

The Darwin Ferry

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The Darwin Ferry was established in 1818 by a man named John McClure. This is why it was first called "McClure's Bluff." Today it is named after the famed author and naturalist Charles Darwin. The ferry has been operating for more than 140 years. It has made Darwin one of the major key points in Illinois for many years. The ferry has been at this location for about 60 years. When the ferry began its operation in 1818, there were almost 30 ferryboats on the Wabash River at the time. Today it is the only ferry left operating on the river.

The main reason the ferry began to operate was to benefit farmers. This was so that the farmers could save time and cut down on their expenses. Since it was 24 miles upstream to Terre Haute, Indiana, and 20 miles downstream to Hutsonville, Illinois, the ferry saved farmers many miles and hours. Many people used to love to go down and eat on the picnic tables and also went to fish, boat, and ride the ferry for enjoyment.

Today, the ferry not only attracts farmers, but tourists as well. It provides the only method of crossing the Wabash River.

Over the years, the ferry has had many operators. Some of them are William Hilbert, Andy Burkley, Everett Newton, Bert Whitkanack, Herb Bash, Roy Hewitt, Ted Sneverly, Clint Creed, Burt Henry, Chet Creed, Charlie Lathrop, Jesse Lathrop, James Lathrop, Clarence Lathrop, Dewey Overmeyer, Addison Gabey, Bill Miller, and Ronnie Clark. The longest ferry operator was Clarence Lathrop (November 2, 1910--March 19, 1994) who operated for 20 years (1962-1982). The Darwin Ferry has been the Lathrop's family heritage. Before Clarence Lathrop took over, his two brothers, Charlie and Jessie, used to run it. His great-uncle, James Lathrop, operated it before them. As an operator, Clarence Lathrop was required to pass a license examination on boats and navigation from the Coast Guard. "The two biggest problems," he said, "I ever came across was the ice in the winter, and the hippies, who tried to get by without paying for the service." He would tell them, "If it's not worth a dollar to cross the ferry, then, it's not worth a dime." For the time he operated the ferry he said, "I crossed almost 60,000-70,000 bushels of grain per year, working every day from 6:00 A.M. to 7:00 P.M." Some of the other things he took over were oil pumps, oil tanks, old tractors, pay loaders, combines, trucks, cars, and even motorcycles. Almost anything could be taken across, with the exception of bulldozers. Many of the past senators and representatives of the State of Illinois and Indiana have even ridden across the Wabash River on the Darwin Ferry.

The ferry has been rebuilt many times over the past years. In 1968, a new ferry was built by Warren and Larry Wells at the cost of 10,000 dollars. It had a life expectancy of 20 years, although it sank twice in the fall of 1987. The recent ferry today was built about 10 years ago in

April of 1988, by Larry Lindley. It took many accidents and for it to have sunk twice before the farmers decided on a new ferry. The new ferry was built in approximately one year at a cost of 30,000 dollars. It is made of all steel, including 65 miles of welding wire. It weighs 32 tons and is three feet tall and 20 feet wide. It is expected to last for about three decades. The boat still hauls grain and farm equipment across the Wabash River for farmers today. It is powered by a push boat with a motor attached to the side. The ferry is attached to the cables that run across the river. The cables are attached to a pole on the Illinois side and a tree on the Indiana side. It has two wheels, for lowering and raising the ramps for on and off use.

Today it costs \$1 per person to ride on the ferry. Back in 1833, prices varied. For a wagon and five horses or oxen, it cost \$1.00; for a wagon and four horses or oxen, it cost \$.75; for a wagon and three horses or oxen, it cost \$.62 1/2; for a wagon and two horses or oxen, it cost \$.50; for a wagon and one horse or oxen, it cost \$.37 1/2; for a man and a horse, it cost \$.12 1/2 cents; for every man on foot or for every head on neat cattle, it cost \$.06 1/4 cents; and for every head of sheep or hogs, it cost \$.02 cents.

The Darwin Ferry is not the only highlight or known history of the town of Darwin. This small town, at one time, had a large distillery that made whiskey. Although the name is unknown, it was located two miles north of town. The location of the distillery not only brought business to the Darwin Ferry, but also brought business to the local farmers as well. The distillery bought a lot of grain from the farmers and was generally a small town operation, since it had everything it needed to operate on within two miles of its location.

Darwin once had a courthouse and held the county seat until they were both moved to Marshall, Illinois. Since this happened, Darwin has grown smaller over the years and lost a lot of the businesses that once made it a hot spot of commerce.

Today there are only three main businesses that keep the town of Darwin running. Bunker Hill Fertilizer, which is managed by Harry Dean Huffington, keeps area farmers in fertilizers. Another business which is very well-known and supplies gravel to many people and businesses of Illinois and surrounding states is Lawrence Gravel. This is owned and operated by Everett Lawrence & Family of Marshall, Illinois. The last of the businesses is owned and operated by Dewey Overmeyer and Emery Elliott, who are known for their professional fishing and also own a small business that sells many varieties of fish to people from Terre Haute, Indiana, Indianapolis, Indiana, Danville, Illinois, and even customers from Cincinnati, Ohio.

Over the years there has even been a song written about the Darwin Ferry:

About twenty-five miles south of Terre Haute

Sits the tired old Darwin Ferry boat

She's on one side of the Wabash....or the other.

Where the moonlight's bright as night
But not a sycamore in sight
And no bridge to take even if you'd druther.

In 1818 she was given the chore
Of carrying folks from the Illinois shore
To the Hoosier side of the Wabash River.
Through the rain and sleet and snow
Always waiting there to go
For the men and gear she'd promised to deliver.

Many years have gone by, but she's still there
With her simple offering that's snow so rare,
For the bridges have replaced most of these vessels.
And when it's time to say goodbye
Every eye will not be dry,
And the cause will be the gap where she now nestless.

Chorus

Oh that Darwin Ferry, the Darwin ferry,
Though the years have passes her by,
For a dollar bill, you can ride her still
If the river ain't too high.

Yes, the Darwin Ferry's a tired old gal,
But she chugs along with her pride,
Like a mother hen, and brood of one,
With that little skiff by her side.

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