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HISTORIC CLOSING: The last automobile to cross the Waldo Hancock Bridge on Saturday in Prospect is a 1915 Model T Ford driven by Mark Wetherbee of Stockton Springs. The bridge was officially closed to traffic after the Model T passed over.

K. J. BUCKSPORT 12/31/06 85 years later, bridge closes

By TOM BELL
Blethen Maine Newspapers

BUCKSPORT — Eugene Churchill walked across the Waldo-Hancock Bridge on the day it opened for traffic for the first time. That was in 1931, and he was 10 years old.

On Saturday, the 85-year-old from Orland joined the crowd that gathered on another span, the Penobscot Narrows Bridge, built to replace the original.

"There is marvelous construction work on the new bridge," shouted Churchill as a convoy of fire trucks and other emergency response vehicles, all blaring their sirens, drove across the bridge, followed by private vehicles. The parade, which followed a ribbon-cutting ceremony, marked the official opening of the \$85-million bridge.

Several minutes later, a parade of antique cars, all honking their horns, crossed the Waldo-Hancock Bridge. An old Ford Model T was the last to cross. Then a tractor lifted some concrete barriers and placed them at the entrance to the bridge, closing it for good.

For some in the crowd, Saturday's events were bittersweet. The Waldo-Hancock bridge, a graceful, old-style suspension bridge, was a beloved landmark, said Pam Smith, a retired Bucksport teacher.

"We're going to miss the old bridge," she said. But with its suspension cables rusting, its paint peeling and concrete



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IT'S OFFICIAL: Maine Department of Transportation employee Ryan Corum, of Belgrade, slides a barricade across the Waldo Hancock bridge entrance Saturday as the Penobscot Narrows Bridge, right, was officially opened to vehicular traffic.

crumbling, repairing it would have been too expensive, engineers concluded three years ago.

The community didn't want to replace it with a standard bridge. They pressured politicians to give them something out of the ordinary. And that's what they got.

The new bridge is 2,120 feet long, and its two towers rise 420 feet above the river, about a third the height of the Empire State Building. One tower houses an observatory that will hold about 48 visitors at a time and offers 100-mile views.

Built by Cianbro Corp. and Reed & Reed Inc., the bridge is held up by a single plane of

web-like suspension cables which are attached at the middle of the bridge rather than the edges.

There are only three bridges in the world like it — the others are in Thailand and Slovakia.

The design of the new structure has won national recognition from several sources, including Roads & Bridges magazine, which recently named the Penobscot Narrows Bridge No. 17 of the top 25 bridges of all time.

State and local officials and business leaders hope that the observation tower will draw visitors and in turn boost the local economy.