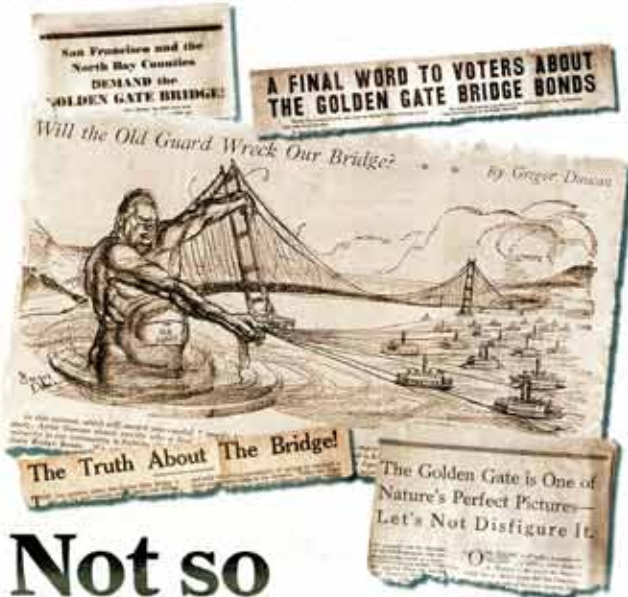


Sunday, May 13, 2012

San Francisco Chronicle

SFGATE.COM | PRINTED ON RECYCLED PAPER | \$3.00 *****

BRIDGE'S 75TH ANNIVERSARY



Not so Golden to them

The Golden Gate Bridge today is revered, but, in 1930, the ballot measure to make it happen provoked a bitter fight that included anti-bridge ads from opponents and editorial cartoons depicting those opponents as fossils and worse. Clippings were provided by the California Historical Society and the Golden Gate Bridge, Highway and Transportation District.

By John King

It is difficult to overstate the symbolic power of the Golden Gate Bridge and its hold on the civic imagination. Or the vehemence with which opponents tried to keep it from ever being built. Critics depicted the bridge as financially unsound, legally dubious, an aesthetic blight and an engineering hazard in the decade before the start of construction in 1933. The battle was most fierce in the fall of 1930, when voters in six counties were asked to allow \$35 million in bond sales for construction.

We know the outcome: one of the few structures in California that graminely deserves to be called an icon. But, on the eve of the 75th anniversary of the 1930's completion, a look back at the fight shows how little has changed.

Bridge continues on A14

A14 | Sunday, May 13, 2012 | SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE AND SFGATE.COM *****

FROM THE COVER

Golden Gate Bridge faced several foes

Bridge from page A1

changed in terms of the attacks that are aimed at major alterations to the landscape — and the difficulty that one generation has in predicting how future generations might choose to live and the values they might hold.

'Go slow'

The skepticism toward a bridge now taken for granted was on full display on Oct. 16, 1930, when the influential Commonwealth Club gathered to hear a debate on the merits of the bond measure.

The proponents on hand included Joseph Strauss, the chief engineer who wanted to span the entrance to one of the world's great harbors with a 4,200-foot roadway suspended from two 246-foot towers, 220 feet above water.

But the focus was on the findings of the club's committees on harbor development and state highways, which provided ample ammunition for voters seeking reasons to vote no.

Among the arguments: ■ Any bridge with a clearance of less than 220 feet could blockade the harbor in the size and height of international vessels increased.

■ The south tower's siting "shows definite weakness," warned an engineer, "more thorough drilling with detailed mapping on more sections must be done."

■ "Have we any assurance that \$35 million is the final figure?" asked statistician H.P. Melnikow. He also questioned the motives of Strauss and his consulting engineers since "they are (financially) interested in this matter and are trying to sell it to us."

■ Traffic projections were "over-optimistic," declared another subcommittee, and "we would have liked to have seen the district's plans and estimates reviewed by an entirely disinterested body of technical experts before the people were asked to vote."

No fiscal position was taken by the Commonwealth Club, founded in 1903 as "an open forum for the discussion of disputed questions." But the two committees agreed the bond measure should be rejected "at this time." In the words of one researcher, "San Francisco should go slow, and be sure that any project will not jeopardize San Francisco's credit for more vital essential things."

Blustrious foes

The committee findings soon became fodder for a newspaper advertisement that began "MR. TAXPAYER. This Ad is published to save you money — READ IT." After all, they echoed what opponents had been saying all along. Things were moving too fast. There were too many unanswered questions. The numbers couldn't be trusted.

The ad was one of many placed by the Taxpayers' Committee Against Golden Gate Bridge Bonds. With a membership list that included future Mayor Roger Latham and City Engineer M.M. O'Shaughnessy, this was no mere collection of gadflies. Such opponents insisted they weren't against the idea of a bridge, simply the reality of this one.

"I am in favor of a bridge across the Golden Gate if it can be physically and feasibly built," O'Shaughnessy declared in one ad. His statement then cautioned that toll bridge "too common to mention" didn't generate the traffic necessary to pay the costs of needed maintenance. And when newspapers supporting the bond ridiculed naysayers for "old fogeyism" or worse — one editorial car-

toon portrayed shipowners, ferry companies and the Taxpayers' Committee as "the dead hand of greed" — the response was pained outrage. "Can it not be realized that the shipping interests are beyond the immediate future?" asked an alliance of 56 steamship companies in an election day ad. "That our only concern is apprehension over the throttling effect this huge artificial barrier at the harbor entrance would have upon the future trade and commerce of this great seaport?"

Variations of all these criticisms had been heard since the War Department in 1934 approved the concept of a spanned Golden Gate. Put in the public vote, however, the bond measure passed 145,037 to 46,954.

From bridge to BART

What is striking is retrospect how wrong the arguments turned out to be — the \$35 million indeed covered the cost of construction, for instance — but how familiar they still sound. We need more details, the details we do have can't be trusted, and there are better alternatives.

Look no further than the ongoing campaign against California's high-speed rail system. Before voters approved bonds to help fund the effort in 2008, opponents depicted it in ballot arguments as a "boondoggle" that would benefit "out-of-state special interests." Since then they've used the environmental review process and other venues to challenge the financing, ridership projections and route of the still-evolving plan.

There were similar objections to the Bay Area Rapid Transit system before its approval in 1962 by 61 percent of the voters in San Francisco, Alameda and Contra Costa counties. Nine years later, as opening day approached, critics were more virulent than ever.

"BART will be especially effective in destroying neighborhood," warned the weekly Bay Guardian, which also called the system "the ultimate money drain." But wait, there's more: "It's designed to handle peak-hour commuter traffic, which occurs only three hours per day. ... The other 11,760 hours per year much of its equipment will be idle and unproductive."

One difference in recent decades is the rise of environmental concerns. The only hint of such issues in 1930 involved aesthetics, as when novelist Gertrude Atherton and sculptor Haig Patigian were among 14 luminaries who put their name to an ad that began "The Golden Gate is One of Nature's Perfect Pictures — Let's Not Disfigure It."

More common was the issue of the election day editorial in the San Francisco Call-Bulletin. It rhapsodized that passage of the measure would show the world "we are breaking down our walls, we are building a mightier city than you have ever seen ... the happiest, bravest and most prosperous city in the world."

Such rhetoric would have no traction now; a legacy of the 1960s is that people who fight large-scale change aren't caricatured as old fogies. The presumption is that they're on the side of the angels, battling gentrification or ecological harm or other threats to the common good.

Attitudinal change

If there's a moral to the story of the birth of the Golden Gate Bridge, it's that there are times when change within a city, region or state comes at an exponential scale. On such occasions, the cultural status quo is threatened. When nature lovers fretted that the gloated Golden Gate would be marred by an immense wave of concrete and steel, they couldn't imagine that each would reach the city center — just as opponents of the Transamerica Pyramid couldn't imagine the 833-foot tower would become a popular symbol of the city almost as soon as it opened in 1972.

Similarly, critics who disdained BART as nothing more



Strong critics

"In the interest of your own uniqueness, dear San Francisco, do not bridge the Golden Gate. Leave that kind of gesture to Los Angeles — which, if it had a Golden Gate, would most certainly bridge it, and sink oil wells into bay and ocean on either side of the bridge."

— "San Francisco Revisited," by Katharine Fullerton Gerould, Harper's Magazine, 1924

"While engineering experience indicates the possibility of building bridges of great length, it must be recognized that a single span of 4,200 feet is a great advance over such bridges as have proven their safety."

— Advertisement against the bond measure signed by 13 engineers, 1930

"The present plan for a bridge across the Golden Gate is a menace to our harbor that should be opposed by everyone who has the interests of San Francisco and its commerce at heart."

— Shipowners Association of the Pacific and the Pacific American Steamship Association, 1930

"Did you know that the chief engineer of the district, who has been so active in promoting the project, has a contract calling for a basic fee of \$1,080,000 if the bridge is built?"

— Taxpayers' Committee Against Golden Gate Bridge Bonds, 1930

"I do not believe it probable that the Golden Gate Bridge will procure the majority of traffic (compared to ferries) that is now going or will ever go between San Francisco and Marin County."

— Arthur Bird, Commonwealth Club, 1930



Ansel Adams in 1948

"I remember thousands of people fought the Golden Gate Bridge. My mother used to think it was 'just terrible, ruining the Gate.' Well, the bridge is up. I personally don't think it was so bad. I think it's a very majestic structure."

— Ansel Adams, from a 1972 interview conducted by the Regional Oral History Office, UC Berkeley

landscape in ways we can't imagine. And sometimes, the landscape is the better as a result.

John King will discuss the Golden Gate Bridge and its cultural reach at 6 p.m. May 25 at the California Historical Society, 608 Mission St., San Francisco. More information on the free event is at bit.ly/KingGB.

John King is The San Francisco Chronicle's urban design critic. jking@sfchronicle.com