

Weddle Bridge

The late afternoon sun slants across the white washed boards of the Weddle Covered Bridge. It is an unusually warm day here in Sweet Home, Oregon for mid-October. The breeze has a crisp feel to it. The sky is a bright blue, no clouds, with a bright, warm fall sun. The evergreen trees on the hillside in nearby Sankey Park create a stark contrast to the bridge with white paint. The tree branches move with the breeze. The sound, of children playing in the park, the energetic noise of young men at football practice and the gentle sounds of the creek create a relaxing experience for the visitor here. "My children would come here everyday, if I let them," says Michelle who is visiting the park with her children. "It's the only park that has ducks."

Noticing the bridge, as one travels through Sweet Home on Highway 20 may be difficult for some if not looking for it. It is located off the west practice field of the local high school. Looking south as you pass through the 15th Avenue intersection will give the traveler a quick glimpse. It appears as a large, white, yawning building in a green landscape. It stands out as an unlikely place for such a construction.

Upon closer inspection the traveler will find that there is no "through" road connected to the bridge. As the traveler enters the parking area off 14th Avenue, the bridge is, directly ahead. The rooftop reaches high toward the sky, an American flag waves from the flagpole in front of the bridge. When approaching the bridge, one is able to get a better idea of its size. "It was put here while I was in high school. Sometimes there were dances on it," Says Michelle. The bridge span is much larger than what would be required to cross this creek. The white entrance portals are arched, the roof above is shingled and the ceiling is open beamed.

With help from the local librarian, information about this bridge can be found at the Sweet Home Library. The Weddle Bridge was named by Linn County after a farmer. Further investigation also states that the bridge is 120 feet long. More facts and details may be gleaned from the book Covered Bridges Near Sweet Home, Oregon written by local residents Bill Davis and Peggy Blair.

It is part of the landscape of Sankey Park, this bridge. It adds a degree of historical feel to the area. The Weddle Bridge connects the park with the sport practice fields of Sweet Home High School. Michelle remembers "Before the bridge was here you did not have access to the park from the other side." Children crossing the bridge on bicycles, people walking their dogs, a child and mother feeding the ducks beneath tell the observer that this is a community place.

Intentional in its acquisition and placement, the bridge came to be here through the efforts of a community group. The group, which consisted of local townspeople, included the high school shop and construction teacher, Ben

Dahlenburg. Ben was originally approached to build a covered bridge replica, to be used as a footbridge on Ames Creek and Ben was willing to use his skills, students and time. He and his students built a small version of a covered bridge, to scale. That bridge is also at the park. It is called The Dahlenburg Bridge. With that project complete, knowledge of the possibility to acquire a dismantled bridge from Linn County came to light.

In Oregon, covered bridges are quite common. You have only to consider the weather to understand why they were built. Covered bridges were built to protect the wooden bridge from the weather. In and around the Sweet Home area there are ten covered bridges.

The Weddle Bridge was originally built over Thomas Creek in 1937. It served travelers there for 50 years. In 1987 it was dismantled and replaced with a concrete bridge.

The first time Ben Dahlenburg visited the bridge, it was nothing but a pile of timbers. "I thought, my gosh, what am I getting into?" he said. Michelle was in high school at the time the project was started. "I remember it (the bridge) was in pieces."

Looking at the bridge with its large beam construction, double trusses and metal turnbuckles, there is a feel for the enormity of the project. It took much planning and conversation with those experienced in reassembling covered bridges to get the project underway. Local trucking companies donated the effort to get the pieces to the site. A crane and operator was donated for use at the site, as were forklifts and power saws. After two years of community effort that included the high school construction classes, the bridge was completed in 1990. "I think it makes people proud of the park." Says Michelle.

The bridge sits quietly as if it waits for visitors. It waits for those children on their bicycles, for walkers young and old. It waits for community events such as square dances, weddings, and holiday caroling. The ducks swim beneath and community pride rests on top. It's a new life for an artifact from our history.