

Viewpoints



Right-to-work: they said it

A few more thoughts about Michigan's historic move away from right-to-work, and back to embracing prevailing wage:

"It's hard to overstate the significance of this moment. Hundreds of workers showed up in Lansing again to celebrate the culmination of decades of hard work, tireless organizing, and relentless advocacy to restore workers' freedom."

"After 40 years, working people across Michigan finally have a government that puts workers first, ahead of corporate interests and the mega-rich like Betsy DeVos. Our Democratic leaders in Lansing promised to make Michigan a workers' rights state and yesterday, they delivered."

—Michigan AFL-CIO President Ron Bieber

"The swing of Michigan back into the pro-union column and the prospect of a revived UAW may both be part of the larger movement in public sentiment, which last year reached the highest approval ratings for unions (over 70 percent), as measured by both Gallup and Pew, since the mid-1960s. None of that, alas, is sufficient to restore the modicum of worker power that can only come with a vibrant union movement."

"That will require a strengthening of labor law to again give workers an unencumbered right to join unions, which business and Republican-dominated courts and administrations have stripped away over the past 60 years. That said, let's hope what's happening in Michigan this week doesn't stay just in Michigan."

—Harold Meyerson, The American Prospect

Headline: "Michigan Dems are reversing right-to-work law, putting muscle back on unions' bones"

"In addition to burying the legacy of Rick Snyder even deeper along the banks of the Flint River, overturning the right-to-work law will resonate nationally. From the Washington Post: 'It is exceedingly rare for states to overturn right-to-work laws. The Economic Policy Institute, a Washington-based think tank, said if Michigan Gov. Whitmer signs the bill into law, Michigan will be the first state to repeal a right-to-work law in nearly six decades.'"

—Charles Pierce, Esquire Magazine, March 15

Michigan "would be one of only a handful of repeals of any statewide right-to-work laws. "It's a huge deal," Jake Grumbach, a political scientist at the University of Washington who has studied the issue, told me. Currently, 27 states have such laws, including most of the South and the Great Plains, as well as Indiana and Wisconsin. Whenever Republicans control both the legislature and governorship in a state, they typically push for a right-to-work law. Yet when Democrats have taken control of a state government, they have sometimes left the law in place, as was the case in Virginia a few years ago, Grumbach noted."

—David Leonhardt, The New York Times, March 10

(Indiana has been the most recent state to repeal RTW: adopting it in 1957, repealing it in 1965, then reinstating it 2012).

Silence (perhaps in disbelief).

—The National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation, a rabidly anti-union group founded and funded to promulgate right-to-work states. Their stated mission: "to eliminate coercive union power and compulsory unionism abuses through strategic litigation, public information, and education programs." Michigan is the first time they let one get away.

The Building Tradesman welcomes your letters to the editor:

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Michigan unions savor rare wins

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(D-Battle Creek) of the House Labor Committee. "I am grateful our constituents trusted us to restore workers' freedoms and re-establish union rights. And I am thankful to all the hard-working people and unions in Michigan that make this state strong and healthy."

The statewide repeal of RTW essentially only governs workers

in private industry, public workers in Michigan and nationwide are still impacted by the Supreme Court's Janus decision 2018 that bans mandatory collection of dues from workers who choose not to pay them.

"House Democrats will always stand in solidarity with working families, and the bills that were passed today restore the power of Michigan workers,

give them the freedom to expand their rights, and deliver on our promise to put Michigan workers first," said state Rep. Regina Weiss (D-Oak Park), sponsor of the bills that eliminated the state's right-to-work law. "We are proud to stand with workers across our state and ensure that they have a seat at the bargaining table and their rights are restored."

One GOP lawmaker on

the House Labor Committee complained about the speed of the legislative process during the proceedings, while a Democrat snorted that in 2012 there were zero public hearings on RTW repeal allowed by the controlling Republican caucus.

"Decades of attacks on workers' rights have dragged down wages, weakened benefits, and exacerbated the share of wealth going to corporate elites like Betsy DeVos," said Michigan AFL-CIO President Ron Bieber. "The new pro-worker majorities in the Legislature are taking a historic step to undo this damage and restore worker freedom in Michigan."

RTW gets kick to the curb

(Continued from Page 1)

union membership numbers.

Michigan's RTW law was adopted in 2012 by a GOP majority behind closed doors and with no legislative hearings. More than 10,000 workers and supporters gathered at the Michigan Capitol Building that year to protest its passage. It was pushed through by Republican lawmakers with big-money backing from the DeVos family in Grand Rapids and the state Chamber of Commerce.

"I was here 10 years ago and thousands and thousands of people were protesting on the Capitol lawn. I just want it noted, there's not thousands of people here protesting the repeal of right to work. It's pretty clear on that," said Jonathan Byrd director of external affairs for the Michigan Laborers' District Council, testifying before the House Labor Committee on March 8.

There were union-friendly overflow crowds in both the House and Senate chambers, though. Bird added: "It really is a freeloader concept. These benefits that we administer cost a lot

of money and the folks who gain that benefit should help to pay."

The freeloader concept refers to the basic idea behind right-to-work, which allows a worker to enjoy the benefits of a union contract without paying dues. It is widely understood that RTW laws are put in place to weaken labor unions. Michigan's unionization rate dropped from 16.6 percent in 2012 to 14 percent last year.

State Sen. Darrin Camilleri (D-Trenton), who introduced the RTW repeal bill, was applauded by the overflow crowd outside the Senate hearing when he pointedly asked about the state's right to work law: "what job has this created?" He also asked what country club or other group would allow members who don't pay their

dues, while a right-to-work law requires unions to represent workers who don't pay union dues.

"Today, we are doing something no state has done in nearly 60 years," said Camilleri. "With the repeal of these worker suppression laws, workers all across our state will be able to secure better wages, benefits, and treatment at their jobs, and it will help build power in families that will last for generations, like it did for my own."

Democratic lawmakers added a \$1 million appropriation to the law banning RTW, making it more difficult to eliminate via a petition drive.

And there is likely lot more pro-worker legislation that will be up for consideration by Dems in the coming weeks.

RTW likely ain't over

(Continued from Page 1)

a petition drive would be a tough hill to climb for the GOP and whatever big-money backers fund the effort.

"It's much more common for people to vote 'no' on a ballot issue that that they may have little knowledge of," he said. "And unions are going to be out there saying, 'vote no to protect your job, or vote no so they don't lower your paycheck.' It won't be hard to create a groundswell of outrage."

Just joking

A fight broke out at a big wedding, and it was so bad that it ended up in court.

The wedding party assembled in the courtroom and the judge asked, "can anyone explain what happened?"

The best man responds, "allow me to explain. I was


the best man and I was dancing with the bride. We were dancing quite close when the groom stormed up and kicked the poor bride in the fanny!"

"I see," said the judge, looking over to the bride.

"That must have hurt!"

"Damn right!" the best man piped up, holding up a bandaged hand. "That kick broke three of my fingers!"






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BUILDING MICHIGAN: Michigan's rail bridge rarities HISTORY IN THE MAKING

By Marty Mulcahy



A FREIGHT TRAIN rumbles over the 172-foot-long Saginaw River Rail Bridge in Saginaw. The bridge's rare Abt bascule drawbridge – which no longer rises for marine traffic – is at the right side of the photo. Completed in 1944 during World War II, construction of the span and use of precious steel was a result of it being designated a “critical job” in order to move goods and materials domestically for the war effort.

It's highly unlikely that you have heard of a guy named Hugo Abt, a railroad bridge engineer who left behind some unique, made-to-last bridges in Michigan.

A civil engineer in Chicago for the American Bridge Co., “Abt believed that there was a more efficient way to construct a bascule bridge, especially for railroad service. After considerable thought, he applied for and was granted three U.S. patents, the first granted in 1921 and the basis for the bridges actually constructed,” wrote civil engineer Jeffrey D. Routson in his 2020 paper, *Hugo Abt Inventor of the Abt Bascule Bridge*.

It's also highly unlikely that you have heard of the Moveable Bridge Hall of Fame, which is the source of the above quote (and which just goes to show that there are halls of fame for just about everything).

Abt, who died in 1959, leaves a nerdy but important legacy here in Michigan. Our state is home to three of his rare bascule bridge designs – which amounts to half of those that remain on the North American continent. They have 448 years of combined service.

“Apparently very few examples of the Abt bascule bridge type were ever constructed,” says *Historic Bridges*. “John A. Schultz Jr. of Hazelet and Erdal Inc. commenting in a 1994 presentation at the fifth Biennial Symposium at Heavy Movable Structures Inc. that

there were only eight Abt bascule bridges built. Michigan however is lucky enough to have three examples.”

The other three that are still in existence are in California. “This yields a total of only six Abt bascule bridges in the entire country remaining. As such, this bascule type appears to be exceedingly rare,” *Historic Bridges* said.

Abt's first bascule span using his new design was the 162-foot-long, still-in-service Wabash Railroad bridge over the Rouge River, erected in Detroit in 1922 (which we featured in the past). He built several others in other parts of the country in the 1920s. Then, working for the Pere Marquette Railway as a client, he designed the 172-foot through-truss over the Black River in Port Huron in 1931 – a structure that today is in grave danger of demolition. Finally in 1944 he designed the still-in-service, 172-foot through-truss over the Saginaw River in Saginaw, also for the Pere Marquette.

The American Bridge Co. built bridges short and long all across the country during the last century, from the mighty Mackinac Bridge to the lowliest single lane viaduct. In their own way, rail bridges were more of a challenge than any other type of span their engineers designed. With river crossings, bridge designs often needed to carry increasingly heavy locomotives and rolling stock, while still being able to be lifted or

shifted out of the way to allow for the passage of watercraft.

One popular engineering solution: a bascule lift bridge, basically a drawbridge with the weight of the span balanced by a counterweight. Like a seesaw, this allows raising and lowering of the bridge span with relatively little energy.

The patented bascule design by Abt most visibly features a “basket” style counterweight that lifts the span's leaf to allow for passage of marine traffic. Made from riveted steel plate, it had a bucket design with the open area facing upward, making it easy to pour concrete into the basket during construction.

But the bridge style also separated the weight of the counterweight and the bascule leaf so that the bridge weight was not focused on a single pier or abutment. This allowed for the use of lighter structural steel. While other “fixed trunnion” style bascule bridges of the era used a fixed rotating pinion gear directly attached to the leaf, Abt's design further spread out the span's weight with a rotating motor-operated pinion gear moving along a stationary frame. The “motor carriage” moves along with the pinion gear during bridge operation.

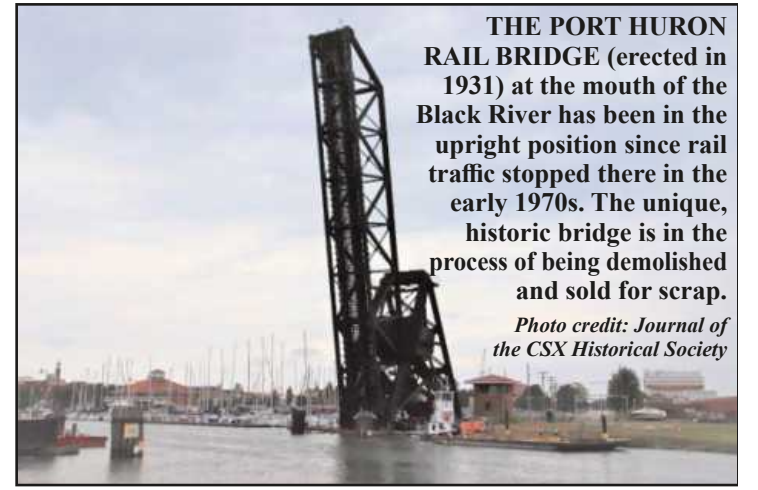
Importantly, this design also made it possible to build an Abt bascule bridge along the existing track alignment of a bridge that's being replaced, without affecting train traffic.

The bridge would be constructed on the opposite side of the river as the existing bascule bridge, and it would be constructed in the raised position, and lowered into place when complete. Train traffic would drive under the counterweight, and through the construction, which would all have been occurring overhead and out of the way.

Port Huron's Abt-designed bridge hasn't spanned the Black River since 1973, when rail traffic no longer needed to cross the river. The bridge's leaf was permanently moved into the upright position, but it is on land that was purchased a decade ago by the Port Huron Yacht Club. The group wants to build an observation tower on the site, sell the bridge for scrap, and has applied for a demolition permit to the Army Corps of Engineers.

“The bridge serves as a visual landmark of the entrance to the Black River and a reminder of Port Huron's rich railroad history. Would they want to tarnish their reputation as a community partner by destroying a national (historic) site for money?” asked The Friends of the Pere Marquette Railroad Bridge. Media reports say a final decision on the bridge's fate seems imminent.

The Saginaw Bridge, the final use of Abt's design, still carries CSX rail traffic over the Saginaw River, although its bascule leaf is now permanently fixed in the down position on the east end of the bridge. And its steel is a different design, perhaps a reflection of being constructed during World War II. *Historic Bridges* called it “a good example of the transition from v-laced and latticed



THE PORT HURON RAIL BRIDGE (erected in 1931) at the mouth of the Black River has been in the upright position since rail traffic stopped there in the early 1970s. The unique, historic bridge is in the process of being demolished and sold for scrap.

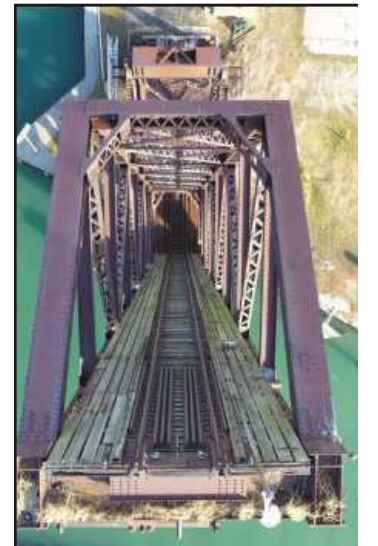
Photo credit: Journal of the CSX Historical Society

built-up beams to a more plain built-up box beam that feature only punched holes. The mechanics of the bascule span are very much like the Port Huron Railroad Bridge.”

Looking back at the Abt/American Bridge design in a 1989 article, the *Engineering News Record* said the legacy of the Rouge River, Port Huron and Saginaw River rail bridge designs was perhaps more important to the people building it at the time. The fact that they provided decades of dependable service has been a bonus.

“A type of bascule bridge was developed with replacement of existing bridges in mind,” said *Engineering News Record*. “The Abt, or American Bridge type of bascule, was designed by Hugo Abt to avoid interference with traffic while building a new bridge on an existing alignment. The Abt bridge counterweight moves in the opposite direction to a normal bascule counterweight and does not foul the approach when in the open position as a bascule with an overhead counterweight usually does.”

A group of Port Huron



ADRONE VIEW looking down the Port Huron Rail Bridge.

Photo credit: Friends of the Pere Marquette Railroad Bridge

historic preservationists has maintained its campaign to keep their Black River bridge in place. “The bridge is historically significant because it represents an unusual, rare, patented bridge design,” says online magazine *Port Huron Healthy Living*, “and, as such demonstrates, the creativity and ingenuity of bridge engineers of the past.”



THE FIRST ABT/American Bridge bascule drawbridge design in Michigan, and the country, was built over the Rouge River in Detroit in 1922. Now framed by the I-75 bridge, iron workers renovated the still-active rail bridge for Norfolk-Southern last year.

Photo credit: Building Tradesman file



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Outdoors Our happy little trees



Brian Dunn, park supervisor at Port Crescent State Park in the Thumb, holds a Happy Little Trees sign before its permanent installation in the park's campground. MDNR photo

By Michelle O'Kelly
Parks and Recreation Division
Michigan Department of
Natural Resources

The Happy Little Trees program began in 2019, during Michigan's state park centennial celebration, as an initiative to brand a partnership between the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and the Michigan Department of Corrections.

Each year, the DNR collects seeds from native tree species in state parks and takes them to correctional facilities to be planted. The seedlings that are produced are cared for by prison inmates.

When the trees grow to approximately 5 feet tall, they are transported back to state parks to be planted to replace diseased and damaged trees.

The DNR approached Bob Ross, Inc. to get permission from the late how-to painter's company to name the DNR/DOC program "Happy Little Trees."

The program's name is a tribute to the American artist and TV

host Bob Ross who was known for his painting of landscapes and his gentle demeanor. Ross, who died in 1994 at age 52, starred in the television program "The Joy of Painting," which aired from 1983 to 1994 on PBS in the U.S.

Ross often talked about "happy little trees" while teaching people how to paint them. The premise of the DNR/DOC's program "Happy Little Trees" was that the trees would be able to happily leave correctional facilities to live in a state park.

Joan Kowalski, executive director of Bob Ross, Inc., gladly accepted the DNR proposal and claimed, "Bob would have loved this."

The DNR/DOC's partnership has produced more than 100,000 native plants, shrubs and trees since its start in 2014. With support from the Bob Ross partnership, more than 2,100 trees have been planted within 20 Michigan state parks.

The initial partnership between DNR, DOC and Bob Ross,

Inc. was intended to solicit volunteers to plant trees in the parks. Volunteers received "Happy Planting" T-shirts that featured a Bob Ross image as well as commemorated the DNR centennial celebration.

With an overwhelming outpouring of people wanting to help, we knew we had a special concept. Later that first year, we decided to do a fundraiser for the program.

The concept of "Run for the Trees 5K" was born. All proceeds support tree planting and forest protection efforts, including invasive plant and forest pest management and early invasive pest detection surveys in Michigan state parks.

It was anticipated the DNR would host a small 5K in one of the state parks with a couple hundred people. A notice went out to gauge interest in the 5K run/walk event, and more than 20,000 people wanted to participate.

The DNR quickly pivoted from an in-person event to a

virtual event to accommodate requests to participate from all over the world.

In April 2020, the first "Run for the Trees 5K" took place. With 19,500 participants, running, walking and hiking, we covered all 50 states and several countries.

Friends and families participated, and even if they were unable to gather together because of the coronavirus pandemic, it gave them a sense of togetherness and purpose. It was quickly decided to make the Run for the Trees an annual event.

The event saw another 18,000 participants in 2021 and 14,000 in 2022. Registration is still open for the 2023 event, and we are quickly approaching another 10,000 participants.

Participants are encouraged to complete their 5K over the time span between April 22 and April 28, approximately between Earth Day and Arbor Day each year.

The program has raised over \$1 million dollars since it started.

Wanting to "share the love" with other states, the DNR has embarked on a partnership in 2023 that will allow the agency to donate proceeds from the event to other states.

Now, when participants register, they can pick from five states their race proceeds can go to. South Carolina, Wisconsin,

Ohio and Indiana have joined Michigan in the program in hopes of receiving proceeds to support stewardship efforts in their states.

The need for tree protection knows no boundaries, and the mission is to have this event support trees across the United States within the next couple of years.

Due to demand, registration was extended to March 17, and participants can still sign up at runsignup.com/bobross5k. Packets will ship before the end of the month and will include a commemorative T-shirt, bib number and finisher's medal in time for the April event.

Participants are encouraged to get outdoors and complete their 5K by walking, running or hiking on their favorite trail or at their favorite state park and to submit photos on the DNR's website and social media by tagging #runforthetrees, #bobross5k and #mistateparks.

The success of this event has been realized by not only those who love to be active outdoors, but also by those who are looking for a cool experience to share with friends and family, those who are inspired by Bob Ross's gentle nature and love of trees, and those who want to make a positive difference for future generations to come.

Learn more about the Happy Little Trees program at Michigan.gov/DNRHappyLittleTrees.

Much to like about revival of prevailing wage

(Continued from Page 1)

Director Lee Graham: "When the state repealed prevailing wage it undermined the very safety and training elected officials said they valued. By lowering the standards and wages in construction, the message was clear: Michigan businesses and Michigan workers aren't worth it."

The new law, which at press time still needed a few details to be worked out between the House and Senate, has the Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity (LEO) setting the prevailing wage rates and fringe benefits for those in the skilled trades on a state building project. It is "substantively the same" as the 1965 bill that was tossed aside in 2018, according to the House Fiscal Agency.

Detroit IBEW Local 58 Registrar Jeannette Bradshaw, speaking on behalf of the IBEW State Conference, told the Labor Committee: "Prevailing wage laws are clearly best for the construction industry the best for taxpayers and create more paths for a middle class living for workers."

Neil Parish, executive director of the Michigan Chapter of the National Electrical Contractors Association, testified on behalf of their network of 300 small businesses before the Senate Labor Committee on March 14. He said prevailing wage is a "vital protection" for worker and small businesses in Michigan.

He was followed by Battle Creek's Motor Shop Electric President John Banks, a union contractor who urged the reinstatement of prevailing wage. He said he is often approached by local business owners about completing projects started by low-bidding, low-skilled contractors who simply abandon jobs they start. "I am the guy they call when it comes to finishing projects started with unskilled labor," he said.

State's road repair tab is going to sting, group says

(Continued from Page 1)

between \$285 to \$535 every year to fund the repairs.

Funding solutions have proven elusive. Early in her administration, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer floated the idea of instituting a 45-cent per gallon gas tax – an unpopular idea that she withdrew in favor a limited, one-time \$3.5 billion bond issue to be repaid over 25 years. But other solutions have proven elusive.

To meet the funding gap, PSC said they examined five potential options "that have been considered and implemented by other states and countries." They include variations on fuel tax hikes; increasing the apportionment of sales tax for transportation; allowing local governments to charge their own sales tax, and instituting mileage-based user charges, which would seem to be more widely directed at electric vehicle owners.

"The greatest use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it."

—William James (1842 - 1910)

"Whenever you commend, add your reasons for doing so; it is this which distinguishes the approbation of a man of sense from the flattery of sycophants and admiration of fools."

—Sir Richard Steele (1672-1729)

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