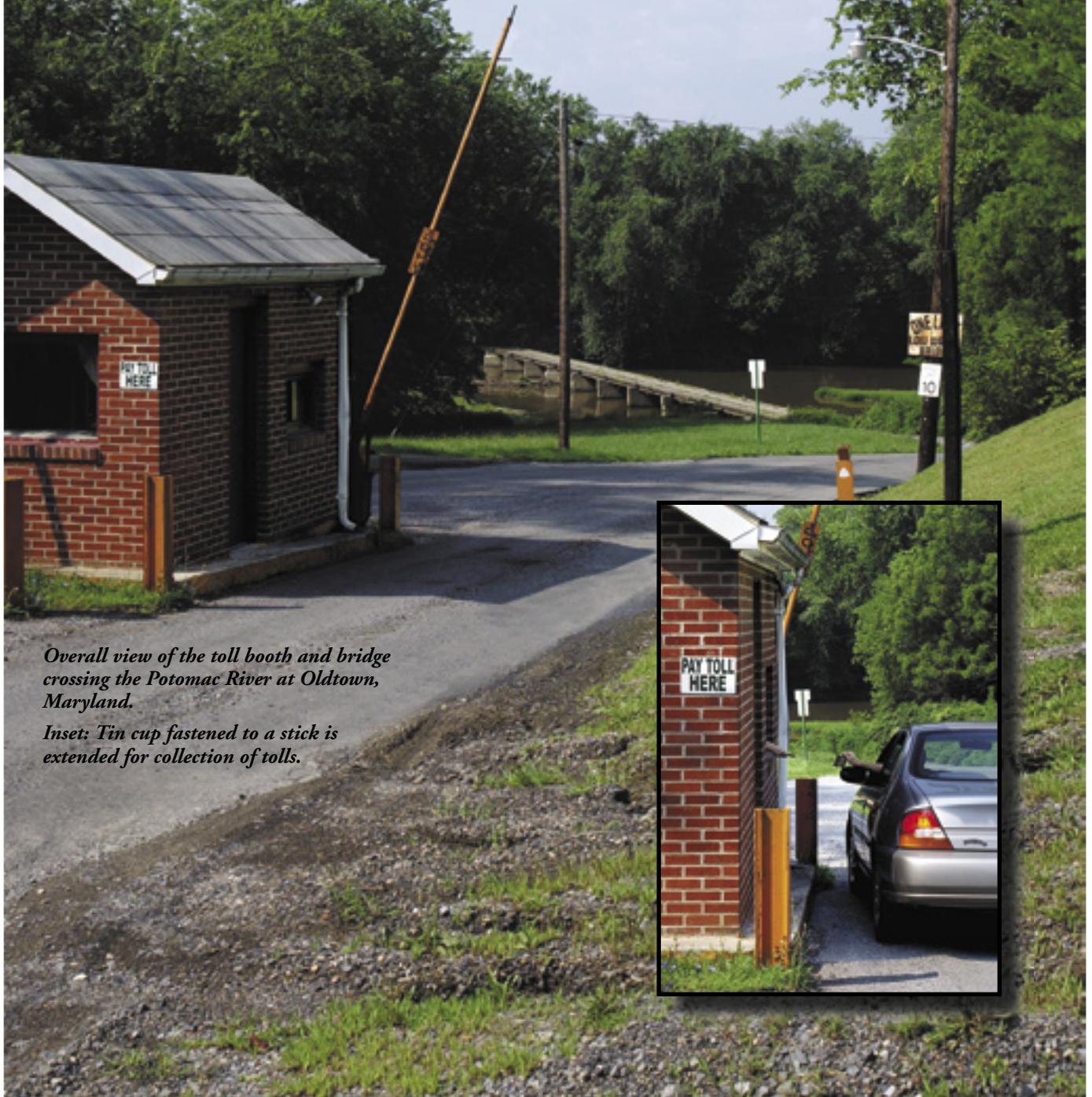


When Life Takes Its Toll

In Oldtown, two quarters will buy you a trip on the only bridge of its kind in the nation.

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Overall view of the toll booth and bridge crossing the Potomac River at Oldtown, Maryland.

Inset: Tin cup fastened to a stick is extended for collection of tolls.

For 17 years, nothing has gotten by Grace Crabtree. That is to say, nothing has gotten by her that has a license plate attached to the backside of it.

Grace is one of four toll takers at the nation's only privately owned toll bridge located in Oldtown, connecting Maryland with West Virginia in the only crossing of the Potomac River within an otherwise hour radius.

There are no "Welcome to Maryland" or "Thanks for Visiting" signs. What you see is what you get. But what you get is the chance to cross a unique popular roadside attraction that almost went under the wrecking ball several years ago.

By description, it's a simple crossing, made simply and managed simply. At least a dozen concrete pedestals secured in the river support an all-wooden bridge, made first of horizontal short planks and then reinforced with the same wood laid by hand vertically. There are no guardrails, just short metal bumper railings stowed into the edge of the bridge to keep cars in line. Don't try and rush the trip. Only one car can cross at a time.



The view atop the bridge is nearly hypnotic. On a clear day, fish and other wildlife seem only an arms length away. The journey is akin to gliding across the top of an aquarium. Locals can be distinguished by tourists from the amount of time it takes to drive the length of the landmark.

There is no tollbooth on the West Virginia side of the bridge. The payment—50 cents one way—is on the Maryland side. That's where Grace is waiting.

"We have cars come from all over the place," she will be pleased to tell you. "I see plates from Indiana, Michigan, Virginia, Florida. Some have heard about it and then drive across and come right back and some people are gone for hours".

And she will see you. Grace keeps a notebook in the tollhouse and she writes every single plate number down of any vehicle that crosses the bridge. When folks occasionally don't stop, she'll find out if they have a monthly pass to cross or have otherwise prepaid. If they haven't, she sends a bill.

Grace has been employed at the bridge the longest of any one person. She has been through three owners and a threat of permanent closure of the bridge, and like the bridge she is perched next to, she is still going strong. "I am probably the person who knows the history of the bridge better than anybody I 'spose," she said, allowing an interloper access to the booth to sit with her a spell and take some notes on her activities.

Grace will tell you that the bridge was constructed in 1937 by "a man with the last name of Carpenter...although no one seems to remember his first name." Carpenter saw a need, Grace said, for a bridge to connect West Virginia with Maryland. Otherwise, motorists and in particular, those people seeking work during hard times, would have to travel an extra hour into Cumberland and back track through town. Once the proper permits were in place, the Army Corp of Engineers,

following Carpenter's blueprints, constructed the bridge and it remained under the same ownership until 1971.

But it was in 1987, that the man who Oldtowners connect most with the facility purchased the property. Charles Walters, a local man, was sentimental for the bridge and purchased it that year, putting Grace to work almost immediately as a bookkeeper.

In 1991, Walters passed away and his wife, Frances, inherited the business. Frances entrusted the management of the bridge then to Grace, who ran the daily operations and kept Frances abreast of its finances. Frances died in March of this year and the bridge was sold to the present owner, John Teter, who kept Grace employed as his chief operations manager and unofficial bridge historian.

The bridge almost met the hard end of a wrecking ball when the county commissioners citing unsafe crossing conditions in 1999 closed it. That period is still a bone of contention for Grace Crabtree. "They said it was unsafe and they put up these barricades but people took the barricades down and crossed it anyway and they did that for years," she said.

The Walters family nearly depleted the bridge account applying for new permits and renovating the bridge, according to Crabtree and the bridge was officially reopened, although if you ask Grace, it never closed. "They put a notice out and as soon as they did that, we started putting the cup back out," she said.

And Grace went from keeping the books to keeping the gate. She took a more personal interest in the matter. Not wanting the county to show up again and close the bridge, Grace agreed to a place in the booth. "Five years ago, I thought, I can't work here, that booth is too crazy for me," she said. Now the pace of traffic coming to and fro over the bridge is part of her day. She would miss the brief conversations she has with each person who stops to plunk two quarters into a can attached to a large stick.

Most locals here know the bridge exists and are happy to tell tourists how to find it. The bridge can be found just north of the scenic C&O Canal path frequented by bikers and hikers. The bridge has been written about in travel journals as a destination stop for those who are mountain biking or hiking as a "must see" stop along the old canal path. The toll is collected from 6 a.m. until 10 p.m. everyday.

Grace not only talks with motorists, she also chats with pedestrians. There is no charge to cross by foot but you have to yield for paying traffic, which is not an easy task. She has chatted with television camera crews, photographers, bird watchers, Potomac River and Canal enthusiasts, even the occasional nosy reporter.

"This is the best office view there is," she said. "You can sit here and if you work mornings, you can see the sun rise and hit the river and when you work nights, you can watch it go down. It's beautiful. It's peaceful here. There is just nothing else like it."

