

History of the Denten Bridge

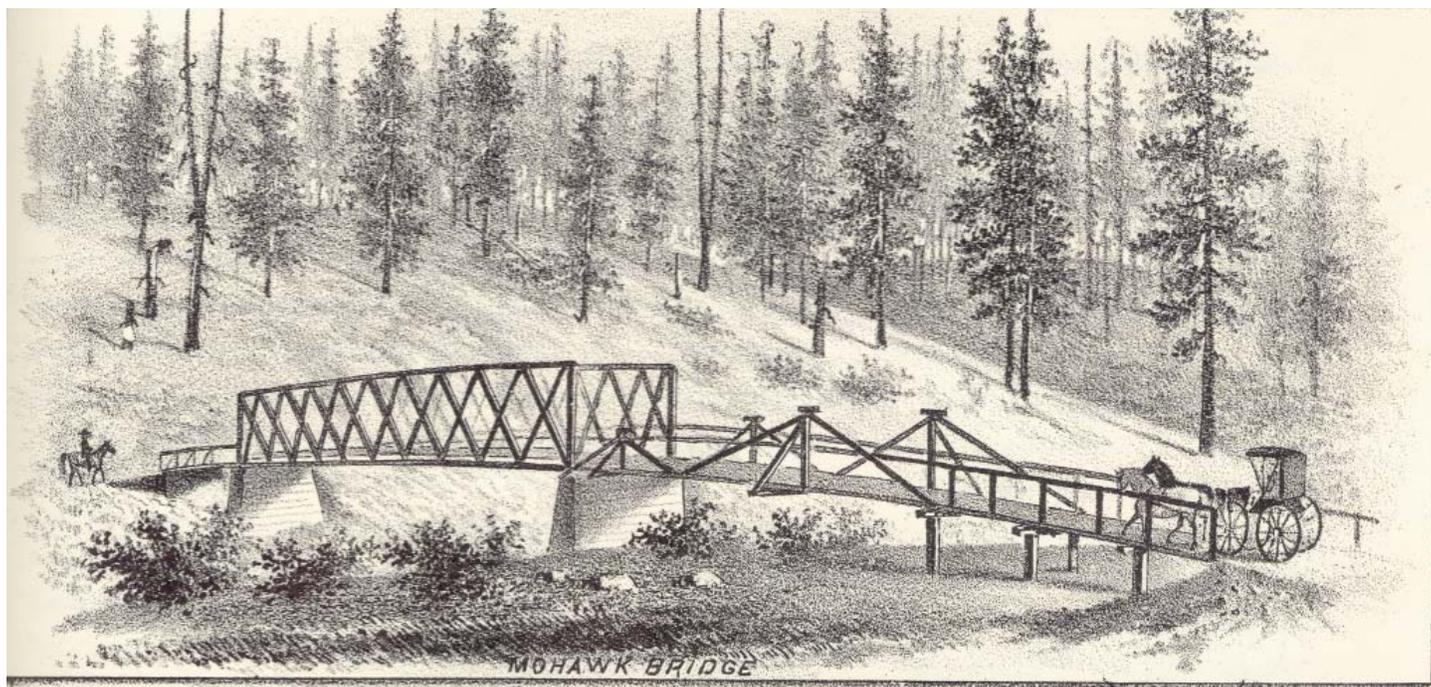
By Scott J. Lawson, Plumas County Museum Director

The subject of this piece is the historic Denten Bridge, located southeast of the town of Blairsden and east of Graeagle, midway on the Blairsden-Graeagle Road.

The original Quincy-Reno Road followed approximately today's Highway 70 route from Quincy. Major deviations occurred at Spring Garden nine miles east of Quincy, at Sloat fifteen miles east, and at Mohawk Valley. As it entered Mohawk Valley from the west, it followed what are today's Little Bear Road, Bonta Street, and the Blairsden-Graeagle Road. Passing through the future site of Blairsden, it followed the Middle Fork Feather River past the Denten Bridge and ascended the hillside to become today's Mohawk Vista Road on its way east into Sierra Valley.

Near the point it entered Mohawk Valley a road branched south or to the right to cross the Middle Fork at "Knott's Ford," near the end of Lundy Lane in Plumas Eureka Estates. This road, built in 1859, was mainly to provide access to the Johnsville area. A bridge was constructed at some point prior to 1879 in this spot, as it was noted in April of 1880, that, "The Mohawkers think the bridge across the river at Knott's is sure to be taken away by the high water. It is the best bridge in the county."

A couple of miles east, the Denten Bridge spans the Middle Fork Feather River on another branch road off the original Quincy-Reno Road. Prior to the construction of the first bridge across the river in this spot, those wishing to reach the west side of the river were compelled to either travel all the way down to Knott's Ford,



The Mohawk Howe Truss Bridge at the Denten Place in 1882. It was constructed the previous year at a cost of \$3,877. View is to the east from the Graeagle side of the Middle Fork Feather River.



The Mohawk Howe Truss Bridge at the Denten Place in the 1890s. In 1902, it was replaced with the current steel structure. Neither bridge at this site was ever washed out in floods. View is to the east from the Graeagle side of the Middle Fork Feather River.

or use a toll ferry located about a mile downstream at the “Old Emigrant Ford,” site of the current Highway 89 Caltrans bridge. Robert Penman, a local farmer, is the first of record to operate the ferry, obtaining a license from the County on May 7th, 1860. Sixteen years later, Dr. McMurtry built a ferry boat for public use in the same spot. This ferry was recovered from a sand bar near the bridge in 1979 and put on display at a local business, but was subsequently left to deteriorate.

Demand for a more reliable crossing resulted in the county constructing a “fine Howe truss bridge ... at an expense of \$3,877” in 1881 at the Denten site. This wood structure stood until 1902 when it was replaced with

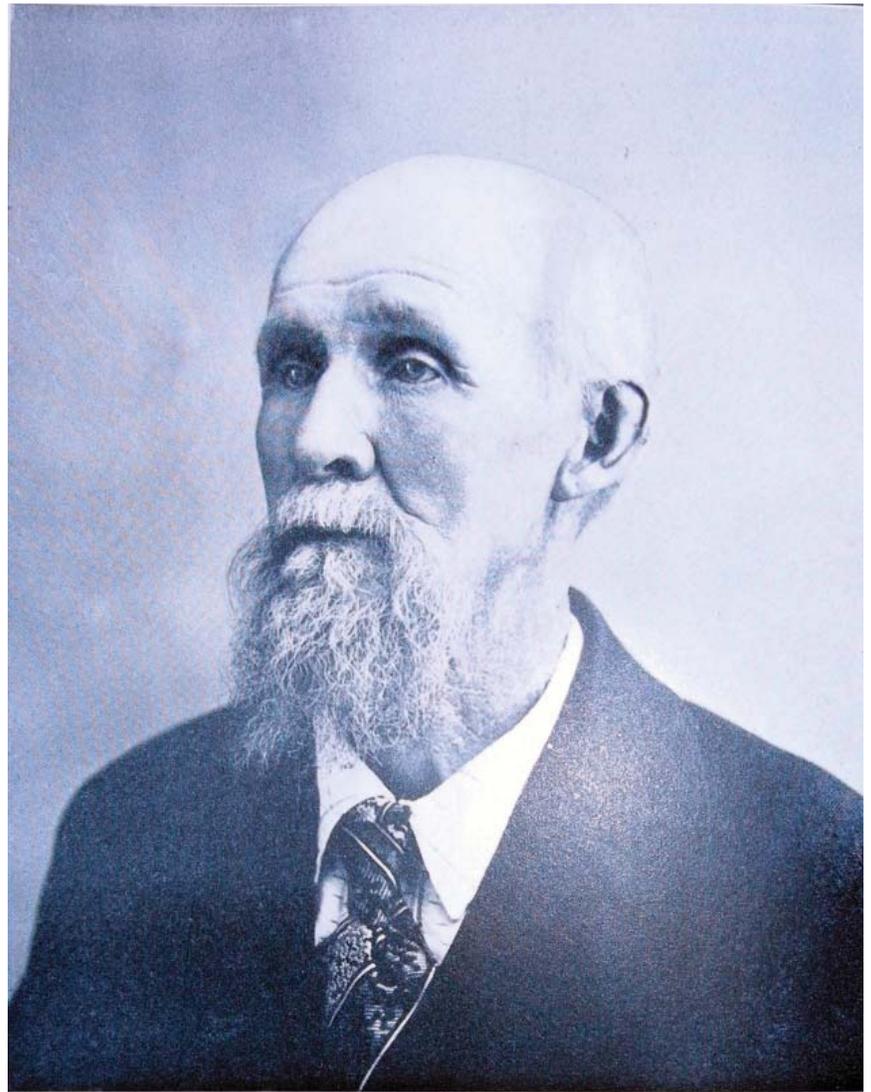
the current steel bridge. Time and travel were taking their toll on the wood bridge; In July, 1898, Supervisor Jacob Stephan was authorized to inspect and report back on the condition of the Denten Bridge, and a week later, Supervisor J.W. Denten was authorized to repair any damage to the bridge, using day labor. In late 1901, the Board of Supervisors considered the proposal of building an iron bridge across the Middle Fork of Feather River near Denten's, but deemed it "unadvisable to construct said bridge this year."

The following March, the Board finally decided to erect a steel bridge to replace the old wooden bridge at the Denten place in Mohawk Valley. It was to be "a modern structure, the span 115 feet long." Arthur W. Keddie was authorized to draw up plans for \$135 and notices that bids were wanted for the bridge's construction were published in the local paper.

On May 5th, 1902, four sealed bids were opened, with local contractors Geo. Brandt & C.J. Lee being the low bidders and winners of the job, at \$4,222. The high bid was \$6,331. Construction began immediately, but in July the contractors were forced to apply to the Board for an extension of time. They were granted the extension until September 2nd, 1902.

Apparently there were no more glitches, and by the appointed date, the bridge was completed. It was said to be "A neat, substantial structure and with proper attention, will last a lifetime." The Board members took a recess from their proceedings to visit the new bridge and were satisfied, accepting it into the county road system the following day. The County Auditor was instructed to draw a warrant in favor of Brandt & Lee as follows: \$22 on Quartz Road District Fund; \$500 on the General Highway Fund, and \$3,700 on the General Fund.

The record flood of March 1907 did only insignificant damage to the bridge, but nine years later, in early July of 1916, a fire of unknown origin seriously damaged the Denten Bridge. Davies Mill employees, along with men from Blairsden, were able to extinguish the fire. The wooden approach on the west side, 135-foot long, was



J. W. Denten

James W. Denten, owner of the Denten Ranch on the west side of the Middle Fork Feather River, just past the Denten Bridge. Denten was a county supervisor for two terms and a rancher and dairyman from 1876 until his death in 1918.



The Denten Ranch in the late 1920s or early 1930s. View is to the south toward Graeagle from the north side of the Blaisden-Graeagle Road.

entirely burned, as was 60 feet of the wood planking on the main bridge. One of the steel girders was burned so badly it warped and had to be replaced. W.J. Maxwell, appointed by the Board to determine the cost of repairs, set the figure at \$1,325. He noted that it would take over 46,000 board feet of lumber to replace the damage. The bridge was insured by Firemen's Fund.

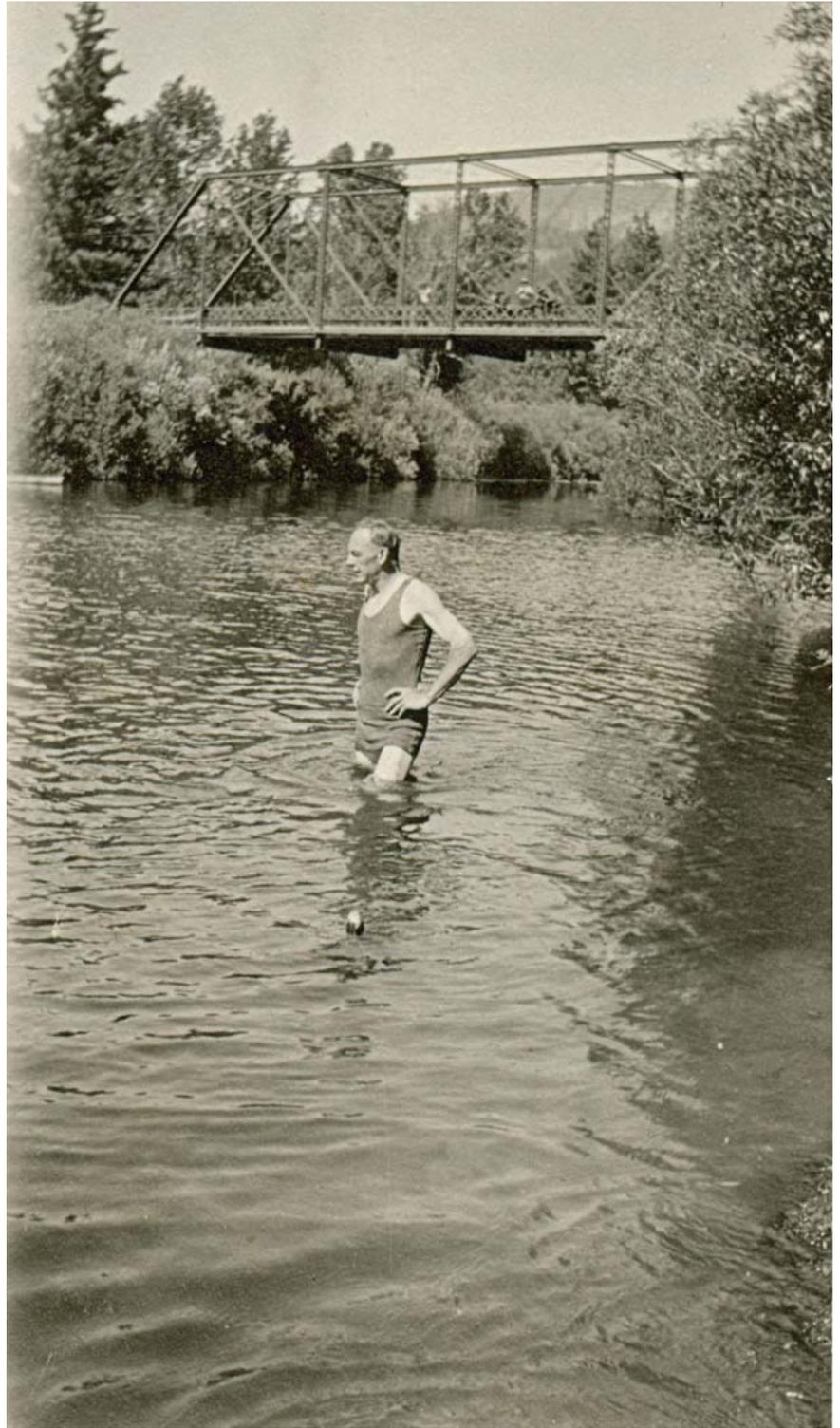
On July 29th, 1916, the Board authorized W.J. Maxwell to oversee repairs of the bridge at cost for materials and labor, with a 15 percent profit margin. Over the years other minor modifications were made, in 1935, 1944, and 1965.

Apparently, the State of California took over the bridge and road at some point, possibly in the 1930s when major road construction was taking place in the county. On November 17th, 1953, the Board passed Resolution #644 stating that upon completion of all repairs to the bridge located on Highway 89 [Blairsden-Graeagle Road] between Blairsden and Graeagle the county would accept the relinquishment of the State Highway Commission and incorporate the Denten Bridge and road into county road system. After the State repairs were made, it was to be used as a one-way legal road. The acceptance appears to have been delayed, as on January 3rd, 1956, the Board notified the Division of Highways of damage to the Graeagle-Blairsden Bridge (Denten) and that Plumas County would not accept it until such time as it met the one-way legal load limit. The damage was a result of another record flood occurring in 1955.

Since that time, the Denten Bridge has served Mohawk Valley residents and visitors as a tangible and picturesque piece of transportation history.



County Supervisor Charles E. Hendel at the Denten Bridge during repairs caused from a fire in early July, 1916.



Swimming in the Middle Fork Feather River at the Denten Bridge, August 22nd, 1926.

This material is provided at the request of the Plumas County Public Works. Sources consulted were the Plumas County Board of Supervisors Minutes, the Plumas National, Plumas-National Bulletin, and Plumas Independent newspapers, Fariss & Smith's 1882 History of Plumas County, and Plumas County Museum files. Special thanks to Carol Paoli, Museum Research Docent, for her diligent research on county bridges.