



The SBA's mission is to preserve the Bridge for non-vehicular traffic and create a park-like setting for the residents to enjoy, while educating people about its history.

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Sutliff Bridge History



Old Bridge ♦
Scenic View ♦
Boat Ramp ♦
Tavern ♦ Fun

The Sutliff Bridge is located in northeast Johnson County, Iowa near
5546 130th St NE
Lisbon, IA 52253

BRIDGING THE GAP

Allen Sutliff came to Johnson County in 1838, and established a ferry on the Cedar River where the bridge and the settlement that bears his name now stand. Mr. Sutliff later sold the ferry service to Jim McLellan. Jim's nickname of "Butts" helped to name the area "Buttsville," also known as McLellan's Landing. When a sand bar formed in the river in the early 1890's, it left part of the ferry on dry land. Without the ferry, residents on the east side of the river were forced to go many miles to find a crossing if they wished to reach the county seat. In December 1896, the Johnson County Board of Supervisors voted to erect an iron bridge at the crossing of McLellan's Landing.

The contract to build the bridge was awarded to J.R. Sheely and Company, of Des Moines, Iowa, for the low bid of \$12,000. The bridge was completed in April 1898. The massive iron bridge measured 827' x 16'8" with a 27' x 16' east span wood trestle approach. It was the longest of 11 known Parker truss bridges in the United States with each of the three spans measuring 220 feet long. More than a thousand people responded to a local newspaper's request for "all hands to turn out and have a good time," and gathered at the new bridge on the beautiful morning of June 3, 1898 for its dedication, opening day ceremonies and a celebratory picnic.



HEART OF THE VILLAGE

The Sutliff Store was built in 1899. A country store could count on trade from a five-mile radius, this distance allowing a farmer and his family to travel by horseback or wagon and still get back in time to do the chores. Shortly thereafter, a bed and breakfast opened in the house next door, Black Oak Grove School was located a mile east, ice harvested from the river was sold at the Store, and the village's blacksmith shop sat where the boat ramp is currently located. A park area was formed across the street from the Store for people to mingle. Picnics were held, horseshoe courts were available, movies were flashed on an outdoor screen, and a pavilion was built with a wooden dance floor and a bandstand. A variety of merchandise was stocked into the 1980's ranging from hog rings to cheese, pickles to hardware, and ice cream to boots.

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE SUTLIFF BRIDGE AUTHORITY (SBA)

In 1979, a state report determined that the bridge was a “dangerous old bridge which is being used by loads in excess of the posting and could collapse if not replaced.” In 1981, the State Historical Preservation Office of Iowa was notified that the bridge would be eligible for inclusion in the National Register. In 1983, the Cilek Bridge was built and replaced the “old Sutliff Bridge” for all vehicular traffic. A movement began to save the 85-year-old landmark from demolition as the Sutliff residents once again rallied around their beloved bridge. In 1984 the non-profit Sutliff Bridge Authority (SBA) was formed. The SBA signed a 50-year lease agreement with the County for \$1. They would be responsible for the Bridge’s maintenance to preserve it as a historic site.

During the next nearly 25 years, it was used as a pedestrian bridge and provided visitors a unique observation point to view the fast-flowing Cedar River. With picnic tables fitted on the bridge deck, a person could rest and reflect. It retained an exceptionally high degree of both historical and structural integrity and was an outstanding example of an uncommon early wagon truss design. It became one of the longest surviving triple-span Parker Truss Bridges in the state. On September 11, 1999, the County placed the 102-year-



old structure on the National Register of Historic Places with a dedication ceremony. Ray Brannaman was quoted as saying “Our hope is that it’s never torn down.”

SBA FUNDRAISING

After saving the bridge from demolition, the SBA began actively fundraising for the maintenance, preservation, and upkeep of the bridge. Events included an annual Labor Day parade and street dance, a 5k road race, the winter Golf Classic (avid or not, golfers unload their clubs into the snow for fun and games along the icy riverbank). For nearly 25 years, the SBA continued in this fashion to preserve the mighty structure.

Today, the SBA continues multiple fundraising events and donates to the Community Foundation of Johnson County, which currently has two funds established for the Sutliff Bridge—an Endowment Fund and a Charitable Giving Fund with the purpose of setting

aside funds for future bridge maintenance or to make improvements to the location as a public destination. The Endowment Fund utilizes the Endow Iowa tax credit adopted in 2003 by Iowa Legislature.

THE FLOOD OF 2008

The river normally flows 15 to 20 feet below the bridge, but in June of 2008, heavy rains produced what meteorologists called the “500-year flood.”

June 11, 2008—The river was out of its banks and began to threaten the cabins, but remained several feet from the road. Expected to crest at 22 feet, the river would have to crest at 25 feet to get to the road.

Unfortunately, the river crested at over 30 feet, well over the forecasts. On Friday, June 13, 2008—at 12:23 pm, the raging river took out the eastern span of the bridge, disconnecting it from the middle span. Between 12 and 18 inches of water continued to flow over the two remaining spans, as the eastern span was carried away and finally sank just 100 yards away.



June 2008 – September 2012—The SBA worked tirelessly with the Johnson County Board of Supervisors, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Iowa Office of Homeland Security, the State Historical Society of Iowa, and county and structural engineers to find funding sources to rebuild this piece of history for the community.

The County voted 3-2 in favor of restoring the bridge to its historic stature. VJ Engineering developed the design and specifications for the bridge, replicating the style of the original span as closely as possible, using modern technology. Iowa Bridge and Culvert was awarded the contract for the rebuild of the bridge at a bid of nearly \$1.6 million. Equipment was moved onto the job site in January 2012, with a completion date of October 2012.