant
Interviewed by Mountain Lake PBS on October 11, 2011

“The building has been here since 1977. I have been here since 1995. I am friends with the Franklins and they notified me that there was a manager’s job open. I came and managed the restaurant from ’95 to ’98. I leased it from ’98 to 2001 and in 2001 I purchased the place.

We get a lot of New Yorkers. I would say a good 80% of my business is New Yorkers – a lot of elderly people, but come summertime we get a lot of tourism – bike riders, motorcyclists. Business has increased over the years. Going to a year round business has increased it significantly.

I was a senior buyer at Goodrich Aerospace. At that time Goodrich was going through a lot of re-alignments and they were laying off a lot of people. And I thought at the time I might as well get out before they tell me to get out.

It has been The Bridge Restaurant probably since the 80’s when the prior owners took it over. It used to be Mr. G’s. It went to The Bridge Restaurant I think for what the bridge meant to this area. It just brought in a lot of business, a lot of tourism and it just wasn’t a piece of steel and concrete. It was our business. It was our icon. It was our lifeblood. So I think that is why our business was named after the bridge. Yes it was old and rusty but it was a beautiful bridge. I think that bridge was like a piece of my family and when it got blown up I felt like I lost somebody in my family.

The bridge brought a lot of business this way. A lot of my business is from New York State and people come over here for medical appointments, they come over here to shop, to work, to get gas. So it brought a lot of customers this way because Vermont is a little more reasonable with prices than New York. When it closed I lost all my New York business. The only thing I had was the locals who came down here to try support me but that doesn’t make up 80% of your business. I do have a lady who comes down here from Charlotte and she says her grandfather helped design the [1929] bridge and she comes down here quite often to check the progress of the new bridge.

Shock followed by panic

“The day the bridge closed I was working in the kitchen cooking and it was a beautiful Friday afternoon and the place was very, very busy and then all of a sudden my waitress comes out and she says to me, she says, “You’ve got to come out here and see this.” She goes and a man just came in and told us that the bridge is closing down and everybody is clearing out. And, I came out and people were asking for to-go boxes or there were empty tables with dishes still on them and the place was just emptying out. I was like, what? And, she goes; a gentleman just came in and said if we were going to get across the bridge we’d better leave now because they were shutting it down indefinitely.

I was like this doesn't make any sense. They worked on it all summer long. It was under construction all summer long. This doesn't make any sense. So, I made a phone call to NYSDOT [New York State Department of Transportation] and I left a message for Jim Boni for him to call me back because I was a business owner on the other side of the bridge in Vermont and I'd like to know what's going on because this was definitely affecting my livelihood and I would appreciate a phone call back. And, he did call me back that night around 8:00 and told me that the bridge was closed indefinitely. It could be closed for as short as six weeks, up to six months, if not forever. And, panic. And everything just set in because it's like six weeks hurts, six months will kill me and definitely for sure. So, what do you do?

Lorraine [Franklin, owner of West Addison Grocery Store] came in and she was kind of in a state of shock. We were all in a state of shock and I just said this can't be. We've got to do something about this. This is going to kill all of our businesses and she was in total agreement. So, together, her and I started figuring out what we were going to do, getting a hold of the legislators and getting people together, other businesses together and getting meetings together and just telling them we need something done and it needs to be done now, not six weeks, six months; we need that bridge back now. We need our corridor open.

Well, we knew that the bridge needed some attention and all of that. Those piers looked terrible when you go under them with a boat but we thought that they were working on that that summer. We didn't realize all the money was going into the superstructure and not the substructure. We just thought - - they put it down to one-lane traffic --we assumed that they were working on all of it, not just the top portion.

Reconnect the corridor

I was contacted by Rich Couch, who is an advocate for roads and bridges for the state of New York and he wanted me to get a hold of people in Vermont that had businesses that were affected that would go down to the rally in Albany. And, I had to twist Lorraine's arm to go because she was kind of not wanting to go but she finally did go on the ride. And, it proved out to be a very good thing because that was the day that we formed the bridge coalition.

The public meeting in Addison - - Vermont started a fight with our transportation department because they wanted to put bridges someplace else. They had other solutions and they weren't really looking at right back where the bridge was. And, they were not understanding that this is what we wanted. We wanted it right back where it was - - the Vermont people because obviously the New York people could not get here. And, we had to kind of let them see that it needed to be back here. And, it got very heated. That meeting got very, very heated. And, then the very next night the meeting was over in New York State in which we boated across and had somebody pick us up on the other side. We boated under the falling-down bridge and we went to that meeting and what Vermont started for a fight, New York brought it home because of the hardship that they had. That they had to travel that bridge to go to work and they couldn't afford a ferry ride at \$8 one way and that the long hours they had away from their family and not to mention the medical. They had no trauma center. How are

you going to get a victim that got hit by a car at Port Henry to Burlington without a helicopter now or a ferry ride? So, they brought home the fight. Then the states both understood that we wanted everything back here in this corridor.

It seemed like it was a forever process but it was just - - it was, I shouldn't say just 108 days. It was 108 days with no traffic out here. But, when you look at it in retrospect, that was pretty quick for two states to move quickly to put in the infrastructure for ferries and they did move quickly. Once it was determined that the people want it back where it was, that's where it's going to go. And, things did move. It seemed like Vermont was a little bit behind but finally they picked up the speed and we had our ferries for February 1[2010].

Separation and survival

My business went way down. It went down drastically. I stayed open until the 23rd of December and finally I decided that that was enough. I would close down until I had a ferry because I was throwing away food, we had long hours with nobody here and then at nighttime the locals would try to come out to support your business but you never knew what you were going to get. Basically, we would get people that were lost because they were coming here to go across the bridge that wasn't there and we would call them "live ones" because we would get them in, tell them our story, they would eat here and buy gas up the road and then they'd go on their merry way with the detours that we gave them. But, you can't survive on that.

Oh, The No Bridge Restaurant name change - - that came about because every time somebody came down here they would focus up on The Bridge Restaurant and I went up to clean it to make it all nice and shiny and as I was up there I'm thinking, hmm, I don't really have a bridge anymore now do I? So, we put some electrical tape up there and changed it to The No Bridge Restaurant, which caught on quickly and everybody thought that that had the sunny outlook of it, the sense of humor. Most definitely we will go back to The Bridge Restaurant [once the bridge opens].

I reopened once the ferry started up and it was nice to have cars back in this corridor and yes, it brought the business back. It didn't bring it back to the full extent it was with a bridge, but it did bring some business back and I was getting the commuters again and people were coming over but it wasn't the level it was prior to. But, it was nice actually to have people in here again and seeing cars go across down the road because the road out here was covered with leaves.

I have compensated by changing my business hours, reducing labor, reducing inventory, any way you can possibly cut, you cut. And, so, it's just survival of the fittest basically and it's been tough. I've had to dig into my personal savings and everything to make this go.

I'm hoping when the bridge opens up that I do get my business back to the levels that I'm used to. I know it might take a little while but I am praying that people will want to come and drive across our new bridge and see what's going on and that I will get it back to the levels that it was.

It's a mixed bag of how the customers feel about the bridge. Some people think that it's too much money to spend on a ferry and have a new bridge put in that we should just do without it but they're not thinking because it doesn't affect them. Other ones - - other customers are thinking that it's good that the people of this area and New York State fought to get the temporary ferry in here and that we are getting a new bridge. So, it's just kind of a mixed bag. Some people don't see the need for it; others do.

Vermont and New York - - the New York business and the Vermont businesses and the people that use the bridge on a regular basis, if you didn't know them well prior to the bridge closing, you really got to know them while it was closed. Even though you couldn't get over there to see them, they reconnected. Everybody connected through Internet, through phone calls, everything, and you actually got a lot more friends and we were all on the same page. We were all ready to fight the fight to get it back, to get the corridor open again and it just reunited us - - We were reunited. There wasn't really a lake blocking us. We all bonded and we were all fighting for the same thing.

That bridge was like the marriage between the two states and for a while we had the separation but it didn't keep us apart. So, having the bridge back, it just reconnects Vermont to New York and New York to Vermont and it just makes everybody all the merrier. It's free travel again. Even though the ferry is free, it's just the idea that you can get in your car and can be in New York in matter of a minute for me.

A dreary day

The day of the implosion - - it was kind of a dreary day just before the implosion and it was just, for me, I don't know, I think I was just in shock all morning long and then all of a sudden when it was imploded and it was gone, like, poof, and it was gone, it was like, wow, did that just happen? And, then it was just like there was this hole in the lake with a little bit of debris sticking up out of it and the piers out of the water. It was very sad and I think the people that were around watching it they all wanted to see it and then it was just so quick. They were like, wow, that quick - -something that big can be gone so quickly.

It was horrible. I absolutely hated to look that way - - to see pieces of the bridge sticking up in the air and the piers and all the debris. It just looked like - - something that was so pretty turned into a junk pile in the middle of the lake and I didn't want to look at it.

My husband's parents are over there in New York and so it was easy to go over to their house. We visited them much more often than we do now with the ferry and just my trips to Wal-Mart and to the places over in New York, to Norm's Bait and Tackle or Gunnerson's to get apples. I wouldn't think anything of it to hop in the car and go over to Norm's and then come back and say, "Oh gosh, I forgot to get apples" and go again. Now, I try to do all my trips in one trip and then it will be a month or so before I try to do it again. And, before with the bridge, I was going across the bridge probably every other day. If not, driving across to walk my dog over at the

fort. I would go over there and walk her at the forts often but I don't take her on the ferry to walk her now.

[The new bridge] It will hold an emotional bond but maybe not in the same way as the old bridge did because the old bridge was there for so long. This one will hold a different bond because this is something that the people of this area fought for and got. So, this is going to be a bond of satisfaction and reunited and that's what we're going to look at. It's like, we, all of us, did that to get this bridge. The other bridge was a beautiful bridge and we loved it dearly but this one's a bridge of satisfaction."