



Clark Avenue Bridge, demolished 1980

There is an etching titled “Cleveland - Steel Mills seen from Clark Avenue Bridge, 1927” in the Cleveland Museum of Art by German-American artist Anton Schutz. Despite the plumes of smoke rising from the stacks, it is a happy, almost bucolic piece, in keeping with Schutz’s portrayals of modern, progressive American cities. Beyond the bridge there are neat factory buildings, and trees and trains and a skyline. It is a painting of industry and progress and growth, and very specifically -- as the onion domes of St. Theodosius Russian Orthodox Cathedral and the skyscrapers beyond the factory attest -- it is a painting of Cleveland: manufacturing and immigrants and a burgeoning downtown.

Schutz discovered what Clevelanders had known since 1916 when the Clark Avenue Bridge opened after four years of construction. There was no better view of the city, in all of its glory and its flaws, than from this epic steel- truss construction. Also called the Clark Pershing Bridge, it soared over the Cuyahoga River and industrial Flats, providing a panoramic view of Cleveland’s industrial epicenter.

But the Clark Avenue Bridge wasn’t just built for looks. It was a bridge with a great purpose: connecting the east and west sides of town over the Cuyahoga Valley, and connecting the industry in the Flats with the city. The city began making plans for it as early as 1901, at the urging of south side citizens.

Considered the longest spanning bridge in the country at the time, it had a total length of 6,687 feet. It was made of 10,000 tons of structural steel; 100,000 tons of earth fill; 35,000 yards of concrete; 31,000 square feet of concrete piles; 200,000 tons of wooden piles; and 700 tons of reinforcing bars. It was built in three sections. The west end connected Clark Avenue to West Third Street. In the middle, this joined a series of trusses over the B & O Railroad tracks next Quigley Avenue. The east section, which went over the river, spanned from West Third Street to Pershing Avenue. The cost of the bridge was \$1.5 million.

At the time of its opening, it was hailed for connecting the southwest and southeast sides of the city. “Long span over the Cuyahoga Valley will aid greatly in development of Flats and will fill long felt want of southside,” proclaimed a 1916 Plain Dealer headline. The bridge, which had lanes for cars, trucks and streetcars, was considered especially beneficial for the growth of industry in Cleveland. “A greater development of the manufacturing district in the Cuyahoga Valley is expected to come with the completion of the bridge,” noted the same article.

More than 60 years later, the same industry that the Clark Avenue Bridge helped spur was its downfall. Corrosive air pollution, too many layers of asphalt and the daily grind of gigantic tractor-trailers coming and going to the factories and mills took a heavy toll on the bridge by the 1970s. By that time, a trip across the bridge was literally a ride through the darkest, haziest days of polluted ‘70s Cleveland. Schutz’s inspiring view would have been completely obscured.

The crumbling bridge was closed by the city in 1978, deemed structurally unsound. It was mostly demolished in 1980, though parts of it stood until 1985. Demolition wasn’t easy, as the bridge crossed over gas and steam lines at Republic Steel and crews had to be very cautious not to set off an explosion. At first there was talk of building a new Clark Avenue bridge, but high cost and the opening of the nearby I-490 bridge made that idea obsolete. The bridge’s enormous supports still loom over Clark Avenue and Quigley Road, a monumental reminder of another era.

The above text was taken with permissions from *Lost Cleveland* (Pavilion Books, 2017), by Laura DeMarco.

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