

THE BRIDGES OF DENTON



MICHAEL A. MURPHY

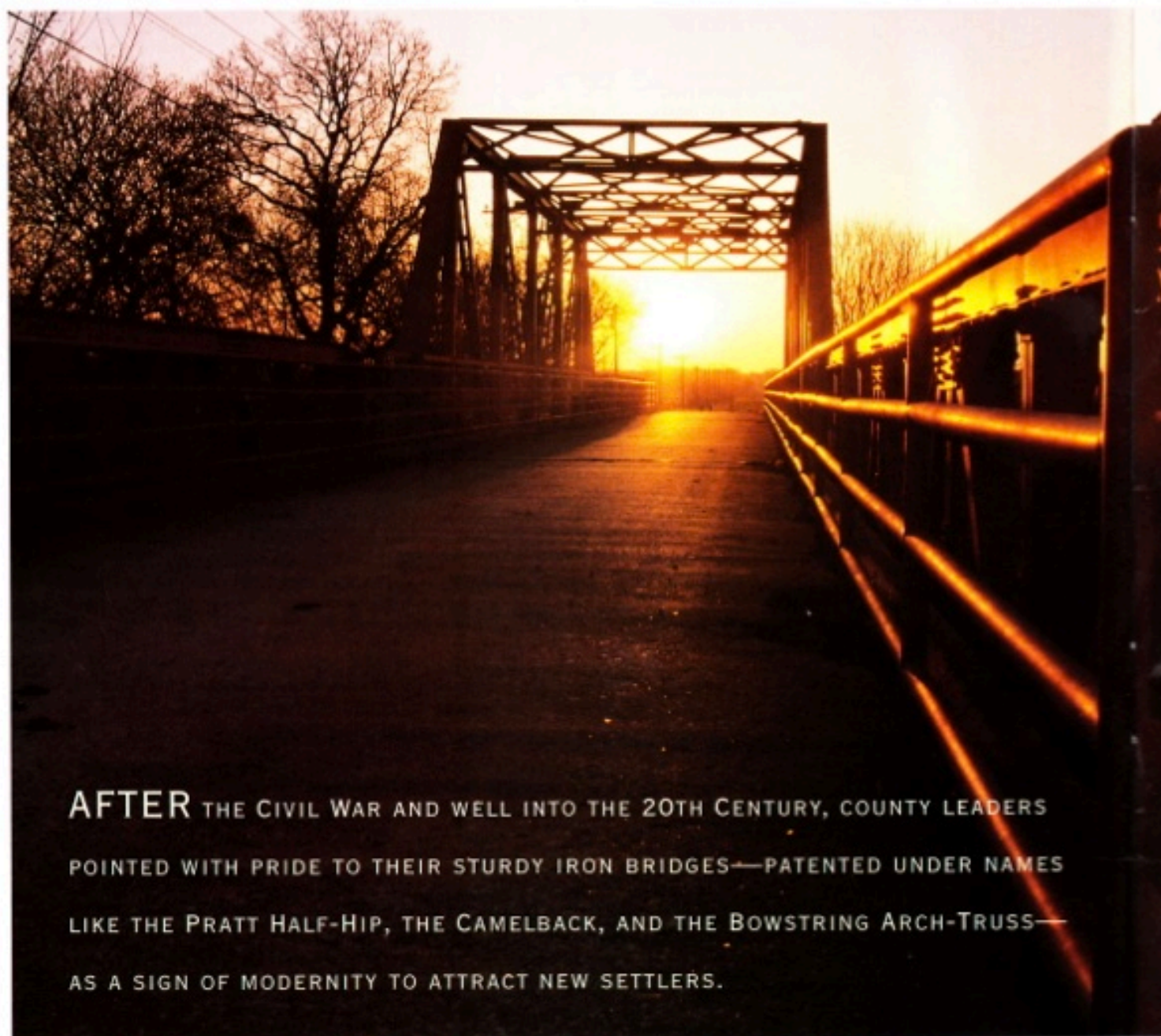
COUNTY

BY PEGGY HEINKEL-WOLFE



BEFORE it was moved and refurbished as a footbridge for a tiny creek in Denton's North Lakes Park, the old iron bridge near Stony (also spelled Stoney) saw more daring uses. According to Moleana Mason Carson, whose older brothers swam in Denton Creek with friends, "My brothers would go up the creek to a spot where they'd jump in the water and float back downstream. Then, as the water started getting fast, they'd catch the iron bridge in order to climb out," she recalls. "I never was that brave. Of course, Mother and Daddy didn't know anything about it. If they had, they would have been scared to death."

Restored and listed in the National Register of Historic Places, the 1884 Old Alton Bridge (left) spans Hickory Creek on Copper Canyon Road. Alton, established in the 1840s, was the second seat of Denton County. A 40-foot bridge (above) spans Duck Creek at Sam Bass Road, northwest of Sanger.



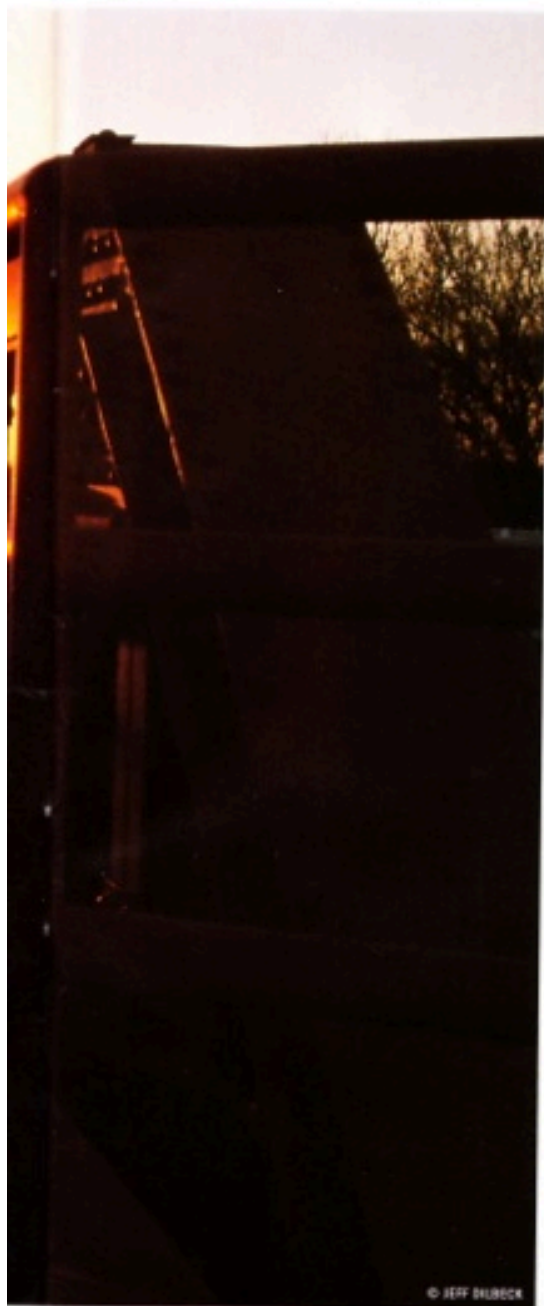
AFTER THE CIVIL WAR AND WELL INTO THE 20TH CENTURY, COUNTY LEADERS POINTED WITH PRIDE TO THEIR STURDY IRON BRIDGES—PATENTED UNDER NAMES LIKE THE PRATT HALF-HIP, THE CAMELBACK, AND THE BOWSTRING ARCH-TRUSS—AS A SIGN OF MODERNITY TO ATTRACT NEW SETTLERS.

Just west of Aubrey, the FM 428 bridge over the Elm Fork of the Trinity River was part of a feeder road and mail route between Aubrey and Sanger. It now serves as a footbridge on the Greenbelt Corridor, a 20-mile, multiuse trail.

NOW 79, Moleana used to walk, and later rode the bus, across the iron bridge every day to get to school. The bridge was the only link between Decatur and her family home, which was part of her grandparents' ranch on the Denton-Wise county line. "There was one low-water crossing, but all of the area flooded terribly every spring. The iron bridges were so much better than those old, flat bridges with no railings," she says.

Many early Texans rejoiced when an assembly of iron beams, pins, and rivets came to a wide tributary or the bed of an unpredictable creek. In fact, after the Civil War and well into the 20th Century, county leaders pointed with pride to their sturdy iron bridges—patented under names like the Pratt Half-Hip, the Camelback, and the Bowstring Arch-Truss—as a sign of modernity to attract new settlers.

The fate of most iron bridges in Texas was sealed a decade ago when the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) found nearly all of them unsuitable for a modern day's load. Now, the tarnished trusses are systematically being exchanged for smooth, wide concrete spans. As a result, Billy Lemons, a Whitesboro-based house mover, stays busy relocating hundreds of old bridges. Although some are bought and moved onto private prop-



erty, he says, many are hauled away for scrap. "In some counties, they can't get rid of them fast enough," says Billy.

But in Denton County, people are working to preserve the bridges. The late Taylor and Mildred Hawk, longtime residents who volunteered for the Denton County Historical Commission, were among the first, and the most vocal, to champion the cause. Kay Goodman, a friend of the Hawks, says the couple met while working at a Fort Worth aircraft manufacturing plant during World War II.

Some three miles west of I-35, a 150-foot-long bridge (top)—built in 1908 at a cost of \$1,500—spans Clear Creek at Sam Bass Road near Duck Creek Cemetery. Above, a 1903 bridge near Krum that crosses North Hickory Creek is slated to be replaced. Krum city officials hope to move it to a new city park.

Mildred worked at the drafting tables and Taylor on the assembly floor, work that likely contributed to their appreciation of the bridges' everyday grace and engineering achievements.

The Old Alton Bridge, which linked

the towns of Denton and Copper Canyon, was declared unsafe in the mid-1980s. Built in 1884 by the King Iron Bridge and Manufacturing Company of Cleveland, Ohio, Old Alton became the first venture for rescue-bent county polit-



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The bridge above, on Litsey Road at Henrietta Creek, sits west of Roanoke. It was built in 1904 by the King Iron Bridge and Manufacturing Company of Cleveland, Ohio. Just north of Denton, a 25-foot span that crosses Millam Creek on Ganzer Road (right) provides service to Interstate 35.

ical leaders and preservationists. County leaders provided for a new concrete span to be built around the original structure over Hickory Creek so that preservationists could have the bridge restored. Today, Old Alton Bridge remains in its original location, now forming part of Lewisville Lake's Elm Fork Trail, a popular pathway for horses and hikers, who sometimes trade ghost stories about the area.

Listed in the National Register in 1988, Old Alton Bridge thus became like an ambassador for the Hawks' efforts to preserve the county's other iron bridges. After Taylor died in 1990, Mildred continued their work, spending several years



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documenting what remained of two dozen iron bridges. Since counties can pursue historic designations where appropriate, she worked tenaciously until her own death, in 2004, recording and advocating for 17 of those two dozen old

bridges, which exhibit a variety of construction styles. (Seven bridges were deemed beyond preservation.) The 17 bridges are chronicled in a brochure-with-map, published with Mildred's own money, that remains widely distributed



TxDOT preservation specialist Lisa Hart points out that in their heyday, iron bridges were often moved as populations or creek beds shifted; one view is that preservation efforts simply continue that process, once again placing the bridges where they can best be used.

A committee of the Denton County Historical Commission is helping to find new homes for the bridges. According to Rynell Novak of Denton, who chairs the committee, several bridges have already been moved, or earmarked to serve as footbridges in public parks, but several more need new homes. Rynell says that time is still on the committee's side to find ways to meet the county's mission to save the bridges by putting

them in public places.

For her part, Molcana Carson is delighted that the county found a new use for the old bridge near her family home: "It feels as if an old friend has come home to stay." ★

PEGGY HEINKEL-WOLFE wrote about Argyle Acres iris farm for the April 2004 issue.



Originally west of Stony, the lovely bridge above has found a home in Denton's North Lakes Park. Like light-houses and trains, old bridges inspire warm feelings, as shown by this plaque on the Old Alton Bridge (see page 22) quoting the late Wayne Stuart Ryan, a Denton businessman and rancher.

Like Old Alton, the Rector Road Bridge (originally near Sanger) is listed in the National Register, which notes that it remains much like it was when the Austin Brothers of Dallas built it in 1907. This past spring, Billy Lemons, together with Jerry Webb of Denton County House Movers, relocated the Rector Road Bridge to Denton, where it spans an environmentally sensitive area between the academic and athletic buildings of John H. Guyer High School.

The Gregory Road Bridge, also in the National Register, sits on Duck Creek at a lonely spot near the Denton-Cooke county line. The short span has been reserved by the city of Southlake for use in its Bicentennial Park.

Unlike the Old Alton and FM 428 bridges, most of Denton County's bridges will have to be moved to be preserved. In answer to objections that moving an artifact compromises its preservation,

through the Denton County Historical Commission and Denton's Courthouse-on-the-Square Museum (brochure and map are on the Web; see Essentials, at right). Because of the efforts of Mildred Hawk and others, Denton County now has two other bridges (the Rector Road and Gregory Road bridges) listed in the National Register.

THE U.S. Army Corps of Engineers restored the former FM 428 Bridge west of Aubrey as a footbridge, as well. Believed to have been constructed by the King Iron Bridge Co. in 1883, it, too, remains in its original location. It now forms part of the Greenbelt Corridor, a 20-mile, multiuse trail that begins at the Ray Roberts Dam, between Pilot Point and Sanger, and ends at the headwaters of Lewisville Lake.

essentials

DENTON COUNTY'S OLD IRON BRIDGES

SOME of Denton Co.'s remaining iron bridges have been moved from their original sites and preserved in public places; others await decisions about their fate. Three are listed in the National Register. To view Mildred Hawk's brochure (with a map) of the bridges, go to the Denton County Historical Commission Web site: <http://dentoncounty.com/dept/main.asp?Dept=112>. Or write to the DCHC, 110 W. Hickory, Denton 76201; 940/349-2860.

For general information about the city of Denton and Denton Co., write to the Denton Convention and Visitor Bureau, P.O. Drawer P, Denton 76202 (office at 414 Parkway, 76201); 940/382-7895 or 888/381-1818; www.discoverdenton.com.