



PHILIP T. HODGE stands on the Illinois Prairie Path's missing link—an incomplete, abandoned railroad bridge in Wheaton that he is working to shore up. (Sun-Times Photo by Barry Jarvinen)

we'll still have to hire some skilled people. This is the biggest project the Prairie Path organization ever has undertaken."

The bridge is expected to cost about \$60,000, he said, despite donations of four tons of steel from an anonymous donor and 80

gallons of paint from the National Trust for Historic Landmarks and a local paint firm.

Even though the old bridge abutments were erected in 1910, Hodge said they still were plenty strong.

"If they could hold up

trains," he said, "they certainly ought to be able to support flocks of bicyclists and horse riders."

The 1,200 Prairie Path members are naturally ecstatic about the bridge plan, because it will be a major improvement in the path.

Surveys have shown that

New bridge last link in Prairie Path

By Lloyd Green

Some people build boats or even airplanes in their garages, but Philip T. Hodge is building a bridge.

What's more, the bridge he's building at his home in Lombard is to be used in Wheaton.

"Well, I'm not really building the whole bridge," said Hodge. "What I'm doing is fabricating and welding steel supports."

His handiwork, which will keep his car outside most of the winter, will be used to help carry the Illinois Prairie Path across Chicago & North Western Ry. tracks.

It will be the last link in the 45-mile recreation and nature path, which follows the former right-of-way of the Chicago, Aurora & Elgin Ry. from Maywood to Wheaton, where it branches in a 'Y' to Elgin and Aurora.

At present, hikers, joggers, bicyclists and horse riders must follow a circuitous route on reaching Wheaton to get over the busy C&NW tracks.

"I got lost the first time I tried to ride my bike through there, and I know a lot of other people have, too," said Hodge, a senior project engineer for Ceko Corp.

In addition, it's dangerous for path users to cross the tracks because they now must use a Manchester Rd. bridge that also carried auto traffic.

But if Hodge and other volunteers have their way, all that will change by next fall. Hodge not only is helping with the heavy work on the bridge but also is the design engineer.

"Building things is my hobby" he explained. "I'm really having a lot of fun."

Using concrete abutments of an old CA&E railroad bridge, his plans call for erection of a wooden-deck bridge 370 feet long and mostly eight feet wide. It will cross not only the tracks but also two busy streets.

The bridge also will have an eight-foot-high chainlink fence along its sides on a 14-foot-wide stretch directly over the tracks.

"To save money, we plan to do as much of the work ourselves as we can," said the 32-year-old engineer. "But



the path has nearly 300,000 users a year.

No government funds will be involved in the bridge construction, and the non-profit Prairie Path organization has started a fund-raising drive. Tax-deductible gifts may be sent to Illinois Prairie Path at P.O. Box 1086, Wheaton, 60187.