

Utilitarian bridges of today pale to earlier spans

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THE EARLY EVOLUTION of bridge construction in Santa Cruz shows a progression of problem solving and building techniques. Bridge structures once common throughout the state are today rare.

Felton's covered bridge is now one of the last bridges made of redwood. There were once 10 covered bridges in the county, yet today only 10 are left in the state, two locally. And West Cliff Drive's uncovered bridge is the last "Howe Truss" span in the state highway system.

It stands where the county's first wagon bridge was constructed, between today's Dream Inn and Ramada Inn. The original was built by town founder Elihu Anthony in 1849, so loaded wagons could climb the bluff to use his wharf at the end of Bay Street. This was reached from Washington and Second streets. Then, in 1918, the Southern Pacific moved the bridge's north entrance to a one-lane driveway on Blackburn Terrace, into which two lanes were later squeezed. The span was replaced that year with a Howe Truss bridge, from the 1840 patent introducing wrought iron into a primarily timber design.

Not until after the Civil War was a second county wagon bridge constructed. Downtown Santa Cruz sat between two San Lorenzo River fords. The deeper was the Water Ford, after which Water Street was named. Soquel Avenue was originally the El Camino Real ("the Royal Road"), and crossed into town at the King's Ford. But



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mostly they were called the upper and lower fords.

Here horses and high-wheeled wagons could easily cross the river most of the year, with boats for winter use. Merchant A.P. Menserve raised money in 1866 to install a footbridge at the Water Street ford. It washed away two years in a row from winter high water, but the bridge's value had been proved by the surge in downtown business.

So in 1868, money for a wagon bridge was raised through public and private donations. The \$10,900 bridge was constructed by Thomas Beck to be 100 feet long, 20 feet wide, and 14 feet above the water to avoid another washout. However, it was built like a wharf with 18 sets of pilings, which caught logs and debris until it collapsed in an 1871 flood. It was rebuilt in 1872, then replaced in 1882 by a wide-spanning arch truss.

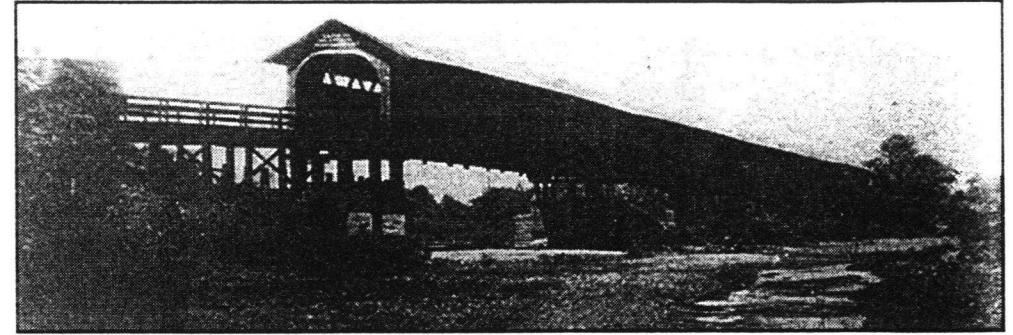
In 1874, the series of failed Water Street bridges convinced locals to fund a high, wide-spanning bridge over the Soquel Avenue ford for \$14,800. Since horses balked at crossing high bridges, this was the only city bridge to be covered. For horses passing through the 18-foot tall entry arches, the

walls of this barn-like tunnel masked the view of a 24-foot drop to the river, while leaving light and ventilation openings near the eaves. A pedestrian walk ran along the outside.

Its 800-foot length made it one of the state's longest covered bridges, and twice as long as the state's longest surviving covered bridge today. Redwood piles were driven 20 feet into the riverbed. These footings were protected by fortress-like timber "drift breaks," prow-shaped on the ends to prevent log jams.

The Eastside building boom of the 1880s made beach access a crucial selling point. But no bridges crossed the San Lorenzo below Soquel Avenue, except seasonal footbridges, dismantled each autumn. Yet everything below Barson Street was Fred Barson's Riverside Hotel grounds and orchards. To reach the city's bridge site, Barson deeded land through his orchard for a road named Riverside Avenue. An ironwork bridge was favored, as it could span the banks 150 feet without intervening piers. But the \$4,769 bridge kit was too short, and had to cross at an angle, so it was named the Cut-Bias Bridge when it opened in 1888.

In 1895 Santa Cruz held its Venetian Water Carnival near the Cut-Bias bridge, and proposed permanent fairgrounds for the annual event, with pavilions and a bridge based on those at the 1893 Chicago world's fair. Nothing came of the plans. But in 1908, a version of the neo-classical span was built as a concrete trolley bridge, parallel to the



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If the 1874 Soquel Avenue covered bridge were still standing today, its 800-foot length would make it the longest covered bridge in the state.

Water Street Bridge. The lantern-bedecked structure was so beautiful that when the Water Street Bridge was demolished in 1914, the trolley bridge was expanded to include a two-lane carriage road for \$15,175. When the trolley company went out of business in 1926, its bridge was combined with the Water Street Bridge as another traffic lane.

The Soquel Avenue Covered Bridge was replaced by a similar concrete span in 1921. But as the old structure's shingles and walls were removed, the framework appeared "as fresh as the day it was constructed." A concrete bridge also replaced the Cut-Bias in 1930. These classical bridges enhanced the garden-like setting of the San Lorenzo River, and were the frequent subjects of paint-

ings and postcards.

But after the 1955 flood, the banks of the river were stripped of trees to install levees, until it resembled a drainage canal. By 1966, all the neo-classical bridges but one were replaced with utilitarian concrete spans. Today however, all these concrete bridges are being rebuilt with a more artistic quality, which will enhance the upcoming landscaped restoration of the river. And at the site of the county's first bridge, West Cliff's Howe Truss is slated for restoration.

■ Ross Eric Gibson is an author/historian, historic architectural consultant, and chairman of the Santa Cruz Historic Preservation Commission.