

IN MY OPINION

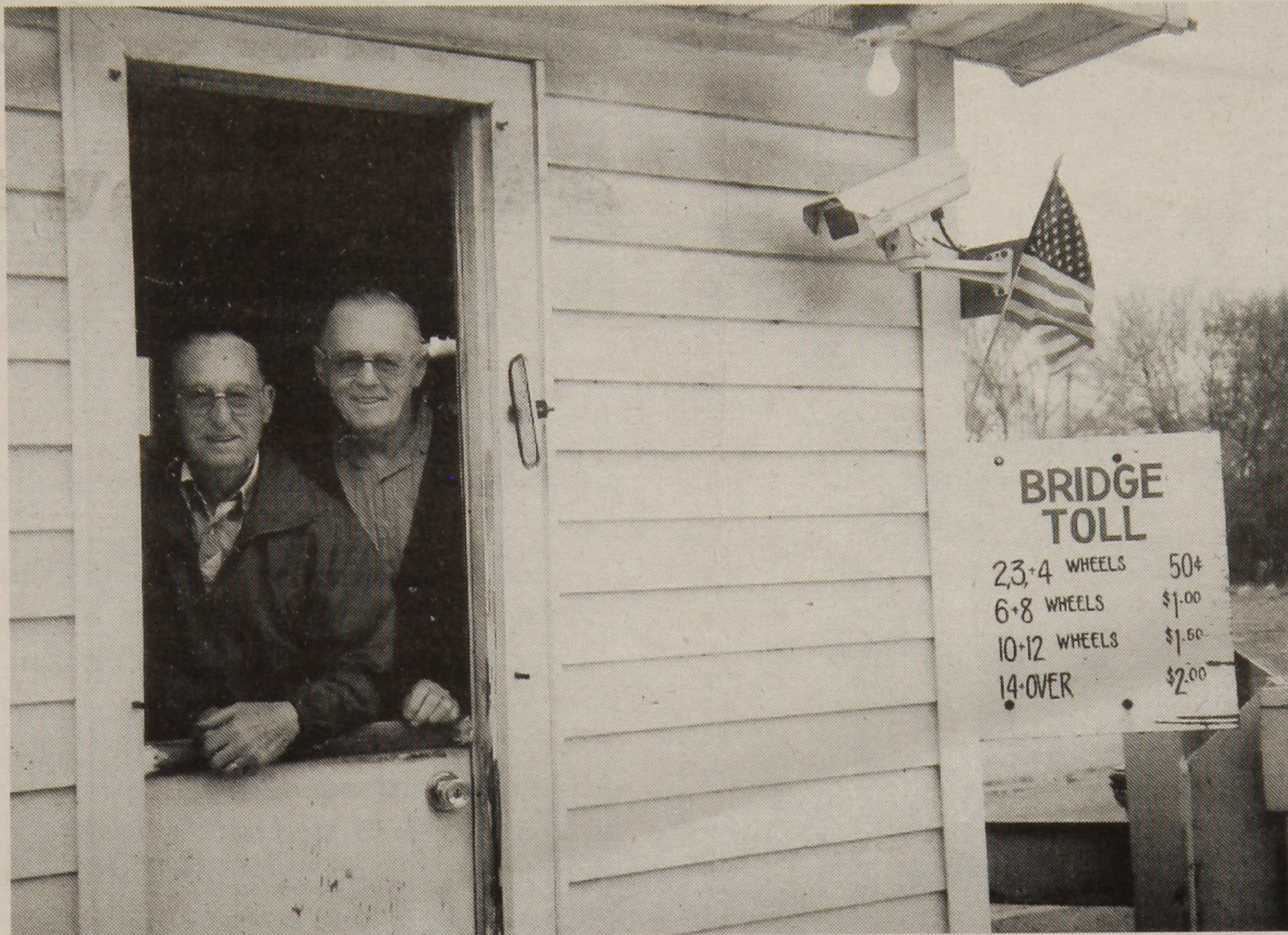
Caroline Porter

The not-so-phantom toll booth

Private bridge and toll booth thrive in Missouri

When we are looking for ways to raise money for services in the county, we should use a little imagination.

Sometime between 1987 and 1989, my husband and I were traveling from our home in Jacksonville, Ill. to visit his brother in Wayland, Iowa. We were motoring along Route 61 in Missouri and about the time we were just West of Keokuk, Iowa, Route 61 came to a halt and we found ourselves on a township road heading towards the Des Moines River, which is the state line between Missouri and Iowa. On the way



L-R, George Lee Master and Larry Broomhall manning the 67-year-old toll booth last weekend.

is a town so small it's not even listed in the atlas — St. Francisville, Mo.

Much to our surprise and amusement, as we approached the river, but out in the middle of nowhere, was a small toll booth manned by an elderly gentleman. At that point, there was no other traffic but our car. I laughed about that little toll booth then and I have been determined to get back to learn the story behind it.

This last Saturday I grabbed my camera and notebook and we drove over 100 miles one way to check out the booth. With my usual luck, the booth was still there and two gentlemen were very busy inside. When they spotted me approaching the booth in

me. But I was invited inside — and yes, it was quite cozy. My luck was compounded when one of the gentlemen informed me he is the last living person to have helped build that bridge. At 83, George Lee Master still works at the toll booth 40 hours a week and drives cars to sales three evenings a week.

The bridge across the Des Moines River is a private bridge, built in 1936 by a group of farmers who decided someone needed to solve the problem of getting across the state line. Master said that Congress passed a bill to make the bridge official, it was signed by the President and on January 1, 1937, the first car drove over. The only

The contractor was a man named Frank Whitehead. The superintendent was his brother, Charlie, and the crane operator was Frank's son, Fred. They got all their rock and sand from the Wyaconda State Park, just South of what is now Route 136 on the Wyaconda River.

Before we become any more amused at this seemingly small operation, consider the fact that at least 30 cars, trucks and semis passed on both sides of the booth while I was there. According to figures from the Missouri Department of Transportation, in the year 2000 that little toll booth operation had a balance on hand of \$830,000 and raked in \$887,000 more. The bridge is still private, but run by the Wayland (Missouri) Special Road District. Master said they also take care of about 40 miles of roads and according to a KCRG-TV Iowa City broadcast early this month, the money is used not only to maintain the bridge and roads but has paid for "things like churches and community centers."

This news article also warns that the days of the bridge and toll booth are numbered. St. Francisville will be affected by the new interstate highway, called Avenue of the Saints, which will go from St. Paul, Minn. to St. Louis. It is expected the bridge will be replaced and the booth made unnecessary by the end of this year. Local residents quoted in the article say the booth may be kept as a historical monument.

St. Francisville will be just another "Saint" on the route and it appears lots of local revenue will be lost. The booth is open around the clock except on Christmas.

Caroline Porter is a freelance writer from Galesburg who can be reached at