

# Days About Ended for Oregon Covered Bridges

By BEN MAXWELL

Days of the covered bridge on Oregon's primary state highways are concluded.

Finis was written May 18, 1953, when the structure shown in the photograph, Mill Creek bridge, immediately east of the guard station on the Alsea highway, was ordered replaced by a concrete viaduct 120 feet long and built according to state highway standards of traffic efficiency.

Mill creek bridge was built in 1924 and was among the last of all covered bridges built on primary state highways according to Glenn Paxon, bridge engineer. None has been built for 20 years though the department has more recently drawn designs for a number to meet county requirements. Eight remain on Oregon's secondary highways.

Covered bridges originated in antiquity. Herodotus, the Greek historian, mentions one in Babylon. At Lucerne, in Switzerland, a covered bridge was built in 1333 and another in 1408. None is believed to have been built in America prior to 1804.

When the first covered bridge was built in Oregon is not clearly recorded in history. However, the Oregon Spectator for November 4, 1851, mentions that the bridge between the Island (a mid-Willamette manufacturing center in pioneer times) and Oregon City was being roofed. This may be accepted as the first covered bridge in the Oregon country until more explicit evidence becomes available.

New England covered bridges of a century ago were ornate and styled according to the builder's capacity for distinctive design. Oregon's covered bridges for the most part lacked any such architectural elaboration. They were conceived as utilitarian and entirely functional. The roof was provided for the same reason that women of some decades ago wore long skirts—to protect the under-pinning. Most were nothing more than a shed open at both ends and spanning a stream.

If they were not noted for architectural merit, they were distinguished for longevity. An open bridge had an estimated life of 12 or 15 years. A covered bridge would last twice as long. County courts saw no romance in placing a roof over a bridge. Economy was their purpose.

Event of the speeding automobile made the old covered bridge something of a traffic hazard and the use of weather resistant concrete in construction ended the era of the covered bridge.

In 1948 less than 2000 were estimated to survive in North America. Canada, especially the Province of Quebec retained more than any other commonwealth in 1948 and Oregon ranked lower on the list with between 200 and 255. Here in 1948, Lane county led the list with 70 and Douglas county was next with 40. Less than 20 years ago three covered bridges spanned the Rick-reall between Independence road and Dallas. Now there is none and not more than three of these quaint structures exist in Polk county.

Marion county, too, had numerous covered bridges 40 years ago. Now there are four: two on the upper Abiqua, one east of Turner and one west of Mt. Angel. This latter structure is the monumental Gallon House bridge, relic of local option days before the First World War when the gallon house, visible through the opening in the bridge, was a well patronized oasis.

Within the past 15 years a number of new covered bridges have been built in Linn and Lane counties. One of these on the road between Scio and Providence church near the Czech hall is framed with wood but sheeted with aluminum. Red covered bridges of orthodox construction may yet be seen on county roads joining the Alsea highway, primary state highway No. 34.

Nor have covered railroad bridges entirely disappeared in the Willamette valley. Three protect trestles over a freight line from Oregon City to Molalla and another stands on the S.P.'s branch line near Gilkey station in Linn county.

Oregon's older covered bridges were built in accordance with the Smith principle of truss construction. Later bridges adopted the Howe truss. Some were, indeed, long lived. Coburg bridge built by A. S. Miller & Son in 1878 was in use until 1928, an interval of 50 years. Knight's bridge

at Canby, a structure of exceptional design, was in use beyond that interval and at the time of its closure in the late 1930s bore signs painted on its interior in the 1880s.

## LAST OF ITS TYPE ON A PRIMARY HIGHWAY



Mill Creek covered bridge on the Alsea highway immediately east of the guard station is the last covered bridge in use on a primary state highway. It has been ordered removed after 29 years of service and will be replaced by a concrete viaduct. Event of the automobile and use of weather resistant concrete in bridge construction has ended the era of these horse and buggy relics in Oregon.

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