

**William G. LaFrance**  
**Head Toll Collector, 1929 Lake Champlain Bridge**  
**Interviewed by Mountain Lake PBS on July 12, 2011**

“My name is William LaFrance and I was the head toll collector for Lake Champlain Bridge Commission at the Crown Point Bridge.

I started out as a toll collector working the night shift, and through the years I worked myself up to the position of foreman and head toll collector. [I worked] from 1975 to September of 1987 when the tolls went off the bridge.

**Toll operations**

On a daily basis I worked the day shift, which we referred to as B shift and I came in I was generally here before 7 o'clock and I took and would go in to the booth and take off each register a portion of the sheet that recorded all the transactions, that's all the axles that took place during the three shifts. I then went inside and out of safe I had three bags that had the reports of each collector and all the transactions that they had done during their tour and I took and counted out the money separately on each shift. I counted the tickets both commuter and commutation which are car tickets and truck tickets and then I proceeded to take and balance out money's versus axle to the point where they had to come out even. This was done on a daily basis.

And then once I completed that report I took the money, made out a deposit slip and went to the bank to deposit the money in the Lake Champlain Bridge Commission account. Now if there was a holiday, say this was a Friday and there was a holiday and you had Friday's, Saturday's and Sunday's, well those days the banks weren't open and I would hold it until Monday and then once I completed the money report then I would take all the days to the bank then deposit them and come back. It was very important, those deposit slips, because we utilize those when we made our monthly reports and we also would use them in the six-month reports and in the year-end reports. We had to watch every step as far as accounting purposes because we were subject to audit by the New York State controller at any given time. We didn't know when it might come in so we had to verify each transaction was properly recorded and the moneys were properly deposited.

I don't believe there was such as a head collector in the past they had guys that were there that were senior guys but the superintendent, which was Robert Clark the time I came on, he did the scheduling and the reports but then when I came on he taught me how to do the reports so that he when he took a day off and also Frank Wojewodzick he was trained so that when I was off he could do the report but when the Bridge Commission hired Jerome Downs, which I believe was around the end of 1980, they decided to make a superintendent of both bridges, that's the Rouse's

Point Bridge and the Crown Point bridge and then that's when the job of foreman/head collector was originated.

The toll booth was in the center of the two lanes approaching the Bridge here on the Crown Point side and in that toll booth there was two registers, what we called a register and on those registers the toll collector would punch a certain key when he see a car come up he would punch 50 cents and that would show on a board so that the person crossing would look up and say I just paid 50 cents. Now if it was a tractor trailer come up, if it was five axles, it was 50 cents an axle, and he would punch up \$2.50 and like I say each of those transactions as well as axles that went over a treadle. We had a treadle in the road, and when that vehicle proceeded over that treadle you could hear it on the register click, click, click, click you know the number of axles and we had a register on each side coming out of Vermont and going into Vermont.

The tollbooth that I talked about was only on the New York side it was not on the Vermont side but what that did it posed a problem to us regarding weights of vehicles and height of vehicles. The center clearance on the bridge was 14 feet. There was vehicles that would exceed that. We had an outfit that had crushed cars, in Vermont. He would crush cars and would come across and we had a few occasions where he would hit the structure because he was over height and he would rip off the cars, smashed cars, onto the pavement and this would generally happen during the night. Sometimes we would have three or four tractor trailer trucks weigh tons, I think it was a 60 ton limit, and we would have three or four tractor trailer trucks on that bridge at the same time. And so, like I said, that posed a problem to us with only watching one side we didn't know what was coming from the other side.

### **Made many friends**

I made a lot of friends, I made a lot of friends, I got to know like I said we sold books of tickets and I got to the point that if I was out there helping the toll collector or I would work a shift out there and a person would come up and say I need a new book of tickets I would not ask their name cause I knew their name. I made a lot of friends all over the area here.

It was a real enjoyable job and you'll see a lot of the collectors they really loved the job they hated to see the tolls go off. I didn't think the tolls would go off. I was a very outspoken person to try and keep the tolls on because I felt that this bridge here was very important to not only local people but Vermont people too. There was a lot of people that worked in Vermont, and, as a result, those people they could buy books of tickets and that was, well it started out \$6 a book, that was 100 tickets good for 6 months, and then it went to \$12 a book for a 100 tickets for 6 months - that's 12 sets of crossing. That was very, I thought a very fair price and all the other out-of-staters and they paid the price. I, at the time, I tried, I wrote letters to every New York State Senator and I wrote to every New York State assemblymen to try and keep the tolls,

because I felt that if you look across the country users pay. That's what pays New York throughway, mass transit, all of those. And I've traveled across the country like I said. I was in the Air force I was in Nevada I've been in California I was in Missouri I was in Illinois I've been in Texas, Oklahoma, Maine and I've been all over.

The [toll] money went - and this is here at Crown Point and at Rouse's Point, both bridges - those money's went into the Lake Champlain Bridge Commission fund. Bridge commission office was located in Burlington and we sent all the reports that covered all the money deposit everything else to the bridge commission. We had a secretary/treasurer by the name of Clifford Duby and there was three commissioners from New York State and there was three commissioners from Vermont. And like I say that money went in and they used it for the upkeep. There was no taxes paid on this bridge and that's what a lot of people thought that there tax payers were paying for this bridge on a daily basis. The tolls money were utilized for the maintenance of the bridge the upkeep of the bridge and for the collectors wages and benefits.

When I came on at early '75 it [the toll] was 20 cents it went up a few years later to 25 cents, that was for a car, and then later on with price increases there it went up to 50 cents for a car and anything with dual wheels it was 50 cents an axle and that's mainly your trucks.

Well the lowest I ever thought it got was 20 cents I know back in 1920 when the bridge opened it was a dollar for a car. A dollar was worth a lot back in 1929. They used to charge for cows and horses and bicycles.

### **Unusual incidents**

Up here in Port Henry a guy had a thing for the parade he called it Champ; it was a large wooden structure. Two guys from Middlebury came over in the late hours of one night and got a little bit inebriated and they hooked on to Champ and proceeded to drag Champ from Port Henry to Middlebury. The toll collector that I had on at the time was a young man named David Vosburg, and this was well after 12 o'clock midnight, he heard this noise coming. He saw the sparks from the runners on Champ coming down the road. They never stopped. They ran the stop sign, went through the bridge and dragged it. Well he got the plate number. Hah I don't know how but he did and they ended up catching the guys and they had to bring it back and pay for the damages you know.

And we had another incident where a guy used to draw bales of hay, hundreds of bales of hay and, I got a little bug on me, but he come over here and he drew hay quite a bit before. Well he went to the local farmer here and loaded the hay on and again overloaded and came through and went up on to the bridge and over 100 bales of hay ended up in the road. Well he couldn't pile them on because it took all of his load out of shape and so he put them onto the sidewalk and asked us to

protect them till the next day, well the next day he came back and there was no hay, local people I guess they had cows or horses or something took it and confiscated it.

We did have an individual who was at a party in Vermont. For some reason, I don't know why, but he came with his children and he jumped off the bridge but he didn't jump into the deep water, he jumped into the mud, and it ended up killing him. And we would have other people who would pull their boats up to the piers, climb the ladder then get up and dive off the ladder.

And I had another, really talk about an incident, I was working one day with a guy in the booth and I see an airplane come up and at that time we had some work going under the bridge. We had a number of chunks of concrete that had fallen out of the lower part under the bridge and this airplane proceeded to fly under the center span and he not only, I think this was illegally according to FAA rules as far as height a plane is supposed to fly, and he went up towards Port Henry turned around and came back and flew under the thing a second time and he had a passenger. I got the number off the aircraft which I knew and I called the FAA in Burlington and turned the individual in because to me it was a dangerous act. There was not only understructure there like cables and stuff where they were working from staging but this it was just a foolish, foolish event that had happened.

### **Working conditions**

Being a toll collector I thought was a very good job. The pay wasn't very much to begin with back in '74 '75. It was \$2.50 an hour with no benefits. But through the years, through the years, I as a personal representative took and achieved through Senator Stafford legislation and everything else and through the Bridge Commission we worked on an employee employer relationship and in the end in 1987 I believe the lowest man was making about eight or nine dollars an hour. They had two weeks-vacation, five personal days, five sick days and they also had five vacation days or, not vacation days, but holidays. Their uniforms were provided by the Bridge Commission. They were laundered dry-cleaned by the Bridge Commission's expense. It was a little hot in the summer time from the pavement but otherwise they would tell you they loved their job. We took a sometimes, we took some very strong I don't know strong comments. We would have money thrown into our face. People that objected to pay the toll, even spit on at times. We would have people purposely run the bridge. We had a motorcycle go up and he would go down and cross the treadle. But you know dealing with the public you put up with all kinds of things and you just have to be courteous and do your job to the best of your ability and that's what all, I felt, all the toll collectors did.

I know the other guys they made a lot of friends. And we were as toll collectors. too we were like, well, we tell people where to stay if it was during the leaf season and we were like history buffs. What's this over here? Well, that's Fort Crown Point. . What's this here? That's Fort St. Frederick. Oh. Ah can I go over in there? Yes. And we were like a tourist bureau we would tell them about Lake Placid or give them a

route. Now where would I go in Vermont? What route do I catch to get here you know? We would issue maps out to people but like I said we tried in every way to know about the history of the local area and to be informed you know help inform the people, tourists or whatever out-of-staters on whatever they might need. We would talk to truckers, we had a CB in the booth and truckers would call ahead of time and ask about the height. And there were people in the wintertime where they would call and say how are the roads? Are they icy? Are we going to be able to make it? We were sort of like weather informers you know. We just did all kinds of things, jack of all trades we were, but like I say we enjoyed, we enjoyed working with the public made a lot of friends.

I always felt the bridge was safe. Like I said, we had an individual by the name of Fred Rowe. He was our maintenance man he formerly worked for Republic Steel down in the mines and this man would climb over the side, I mean he would constantly be checking that bridge. Vermont [Highway Department] put salt, pure salt, they took and plowed the bridge during wintertime. They would put pure salt so as a result of that salt when the snow would melt and the ice would melt it would go into what we call scuppers or drain holes and that would drip down on to the metal structure.

And Fred Rowe our maintenance man, to correct this rust problem that was occurring when the salt melted and would leak down onto our, would drip down onto our metal structure, Fred devised a funnel type system at each drain and then from that funnel system he would run PVC pipe down to below the metal structure so that it would drip into the lake and not onto the metal. And I thought that was a very good idea but that was one of the things that this man done in his maintenance work and ways to try to keep the bridge from rusting and deteriorating.

We had some bad accidents on the bridge. We had two individuals that came across and at wee hours of the night and they had been drinking too and they ran the bridge and you know the toll booth and the stop sign. At that time we were working on some of the pavement. Up there we had barricades. We had lights warning, yellow warning lights, and they went up over the bridge smashed through the barricades and then went up over the sidewalk/the curbing. Half of the car was out through the fence over the water, tore the axle or the transmission right from the vehicle; flattened the tires. We had the fire department in from Vermont; we had the State Police and I came out and the girl was hurt and they took them by ambulance. It was a very scary event you know and they did a lot of damage, a lot of damage to what was getting ready to put down blacktop. They tore up what they call a membrane that they put on top of the concrete getting ready to blacktop it. It just destroyed that. But it was really scary when I saw that. I thought when I saw that car I thought they were dead.

## **Tolls removed**

In September of 1987, I believe it was the 21<sup>st</sup> there at noon and this is when they decided to take the tolls off. The reason they took the tolls off is because the Rouses Point Bridge at the time was a swing bridge and that swing bridge when the boats would accumulate they would open that bridge, swing it to allow the boats through and then swing it back. But each time they would try to bring it back it wouldn't line up. They had difficulty so this posed a safety problem. It was an old bridge. It wasn't an arch bridge. It was a flat bridge, but a swing bridge, and the Bridge Commission did not have money's enough in the Bridge Commission fund to build a 20 something million dollar bridge. So, as a result, they elected to go to the federal government and meet with our representative down there. And as a result they obtained funds through the federal highway and bridge funds so that they could come back and build a bridge at Rouses Point, which they did. And as a result of getting federal funds it was established that you could no longer charge tolls. So when that bridge was finished up there, there was no tolls charged and then it resulted in taking the tolls off here.

Well no, like I said, I was opposed to it. I'd done everything I thought possible to try and keep the tolls because like I said users paid across the country and there was no tax dollars that went into this bridge here from well originally 1929. I think it was 60/40, I think New York State paid 60% of the cost of [building] the bridge and Vermont paid 40% but from that time on the toll money's were used for the maintenance and for the bridge personnel's wages and their benefits. There were no tax dollars that went into it. The user money was paid for the upkeep and like I said our salaries and benefits.

I had seven collectors and two maintenance people. I trained one of those maintenance people to be able to go into the booth when I need them, say I had a toll collector that was off on vacation or his day off, I would utilize him in the booth. Other times I would use the maintenance people like mowing grass and cleaning the bridge you know sweeping and so forth like that anything as far as upkeep that was necessary.

## **Bridge demolition**

When I learned the Crown Point Bridge was going to be demolished I knew we were going to lose a historic piece of structure from the area and I knew that there had been some problems with the bearings but from 1987 to when they decided to blow the bridge up and demolish it I don't know what work was done on those bearings. Those expansion joints I know they had some problems with them. But when you see how long and how hard it was to bust up those piers it makes you wonder if they were as bad as they [said they] were but I guess there was a decision or something to build a new bridge to do away with the others. But there was a lot of people that were fighting to keep the bridge, fighting because of its historical, you know representation, but I hated to see it. I hated to see it down like anything. It's like this

fort here, part of our history, and if you saw somebody come in and be able to destroy it you know it would make you feel bad. If anything, it's part of your history; you hate to see it go you know but I guess there are times when it needs to be done.

I haven't gotten involved with the construction of this bridge that's being built here now but I recently met with Miss Audrey Nieson from the Parks Historic [New York State Office of Parks and Recreation and Historic Preservation] and I've given her some photographs and other information that she is going to use in a I don't know if it's like a museum or some type of a display that they're making and are going to have available.

What I'm aware of as far as toll money's taken in on a yearly basis it was in the 250,000 dollar category.

### **The new bridge**

I've seen the pictures of here at the tourism center over here and I saw some of the designs that they selected from and I think that they picked the best choice as far as I'm concerned with the bridges that they had to choose from designs.

I think it's going to be a lot wider than the old bridge. It's not going to be on the same pitch. It's going to be a lot farther up you know up climbing. See that the old bridge the tractor trailer trucks when they would come down the hot July they would break all the way down the bridge and as a result it would cause cob webbing into the black toping and this was once of the things we experienced so this bridge here doesn't seem to have that pitch that the old bridge had as far as going up.

[Until the new bridge is open] I'm using the ferry. My wife and I we're BINGO experts and we go over across to Vermont. I go to VFW Veterans of Foreign Wars since I'm a Vietnam Veteran myself and the American Legion is over there. We take and support them. In fact, I had an individual at the VFW last night [say]they want this bridge to be named the Crown Point Veterans Memorial Bridge. I know Rouses Point is Korean Veterans Memorial Bridge and this as Veterans would apply to all whether your Air Force, Army, Navy, Marines - anybody that's contributed to the country.

### **More memories...**

We had to take out a portion of the roadway up near the arch a 38 about a 40 one full lane, one full lane wide 30 to 30 something feet long all the way down to the re-bar. They got everything they got. the you know under stage and everything else. They got the new re-bar in and Carrera was the one who provided the concrete and the driver. The Carrera driver, the normal driver was not available so they put on a substitute and he came from the Vermont side with 14 yards of concrete on his concrete truck. He proceeded on the bridge, came to the area and drove into the hole on to the re-bar, bending all the re-bar and couldn't get out. We went up with a

big pay loader tried to lift him. We put boards underneath and Fred Rowe our maintenance man there I mean we tried everything available to get this truck out of there. So what resulted and happened was the shoot went over the side of the bridge and 14 yards of concrete went into Lake Champlain. That was the only way we could get the man out of there but as a result all that re-bar again interlaid the pouring and we had to again replace all that re-bar and get the all ready for a re-pour. But we had traffic from both sides 'cause this was just about three o'clock, four o'clock in the afternoon and traffic from both sides, traffic from both sides was lined up cause we only had one lane up there. The other one was like I said not drivable cause it was all opened up. I would say this was in the early well I would say the later 70's. [19]79 I believe, yea it was in that area sometime.

[The Hollywood film] What Lies Beneath you know of course, the bridge. There was no tolls. It was under the New York State DOT at the time [of the filming] and I came by of course. The movie outfit that was filming they took and modified the area down there by the toll house and they made it like a set. Where they went down into the lake and I saw the movie I've seen it twice and it doesn't to me, it doesn't look like where that actually that car went into when it was under the water and everything else and of course she drowned. And over at Basin Harbor where they built that mansion I guess they built a beautiful mansion that they lived in and I don't know if they tore that down or but it was a curiosity thing for all the people that came by here you know watching that crew as they filmed that.

To me that Lake Champlain Bridge is a Gateway between Vermont, the State of Vermont, and New York State. We have people and not only people but businesses that their livelihood and people working at IBM, General Electric and there used to be Standard Register, BF Goodrich on a daily basis they need that bridge so when it was - had to be destroyed - it caused a problem. People lost money and it lost money in their businesses they could not get across. Like we have people that draw milk, big tankers that draw milk, they had to go way out of their way and this put a cost because of the prices of gasoline. So it's very, to me it's very important, that when this bridge is completed that this gateway would begin again and people will start recouping some of the losses you know that incurred. It's essential. It's an essential part of the lake crossing that was needed.

I'm glad they were able to get funds to build this new bridge and again open up the traffic to both sides of the lake."