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I-40 bridge collapse third worst in nation

 By [Sonya Colberg](#)
 The Oklahoman


Even before the last tiny victim -- Shae Nicole Johnson -- was pulled from the Arkansas River, the barge-bridge accident in Oklahoma had become the nation's third-deadliest.

Since 1980, a total of 105 people have died when boats hit bridges. As news came that Shae, 3, was the 14th victim of a boat crash with the [Arkansas River](#) I-40 bridge, concerned groups and individuals began calling for greater safety measures on the nation's waterways.

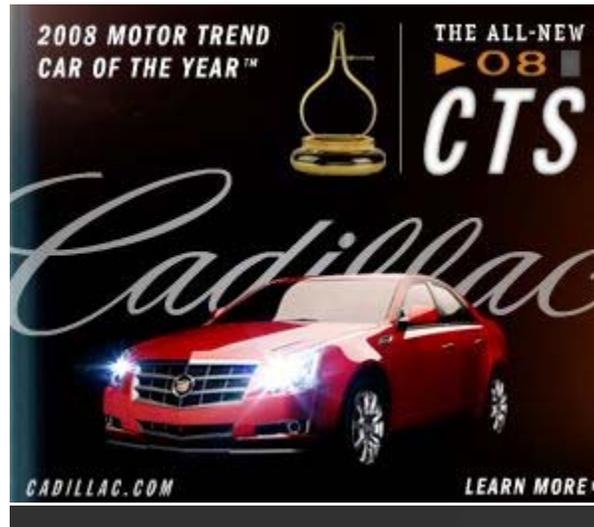
The American Waterways Operators are concerned about making navigation safer and talks have begun between the group and the [Coast Guard](#) about what happened in the Webbers Falls tragedy and how to cut the risk, said [Anne Davis Burns](#), spokeswoman for the waterways group.

"It's a high priority," she said.

The [Robert Y. Love](#) towboat veered 300 feet from the navigation channel and hit the bridge support, causing about 580 feet of bridge to drop into the [Arkansas River](#), investigators said. Dirt-filled concrete cells protect the south or downriver side of the bridge. But the [Love](#) was traveling against the river flow at 6 to 7 mph, and there were no protective barriers on that side.

"The piers in the middle probably would have crumpled the barge like a beer can," [Steve Tipton](#), [University of Tulsa](#) mechanical engineering professor, said Friday, "but the piers on the side aren't meant to withstand that."

Towboats and tugboats accounted for almost 42 percent of all collisions with bridges, according to



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I-40 Bridge Collapse

See archived coverage of the 2002 collision, v a barge hit one of a dozen piers that held the bridge near Webbers Falls in place. A 580-foot section of the west side of the bridge collapse people traveling along I-40 that morning died 

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the [Coast Guard's](#) marine casualties database. They struck bridges 1,047 times from 1992 to September 2000.

Freight barges came in second at nearly 33 percent, or 828 collisions with bridges over that period. Commercial boats, tank barges and other vessels fell well below in number of collisions.

The greatest cause of the accidents were navigation execution (almost 19 percent) and weather conditions (over 16 percent), the database shows.

[Tipton](#) said just as a virtually failsafe car can be made, it would cost millions. And while the state would have to consider the expense of added protection on the waterways, he said additional measures likely would cut the risk of more tragedies like Sunday's and another one nine months ago.

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On Sept. 15, 2001, just four days after the terrorist attack, the [Queen Isabella Causeway](#) collapsed in Brownsville, Texas, after a towboat and barge s The bridge's midsection cratered into the bay some 80 feet below, killing eight people.

[Mikal Watts](#) with [Watts and Heard of Corpus Christi](#), handled lawsuits in that case.

"After the [Queen Isabella Causeway](#) collapse, there was a lot of talk about the [Coast Guard](#) coming in and augmenting safety requirements," [Watts](#) sa "Unfortunately it was just talk."

He said there has been no effort to strengthen safety regulations or increase barge operators' training.

"Unfortunately, our clients in Brownsville appear to have died in vain. And their failure to take precautions has resulted in the deaths of 14 people in Oklahoma," [Watts](#) said.

In September 1993, a railroad bridge was displaced by barges traveling in dense fog. An [Amtrak](#) train reached the bridge and derailed moments later, 47 people.

That accident led the industry to develop stricter safety rules, [Burns](#) said. The association has kicked out 13 members who missed a deadline to meet standards. [Magnolia Marine Transport Co.](#), the owner of the [Robert Y. Love](#), is a member.

[Burns](#) defended the standards required of boat captains, saying they are well-trained.

The towboat captain, [William Joe Dedmon](#), had 30 years' experience. He told investigators that he blacked out and veered into the bridge support.

Although investigators wouldn't say whether they thought [Dedmon](#) might have fallen asleep, they made an issue during a press conference of [Dedmo](#) saying he reported that in 46 hours leading up to the accident, he was awake 36.5 hours and slept 9.5 hours.

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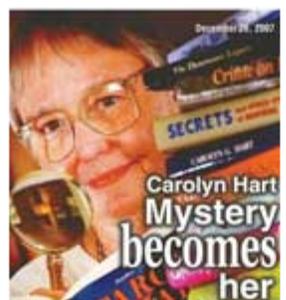
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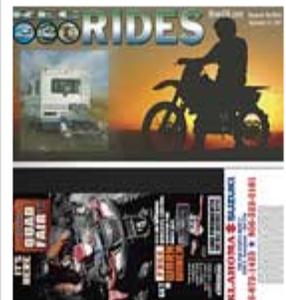
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