Built for $32,000 in 1903, the Schell Bridge in Northfield is slated for demolition — a $300,000 job.

Losing a bridge to the past

After nearly nine decades, Schell Bridge to disappear

By DICHE DAVIS

The bridge nearly disappeared amid all the others recently: "State says it will dismantle Northfield’s Schell Bridge."

Of course, we know better to disbelieve much of what the state says, just on general principle. But if the commonwealth of Massachusetts ever gets the funding together, its Department of Public Works has plans to reduce the turn-of-the-century iron structure to merely a piece of history.

The 900-foot-long bridge spanning the Connecticut River is already a hefty hunk of history. Francis Robert Schell gave the town $20,000 to build it as an "enduring memorial" to his mother and father.

Rose Johnston of the Northfield Historical Commission said Schell built the bridge to replace one downstream that carried trains as well as horse traffic.

Northfield, the only Massachusetts town split by the Connecticut River, had been trying since the 1960s to get state or federal assistance in fixing the bridge, which was built to handle 10 tons of traffic.

But in January 1985, selectmen gave up the struggle, and the bridge — its trusses and plates rusted, its bearings corroded, its braces buckled — was closed.

Despite a lobbying effort by residents, town officials and legislators, the state couldn’t justify the cost of repairs, estimated in 1984 as up to $1.5 million to bring the bridge up to 1968 standards. A new bridge, it was esti-
Schell Bridge to disappear

By RICHIE DAVIS

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But in January 1965, selectmen gave up the struggle, and the bridge — its trusses and plates rusted, its bearings corroded, its bridge house — was closed.

Despite a lobbying effort by residents, town officials and legislators, the state couldn't justify the cost of repairs, estimated in 1965 as up to $1.5 million to bring the bridge up to 1965 standards. A new bridge, it was estimated, would cost $2 million. 

Not only has the bridge been closed since then, but barricades have kept pedestrians and bicyclists from using it as a link between the east side and west side of town.

The Legislature has appropriated more than $300,000 to demolish the bridge — it costs the town $3,000 a year to maintain it, a fraction of what repairs would have cost.

At one point, according to the town history, motorists were greeted at the bridge with a frightening sign: "Bridge closed to trucks and buses — other vehicles enter at own risk with order of selectmen."

If that wasn't enough to send fear into my heart as I crossed the rattling bridge when I lived in town several years back, there was the panic of spotting a car in my rearview mirror that had followed right behind me onto the structure, so that we — and the weight of our rigs — were testing fate together. I'd always wondered what the view was like at the water's edge, but not from a car at this close range.

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The Schell Chateau, a summer home for two completed in 1903 for about $3 million by Schell, was a French-style castle, with turrets and galleries, rising five stories high. Sold after Schell's death in 1929, now the Northfield Mont Vernon School, the 89-room mansion with a unique double-spiral staircase, cross-shaped chapel and brocaded walls, was eventually converted into an arena to the Northfield Inn, where conferences and proms were held.

Too expensive to maintain, the Chateau began to deteriorate, and by the early 1960s, it was too structurally unsafe, in 1966. Its furnishings were auctioned off for $1,700 — perhaps the price today of two of its chairs alone; it's been observed — and the magnificent landmark was razed.

The 123-room inn, built by Northfield Mount Vernon founder, evangelist Dwight L. Moody in 1888 to accommodate visitors to his summer bible conferences, didn't get a liquor license until 1969. But it had no trouble attracting notable guests like President Theodore Roosevelt, Amelia Earhart, Henry Cabot Lodge and William Jennings Bryan.

Then, a decade after the neighboring Chateau was torn down, the inn's own financial problems became apparent, leading to its demolition as well. After a long search for a suitable buyer — with prospects including the town and a meditation group — the inn was closed in November 1976 and was razed four months later.

Surely Schell Bridge, which squawked and shook every time a car traversed it, had little of the magnificence of the chateau or the inn. But in fact, it was determined eligible for the state register of historic landmarks.

It's noteworthy that the cost of destroying these structures costs as much as, or more than, building them. With a little dynamite, with a wrecker's ball, these treasures that have stood for years can be eradicated in a matter of minutes. Given the enormous costs today and the little attention we devote to the future, we know that nothing of similar grandeur will ever take their place.

The fact that we could allow the Schell bridge, like the inn and the Chateau, to be destroyed shows that we also pay little homage to the past. In passing — like those of the two grand buildings — marks the loss of another tangible piece of a town's fascinating, colorful history.