SWINGING BRIDGE 5:05 P.M. 04/09/2018 N. LUKASAVITZ

The Swinging Bridge in River Falls is now a structure considered worthy of preservation by the Wisconsin State Register of Historic Places and is also currently in the nomination process to become admitted into the National Register.

Nathan Lukasavitz (LUKE-us-av-its) has the story.

MP3 RUNS: 4:17 Q: “…LUKASAVITZ.”

NATHAN LUKASAVITZ: LIFELONG RIVER FALLS RESIDENT BRENDA GAULKE GREW UP IN THE HOUSE RIGHT NEXT TO THE SWINGING BRIDGE AND NOW LIVES WITHIN A TWO MINUTE DRIVE. WITH ALL THAT GAULKE HAS SEEN TAKE PLACE ON THE BRIDGE OVER THE COURSE OF HER LIFE, SHE SAYS IT’S HER LATE FATHER WHO WITNESSED SOME ITS MOST REMARKABLE MOMENTS.

BRENDA GAULKE: THERE IS A LOT OF WEDDINGS THAT HAVE TAKEN PLACE OVER THERE, AND THERE’S ALWAYS PICTURES OF BRIDES AND GROOMS ON THE BRIDGE, INCLUDING IN OUR OWN FAMILY – ALL OF OUR WEDDING PICTURES, ALL OF OUR CHILDREN’S GRADUATION PICTURES. THEY ALL INVOLVE THE BRIDGE. MY FATHER WOULD SIT OUTSIDE AFTER HIS EARLY RETIREMENT, AND HE’D BE WATCHING ALL THE KIDS COME BY. IT WAS THE MAIN THOROUGHFARE, AND EVERYBODY IN TOWN RODE THEIR BIKES ACROSS THE BRIDGE AND TO THE SWIMMING POOL, AND ALL THAT STUFF ALL SUMMER LONG.

NATHAN LUKASAVITZ: GAULKE’S FATHER, CHUCK KELLY, SERVED AS THE RIVER FALLS CITY ELECTRICIAN PRIOR TO A 1969 WORK ACCIDENT, WHICH PARALYZED HIM FROM THE SHOULDERS DOWN, PLACING HIM IN AN EARLY RETIREMENT AND ALLOWING HIM TO WITNESS OCCASIONS SUCH AS GRADUATIONS AND WEDDING CELEBRATIONS THAT TOOK PLACE AT THE BRIDGE. HOWEVER, ALONG WITH THE FUN-LOVING TIMES THE BRIDGE HAS HAD, GAULKE SAYS KELLY ALSO WITNESSED TRAGIC EVENTS SUCH AS SUICIDES THAT HAVE TAKEN PLACE ON THE BRIDGE. IN PARTICULAR, GAULKE RECALLS HER FATHER TALKING ABOUT AN INCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON OCT. 18, 1972, WHERE A MOTHER DROPPED TWO OF HER CHILDREN FROM THE BRIDGE, CAUSING THEM TO FALL 51 FEET BEFORE HITTING THE KINNICKINNIC RIVERBED.

BRENDA GAULKE: MY FATHER WAS THE ONE WHO ACTUALLY WITNESSED QUITE A BIT OF IT BECAUSE HE WAS HOME ALL DAY AND JUST HAPPENED TO BE SITTING THERE IN THE DINING ROOM WHERE HE COULD LOOK OUT AND SEE. ONE LADY THREW HER TWO CHILDREN OVER THE BRIDGE, AND ONE OF THE CHILDREN DIED AND ONE SURVIVED. THIS WAS YEARS AGO, AND THEY WERE JUST MORTIFIED BY THE WHOLE THING, AND THERE’S BEEN QUITE A FEW THINGS LIKE THAT.

NATHAN LUKASAVITZ: GIVEN THE WIDE RANGE OF EVENTS THAT HAVE OCCURRED SINCE ITS ORIGINAL CONSTRUCTION IN 1925, THE BRIDGE, AS OF THIS FEBRUARY, IS NOW A PROTECTED LANDMARK BY THE WISCONSIN STATE REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES AND IS IN THE NOMINATION PROCESS FOR THE NATIONAL REGISTER. CITY DEVELOPMENT SPECIALIST AMY PETERSON BELIEVES THAT WITH THE BRIDGE NOW RECOGNIZED AS A HISTORIC SITE, PEOPLE WILL WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE BRIDGE AS WELL AS OTHER HISTORIC LOCATIONS IN THE CITY.

AMY PETERSON: I HOPE THAT AWARENESS CAN BE RAISED ON THE HISTORIC STRUCTURES THAT WE HAVE IN THE COMMUNITY, WHETHER THEY BE BRIDGES OR BUILDINGS OR RESIDENCES, WE’VE GOT A NUMBER OF WORTHY HISTORIC STRUCTURES IN THE COMMUNITY, AND WE DON’T ALWAYS GET A CHANCE TO HIGHLIGHT THOSE ENOUGH I THINK.

NATHAN LUKASAVITZ: ALONG WITH AN ONGOING PLAN TO RENOVATE GLEN PARK, WHICH THE CITY IS CURRENTLY DELIBERATING, PLANS ARE ALSO IN PLACE TO MAKE MINOR IMPROVEMENTS TO THE BRIDGE. ALTHOUGH THE BRIDGE HAS OCCASIONALLY SEEN SUBTLE CHANGES SINCE IT WAS FULLY REHABILITATED FOR 111-THOUSAND-DOLLARS IN 1986, PETERSON SAYS THE BRIDGE, WHICH SERVES AS GLEN PARK’S NORTH ENTRANCE, SHOULD ALSO RECEIVE SOME ENHANCEMENTS AS PART OF THE RENOVATION PROJECT.

AMY PETERSON: WE WERE LOOKING AT LIGHTING OPTIONS AND ALSO RENOVATION OPTIONS FOR WHAT WOULD BE THE NORTH SIDE OF THE BRIDGE FOR ACCESS – EASIER ACCESS FROM THAT NORTH SIDE. IT’S KIND OF CONVOLUTED COMING OFF THAT CUL-DE-SAC OVER THERE. SO THOSE ARE IN THE PLANS. I DON’T BELIEVE THEY’RE GOING TO BE FUNDED IN THE FIRST PHASE OF RENOVATIONS, BUT SOMETHING WE CAN PROBABLY PICK UP OVER THE NEXT MAYBE FIVE YEARS TO GET THAT NORTH ACCESS OF THE BRIDGE CLEANED UP A BIT. WHAT THE CONSULTANT HAD PROPOSED WAS ACTUALLY UNOBTRUSIVE STRIP-LIGHTING THAT WOULD BE UNDER THE RAILINGS ON EACH SIDE GOING ACROSS, SO IT WOULD PROVIDE LIGHTING FOR WALKING IN THE EVENING AFTER DARK.

NATHAN LUKASAVITZ: ACCORDING TO PETERSON, LIGHTING DID PREVIOUSLY HANG FROM THE BRIDGE, BUT EVENTUALLY HAD TO BE REMOVED AFTER VARIOUS CASES OF VANDALISM. OTHER LOCATIONS IN RIVER FALLS THAT ARE ALSO IN THE REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INCLUDE BOTH NORTH HALL AND SOUTH HALL ON CASCADE AVENUE. FOR THE FALCON NEWS SERVICE, I’M NATHAN LUKASAVITZ.