



PHOTOGRAPH BY TYLER HICKS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Cited by Simon and Garfunkel, the Queensboro Bridge will be celebrated at its centennial in March with a dance, symposia and a gala.

## Honors for Bridges Many Take for Granted

### Fans Are Celebrating Birthdays of What Some Call 'the Bones of the City'

By GLENN COLLINS

Though more marine traffic crosses under it than under any other city drawbridge, most drivers who traverse the humble Pelham Bay Bridge in the Bronx barely take notice. This buff-and-blue span in Pelham Bay Park — a heavily traveled approach to City Island — is certainly not the bridge to nowhere. But it is only a bit player in the transportation firmament of bridges with star names like Brooklyn and George Washington.

Yet despite its obscurity, the centennial of this workhorse will be greeted next month with a brass marching band. There will be a color guard, a parade of Clydesdales followed by a horse and carriage, a canoe flotilla and a procession of dignitaries expected to include the Bronx borough president, Adolfo Carrión Jr., and the city parks commissioner, Adrian Benepe. There will be speeches. And the clamshell drawbridge will be ceremonially opened as a fireboat spouts in red, white and blue.

But why? "Our bridges get no respect," said M. Barry Schneider, founder of the New York City Bridge Centennial Commission, which has given itself the mission of celebrating the 100th anniversary of six city bridges from 2008 to 2010. Before this year the commission had little more than a logo (a jaunty suspension bridge in blue and gray), but now has two centennial celebrations under its belt: the University Heights Bridge (January) and the Borden Avenue Bridge (March).

Next, on Oct. 28, is the big bash for the Pelham Bay Bridge (it actually opened on Oct. 15, 1908, but borough presidents' and commissioners' schedules are tricky). That will be followed by honors for the Queensboro Bridge (2009), the Manhattan Bridge (also 2009) and the Madison Avenue Bridge (2010).

Such revelry has not been inspired by any official arm of the city government, but rather, by a

nonprofit group that has won enthusiastic cooperation from the borough presidents' offices, the mayor's office, the city's parks department and its Department of Transportation. All are participating in the hoopla.

"I think it's great that we're having birthday parties for these six bridges," said Transportation Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan, when asked about the commission. "The bones of the city are really strong — and we are celebrating that great bone structure."

Mr. Schneider created the commission with his wife, Judith, in October 2006. "I picked the name 'commission' so we could all be commissioners," he said with a laugh.

His agenda, however, is entirely serious. "We take our infrastructure for granted," said the 73-year-old Mr. Schneider, a retired advertising executive who is a current member and former president of Community Board 8, and is president of the 650-member East Sixties Neighborhood Association in Manhattan. "And if we don't take care, we'll wind up with bridges that fall down."

The commission has given voice to a small but passionate band of bridge groupies, variously known as bridgies and bridgeaholics — largely engineers, architects, contractors and historians — who form the group's membership. "Artistically, bridges are beautiful, they are incredibly mathematical and there is an elegance and lightness to them," said Samuel I. Schwartz, an independent civil-engineering consultant who is the bridge commission's president.

"From 1883 to 1910, there were 23 major bridges built in New York City — and we are a bridge mecca," said Mr. Schwartz, who was first deputy commissioner and chief engineer of the New York City Department of Transportation from 1986 to 1990.

Some bridge chauvinists argue that the very construction of bridges created the modern New York City. The frenzy of bridge building at the dawn of the 20th century followed the consolidation of the boroughs in 1898.

"There came a rush to connect the boroughs at their points of easiest access," said the Lincoln historian Harold Holzer, a member of the bridge centennial commission. He added: "That's when those five cities came to the sudden realization that there was no interconnection — save for their

spirit."

The city's network of bridges "is an invisible thread, and people don't pay attention to it until it snaps," Ms. Sadik-Khan said of the city's more than 2,000 bridges, including highway overpasses, those over water and those for trains. She said 789 of them were owned by the city.

Bridges are complex machines fitted with moving parts to accommodate the weight of vehicles and trains and the effects of the weather, Mr. Schwartz said. For example, he said, the Manhattan Bridge drops and rises

### Parades for the Queensboro and lesser-known spans.

eight feet as subway trains cross.

Mr. Schwartz recalled that when he was chief engineer, he closed all or part of 20 bridges, including the Williamsburg Bridge for four months in 1988 due to severe corrosion. "We took a lot of heat for closing it, but now people say it was a gutsy call, especially after the Minnesota bridge," he said of the Interstate 35W span that collapsed last year in Minneapolis, killing 13 people.

In New York, "maintenance had long been deferred, and when the fiscal crisis of the 1970's hit, there was no constituency for

bridges," Mr. Schwartz said. But in the late 1990s, a maintenance program was put in place.

"New York is doing a very good job with its bridges now," Mr. Schwartz said, noting that the city had spent \$3 billion so far on maintenance during the Bloomberg administration, which has budgeted another \$2 billion over the next two fiscal years.

"The Brooklyn Bridge has been getting the lion's share of attention," Mrs. Schneider said of the span that celebrated its 125th anniversary in May with Grucci fireworks and a performance by the Brooklyn Philharmonic. "But the truth is there are so many other bridges that have significant anniversaries — bridges important to the history and growth of the city."

They include the University Heights Bridge over the waters of the turbulent Harlem River between 207th Street in Manhattan and Fordham Road in the Bronx; it celebrated its centennial in January. Then there is the oft-ignored Borden Avenue Bridge above Dutch Kills, in Sunnyside, Queens, which celebrated its centennial in March. Though hardly the Pont d'Avignon, it is a rare "retractile bridge," which moves horizontally on rails.

The festivities for the Queensboro Bridge next May will be the most grandiose to date. There are plans for the Queens and Manhattan borough presidents to meet at mid-span in the city equivalent of a golden-spike moment, and bridge lovers are

scheduling walking tours, a dance in the park under the bridge, symposia, boat-ride lectures and a gala at Guastavino's, the catering place beneath the bridge on the Manhattan side.

Some 50 workers lost their lives during the construction of the Queensboro, which opened to traffic on March 30, 1909. It is the only city bridge to have been honored by a Simon and Garfunkel hit, but "The 59th Street Bridge Song" is, to Queens residents, geopolitically incorrect "since the title is Manhattan-centric," said Mrs. Schneider.

The Manhattan Bridge — which connects Flatbush Avenue in Downtown Brooklyn with Canal Street in Chinatown over the East River — "came close to collapse in 1986" because the steel braces that moored its 20-inch-thick cables corroded, Mr. Schwartz said. It was rescued, and will reach its centennial in December 2009.

And finally, the Madison Avenue Bridge, connecting 138th Street in the Bronx with Manhattan over the Harlem River, is to have its centennial in July 2010.

The creation of many of the bridges "was a miracle of futurist planning, because they were bridges to nowhere," said Mr. Holzer, the historian, referring to spans like those over the Harlem River connecting Manhattan to largely undeveloped land. "Now they are bridges to somewhere. And sadly, there is not a lot of this kind of anticipatory development now."



The University Heights Bridge over the Harlem River had its centennial in January.