Oregon Historical Covered Bridges

During my frequent travel between Portland, Oregon, and the San Francisco Bay area I pass a place where the sun is always shining. It's called Sunny Valley, but more important than that the sun is always shining, is that they are fortunate to have a historical covered bridge.

Grave Creek Covered Bridge, Sunny Valley

Today, the covered bridges are considered historical landmarks, romantic structures reminding of the past, but what was the purpose of covering these bridges?

The list of covered bridges in the state of Oregon contains 50 historic bridges remaining. This represents the greatest number of any U.S. state.

Most bridges in Oregon were built between 1850 and 1945. There were an estimated 450 covered bridges, which by 1977, had dwindled to 56. A significant preservation effort is in place to save them for future generations.

There were thought to be many reasons why bridges were covered, although not all of these ideas were correct. One explanation was that "the spans were built to resemble barns so farm animals would feel more at home and not stampede as they were driven across the rushing waters."

Other explanations included: “to keep snow off the bridge”, "to keep the oiled planks of the roadbed from becoming dangerously slippery in the rain", “to cover up the unsightly trusses”, “to provide shelter to travelers caught in a storm”, “and to provide a place to court your lady and secretly steal a kiss”.

While standing under such a bridge, listening to vehicles and people passing by, is perhaps a wonderful piece of our history softly speaking about a long gone era.

One real reason for covering bridges was to protect the trusses from the weather because the environment caused bridges to fail sooner. Bridge engineers pointed out "that a housed timber truss span has a life expectancy at least three times greater than an uncovered bridge". Due to the wetness of Western Oregon, bridge builders quickly discovered the importance of covering their bridges.

"Another important consideration was that housing provided a sort of insulation for the timber, shading it from the sun and maintaining it under more uniform temperature conditions". Covering bridges became so ingrained within the minds of people living in harsher climate regions, with hot weather in the summer and cold and rain or snow in the winter.

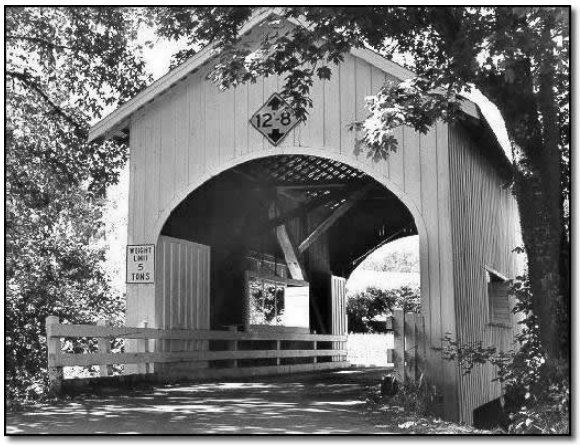
But this sort of climate is less destructive to wood than the mild, moist climate of western Oregon, so covering the wooden bridges there would be more important to protect them. Most of the covered bridges where built in similar style during the mid to late 1930’s, and I would like to cover a small sample of them that can still be found in Oregon.

Oregon has the largest collection of covered bridges in the western part of the United States, with over 50 existing covered spans. Because of the vast availability of forest resources in Oregon, most of the early bridges in the state were timber structures. These timber bridges were often covered to protect them from the weather as with the Jordan bridge, built in 1937, but is now lost to us.

Jordan Bridge (1937)

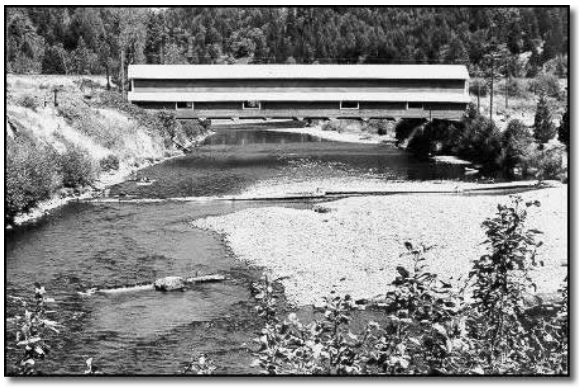
The remaining examples of this obsolete bridge construction technology, generally located in pastoral rural settings, provide one of the most significant tourist attractions in the state.

The Neal Lane Bridge is one of the shortest covered bridges in Oregon at 42 feet, is the only covered kingpost truss in the state. The plank flooring, arched portals, narrow openings, and rural setting constitute the appeal of the bridge. The Neal Bridge, built in 1939, for only $1,000, was constructed by Douglas Co.



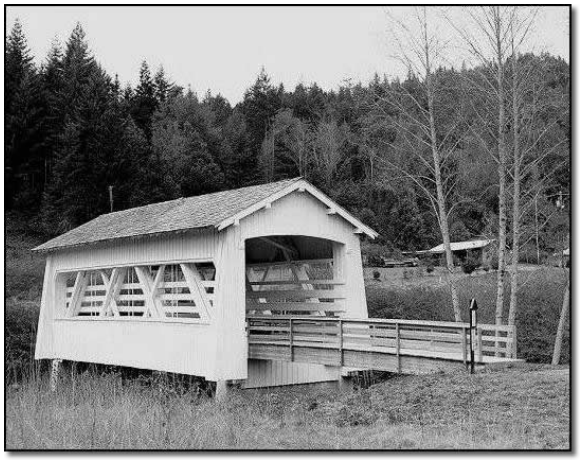
South Myrtle Creek (Neal Lane) Bridge (1939)

Westfir Bridge is most massive and longest of Oregon's covered bridges. This 180-foot housed Howe truss was constructed by the Westfir Lumber Company using triple timber beams to afford the strength necessary to carry heavy logging trucks. The bridge connects the lumber mill with the office (hence the common name of the bridge). The structure is one of only two covered bridges in Oregon built with triple truss members. A distinction of the bridge is the covered walkway on the side of the bridge, separate from the roadway.



Westfir Bridge (1944)

The 60-foot Sandy Creek Bridge, built in 1921, is the only remaining covered span in Coos County. Bypassed in 1949, this bridge was formerly in state ownership on State Route 42. The truss consists of two crossed Howe truss members on each chord, a rarity in short covered trusses. The design of the bridge with large side openings is similar to those found in Linn County. Until the mid-1980's, the bridge was in poor condition, but has now been restored by volunteers. In September 1984, the bridge was dedicated as a Coos County park and serves pedestrian uses.



Sandy Creek Bridge (1921)

The Covered Bridge Society of Oregon is summarizing well the view on the history of covered bridges;

“Rugged pioneers armed with only hand tools, sweat and ambition began building covered bridges in Oregon during the mid-1850's. They often camped out at remote sites, living off the land or contracting with local farmers for food. Early covered bridge owners often financed construction by charging tolls: 3 cents for a sheep, 5 cents for a horse and rider.

In the early 20th century, the state provided standard bridge designs to each county, most of these structures incorporated the Howe truss. The abundance of Douglas Fir and the shortage of steel during the world wars continued construction of covered spans well into the 1950's.

A wooden bridge was covered to keep the huge truss timbers dry. A covered bridge could last 80 years or more, while an uncovered span would deteriorate in about nine years. In Oregon, legislation was established in 1987 to help fund preservation of these rich links to our past and heritage”.

References and sources for more information:

1. All photos provided by James Norman, ODOT
2. Oregon Covered Bridges

   www.oregon.gov.ODOT/HWY/GEOENVIRONMENTAL/historic_bridges_covered1.shtml
3. Covered Bridge Society of Oregon

   www.covered-bridges.org/

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