

Bridge Over The Sunshine



The Sunshine Skyway Bridge, completed in 1987, is a concrete bridge crossing the lower Tampa Bay. It connects Bradenton to St. Petersburg. The bridge is a sight to behold in both the daytime and the night. Drive on the bridge on Interstate 275 or see it from numerous points around the Bradenton, Clearwater, and Tampa areas. This toll bridge hosts bait shops, kiteboarding shops, multiple fishing piers, restrooms, a rest area, and entrance to the Skyway Fishing Pier State Park.

In 1924, J.G. "Jim" Foley, a realtor, and his partner, Charles R. Carter, teamed up with James E. Bussey, a lawyer, to form the Bee Line Ferry Company. The service began on March 7, 1927, with only two ferries: The ferries traversed from the end of Bay Vista Park in St. Petersburg to Piney Point on the bay's other side.

Fast forward approximately twenty years later, Parsons, Brinkerhoff, Hogan, and MacDonald (PBHM) were awarded a contract and became the new designers and engineers of a new bridge. The successful operation to build a bridge came after the Florida State Improvement Project agreed to finance it.

St. Petersburg held a "Spans Across The Bay" festival on July 4, 1950, to celebrate the start of the construction and naming of the new bridge over Tampa Bay. The Florida State Road Department and the St. Petersburg Junior Chamber of Commerce had oversaw a nationwide contest to name the bridge. The rules directed that it could not be named after a physical place or a specific person. More than 20,000 names were submitted. Local resident Virginia Seymour, was announced as the winner, with her entry "Sunshine Skyway".

The Sunshine Skyway Bridge had its grand opening on September 6, 1954. At the time, it was the longest continuous bridge in the United States as well as one of the longest bridges in the world. Many notable people participated in the Bridge's opening ceremony including a U.S. General, a U.S. Senator, a singer, and three former governors. Delegations were also sent from ten other Florida counties to attend the opening ceremony. More than 15,000 people crossed the bridge on opening day.

In 1969, a second bridge was constructed alongside the original bridge to ease traffic and to qualify for Interstate Highway standards. Opening of the bridge was delayed until May 1971 to reinforce the south main pier, which had cracked due to insufficient supporting pile depth. Both the mayor of Bradenton, B.T. Arbuckle, and Governor Reubin Askew participated in the opening ceremony. The second bridge span was used for all traffic traveling south, while the original span was transferred to carry only northbound traffic.

On May 9, 1980, tragedy struck. The bridge's southbound span collapsed after the 606ft long freighter, MV Summit Venture, crashed into a support column during a sudden squall. Several vehicles were at the top of the bridge when a quarter mile of roadway plummeted down, as other cars fell off of the bridge's

gap. In all, a truck, six cars, and a Greyhound bus plunged 150 feet into Tampa Bay, resulting in the deaths of thirty-five people. Several drivers, including Major League Baseball player Granny Hamner were able to halt their vehicles just before reaching the gap.



John Lerro, the old hand harbor pilot who was piloting the ship at the time of the accident, was absolved of wrongdoing by both a Coast Guard and state grand jury investigation. The investigations determined that the inbound freighter had been in the process of steering into the narrow channel

under the bridge's center when a microburst comprising unexpected torrential rains and 70 mph (110 km/h) winds cut discernibility to near zero and for the moment rendered the ship's radar unusable. Lerro put the ship's engines into full reverse and ordered dropping the emergency anchor when he realized that the freighter had departed the channel, but the 20,000-ton ships' frontward thrust and robust winds from the rear pressed the bow into support beams to the shipping lane's right.

Shortly after the accident, the intact northbound span was changed back into a two way or two-lane bridge while the Florida state government studied proposals for a replacement. Ideas included building a tunnel and rebuilding the old bridge's broken section. Governor Bob Graham, however, proposed that the entire bridge be replaced by a signature cable stayed bridge with a 50% wider span than that of the original bridge. Additionally, the support piers would be shielded by large, concrete dolphins, and the waterway would be marked by a quarter mile long progression of big concrete barriers.

Construction started in January 1983. The complicated project was pushed back several times by the various construction difficulties and by dangerous weather. The planned opening was rescheduled multiple times. Finally, the new bridge's opening ceremony was scheduled for April 30, 1987. However, the day before, at around 3:30 pm, The Deliverance, a 74-foot shrimp boat, collided with the bridge's protective bumpers. The bumper received small damage, while the bridge remained intact. Water, however, poured onto the vessel, which was then towed out of the bay and moved into shallower waters, and then, promptly sank. The opening ceremonies went on as planned.

The Sunshine Skyway Bridge is certainly one of the most majestic bridges in the world. The outstanding yellow cables and elegant span are illuminated at night and can be seen for miles day or night. It is best viewed from the East Beach area of Fort Desoto Park. Due to its beauty, the span has been the place of several automobile commercials. A Travel Channel TV special rated the Sunshine Skyway as the third best of the top ten bridges in the world. If you drive across the Sunshine Skyway

Bridge, enjoy the majestic view, shops, fishing pier and state park. If you are in the area, it is worth the trip.

Sources:

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