The Bridgeport Covered Bridge

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THERE IS SOMETHING EXCITING about a covered bridge, and the "bridger" or covered-bridge buff has a right to become excited about these structures as they fade away, one by one. The Bridgeport bridge across the South Yuba River in western Nevada County is one that is unique in many ways. For instance, the Bridgeport bridge is the longest single-span covered bridge in the United States. The second longest bridge spans Schoharie Creek at North Blenheim, New York, and it measures 228 feet, one foot less than the trussing of the Bridgeport covered bridge.

At one time the Bridgeport bridge measured 251 feet at its ridge pole, which included wing walls to protect the footings at both ends, but these wings no longer exist. The bridge at New York, built as a two-lane structure in 1855, was replaced in 1932 by a modern steel bridge, and the Schoharie County Board of Supervisors voted to retain the old bridge as a public historical landmark. The Blenheim bridge and a recreation and picnic area surrounding it has become a popular tourist attraction, and the success of this New York endeavor prompted Nevada County residents to do the same with their historic crossing.

The Nevada County Historical Society took the lead in 1968 and called for early restoration and preservation of the bridge. In 1969 a committee was formed to raise the necessary funds, estimated then at $100,000. The campaign was a success, and in addition to the restoration, a picnic area was developed on the site of the former toll station. The span was realigned at that time and the shingles and floor boards were replaced, but most of the support structure in the arch and truss dates from the original construction in 1862.

According to the experts, this unique covered bridge relies on a type of construction known as "a Warren Truss with an elaborate auxiliary Burr Arch." It makes use of wrought iron vertical members and cast iron bearing blocks; all other material is wood. (The Central Pacific Railroad Company constructed bridges a few years later with similar cast iron
support members, but substitution of metal trusses eliminated the need to cover its bridges, because iron does not deteriorate as quickly as wood. The use of iron trusses eventually brought about the demise of covered bridges in the United States.)

On the Bridgeport structure, a network of large hand-hewn timbers is tied together with enormous iron bolts to provide support and tension for main trusses that are 230 feet long. The trusses are supplemented by a double arch on each side that is bolted to the trusses—the arches are visible on the inside and outside of the bridge. The abutments are constructed of fitted granite blocks, and the distance from one abutment to the other is 210 feet, 4½ inches. The gabled roof is wood-framed and covered with 27,000 hand-split sugar pine shakes that are 36 inches long and 5 to 6 inches wide.

The California Gold Rush

The rush for gold in the Far West began in 1848 and had continued throughout the 1850s and 1860s, particularly in Nevada and Sierra counties, where a variety of techniques for gold extraction had been used with considerable success. By 1860, individual placer miners still worked many of the streams and rivers, but the most valuable resources had fallen into the hands of capitalists who were able to employ large numbers of laborers at relatively low wages. Some companies were engaged in washing away mountainsides with powerful streams of water forced through pipes and nozzles under extremely high pressure; other workers were employed underground, where they drilled, blasted, and shoveled gold-bearing quartz rock into ore carts so it could be hauled to quartz mills for processing.

In the earliest days, the roads from Marysville and Sacramento to mining camps in Nevada, Yuba, and Sierra counties had been little better than trails, and they were used mostly by pedestrians, equestrians, and mule trains. It wasn’t long, however, before the roads had to be rebuilt and improved to accommodate the use of stage coaches and heavy wagons. After the discovery of rich ores over in the Great Basin, these roads were put to use as feeder lines for the Henness Pass highway. Two roads ran from Sacramento to Marysville, and these were known as the “upper and lower Marysville roads.” The upper one passed through the towns of Lincoln, Sheridan, and Wheatland. The lower road went by way of Nicolaus and followed the Sacramento and Feather rivers.
that, and each time was required to pay for his crossing at the toll station on the south end of the bridge. Undoubtedly the records need more research.

Lake Wildwood: The Old Disappears Beneath the New

In the 1960s a recreational lake was created where Deer Creek flows through Pleasant Valley. A modern subdivision was developed around a man-made lake that is two miles long with seven miles of shoreline. It inundated the pioneer roads and the historic site of the Anthony House. Pleasant Valley Road then was rerouted around Lake Wildwood, and it crosses the dam to connect with the old turnpike leading to Bridgeport.

It is interesting to compare the new activity and development at Lake Wildwood and Penn Valley to the bustle of bygone days, when more than 100 teamsters are said to have passed a given point every day from spring to winter for at least 20 years. Nearby Indian Springs was a principal stopping place for wagon and harness repair, and the feeding, lodging, and shoeing of animals. Preparations for the long haul to the Comstock via Henness Pass meant work for thousands of skilled workers, including blacksmiths, farriers, wagonmakers, carpenters, merchants, hotelkeepers, and teamsters, many of whom were positioned at various stations and ranches at every ten miles or so along the 100-plus miles between Penn Valley and Virginia City. Each had his own responsibility to keep the long line of teams moving, as if a great chain was moving and no link could be neglected.

The typical freight team consisted of two wagons pulled in tandem by six horses, mules, or oxen. This combination made it possible to attach all the animals to one wagon at a time when a steep grade was encountered, or to proceed with a single wagon in case of a failure of equipment or animals. Larger rigs, known as “jerk-lines,” also operated with as many as twenty teams pulling heavy loads. Stations and camps were established on the basis of how far the animals could travel in a single day. Oxen moved only seven to ten miles, but horses and mules could go twice that distance. Today’s mountain roads are wider than those of the previous century, when there was precious little room for teamsters to negotiate the sharp turns and narrow roadways. Drivers then used bells instead of horns to signal the oncoming traffic to avoid tie-ups on the grades.

Most of these roads are still in use, with some rerouting, and they are a delight to travel, especially for the historically inclined. Much of the Henness Pass Road is paved, particularly on the eastern side of the summit, and all of it is passable in good weather, even by passenger vehicles, so long as the driver uses caution and watches for occasional ruts and boulders on the unpaved sections and looks for oncoming vehicles to appear suddenly from around blind turns on the wrong side of the road.

The Several Historical Plaques

David Wood’s granddaughter, Verna Wood Dunshee, and her husband, Bertram K. Dunshee, were prime movers in the successful effort to obtain landmark status for the bridge, and in 1948 it was registered as California Historical Landmark No. 390. The text on the plaque that was placed at the bridge on October 17, 1948 by the Columbia Parlor #70 is succinct and accurate, unlike a later version that was erected at the site 16 years later by the California State Park Commission, in cooperation with the Nevada County Historical Society and the Wm. Bull Meek—Wm. Morris Stewart Chapter 10 of E Clampus Vitus. The 1964 plaque incorrectly gives the builder’s middle name as “Isaac” instead of Ingerfield, and suggests that Bridgeport also was the site of Nyé’s Crossing, which is not the case. Nyé’s crossing actually was on the Middle Yuba River, near Oregon Creek.

When the reconstruction work was completed in 1971, the Bridgeport bridge was registered as a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark, and a plaque furnished by the Ameri-
The bridge’s intricate skeleton was revealed during the 1971 restoration. A fourth plaque was erected and dedicated in 1973 by the California State Society, Daughters of the American Colonists, and it honors the pioneers who used it in earlier times.

The State Park Project

After the 1971 restoration was completed, Sequoia Challenge, a non-profit land trust organization developed a cooperative management agreement with Nevada County to protect the newly refurbished bridge. Between 1979 and 1985, California State Parks and Sequoia Challenge also made plans and acquired lands to protect easements along portions of the historic Excelsior mining ditch which had been abandoned by the Nevada Irrigation District. This ditch, which clings to the walls of the South Yuba River canyon ten miles upstream from Bridgeport, offered great opportunities for development of a completely accessible wilderness trail. This potential, combined with the historical significance of the Bridgeport covered bridge, and the overall natural beauty of the river canyon, has led to creation of the South Yuba River Project, one of California’s newest state park units.

Using funds provided by voter-approved state bonds, California State Parks purchased the bridge and the surrounding area in December 1984. Plans are underway to restore the missing wing walls that were intended to protect the bridge abutments on the original covered bridge. The rock walls along the original Virginia City Turnpike will be restored, along with the road bed itself. Another plan calls for conversion of an existing 1960s-era ranch house into a park visitor center and ranger station, and turn the old abandoned ranch back to pasture and native vegetation.

The Bridgeport bridge is easy to visit. You can approach it from the south by going from Highway 20 to Lake Wildwood and continuing north on Pleasant Valley Road. If you are on Highway 49 near North San Juan, turn south on Pleasant Valley Road at Peterson’s Corners, go to French Corral and continue until you come to the bottom of the canyon. Regardless of how you arrive, your visit to the Bridgeport covered bridge will be a rewarding experience. In summer you may want to stay all day and picnic and swim in the waters of the South Yuba River. At others times of the year you will enjoy sights and sounds that take you back in time, and you will find yourself imagining teams and wagons rumbling across the planked deck of the bridge, as they did in fact for so many years.