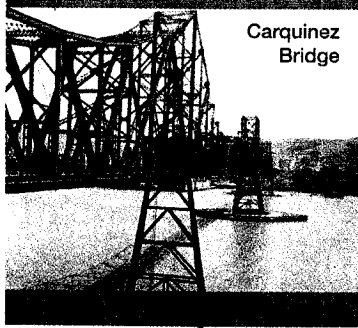


Photos: Bill Alonzo



Carquinez Bridge



Alonzo and fellow toll collectors



Carquinez Bridge toll booths



[LOOKING BACK]

Former toll collector's memories span a lifetime

Bill Alonzo was already a teenager when the original Carquinez Bridge was built in 1927. Now, 80 years later, as the steel cantilever bridge is being dismantled, replaced in 2003 by the Alfred Zampa Memorial Bridge, he looks back over his life and remembers in particular the years from 1937 to 1940, when he served as tollkeeper on what was then, he says, the world's largest highway bridge.

After Alonzo graduated from Vacaville High School in 1933, he left his father's farm to seek his fortune—or at least a job—in Richmond, where he walked the streets, stopping in at every store to ask for a job. But no one could afford to hire an extra mouth during such depressed times. Ever the optimist, Alonzo checked in with Standard Oil of California, where his uncle worked for several years. The next day, he found himself aboard the SS Lubrico (later renamed the R. J. Hanna) headed to sea and a future of adventurous travel and steady paychecks. But by 1937, he'd had his fill of steamship travel. He returned to Richmond to study at Merritt Business College in Oakland and work at Montgomery Ward. One day as he was leaving for work, he watched a young lady emerge from a car in front of the neighbor's house. It was love at first sight. They waited to marry until Dolores turned 18 the next year, and stayed married until her death 61 years later.

The same year he met Dolores, Alonzo heard rumors of a job opening on the Carquinez Bridge. He recalls, "I walked up and told the manager, 'I understand you're looking for another toll collector.'" The interview was brief. Discovering that Alonzo

was already bonded, then-CEO Will Morrish asked only why he wanted to work as a toll collector. "This is the Depression," Alonzo told him. "My dad raises the most beautiful fruit, but we can't sell it." To which Morrish replied, "Then you're gonna be a city boy."

For the next two years, Alonzo's cheerful smile greeted eastbound travelers at the toll plaza—travelers such as Herbert Hoover (so angry at having to pay the toll, "his jowls were shaking") and U.S. Rep. Frank H. Buck, Alonzo's former neighbor, who greeted him by name. "Hi, Bill," echoed his companion, President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

But Alonzo's favorite memory of the time when traffic was slower and drivers stopped to chat was the midnight in 1940 when a car advanced, the floodlights of the toll plaza gradually revealing the faces of the occupants, Carole Lombard and Clark Gable. "The view I got was the same as if I were in a theater, and I saw Clark and Carole facing out from the screen," Alonzo says. During their chat, the actors invited Alonzo to a press interview they had planned the next morning, but—scheduled to work a double shift—he declined.

Later that year, the bridge was sold to the state and Alonzo moved on.

Traffic across the Sacramento River at the Carquinez Strait has since outstripped the original American Toll Bridge Company's structure. Although it is now being recycled, its glory days will live on in the stories of Bill Alonzo, who at 92, says he plans to keep telling them for at least another 10 years.

—Jane Lott