

Strand Theatre Shelbyville, Inc.

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Historic Shelby County Bridge

Written by David on June, 18 2013

The Strand Theatre presented a lecture on Historic Indiana Bridges. This topic was discussed in this lecture. Ron Hamilton, Shelby County Historian, has revisited one of the bridges highlighted during our Lecture Series. Below is his article on the subject.

Middletown Stone Arch Bridge Is Relic and Reminder of Bygone Era

By Ron Hamilton

Shelby County Historian

One of Shelby County's most charming, rustic and historically interesting and important architectural structures is currently on life support, with state and county officials standing by ready to pull the plug.

It is the 110-year-old Middletown Stone Arch Bridge, which is seldom seen and appreciated by passing motorists. That's because the surrounding trees and brush largely mask it from public view during most of the spring, summer and fall. Regardless, it is a treasure worth preserving for future generations.

The 4-arch stone bridge, which for more than a century carried travelers across Conn's Creek, is located at 450 South and 675 East, just west of Middletown in southeast Shelby County. The Indiana Department of Transportation calls it simply "County Bridge No. 149," an unimaginative and non-descriptive name for a rather remarkable and beautiful bridge. The limestone span lies on a portion of the original Michigan Road, a once vital transportation artery and one of the first macadamized, or crushed stone, roads in the state.

As construction material, stone has tremendous strength under pressure and can bear an almost unlimited load when arranged in an arch. Centuries ago early Roman engineers used stone arches for large bridges and aqueducts. Stone also was favored for use in piers and abutments during road, bridge and railroad construction during early American history.

Stone bridges were commonly made with locally available materials. In the case of the Middletown Stone Arch Bridge, the quarries from the nearby St. Paul area furnished ample limestone for bridge construction. Stone arch bridges were built by using skills from craftsmen who at one time were available in most communities.

After carpenters made the arch-shaped wooden forms, called centerings, upon which the stones were laid, masons could lay the stone. The bridges were filled with crushed rock and the cracks were mortared with burned lime or crushed stone from nearby quarries.

According to local records, the Middletown stone span was built in June 1903 at a cost of nearly \$3,000 by Waldron-area contractor William Avery. Avery is listed as the contractor of record for several early 20th century highway, railroad and inter-urban traction bridges in the southeastern part of the county. He built several stone bridges after many of the wooden structures were washed out during the famous flood of 1913. He often worked with members of the Eck family, who were stone masons and cutters who operated a limestone quarry in the St. Paul area for several years.

Avery was born on his father's Noble Township farm in 1860. At the age of 20, he was a worker in a nearby stone quarry. He attended Danville Normal College and taught area schools for thirteen years. He also served as principal at Waldron for five years. He later left the teaching profession and devoted the rest of his life to farming, bridge building and road contracting. He died in Indianapolis in 1936.

Avery's Middletown stone bridge was bypassed during the summer of 1929 when the Indiana State Highway Commission built the present three-span concrete structure. At that time, the Michigan Road was called State Road 29, and later became known as U.S. Highway 421. Up to a few years ago, the old stone bridge still handled a small amount of rural traffic, but was only one lane with a posted 3-ton weight limit. The bridge is 15 feet wide and 140 feet long, and each of its four spans is 18 feet high and 25 feet long.

A structure inventory and appraisal report issued by the Department of Transportation during the 1990s listed the bridge as "distressed." This alarmed many long-time area residents, who are quite fond of the beautiful structure. Their fears that the bridge would suffer neglect due to its lack of motorized traffic and that neglect would lead to its eventual demise appear to have been realized.

"This bridge is important to the people who live nearby," said Lucille Stevens, whose home is merely a few feet from the bridge's west entry. "The bridge is not only beautiful, it's necessary. Without it motorists have a hard time turning east from this road onto the Michigan Road. The angle forces drivers to go far out in the oncoming traffic lane and that's dangerous."

Candy Miller, director of Grover Museum in Shelbyville, appreciates the unique history and architecture of the bridge.

"The skills and craftsmanship necessary to build a bridge like that are very hard to find nowadays," she said. "Stone arch bridges are rare and few remain in Indiana. The Middletown bridge should be saved."

Twenty years ago it was estimated that the cost of replacing the bridge and improving the adjacent roads would cost more than \$500,000. That amount is believed to be much higher now since the bridge recently suffered a collapse in one of its four arches.

Area residents, along with county preservationists, hope the bridge survives the recent neglect and scarcity of maintenance funds. The lovely bridge looks like something out of mid-19th century America and is one of a only a few 4-arch stone bridges left in the state. It is a striking example of craftsmanship that has long ago disappeared from the American landscape.

Images on this post:



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