

The ups and downs of Martha's Vineyard bridge tenders

Operating the Island's only drawbridge requires a team effort, and on occasion, a thick skin.

By **Barry Stringfellow** - August 26, 2015



Bridge operator John Armstrong helps guide boaters through the narrow channel. — Photo by Michael Cummo

The Lagoon Bridge connects Vineyard Haven and Oak Bluffs on one of the most heavily traveled stretches of road on Martha's Vineyard. It is also the only drawbridge on the Island, allowing boats passage between the Lagoon, designated a harbor of refuge by the Army Corps of Engineers, and Vineyard Sound.

Earl Littlefield has been an operator on Lagoon Bridge for the past 26 years. Mr. Littlefield and operator John Armstrong work as a team on this critical piece of Island infrastructure. They are powerful men. They can lift approximately 20 tons of steel and asphalt with a touch of a finger. They can bring traffic in Oak Bluffs and Vineyard Haven to a standstill in minutes. "We also control all the traffic lights on Martha's Vineyard," Mr. Littlefield said. "Both of them."

The bridge masters can also be the object of Islander ire, evidenced by a Letter to the Editor in last week's MV Times that impugned the "old guy in the drawbridge," accusing him of backing up traffic all the way to Cronig's on State Road.

"John and I go by Troll," Mr. Littlefield joked, sitting in their corrugated steel bridge house, perched on the

Lagoon side of the temporary bridge with commanding views of the Lagoon and Vineyard Sound. It's equipped with a monitor showing four camera feeds — each end of the bridge and both directions of the channel. There are two radios, one set on 229, the emergency response channel, and one on 16, the hailing channel for boats.

The shed vibrates so strongly from passing traffic that the whiteboard regularly falls off the wall, and the small refrigerator has literally "walked" off its table.

"It's like working in San Francisco," Mr. Armstrong said, over a constant cacophony of slamming planks. "It shakes the most when the big trucks bomb across the bridge. I used to look at that sign and say, 'Twenty miles an hour, are you kidding me?' Then after I started working in the bridge house, I understood why."

The sign asking cyclists to walk their bikes over the bridge is also roundly disregarded. It was heeded by no one in the hour that The Times spent with Mr. Littlefield and Mr. Armstrong. "We tried asking people to follow the rule, but we just gave up," Mr. Littlefield said. "We got called all kinds of names."

On-demand channel

During the summer schedule, May 15 to Sept. 15, there are five 45-minute windows for boats to request "on demand" passage.

Bridge openings can take place in the morning between 8:15 and 8:45, 10:15 and 11, and in the afternoon between 3:15 and 4, 5 and 5:45, and 7:30 and 8:15 in the evening. "There used to be an afternoon opening at 1:15, but they did away with it because so many people complained that it messed up their lunch hours," Mr. Littlefield said.

Mr. Littlefield said the busiest times during the summer are the late morning and the 5 pm opening. He advised motorists not to turn around if they're stuck in line during bridge opening: "It takes seven minutes for the bridge to open and close. We might have more than one opening in one of the on-demand periods so we don't tie up traffic for more than 10 minutes at a time. You lose time if you turn around and take Barnes Road."

After Sept. 15, the bridge opens on a winter schedule, which is on call, 24 hours. Mr. Littlefield is on call 24/7, all year long. "If we have bad weather coming, people can call us anytime, we'll get you in, as long as the winds aren't over 40 [mph]," Mr. Littlefield said. "Once winds get up to 40, the bridge kites."

On Oct. 1, the temporary bridge will be permanently closed. If all goes according to plan, the new bridge will be operational in December and the temporary bridge will be gone by Jan. 31, 2016, according to Melinda Loberg, Tisbury selectman and bridge committee member.

Mr. Littlefield said he looks forward to the new bridge, and the new digs for the bridge master. He showed The Times a picture of the new console, which has new features that include a laser-guided depth finder. Still, Mr. Littlefield, a railroad aficionado and history buff, has an affinity for the old bridge that was demolished five years ago. Skimming a well-thumbed copy of "The Rails of Martha's Vineyard," he pointed out older versions of the Lagoon Bridge, dating back to when it was crossed by electric streetcars.

"I miss the old bridge," he said. "That was a classy bridge. It was built in 1932, and lasted up until five years ago. A lot of Islanders miss it too. They used to jump off it when the the bridge operator wasn't around."

A downside to the old bridge, however, was that it would lock up sometimes during heat waves. "It used to lock up when the steel expanded in the heat," Mr. Littlefield said. "We'd have the fire department come down and put cold water on it. We'd have to call in a crew and grind off about a quarter-inch of bridge on each side, which could take a little while.

She was 75 years old. You get a little rickety after 75 years."

Asked about some of the most memorable things he's seen from his perch in the past 26 years, Mr. Littlefield didn't hesitate to recall an incident in June 2013, when an underwater earthquake off Cape Cod triggered a small tsunami.



"I'm looking out over the Lagoon and it's emptying out. Then a few minutes later it came rushing back in. The tide went in and out four times in 15 minutes," he said.

Mr. Littlefield said a particularly memorable operational snafu occurred when the computer screen on the operator's panel read, "Insert credit card to continue."

"I called the engineer; at first he thought I was kidding," Mr. Littlefield said. "Then he called the electrician, and he thought he was kidding. It eventually went away after about a half hour. It never happened again."

Never a dull moment

When boats call in and request an opening, the bridge master gives them a lineup time. Once the boats are in position, the bridge master checks with the Vineyard Transit Authority to see if any buses are near, and also with the Communications Center to see if there are any emergency vehicles heading that way. Once the all-clear is given, the Island's two traffic lights turn red, and two gates go down on each end.

On this particular opening, Mr. Armstrong operated the touchscreen control panel while Mr. Littlefield made a visual inspection of a blind spot created by the new bridge master's shed, under construction.

"Earl makes sure the Oak Bluffs traffic is stopped," Mr. Armstrong said. "People blow by him all the time. I should get him a matador's cape."

"There's never a dull moment," Mr. Littlefield said. "I see something different every day. Yesterday a girl ignored the lights, went under the gates and kept walking. The siren was going off, and she said, 'What's that for?' Somehow she didn't know it was a drawbridge. During the summer you'd be amazed how many people ignore the gate and the lights and get stuck on the bridge. We let them through, but it's a \$160 fine. There's one guy who swears we open the bridge when we see him coming."

After Mr. Armstrong sets off the siren, he goes through a sequence on the multicolored touchscreen. He has to keep his foot on a pedal, or the cable that raises the bridge will stop. The bridge is raised entirely by cables — there are no counterweights. The cables are attached to an engine inside the cable house, the small shack that sits directly over the bridge on the Vineyard Haven side. The cable house also houses a generator that serves as a backup in the event of a major power outage.

"There's all kinds of failsafes on this bridge," Mr. Armstrong said.

Mr. Armstrong, a former commercial fisherman who also spent four years in the Coast Guard, tells the boats how the tide is running, and sometimes coaches them through the channel.

"The construction barges narrow the channel, so the water travels faster," he said. "It can be a little intimidating for people without a lot of experience, especially with a strong tide."

It's not only automobile drivers who get impatient with the bridge. Mr. Littlefield said recently a boater entered the channel before the bridge reached its peak of 73 degrees. "John told him to wait, but he didn't. He snapped his mast right off."

After boat traffic has passed, three blasts of the horn signify that the bridge is beginning its slow descent. Roughly three and a half minutes later, a klaxon with an earsplitting pitch confirms the 20 tons of steel and asphalt are back in place, and traffic can resume.

Every boat that goes through the channel is written in a log book. "If the Coast Guard wants to know if we're missing a boat, we can go back to the log," Mr. Littlefield said.



According to the log, there were 115 bridge openings in July, considerably down from 192 openings in July 2013. So far in August, Mr. Armstrong estimates an average of seven openings a day. Undoubtedly, every one of these openings will spike the blood pressure of motorists who are late for work or trying to catch a boat. But the vast majority of the time, Mr. Armstrong said, no one complains. "For the most part, people are pretty understanding," he said. "You don't want to get on a troll's bad side."

