

# It wasn't easy bridging the Pajaro

By BETTY LEWIS

"Ferry across the Pajaro — This ferry is running at intervals, subject to the caprice of Dutch John who unfortunately obtained a franchise, but knows no more about running a ferry than he does about keeping a hotel. Through gross negligence on his part, the telegraph that had been replaced by considerable difficulty, was broken and carried away. John acts on the principle that the entire river being at his disposal, he has a right to run his boat anywhere, regardless of the rights of others. A 'reminder' in the shape of a fine, would perhaps bring him to a proper knowledge of 'what's what.'"

—Pajaro Times, March 9, 1867

John "Dutch" Herander was one of Watsonville's early-day characters and the builder of the first bridge over the Pajaro River at the end of Main Street. The year was 1867 and Mr. Herander built most of the 610-foot bridge by himself. It opened to the public on Thanksgiving Day, with toll charges as follows:

Footmen, 12½ cents; buggy with one or two horses, 50 cents; cattle, per head, 5 cents; sheep, hogs or goats, each, 2 cents.

Three weeks after the bridge was completed, high flood waters choked with debris tore off the 40 foot piles supporting the bridge and swept away 310 feet of its span. By August of 1868, Dutch John had rebuilt the bridge, and again it was opened to the public.

In December Santa Cruz and Monterey counties purchased the bridge from Mr. Herander for \$7,000, each county picking up half the tab.

As the dividing line between the two counties, the bridge was often a political football and was the subject of lively debate. The following is from the Pajaronian in 1874, regarding a statement in the Salinas paper about an inspection of the bridge by a committee appointed by the Monterey supervisors. The committee had said that "the bridge needed to be replanked — nothing more."

"The Committee was doubtless selected by the Board on account of their economy. Considering the state of the Pajaro bridge the report of the Committee shows a most marvelous and careful economy ... Wonder if they don't lay awake nights studying how much it will cost to get buried..."

The Pajaronian, June 18, 1874

The northern end of the bridge was covered, while the Monterey end was not. People, especially women, took exception to traveling

through the covered part, especially at night, and a wide path was soon provided on the outside. In 1904 improvements were being made:

"The work of tearing down the old wagon bridge which spans the Pajaro River at the foot of Main Street is progressing nicely and in the near future the Granite Rock Company will begin construction work on the concrete abutment and wing walls."

—Evening Pajaronian, Aug. 4, 1904

The short wooden span was strengthened, but lack of funds prevented the building of a steel span. During the 1906 earthquake on April 18th the bridge was severely damaged, slipping off the abutments as the ground cracked and leaving a drop of three feet. Travelers had to get across the river as best they could until repairs were made.

In the summer of 1907 a lake was formed on the eastern side of the bridge by damming the river. This became the scene, for a number of years, of water carnivals, boat races, Fourth of July celebrations, picnics, etc.

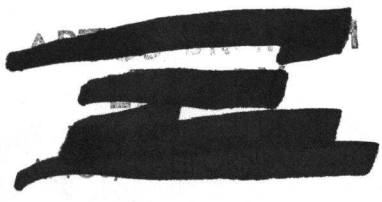
In 1915 a new concrete bridge was built, designed by Leonard & Day. Portions of the old bridge were taken to Malpaso Creek, south of Monterey, for construction of a bridge there. The new span over the Pajaro River was indeed a welcome improvement, but memories of happenings on and near the old bridge still remained with local people ... As

when Chinatown was located over in Pajaro on Brooklyn Street; some of the Chinese leaving Watsonville and passing through the covered portion of the bridge would be detained and have their queues cut off ... Or the swift hand of justice, when horse thieves or other miscreants were "strung up" and left hanging from the bridge, a reminder to all who passed by that crime didn't pay.

Flooding was always a threat; the rising waters would creep up over the banks of the river and flood the southern end of town. According to Harry Meyers of the Watsonville Public Works Department, the levee was constructed in 1938, putting an end to flooding in the Pajaro River bridge area. In the 1955 flood high water threatened the levees where Corralitos Creek meets Salsipuedes Creek and where the Salsipuedes joins the Pajaro River.

The present bridge spanning the river at the end of Main Street was built in 1950 and dedicated on April 16, 1951, Mayor C.H. Baker cutting the ribbon at the ceremonies. Built at a cost of \$492,000, it was constructed without stopping the flow of traffic, which continued to use the old bridge while two new lanes were built on either side of the span. When this was done the process was reversed, with traffic using the new lanes. The completed bridge reached over the river for 401 feet; it was 70 feet wide.

According to Father Crespi's diary of October 8, 1769, Don Gaspar de Portola and his party of 67 halted at the river, "not far



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from the burned village, which was near its very verdant and pleasant plain, full of cottonwoods, alder, tall oaks, live oaks and other species not known to us. We saw in this place a bird which the heathen had killed and stuffed with grass. To some of our party it looked like a royal eagle. It was eleven palms from tip to tip of its wings. For this reason the soldiers called the stream Rio del Pajaro."

Thus, Pajaro River, Pajaro Valley and Pajaro bridge — and at one time the town of Watsonville was called Pajaro.

At the northern entrance to the Pajaro bridge is a large rock with a carved-out niche. On the seat are the words "Rest & Think It over," and above this is a plaque which reads, "Here came the first men with Portola and Fr. Crespi —

October 9, 1769 — This river they called Rio del Pajaro." The marker was placed near the river in 1909 by the women of Watsonville and was moved several times. The last move was in 1951 when the present bridge was completed.

It has been 114 years since Dutch John built that first toll bridge over the Pajaro river to make travel easier between Santa Cruz and Monterey counties.

"In Pajaro the rain and storms have done a little damage. The Pajaro river is very much swollen and Captain Herander is doing the crossing with his boat."

—Pajaro Times, Dec. 22, 1866

—Pictures courtesy Pajaro Valley Historical Assn.



Workers put up the first concrete bridge, built in 1915.



This photo, taken in 1907, shows how the Pajaro River was dammed to create a recreational pond.