

Keeping Ohio's covered bridges

Story and photos by HAZEL FREEMAN

What is it about gazing upon a rustic, weathered covered bridge that enchants us so? Is it the image we get of a more tranquil time when horse and buggy regularly rattled the wooden planks? Or perhaps it's the picturesque setting that calms our nerves, sends our cares away and allows us to simply enjoy the moment. Whatever the reason, many of us surrender to a sense of tranquility in their presence.

By the late 1800s and early 1900s, it's estimated that as many as 10,000 covered bridges spanned waterways across the nation. These stalwart structures were a boon to early transportation routes and became vital links that opened up Ohio and the rest of the country to settlement and economic development.

At the height of the covered bridge era, Ohio had several thousand of these bridges, but like most states, only a small percentage remain. "Ohio is second in the number of [remaining] covered bridges, with 141," says Miriam Wood, a covered bridge historian and secretary of the Ohio Historic Bridge Association. "Pennsylvania has the most, with around 200." Some bridges are lost each year due to age, arson, flooding and traffic.

Wood is one of a dedicated number of covered bridge enthusiasts who work toward preserving these historical landmarks as well as promoting the building of new ones. Wood's love of covered bridges has been with her since childhood. "When I was a little girl during the Great Depression, my grandparents, parents and I went for a ride and

came upon a covered bridge in Pickaway County. My father said I was absolutely fascinated with the structure, and I have been ever since."

The first timber-covered bridges appeared in Europe. Medieval craftsmen hewed huge timbers with a broad axe and pounded wooden pegs into the mortised joints. European immigrants to the New World brought with them the skills of timber framing. By the early 1800s, there was a great demand for roads and bridges. Innovative American builders were eager to design their own wooden

structures. With limited engineering knowledge but plentiful supplies of virgin timber, builders experimented and adapted each other's designs. Early bridge engineers worked to create stronger, more economical, long-span wooden structures that would stand up to the test of time.

"Bridges were covered to protect the timbers," says David Simmons, president

of the Ohio Historic Bridge Association (OHBA) and an engineering historian with the Ohio Historical Society. "Without the protection of the roof and sides, wooden bridges have a very short lifespan," adds Simmons. It wasn't long before American bridge-builders combined craftsmanship with science, and bridge construction turned into a lucrative industry in the state.

The longitudinal trusses, the backbone of the covered bridge, became the focal point of covered bridge engineering and bridges became classified by their truss construction. Some are identified with names such as Queenpost or Multiple Kingpost, but most carry the name of their designer as in the Burr Arch, Pratt, Long, Town Lattice, and Howe, all-truss designs that were patented and used extensively by bridge construction companies.

Ohio native Robert Smith received two truss patents in 1867 and 1868. He founded the Smith Bridge Company in Toledo and built hundreds of bridges around the state, using not only his truss designs, but other truss types as well. Only about 14 Smith Truss bridges remain in Ohio.

One of them, built in 1876, is a testament to the timber framers and bridge builders of past and present, as well as the commitment of the local commu-



The Foraker Bridge in Monroe County is a good example of the Multiple Kingpost timber frame construction.

October's Covered Bridge Festival

For a weekend full of fabulous fall foliage and covered bridges, old and new, take in the 24th annual Covered Bridge Festival in Ashtabula County, Oct. 13 and 14. For more info, visit www.coveredbridge-festival.org. For more information on covered bridges, Wooster Book Company recently published the beautifully illustrated book, *Covered Bridges: Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia* by Miriam Wood and David Simmons, photography by B. Miller.

