

Who needs fake covered bridge?

My first disillusionment with the committee system of the Knox County Board came in 1995, after the highway committee, of which I was a member, recommended building a modern, two lane bridge to replace the historical Wolf Covered Bridge, burned down by arsonists in August, 1994. Before making the recommendation, the committee worked for a year, getting public input and reviewing information provided by a study prepared by WVP Corporation; engineers, architects and planners from Decatur, Illinois. The study was prepared for the Knox County Highway Department and The Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT).

That study suggested that a modern, two-lane bridge was not only practical and stronger, but hundreds of thousands of dollars cheaper than the replacement bridge we have. A small group of people influenced the board to choose the covered timber bridge, their motivations running all the way from being strict historians, to having businesses nearby, to being named Wolf.

The fact that the State of Illinois, represented by State Senator Dale Risinger, then with IDOT, promised to pay for the bridge and its maintenance forever had a lot to do with the county's decision to build the current structure. County board members apparently thought that the nearly million dollars from the State somehow didn't come from our taxpaying pockets. Well, it did, no matter what route it took.

But, when all is said and done, what good is it doing out there on the Spoon River?

The bridge is surrounded by farms, but has one lane so it can't accommodate modern, large farm machinery. The Galesburg Convention and Tourism Bureau people guess that 200 to 300 people ask about the bridge every year, mainly during the scenic drive in October. But compare that to the Carl Sandburg Birthplace, which draws an average of 10,000 visitors a year, and because of State budget cutbacks, it is now only open five days a week.

According to an article I wrote in 1992, 17,000 people were expected to visit that year and there have been significant additions to the site since then.

Consider Railroad Days, which has drawn 30,000 to 60,000 people in a three-day period. The Cardboard Boat Regatta draws thousands of spectators and participants. One good production in the Orpheum Theater may entertain nearly 1,000 people in a night.

It's nice there are postcards of the bridge and the Sheriff's Deputy's badges display it, but really, this hardly justifies the huge amount of money spent on the new Wolf Covered Bridge. Besides, it is simply no longer a historical landmark.

A visit to the bridge today finds graffiti throughout. The Sheriff's department has had no calls about the bridge in several years, so apparently no one has been murdered there lately. There is no place a car can stop in order for people to look at the bridge or walk over it. I parked on a perilous incline where tire tracks led down a steep hill to under the bridge and I wasn't about to venture there.



If the government of Knox County was supposed to provide a small park in conjunction with the bridge, it certainly has not happened. If private citizens planned to develop a park, they have not done so.

This timber-covered bridge is not very attractive or accessible and certainly doesn't draw many visitors. I'll bet if a vote were taken today, the surrounding farmers would choose the 1995 recommendation of the county board highway committee and the WVP Corporation - to build a modern, two lane bridge costing about half as much as the existing, \$900,000 structure.

Caroline Porter is a freelance writer who can be reached at cporter@galesburg.net. Other columns are online at The Zephyr website.

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