

Covered Bridges

BY JOAN ODESS

Covered bridges have captivated people around the country for decades and folks here in Delaware County are no exception. The July 1956 issue of "The Courier Magazine" devoted five pages to showcasing the covered bridges of Delaware County and this year Kaatskill Life's calendar is entitled, *Spanning the Waters, Covered bridges of the Catskill Region*. This enthusiasm is not only evidenced in print however, in recent years three covered bridges in Delaware County have undergone extensive rehabilitation. The history of the covered bridge tradition in our county is fascinating and the remaining bridges majestic.

As the population of Delaware County grew in the nineteenth century, improved roads and bridges became essential for linking communities and promoting commerce. Wood and stone were deemed the materials of choice for bridge construction, as they were readily available throughout the area. As Raymond W. Smith of the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation notes, "The timber framing skills of local millwrights and joiners were readily adaptable to construction of timber bridges". Local materials and local knowledge and skills combined to make timber bridge building possible. The earliest timber bridges were simple roofless structures with plank decks.

Numerous theories have been proposed to explain why building traditions changed and bridges began to be covered. It has been suggested that covered bridges provided shelter for travelers who were caught in bad weather, that horses were less apt to shy from the water they were crossing over if they could not see it, and even that they were covered purely for aesthetic reasons.

According to Philip Pierce, Delaware County's Deputy Commissioner of Public Works

and covered bridge enthusiast, "The real reason for covering timber bridges was to protect the main timber trusses from the detrimental affects of rain and snow. The intermittent wetting and drying provided an ideal atmosphere for accelerated timber deterioration- rot." Raymond W. Smith agrees, noting that "From the early decades of the nineteenth century, the cost of building and maintaining timber bridges generally fell upon local governments or state-chartered turnpike companies, which were established as for-profit ventures. It soon became evident that protecting the bridge's structural system from the elements would reduce the burden of maintenance and replacement costs. This protection was most readily achieved by covering the timber truss bridge with a roof and board sheathing to enclose the structure".

At one time there were 250 covered bridges in New York State alone. According to Ward Herrmann, author of "Spans of Time, Covered Bridges of Delaware County", our county once was home to at least 57 different covered bridge sites. As recently as 1942 eighteen covered bridges were still in use in Delaware County. Six spanned the East Branch of the Delaware River, four spanned the West Branch and two crossed Dry Brook. The others crossed Beaver Kill, Beach Hill Brook, Trout Creek, Mill Brook, Charlotte Creek and Ouleout Creek.

Today Delaware County is home to five, three which are open to public vehicular traffic, one that is used privately and another that is open for foot traffic only. Some have been lost to fires and floods, and many have simply been replaced by iron bridges. However, the recent major rehabilitation work which has been carried out on all three that service the public: Fitches Bridge, Hamden Bridge and Downsville Bridge, will en-

sure that they remain in service for many more years to come. Each has its own fascinating history and unique characteristics and each was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on April 29, 1999.

Fitches Bridge, East Delhi

Fitches Bridge was the first covered bridge in Delaware County to be moved from one river crossing to another. The bridge, which originally spanned the West Branch of the Delaware River at Kingston Street in Delhi, was built in 1869/1870 by James Frazer and James Warren at a cost of \$1,970 after an October flood washed away its predecessor. In 1885 an iron bridge, built by the Groton Bridge Company, replaced the covered bridge which was dismantled and moved three miles upriver to its present location at Fitches Crossing where it was rebuilt. Fitches Bridge is a 100 foot long single span, one lane Town Lattice truss bridge.

The bridge has seen a couple of major rehabilitations since its move, the most recent took place last year. The work was headed by Philip Pierce and carried out by Delaware County Department of public Works crews. Changes were made to both strengthen the bridge and to bring it closer to its original state. Among other things, the truss length was increased by eight feet after it was discovered that the trusses had been shortened when the bridge was moved in 1885. The lattice-work was modified to fit the added length. The buttresses were removed and not replaced as they were not original to the structure and a wood shingle roof replaced the old one. Windows were added to the bridge to increase visibility inside and the bridge was left unpainted.

Downsville Bridge, Downsville

The Downsville Bridge was constructed in 1854 and may have been the first bridge ever built by Robert Murray. Murray, a famous Delaware County bridge builder, was born in Scotland in 1814 and immigrated to the United States when he was nine. His family settled in Bovina in 1818

and he is also known to have lived in Andes. He built at least nine covered bridges, including the ones in Downsville, Hamden, DeLancey and Margaretville.

Murray received \$1,700 to build the Downsville Bridge and was required to supply all the materials himself. He used the patented Long truss design that he was to use five years later when constructing the Hamden Bridge. The Downsville Bridge crosses the East Branch of the Delaware River in a single 174 foot span. It has the honor of being New York State's longest operating covered bridge, being in service 147 years. The bridge narrowly escaped destruction in December 1901 when Hood's Bridge, located two miles upstream was swept from its abutments during a flood. The bridge is reported to have been broken in half and carried downstream where one of the halves struck the Downsville Bridge as it passed under.

The Downsville Bridge was the first of the three public covered bridges in Delaware County to under go extensive rehabilitation in recent years. In 1998 it was completely rehabilitated when among other things, the bottom chord of the truss was replaced by laminated beams.

Hamden Bridge, Hamden

According to the Hamden Covered Bridge Dedication booklet, "A contract to construct the bridge was signed between Robert Murray and the Town of Hamden on April 27, 1859 for the sum of \$1,000. The 1830 Long truss design used by Murray was patented by Colonel Stephen H. Long of Hopkinton, NH. When originally constructed, the bridge was a single span, but in the 1940s a center pier was installed for additional support. The county repaired a lean in the bridge in 1966 by adding two large buttresses on each side. Two new windows cut into each side provided a safe place for young folks to fish and allowed more light into the dark interior. That same year, the bridge received its first coat of red paint. In 1967 the portals were squared off. Restoration of the Hamden Covered Bridge began in the

summer of 2000, with contractor W.L. Kline, inc. in charge. On July 19, while the bridge was being lifted off its abutments in preparation for the restoration project, an unanticipated mishap occurred. The top chord broke and approximately one-third of the bridge had to be lowered into the river. Fortunately, the damage was not significant. Restoration went on to include replacement of the tin roof with a standing seam metal roof. Decayed bottom chords were replaced with a single 130 foot glued-laminated chord manufactured by Unadilla laminated products in Unadilla, NY. To keep as much of the original Long truss as possible, some truss post members were relocated to accommodate stress levels in different areas of the bridge. Work continued through fall, and on November 13, the bridge was moved back over the West branch of the Delaware River. Great care was taken during the process to restore the Hamden Covered bridge to its original beauty. With the buttresses removed, and the diagonal appearance to the portals returned, she now stands straight, cambered, and proud- a single-span structure once more.”

The following two historical covered bridges are owned privately and have inherited a number of different names as their locations and owners have changed over time.

Tuscarora Club Bridge, Demis Bridge, Dunraven Bridge, Margaretville

The Dunraven Covered Bridge, originally a 38 foot long Queenpost truss was built as a toll gate bridge in 1870 by William Mead. It originally spanned the Platte Kill stream in the village of Dunraven. According to Ward Herrmann, “When the new road was constructed from Margaretville to Arena, it crossed the stream on a modern iron bridge below the old route, and the covered bridge was left abandoned.” In 1935 it was moved to its present location on property owned by the Tuscarora Club south of Margaretville off Mill Road. It was shortened to 24 feet and became a Kingpost truss. These changes rendered it ineligible for the National Register of Historic Places. Today it carries a foot trail over Mill Brook and is closed to vehicular traffic.

Lower Shaverton, Campbell, Old Roscoe Bridge, Cooks Falls

The Campbell Bridge is a 32 foot long Town Lattice truss built in 1877 by Anson Jenkins and August Neidig in Shavertown. In May 1954 progress on the Pepacton Reservoir necessitated the removal of the covered bridge. It was purchased by Carl Campbell for \$1,000 and moved to its present location on private land along Methol Road. Today it crosses Trout Brook and provides access to the owner’s home on the opposite side of the stream. On April 29, 1999 it was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

Delaware County is fortunate to have these five treasures in active use today. We owe many thanks to the residents and leadership of this county for their foresight, enthusiasm and hard work in keeping the covered bridge tradition alive. The following poem, from a collection owned by Philip Pierce and originally gathered by Frances Laninger of Canton, Pennsylvania, perfectly expresses the importance of these majestic structures.

*“What stories could these bridges tell
If they could only talk?
They’d tell us of the ones who rode
And those who had to walk,
The rich, the poor... those in-between
Who used their planks to cross,
The soldiers, farmers, businessmen
In buggies, sleighs, by “hoss”,
Like sentinels these bridges stand
In spite of flood and fire,
Their rugged, stalwart strength remains
Our future to inspire.”*

- Author Unknown