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Man donates 100-year-old journal about the building of Bloomington bridge



David Proeber

A group of city officials accompany Henry Berenz III over the Miller Park Bridge before Berenz presented the city with archival material of the bridge's construction, Monday, November 28, 2011. (The Pantagraph, David Proeber)

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November 28, 2011 9:45 pm • By [Rachel Wells](#) | rwells@pantagraph.com

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BLOOMINGTON -- A little more than 100 years ago, Henry Berenz Sr. cashed a \$300 check for 300 silver dollars, which he promptly poured into his son's boot.

The money was the first payment from the city of Bloomington to Berenz and Sons Construction for its work on what would become the Miller Park Bridge, now a walking bridge but once a prime pathway for leisure horse-drawn carriage rides across Miller Park Lake.

"I guess Dad wanted me to find out what that many dollars felt like, and how heavy they were," wrote Henry Berenz Jr. in a journal his grandson, Hank Berenz, presented on Monday to the city of Bloomington and the McLean County Museum of History.

The Nov. 28 presentation took place exactly 100 years after Henry Berenz Jr. wrote his last journal entry about the bridge, which was built under a \$1,200 contract.

"It's very important that (the journal) stays here in McLean County," said Hank Berenz, who now lives west of Chicago in Sycamore, where he too works in construction. "There's a lot of history. I've got movies and old pictures and records and receipts and all kinds of business and family items that are tied to Bloomington and McLean County area. This stuff has to be brought back."

Hank Berenz on Monday also donated several photographs related to construction projects in Miller Park and said he plans to donate more original documents as he sorts through several more boxes of family history.

He said Berenz and Sons Construction also worked on Miller Park's Summit Street bridge, war memorial and pavilion and the footbridge in nearby Forrest Park.

"These are beloved spots and they're spots that evoke memories and are associated with moments of leisure for people. I imagine people proposed on that bridge, don't you think?" said Greg Koos, executive director of the McLean County Museum of History.

Koos said the sides of the bridge appear to be made out of local stones, and it is a great example of the English Arts and Crafts aesthetic in vogue at the time.

In preparing to build the bridge, Henry Berenz Jr. convinced his father to purchase a concrete mixer so he wouldn't have to mix the concrete by hand, but the new machine - used to build the bridge's arches - caused a few frustrations. "At one time Dad got angry and said to dump the ... mixer in the lake and use the mixing boards. We talked him out of it, and finally finished the arch," the younger Berenz wrote.

The journal also explains that the city's Great Fire of 1900 is what brought the Berenz family back to Bloomington, where Henry Berenz Sr. made his home in the 1880s after emigrating from Germany until he left for Minnesota in the 1890s.

"There would be plenty of work in Bloomington. Jobs were scarce and the town would have to be rebuilt," Henry Berenz Jr. wrote.

Koos said the donation is a "tremendous" addition to McLean County records that will "help us understand important episodes of Bloomington construction history."

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