

Cotter's R.M.

Ruthven Bridge has colorful history

From Baxter County Historical & Genealogical Society

(This story was researched and written by Lynn D. Baker)

After attending the third annual Bridge Bash on Sept. 21, one would have to wonder why did they choose the old Cotter bridge? Why not the Norfolk bridge where the Food Bank of North Central Arkansas, the event organizer, is located, or the newer and larger U.S. Highway 62 bridge located north of Cotter. After understanding a little history of this interesting bridge, the reason becomes quite clear.

The bridge basics

Cotter was established in 1905 as a railroad town. The area used a ferry system to cross the vast White River, with the nearest road crossing being 100 miles north in Branson, Mo. The river would rise and fall very quickly,

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ABOVE: The R.M. Ruthven Bridge at Cotter in 2005, after its restoration. RIGHT: Construction of the Cotter bridge across White River in the late 1920s.

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Ruthven

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which caused the ferry to be very unreliable.

Baxter County residents wanted a bridge, but were opposed to the use of toll to pay for it. Once it became apparent that the federal road U.S. Route 62 would replace Arkansas Highway 12 through the area, bridge interest reached a peak. The federal road would bring an economic boom to the touristthemed Ozarks that had not been developed, but the funding still was not available due to Arkansas' lack of a central road authority.

In 1927, a franchise was granted to construct a toll bridge at Denton's Ferry (located two miles upriver from Cotter), but the residents of Cotter wanted a bridge of their own. An appeal was made to the Arkansas Highway Commission, and in 1927 the Legislature approved a bridge at Cotter. But, due to the Depression, the state said it would have to be a toll bridge.

The prime force behind obtaining the bridge at Cotter was Baxter County Judge R.M. Ruthven. Before the bridge was built, the state hired a New York firm to assess traffic in Cotter. According to the firm, Cotter didn't have enough traffic for a bridge to be built. When the Highway Commission met to make its final decision, a meeting that Judge Ruthven attended, the Cotter report done by the firm mysteriously disappeared, and the bridge at Cotter was approved.

The construction phase

The bridge itself was designed by Marsh Engineering Company from Topeka, Kan., and built by the Bateman Contracting Company from Nashville, Tenn. The bridge is the only Marsh Rainbow Arch bridge in Arkansas, and the largest bridge designed by the Marsh Company. The bridge is constructed of two 90-foot tall steel towers that were placed on either side of the river approximately 2,000 feet apart. Over 5,000 cubic feet of sand and 9,000 cubic yards of gravel were taken from the river at the site to make the concrete that was used to build the bridge. The bridge consisted of five main arches and a smaller sixth arch, and it would include over 60,800 pounds of structural steel and 825,000 pounds of reinforcing steel. It cost about \$500,000 to build.

Builders began working on the bridge in November 1929. The contract stipulated that the bridge would be completed in 300 working days, but the bridge actually was completed six months earlier. Bateman Contracting Company used as much local labor as possible. A cable system was used to avoid problems with the mercurial river. The company installed lights and worked around the clock in order to prevent delays. The bridge was dedicated on Nov. 11, 1930, but for months the residents of Cotter continued to use the free ferry system rather than pay the toll. The Highway Department even had to threaten the community with retracted funding unless the residents began using the bridge.

Festival highlights dedication

The Cotter bridge celebration was composed of a two-day festival where an estimated 3,000 to 4,000 people were said to have attended. At 2 p.m. on the day of the dedication, thousands of poppies were dropped from an airplane, and Miss Elizabeth Ruthven christened the bridge with water from the Cotter Spring. The state also celebrated the new Highway 62, which stretched from Kentucky to New Mexico. In all, it was a celebration of an enormous feat for the people of Cotter and the design team. Unfortunately, two men were killed while building the bridge.

The new Cotter toll bridge charged walkers five cents, a man on a horse 10 cents, and an automobile or a horse and wagon 25 cents. The residents of Cotter complained, and the state soon found out that many residents were using the ferries instead of the new bridge because of the costs. In August of 1931, the ferry was officially put out of business, and prices were lowered. In 1938, Carl Bailey, as one of his first acts as governor, discontinued the toll on Cotter Bridge. In 1976, the bridge was named after Judge Ruthven, and is now known as the R.M. Ruthven Bridge. On October 1986, the bridge was dedicated as a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark by the American Society of Civil Engineers.

Bridge restoration in 2002

The Cotter bridge stood for 73 years before undergoing a restoration project in 2002.

There were 44 workers involved in the project and, even though there was a delay, on Aug. 4, 2003, they were able to finish the bridge restoration. They were able to have the Cotter bridge finished in 2004. The lighting of historical Cotter bridge with more than 3,000 lights was celebrated on Dec. 13, 2004. The re-dedication of the bridge was a day to remember.

It started on Sept. 24 at 2 p.m. with the singing of the National Anthem and the flying of three vintage aircraft from Cotter's "Air Force" overhead at the Valley Fly-In. At 3 p.m., the cannon roared to proclaim the reopening of the R.M. Ruthven Bridge. There were Civil War re-enactors from Mountain Home and Bakersfield, Mo. The re-enactors fired their 12 pound Napoleon cannon on the signal given by Hart's Battery while the Cotter Fire Department sprayed arches of water to add to the already vast celebration.

The ribbon on the bridge was cut by Mayor Bill Jennings of Cotter and Mayor Mary Jane Erwin of Flippin. The mayor led 10 vintage cars across the bridge, including a 1923 Buick Roadster, 1926 Ford Phaeton, 1927 Ford Model T, 1929 DeSoto and several others. The speakers included Jennings, Wayne Ruthven, Forrest Wood and Jonathan Barnett. A poem was written by Herbert Messick, and read by his daughter, Mary Ann Messick. It was dedicated to all the workers who worked on restoring the bridge and to all the men years ago who built the historical rainbow arch bridge.

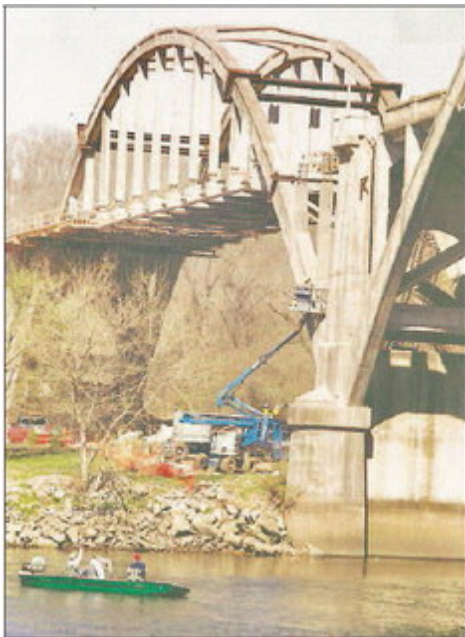
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Dedication ceremonies for the Cotter bridge in 1930. PHOTOS COURTESY OF BCHGS



Jay and Jerry Baker in front of the toll booth at the Cotter bridge in 1933.



Restoration work in the R.M. Ruthven Bridge in 2003.