

Riverside's Swinging Railroad Bridge

Episode 31: Mar. 26, 2008

Adapted, by permission of the Walker County Historical Commission, from: Riverside's Swinging Railroad Bridge. (1986). In Walker County Historical Commission (Ed.), *Walker County, Texas: A History* (p. 914). Dallas: Curtis Media.

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In 1866 a special act of the Texas Legislature authorized the International Railroad Company to build a line from Fulton, Arkansas, to Laredo, Texas. The International and Great Northern connected with the Houston and Great Northern to form a line through East Texas. Almost overnight, towns began to spring up along the route. Several in and around Walker County resulted from this growth: Riverside, Dodge, Phelps, New Waverly, and Trinity.

A bridge was constructed across the Trinity River at Riverside to accommodate the train traffic. It was built about 1871 or 1872. All that remains of this first bridge are remnants of two stone piers which once supported part of the former structure.

The Wisconsin Bridge and Iron Company was awarded a contract to construct a swinging bridge over the river to allow barge and steamboat traffic to pass. The bridge would turn a complete ninety degrees on a huge steel pin mounted in the center of a concrete pier.

In 1912, work began at the construction site. Two of the original stone piers from the previous bridge were shortened and then recapped with fresh concrete to serve as piers for the approaches at the ends of the proposed steel span. Their role was merely to stand in position at the ends of the swinging span, since the entire weight of the steel truss was to be supported on its one central pier. Work progressed on this portion of the project as well. At the center of the proposed steel truss span, a foundation was excavated for a 33-foot diameter concrete pier to support the swinging span. After the foundation was dug, elm pilings were driven into the ground to bedrock to provide further support. Then a -inch [????] steel shell made of used oil tank material was placed in the excavated area and wooden forms placed in position above the level of the riverbed for a large concrete pouring job. With steel reinforcing rods positioned, fresh concrete was poured over the pilings, filling both the steel shell and the wooden forms.

The steel superstructure for the bridge was done by the bridge company in North Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The prefabricated overhead truss together with the operating machinery for turning were shipped by rail to Texas.

The swinging span was a total of 294 feet 4 inches long. It was 15 feet wide and 21 feet 8.5 inches clearance from the top of the rails to the underside of its overhead truss members. This bridge was an engineering marvel for its time.

A dedication ceremony was held before the railroad accepted the bridge. They turned the bridge, by hand, using a wheel, similar to a ship's wheel, with spokes, and it would screech, and go a little bit, and screech, and go a little bit further. The contractor told the railroad people, "A hundred years from now, this bridge will turn this good."

The bridge was opened only two times, first for the dedication and second in 1926 during a flood to allow large logs and driftwood to pass. As far as can be determined, this bridge was never used for traffic on the river. No barges or steamboats ever travelled this far up the river.

In 1955, after Missouri Pacific had received this line, the ends of the bridge were welded, converting it into a fixed bridge. To view this bridge, drive north to Riverside, and look to your right as you cross the Trinity River.