

BACK IN TIME

Crossing the Applegate River

BY EVELYN BYRNE WILLIAMS WITH JANEEN SATHRE

At one time the trails and eventually the main roads in the upper Applegate area were on the east side of the Applegate River. People living on the west side had to find ways to cross the river to reach trails and roads. Most of the time you could ride a horse or wade across the river at a ford where the water was shallow and slow moving, but when the river was flooding it would be impossible to cross anywhere. Thus many forms of bridges sprang up along the river.

One of the most interesting bridges was the “swinging” footbridge made with fence wire, cables, and really snazzy planks of wood placed along the bottom. This contraption would be anchored on large trees several feet above the river where winter floods could not reach. Photo 1, from around 1891, shows one of these bridges with some children from the Watkins School (which was on the east side of the river, but is now under Applegate Lake) standing on it. I am guessing that the Watkins School District paid for the bridge so the children could get to school. I do know that the bridge was widely used for taking supplies, mail and visitors to the west side.

The Collings family, living on the west side, had a walk-across bridge made of lumber (photo 2) just a few feet above the water. This was used when the river was at its lowest. They would remove it when the water started rising and find other ways to cross to the west side. Now these areas are all under the Applegate Lake.

When the Beaver Creek School was first organized in 1898, a box-type conveyance (photo 3) was built so that children living on the opposite side of the river from the school could get to school. This box was held above the river by cables and the occupants would hand-pull themselves across. The school was on the west side and was sometimes called the McKee School because most children attending the school were from the McKee families. In 1913 a new school was built on

the east side near what is now the Jackson Campground.

I don’t know when the swinging bridge (photo 4) was built across from my home, about a mile up river from the Beaver Creek School. I remember it being there in 1930 when our home was built near it on the west side. My family was happy for a shortcut to go visit my McKee grandparents who lived across the river. The bridge was used all the time by my family and visitors, going to school, work, and just because.

In crossing a swinging bridge (photo 5) we encountered many obstacles, especially while carrying a lunch pail and some books on the way to school. We had to steady ourselves with a hand on the wire cable to keep from stepping off the 12-inch-wide boards. And, of course, it was called a swinging bridge for a very good reason—it could start swinging the minute you put your feet on it. It was extra scary when there was snow or ice on the boards. Dad would shovel the snow off and I would put some of his wool socks over my shoes, which helped to keep it from being so slippery.

After the main road to the upper Applegate crossed the river in several places by well-built bridges for wagons and cars, the old way of crossing was no longer needed. Many of those old bridges became dangerous, and one by one were taken down. The last time I saw the swinging bridge by my home was in 1960. It had become somewhat of a tourist attraction. So many people were stopping to look at it and walk on the bridge that it, along with the other old crossings, became a footnote back in time.

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Photos: 1—Bridge to Watkins School. 2—Collings bridge. 3—Beaver Creek bridge. 4—Byrne bridge near the author’s home. 5—Swinging footbridge.

Photos provided by Evelyn Byrne Williams.

