Structures Along the River

Huron Township Historical Society

As you glance at a Huron Township map you will notice that the large square shape defined by its borders is divided diagonally and roughly in half by the Huron River. The river enters the township near the northwest corner after flowing over the dam (construction of the dam completed in approximately 1924) at Edison Lake. This part of the Huron River is located in Van Buren Township and is near the site of a now extinct town by the name of French Landing. The Huron River travels its tortuous path for miles, finally arriving at the southwest corner. Here you will find a bayou that can be viewed at the base of Middlebelt Road where it meets Huron River Drive. This backwater has resulted from the construction of the Flat Rock dam, located at Huron River Drive and Arsenal Road.

The original Indian residents and hunters travelling the area created trails along the river. There were two main trails, one to the north side of the river and the other to the south. The trails followed the general path of the Huron River along its entire length as it passed through the township. Inevitably, the need arose to cross the river. The Indians would ford the river on horseback or wade across by foot at traditionally used shallow spots.

Fording the river was not always convenient. The river would be swollen in the spring by run-off waters when the snow and ice accumulated in winter would melt. An account found later, an excerpt from the "Log Hut on the Banks" article, told how travelers from Ohio destined to visit the Wyandot Indian Reservation came upon exceptional obstacles trying to cross the river. The severely cold weather had caused the river's waters to freeze along both banks. The ice sheets hampered them entering the river and climbing up the opposite bank. It made the crossing, usually inconvenient and uncomfortable, a potentially life threatening ordeal.

> The village of Flat Rock claimed the honor of having the oldest Methodist Episcopal society in Michigan. It boasted of having the oldest church building in constant use until a few years ago, when the building was removed and replaced with a new structure. This church may be properly called the successor of the Huron and Wyandotte mission. This mission was originally organized for the benefit of the Wyandotte Indians, who lived on the reservation along the Huron River. The following account of a visit by the Rev. J. S. Finley to this mission is in his history of the Wyandottes: "Late in the afternoon of Sunday, Dec. 14, 1823, we arrived at the Huron River, on the Wyandotte reservation of eight sections. Here we had a very formidable difficulty to encounter. The river was just fordable and frozen on both sides for two or more rods. We took our tomahawks and cut the ice, then jumped our horses down into the water, got on and rode to the ice on the opposite shore, here we sat on our horses and cut the ice, where the water was more than midsides deep, and I think a colder day I hardly ever experienced.
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> After staying in the water nearly half an hour we got on the ice. We were not out of the water 10 minutes before our clothes were frozen stiff and then we had two miles to go before we could arrive at any house."

Years later the white settlers to the township took it upon themselves to engineer and construct bridges that would span the Huron River.

The first bridges were, no doubt, constructed of wood. Eventually iron structures were proposed and constructed. Iron bridge construction was much more durable, allowed for wider roadbeds and had greater weight bearing capacities. The type of bridge common constructed in the late eighteen hundreds was the through-truss bridge. The name refers to the manner in which the iron trusses rise to each side and connect to the beam members supporting the roadbed below. An excellent example of a vintage through-truss bridge can be found further upstream on the Huron River near the entrance to Delhi Park (also part of the Huron-Clinton Metropark system).

Two general areas along the Huron River, in Huron Township, have traditionally been used since the settlers began constructing bridges. The first encountered when traveling downstream on the river is the Waltz Road Bridge. The existing structure is the second iron or stell bridge to be constructed at this location. This double-span bridge (painted "Smurf Blue") is the big sister to the Belleville Road bridge found upstream, separating Edison Lake and Belleville Lake. These bridges share the same construction details and were fabricated by the same company. Both bridges were constructed in or about 1924 and are themselves prime examples of steel truss construction, not commonly found today.

The integrity of the Waltz Road Bridge's construction was tested very shortly after its completion. A photograph taken at the time of the incident shows construction wagons still sitting at one end of the span. The incident occurred when the earthen dam upstream on the Huron River, constructed to form Edison Lake, collapsed and caused an enormous flood of water. The same photograph taken in 1925 shows the river swollen, nearly touching the metal beams under the bridge.

At the same time the Waltz Road Bridge was constructed (which came under the hurisdiction of the Board of County Road Commissioners of Wayne County) a new "paved" road was built to serve as its approach from the south. Originally, traffic approached New Boston from the south using Savage Road which ran along the river from the old Gentz Farm (located where Gentz Road and Savage Road meet). This section of Savage Road was open until the late 1950's and is still remembered by many of its residents. The gravel road bed is still evident today, and although overgrown by trees and brush, serves as a shortcut for bicyclists or people walking to town wanting to avoid the Waltz Road traffic.

The bridge that preceded the structure standing today was located in the same spot. What is interesting about the project is that the Huron Township Board and Huron Township residents were responsible for the planning, funding and construction of the bridge.