Historic Eastern Oregon Bridge Recognized

Ceremony commends key players involved in restoration of 88-year-old Upper Perry Arch Bridge

Written by Dick Mason, The Observer - May 08, 2012 (reprinted with permission)

It is a story of overcoming daunting engineering challenges.

It is also a tale of an intriguing corncob pipe and a popular mountain goat.

This is the story of the restoration of the Upper Perry Arch Bridge, recounted Monday afternoon during an award ceremony at the new Upper Perry Arch Bridge viewpoint.

The ceremony recognized those who played key roles in the restoration project led by the Oregon Department of Transportation, the project's contract administrator.

Restoration of the 88-year-old bridge was completed in 2009 after the bridge had been closed about a year. A month ago, a viewing area with benches, a walkway and interpretive signs was completed just east of the Upper Perry Arch Bridge site.

Monday's program was an unofficial ceremonial opening of the now fully completed bridge complex.

Howard Postovit talks about project

Howard Postovit, the regional environmental coordinator for the Oregon Department of Transportation Region 5, said that the success of the project is remarkable considering the poor condition of the bridge's concrete. Postovit said the bridge's poor condition was the result of freezing and thawing and a condition known as alkali silica reaction.

"The concrete was consuming itself. This (alkali silica reaction) is like concrete cancer," said Postovit, the master of ceremonies at Monday's program.

Fortunately, most of it was limited to the railings and the deck. The majority of the damage was caused by the freezing and thawing of moisture, which had seeped into the upper part of the bridge. Work was done by crews to eliminate spaces water can seep into in the future.

A few portions of the bridge were in such poor condition that they had to be completely replaced.

"I won't tell which ones. It is a secret. It is close enough to the original that people are not going to quibble over it," Postovit said with a smile.

Work was done by Wildish Standard Paving Co. of Eugene, which received an Exemplary Human Environment Initiative award from the U.S. Department of Transportation at the ceremony along with ODOT Region 5 and Otak, an architectural and engineering firm in Portland.

The award was presented by Phillip Ditzler, the administrator for the Oregon division of the Federal Highway Administration, which is part of the U.S. Department of Transportation.

The ornate bridge ODOT, Wildish and Otak were recognized for restoring was a main thoroughfare when it opened in 1924 as part of the Hilgard-to-La Grande section of the old Oregon Trail Highway.

FHWA, ODOT, Otak and Wildish with awards

The span is a credit to the artistic and engineering genius of Conde B. McCullough, Oregon's state bridge engineer from 1919 to 1936.

McCullough's design team created about 600 bridges in 17 years. The engineer developed a national reputation for his work.

Conde B. McCullough

One reason is that scenic qualities were important to McCullough, who had a dim view of engineers who designed lifeless-looking structures.

"Engineers have been busily engaged in ruining this fair earth and taking romance out of it," McCullough, who died in 1946, was quoted as saying in a 2007 Observer article.

McCullough may have unintentionally left personal evidence of his presence at the site of the bridge's construction in the 1920s.

A corncob pipe around the bridge turned up while crews were renovating the bridge. This was significant because McCullough was known to smoke a corncob pipe. The pipe is now in the office of an ODOT employee in Union County because of its possible link to McCullough.

The Upper Perry Arch Bridge McCullough designed was the site of heavy traffic through 1960 when the nearby segment of Interstate 84 was completed, allowing highway traffic to bypass the span.

Since then, it has primarily served landowners and recreationists on a dead end section of old Highway 30. The Upper Perry Arch Bridge was repaired rather than removed or replaced because of its historical significance and the support of local landowners.

One of the project's most faithful observers was a mountain goat frequently seen on the slopes around Perry several years ago. The mountain goat, one discussed at the ceremony, would often stand about 100 yards from the project site and observe the workers for extended periods.

The mountain goat, seen by countless travelers on Interstate 84 while driving by Perry in recent years, has reportedly not been seen for many months.

The mountain goat may be gone but the Upper Perry Arch Bridge is now clearly here to stay for many decades to come.

###