

THE BRIDGE ON WILLOW SPRINGS ROAD

The picturesque wrought iron bridge on Willow Springs Road is well known to most of the Wilhelm Pagel branch of the family. It is slated for both rehabilitation and a historical marker in the coming months.

This bridge over Cummins Creek was erected in 1885, as one of the first iron truss bridges in Fayette county. Its site off the major thoroughfare between Industry and Fayetteville gives it a complicated history. However, that location, chosen by a bridge engineer so many years ago, is probably the reason it has survived as one of only two through truss bridges still in use in rural Fayette County.

James Miles, his wife, Sarah, and their four children arrived in Texas in 1830 and were granted a league of land lying on the east bank of Cummins Creek on March 23, 1831. Under present county boundaries, the James Miles League lies mostly within the eastern boundary of Fayette County, but overlaps somewhat into Colorado and Austin Counties. Before his death in April 1834, Miles arranged to sell the upper quarter of his property to David Breeding.

Breeding and his family became prominent in the area, which was known for a time as Breeding's settlement. In 1847, the town of Fayetteville was platted about five miles west of Cummins Creek, causing the public road between Industry and Fayetteville, and then on to La Grange, to be even more well-traveled. The point where this road crossed Cummins Creek was referred to as Breeding's crossing.

In 1850 the Breedings sold Gottfried Pagel acreage that stretched to Cummins Creek along this road. In 1858, he moved on to Lavaca County. However, his son, Friedrich "Wilhelm" Pagel, and Wilhelm's wife, Magdalena, stayed behind on the Fayette County land. They were just one German family of many in the area, but in 1866 they bought more acreage about a mile to the east, again along the Fayetteville-Industry Road and established a general merchandise store which became the heart of what is now called the Willow Springs community.

In the early days, the Fayetteville-Industry Road came through Willow Springs at approximately the same location as present-day State Highway 159. However, just east of the E. C. Minssen Store, about where the small brick telephone company structure is located, the old road veered to the south. Part of that road still exists as the lower part of Darden Loop. Just past the Pagel Cemetery, the old road continued straight towards Cummins Creek, instead of turning sharply toward Highway 159 as Darden Loop does today. As late as

2023 PAGEL FAMILY REUNION

Saturday, July 8th from 1 to 5 p.m.

at the Fayette Public Library, Museum & Archives Meeting Room
855 South Jefferson Street, La Grange, TX 78945

Come join us for coffee, snacks and dessert in the library's meeting room. Our family history info will be displayed upstairs in the museum space, which is accessible by an elevator. There will be a G-rated video game upstairs for the kids, too.

The library will be closing at 1 p.m., so use the after-hours entrance to the meeting room on the southeast corner of the building. The closest parking spaces are on Vail and Franklin Streets.

Be thinking about who is able to help with next year's reunion and we may get back on track to the full catered meal, etc. to which everyone had become accustomed.

If you have questions, please email Rox Ann at roxannjohnson@me.com or call 512-925-4804. It would also be nice to hear about address and email changes, as well as recent births, deaths, and marriages.

the 1970s, the route of the old road was still evident.

In the early days, there were no bridges over creeks and rivers. Crossings were established at shallow areas where stone or gravel bottoms made the waterways fordable. There was a cut down to Breedings Crossing from the east. There Cummins Creek had a natural gravel bottom that provided a diagonal route up the creek a short way to the north before climbing back out onto the road on the west side, where the bank was lower. However, high water frequently made the old crossing impassable to early travelers.

On Saturday morning, June 28, 1884 a public meeting was convened at Fayetteville to "consider the question of bridging Cummins' creek." The group resolved to petition the Commissioners Court for a bridge with fourteen of the most influential residents named to solicit petitioners and a committee of three was appointed to receive the petitions before the first of August and present them at the next county commissioners meeting.

When the Commissioners Court next met in August, they acted on the petition by appointing County Commissioner W. W. Little, Max Meitzen, William Muenzler, Adolph Schulze and Louis Bartling to work with an engineer to select a place for building a bridge if they agreed to its necessity. Additionally, if they selected a place other than Breeding's crossing, they and the county surveyor were to lay out a new second class road from "some practicable point on the east side of Cummins creek, thence to the building site selected."

By March 1885, this committee had decided the new bridge would be a half-mile north of the main road where the steep sides of the creek made it less likely to flood than at Breeding's crossing. A new road would have to be laid out from the main road to the bridge.

The bridge contract was given to the lowest bidder, the King Iron Bridge and Manufacturing Company of Cleveland, Ohio, at the March 26, 1885 meeting of the Commissioners Court. The contract price was "\$3800, one-fourth on delivery of the material; one fourth on completion of the

bridge—and the remainder \$1900, on the first of January 1886." This was the first iron bridge in the county and a great many petitions for bridges soon followed.

On May 21, The La Grange Journal reported a route for the public road to the bridge had been laid out and shown to be necessary.

The precise route of the detour between the old Fayetteville-Industry road and the 1885 bridge has not been determined. However, damages for land and fencing were to be awarded to H. D. Shaw, Magdalena Pagel, Charles Albert, C. Quant, Friedrich Scharnberg, Otto Henniger, A. Wagner, and E. Henniger. Magdalena Pagel received the most, \$100 for one and one-half acres and 1339 varas (approximately 3,700 feet) of fencing.

According to a local history enthusiast, the portion of the current Willow Springs Road west of the creek, between the bridge and Highway 159, was rerouted there when 159 was built in the 1920s. Originally, it did not follow the creek so closely.

As contracted, Fayette County issued payment of \$950 out of the Road and Bridge Fund to the King Iron Bridge Company on August 1, 1885. The one-span Pratt through truss bridge was completed on August 6, 1885 and another check for \$950 was issued, leaving the balance to be paid in January. Additionally, the county received invoices for \$6.48, the cost of 324 feet of lumber used on the bridge.

As soon as the approaches to the

IN REMEMBRANCE

This issue of *The Pagel Family Times* is dedicated to the memory of those who have passed away since the last newsletter.

Kevin Bennett
Donna Gail Appelt Coldewey
James Wilbur Heinsohn
Jerry Allen Kersten
Perry Anderson Kersten
Frank James Pagel
Tommy Gene Pagel
Sandra Ahlgrim Zettel

bridge were finished, a picnic celebration was planned to show appreciation for the elegant and much needed structure. August 20th was the date selected and invitations were extended to the general public. Four people from La Grange attended, including P. E. Edmondson, The La Grange Journal newspaper editor, who described the event in his next issue. He first complained about the 2 hour and forty minute buggy trip to the site in the August heat. There a small crowd of men, women, and children were assembled in the shade. The Shelby brass band played, which encouraged some of the young ladies to dance on the bridge. However, the roughness of the boards caused them to give that up. The men talked, drank beer, soda water and lemonade until dinner. At that time, Mrs. W. W. Wade, widow of one of the earliest settlers in the area, provided a dinner that included fresh fish caught that morning by Max Meitzen and others. The gentlemen from La Grange left the party around four that afternoon.

Evidently, many of the local people did not want the bother of taking the detour to the bridge and continued to use the old crossing to the south. In 1915, a group headed by E. C. Albrecht of Willow Springs, once again petitioned for a bridge on the more direct route of the Fayetteville-Industry road. Albrecht had just bought his first automobile, which might have influenced the timing. Each of the petitioners pledged their labor for the project, as was the custom at the time. The project was approved and completed at a cost of \$3,450. By early December, locals flocked to admire the “beautiful and massive structure.” With a total length, including approaches, of 247.1 feet and designed with a 6-panel pinned Pratt through truss and 4-panel pinned Pratt pony truss, this new bridge at the old Breeding’s crossing was much longer than the 149-foot-long 1885 bridge on Willow Springs Road.

There are at least three photographs showing the construction of the approaches to this newer longer bridge. Ap-



parently, the adjacent landowner, Frank Coufal, warned that the bridge would be a problem because of flooding at this location and, indeed, the approaches to the new bridge washed out frequently.

It was only about nine years later, approximately 1924, that it was decided to make the La Grange to Bellville road, by way of Fayetteville and Industry, a state highway. The new highway realigned the road to cross Cummins Creek on a new bridge between the two previous iron bridges. The 1885 iron bridge, .35 mile north of the new highway, received mostly local traffic. The 1915 iron bridge south of the new highway was no longer used and was moved in 1929 to a location that is farther north on Cummins Creek, on present day Haw Creek Road where it was badly needed to replace a low water crossing. About 1996, a modern bridge was built just to the north of the Haw Creek Road bridge and the abandoned 1915 bridge slowly deteriorated until being moved a second time earlier this year to private property. Meanwhile, the concrete piers at its first location to the south of Highway 159 are said to still be in place.

The current Willow Springs Road did not receive its name until the early 1990s, when all of the numbered county roads were given names for 9-1-1 addressing and mapping. Before that it was County Road 272. Norman C. Krischke, a well-known Fayette County historian who lived at Schulenburg, gave many of the roads their new names. So he may be responsible for the fact that the road assigned

the name, Willow Springs Road, does not lead to Willow Springs, but rather detours around it, connecting State Highway 159 to FM 954.

A bridge inspection of the 1885 bridge on Willow Springs Road, dated May 17, 1992, listed the timber plank decking as its weakest component and recommended the bridge be closed pending rehabilitation. Sometime afterwards, the timber decking was replaced with metal grids.

A group of artists, poets, and writers belonging to Arts for Rural Texas in Fayetteville memorialized the bridge in 2014. Some of their work can be viewed online at <https://willowspringsbridge.weebly.com>. Elsewhere on the internet, you will find many modern-day photographs of this beautiful and historic bridge.

Today the 138-year-old bridge over Cummins Creek on Willow Springs Road receives little traffic, which is probably what has saved it from being replaced like most of the other iron bridges in Fayette County. The Texas Department of Transportation has assigned a structure identification number, 130760AA0398005, and states the bridge is significant as one of only eighteen remaining examples of Pratt through truss bridges originally designed as vehicular bridges in Texas and retains integrity of design, materials, workmanship, feeling, association, and setting. This landmark, one of the county’s first iron truss roadway bridges, is a memorial to by-gone days that is well loved by both its neighbors and the numerous sightseers who seek it out.

This issue of The Pagel Family Times was edited by Rox Ann Johnson, Pagel Family Reunion historian, who takes full responsibility for its content. You may contact her at (512) 925-4804 or roxannjohnson@me.com.

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Check out our Facebook page, The Pagel Family in Texas, for the latest family news, plus photos—both old and new.

www.pagelfamily.org

Our cousin, Clay Maeckel, generously provides space on his server for our family reunion web site. Thank you, Clay!