

BACK TO SCHOOL



ITALIAN STYLE



Do you think wearing a mask in school might be difficult?

It's the first day of school in 1959 and school children are hoisted across the Panaro River at Guiglia near Modena, northern Italy, in a primitive form of a chairlift as they make their way to school. They would make this crossing twice each day.

Since the Second World War when the Guiglia (Samone) Bridge was blown up, the chairlift was the only link between the town and the countryside on the other bank of the Panaro River.

As we embark on a new wave of infrastructure repairs in America, we often forget that a tremendous need for repairs existed throughout what were the battlefields of the Second World War. This area of Italy was not that well populated and suffered greatly from the ravages of war but replacing the destroyed bridges was not a top priority on anyone's list. So how would the people get to the other side of the river? How would the children get to school?

The children of the hamlets of Gainazzo, Fondo Barbetta and Castellino under Guiglia in the Modena Apennines had to go to school. Education in the post-war world was a necessity and could not wait, but their school was beyond the Panaro River at the Casona di Marano. The other shore was far away. Going around the river would take too much time. The people had to figure out how best to cross it. This was where Italian ingenuity stepped forward.

Whoever had the idea is unclear. On the site of the destroyed bridge, a rope and pulley system were constructed. This was how it worked. Someone pulled a tight rope to which small pulleys were attached. Each

pulley was then attached to a leather harness. Each harness also had an apron inside for the placement of a baby, if needed. You got a push and off you went. As a local recalled, "You must take the pulley home, because if left they would be taken."

The trip towards the valley was easier since it was downhill. All one had to do was just let themselves slide. The trip towards the mountain was a struggle that took some effort to pull the rope in order to move in an upward direction.

At first, it was fun, but this quickly became another one of the post-WW2 hardships of life. The Italian people that lived in this area, as throughout Italy, simply did what they had to do because there were no viable alternatives. As often demonstrated throughout Italian history, if a situation existed and could not be avoided; the Italian people simply figured out the best way to handle the problem with the money available.

Believe it or not, this cableway remained in operation until around 1980. In the quarter of a century of use, some children made a few unexpected dives into the Panaro River, but there were never any serious accidents or drownings.

A new bridge was installed in 1980. The replacement bridge only lasted a few years when it was destroyed by an earthquake. This time around the townspeople, many of whom grew up using the cable system, started a campaign. They pressured and embarrassed the Italian government by using the historical pictures of children hanging from the cable system. It worked; the new replacement bridge was a modular one that was constructed on land and moved into position in less than 6 months.