

*Welcome to “History on the Fly” a new podcast series offered by the Washington State Historical Society. This episode is titled: “Gallopig Gertie and a Tale of Three Bridges,” by Fred Poyner, curatorial staff for the Washington State Historical Society.*

I'll start this off by asking a question: “Where do old bridges go to die?” Or, maybe a better question is “Why should I care?”

The answer to both questions -- for me anyway -- is that the Historical Society is doing an exhibition on the history of a local bridge - The Tacoma Narrows Bridge – and we've been given a hot tip on where to find some choice pieces (maybe) of the original bridge to bear the name, aka “Gallopig Gertie” I'll get to the nickname in a minute.

For those not versed in local lore surrounding the first Tacoma Narrows Bridge, know this: it didn't last quite as long as planned, in terms of a lifespan; it didn't go quietly; and it didn't go far – straight down, in fact.

Now, as bridge history goes, this is about as exciting as it gets. And the collapse of the first Tacoma Narrows Bridge in 1940, shortly after it was opened to the public, made for big headlines. Of particular note to observers at the time, was the way the bridge bucked and swayed, during the high winds of a storm on one fateful day in November. One could almost say the bridge “galloped” as it broke apart, and had its mid-span sections crash into the waters below. The description later stuck as a nickname, and “Gallopig Gertie” was born.

Luckily, no one was killed in the 1940 collapse. But it wasn't until 1950 that a second, more structurally sound and engineered bridge to bear the name was opened to reconnect the Gig Harbor peninsula with the mainland to the East.

As the years past by, portions of the original Tacoma Narrows Bridge remained underwater, and this site later become designated on the National Register of Historic Places. There, beneath the cold surface of Puget Sound, concrete and cable, steel and curb molders beneath the waves, a silent testimony to public transportation projects gone awry.

But even bridge collapses can have a good side. When I finally did get the call to go look at several pieces of Gallopig Gertie on the western shore of the bridge site, it takes me 15 minutes to walk along the Western Gig Harbor shoreline to get to there. I kind of feel like Charleton Heston, at the end of “Planet of the Apes,” walking towards a monument that waits to be discovered.

And it's a good day for discoveries, as it turns out. It's not raining: in fact, this is the first day of sunshine we've had for awhile this Winter. The clear day offers me a great view of the newly constructed, and third, Tacoma Narrows Bridge, in the distance and growing closer with each footstep. The bridge -- built parallel and south to the 1950 bridge -- is almost complete, and unlike Heston's character of Taylor, who marveled at mankind's

folly at being able to destroy things, I'm left with a feeling of wonder when I see the things we can accomplish.

Which brings me to the end of this tale. I find the pieces in question just up from the tide line, for which we can thank the folks at the State Transportation agency; take some pictures, a few notes for the exhibit, and am left to wonder how some concrete fragments and bits of rusted metal – a curb here, a girder up the hill – once were part of a grander structure, not totally unlike the one over 100 feet above me now. I also wonder if this same feeling will be felt by our visitors seeing these pieces in our galleries, or, if like Taylor, they will be only left with a sense of loss.

*“The ‘Bridging the Narrows’ exhibition runs from March 31 to November 18, 2007, at the Washington State History Museum in Tacoma, WA.*

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