Regency "Swinging" Bridge

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What a view!

Since my family didn't arrive here in Goldthwaite until mid-December of 2014, we didn't have the chance to see the famous Regency Bridge in person.

That is until Commissioner Jason Williams called the Eagle office early 2015 to let me know: the bridge was open again!

Closed since Aug. 18, 2014, the bridge was scheduled to reopen in January but unforeseen site conditions had led to additional work and a delayed finish date.

The bridge, one of the last suspension-types left in service, is located 18 miles west of Goldthwaite off Hwy. 574 and on CR 433.

Being new to the area and sadly reliant on Google Maps on my phone for directions, I ended up driving all the way to San Saba and cutting back across FM 500, eliciting groans from my three impatient co-pilots: my kiddos Mickie, 10; Canon, 8; and Athena, 4.

The drive was beautiful, the road made my car jostle like an off-kilter washing machine, and as we reached the bridge and started across it – every kid's eyes went up and over the edge.

Squeals ensued.

We parked on the far side of the bridge, and tasked with getting a good photo of the bridge at sunset, my little daredevils and I cautiously made our way onto and across to the center of the Regency Bridge.

The closer to the center we got over the Colorado River, the more exciting it was – the view was incredible. We looked over one side of the bridge at the river disappearing into the distance, and over the other at the remnants of past lives of the bridge: the original was built in 1903, but it fell in 1924, its replacement was demolished by a flood in 1936, and today's bridge was rebuilt almost totally by hand in 1939.

While we did not test the bridge's sway in the apparently traditional manner of gunning onto it and then slamming on the brakes, we did stand at the middle of the bridge, leap into the air all at once, then land hard to get a little wiggle out of it.

The kids' eyes and smiles couldn't have been bigger at that feeling.

On the drive back into San Saba for dinner at The Brick Pizzeria & Grill, owned by San Saba residents Donny and Angela Smith and dishing up a delicious gluten-free Hawaiian pizza, the kids couldn't stop talking about the bridge, and asking questions about how suspension bridges work.

The Regency Bridge holds over 100 years of memories and stories with the families of Mills County, and thanks to the investment in keeping it swinging over the Colorado River, new memories can continue to be made for generations more.

Who knows; maybe decades from now, one of my kids will have pursued a career in engineering because of their experience with the Regency Bridge, and they'll be on the team that performs the next round of bridge repairs. They may tell their boss, "I'll never forget the first time I stood on this bridge as a kid back in 2015. It changed my life."

Regency "Swinging" Bridge, one of the last suspension bridges in service, is a favorite local attraction

HISTORY

From a 1983 Eagle article on the Regency Bridge:

The Regency Suspension Bridge (1939) across the Colorado River is one of the most handsome surviving bridges in Texas. It is a fine representative example of the type of suspension spans erected for rural use throughout the United States in the years between the two world wars.

In the spring, 1939, the counties of Mills and San Saba contracted with the Austin Bridge Company of Dallas, Texas, to build a bridge across the Colorado River to connect western Mills County with northern San Saba County. The site selected by the two groups of county commissioners was the Regency crossing, a point with a high bluff on the south side of the river that made it ideal for a suspension span that would be safe from flood danger.

A crew of a dozen men began work on the bridge in the late spring, 1939, and completed it in the autumn. They used primarily hand tools, the only mechanized equipment available being a winch truck, a gasoline fueled concrete mixer, and for a short time a steam shovel for digging foundations. One of the men who participated on the project estimated that 90 percent of the work was done by hand.

The bridge consists of a 340-foot suspension span which is added to a 54-foot girder approach span at its north end. The foundations and piers are concrete, and the four towers consist of welded angle steel topped with cast-steel saddles to support the cables. The cables comprise 475 individual strands of no. 9 galvanized wire with a combined diameter of 3.25 inches. The 16-foot long roadway consists of wooden timbers supported on steel floor beams.

The initial work on the Regency Bridge centered on excavating anchors for the steel chambers. As this work progressed, foundations were dug for the abutments and piers, concrete was poured for these portions of the structure. Four welded-steel towers with saddle casting in their tops were erected over the piers. Then cables were strung to support a light wooden catwalk stretching 340 feet across the river valley between the towers.

Workers crossed the catwalk hundreds of times carrying the wires one at a time to form the large cables that eventually would support the roadway.

The men used special belts with rollers that would allow the wire to unroll smoothly as they crossed and recrossed the narrow catwalk suspended in the air. At each tower the wire was lifted by another worker to the saddle atop the tower and then lowered either to be carried to the other side or to go to the anchor at the extreme end of the project.

This operation took approximately six weeks.

The most dangerous work, wrapping the completed cables with wire and then covering them with a special treatment to resist corrosion, remained to be done.

"That was about the hardest part of all because you were suspended in the air," one of the men recalled years later. "You had to ride those cables... sit down and scoot along those cables to get the wire wrapped around them."

Two weeks were required for this portion of the job. In the meantime, other laborers attached steel hanger rods, which connected the cables with the steel floor beams to support the wooden roadway for the bridge. Then the wooden timbers and the floor decking were put in place.

The final work on the project consisted of installing a steel cable and wooden handrail along the side of the roadway to protect pedestrians from accidental falls. There have been no major changes in the structure.

The bridge itself is very pleasing to the eye, and the view of the Colorado River far below is most impressive. In part to ensure its preservation, the Regency Bridge was placed on the National Register of Historical Places.

The Regency Suspension Bridge is a typical example of the suspension techniques of the 1930's. Although not the only suspension bridge left in service, the Regency Bridge is among a handful of these bridges left in Texas. This type of construction has all but vanished from county-sized bridges.

Directions: Approximately 18 miles west of Goldthwaite, Texas on Highway 574. Turn south on County Road 433. Travel about 3.5 miles to the bridge.