

BRIDGEPORT BY THE CANADIAN

*By Chrystobel Berrong Poteet**

Few towns in Western Oklahoma, either great or small, possess an early history like that of the quiet little crossroads town of Bridgeport. This town, once many times larger than it is now, is located about a mile from U. S. Highway 66, near the Canadian River in the northern-most part of Caddo county.¹

Treacherous and unpredictable as it has always been, the Canadian River was an important factor in the selection of Bridgeport's location. The railroad bridge which crosses this river was constructed in 1898, and it has served as a connecting link between the east and west portions of this part of the country for more than a half century. The toll bridge which spanned this tricky riverbed of quicksand in past decades gave Bridgeport a certain prominence which other towns along the line never had.

The first toll bridge to span the river was constructed with a long approach on each end and three sixty-foot sections in the middle. It was built in 1893. This bridge enabled settlers from the Cheyenne Arapaho country which was opened in 1892 to come to El Reno to buy supplies. However, this was the third attempt at building a bridge across this treacherous river. During the spring of 1893, two other attempts undertaken by El Reno businessmen to set the understructure for a bridge were swept away by sudden flood waters.

Between the years of 1895 and 1901, all this region south of the Canadian River, east to the 98th Meridian and west to Cheyenne Arapaho country, was known to the white man as Range Country where cattle were grazed by the thousands. Ranchers from this area were forced to drive their cattle on hoof across the flat, Canadian riverbed of quicksand on their way to market.

The crossing of the river was always considered a hazardous undertaking as one or a number of animals might suddenly sink out of sight in the deep quicksand. The Railroad Company officials realizing the great need of shipping facilities for these cattlemen

* Chrystobel Berrong Poteet (Mrs. C. V. Poteet) has contributed this article on old Bridgeport in Caddo County, in memory of her father, J. H. Berrong who brought his family here when the Wichita-Caddo country was opened to white settlement and made a part of Oklahoma Territory, in 1901. Mrs. Poteet makes her home near Hinton, Oklahoma.—Ed.

1. This part of U. S. Highway 60 which runs across the Northern end of Caddo county was opened July 9, 1934. The new Interstate Highway 40 is one-half mile to the south of Highway 66.

extended a line westward from El Reno across the Canadian River and as far west as Weatherford.

In 1898, the same year that the Choctaw, Oklahoma Gulf railroad²—later Rock Island—was built across the entire northern end of the Wichita-Caddo reservation lands, a U.S. survey completed the making of township lines in these lands which everyone knew would soon be opened for settlement. Because of the railroad, a townsite on the south bank of the Canadian River was included in the Government survey. The station was named Bridgeport and lots were plotted designating that this place would become a city of the first class.

For the convenience of the ranchers whose large herds ranged on the land south of the Canadian River, the railroad located a switch complete with stockpens and loading chutes a few miles west of Bridgeport and east of a boxcar station called "Caddo" where the town of Hydro was later founded.³ This loading place with its strong chutes and high fenced yards was a boon to the men who unloaded cattle by the trainload shipped from Texas in the springtime to this fine grassland and who loaded the fattened animals in the autumn where they were shipped directly to market in Kansas City.

Bridgeport's first Post Office, established February 20, 1895, with Stacy B. Gorham, Postmaster, was located at the north end of the toll bridge inside Gorham's trading post, this store handled many different items in general merchandise and groceries in those days.⁴ George Gorham, who kept buying up shares until he owned most of the toll bridge, was the postmaster from 1898 until late 1901 when the post office was moved to the townsite. Sanford Boren who moved to Tulsa years afterward was the toll taker at this bridge.

Before the United States government announced that the Wichita-Caddo Indian Reservation lands were to be opened for settlement in August, 1901, word had already been sent out ahead that Bridgeport was a promising place. So, men with different vocations and most of them with families came to this place to make a home and a name for themselves. Included in the group of men seeking one hundred sixty acres of land upon which to

2. The name of this railroad, also the stations Bridgeport and Weatherford are shown on a Rand McNally Map published in 1898. The map also shows how township lines had been drawn in the Wichita-Caddo Reservation lands.

3. This information was furnished by Mr. Val Burgman, now 83, who worked as a cowhand in this part of the Territory from 1898-1901. He drew a claim in Blaine county north of Hydro, and has resided there since 1901.

4. George H. Shirk, "First Post Offices within the Boundaries of Oklahoma," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXX, No. 1 (Spring, 1952).

establish a home was J. H. Berrong, a bridge builder for the Rock Island Railroad. Incidentally he was helping construct a high bridge across this same Canadian River near Tucumcari, New Mexico, in July before the drawing was held at El Reno, August 6 and 7. It was his hope to file on a claim south of Bridgeport but when he arrived from New Mexico all that land had been taken. His second choice was one hundred sixty acres nine miles south-east of the present town of Hinton which was founded in 1902.⁵

From first a city of tents, Bridgeport grew like magic to a population of over three thousand in its first few months. Besides the merchandise stores common to any new pioneer town, there were two lumber yards, a bank, three blacksmith shops, a three-story hotel known as the "Tremont," ten saloons, some with dance halls, and twelve doctors who came thinking this place would be ideal for their practice.

Among the twelve doctors who first came to this frontier town was Dr. A. F. Hobbs,⁶ who after seven years practice in Bridgeport, moved to Hinton where he was known as one of that town's prominent physicians for more than forty years.

Three weekly newspapers were published in this young town to keep the townspeople informed on all Territorial affairs. These publications were the *Bridgeport News*, *Bridgeport Press*, and *The Bridgeport Banner*. When the town of Hinton was founded seven miles south of Bridgeport in 1902, the *Bridgeport News* sold out to Henry A. White who became first editor of the *Hinton Record*,⁷ a publication still published regularly each week.

Business was so great during the first year of Bridgeport that

5. On this homestead, Mr. and Mrs. J. H. Berrong reared and educated their eight children, four sons and four daughters. For fifty-three years until the death of Mr. Berrong in 1954, this was the family home. Four of the children who moved to another state are Mrs. E. L. Brown, Dallas, Texas; Everette Berrong, Boulder, Colorado; and Fred and Olney Berrong of Los Angeles, California. Four of the children who built permanent homes in the state of Oklahoma are Mrs. Volga Collier and Sen. Ed Berrong of Weatherford, and Mrs. L. R. Riffel of Enid. When Mr. and Mrs. C. V. Poteet purchased a farm for their home in 1919, they bought a tract six miles south of Bridgeport. Their own four daughters, and now their seven grandchildren know no other place as "home."

6. Dr. A. F. Hobbs, who practiced medicine 54 years spent seven years 1901-1908 in Bridgeport. He was the first person in that town to own an automobile. Many times when the river was too high to use the toll bridge, Dr. Hobbs, a satchel in each hand, walked across the railroad bridge in the darkness of night to reach sick people on the other side of the river. In World War I, Dr. Hobbs was sent to France.

7. Mrs. Marie Wornstaff, teacher in Hinton school system for thirty-six years furnished the information on Bridgeport's newspapers. Also gave news of Tremont Hotel. She has compiled a great amount of information concerning the communities of both Hinton and Bridgeport.

men were waiting to rent a building as soon as it was completed. Most buildings held two, sometimes three business establishments.

One factor that helped immensely in Bridgeport's early business boom was the toll bridge across the Canadian river. Cattle were driven across this bridge to the loading chutes near Bridgeport. The bridge also connected the town with the Cheyenne farm camp in Blaine county. There has been some controversy about the purpose of this camp of log houses. Some declare it was only a place to issue beef to the Indians. But it is authentic to say that the man in charge taught the Indian boys how to farm. His duties were much like the county agent of recent years.⁸ Camp Logan was first man to take charge of Indian business affairs at this camp. Herbert Walker was his Indian interpreter. Indians from this farm camp came across the bridge to the Bridgeport bank to cash their quarterly payments. They participated in public barbecues or any other special event held by the white people and so of course spent their money in this town.⁹

The Canadian River furnished many a news item for the local newspapers and many strange sights for the townspeople. Once a freight train carrying cars of German emigrant household belongings and livestock fell into the sandy river bed. Immediately the heavily loaded cars began sinking into the quicksand so men in charge opened wide the car doors. Out flew chickens, ducks, and geese to make their way to the bank on the Bridgeport side of the river. Only the engine and coal car from the front end and the caboose from the rear were saved from this train. To this day the other cars with everything inside as well as the middle section of the bridge lie buried deep somewhere in the shifting sand of the Canadian riverbed.¹⁰

8. This so-called Indian camp was one of ten Indian colonies established on the Cheyenne and Arapaho Indian Reservation in 1886, for agricultural and educational purposes under the supervision of Capt. Jesse M. Lee, 9th U. S. Inf., as Acting Agent on the Reservation. These colonies were established at different locations on the Cheyenne and Arapaho lands, under new plans inaugurated for the reservation system as suggested by Capt. Lee. In 1885, leases for grazing cattle to cattlemen throughout the reservation were cancelled by Executive Order out of Washington, and the former Indian camps huddled near the Agency at Darlington were moved out, the Indians generally settling in the new communities in bands, many miles apart. The Cheyenne Colony on the Canadian River near Bridgeport was reported for its first year in 1886, consisting of 19 farms with 100 acres of sod broken and good crops raised.—Ed.

9. This information furnished by Mrs. Ben Snow. The Snows first saw Bridgeport as a tent city. They had a farm near the town, and lived in a one-room house. Later they had a store in Bridgeport and still later operated the telephone exchange. Mr. and Mrs. Snow are residents of Hinton but still retain their farm near Bridgeport.

10 Mrs. R. F. Hobbs, who lives in Hinton and is the widow of the late Dr. Hobbs, furnished this interesting story.

Although the river lay dormant most of the year it often went on a rampage during the stormy spring season. People used to come many miles to Bridgeport to see the muddy surging floodwaters as the river rolled dark, angry and bold from the west filling the wide sprawling riverbed full from bank to bank. Oftentimes the swift current brought along uprooted trees, drowned cattle and even housetops in its mad rush down-stream. Very often mail was held up for three or four days at a time whenever the river made the railroad bridge unsafe. Sometimes the current would be strong enough to take out one or more spans of the bridge.

The worst flood as far as property damages was concerned, was in 1904 but five people were drowned in the flood of 1914 which was the time when the surging waters washed away almost all of the railroad bridge. P. J. McCoy, one time station master at Geary, and seven others were standing on the north end of the bridge when the angry waters tore loose that section and carried it away downstream. McCoy was swept into a large cottonwood tree where he was forced to spend the night. Two men were rescued from an island in the river close to the Barbee farm six miles down stream. Doctors Hobbs and Smith were both called to give these men medical attention. Both men survived but days later the bodies of two dead men were found in the sand along the bank of the river near Union City, and the three other bodies were never found.¹¹

So great was the danger around the depot this time that in the next two years tons and tons of huge rock boulders were hauled to Bridgeport from the west by the railroad company, and used to face the river bank alongside the depot. These rocks have been strong enough to hold the river in check at that point with no change in its channel for more than forty years.¹²

In 1902, the Choctaw Railroad Company built a line south from Enid through Bridgeport to Waurika, making Bridgeport a center not only for east and west travel but north and south as well. With this early development and good business one might readily ask, "What happened to the bustling busy town? Why did the place decrease instead of growing larger in size?"

Like many another pioneer town in history, Bridgeport became divided into two factions, and then "Mother Nature" played a hand in its affairs. People found that the drinking water on the west side of Bridgeport was clear and pure while that on the east side, where most of the business buildings had been erected, was

11. Mrs. Hobbs, also told of this incident and about the feud in the town.

12. This information was taken from Mrs. Wornstaff's files.

filled with gypsum crystals. Instead of sharing or trying to find a way of voting to bring the good water to the east side, a bitter feud developed.

The depot was on the west side of the town near the river but a long hill had to be climbed to reach the Post Office over on the east side. To get the mail distributed more conveniently business men of the west side contrived to have the Post Office moved one night during the dark hours. The men who were hired for the job were not interested in the Post Office; they thought only of the sizable amount of money they were being paid to get the equipment to a building on the west side. George Walker was Postmaster at that time.

A two-story brick building was erected hurriedly on the west side for a bank, first president of which was W. W. Waterman. The big three story frame hotel was also moved to a corner location on the west side.

Merchants of the east side became so embittered over the fast growing feud that many of them, in 1902, moved their buildings and took their business to Hinton, a new town about seven miles south of Bridgeport on the Choctaw Railroad. Little by little, year after year, Bridgeport instead of gaining in size and business kept losing its frontier prosperity. This was a disappointment to the Rock Island Railroad Company which had had hopes that this town would become a railway terminal.

When the privately owned toll bridge washed away, a ferry was used to convey traffic across the river at one dollar per car. In the early 1920's, another toll bridge, a swinging one called the Key Bridge, so named from the contractor, was constructed across the river giving Bridgeport some boost in business and a certain prominence because all east and west travel of a great part of the Nation passed over this bridge. But the boom was short-lived for Bridgeport became an isolated town in 1934 when U. S. Highway 66 was opened to the public. A modern bridge known as the William H. Murray Bridge and also free to the public was built downstream a few miles to the southeast of the toll bridge. The national highway running east and west and sometimes called the "Main Street of America" is located one mile south of Bridgeport.

However, the swinging bridge was left standing for several years. It was used occasionally by farmers who had interests in both Blaine and Caddo counties. In 1948, a brush fire burned the south approach of this little used bridge, and in 1952, it was sold to a salvage firm in Kansas City that wrecked the remaining part of the bridge and shipped away all the material.

Years before the bridge was sold the town had already lost its bank; later the large three story hotel was torn down and the material sold to a group of people who lived in Anadarko.¹² In 1944 the highschool was transferred to Hinton, and still later the grade children were included in the transfer. In 1945, the large brick gymnasium of which Bridgeport was so proud was sold to the highest bidder who wrecked the building and hauled it away.

During World War II, the railroad bridge at Bridgeport again became a point of national interest. For, many a train of soldiers crossed over this bridge passing by the station depot on their way to the West Coast.

Bridgeport established as a railroad shipping center has retained its usefulness throughout the years. Many trainloads of range cattle comprised the first shipments. The next big business was the shipping of walnut logs and stumps. These were shipped east to be made into furniture. With the coming of the settlers the shipments soon changed to cars of wheat, corn, hogs and poultry. During the 1930's and 1940's this section was known as a watermelon shipping point.

At the present time, the elevator built near the depot still services a large area around Bridgeport. Farmers unload their wheat at this elevator where it is shipped out for government storage.

Old-timers, people now in their eighties and nineties, who helped to build Bridgeport like to reminisce about the early life of the town. They like to tell about the time when Bridgeport honored Governor Haskell with a banquet.¹³ This was during the years when Frank Carpenter served as State Representative. These people like to tell how James Kessler who worked as a clerk in the Owl Drug Store owned by Dr. Hobbs, later made a fortune in oil. They are equally proud of their younger people who selected the field of education as their profession.

Today, the town with a 1960 census count of one hundred thirty-nine population still has a city council thus maintaining its distinction as a city of the first class.¹⁴ In a small, one room building Mrs. Lucile Heldermon serves as Postmaster. She has served the little town for twenty-two years. There is one small grocery

13. Mrs. A. F. Hobbs told this story, James Kessler worked for them. She also named ladies in their fifties as well as the younger generation who became teachers.

14. Information on Post Office, census and city council given by Mrs. Lucile Heldermon. All town records are kept in the office of her husband who writes insurance. They both confirm the fact that Bridgeport has always been and still is a city of the first class.

operated by John Mashaney. Instead of the Nazarene, the Baptist and United Evangelical churches of a former day, Bridgeport people attend their one Methodist church. These people each like to tell that their town's drinking water, which is tested every six months, is 98% pure.¹⁵ The purest water, it is said, of any nearby town.

15. The bit of information about the test of the water was given by Melvin McCain, longtime resident of Bridgeport, who has many old newspapers on file.