

Chimney Rock Bridge

By Jason D. Smith

Location: Upper Iowa River on Chimney Rock Road, just off CSAH W 58, 2.3 miles NW of Bluffton. The bridge is a few minutes south of Chimney Rock Park and campground

Description: 10-panel pin-connected Parker through truss bridge. Portal and heel bracings consist of a Town-Lattice design with a 55° angle heel bracing from portal to end post. V-strut bracings run along the upper chord creating an arch inside the bridge. Plaques are located on both portals.

Dimension: 162' long (total); 160' truss span. 16' feet wide, and 14' height clearance (at portals)

Built: 1906 by Continental Bridge Company, Chicago, IL

Commentary:

If mystery writers Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, and Alfred Hitchcock were pontists, they would have had a hey day regarding researching and writing about this structure for two reasons:

1. The history of the bridge company
2. The issue whether this bridge was built in this location or brought in from somewhere else

As far as the history of the bridge company is concerned, there is little information about how the Continental Bridge Company (CBC) evolved, let alone whether the company relocated several times or was resurrected under different owners. We do know that there were four different companies that existed over a span of almost 140 years. There was the CBC in Philadelphia (1869-1878), the CBC in Chicago (1903- 1907), the CBC in Peotone, IL (1902- 1931) and the CBC in Alexandria, MN (1972-2005). The CBC in MN is the youngest of the four companies, and according to the personnel in charge, the company is not connected to the earlier ones. So, the bridge company, now part of a larger consortium, is off the list of possible suspects. However, there may be some connections with the other three. The CBC in Philadelphia was run by Joseph Henszey, who was responsible for the development and construction of tubular bowstring arch bridges- bowstring structures built with Phoenix columns (hollow; square-shaped columns used for the upper chord and end posts of the truss structure). There are two examples of this design that exist today in the US- both in Pennsylvania. One of them is a 133 ft. span over Ontelaunee Creek near Slatington in Lehigh Co. The structure was relocated to Central Pennsylvania University in Summerdale, a suburb of Harrisburg, in 2002. The other structure, a 54-footer over Conestoga Creek in Lancaster Co., PA, is still in service but is awaiting relocation. Both bridges were constructed in 1869. The company dissolved in 1878 and it was not until 1903, when the CBC reappeared in Chicago. It is unclear who established the company, but it was clear that the CBC in Chicago, whose headquarters was in the Monadock Building on W. Jackson Blvd. built a wide array of truss bridges from 1903 to 1907, including the bowstring arch design patented by Henszey. The finest example of this type was the 122 ft. long Viely Bridge, built in 1906 spanning the Vermillion River in Livingston County, IL. Unfortunately, the bridge was

demolished in 1987, leaving no traces of its past behind, except on the HABS/HAER document. Because of the usage of the bowstring arch bridge design with Phoenix columns, there is a possibility that the CBC in Philadelphia and the one in Chicago may be connected. But since there is no concrete evidence to prove it, one has to assume the following conclusions between the two:

1. Henszey relocated the company to Chicago and there was no record of bridge construction between 1878 and 1903
2. The next descendant of the Henszey family decided to carry on the family tradition after Joseph Henszey retired or passed on, and since Chicago was one of the fastest growing metropolises in the USA during that time, decided to take his chances in Chicago
3. Someone else established the company in Chicago and adopted the patented Henszey design for construction uses.

Another factor worth investigating is the debate on whether there was a connection between the CBC in Chicago and the CBC in Peotone, for the information on the relationship between the two are contradictory. According to Margo Hupe of the Peotone Historic Society based on the literature by Tom Adamsick, the CBC in Peotone was built in 1902 under the name Massillon Bridge Co. It later expanded its facilities and changed its name first to Darst and H.E. Hughes, and eventually to CBC in 1911. The company continued to construct bridges, barges, and ships up to 1931. In 1946, S.A. Benett bought the company and it became Benett Industries, Inc. Like the Viely Bridge, the CBC in Peotone had a living example of a truss bridge built in Sanilac Co., MI, the Church Road Bridge. The 99ft riveted Pratt through truss bridge was built in 1920 over the Black River, and despite its rehabilitation in 1968, the bridge was demolished in 2004. The bridge's obituary can be found in Nathan Holth's historic bridges website. There are many questions that still need to be answered regarding the relationship between the CBC in Chicago and the CBC in Peotone. If there was a connection, chances are that the company in Chicago bought the Peotone facility and eventually reestablished its headquarters there. If there was no connection, then either there was a legal battle over the naming rights between the two companies and the ruling favored the Peotone facility, or the company dissolved in Chicago and reevolved in Peotone. It will take some more research and interviews to follow the history of the CBC, not only from that perspective, but as a whole, from its establishment in 1869 in Philadelphia to its eventually takeover by another company in Peotone in 1946.

The other mystery involving the Chimney Rock Bridge is its origin of construction. Even though the bridge was built in 1906 and has been rehabilitated in the 1970s (records from the IaDOT showed the bridge being renovated in 1977), the information regarding the bridge's origin remains unclear. According to various sources, there is evidence that reveals that the bridge may have been relocated to its present spot from another part of the region, based on the physical markings on the bridge itself. According to the Iowa Dept. of Transportation (IaDOT), the CBC in Chicago did present bridge designs to the county between 1906 and 1907, but there were no records of the bridge's construction. Two conclusions were made in the bridge report conducted in 1992: 1. The bridge escaped

construction records for unknown reasons, or 2. The bridge was relocated to its present spot during the 1950s or 1960s. While the evidence supports the second the conclusion, one piece of evidence may serve as the trump card in solving the riddle. During our visit to the engineer's office in 2005, we were presented with a listing of through truss bridges that were (and still are) still standing in the county and saw that the Chimney Rock Bridge was rebuilt in 1952. Since the structures were relocated in the 1950s and 1960s, according to the IaDOT, the Chimney Rock Bridge may be one of the structures that was relocated either in that particular year or at least during that time period. If that is the case, the question remains whether there was a previous structure at the bridge's current location or if the bridge was built in addition to the roadway. More research on the bridge's origin would be needed to find out whether the bridge was moved to its current location or if it was built here and was never relocated.

At the present time, the Chimney Rock Bridge is not in the county's 5-year plan for replacement. However, given the increase in traffic combined with the structure's age, chances are likely that the bridge will be replaced in the near future. The good news regarding the bridge is the fact that it has four key factors which could be potential in preserving the structure: 1. It is located near a field, 2. It is located a few miles NW of the Upper Bluffton Bridge and Hruska's campground, 3. It is located a few minute's walk from Chimney Rock Park and campground, and 4. The structure serves as an important navigational point for boaters and canoeists alike. These four factors could present the planner with the best of both worlds in terms of historic preservation combined with recreational possibilities and profit. There are three different ways of saving the Chimney Rock Bridge, while at the same time having all parties profit from these possibilities. The first possibility is preserving the bridge in its place and using it as a picnic area. A newer bridge would be built right next to the structure to allow traffic to flow smoothly. Various examples of such a measure can be seen in Iowa, including the Whipple truss bridge at Wilkinson Park in Cerro Gordo Co. and a Pratt truss bridge at Oakland Mills State Park in Henry Co. (see links below). The first option is perhaps the most viable and affordable, even though some work on the truss structure may be needed to prolong its life. The second possibility is incorporating it into a bike trail running from Chimney Rock Park and campground to the Upper Bluffton Bridge and campground, with the option of extending it to Decorah afterwards. Both campgrounds would benefit from this option with an increase in tourism, while tourists can take advantage of viewing the beautiful bluffs between those two areas by bike or by foot, without having to do that by canoe. The third option is utilizing the field adjacent to the bridge and convert the area into a historic bridge park, providing the tourists with a possibility of reading about the history of each bridge that is brought in (through plaques constructed at each site), while at the same time relax and have a picnic on the bridge, among grooves of trees and bushes. This plan was brought up a few years ago in light of the Tavener Bridge debate. However, the plan fell on deaf ears and the bridge eventually met its unfortunate fate in 2005. Two problems involving this plan are the following: 1. Which type of bridges should be brought in: All the remaining bridges in the county or just certain

types? 2. Will the proprietor of the field be willing to cede his land to such an idea in exchange for any form of compensation? While the second option would have to be cleared up between the proponents and the proprietor, the first issue is a rather tricky one, due to the fact that we have “theoretically” a bridge park east of Decorah- Trout Run Park and its centerpiece Freeport Bridge. To construct a historic bridge park outside Decorah and not incorporate it into the Trout Run Trail would take the attention of the tourists away from the 2nd longest bowstring arch bridge in the USA, let alone the bike trail itself. On the other hand, there’s no guarantee that visitors would visit the park at Chimney Rock Bridge. Many would rather take the bike and utilize the Trout Run trail encircling Decorah. If a historic bridge park is to be realized, our suggestion would be to construct two parks: one centered around the Freeport Bridge and consisting only of bowstring arch bridges, including the Turkey River and Gileecie Bridges, and one centered around the Chimney Rock Bridge, consisting of other truss structures. It is unclear whether this idea will go down with the rest of the county, but from our point of view, the compromise does make sense, for the bridges in this county, as well as outside, would have a second life, being on permanent display for those interested in seeing the structure in person. Even if a historic bridge park is not realized, there are many reasons to preserve the Chimney Rock Bridge:

1. The bridge is the last through truss bridge constructed by the Continental Bridge Co. in Chicago. In order to still solve the mystery of the company, one would like to have some living evidence to do some research- not just in a form of plaques, but the entire structure itself.
2. The issue of the bridge’s origin still has to be cleared up, and many who visit the bridge may have some stories to share with the rest of the county regarding its construction, which could potentially solve the mystery of whether the bridge was constructed at its current location or if was moved here from somewhere else.
3. Not counting the bowstring arch bridges, the bridge does present some architectural wonder and its conformity with the natural surroundings for people to see, which is surpassed only by the neighboring Upper Bluffton Bridge.
4. The bridge serves as an important navigation point and place of rest for canoeists and bikers alike. It would be a shame to lose this point of interest in a way similar to the tragedy that happened with the Tavener Bridge.

As mentioned before, even though some people may not be of the opinion of preserving structures, like the Chimney Rock Bridge, there are others who wish to preserve what is left of our heritage, regardless of how they would like to do it. As the old saying goes: When there is a will, there is a way.

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Links:

Wilkinson Park Whipple Truss Bridge:

<http://bridgehunter.com/ia/cerro-gordo/295th-street/>

Oakland Mills State Park Bridge:

<http://www.ole.dot.state.ia.us/historicbridge/detail.asp?id=104>

The pieces of the Tavener Bridge puzzle is slowly coming together and the article should be available very soon. In the meantime, the next structure that will support the need of a bowstring arch bridge park at Trout Run/Freeport Bridge Park is the Turkey River Bowstring Arch Bridge. The article on the bridge will come on 16 April. In addition, a bridge for the taking will also be presented; another bowstring arch bridge in Minnesota known as the Kern Bridge. Any stories pertaining to the three structures? Send them here to JDSmith77 -at- gmx.net. Deadline: 9 April.