



In 1919, Lake Overholser was constructed to provide water for Oklahoma, City. The task of crossing Overholser in the early years was accomplished by ferry. The fee was 25¢ for a team of horses and a buggy. If you drove a Model "T," you coughed up 50¢.

When 1924 rolled around, the 748 long Overholser bridge connected the west and east banks of the lake. Like graceful bookends, its camelback Warren Pony Trusses accommodated one Parker-through-truss in 1924. Then three more were added, and the bridge was lengthened to straddle a widened river channel in 1925. Patterned after the hollow bones of dinosaurs and birds, the Warren trusses draw strength from internal triangles.

Longtime Bethany, Oklahoma resident Charles

## The Lake Overholser Bridge

*This historic structure once had more names than spans*

McFarland recalls when the bridge was new. "I was five years old in 1924, and I remember going with my dad down to the bridge. We met the fellow in charge of construction."

Eventually, McFarland left the family acreage near Lake Overholser to join the army. He served under General Douglas MacArthur. "I went in as a recruit and came out a captain," said Charles. "When you're young, everything is an adventure. You're not really thinking you're fighting for

freedom or anything. You're just fighting to get home again."

About the time Captain McFarland returned to Oklahoma, fellow Bethany resident Tom Hoskison, was bidding the state, and the bridge, farewell. "After World War II, our family moved to California twice," he recalls. "My father labored hard as a migrant worker. There was crop rotation, so he would bale hay at night and gather fruit during the day."

"I did not care much for

living in California, so when we came back to Oklahoma I was hoping it would be for good. When we crossed that bridge, it seemed like we were home."

By then, the bridge had accumulated more names than spans. Once known as the Thirty-Ninth Street Bridge, it was part of the Postal Highway and the State Highway 3 system before it became a piece of historic Route 66. Designation as a portion of the Will Rogers Memorial Highway followed.

In 2004, the river crossing, then known as Lake Overholser Bridge, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. According to the National Park Service, the steel structure mounted on concrete piers is noteworthy for its "high integrity of location, design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association."



Not commonly known though, is how close it came to being the bridge to oblivion.

According to an article in *The Oklahoman*, "there has been serious fear in the minds of road backers that the west end of the big bridge might be left projecting out into thin air." Thankfully, city and state officials came to an agreement and an approach was built at the west end of the bridge.

All manner of two and four wheel vehicles journeyed across the span during the last seventy-five years of the 20th century.

"As a kid, I was always in a hurry to ride my bike across there because there was a lot of traffic but only two lanes," recalls Tommy Street of Bethany. "I paid a quarter to take a Chris Craft motorboat ride on the other side of the bridge."

However, there were no boat rides during the dust bowl. Pictures from that era show a bridge spanning cracked earth that crumbled underfoot like parchment.

After the dust storms waned and World War II ended, Jack D. Rittenhouse published *A Guide Book to Highway 66*. He mentions Lake Overholser as well as the steel bridge that crosses over the North Canadian River. In fact, so many paneled station wagons and chromed touring cars queued up to traverse the

span that the Federal Government took action. In 1958, a divided four lane bridge was built just to the north of the Overholser Bridge. Local traffic as well as those seeking a sedate pace continued to ease across the 1925 structure.

Originally built by General Construction Company from St. Louis, Missouri, the Overholser Bridge underwent an extensive renovation and was reopened in October of 2011. Cimarron Construction Company of Oklahoma City handled the restoration.

Project Manager Travis Lloyd was careful to maintain the bridge's historicity. "We used weathering steel so it will rust and have the same look as the old truss," says Mr. Lloyd. "We preserved the original truss by straightening and strengthening the visible portions. We also kept the original handrail."

"All of the steel floor beams were replaced and new deck concrete was put in," adds Lloyd. Open to two-way traffic at a posted speed limit of 15 mph, the bridge now has one more span to its credit:

It links the past and the future.



### Story by Lori Williams

#### About the author:

Twenty-five years ago Lori Williams developed an affection for Route 66 (that's when her fiancé drove her around Lake Overholser which confused college students call Lake "Hold Her Closer.") The lake is still a favorite destination for the Williams' family, whether they're tandem bike riding, pelican watching, or picking wildflowers. Williams, a freelance scribe, enjoys penning stories about Oklahoma people and places.

