

HERITAGE

THE PRESERVATION UTAH NEWSLETTER

WINTER 2017

Preservation Issues:
Utah State Fairpark
and St. George
LDS Tabernacle
page 3



Call to action
Help get Main Street
Module into
local schools.
pages 5



National Conferences
Coming this spring
to Salt Lake City

page 8



How a Small Town is Preserving an Historic Treasure – And how you can help!

BY JOYCE HARTLESS

Gracefully spanning the Virgin River in southwest Utah is a majestic Parker through truss bridge, the last of its kind in the state. It's polygonal top chord bows over the single lane structure, making it architecturally unique. The little town of Rockville has accepted the challenge of restoring this iconic landmark. Will you help?

When the National Parks were being set aside for preservation, the need to create roads and rails to transport tourists to these natural wonders arose. Congress appropriated

\$133,000 to Zion National Park in March of 1923 to identify park roads, specifying \$40,000 be used to construct a bridge over the Virgin River on public lands. Because of its proximity to Zion's south entrance, the town of Rockville was selected for this new river crossing. The first U.S. Park Service Director, Stephen Mather (pictured left), personally gave \$5,000 towards its construction, a sum equal to approximately \$68,000 today.



Believed to be the only structure outside of park boundaries ever funded by the U.S. Park Service, it was designed by the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads for the National Park Service. Ogden contractor C. F. Dinsmore erected the bridge onsite from prefabricated steel components manufactured by the Minneapolis Steel



The Rockville bridge looking north.

and Machinery Company. It was completed under budget for \$42,000 in February of 1925. Seventy years later it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in August of 1995.

This single lane, rigid-connected, Parker through truss bridge is supported by concrete abutments and consists of eleven panels. Parker truss bridges are a variation of the Pratt truss bridge. The Parker's polygonal top chord of more than five slopes provides greater strength than the Pratt, allowing for longer spans. The Rockville Bridge spans approximately 220 feet, making it technologically significant because it incorporates distinctive characteristics in its method of construction.

(continued on page 4)

Small Town is Preserving an Historic Treasure (cont.)

In 2012 the Utah Department of Transportation downgraded the bridge's weight limit and declared it obsolete. Despite that declaration, the residents expressed a desire to rehabilitate the historic bridge in a 2014 survey by an overwhelming 74% majority.

Recent engineering studies determined the bridge remains in much the same condition structurally as when built in 1924. Surface rust has eroded most of the original green paint, but has not significantly impacted the bridge's structural integrity. The engineer's report indicated some steel members could be improved. More importantly, the bridge's rollers, which provide shock absorption by facilitating movement, have been frozen solid for decades because of debris accumulation.

Restoration would preserve the historic character of the bridge, strengthening several steel members to improve the weight carrying capacity, replacing the deck, modernizing the rollers, and repainting the historic steel. The initial rehabilitation will extend the bridge's useful life for another thirty years. By restricting weight loads and completing future maintenance, the engineer estimates the bridge could continue to be used for vehicular traffic another seventy years.

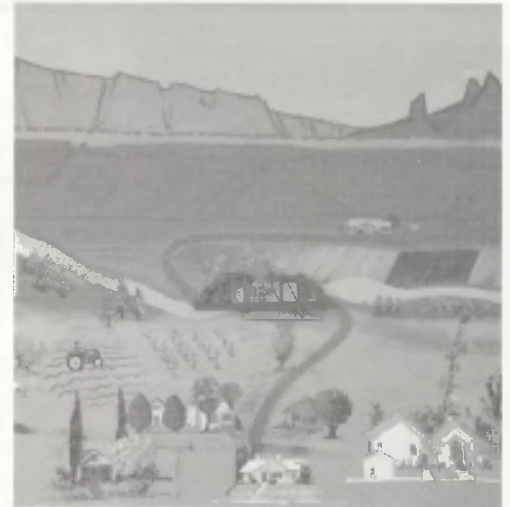
In early 2016, the Utah Department of Transportation's committee controlling federal funds for bridge projects granted Rockville \$2.5 million to rehabilitate their historic truss bridge. The town must match the grant with \$170,000.

Rockville has no significant commercial tax base, merely a few bed and breakfasts and home-based businesses. Maintaining a conservative approach to growth and development because of limited water supply, the Rockville Pipeline Company has allowed just 150 municipal water connections.

So imagine a \$170,000 tax bill split between 150 residences and the individual household's share of the expense is \$1,133. A significant sum, regardless of socioeconomic status.

The town appointed a fundraising committee, which has hosted various fundraisers including an art exhibition, educational lectures, and a rubber ducky race down the river. They've organized volunteers for the Zion Half Marathon and collected change jars all over Springdale for the last couple years. The neighboring Town of Springdale, which does have a commercial tax base, has contributed, as have many residents. Rockville was awarded two grants totaling \$15,000 from the National Trust for Historic Preservation

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Town mural featuring the Rockville Bridge.



The Rockville Bridge shortly after construction in 1924.

underwritten by the Eccles Fund for Utah. And the Simmons Family Foundation donated \$25,000.

Those fundraising efforts and individual contributions have resulted in a significant sum, but the town still needs approximately \$100,000 to achieve their goal before restoration commences in October of 2017.

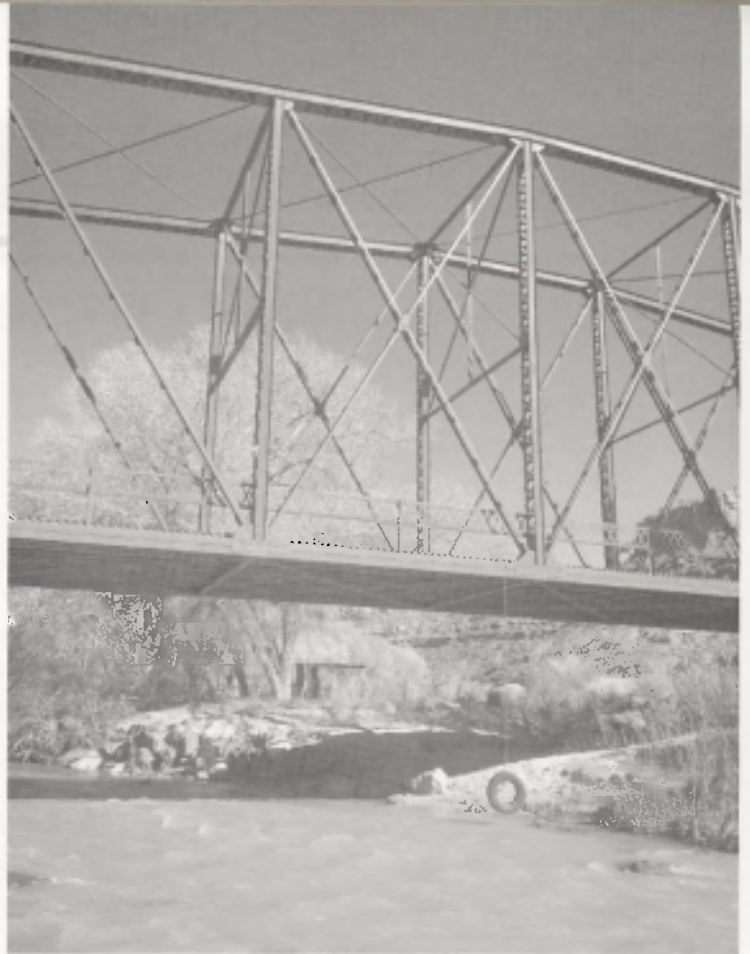
Built as an essential automobile link in the early days of the national parks, today this bridge is more than just the proud centerpiece of the town. It is a vital link across the Virgin River for local residents, tourists, and recreationists. It is the only public Virgin River crossing for 14 ½ miles and its use cuts 33 miles off a trip from Apple Valley and Hildale to Rockville and Springdale.

As 9-year old Romy Thomas stated in her poem, "People come from all around just to see this bridge in our town." The Rockville Bridge is often facilitated as backdrop for family reunion, engagement and senior class photographs. Artists utilize it as the subject of their work. And the Piano Guys filmed their video "Home" on the bridge. Rockville residents understand why visitors esteem the bridge so highly: it is the heart of our community.

It's not just a local, or regional, or even a state treasure. It is a national treasure! As such, this jewel is worthy of polishing and restoring. The Town of Rockville has decided its value is worth far more than the cost to preserve the distinctive landmark for future architects, historians, engineers, and national park aficionados. If you agree, please consider a tax-deductible contribution.

To show your support, visit <http://rockvilletown.org/bridge> to contribute by credit card, or mail a check to the Town of Rockville with "Bridge Fund" in the memo section, and mail to P.O. Box 630206, Rockville, UT 84763. All donations to a municipality for public works are fully tax-deductible.

Joyce Hartless "retired" to southwest Utah in the fall of 2013. When not raising funds for the historic Rockville Bridge, she happily serves as the administrative director for the Zion Canyon Arts and Humanities Council in Springdale. She is a board member of the Rockville Historic Preservation Committee and the Grafton Historic Preservation Partnership. She enjoys socializing with friends and hiking the local landscape with her loving husband and reliable dog.



The Rockville Bridge Poem By: Romy Thomas

People come from all around
Just to see this bridge in our town
Rainy canyons, good companions,
Cottonwood trees and stinging bees

People come from all around
Just to see this bridge in our town
Pretty trees blossoms and blooms
Even sometimes wild mushrooms
The colored trees, the leaves and weeds
And even pumpkin seeds

People come from all around
Just to see this bridge in our town
Fluffy snow, icy roads, our snowy bridge
And the snow on the mountain ridge
Sunny skies and butterflies sand by the river
And the bridge that's a giver

People come from all around
Just to see this bridge in our town