

Felton Covered Bridge renovation under way

By JAMIE MARKS
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FELTON — Under an aging sycamore tree by the banks of the San Lorenzo River, Bob Sibley and Russell Martin are cutting their place in history.

The two woodsmen are painstakingly hand sawing the supporting wood pieces for the structural renovation of the historic Felton Covered Bridge.

Like sculptors poised above a slab of marble, the sawyers run their coarse hands down the side of the redwood giant, feeling the telltale rings of growth and pondering their next cut. Each cut must be as perfect as the last, for this lumber is destined to carry future generations across the wooden span.

The tools of the trade are a Mini Mite movable sawmill powered by a Volkswagen engine, and an Alaskan saw, a glorified name for a chain saw with a guide.

Through the whine of the sawmill blades grinding against the dense core of the redwood, Sibley focuses his attention on cutting back a piece of the bark. This will give him a straight edge from which he'll cut a few more pieces before attempting the final one.

The last piece will be cut with the Alaskan saw. Sibley, who owns the sawmill, and Martin, a musician turned woodsman, prepare by standing on either side. They straighten the chain saw and

crank it up. Starting slowly, they steadily guide the chain saw through the wood.

Martin pushes through the log, as Sibley breaks loose to get a can of oil. The chain saw eats up a lot of oil, explains Sibley.

Ten minutes later, the finished product emerges — all 3 by 14 inches and 20 feet of it.

All told, Sibley will need 60 of these to meet the requirements of the architect.

The sawyers proudly point to one of their products of love — two massive pieces of lumber, measuring 8 by 8 inches by 28-feet long, that will be used as supports on the western entryway to the bridge. Hundreds of other different-sized pieces are carefully stacked nearby and many more will be cut before this project is completed.

Phase 1 of the renovation is reconstruction of the bridge deck and approach ramps. Coastwide Construction Co. won the bid for the \$54,000 project, which should be completed in five weeks, according to Jeff Oberdorfer, the architect.

Phase 2, if funded next year, will mean a new roof, board-and-batten siding, and handrails, said Oberdorfer. About the only thing not being replaced is the frame.

Coinciding with the bridge repair is another project to shore up the banks of the San Lorenzo River, which will be undertaken by the U.S. Soils Conservation Service and the county to the tune of \$170,000.

The riverbank was badly damaged by the torrential rains of 1982.

Why all the fuss over this bridge? Because it's the tallest covered bridge in the United States, said Oberdorfer. It's destined to be a national landmark, some think.

Technology may have advanced from the days when the all-wood bridge was built in 1892, but nature has not. One of the toughest jobs the sawyers have is finding logs strong enough to meet the state standards for bridge construction.

"This lumber essentially can't be found anymore," said Jack Schultz, the contractor supplying the wood. "It's three times as expensive as regular (lumber), if you can put any price tag on it."

These are virgin redwoods; they've never been cut. No second growth here. The rings are so compact they can barely be counted. Sturdy with a capital "S."

If they meet the grade, they'll be used. If not, they'll be cut up and sold for some lesser use.

Schultz came to the project by way of losing the bid to rebuild the span to Coastwide Construction Co. "We wanted

to do it so bad we could taste it," he said.

Coastwide planned to buy their redwood from Northern California, where stands of virgin redwoods still loom, but Schultz offered to locate the lumber locally and mill it here, in keeping with the historic theme of the renovation project.

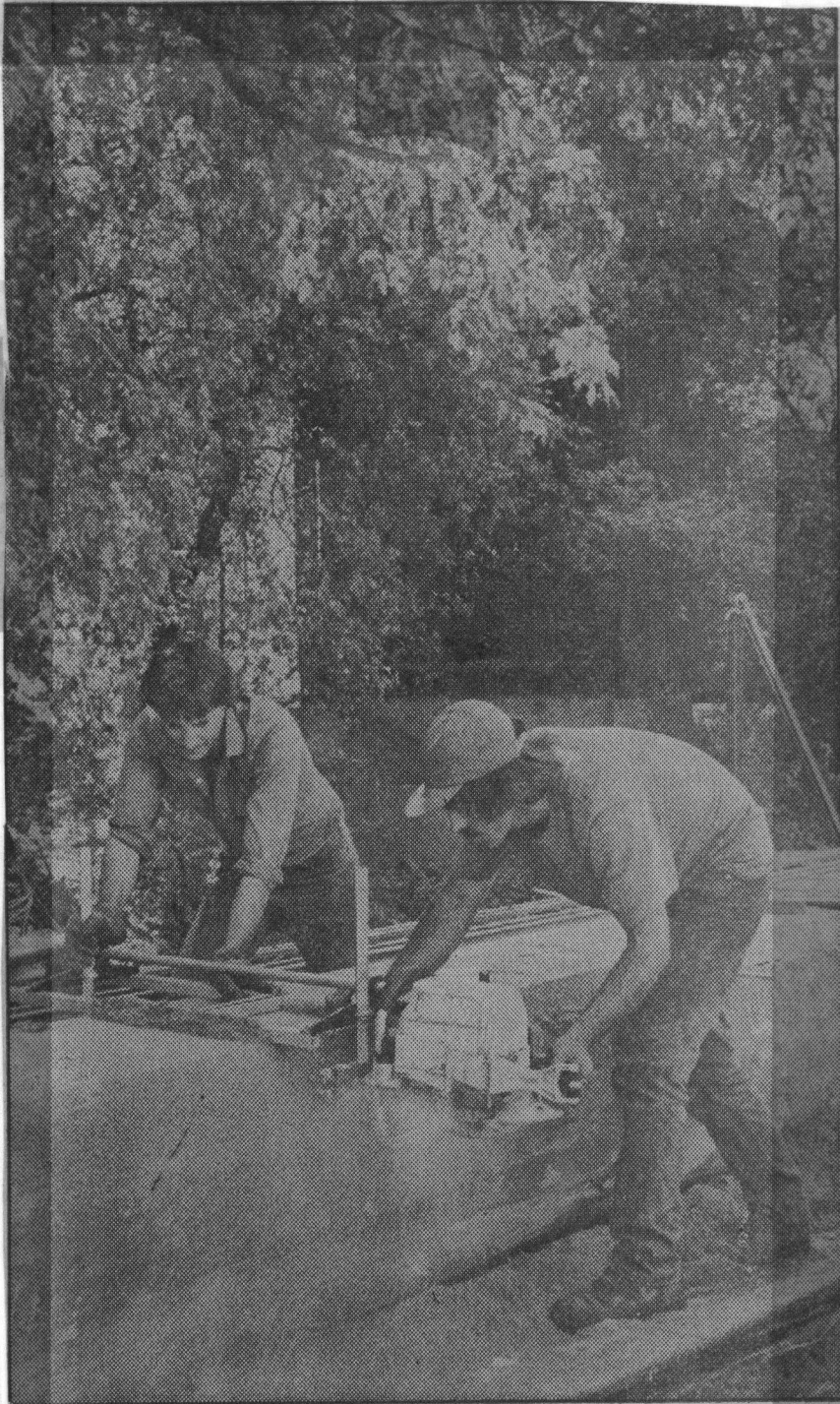
Through a network of loggers, Schultz

found what he was looking for: ancient redwoods at the bottom of remote canyons, abandoned by lumberjacks at the turn of the century. Williams Tree Service found four old trees at the bottom of a canyon off Summit Road. Someone else found a massive tree that fell during the floods of '82.

The result is that the sawyers have logs ranging in size from 3-5 feet in diameter and 20-28 feet in length to work on.

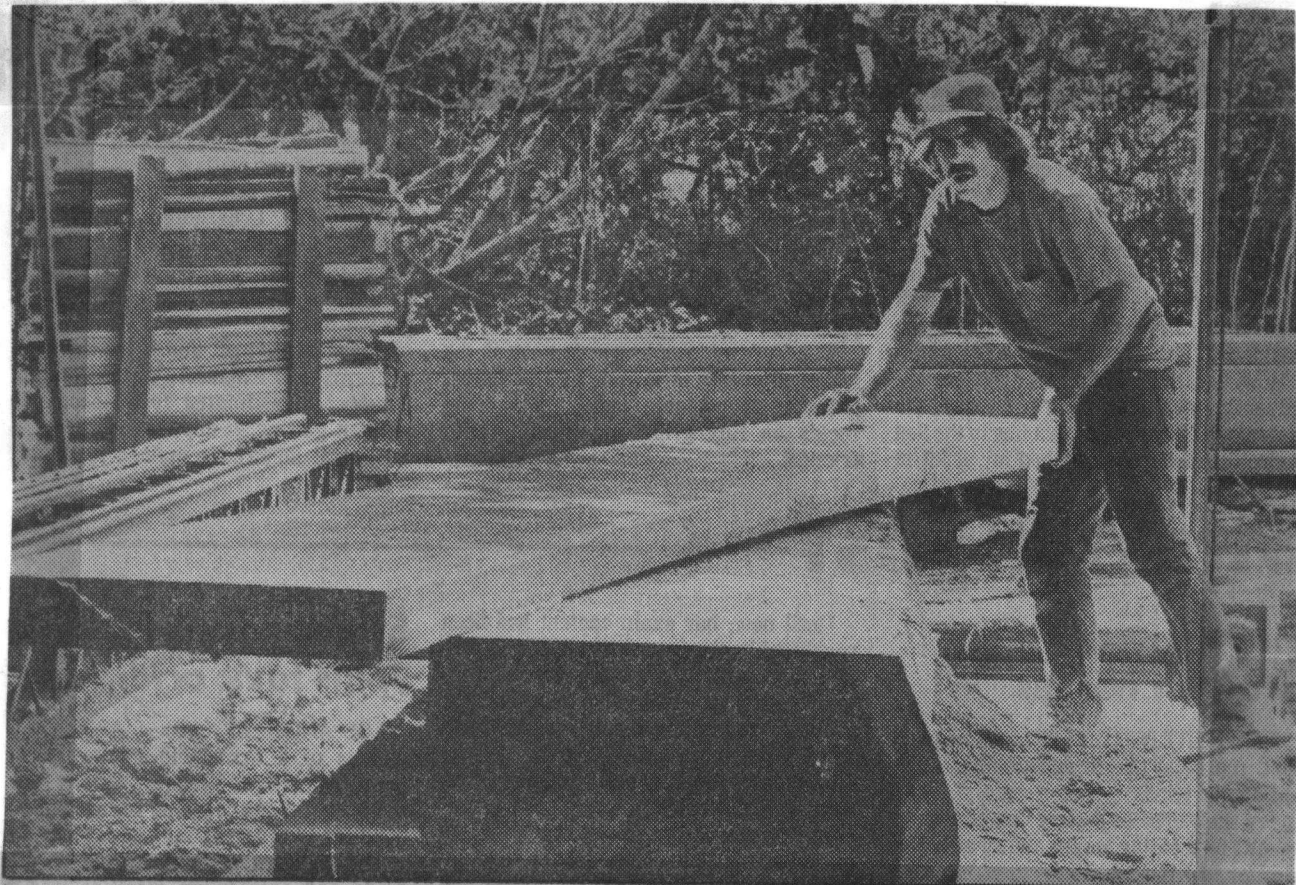
They'll need more logs to finish the reconstruction, said Sibley.

"This is a real unusual job," said Sibley, but he adds "It's a good job. Some day I'll be able to show my grandchildren ..."



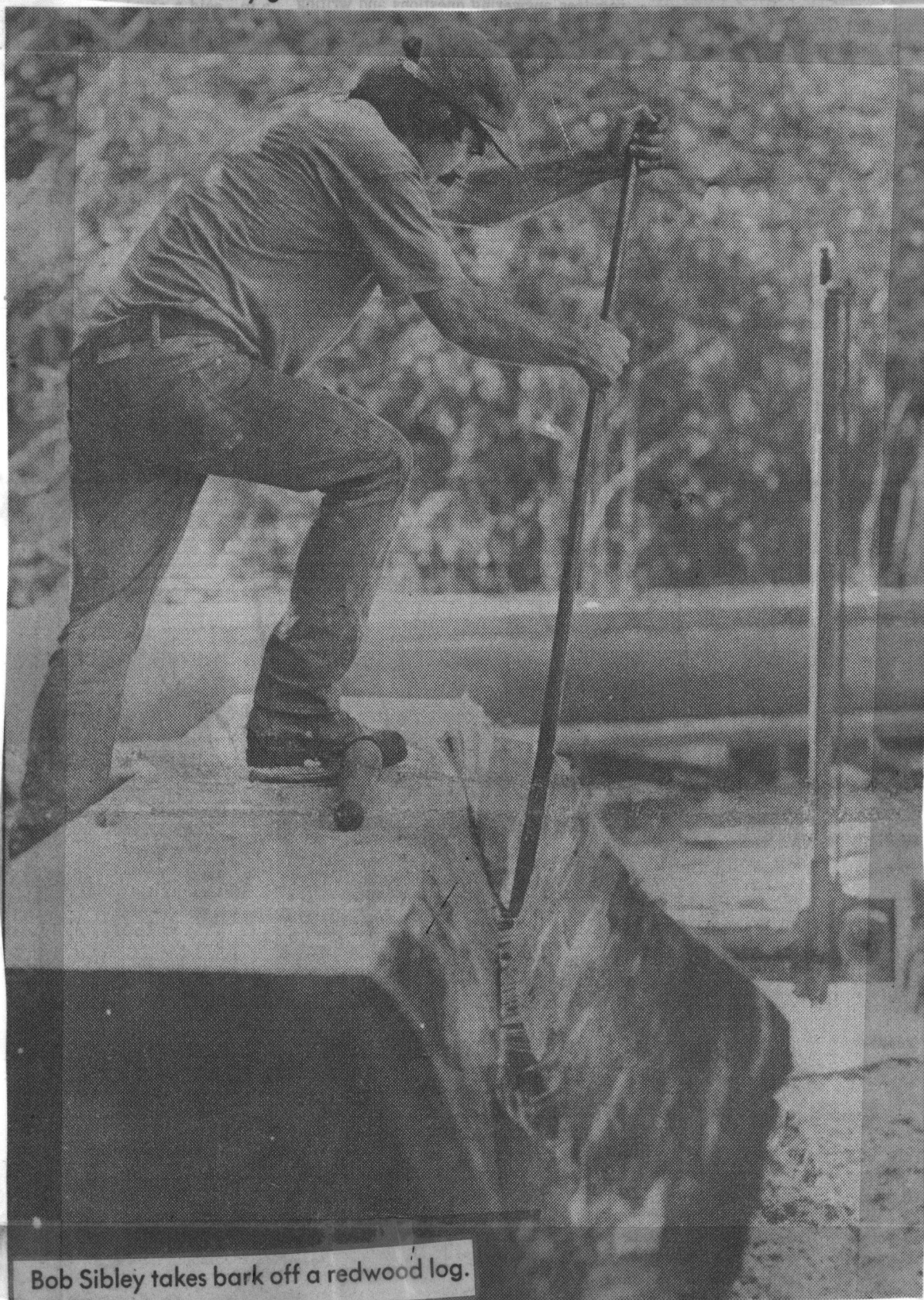
Pete Amos/Sentinel

Russell Martin and Bob Sibley work with Alaskan saw.



Bob Sibley guides a 20-foot board cut from a redwood tree.

Pete Amos/Sentinel



Bob Sibley takes bark off a redwood log.