

## HISTORY

## Fifth Street Bridge:

A necessary project

Sometimes roads or bridges are located because that's the way the cow wandered down the hill ... or a pioneer like George Crawford crossed the river in a particular spot and was followed by someone else, and then someone after that, and it became the place to cross.

The crossing at the Gunnison River that flows into the Grand River (now Colorado River) was such a place. A ferry was built by Patrick Henry Gordon and put into use at this location in early 1882.



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When we were still Gunnison County, two men drowned on April 1, 1882. It happened when some lawless characters who thought they could run rough shod

over the town were arrested by the citizens for various offenses. Finding the law was being enforced, some of the troublemakers took the ferry and escaped across the river with Gunnison County Deputy Sheriff Benjamin A. Scott and ferry owner Gordon, plus other citizens, following them in two boats around 9 p.m.

The second boat carrying Deputy Scott and Mr. Gordon overturned in the dark river and both men drowned; their bodies were found a few days later and buried in the pauper's field behind the Orchard Mesa Cemetery. Deputy Scott was the first law enforcement officer to die in the line of duty in our community.

Even with a ferry in place, safety was an issue crossing the river. And as more people were traveling back and forth and supplies were coming from Gunnison to Grand Junction, it was necessary to erect a bridge to cross from Orchard Mesa to Grand Junction.

In January 1886, a contract to construct the Fifth Street State Bridge was awarded to the Groton Iron Bridge Company of New York for the sum of \$32,893. It was to be 710 feet long, consisting of four



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

New car dealers drive cars over the bridge as part of the celebration in 1933.

spans of iron trusses and a section of 150 feet in short spans, resting upon iron piles driven into bed rock.

A dedication ceremony was planned for late October, however strong winds on the night of Oct. 10, destroyed the first span of the bridge because the main supports were too light to support the bridge's weight. Engineers were called in to make necessary structural adjustments, and the bridge was finally completed and dedicated.

During the ceremony Walter V. Champlin, age 26, was the first person to cross the new bridge on horseback. Travelers in wagons and horseback were glad to have the bridge in place. But there were restrictions. A \$25 fine was to be imposed on anyone riding a horse or driving a wagon faster than someone could walk; also a \$25 fine imposed on anyone driving more

than 50 head of cattle or horses across the bridge at one time.

With the advent of the automobile the wagon bridge was not strong enough, and in 1932 construction of a new stronger bridge was begun just west of the old 1886 bridge.

By July 9, 1933, plans for the opening of the new bridge had begun in earnest. A Bridge Queen was needed to be chosen from the young ladies of Grand Junction; a band was needed; someone needed to ask the National Guard and Naval Honor Guard to be present and participate; a speaker was necessary; final decisions were to be made on the Lincoln Park and swimming pool events; and someone was needed to plan the evening dance on the new bridge.

One issue was what to use to christen the bridge? Wine was suggested, but it was protested because it was during the time of prohibition, so a bottle of tomato juice was suggested and protested, then a bottle of grape juice and yet another protest. Finally a bottle of 3.2 wine was approved as appropriate to christen the bridge.

Genevieve Rossler was chosen by popular vote to serve as the Queen of the Bridge, and Walter V. Champlin was located in Ouray and invited again to be the first person to cross the new bridge on horseback as he had done in 1886.

On July 18, 1933, over 3,000 people stood on both sides of the new Fifth Street/Orchard Mesa Bridge. Genevieve Rossler, wearing an attractive pink sport outfit with a colorful corsage, was escorted by the Naval Color Guard and saluted by the National Guard unit stationed in Fruita. She held a bottle of legal wine with Colorado Columbine colors of purple and white, which she broke over one of the steel girders and christened the massive "Colorado River Bridge."

Walter Champlin, now 73 years old, crossed the bridge from the Orchard Mesa side, as he had done 47 years before, and

was followed by a man riding an old-time, high-wheel 1880 bicycle, and two modern bicycles ridden by a boy and girl. Then all of the car dealers in town had their new automobiles driven across the bridge. On that day there would be more than 1,000 cars cross the bridge.

The mayor of Grand Junction, Allen Holcombe, gave Walter Champlin the key to the city and the local Junior College Band played music for the parade. The guest speaker and attorney from Montrose, Mr. Charles Moynihan, gave a brief dedicatory address, and said, "It is significant that the grave of George Crawford, who founded Grand Junction, overlooks the bridge we dedicate today ... and where the pioneer's ox teams once crunched the boulders of the riverbed below us, we today cross the chasm below with ease and comfort." Thus on July 18, 1933, the new Fifth Street bridge was completed.

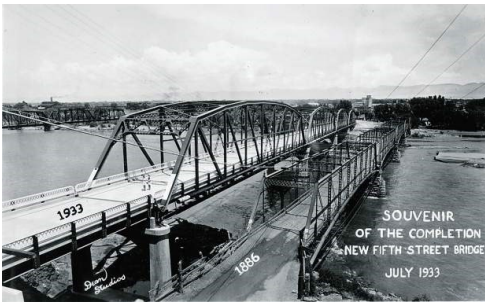
Fifty-six years later on July 6, 1989, a newer Fifth Street bridge was dedicated. While Walter V. Champlin, who died on December 30, 1941, was not able for the third time to be the first person to cross the new structure. Mrs. Genevieve Rossler Wilson, who married Clifford Wilson in 1943, was able to once again christen the Fifth Street Bridge. She passed away on April 1, 2011, but in July 1989 she was still the Bridge Queen and the wine used to christen the bridge was legal.

Photos and information: Museum of Western Colorado, Loyd Files Research Room, Michael Menard; Marie Tipping: Grand Junction News; Daily Sentinel; History of Mesa County; George Crawford Letters; Marilyn Fillmore Files; Snap Photo.

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Queen of the Colorado River Bridge, Miss Genevieve Rossler, was later known as Mrs. Clifford Wilson. She is mother-in-law to Joe Higgins of Partners (a local nonprofit).



An 1880 high-top bicycle is followed by modern bicycles (boy and girl) then all the new cars after them.(1933)



Mayor Allen Holcombe of Grand Junction is seen giving the key to the city (Grand Junction) to Walter V. Champlin; next to the mayor is Genevieve Rossler, Queen of the Bridge; also seen is the National Guard Unit from Fruita, and the Naval Honor Guard off to the right.



Cars crossing the new bridge from Orchard Mesa; note all the people on the hill and across the river.