



The Soquel Avenue covered bridge looked like this in 1920 when travelers used it to cross the San Lorenzo River.

Santa Cruz County Historical Trust

Bridges

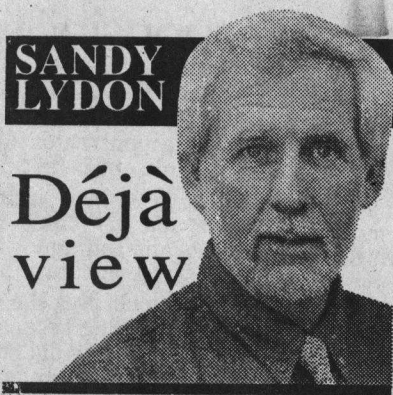
Mystery of covered bridges uncovered

THE QUESTION I am most often asked by students these days when I show a photograph of a covered bridge is the most basic one: Why were bridges covered? I guess it's time for Covered Bridge 101. The primary reason that bridges were covered was to protect them from the elements. Because many of the bridge timbers were Douglas fir or pine (builders tell me that redwood does not have as much linear strength as pine), they would weaken with exposure to the weather. A secondary reason for covering bridges was it made it easier to get horses, which might otherwise be frightened by the height, to cross without a struggle.

The above bridge carried Soquel Avenue across the San Lorenzo River from 1874 to 1921. Built by the Pacific Bridge Company of San Francisco at a

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cost of \$15,000, the bridge had a total length of 800 feet; the covered section was 500-feet long.

The roof eaves covered a pedestrian walkway originally on the north side

(left-hand side in this photograph) of the bridge, but in 1890 it was moved to the south side to make room for street-car tracks. The Union Traction electric car tracks are beyond the railing on the left and not visible in this photograph.

The sign above the entrance says "Close Muffler Speed Laws Enforced" and refers to early-day hot rodders taking great delight in opening their muffler bypasses and roaring through the bridge frightening everyone nearby. (I can remember doing a similar thing with glasspack mufflers in the tunnel near the wharf in Monterey, and in the granddaddy of all "rumble tunnels" — the Wawona Tunnel in Yosemite.) If you look carefully you can see that the muffler warning sign was placed over the outline of an earlier sign warning folks not to gallop their horses across

the bridge. Apparently there was something about covered bridges that made folks speed up.

The bridge is looking a bit tattered in this photograph, and in the spring of 1921 it was dismantled and replaced with one of concrete and steel.

Local Quiz Question: How many covered bridges are there in Santa Cruz County, and can you name them? (One of them was built two years before the one in the photograph.) Answers next week.

If you have a favorite photograph you would like to see used in this column, or one that you would like some help in identifying, send a copy (never send original photographs) to Déjà View, Sandy Lydon, care of The Santa Cruz County Sentinel, 207 Church St., Santa Cruz, Calif. 95060. Sandy Lydon is a member of the History faculty at Cabrillo College.