

The Day Chicken Bridge Got Its Name

By Barbara Clark Pugh
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Shhh!

Hear the chickens as they flap their wings to get to a roost in the trees along Haw River? See the broken, empty chicken coops on the banks as feathers float on the rippling water? Touch the broken pieces of the old truss bridge that gave up on its promise to provide a safe passage over the river. Smell the aroma of fresh-fried chicken coming from the neighbor's house? Maybe you'll be invited to come and sit a spell and talk about the day that Chicken Bridge got its name.

One day in the early 1950s Walter Hugh Campbell's workday was probably shaping up to be pretty much like normal. Until a section of the bridge fell while he and his truck, loaded with chickens, were crossing. It could have been exciting for the chickens, for they were on a one-way trip to the processing plant; now they had a world to experience outside the chicken house.

Mr. Campbell probably found it less exciting, as he and his 1950 Studebaker truck sat precariously on the broken section of the bridge, with a piece of the metal truss pressing on his arm, which was outside the window. This was his position until his brother-in-law Harry Fox, driving a truck behind him, could wade across the river to rescue him. Mr. Fox had his own set of problems, though. To save himself, he had to stop his truck, also loaded with chickens, before he got to the edge of the broken bridge. The last truck in the four-truck chicken caravan



1950 Studebaker chicken truck sitting precariously on the broken section of what is now known as Chicken Bridge.

Photo from the collection of Charles Shorty Johnson

was driven by Winfred Buckner. The first truck, which had already crossed safely, was carrying Clyde Reid Perry and Charles Shorty Johnson. Such a group of trucks and men was a common sight in Chatham County in the early 1950s, as

practically every farm family in the county received some part of their livelihood from poultry.

It all went together: chicken-raising, chicken-catching, chicken-hauling, chicken-killing. And chicken-eating. In the late evening of that fateful day, flashlights could be seen in the woods as folks went about catching the wayward birds.

The exact date of the event leading to the name Chicken Bridge is unknown, but for a long time there was no bridge across the Haw in that place. In January 1954 the Chatham Record reported action of the county commissioners petitioning State Highway Commissioner A. H. Graham to replace Baldwin's Bridge because it was the only link between Hadley and Baldwin townships and between upper Chatham and Orange counties. According to the petition, residents had had to travel many miles to get to the other side of the river since the bridge collapsed several years ago. The petition was successful and a wooden bridge replaced the truss bridge in 1954.

The wooden bridge had an interesting life of its own. In the 1970s military bombers used it for target practice. Even though the bullets weren't real, the real noise had neighbors signing petitions. The neighbors had the final victory. Then for several years in the 1980s the bridge was the focal point of the annual Chicken Bridge Run, a benefit race sponsored by the East Chatham Rescue Squad.

But the most shining time for the little one-lane wooden bridge was at Halloween. Cassie Wasko wrote a tribute to the spirit of the bridge and the neighborhood in the November 5, 1987, *Chatham Record*:

There must have been 500 folks out at Chicken Bridge Halloween night. They ranged from costumed kids to elderly folk out to see the pumpkins lining the bridge. The sight of all those people with something constructive to do on Halloween was a real treat, not to mention the fun of seeing the creatively-carved pumpkins

The pumpkins and how they came to appear on the bridge magically just in time for Halloween has been sort of a mystery ever since it started a few years ago. But more than a mystery, it is community service available at no cost through the generosity of some community-minded, fun-loving folks. There aren't any government grants funding this project; there aren't any in-kind services. It is simply a gathering of folks who pay for the pumpkins and candles and provide the scenic attraction as a public service.

In a world where most folks think they deserve to profit in some way for everything they do, it is especially nice to see something like the pumpkin display just for fun and for the enjoyment of others.

Construction of the big new cement bridge began in November 1988. Destruction of the old one-lane wooden bridge began in November 1989.

Appreciation is extended to Charles Shorty Johnson for the picture and his stories and to Wayne Campbell and Melba Dixon, son and daughter of Mr. Walter Hugh Campbell, for sharing their memories.

Barbara Pugh has served as president of CCHA and as a member of the CCHA board. She is a life-long resident of Chatham County and has an interest in genealogy.