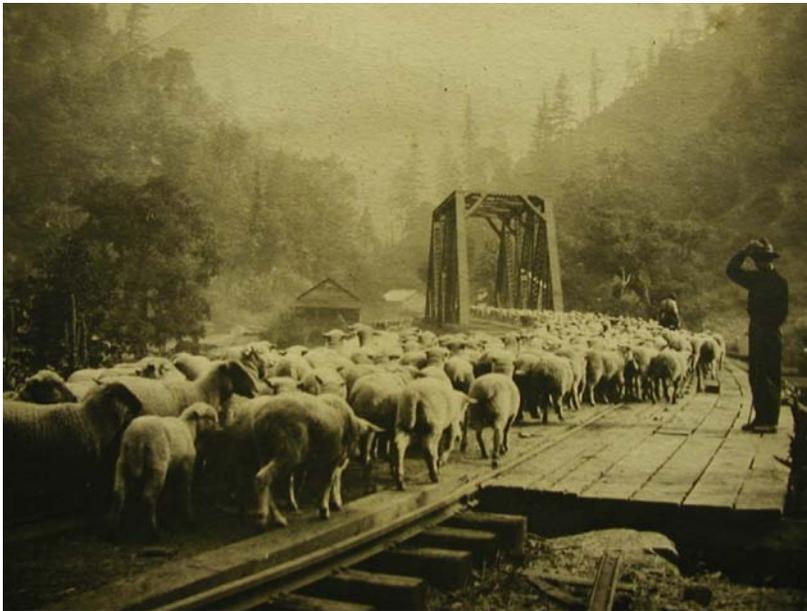


## History of the Belden Bridge

By Scott J. Lawson, Plumas County Museum Director

The subject of this narrative is the Belden Bridge, spanning the North Fork Feather River at the town of Belden, approximately 29 miles west of Quincy, on California State Highway 70. The Belden Bridge provides access from Highway 70 to the small town of Belden, located on the south side of the river.

The Belden Bridge is a steel, rigid connection, one lane, one span Pratt-style bridge, 104 feet long. It was built in 1913 by the American Bridge Company for the Oro Light and Power Company and served as a Western Pacific Railroad spur used in the delivery of building materials for the Yellow Creek Powerhouse. During the 1930s, its location on the railroad line allowed for expedient delivery of supplies for the Feather River Canyon Highway project. Once the highway was completed in 1937, the bridge was converted to a single lane highway bridge serving as a link to Highway 24 (now 70) for local residents and the Belden community. According to a 1985 CALTRANS bridge report, it is historically significant under Criterion A, as a key link in an important highway and Criterion C, as a distinctive example of a type, method and period of construction.



*Sheep crossing the Belden Bridge in 1915.* Borneman Collection.

Belden as a town originated with the construction of the Western Pacific Railroad between 1905 and 1909. It was named for the Susan (Maidu Indian) and Robert Belden family, pioneer settlers who raised their family on the river and spent their adult lives there. Prior to the establishment of Belden, the north side of the river, known as Brown's Bar, was the main site of habitation by gold miners, a few struggling farmers, and

a small Maidu Indian village. A county-owned suspension bridge for pedestrians and pack animals spanned Yellow Creek near its confluence with the North Fork Feather River as part of a network of trails that connected Brown's Bar to other camps on the North Fork, East Branch North Fork and the Humbug Valley and Big Meadows (now Lake Almanor) region. A small cemetery nearby contains some half dozen or so graves of denizens of Brown's Bar and Belden, mostly Maidu Indians.

In short order a large hotel, a store, a saloon, and a number of cabins were built at

Belden to accommodate the train-traveling public as well as fisherman and hunters. Guided hunting and fishing excursions were based out of Belden, mostly into the High Lakes region, the North Fork reach, and along the East Branch. Half a dozen hiking and pack trails nearby provided ample opportunities for recreationists to enjoy the Feather River canyon.

By 1910, “white gold” or hydroelectric power projects had become very attractive to venture capitalists. The Las Plumas powerhouse was built in 1908 at the Big Bend on the Feather River above Oroville, and in 1910 construction began on the dam at Big Meadows to form Lake Almanor. The Oro Electric Company threw their hat into the ring in 1911 and began making surveys for a hydroelectric project in Humbug Valley as well as along the North Fork and at the mouth of Yellow Creek.

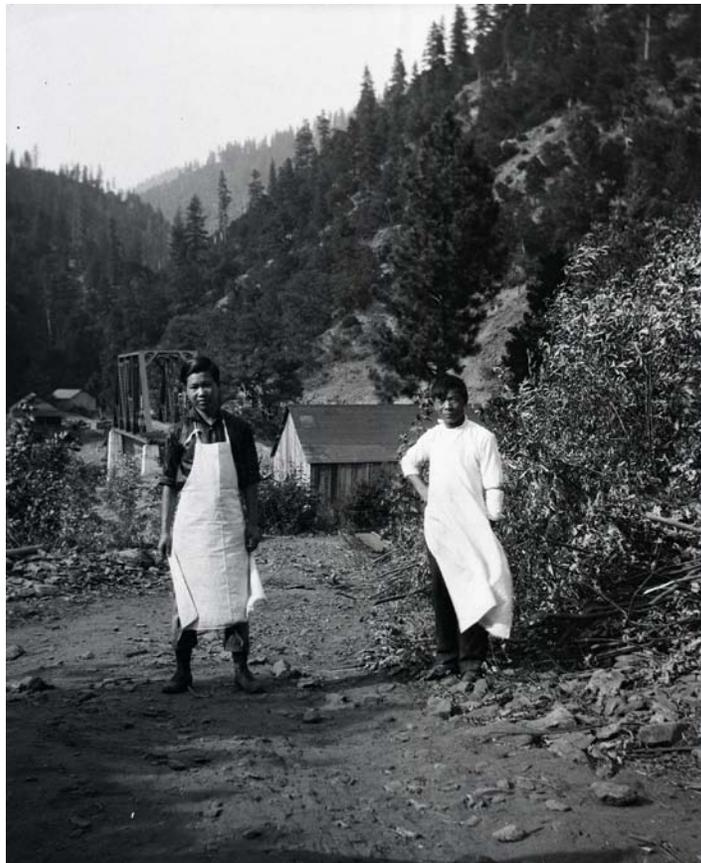
In mid-July 1912, a Quincy newspaper reported that 200 men working for the Oro Electric Company had the road bed graded and piers in place for the road and bridge across the North Fork at Belden. They also noted that the bed of the proposed railroad

from Belden to Humbug Valley was already graded.

Optimistically, they also stated that work on the dam to impound Yellow Creek would take place the next week.

By February of 1913 the company was busy erecting boarding and lodging houses for its laborers and cottages for its officials and directors at Belden. The skeleton of the steel bridge was underway and the proposed railroad to Humbug Valley mentioned in July 1912, was now downgraded to a wagon road with expectations that it might still possibly become a railroad. The power house connected with the Yellow Creek dam in Humbug Valley was to be built at the mouth of that creek.

Several weeks later a steel gang was laying rail on the new bridge but was then held up due to the slow progress of the installation of an air compressor



***Great Western Power Co. cooks with the Belden Bridge in back, 1916.*** Borneman Collection.

for riveting on the bridge. Both concrete approaches to the bridge were completed and excavation work for the “Y” above the bridge was started. The grading of the railroad-wagon road at the top of the mountain had slowed considerably due to the ruggedness of the country.

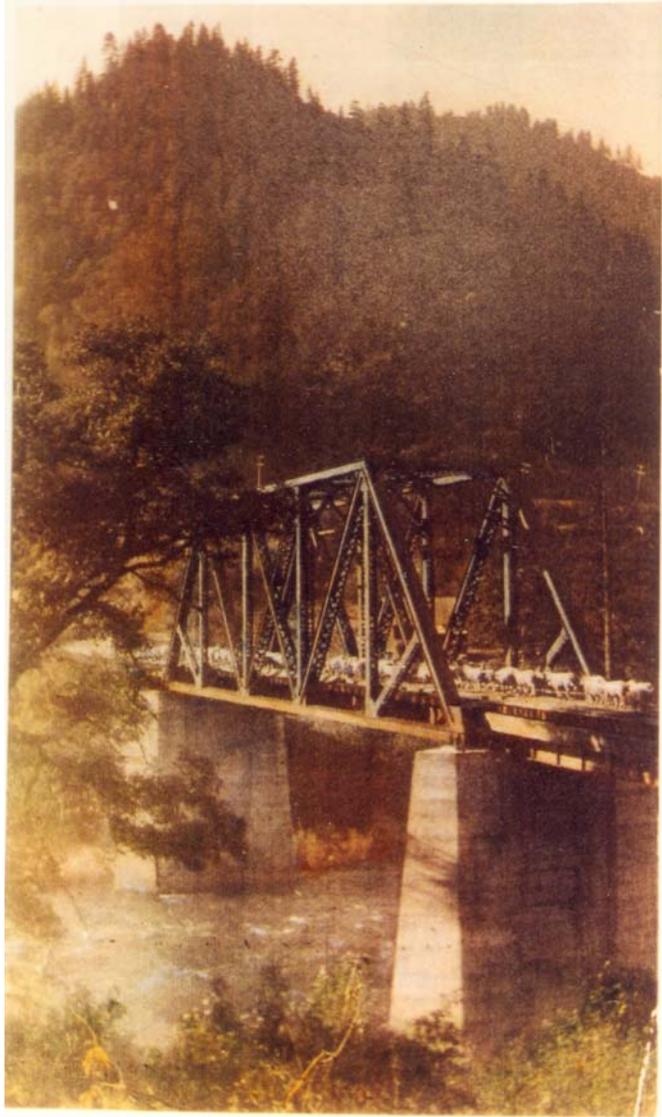
A week later crews were still waiting on the compressor while grading and timbering for a connection to the Western Pacific siding had commenced. Rock gangs had finally blasted out most of the rock points on the grade on the mountain and the road was almost completed.

As of April of 1913 there were some 300 men at work in and about Belden in various capacities. Civil and mining engineer and surveyor A.W. Keddie had completed surveys for the company relative to their proposed power house construction, and the 2,500-foot connection to the Western Pacific siding was completed. The steel railroad bridge across the river was now resting on the piers constructed the year previous. It was stated that work on building the railroad up to Humbug Valley to the dam site was underway, with construction of the dam to be prosecuted "in due time."

"Due time" never arrived as during August of 1913, the Great Western Power Company, predecessor of Pacific Gas & Electric Company, purchased the public utilities end of the Oro Electric Company, effectively putting an end to the Humbug Valley project.

In 1937, with the construction and completion of the Feather River Canyon Highway from Oroville to Quincy, the Belden Bridge was retrofitted for use as an automobile bridge. Ninety-nine years later it continues to serve the public.

This material is provided at the request of the Plumas County Public Works. Sources consulted were the *Plumas Independent*, the *Plumas National-Bulletin*, the *Feather River Bulletin*, CALTRANS Bridge Survey (on file at Plumas County Museum), Plumas County Museum files. Thank you to Carol Paoli, Museum Research Docent, for her research on county bridges.



***Sheep crossing the Belden Bridge in 1915.***

Charles Belden Collection.