The old Bridge
at Chesterfield

by Lowell Getz

The old bridge at Chesterfield is to be replaced. As is true of countless other bridges built in the early days of highway construction, this one is too narrow for today’s traffic and is rapidly becoming unsafe. So a new, wider modern bridge will soon span the small creek. This will not be noted as even a minor event in the lives of those traveling Route 111. Although scores of cars and trucks cross this bridge daily (as they have for the past 58 years), few of the occupants even notice there is a bridge at the bottom of the hill. Still fewer will recognize there is a new bridge. To the motorists, replacement of the bridge will mean only a slight inconvenience while under construction, and to the highway department just another drain on an always inadequate bridge repair budget. But to me, disappearance of the old bridge will leave a personal chasm no new bridge can hope to span.

This old bridge forms an integral part of my early memories and has continued to be a stabilizing force for me over the years. I was born in my grandparents’ house at the top of the hill at about the same time the bridge was built. As a child, I spent considerable time with my grandparents. During those years, I made innumerable trips down the hill to play in the creek under the bridge. I raced
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"boats" (sticks and leaves) down the riffles in the shade of the bridge. I built forts and caverns in the creek sand. When I was five years old, I caught my very first fish ever in a small pool beneath the bridge. I have never been so proud of any other fish I have caught as I was of those two small green sunfish. I still remember the pride with which I showed them to a highway maintenance worker as I took them back home in a tin can, glowing in his exaggerated compliments about my fishing prowess.

And there were the daily trips down past the bridge to bring the cows up from the "bottom pasture" to be milked. Even at that early age I had a general idea as to the events that preceded the incident of the man in the gray De Soto throwing from the bridge a paper sack containing a complete set of women's undergarments. Of course, I saw to it that these same garments gracefully adorned the trunk of the sycamore tree below the bridge for months before being swept away by the wind and rain.

On each of my now infrequent trips back home, I find that more and more of my roots have disappeared. The house in which I grew up is gone, my grade school is sealed by the EPA because of the presence of hazardous toxic wastes, the ball diamond where we played "rounders" at recess is overgrown with weeds, my high school has been torn down, all the stores in my hometown are gone or stand as disintegrating empty shells, and almost all of the people with whom I associate my early years now lie quietly in the various local cemeteries. But the one thing I could always count upon as still being the same was the old bridge. And now it, too, will soon be gone. With it will go one of my last ties to a freer time, a time when to a five-year-old, who was blissfully unaware of what a depression was and with no realization of the complexities of life that lay ahead, life was simple and merely to be enjoyed. That naive sense of innocence I regain, if for only a fleeting moment each time I cross the bridge, will be forever lost when the bridge on Route 111 near Chesterfield goes.

I fully understand, of course, highway safety takes precedence over sentimental misty memories of an aging nostalgic. What must be done will be done. This is the price we must pay for living. Cars and trucks will continue to cross the small creek on the new bridge, but a lot of me, and perhaps a little of all of us, will be forever gone. As other bridges over other creeks are replaced, we should realize that even an old deteriorating concrete structure spanning a small obscure stream can also, for someone, harbor fading memories of better days gone by. So as the old bridge comes down, don't be surprised if someone senses the presence of a barefoot five-year-old in overalls with a willow fishing pole and two small green sunfish in an old tin can looking on sadly. Because, from somewhere, he will be.