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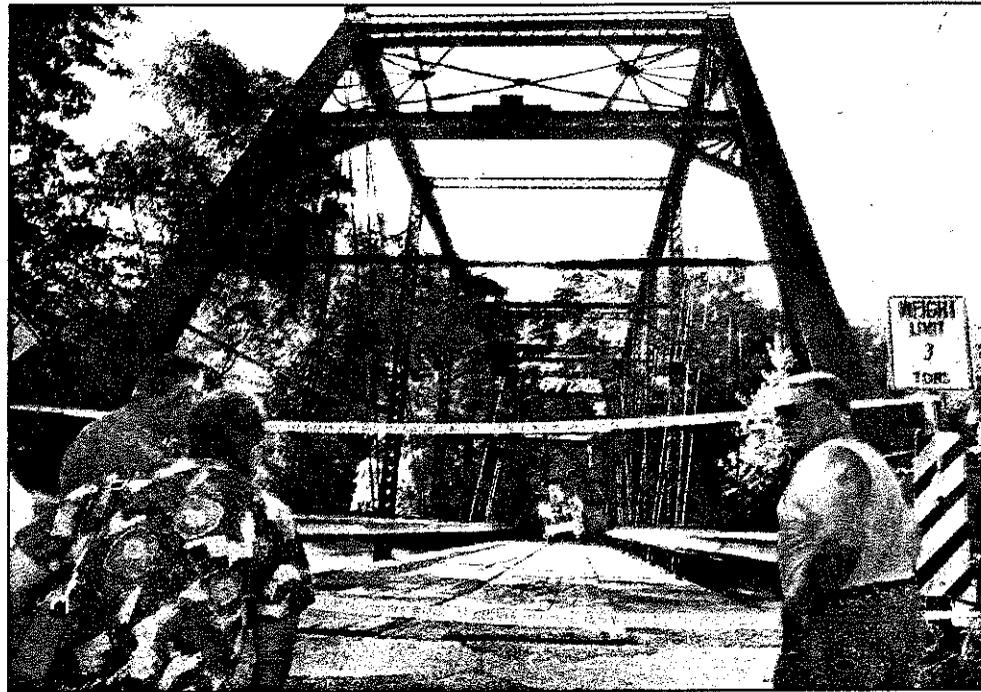
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Delphi residents look at the Hamilton Street Bridge this morning. The south end of the 'Whipple truss' bridge dropped into Deer Creek Sunday night when a bucket on a PSI Energy truck caught a crossmember of the structure.

Delphi Bridge Collapses

◆ 1891 structure buckles under the weight of PSI Energy truck

By **HEATHER NAVA**
Pharos-Tribune Staff

DELPHI — When Delphi Mayor Sam Deiwert approached the Hamilton Street Bridge from the north Sunday night, he couldn't see the damage.

In the darkness, the 104-year-old bridge looked intact. "I couldn't tell anything was wrong," Deiwert said this morning.

But he had only to go to the other side of the bridge to see that the damage was extensive.

"The south portal was just a mangled mess," he said.

The first 20 feet at the south end of the "Whipple truss" bridge, built in 1891 and owned by Carroll County, is sitting in Deer Creek, the victim of a PSI Energy bucket

truck.

The truck was in excess of 10 tons, Deiwert said, considerably over the bridge's posted three-ton weight limit. The truck also violated the posted eight-foot clearance limit.

"I would almost have felt better if a tornado or flood would've taken it out. For this to happen out of someone's negligence is just very hard to take," the mayor said.

The truck, driven by Thomas J. Higbee, 41, Lafayette, tried to cross the bridge at about 11:15 p.m. when the bucket on it caught the crossmember of the structure, causing the south end of the bridge to drop into the creek with the truck still on it, Deiwert said.

"The truck was in the area because a residential customer was experiencing some problems with a transformer," said Burch Hancock, PSI Energy's northwest regional manager.

As far as PSI's financial responsibility to

Carroll County or any disciplinary action against Higbee, it was too soon for Hancock to remark.

"It's a little early to make any comments in that area. That will all come some time later, as far as discussions with our internal people and Carroll County go. Our internal investigation will no doubt determine the facts as they are," Hancock said.

Today, the truck remains in the creek, surrounded by bridge debris. Higbee suffered lacerations on his head, and complained of back pain. He was taken to Home Hospital, Lafayette, where he was listed in fair condition this morning.

"To my opinion, there's just no excuse. From what I understand, this gentleman was from the area at one time. I would assume that he should have been familiar with the area," Deiwert said.

The mayor said that there had been two PSI trucks in the area Sunday night. The

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◆ Bridge

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workers were on their way to Hardee's to take a break, but the two vehicles took different routes to the restaurant, he said.

But Deiwert cannot figure out why Higbee chose the Hamilton Street course. "I haven't got a credible story from him at this point," he said.

The bridge, valued at \$100,000 by the Carroll County Sheriff's Department, is most likely a total loss, Deiwert said.

"When one end fell into the creek, it obviously put stress on the rest of the structure; plus, they're going to have to take the truck out of there. They're going to have to take it up the roadway of the bridge that's left. Then, I don't know."

The mayor said some parts of the bridge, such as the commemorative plates and ornaments, can be salvaged.

Deiwert and many others from the Delphi community had united over the last couple of years to save the bridge, which the Carroll County Commissioners had originally voted to demolish.

"I'm extremely disappointed. There are literally thousands of hours in this effort, not only by myself, but by many others as well," Deiwert said.

As recently as Feb. 24, 1995, a committee offered a solution to both save the old bridge and create a safe passage for emergency vehicles over the creek.

The plan was to install a new bridge west of the existing Hamilton Street Bridge, with new road alignment and a new intersection. Everyone who heard the plan agreed it was the best solution.

"The county had finally conceded to look at a new route. So now, I don't know what that does to all those plans," Deiwert said.

Ironically, Deiwert had received notice from the state last week that \$175,000 to rehabilitate the bridge was on the way. The bridge also was in the process of being placed on the National Register of Historic Landmarks.

Although the structure may physically be at complete loss, Deiwert tried to find the silver lining.

"(This bridge) has shown that for worthwhile causes, a community can make a difference when it wants to. We're going to miss that thing. A lot of sentiment is attached to it."