

BACK IN TIME

Covered bridges

BY EVELYN BYRNE WILLIAMS WITH JANEEN SATHRE

As a young girl, I remember traveling through the covered bridge at Applegate and two others, Cameron and McKee in the Upper Applegate. To enter a covered bridge in the summer time was refreshing, an escape from the penetrating sun with an offering of a cool breeze inside. It also was a good place to escape from the rain or snow. School children who walked through the bridges to school must have enjoyed it, as I once did with my school chums. It offered a place to run a race, without stepping on any of the cracks, or to holler as loud as one could so the sound could be heard bouncing off the walls. It also could be a place to just listen to the river gently flowing beneath.

Covered bridges were never built for future generations. A bridge's life span was not much over 35 years. Who would have thought, back then, a covered bridge would someday become a historic entity? If the Applegate covered bridge was here today it would almost be a shrine in the valley, and the Applegate Historic Society would be truly blessed in having such a nearby treasure and attraction.

To be realistic, there is no way that the Applegate covered bridge could have been saved. When steel began to take the place of wood, bridge building changed dramatically. The holding weight and longevity of steel was a tremendous improvement and there was no longer

a need to cover the bridges from the elements.

Most covered bridges were very dark inside, which was the case of our three bridges here. Accidents could occur when entering the dark chambers from the bright sunlight or during the dark winter. The McKee Bridge had some window openings in later years, probably after a car and truck had collided inside. The openings also allowed the air to circulate, which was found to be important in preventing deterioration.

Some covered bridges have been saved from destruction, nostalgia taking precedence over practicality, with money being donated to save and restore the bridges.

Even though the Applegate covered bridge is no longer here, it will always be a cherished memory for those of us who used it and are left to tell something about it.

The first spanned bridge at Applegate was built around 1872 by Thomas Mee. (He also constructed the first bridge, called the Centennial, across the Rogue River located at Rock Point, in 1876. Thomas and his brother, Warren, were farmers and loggers living on Thompson Creek.)*

In 1892, Jackson County built the covered bridge, which saw many years of service by the increasing population of farm people living here in the

Applegate. Forty-two years later the bridge was in need of repair and Jackson County opted for a new replacement. Some time in February, 1934, the new 180-foot span of steel was started, to be finished in June. The work was contracted to the Mountain States Construction company of Eugene,



The Applegate Bridge circa early 1930s..

with Fred Lindsay as superintendent. The cost was \$32,806.

The Applegate Valley began preparing a celebration for the dedication of their new bridge. A committee was appointed to investigate the cost of a bronze plaque bearing the "Pioneer Bridge" name. The state highway commission agreed to install the plaque for free.

The sponsors of the event were the Applegate Community League, Applegate Grange, and the Applegate Extension Unit. They made a special effort to invite all the pioneers of the region to participate. All southern Oregon and northern California residents were cordially invited to attend. A picnic lunch would be at noon. Those participating were asked to bring their own eatables and table service. Coffee would be served free and the Home Economics Club of the grange would have cold drinks and ice cream for sale.

One of the greatest turnouts of "old settlers" ever seen in the vicinity came for the celebration. Mrs. Louisa Ray, 87, cut the ribbon, symbolizing formal opening of the fine new span for traffic. She had come west from Illinois in 1853 and was married in Jacksonville 19 years later, in 1872. She was the only surviving Granger of the 1870s and had

been a resident of the Applegate longer than any other woman.

Aubrey Edwards was master of ceremonies. The program started at 2 pm. The invocation was followed by community singing with a Grants Pass band accompaniment, then an address by C.E. Gates of Medford. The band played again after which there was an address by Arthur S. Taylor of Southern Oregon Normal School in Ashland. Pioneers were introduced and the audience sang the Oregon State song with band accompaniment. After the ribbon-cutting, the day's festivities were closed and a big dance followed at the Applegate hall that evening. It is noted that the proceeds from the dance were used for the bridge's bronze plaque. (It can now be seen when entering the bridge from the north.)

I am very grateful to Marguerite Black (now deceased) for sharing her copies of Maud Pool's "Big Applegate" newspaper articles, which appeared for many years in the Medford *Mail Tribune*. This valuable information enabled me to put this history together.

* Interview with Barbara (Mee) Ross

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The Mee family.