

Photo courtesy of Michigan Department of Transportation Photography Unit



Visionary leader Prentiss M. Brown

Nowadays, we take for granted that we can drive from one Michigan peninsula to another. But a bridge across the Straits of Mackinac came into existence relatively recently and against all the odds. The Mackinac Bridge story is also the story of Prentiss Marsh Brown—a lawyer from St. Ignace who had dreamed from boyhood about a way to span the deep, cold waters of the Straits.

Although the idea of a bridge to connect the upper and lower peninsulas of Michigan had been around since the late 1800s, public support of the project was very divided for many years. People were skeptical and they believed that the bridge could not be built. It was too risky and the obstacles were overwhelming: lack of financial and legislative support, and challeng-

ing physical conditions in the Straits of Mackinac, i.e., wind, ice, geology, currents, and storms. No, it could not be done.

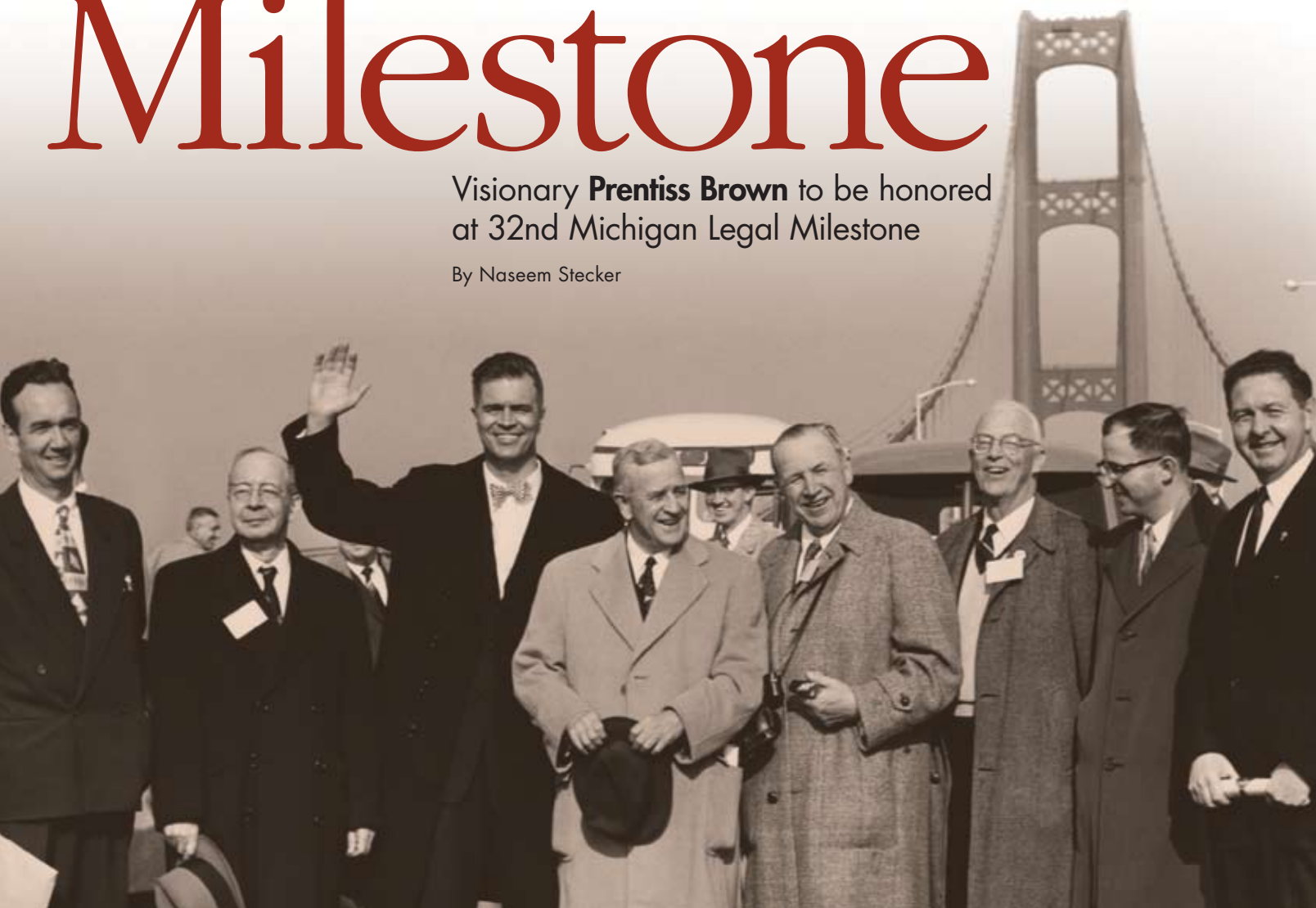
Fortunately, in the early 1950s, the tide turned. Favorable feasibility studies were completed and some of the best engineers of the time backed the project. Public Act 214 was adopted, creating the Mackinac Bridge Authority, but the legislature refused to appropriate any funds for the design, engineering, or building of the bridge, so it had to be funded by bonds. Later, when the State agreed to provide a token amount annually, there was a further stipulation that the funding had to be in place by December 31, 1953.

The man put in charge of the Mackinac Bridge Authority was Prentiss Brown. Although he had achieved prominence in his

A Mackinac Milestone

Visionary **Prentiss Brown** to be honored
at 32nd Michigan Legal Milestone

By Naseem Stecker



career first as prosecuting attorney for Mackinac County, and then in the U.S. Congress and Senate where he became a troubleshooter for President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Brown is best remembered as “the father of the Mackinac Bridge.” Without his influential leadership, many involved in the design, financing, and construction of the bridge believe that it could never have been built, or if it had, it would have been many years later and at significantly higher cost. As it turned out, the bridge was completed in 1957 at a cost of just under \$100 million.

Prentiss Brown is the subject of the State Bar 32nd Michigan Legal Milestone, an award-winning Public Outreach Committee program that honors important cases, events, or personalities in our state’s rich legal history. His accomplishments will be highlighted at a ceremony on September 28 in Grand Rapids, which will coincide with the State Bar Annual Meeting. A bronze plaque recalling Brown’s contributions will also be unveiled and later permanently placed at an appropriate location near the bridge. This year also marks the 50th anniversary of the opening of the bridge—the longest suspension bridge in the western hemisphere, and a remarkable engineering feat and work of art. It is also one of the safest bridges in the world, having a “perfectly assured aerodynamic stability for all wind velocities up to infinity.”

Together with Brown, architect and bridge engineer David B. Steinman, Michigan Governor G. Mennen Williams, and Lawrence Rubin, secretary of the Mackinac Bridge Authority, are often considered the main players in the Mackinac Bridge saga. One of their most difficult tasks was getting the funds to build the bridge. Constitutional and legislative restrictions meant that they had to sell bonds on the open market, and bond sales had to be postponed twice because the market was so bad. At the beginning of December in 1953, underwriters in New York finally agreed to put the bonds up for sale, but there was one last obstacle: State Senator Haskell Nichols filed a petition with the Michigan Supreme Court on December 16, challenging the legality of Act 214, one day before the bonds were to go on sale. To circumvent this threat, Brown and his legal team, including masterful bond at-



Left to right: Prentiss Brown, Governor G. Mennen Williams, and consulting engineer and designer of the Mackinac Bridge Dr. D. B. Steinman at the ground breaking ceremonies for the Mackinac Bridge, May 1954.

torney John H. Nunneley, then head of Miller Canfield Paddock and Stone’s bond practice, convinced the Court to hold the hearing after the sale but before the delivery of the bonds on February 17, 1954. In this way, they were able to meet the December 31 deadline. Subsequently, the Court unanimously upheld the right to sell the bonds and the funding was finally in place! It took four years to build the bridge, but more than twenty to get the project going.

In his 1956 book, *The Mackinac Bridge Story*, Brown writes:

All of us, the engineers, the contractors, the courageous high bridge workers and deep foundation men, the Legislature and the Governor are proud of this stupendous undertaking. We in the Authority are proud, too. We feel like the pioneer railroad builder who when asked, “what do you like best to do in life,” replied,

“Plan some big piece of helpful work that everybody says can’t possibly be done, and then jump in with both feet and do it.”

The Michigan landscape would be strangely deficient if these men had not “jumped in.” As the architect Steinman so eloquently put it, “The Mackinac Bridge is a triumph of science and art. It is a monument—an enduring monument—to vision, faith and courage. Without the vision, faith and courage of the people of Michigan—their leaders, their statesmen, their workers—this great bridge could never have been built. Outsoaring gravity and space, it rises from the waves on shining strands to arch across the sky in lofty grace. This is our triumph over ancient fears. A bridge of Peace, wrought of the dreams of man!” ■

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