

BACK IN TIME

McKee Bridge Park

BY EVELYN BYRNE WILLIAMS WITH JANEEN SATHRE

An early-day settler, James McLaren, sold two mining claims to "Deb" and Leila McKee in 1902 and the McKees built a two-story house on the east side of the Applegate River. They later ran a stage stop there for travelers going to and from the Blue Ledge Copper Mine. The McKee Bridge gets its name because Deb McKee donated the land it sits on. The bridge crosses the river just above a well-used camping area and swimming hole. Many a miner would camp there on their way to or from Jacksonville when doing a supply run. The bridge building crew also camped there and many times arranged to have their meals at the McKee stage stop.

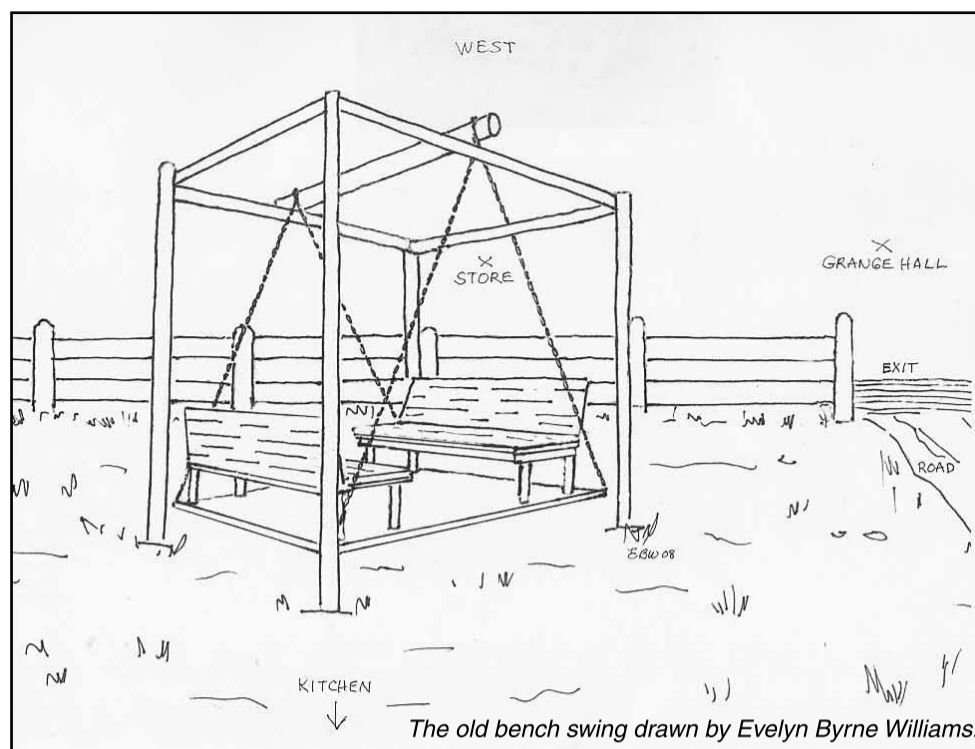
At that time the road from Ruch to the Upper Applegate forded the river a couple of times making spring travel difficult or impossible. Sometime in 1903 or 1904, Jackson County made a new road that stayed on the east side of the Applegate River, doing away with the river crossings. However, the East Side Road at Dead Horse Hill was very dangerous and with the increase of traffic, especially from the Blue Ledge Copper Mine, the county planned to build two covered bridges. In 1917 the Cameron and McKee bridges were finished and, even though the road was not paved, travel to the Upper Applegate became much easier.

By the 1930s the spot was a well-established campground according to the following by Maud Pool published in the *Medford Mail Tribune*: "Big Applegate, July 24, 1936. Camps Improved in Forest Areas: At the campground at McKee

Bridge, already equipped with a pump, stone stoves and tables, the hydraulic rams will be installed in the Applegate for irrigation of shrubbery and a diving board will be erected. Dee Mills is in charge of this work. Both camps will be enclosed with a rustic pole fence, with cattle guards."

I remember some of my teenage friends came out one day to swim and spend the night. We were the only ones in the campground that night and we felt as safe as if we were in our own homes. We had blankets and quilts on which to lie on the hard ground. By morning the ground seemed much harder, but that's the way it was—no luxuries.

Again from the *Tribune* on August, 4, 1939, Maude Pool wrote, "McKee Park Pool Will Be Lighted: McKee Bridge forest park, one of southern Oregon's most popular free resorts, will have its swimming pool in the Applegate River equipped with electric lights within a short time, according to local forest service officials. CCC workmen at Camp Applegate are constructing a water wheel which will be installed in a farmers' ditch running through the park. The wheel will operate a generator, and it is expected that the system will supply sufficient electricity for six lights at the pool. The work is under the supervision of H. Barnhart, project superintendent at Camp Applegate. An added improvement planned for the immediate future in the park is a sprinkling system to dampen the grounds. Three thousand feet of pipe



The old bench swing drawn by Evelyn Byrne Williams.

have been purchased, and the water will be piped in, although its exact source has not been determined. It is thought probably that the forest service will enlarge the capacity of the park with the purchase in the near future of an adjoining acre half of ground."

I don't recall the swimming hole ever being lighted at night as stated in the 1936 news clipping. However, the forest service did build a nice bathhouse where swimsuits could be changed—one end of the building for women and the other for men. It was located on the bank near the ditch above the swimming hole. And at one time there was a children's playground with swings much larger than the usual size for school playgrounds. One could really fly high. Perhaps my fear of heights is why I don't remember there being a slide, but a cousin of mine says there was a fun one. The slide was made even more fun after he and the other boys used wax paper to make it really slick.

There also was a large teeter-totter that I rarely got on because I usually ended up being on the upper end of it. The thing I remember enjoying the most was the two "swinging benches" that held three people on each side. When the Grange had their dances, it was a place for teenagers to gather and chat during the night.

I also don't remember when the park became a day-use only park, but I do remember Sunday afternoon trips to McKee Bridge Picnic Grounds as a favorite pastime for my family, who had little other entertainment in this neck of the woods.

Even our dog took advantage of the outing, although he was never really invited to go with us. That dog just happened to be there when we arrived and acted as though we were strangers to him. He would run away each time we tried to catch him. Other people must have thought we were trying to mistreat him, but the next morning he would show up for breakfast and was very happy to let us see all of the garbage he had dragged

home from the park. We think he must have known when the weekends came as he rarely strayed from our farm during the week.

Through the years the park has seen many people enjoying the shade of the tall pines and the cool water of the deep swimming hole. Even though the park is closed now for some needed renovation, I am sure that it will continue to be a wonderful place to enjoy the Applegate River.

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