

Hidden Treasure

Little-known Powder Works Bridge considered for National Landmark



Local historian and Paradise Park resident Barry Brown stands inside the California Powder Works Bridge in Paradise Park and says the National Park Service is considering naming the covered bridge — built in 1872 — as a National Historic Landmark. DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Covered Bridges

By JASON HOPPIN

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PARADISE PARK — Once critical to the nation's transportation infrastructure, there are just 690 historic covered bridges left in the U.S., with fewer than a dozen in California.

Yet two happen to be in Santa Cruz County. The 1892 Felton Covered Bridge you probably know about. But the one you don't know about — the one built just after the Civil War and which still carries traffic today — could prove much more significant to historians here and across the country.

Little-known beyond the few hundred residents of Paradise Park, the 1872 California Powder Works Bridge is being considered by the National Park Service as the county's second

National Historic Landmark. If approved, it would join the pairing of the Looft Carousel and Giant Dipper roller coaster.

"It's sort of not surprising" no one knows about it, said local historian Barry Brown, Paradise Park's resident expert on California Powder Works history. "We don't advertise it. There's a certain hobbit village atmosphere to Paradise Park."

The bridge is one of the few vestiges of the Powder Works, established by 19th century venture capitalists as a way to replace East Coast supplies of gunpowder, which dried up during the Civil War, and keep pulling gold from the California hills.

Investors picked the banks of the San Lorenzo River for a

SEE BRIDGE ON A4



Built in 1872, the California Powder Works Bridge spans the San Lorenzo River in Paradise Park. DAN COYRO/SENTINEL



ON THE NET: To view the National Historic Landmark designation report for the California Powder Works Bridge, visit santacruzsentinel.com and click on this story.

BRIDGE

Continued from A1

location, and the Powder Works operated for 50 years. Numerous explosions and fires killed about 50 people during that time, Brown estimates, before the Freemasons converted the area to the unique neighborhood seen today.

Built by the Pacific Bridge Co., the 180-foot crossing has caught the eye of national historians. It is one of 23 remaining examples of a wooden Smith truss. Furthermore, it is the only one on the West Coast and the only one still in regular operation — Paradise Park residents on the east side of the river depend on it.

"Powder Works Bridge clearly illustrates the character-defining features of the resource type," a National Parks Service assessment asserts. "It retains an uncommonly high level of integrity in location, setting, design, material, workmanship, feeling and association."

The famed Felton Covered Bridge is on the National Register of Historic Places, and is



At 180 feet, The California Powder Works Bridge is more than twice as long as the Felton Covered Bridge, spanning the San Lorenzo River in Paradise Park. DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

known as the tallest covered bridge in the U.S. But it has been "adulterated" over the years — moved and renovated — and is not on the more exclusive "Landmark" list, which comprises 2,400 sites. Those include popular destinations such as Alcatraz Island and Carmel Mission, but also lesser destinations such as the Fresno Sanitary Landfill.

"Certainly, I think it would merit that designation," Supervisor Bruce McPherson said, whose district includes Paradise Park.

The Park Service could approve the designation in May, but not before the residents of Paradise Park weigh in. Since it sits on private property, the federal government is seeking local input, and a neighborhood meeting is scheduled for Feb. 14 to hear a pitch from Park Service historians.

Brown acknowledged trepidation that the designation will bring more gawk-

ers. But it could bring a big upside, too — money. Fixing the bridge once it fails, as all bridges eventually do, would carry an exorbitant price tag for Paradise Park residents.

"If something happened to the bridge, we couldn't afford to replace it," Brown said. "It would have to be a much more prosaic bridge."

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