

Letters

The history of the Pajaro River bridge

To the editor: The Pajaro River is a prominent part of the Central California story for many reasons. It is referred to in the earliest historical documents — the diaries of members of the 1769 Portola Expedition who carried out the first European land exploration of the California coast.

In these writings it is told how the river came to be named "Pajaro," the Spanish word for bird, when the members of the party found near the river a large stuffed bird, thought to be used by the native inhabitants for religious ceremonies.

About fifteen years later, and after the missions at Monterey, San Juan Bautista, and Santa Cruz had been established, it is recorded in the government documents of the province that a new road was opened with a ford at Pajaro (now Watsonville) to improve movement between these three locations.

The building of a bridge is mentioned in the provincial records of 1819. If this really was the first bridge, the conclusion is that the river was forded for thirty years during the period of initial settlement by the founders of the missions and ranchos of the Monterey Bay area.

This bridge was built of hand-hewn lumber by neophytes (natives who became converted to Christianity and provided much of the labor for the missions and later the ranchos).

The work was directed by Sgt. Pico, a retired soldier of the Monterey Presidio and then a resident of Rancho del Rey near Monterey.

This early bridge apparently did not survive, because when California became a state in 1850 and American settlers arrived in the Pajaro Valley, they reported that the river was crossed in small

scows in winter and forded in summer, with planks and ropes laid across for pedestrians.

In 1867, the state of California incorporated the city of Watsonville, and the city issued a charter to John Herander to build a bridge. Herander, known as "Old Dutch John," had operated the scows that provided ferry service during high water since the 1850s.

There is much more information about this early bridge. It was 610 feet long, 16 feet wide, and cost \$8000. The pilings were 40 feet long and were driven into the ground 20 feet.

Three weeks after the bridge was completed, high flood waters carrying large quantities of driftwood swept down the river and tore away nearly half of the structure. The bridge was rebuilt in a more substantial manner and two years later was purchased by Monterey and Santa Cruz Counties from Herander.

When the bridge was first built, the newspaper reported the toll rates: footmen 12 ½ cents, buggy with one or two horses 50 cents, each additional or led horse 12 ½ cents, cattle per head 5 cents, sheep, hogs or goats 2 cents, wagon with two horses or one yoke of cattle 50 cents, and additional or yoke of cattle 25 cents. James Pellissier was the toll collector.

After more than 20 years had passed, the bridge was wearing out, and Monterey County Supervisor, John T. Porter, proposed that the Monterey County half of the bridge be replaced.

In 1894, the county erected a modern steel structure to replace their part of the old wooden bridge.

For many years, these two dissimilar bridge parts worked to-

gether to form a vital link between the two counties. The Monterey end of the bridge was heavily damaged in the 1906 earthquake.

Finally in 1915, it was agreed to build an entirely new concrete bridge. This bridge, built when C.H. Baker was mayor, held two traffic lanes with six light standards on each side.

The bridge was designed to present a beautiful aspect from any angle. Every element of the bridge was integrated into the overall design — the supports, the railings, and the "gates" or bridge approaches.

In 1952, Watsonville's Centennial year, the bridge was widened to four lanes to accommodate the growth in population and commerce.

Federal funds were available for bridge construction at this time because the freeway to the west had not yet been built, and California State Highway 1 followed Main Street through town.

Today, plans for replacing the Pajaro Bridge, damaged in the 1989 earthquake, are in the final stages of approval.

The cost in 1995 will be over \$8,000,000, the amount currently necessary to construct a modern bridge designed to carry crops and foods from fields and processing plants to world-wide destinations.

In 1867, \$8,000 provided a sufficient amount to build a bridge for that time — for wagons and buggies and driven livestock.

(Information for this article was found in the archives of the Pajaro Valley Historical Association (notes of Mabel Rowe Curtis). Indians and Pioneers of Old Monterey by James Culleton, and The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft, Vol. I History of California.

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