The Huey P. Long bridge has been honored as a National Historic Civil Engineering landmark, a distinction shared by the Eiffel Tower and other famous structures.

Huey P. Long Bridge honored

Structure recognized as a civil engineering landmark in ceremony

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JEFFERSON — Joining the ranks of the Eiffel Tower, the Statue of Liberty and the Panama Canal, the Huey P. Long Bridge has been officially recognized as a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark.

In a dedication ceremony beneath the bridge on Thursday morning, John "Spud" McConnell, playing the role of the legendary Louisiana governor, moderated the event, which concluded in the unveiling of a plaque attached to the base of one of the bridge's cement towers on the east bank of the Mississippi River.

Several of Long's great-grandchildren attended the ceremony.

There was enough steel used on the bridge to build two Eiffel Towers, said Steve Spohrer, director of Louisiana TIMED Managers Program.

Structures that are designated as a landmark must be at least 50 years old with national civil engineering significance. They must also contribute to the development of a large region.

The Eads South Pass Navigation Works in Plaquemines Parish and the McNeill Street Pumping Station in Shreveport also share the National Historic Landmark designation. There are fewer than 300 such landmarks in the world.

When the Huey P. Long Bridge opened in 1935, it was the longest high level railroad bridge in the world and held the distinction for 15 years. The opening of the bridge revolutionized river commerce, which previously required using the bridge in Vicksburg, Miss., or disassembling trains and placing them on ferries to cross the river.

The engineers, who lacked many of the tools used today, also faced significant challenges building the bridge on soft delta soil, amid strong river currents, to extremely high clearance to allow large ships to pass beneath.

The bridge was also unique at the time because of its public ownership. The rail bridge in Vicksburg and others were owned by rail companies, and only allowed their own trains to cross.

Driving across the bridge, said Jefferson Parish President John Young, is notorious for being a terrifying experience for anyone new to town, with its narrow lanes and absence of shoulders.

However, those white-knuckle trips across will soon be a thing of the past. Thursday's ceremony, said Young, is to celebrate engineering marvels of the past as well as the bridge's ongoing engineering achievements looking into the future.

The bridge was not designed for today's larger vehicles and semitrucks, but McConnell, as Long, suggested that the narrow lanes and infamous "jog" in the middle (where the two sides of bridge, when built, did not quite match up when they met in the middle) were intentional, "just so you would remember me."

The westbound widened lanes are projected to open in April 2013, with the eastbound lanes opening in the May or June 2013.

Once completed, Young said, the bridge will "open up the west bank of Jefferson Parish to economic growth and development."

And he added, the project, just as when it was built in 1935, is an anomaly in government in being within the budget and on schedule.