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(Photo by The Sentinel's Bill Lovejoy)

Despite its recent troubles, the Felton Covered Bridge remains a well-traveled landmark.

## Felton Covered Bridge Spans Troubled Waters

By DALE POLLOCK  
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Like Old Man River himself, the Felton Covered Bridge just keeps on going, a weathered and mute testimonial to a distant era. For all its splendid 85-year history and community attention, times are hard for what has become a troubled bridge over still waters.

How can that be, some might ask. Don't those pancake breakfasts held each summer for 2-3,000 hearty eaters make more than enough money to keep the bridge standing a little more proudly?

Not any more, responds Felton Fire Chief John McDonnell. While the breakfast is as popular as ever, the

costs of assembling all those flapjacks, sausages and oranges have gone higher than the arching beams of the bridge itself.

"Last year we only cleared \$200," McDonnell says, "and we spent \$785 for sausage alone. Then there's pancake flour, butter, syrup, coffee, even portable toilets that we have to bring up there."

Despite the inflationary spiral, the price to Valley residents and those who journey from as far away as Modesto has remained a steady \$1.25 for adults and 50 cents for the smaller fry, thanks to the efforts of Ted Toft, retired Felton fire chief, and the man responsible for saving the bridge.

"When I used to live up Zayante,"

Toft recalls, "every day going to school we'd have to go through the covered bridge." That was around 1905, and the bridge was a well-used thoroughfare for both schoolchildren and horse traffic.

Now, however, "The bridge is desecrated," says McDonnell, shaking his head. "The shingles are kicked off the roof, fires have been set on the floor, and the graffiti is something awful."

And that is why between \$3,000 and \$4,000 sit in a bank account, collecting interest, while the bridge begins to show its age. "We could do a first class job on the bridge, but we don't want to see it torn up," explains

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Young Matt Klus of Ben Lomond finds a quiet corner on Felton Covered Bridge.

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McDonnell. "By the time we get ready to do something, the vandals are right behind us."

The volunteer firemen have already sunk over \$8,000 into the venerable structure, all of it raised in the 17 benefit breakfasts held on the second Sunday in July since 1959. The county abandoned the bridge in the early 1930's, and since then according to Toft, "the only money they put into it was in the winter of 1955, when the heavy snow broke one of the needle beams under the bridge—they sent Granite Construction up to fix it."

The bridge was declared a State Historical Landmark in 1969, but no plaque has been erected that signifies the honor. Negotiations went on for a rock monument that would carry the

designation, but stalled when property owners couldn't agree on a price.

"Still, that bridge would be in terrible shape had it not been for us," Toft avers. The floor planking was all torn out and replaced, and the bridge sides, which were originally removed so automobile passengers could see in either direction, were replaced.

Toft is proudest of the shingle roof, which was repaired using the original type of "riven" shakes. They had to be hand-split to a  $\frac{3}{8}$  inch thickness out of virgin redwood, and the final batch bought from Karmany West of Boulder Creek may be the last in the state.

Most of those repairs are in the past, though, and now the Fire Department volunteers are just trying to maintain the landmark. "It'd be

fine if we had it fixed up and some way to preserve it, but there's no way to do that," McDonnell observes. As for Toft, he states, "We're able to support it the way it is, but how long can the fire department keep giving breakfasts?"

"We'll put on the breakfast whether we lose money or not," vows bridge fund treasurer Herman Sahlman. "Why, the town would never recognize us if we didn't put on the breakfast." There may be a price raise, McDonnell hints, but Toft is adamant about maintaining the tradition.

"It's an important part of history," the 82-year old Feltonite, speaking of the bridge that is only three years his senior. "We wouldn't want to lose it."