

# Siuslaw News Coast Life

## SENIOR NEWS CALENDAR

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# Elegant at 80

*In its 80th year, Siuslaw River Bridge still has decades to go*



PHOTO BY CHANTELE MEYER/SIUSLAW NEWS

Architect Conde B. McCullough designed the Siuslaw River Bridge in Florence and his other bridges in the art deco style popular in the 1930s.

By JACK DAVIS  
Siuslaw News

No one watching Rhododendron Festival Queen Gail Darling break a bottle of ginger ale — Prohibition was over, but Champagne was still expensive — on the Siuslaw River Bridge during the opening day ceremony, March 31, 1936, could possibly have imagined that 80 years later almost 1 million cars a year would be crossing over the iconic span.

Judy Fleagle, author of two books about the bridge said, “The Siuslaw River Bridge was the most important thing that ever happened to Florence. It changed everything.”

Prior to the bridge, foot and later car ferries transported people between Florence on the north side of the Siuslaw River to Glenada on the south side. The pilings near the gazebo off Bay Street in Old Town are the decaying remnants of the old Florence ferry dock.

In addition to having to wait until the ferry was full before it departed for the other side, ferries were subject to the elements.

“The ferry was closed at night. The ferry didn’t run if the tide was too low. The ferry didn’t run if the weather was too bad,” Fleagle said.

During the middle of the Great Depression, a visionary civil engineer named Conde B. McCullough proposed to build five bridges across the five major water obstacles along the Oregon coast.

All five of the bridges — McCullough Memorial Bridge (Coos Bay), Umpqua River Bridge (Reedsport), Siuslaw River Bridge (Florence), Alsea Bay Bridge (Waldport) and Yaquina Bay Bridge (Newport) — were constructed during the same two-year period. McCullough traveled from bridge to bridge to oversee the entire project.



SIUSLAW NEWS FILE PHOTOS

Cars await the inaugural crossing of the Siuslaw River Bridge prior to the grand opening ceremony on March 31, 1936.

McCullough designed and built a total of 10 Oregon coast bridges between the Wilson and Rogue rivers. Their unique art deco architectural design attracts visitors from around the world and is considered one of Oregon’s signature trademarks. Of the 10, the Siuslaw Bridge is the only drawbridge.

In 1936, when the 1,568-foot Siuslaw River Bridge was dedicated, Florence had a population of 350.

Despite bitter lobbying by Oregon’s lumber industry, the U.S. Army Corps of

concrete and reinforced steel.

Ironically, almost as much lumber was used in support and scaffolding during the construction of the five bridges as would have been required to build them entirely out of timber.

In all, about 1.5 million lineal feet of lumber, 10,000 cubic yards of concrete and almost 1.6 million pounds of reinforced and structural steel were used to build the Siuslaw Bridge.

**“The Siuslaw River Bridge was the most important thing that ever happened to Florence. It changed everything.”**

—JUDY FLEAGLE, LOCAL AUTHOR

Engineers, who had final control of all coastal bridges at that time, nixed the idea of wooden bridges. The corps determined that the bridges would be constructed out of



Florence’s 1936 Queen Rhododendron Gail Darling christens the Siuslaw River Bridge with a bottle of ginger ale on March 31, 1936, during the 28th year of the Rhododendron Festival.

Total cost of the bridge was \$527,068.67.

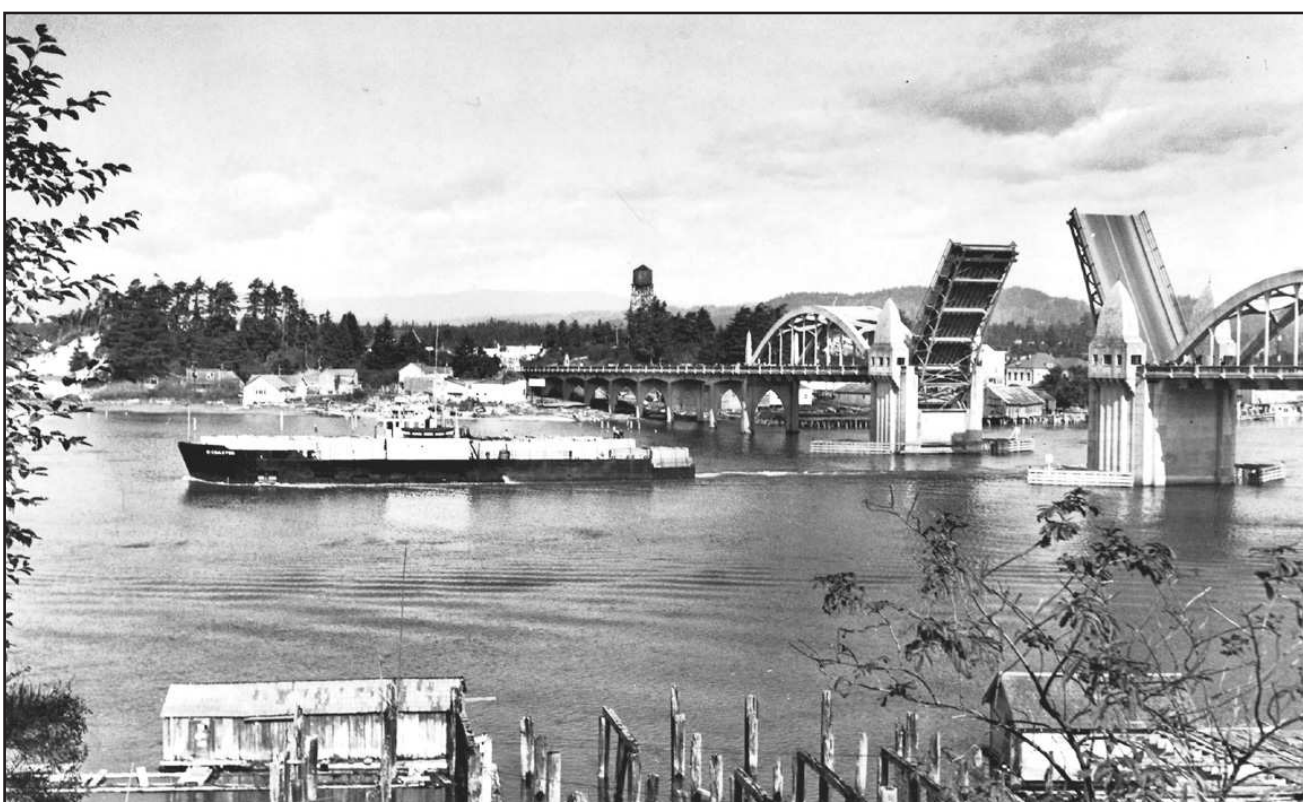
The bridge is currently undergoing two upgrades: zinc impress cathodic protection and earthquake retrofitting that will extend its life expectancy for decades into the future. The bridge is also being made more handicap and pedestrian accessible.

According to Fleagle, zinc impress cathodic protection is a recently developed process that protects the bridge’s steel reinforcement from being literally eaten up by a condition that occurs when metal, like steel, is subjected to salt water.

“The federal government doesn’t have the money to replace these bridges,” Fleagle said. “This procedure will give the bridge decades more life.”

Historical and statistical information in this article is from Fleagle’s book “Crossings, McCullough’s Coastal Bridges.”

People can visit the Siuslaw River Bridge Interpretive Center in Old Town Florence for more information on the bridge’s history.



**Of McCullough’s 10 Oregon coast bridges, only the Siuslaw River Bridge is a drawbridge, which is still operational to this day.**

BLACK  
YELLOW  
MAGENTA  
CYAN