

Roubidoux Bridge — A Century of Service

The City of Waynesville celebrated the centennial of the Roubidoux Bridge on April 1, 2023, in Roubidoux Park. On a windy but sunny Spring day, a group of citizens was in attendance to hear the Waynesville High School Band play several selections and then several dignitaries extolled the longevity of the bridge. A non-dignitary, your humble editor, added the remarks that follow about the history of the concrete span.

The first appearance of an automobile in Waynesville was on August 21, 1909. A small boy witnessed the big iron horse rolling into town. That small boy was nine-year -old Dru Pippin, who was standing that August day in 1909 in front of Joe Mart Long's grocery on the southwest corner of the town square (now Lone Oak Printing) . Dru vividly recalled that scene 67 years later.

“The first automobile I remember having ever seen in this area was an old chain drive Metz, a very high-wheeled affair with open cockpit so to speak and the wheels were almost as big as a buggy wheel. In such a contraption, the then chief of police of St. Louis by the name of Creecy made a trip from St. Louis in one of these driving automobiles. It took him three days to make the trip when he finally landed at Waynesville. Just before he got there, he hit a stump in the middle of the road and bent an axle and had to stop at the blacksmith shop and have the wheels taken off and the axle taken out and straightened before he could continue his trip.”

Chief Edmund Creecy had been



St. Louis Chief of Police E. P. Creecy.

traveling on the St. Louis to Springfield Road, sometimes called the Wire Road as a telegraph wire had been strung along this trail by Union soldiers during the Civil War. To get to Waynesville from the east, Creecy had to splash through the Big Piney River at a crossing known since those Civil War days as Wagon Ford but, beginning in the 1890s, called Hooker Ford because that is where you could find —the residence of John Hooker, well-known guide and float fishing outfitter. After fording the river, Creecy had to climb a steep hill out of the Big Piney floodplain to the high ground on the road to Waynesville.

For most of its length, and certainly in western Phelps and eastern Pulaski counties, the Springfield Road was a rough, rutted dirt thoroughfare, furrowed by wagon wheels, and, yes, an occasional tree stump to dodge. Such was the condition of most of the roads statewide.

Road construction and maintenance at the time was the responsibility of the counties in Missouri. Poor counties had poor roads.

The construction of this bridge is the result of landmark legislative action and a county highway engineer's effort. When Edmund Creecy drove the first automobile into Pulaski County and the Waynesville square in 1909, no one in the county owned an automobile. Henry Ford's rolling assembly line revolutionized the availability and drastically reduced the cost of automobiles. Statewide, auto ownership ballooned: from 16,000 cars in 1911 to nearly 350,000 in 1921. Meanwhile, automobile drivers clamored for better roads, spawning the Good Roads Movement, with regional groups holding conventions and lobbying legislators.

In 1917, the General Assembly passed the Hawes Law which shifted the primary responsibility of road-building from the counties to the state. Missourians put their money where their mouths were in 1920 by voting a 60 million dollar bond issue to, as the

bond campaign slogan said, “Get Missouri Out of the Mud.” Enabling legislation was then needed to determine how the money would be spent. There were urban wants and rural needs. A special session of the General Assembly was convened during the steamy summer of 1921, accompanied by hot debates, to develop a highway plan. The result was the Centennial Road Law, so named because it passed during the centennial year of statehood.



1909 Metz

The Centennial Road Law established a four-member State Highway Commission with the powers to locate, design, construct, and maintain a state highway system. It would purchase right-of-ways and let all contracts. It prescribed a 1,500 mile system of primary roads that would connect the principal cities. The St. Louis to Springfield road was designated as one of the six primary roads.

The Springfield Leader and Press announced in January of 1923 that “there will be three projects in Pulaski County let. Two of them will be the grading of 5.8 miles of highway on the Springfield-St. Louis highway and the other will be a 400-foot [415.9] concrete bridge across the Roubidoux river. This bridge will consist of five 80-foot arch spans. There will also be one and one-quarter miles of road included in the contract. The bridge, which is located near Waynesville in Pulaski County, is also on the Springfield-St. Louis primary highway.”

Statewide there were 412 projects underway with an estimated 12,000 men engaged. There were at least 38 road projects underway in south-central and southwest Missouri in mid 1923, with the largest sum being spent in Pulaski County, costing \$335,000.00. This was a huge amount of work for a fledgling state highway department. It had to make use of local surveys and county highway engineers. Pulaski County's highway engineer was George Marcellus Reed. Mr. Reed became the county highway engineer in 1919 and was ap-

pointed Special Project Engineer for the State Highway Department in 1921.

George realigned the St. Louis to Springfield primary road, bypassing the Hooker (Wagon) Ford crossing of the Big Piney River where Chief Creecy had crossed in 1909. It was a poor bridge site with a wide floodplain. Reed took it around Hooker Hill and crossed the Piney River about a mile upstream at Devils Elbow. He had a hand in straightening the road going west from the square, creating a new bridge crossing of the Roubidoux about a hundred yards or so upstream from a narrow steel bridge built in 1911 where the St. Louis to Springfield road crossed the creek.

There would be three bridges constructed in our area in 1923 on what became designated as State Route 14. They crossed the Big Piney River and Roubidoux Creek in Pulaski and, 2.5 miles west of the county line near Hazelgreen, a bridge was built across the Gasconade River.

The Crocker News reported on April 5, 1923, that “Two or three [rail]car loads of machinery, concrete forms and other equipment is being unloaded here this week to be used in the construction of a new bridge over the Roubidoux at Waynesville.”

The total contract for the 416-foot concrete arch Waynesville bridge was awarded to Koss Construction of Des Moines, Iowa, in the amount of \$74,414.00, which included a mile-and-a-quarter of graded earth road. The cost of the bridge was recorded as \$44,035. This is \$778,000 in today's dollars. This left the hefty sum of \$30,000 [\$530,000] for a little over a mile of graded earth road That road was to run, according to the Crocker News quoting the Pulaski County Democrat “from near the front of the Doolin blacksmith shop on Main Street to the barns on the M. G. Wyrick farm.” Doolin's blacksmith shop was on the east end of Business Row, at the foot of Waynesville Hill where the public parking lot is now. The Wyrick farm and barns were on the west side of Roubidoux Creek.

Since Waynesville's founding, a wet weather creek ran down the middle of Main Street in front of the stores on the south side of the square. The locals



A 1915 view of Waynesville with “the ditch” and foot bridges running down the middle of Commercial, sometimes called Main, Street. The wet weather creek was diverted into a culvert built under the road surface for the Highway 14 project.

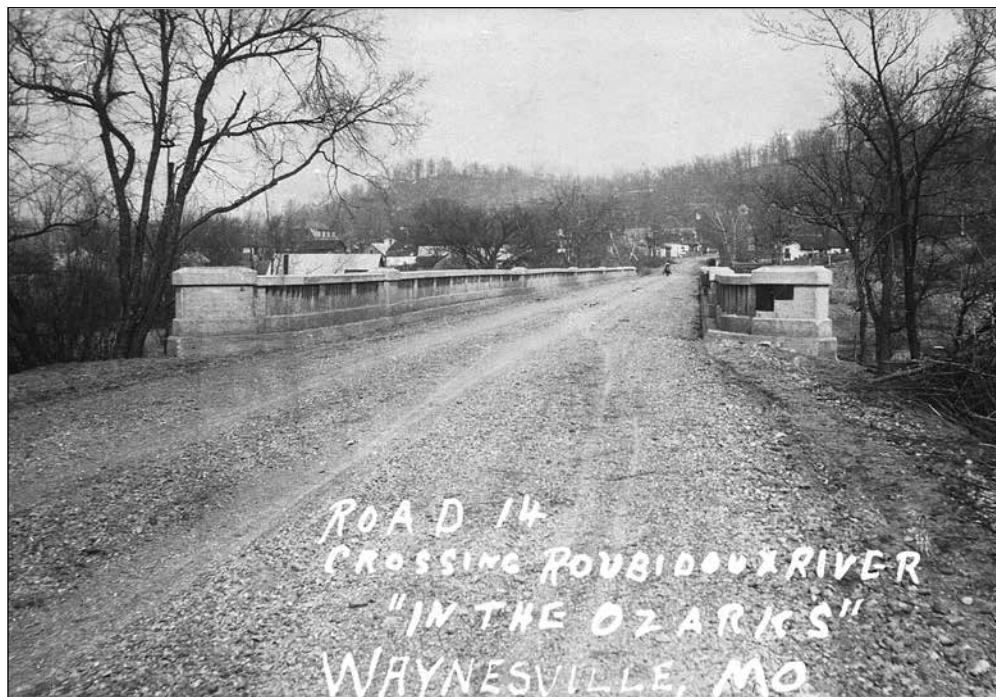
Courtesy of Maxine Farnham.

referred to the creek as “the ditch.”

The town built a series of wooden foot bridges over the ditch that emptied into the Roubidoux. I believe this is when the ditch disappeared beneath the road-bed into a four-foot-diameter concrete, mile-long, culvert. Hence, the \$30,000 road work done along with the bridge construction. This drainage culvert, by itself, was a big improvement for the village.

The notice that a big construction project was to begin soon was welcome news to local men. Frank Brown of Bloodland told the paper that he had perfected an organization whereby a half dozen of Bloodland’s best old men would go to Waynesville to work on the bridge project about June 20. The Houston Herald had noted earlier that a number of the younger generation were attracted by the road work on the state highway where they were getting \$3 a day and board.

This is where I wish I could give you a condensed report of the road and bridge’s progress. No doubt the local newspaper, the Pulaski County Democrat, chronicled the work weekly. Unfortunately, no papers from the 1920s have survived. There is just a line in the August 2 Crocker News “that at Waynesville a substantial concrete bridge is being constructed across the Roubidoux along the east and west highway.” That gives us a clue that work was still going on in late July. Koss Construction Company ran a quarter-page advertisement in the August 22, 1923, issue of the Des Moines



Tribune. It featured its current highway paving projects and bridges constructed in towns in four states. The bridge in Waynesville, Missouri, headed that list. The bridge was probably completed by that August date.

By late fall, Highway 14 was shaping up. The Riley and Bailey construction company of St. Louis was finishing the bridge at Hazelgreen. The Crocker News reported in late October that Riley and Bailey was delivering the steel to the bridge site at Devils Elbow with a completion date projected as January 1st, 1924.

There is no record of a dedication ceremony being conducted for the Roubidoux Bridge. An item in the Springfield Leader and Press noted that an official of the State Highway department would

be speaking at the dedication of the steel bridge over the Big Piney at Devils Elbow on July 4, 1924.

The gravel-surfaced Roubidoux Bridge was a State Highway 14 bridge for barely two years before the roadway was renumbered as a federal highway: first as Route 60 in September of 1925. This number proved unsatisfactory for several reasons and the numeral was changed to 66 in April of 1926. Good thing or we wouldn’t have “Get your kicks on Route 66.” There’s not a good rhyme for sixty.

The gravel surface of the bridge and Route 66 was turned to concrete through Waynesville in the fall of 1930. The final stretch of Route 66 near Arlington was paved in January of 1931. Old Highway 14 was now a ribbon of concrete 302 miles long across the Mis-

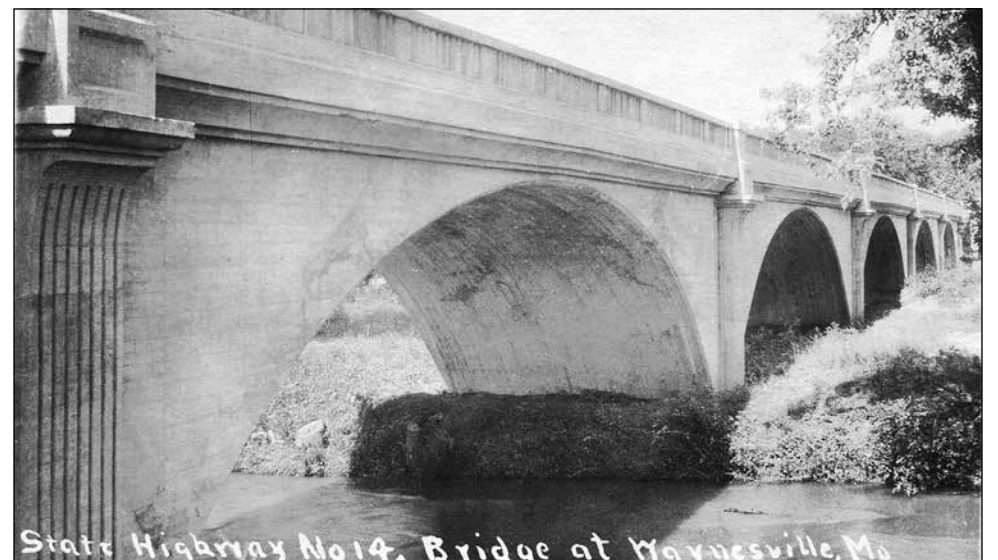
souri Ozarks.

The bridge carried its load untouched for the next 16 years. In 1939, the State Highway Department carried out a prescient project of widening the bridge, adding a walkway on the north side. In reporting this improvement, the Crocker News stated that “this has long been a dangerous section of highway and when completed most of the hazards to person and property will be removed.” Reportedly, a pedestrian fatality on the span had occurred three years earlier.

A traffic count on Route 66 west of Waynesville in 1939 revealed about 1,500 vehicles a day crossed the bridge. The construction of Fort Leonard Wood began in December of 1940 and 32,000 construction workers descended on this rural area and its roads over the next several months. Another traffic count was conducted in February of 1941, when only half of the peak April workforce was employed. The count resulted in a four-fold increase to 6,000 vehicles per day, which would soon double. Local restaurants and bars were overwhelmed and new businesses sprang up in West Waynesville, across the bridge. Many construction workers and the streams of soldiers who followed them were mostly without autos. They strolled to West Waynesville safely via the bridge’s sidewalk.

Today, locals, tourists, and soldiers still cross the creek on Historic Route 66. The bridge is now a part of the lore of that famous highway.

A century of service—from Model Ts to SUVs—this unique bridge continues to fulfill its purpose.



These are the earliest pictures we have of Waynesville’s Roubidoux Bridge, between late 1923 when construction was finished and 1926 when Highway 14 was renumbered Route 66 and before the route was paved in 1930.