

# Natural Beauty in Hodgeman County

By Lea Ann E. Seiler

*“Walls keep people out. Bridges bring them together.”*

A rare and beautiful treasure has been discovered in Hodgeman County. Like many famous treasures, it has been “hiding right under our noses” for 70 years! “The “Stoecker” Bridge in Western Hodgeman County is probably the most unique, picturesque bridge in the area,” says local bridge-enthusiast, John Colburn. “It is a double arch, native limestone structure and is in excellent condition. The stone was quarried from a nearby quarry, possibly from the section south of the site or from one of many in the immediate area. The stone was cut and shaped on site by a water-cooled circular saw.”

Mr. Colburn has done some extensive research about the bridge in his quest to have it added to the Register of Historic Kansas Places. While most of us in Hodgeman County were simply driving over it, his curiosity drove him to investigate further. He has taken many photos from all sides and even asked Photographer Gary Stoecker to accompany him – which resulted in the beautiful photograph you see here. John’s investigation continued. He began talking to local residents and going back through all of the old newspapers to learn more. (His wife Lois, ...smiling, commented that this has become quite an obsession.) John discovered that Oren “Cap” Neeley was the overall foreman for the WPA bridge project, and, according to Mr. Art Stoecker (the stone mason, who is now deceased) Cap was a near genius – saying he worked out all of the problems in his head. Mrs. Bill (Red) Schroeder told John that her husband was the head carpenter for the structure and that one day, after most of the workers had gone home for the day, he found himself trapped up to his neck by sand that shifted unexpectedly. Harold Demoret, John Burns, Red Crocker and John Witman were still at the site and they were able to dig him out. The incident was firmly etched in Bill’s memory and his son and grandson have both stated that he referred to it many times – remembering that he had been in bed immobile for three days after the incident. He never could give enough praise to those four men for rescuing him. Two other men that were believed to have been on the bridge crew were Clark Burdue and Clarence Demoret. The same WPA crew that built the bridge, or at least part of them, also constructed the shelter house near the creek in Jetmore (now near the Kenyon Parkway) and the east wall of the cemetery.

WPA (Works Progress Administration) was established in 1935 as part of President Roosevelt’s plan to employ large numbers of people through locally sponsored projects – as well as through projects for state and federal agencies. Under the WPA in Kansas, more than 13,000 miles of road and 567 bridges were erected. Structures such as firehouses, swimming pools, libraries, prisons, and schools were also built. At one point in 1936 the WPA employed over 3 million people across the nation.

One question that John, and many others have, is *why* this bridge was created so much differently than the other standard bridges in the area. No definite day has been agreed upon, but it appears to have been completed in 1937 or 1938 – fairly early on in the WPA era.

If you would like to come visit the bridge – or just learn more about it – come visit the Haun Museum in Hodgeman County. There is currently a traveling display about the bridge in the museum – and the museum’s Curator or one of the Hodgeman County Historical Society members, can give you directions to get there. It’s only about 14 miles outside of Jetmore and we would love to share our beautiful treasure with you!

Information about Hodgeman County and the Haun Museum can be found at [www.hodgemancountyks.com](http://www.hodgemancountyks.com) or you can call Hodgeman County Economic Development at 620-357-8831.



Picture taken by Gary Stroecker.