

Covered Bridges

By John V. Young

[Note: This article was written in 1984; since then, the Glen Canyon covered bridge has been taken down. RAP-ed.]



Covered bridge in Felton

Santa Cruz County has the most covered bridges still standing of any county in the state, all of them deep enough in the hills to be considered part of the mountain picture.

To be sure, the total number is only three (or 3 1/2 if you count the pigmy built in recent years as a commercial tourist attraction at Felton). There are counties in Oregon and Washington that still have dozens of these quaint relics, but even three are not to be sneezed at any more.

According to Kramer Adams, the Western authority on the subject, covered bridges, which once numbered more than a thousand in the western states, are disappearing at the rate of about 10 a year.

Thus the trio in Santa Cruz County, all well preserved and unlikely to be discarded, have attained considerable historical importance and doubtless will continue to enjoy that status for a long time to come.

Why covered bridges? In the days of steel-tired wagons and steel-shod horses, before rubber tires and asphalt roads, the wooden flooring of timber bridges took a terrible beating, especially in regions of heavy precipitation. To protect the flooring and main supports from rain, fog and snow, bridges were commonly roofed over and siding added, until the innovation of modern chemical wood preservatives, concrete bridges and paved highways. Some railroad bridges had the siding without the roofs, giving them an upside-down appearance.

The Felton Bridge, over the San Lorenzo River just south of the town's main highway intersection, is said to be the last one of its kind built of redwood. It is also said to be the highest or tallest in the United States, but why it was designed that way remains a mystery.

When it was taken out of active service in 1929 to become an historical landmark (California no. 583), it became the first western example of the custom of preserving by-passed bridges, according to Kramer Adams.

Erected in 1892, the Felton Bridge is 180 feet long. It replaced an earlier open structure put up in 1878 after repeated petitioning by Felton residents. Although the road up the San Lorenzo to Felton from Santa Cruz had been completed in 1868, residents and travelers alike had to ford the river, when the water was low enough, for a decade. When the river was high, horses had to swim with mail, passengers, even with supplies for the first hotel, Bib Tree House. The hotel was erected early in 1878 by Mr. and Mrs. George Day, who also operated a livery stable and stage line.

The Felton Bridge is one of the best known in the state because of its accessibility. It is maintained by funds raised by the citizens in a yearly pancake breakfast staged by the volunteer fire department. The event carries on a tradition that started back in the 1860s when an old-time costume ball was held in Santa Cruz to raise money for the original bridge.

A few miles downstream from Felton the Paradise Park covered bridge spans the river in the summer home colony of the Masonic Lodge, which adjoins the southern edge of Henry Cowell Park. It is the only covered bridge in the county still used daily for both pedestrians and vehicles, and is the only one in the west protected at both ends by fire hoses.



Bridge at Paradise Park

The Masonic Park is on the site of an early-day sawmill, and the first paper pulp mill in California. The pulp mill ran only from 1860 until 1862, when a flood wrecked the flume that supplied water to the operation. Three years later the California Powder Works built a plant on the same site to make blasting powder for the new Central Pacific Railroad's construction. Its grinding wheels were driven by water from a 1,300-foot tunnel that tapped the river farther upstream.

Dupont took over the powder company, which had produced the world's first smokeless powder, and shut down the plant in 1916, leaving only the tunnel, some foundations, and the name Powder Mill Flat for history to recall, besides the covered bridge.

Built in 1872 to carry a railroad as well as wagon traffic to and from the powder mill, this 180-foot span was intended to last. A new tin roof and an occasional coat of paint have served to keep it in good repair ever since the railroad tracks were removed during World War I.

Because of its attractive setting over a creek, the Glen Canyon Covered Bridge has appeared in many movies and TV shows. Only 83 feet long, it was moved all in a piece from its original site on Glen Canyon Road in 1939, when it was only 47 years old but about ready to fall down. On its new location half a block away in DeLaveaga City Park, it has been refurbished and its board siding removed - the latter because the city fathers thought the enclosed bridge might be used for some illicit pursuits.

Glen Canyon Bridge is the southernmost covered bridge in California, and the only one within the Santa Cruz city limits that is still standing. It is open only for pedestrian use in the park.

Sources

- *This article is a chapter from Ghost Towns of the Santa Cruz Mountains, by John V. Young. Western Tanager Press, c1979, c1984. It is reproduced with the permission of the author. Postcards are from the Santa Cruz Public Libraries' collection.*

The content of this article is the responsibility of the individual author. It is the Library's intent to provide accurate local history information. However, it is not possible for the Library to completely verify the accuracy of individual articles obtained from a variety of sources. If you believe that factual statements in a local history article are incorrect and can provide documentation, please contact the Webmaster.