

'Bridge is like my child'

Former engineer is proud that Penang Bridge has turned 25

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IT'S virtually impossible to throw a party along the traffic-choked Penang Bridge nowadays but 80-year-old Liaw Yew Peng could fondly recall attending one 25 years ago.

And the bridge project's former chief resident engineer could still remember that glorious night when they literally "shaved their hair down" after three-and-a-half years of hard work and sacrifices.

"We were partying all night long on the bridge," said Liaw with a tinge of nostalgia.

Liaw said they had then attended a scrumptious dinner along the 13.5km bridge shortly before it was opened to traffic in Sept 1985.

He was among some 60,000 people who were invited to walk across the RM850mil bridge on Sept 8, 1985 before it was opened to the public on Sept 14 by the then Deputy Prime Minister Tun Musa Hitam.

Liaw, who still keeps the 25-year-old invitation card, was appointed the project's deputy chief resident engineer in September 1982 before being promoted to chief resident engineer in December 1985.

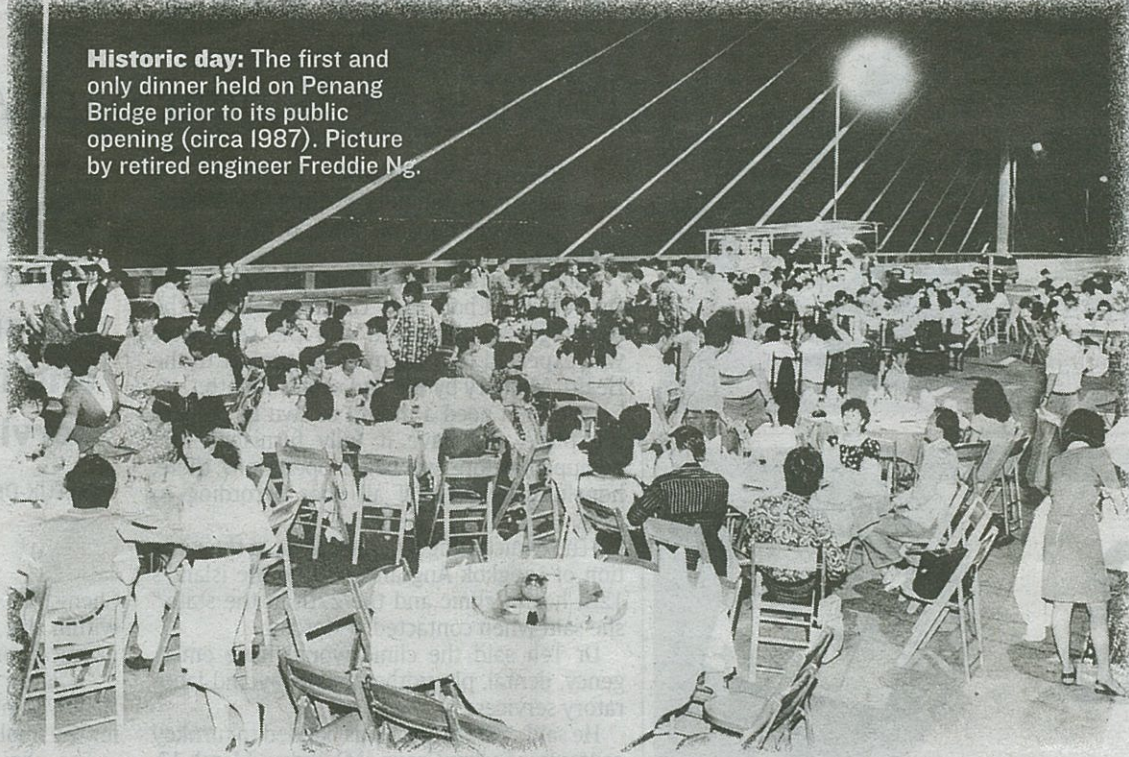
His work included work supervision, contract administration, monitoring physical and financial progress, recruitment of field personnel and liaison with employer's representative on contractual and financial matters.

Preliminary work including designing the bridge by the late Tan Sri Prof Chin Fung Kee, a well known authority on geotechnical engineering, began as early as the 1980s but actual construction only started in April 1982.

"I still have all the drawings, microfilming and photos taken with me. The bridge is like my own child," he told *The Star* in an interview yesterday.

This year, Penang Bridge Sdn Bhd celebrates the bridge's 25th anniversary since its

Historic day: The first and only dinner held on Penang Bridge prior to its public opening (circa 1987). Picture by retired engineer Freddie Ng.



My story: Liaw (left) showing one of the write-ups he wrote in a bulletin on his experience as an engineer to Lim.

official opening in 1985.

Liaw described the anniversary as like seeing his son turning 25 after the hard work, love and sacrifices by some 3,000 Malaysian workers and more than 100 Korean workers.

"Every time I cross the bridge, it is like a walk down memory lane. I could still remember seeing them so dedicated to their work when I went to check on the work progress at 2am.

"I feel proud to be part of the team involved in joining Penang island to the mainland, although I still have to pay the toll," he quipped.

Liaw was, however, upset when the authorities decided to change the steel bar cable at the midspan into wire strand cable.

"The steel bar cable has gone through various load test and is filled up with cement in a big pipe covered with a sleeve. It is supposed to last for 120 years and won't crack.

"Still, working on the project was the happiest time of my life. Everyone, be it the employer, engineers or contractors, worked as a team with no conflict.

"We knew our duty well and everything went on smoothly. Blood, sweat and tears were shed on the project. Nine lives

were lost during its construction," he said when met at state Public Works, Utilities and Transportation Committee chairman Lim Hock Seng's office in Komtar.

Asked what the team's biggest challenge was, Liaw said it was time and money.

"We had to finish it on time with no extra cost incurred.

"But I'm proud that not only did we manage to finish the project within the stipulated time frame, we even managed to save RM110mil from the budgeted sum," he said.

Liaw also said they decided to build three lanes at the midspan only due to the low traffic flow at that time and to leave the remaining part of the bridge for the future.

With the expansion on the Penang Bridge's third lane, which opened in August last year, the bridge could now accommodate 155,000 vehicles a day compared to 120,000 before the expansion project.

Lim said credit must given to the far-sighted leaders in making the bridge construction a reality.

"They were able to foresee an increase in traffic volume in years to come but it is a pity that the state government's initial 15% equity in 1993 in Mekar Idaman Sdn Bhd was lost when the company wound up.

"That resulted in the state losing its say on any decision pertaining to the bridge.

"We also feel disappointed as to why there was no isolated motorcycle lane like the Butterworth-Kulim Expressway made on the bridge," he said.

Lim added that Penang Bridge had spurred tremendous economic growth to the state over the years.

Taking shape: A photo supplied by Penang Bridge Sdn Bhd showing Penang Bridge construction work in progress.

