

Reno's Virginia Street Bridge - A Tribute

By Cindy Ainsworth

The beautiful 1905 Virginia Street Bridge, an iconic symbol of downtown Reno will be demolished in 2015 due to safety and flooding issues. By the time you read this article, the bridge will be destroyed to make way for a modern bowstring arch truss design. The bridge is one piece in the Truckee River Flood Control Management projects.

When visitors interested in history or architecture come to Reno they want to know where to go to have a genuine historical experience, not a faux casino equivalent. When in Reno most will head toward history central. The place where Reno started as Fuller's and Lake's Crossing. An area teeming with Reno's most important historical resources like the Washoe County Courthouse, the Riverside Artists Lofts, the Post Office and the Virginia Street Bridge.

Not only did the bridge stand as a testament to past civic pride and a fine example of early concrete bridge technology, it was a part of Reno's unique migratory divorce history. The bridge was also located on what was an important early north/south route leading through Nevada and California. After 1913, the bridge became a part of America's first transcontinental highway link through Reno, the Lincoln Highway

In those early years travelers heading south to Carson City and then over the Kings Canyon Pioneer Route to Lake Tahoe, may have taken the Reno Lincoln Highway route first going west on East Fourth Street and then a quick left turn onto Virginia Street and over the historic bridge.

To mark the early route, the official Lincoln Highway stenciled sign was completed by the proprietor of the Riverside Hotel on the south end of the bridge. Quoted from an article in the April 17th, 1914 Reno Evening Gazette, "Another Lincoln highway sign, or, rather, two of them, one on each side of an iron -post at the south end of the Virginia street bridge, was painted today, and it is said the preliminary preparations for the campaign of sign painting have been completed." Oh if only we could recover those signs to photograph and record for historians. The following is a tribute to this historic bridge.

Reno's Early Town Site Bridges

Built in 1905, the Virginia Street Bridge had withstood countless floods and the wear and tear of daily traffic of every description from street cars to buggies, to bicycles and automobiles. At the center of Reno's early history, Nevada's oldest functioning bridge is a significant part of Reno's heritage.

The trickle down opportunity from the discovery of the rich Comstock Lode helped establish a little outpost along a ford of the Truckee River and with it came the building of Reno's first bridge. Former teamster and storekeeper, Charles William Fuller, hoped he had found his silver in the guise of a primitive road, waystation and bridge. Coming to the Truckee Meadows from Honey Lake, California in 1859, he claimed land along the Truckee upstream from the established emigrant river crossings and way stations near Glendale. Fuller cleared a road approximately from Panther Valley south to Huffaker, a route similar to the present Virginia Street.

By 1860 he built a hotel and crude bridge and founded Fuller's Crossing. According to one description, the low bridge was hardly substantial and had to be "fastened down during high water."

But it would be shrewd businessman Myron Lake who would turn Fuller's investments into silver and in the process help establish what would become the Reno township. Lake bought Fuller's Crossing and the road in mid-1861. The lucrative business of travelers from California to the Comstock over Lake's bridge and road contributed to Lake's increasing wealth.

Lake rebuilt the flimsy bridge in 1862 after early spring rain flooded the valley and secured a franchise with the Nevada Territorial legislature for the toll road and bridge. Although limited to ten years, the funds from this franchise along with the Lake House Inn and a grist mill north of the bridge enabled him to buy the property that he would in turn sell to Charles Crocker and the Central Pacific Railroad in 1868 for a depot and Reno town site.

Reno's civic center emerged south of the bridge when in 1871 the Nevada legislature transferred the county seat from Washoe City to Reno. A new Courthouse was completed with land donated by Lake and turned over to Washoe County in 1873.

Lake's rickety wooden bridge was replaced by the county in 1877 with a modern trestle like iron bowstring arch truss bridge which was said to be painted bright red. The bridge became a centerpiece of civic pride and was a favorite place to take a stroll. The bridge continued to serve the community when it was moved east to Rock Street. Ironically, the bridge was demolished in the 1950 flood.

According to the U.S. census, Reno's population would more than double from 4,500 in 1900 to 10,867 in 1910. Reno benefited economically from the mining boom in Tonopah and Goldfield by being the wholesale transportation shipping hub for supplies to southern Nevada. A more permanent, influential population of bankers, cattlemen's families and mine owners took up residence in Reno's new housing additions.

By the 1900s Reno was moving away from its pioneer roots and into the modern world. The city was taking on a more metropolitan feel. Automobilists took to the dusty streets in their new steam or electric "devil wagons" as one local newspaper called them. The new Carnegie Library popped up along the east bank of the Truckee along with the Masonic building across the street. A beautiful brick Riverside Hotel would soon follow in 1906. All that was needed to complete this picture of progress was a new modern bridge.

Beautiful Bridges, "A Sure Indication of a Progressive Community"

Proponents of the new civic improvement movement succeeded in having a bill passed in the 1905 Legislative session in support of building a new Virginia Street Bridge. The Washoe County bridge commissioners chose John Leonard, a civil engineer from San Francisco to design the steel reinforced concrete bridge and the Oakland California firm of Cotton Brothers and Company as the contractors.

The reinforced concrete bridge building method was still in its infancy when Leonard was awarded this project. Although this would be his first reinforced concrete example, he would go on to become California's preeminent designer of this type of bridge.

Leonard was a firm believer in the esthetics of concrete bridges and noted in the 1913 publication, *The Concrete Bridge*, "conformity with environment ... pleasing outline and appropriate use of ornament." Beautiful bridges "... are a sure indication of a progressive community." This is reflected in the design of the Virginia Street Bridge with Leonard's use of graceful arches and scribed concrete to look like masonry. The Beaux-Arts style lights and railing compliment Reno's new urban awareness.

Construction began in July of 1905. A temporary wooden bridge was erected for traffic over the Truckee. Some of the old heavy timbers from either Fuller's or Lake's bridge were found just below the streambed during the construction excavation. According to a 1945 Reno Evening Gazette article, laborers also found on the river bed an old key-winding gold watch which "brought speculation amongst the bystanders about the origin of the timepiece." Some thought it maybe loot thrown over by a robber being taken to jail several years before.

The contractor maintained a tight schedule with only a couple of instances. In August, a section of the south end abutment masonry from the old iron bridge caved in damming the water in a construction ditch. Terrified workman jumped to avoid being caught and luckily, no one was injured.

The concrete work was completed ahead of the November 12th contract deadline but there was a delay with delivery of the railings and electric light fixtures. Nevertheless, according to the November 15, 1905 Reno Evening Gazette, the bridge commissioners threw open the bridge for public use. All day "long wagons, automobiles and pedestrians passed over it," although "earth covering the bridge is yet soft and bicyclists are unable to ride over it." ... "the new structure pleases everyone and as soon as it is paved it will be one of the best bridges on the coast."

The Bridge of Myths

Reno's lucrative migratory divorce trade contributed to one of Reno's most beloved bridge tales; the divorcee's tossing of the wedding ring from the Virginia Street Bridge. This all started most likely with the 1927 publication of Tom Gilbert's book *Reno! 'It Won't Be Long Now': Ninety Days and Freedom*. He suggested that the practice was so wide spread that fish in the Truckee River sported golden rings on their fins. Colorful phrases like "Bridge of Meditation" and "Bridge of Sighs" can be accredited to Gilbert.

For years national magazines, newspapers and movies all contributed to the tale of the ring. Was it a myth or did the years of publicity actually turn this into a Reno tradition. Did those divorcees pawn their rings at the conveniently located "End of the Trail" pawnshop and then proceed to the dime store to buy a cheap imitation for the ceremonial toss? One can only speculate but those tales certainly contributed to Reno's national notoriety and our heritage.

In 1980 the Virginia Street Bridge was nominated to the United States Department of the Interior's National Register of Historic Places. The bridge was chosen because of its architectural, engineering and transportation significance. The fact that it was Nevada's first reinforced concrete bridge and was the focal point of the small city during the early 20th century further helped in the selection.

A quote from former Judge Peter Breen from Scenic Nevada's 2007 Nevada's LAST CHANCE Scenic Places publication sums it up beautifully, "Virginia Street has been the main thoroughfare in the City of Reno. If the Virginia Street Bridge goes, we will truly be burning the last bridge to our past." Sadly, that historic bridge is now gone. The new bridge design will incorporate the original 1905 lights and railings.

Cindy Ainsworth is President of the Nevada Chapter of the Lincoln Highway, the Nevada Director and is a founding member of the Historic Reno Preservation Society (HRPS). Parts of this article appeared in HRPS publication FootPrints Vol. 10 No.2 in Spring 2007.



Bridge Under Construction (1905). Photo courtesy of Neal Cobb



Virginia Street Bridge. The 1905 Virginia Street Bridge and the chateau-like Riverside Hotel (1906) which was destroyed in a fire in 1922. Photo courtesy of Cindy Ainsworth



Virginia Street Bridge. Northeast corner of the bridge, Center building is the Federal Building and Post Office (1908) and to the right, the YMCA Building (1910). Both buildings are now gone. Photo courtesy of Cindy Ainsworth



Riverside Hotel and Truckee River. A new Riverside Hotel at the southwest corner of the bridge was completed in 1927. The building is now the Riverside Artist Lofts. Photo courtesy of Cindy Ainsworth

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Truckee River Flood Project website: www.truckeeflood.us

More information about the Virginia Street Bridge project can found at:
www.vsbreno.com.