

Have I Got a Bridge For You...

By Penny Smejkal

We sold our bridge in October 2006...it was the one located out near Johnny Serafin's place on Hwy 47 before being replaced by the new modern concrete one; I wonder just when it was replaced. I can remember driving at age sixteen over the old steel bridge, fearful of meeting a car while crossing the river as the bridge was only sixteen feet wide (inside dimensions).

I asked Fran Fletcher about the date because I thought her husband Dan would remember...he didn't. Fran remembered the old one was still in place when she went to work at West

day, and then a little shorter distance the third day to make our 1,440 mile trip. Our first night we stayed in Meridian, Idaho at a huge truck stop.

A reefer (refrigerator) truck parked right next to us late at night, I thought a locomotive was passing through.

The following night we drove just past Big Rock Candy Mountain near Richfield, Utah. Big Rock Candy Mountain is bright sulphur-yellow mountain, with what looks like chocolate fudge topping. Quite beautiful, it seemed to glow

about sundown, almost translucent. Looking forward to a more restful nights sleep, we stayed overnight in a closed rest area there.

The next morning, as we were leaving, I told Ken that I had some trash to put in the can before we got onto the highway. We didn't see any trash cans at the entrance to the rest area, but there was one back in a ways and up a little hill.

As I got out of the pickup, I saw

a black dog wagging its tail at me, and sort of prancing...I walked towards him and he walked with me on up the hill, bouncing like a puppy does, glad to have my company it seemed...I tossed the trash and then turned back towards the pickup. The dog, a Rottweiler, grabbed the bottom of my jeans above my shoe, and so I had to sort of drag him as I started back.

I told him 'no' and 'stop' several times, each time he'd let go and look up at me and bark a couple of times and then grab hold again...it wasn't like he was mean, but I wasn't positive of that.

Dog in tow, I worked my way back to the pickup. Ken had turned around and pulled down the hill about one hundred yards waiting for me to return; he couldn't see me out of either mirror, nor hear me if I yelled for him. The dog must have tired of me though, as I got to the pickup he let go...and I was happy to be on the road again as we began our journey for the third day.

We'd left the day after the "heavy haul" truck did and got to Window Rock a day and a half before it. The driver was stopped Friday night at the Utah border near Page, Arizona and couldn't travel again until Monday morning, per Arizona State law. He pulled into Window Rock at about two in the afternoon on Monday November 6 and the crane unloaded the bridge before dark, thank goodness.

The next day the crane operator came back to place the pieces in the proper alignment readying them for what was to happen next: the sandblasting, the welder, and the painter. That was the purpose of going really... that is... we felt the people buying the bridge didn't know the reconstruction process, and felt obliged to help where we could.

Final resting ground

The bridge will cross a "wash" about thirty feet deep and one hundred feet wide. Ninety-nine other people who live on that side of the wash in Tse Bonito, New Mexico (pronounced

Tsay...sort of slur the "t"), will also use the new crossing, plus quite a lot of Native Americans. Utes, Zunis and Navajo live all around the area and next to this little island of land.

When Tse Bonito's crossing (comprised of several huge culverts covered with dirt) washed out in August 2005, the president of the Navajo Nation sent people to help the community. They brought the little community water, porta potties and groceries, and also allowed them to cross their private roads to get to the town of Window Rock.

The mortician told us that the road they were allowed to use is mostly a meandering trail through people's yards, past their clothes lines, barns and chicken houses, and children playing. Soon people began speeding their way through the area from Tse Bonito to Window Rock, causing barriers to be put up to slow the speeders down. The business people felt the next step would be to bar them from using the roadway altogether - hence the desire for the bridge.

While we dealt mainly with the mortician, three individuals paid for the bridge as well as the cost of moving it. The buyers were all business people, owning a car wash, check cashing, Laundromat, mortuary, and flower shop. The balance of the people in Tse Bonito were free with advice and criticisms but did not put up a cent to support the bridge, so the buyers were considering a toll. We learned later that the bridge was brought up to standards and sold to the state or county to be maintained to their requirements.

Our customer the mortician

Since we sold the bridge to a mortician, we learned a lot about the Navajo Nation and Native American burial customs while there.

The Navajo Nation is the largest Native American land reserve in the United States, and a welfare state of amazing services, including their own mortician.

Pendleton blanket-lined caskets and burials on the "family" lands.

The Pendleton company actually lines the caskets with their blankets - the caskets are made of light or dark wood, and are really beautifully done.

Most of the Indians choose the Chief Joseph blanket to be wrapped in their traditional manner, with their hands exposed and crossed on their chests to display their wealth of Silver and Turquoise jewelry bracelets and necklaces. The Indians sometimes take a 'best' horse to shoot and leave at the gravesite, providing a ghost horse for the deceased to ride on his way to the Spirit Land.

If a small child is being buried, they buy a large casket to fill with all new toys for the child to have in his Spirit World.

We were thunderstruck to learn all this...the clothing is slit that they are buried in, so it can be taken off rapidly, the



Oregon Electric in May of 1958.

A "Pony" Truss Bridge.

We learned that it's called a pony truss bridge. Vernonia still has a truss bridge on the north end of town; formerly known as King's bridge by my family, it's more commonly called the "green" bridge these days.

Truss bridges are just about impossible to move with out dismantling completely. The bridges are riveted; after the rivets are heated, they are thrown somehow and caught with a bucket by a man on the bridge who pounds the white hot round metal rivets through the holes of the bridge stringers, etc., thus holding the pieces together...on-site. That may be a lost art now.

Likely, the most relocated bridge in Oregon

The bridge first went to Seaside, purchased by the golf course there. They kept it about fifteen years, but it never was put to use.

It was then sold to a man named Campbell who intended to place it somewhere on his property near the three-mile post on Hwy 26. He sandblasted it, had it engineered, then got old and died.

A junkie (the old fashioned kind that still buys and sells junk metal) bought it and it sat for some more years.

When our friend, who lives in Gearhart, told us that it was for sale we bought it. Before my husband Ken and I brought it home, we took it apart, had two pieces 125' long, each one 13' wide at the widest point. It was hauled on a steering trailer, pulled by a truck.

We had it for about a year and a half, advertised it on the Internet a couple of times and finally sold it to a mortician in Window Rock, Arizona. So the story begins...

More dismantling

After it sold and we were paid, we then cut it in half again... so we had four pieces that were 62' 10" long, plus seven cross-brace pieces. The total weight was about 37,000 pounds. Right up until the last cross pieces were loaded, we didn't know if we were going to drive to Window Rock pulling a utility-trailer loaded with the bridge pieces or our travel trailer. Fortunately for us, the mortician (our buyer) found a heavy-haul company (Atlantic and Pacific) in Vancouver Washington to haul the bridge about 1,550 miles, by way of the Interstate highways.

Roadtrip

We left Nov 2, happy to be pulling a travel trailer instead of 37,000 pounds of steel down the Interstate. The first two days on the road were long days, at about 500 miles each



shoes are placed on the wrong feet, to confuse the evil spirits. We also learned that Delta Airlines is one of the few who continue to fly the Native American remains back to the reservations. There is by tradition, a four-day time frame to get the deceased back to their family land for burial.

We will return one day

We learned a lot on this trip and plan to go back for their ribbon cutting ceremony in which they are dedicating the bridge to the President of the Navajo Nation.

Penny Smejkal is a native Vernonian. She had her husband Ken, aslo a Vernonia-native live, on Timber Road just west of town.