Covered Bridges in Canada

by Jacques Coulon

Always picturesque and just rare enough to arouse interest, the old covered wooden bridges seem growing in popular appeal at the very time they are dwindling in number as a result of age, fire, destruction for replacement by modern structures, or simply of neglect. In some ways, wooden bridges are like the sailing ships of years ago — they must give way to modernism. But our surprising discovery is that they are still so widespread since almost 1,400 or more survive in 28 U.S. states plus an additional 400, or a little less, in Canada.

Travellers who usually use the main highways and concrete bridges in Quebec and New Brunswick might easily be led to think that these relics of the “good old days” have almost all been replaced by more modern structures, since a good many of them are just beyond sight from main roads, concealed and camouflaged in some deserted areas of the provinces’ hinterland. At the turn of this century, there were at least a thousand such bridges in Quebec, but by 1940 only half of them remained. Incidentally, in typical fishing provinces like Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, where inland roads were very scarce in former times, covered bridges were not often built. There is one in Nova Scotia, in the village of Kennetcook.
— a relatively aged one since it was constructed in 1876. Also, there is one remaining in Ontario, although this province never had many. However, the densely forested farmland of New Brunswick had up to 400 covered bridges at the turn of this century. In 1960, only 204 had weathered the time and elements. Today, only 142 are still in existence, and a good many of them are open to light traffic — 142 covered bridges out of the 4,000 structures of all kinds spanning a host of rivers and streams. Kings County alone, an area about 50 miles square, has 25 of these old bridges, which are probably among the finest to be seen in New Brunswick.

The completely roofed-over type of bridge — the "barnlike" one say country folk — seen in northeast America is peculiar to her alone, and the early covered spans of Quebec and New Brunswick were quite similar to those of New England. With the crude, unreliable "bridges" of old, which were roughly cut timbers fastened together and flung across the rivers, commerce and communications were suffering greatly. Merchants, travellers and military couriers had to travel at the risk of breaking their necks. So the bridge topped with a roof — the first one was built across the Schuylkill River at Philadelphia in 1805 — was designed to shelter the floors from the rotting effects of sun, wind, rain and indiscriminate snow storms, but snow had to be spread over the flooring in winter to help sleighs and bobsleds travel through. The covering on them was strictly for practical purposes. If a wooden uncovered bridge lasted about 10 years, roofed ones had a life expectancy of 80 years, and sometimes more.

Most of the covered bridges in Canada were of the "Ithiel Town" lattice design, supported by stone abutments and piers. Ithiel Town was a Connecticut architect who conceived a superstructure as attractive as a garden fence but strong enough to resist storms and weight, and his designs were largely adopted because they were also suitable for bridges of any length. Most of his covered spans were covered with shingles or, occasionally, thatch. Clapboards on the sides were usually perpendicular. Many of the simple, undecorated ones in both Quebec and New Brunswick had no openings for light, but a few had "fancy windows" — rough cut openings in the clapboards with a swinging leaf designed to let the daylight come in. Later in their development, Burr truss bridges, named for Theodore Burr who in 1817 designed a graceful combination of triangular posts and rainbow-shaped arches, proved to be a lot stronger and also more durable. Some of Canada's covered bridges were of the Burr type but eventually most of them went their way and very few can be seen around today.

All the covered bridges in early New Brunswick and Quebec — and in New England too — were built either by the community, or by in-

*Upper Dorchester spans Memramcook River, Westmoreland County, on road to Taylor Village, N.B. It is known as the "second longest covered bridge in the world".*
individuals or small companies. Many of them were toll bridges, and it is said they gave back to their owners a fairly high percentage of the original cost of building. This sometimes raised great protests from the farmers who used those bridges to walk their cattle and sheep to the nearby markets, or just to the meadows across the river. Some of the biggest covered spans were under construction from two to five years, as all the lumber was cut by hand and drawn by teams from the nearest mountain side, and workers often left temporarily when urgent farm jobs called.

For a long time the bridges were known as “kissing bridges” for the privacy they provided to occasional couples — it was always considered fair to steal a kiss from a pretty girl while passing through! Then there were the famous “haunted bridges” where old-timers said they heard weird noises and “spooks”, and those believed to shelter a phantom horseman shaking the aging wooden floor on moonlit nights. Lighted at night by one or two ghostly, swinging lanterns, the inside of most seemed haunted by grim, dancing shadows. Robbers, it is said, sometimes waited in the darkness for unwary travellers. The old covered spans of a century ago proved to be a good place for political rallies or other meetings, and local merchants and village retailers sometimes took advantage of the immediate entrance to a bridge — or its walls — to advertise all sorts of goods and products such as horse liniment, flour, harness oils, home.
linens, blankets, medicines or a new brand of chewing tobacco. Traces of these brightly painted “ads” may sometimes still be seen. The warning, “Walk your horse and save the fine ($20.00)” can be read on many of them.

As time went by almost every one of these bridges in Quebec and New Brunswick acquired its own special story or legend. One of them near the little town of Lac Mégantic, in Quebec’s Eastern Townships, was the scene of a mad man’s suicide and villagers swore they heard the poor man’s forlorn voice for years after. Near Elgin, New Brunswick, is the Jonah Bridge — or Sproule Bridge — named after Harry Jonah, a farmer who once fell through together with his herd of cows. So a good many of them were given a second name aside from the appellation they were known from by the Department of Public Works. There are the Dan Cupid Bridge, the Shortest, the Longest, the Bridge to Nowhere, the Twins at St. Martins, New Brunswick, and several “travelling bridges” — so named because they were invariably washed off their piers during the spring thaw. In most cases, cost or technical difficulties involved in hauling a bridge back to its original location was way beyond local people, so the next community downstream inherited the travelling span unless it was a complete wreck.

In the New England States and in Pennsylvania, the covered bridge was often guarded by a hand rail and terminated with a handsome toll-gate. Others had a centre partition separating the north and south-bound traffic, and a covered sidewalk for pedestrians. Rare and fashionable examples of this type can be seen in Stark, New Hampshire, and in the Shelburne Museum, near Burlington, Vermont, where one such “double-barrel” bridge was moved over from the Lamoille River. Very few of these models were ever built in Canada.

Covered bridges are still to be found in almost every part of Quebec, the oldest and perhaps the most picturesque scattered in the countryside of the Eastern Townships, the Gatineau River Valley close to the Ontario-Quebec boundary, the area around Quebec City and the Abitibi district, that vast mining region of the northwest. Almost all of the large rivers in Quebec once had their covered spans, and many of them were of remarkable dimensions. For example, there was one most artistically designed at Maria, Bonaventure
County, in the Gaspé Peninsula, which was almost 1,000 feet long. Someone set it on fire and it collapsed some years ago. Another, at St. Félicien, in the Lake St. John area, was even longer. Rafting ice and rushing waters carried it off in 1942, and it had to be demolished and replaced by a concrete structure. Beautiful bridges may still be seen in Quebec at Rivière-aux-Renards, Notre-Dame de la Providence, Sweatsburg, Cowansville, Cookshire, Notre-Dame du Laus and scores of other places and villages. The bridge at Philipsburg, on Rivière de la Roche, is probably the oldest in Quebec and one of the shortest. A very lovable one—undoubtedly the last surviving one of this type—with two covered sidewalks for pedestrians, still reaches across the rather narrow Rivière Tomioobia at Rock Island, Quebec. There is one in the Quebec City area that has a rough, rattling flooring about 12 feet long.

In New Brunswick, many covered bridges are much longer than their brothers in Quebec. About 12 miles from Sackville, spanning the broad Memramcook River near Upper Dorchester Village, is perhaps the most beautiful old bridge in eastern Canada. It was laid in place in 1918 and its total span is around 850 feet. It is said the original bridge was blown down into the river in 1917 carrying with it an old farmer whose body was never recovered. Another impressive span is the Hunter's Ferry Bridge near Princess Park. It was built in 1912 and is 732 feet long. The "longest covered bridge in the world" is the seven-span, 1,282-foot long bridge over the St. John River at Hartland, originally built as a toll bridge in 1896. It was bought by the New Brunswick government in 1900 and a new roof and concrete piers were built some 40 years ago.

Early builders of covered wooden bridges, were mostly local carpenters or farmers who adapted designs to their own rivers and streams. Although they knew nothing of the theories of scientific building, they did know their materials and were skilled enough to work wonderfully with adz and pit saw. They used crude oaken pins—big hardwood pegs called "tree nails"—to hold their structures together, and the roofs were covered with shingles or occasionally with thatch, as in Pennsylvania. The lower covering of clapboard was often painted dark red. In times when labour was cheap and material plentiful, some covered bridges cost as little as $600. Today, several organizations of covered bridge enthusiasts in the United States look after their conservation, and by compiling historical and technical data, legends and folklore, try to arouse more public interest. One of these societies, with headquarters at Boston, even publishes a quarterly magazine.

Covered bridges in Canada, too, would surely be worthy of a book or the good care of any organization that could help to preserve them. Incidentally, concern over the gradual disappearance of this kind of bridge
in New Brunswick was recently expressed in a magazine of the Atlantic region. It brought a reply from André F. Richard, Provincial Minister of Highways, outlining a special program designed to save the most valuable and beautiful, meanwhile clearly pointing out that all covered spans must give way to modern bridges in the shortest possible time, since they are considered a weak link in the road transportation system.

Restoration of the aging bridges — to start in late summer or fall — will include the replacement of missing stones, wooden frame logs and clapboards and, where necessary, painting. Signs will also be erected at each restored bridge indicating that it is an "historic" relic and worthy of attention for any pertinent reason. Reproduction of original "ads" and advertising posters will be made and fixed to the old bridge. Signs will be erected along the main highways to indicate where covered bridges worthy of interest are to be found and suitable picnic areas will be located in the immediate vicinity of any interesting structure. Although no final decisions have been reached yet, it seems likely the restored areas will be administered by the Parks Division of the New Brunswick Department of Natural Resources, while the Department of Highways will carry out continuing maintenance on the covered bridges and the road approaches. Quebec Province has nothing underway right now, but it is highly probable the tourist department will try to save any wooden span of interest wherever a new, concrete structure has to by-pass it. However, only the pooled efforts of both provincial agencies and the public's enthusiasm will succeed in keeping around all these sturdy, beautiful relics of the pastoral days of old in Canada.