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RED RIVER BRIDGE WAR

by Jerry B. Lincecum



On Thursday, December 6, 1995, the old three-truss bridge spanning the Red River north of Denison was destroyed with 750 pounds of dynamite strategically placed by the Texas Department of Transportation. The blasting of this structure, which in 1931 became the most famous public free bridge across Red River between Texas and Oklahoma, marked the end of an era. However, few people know about the heated controversy it provoked six decades earlier.

This bridge was involved in a war—the Red River Bridge War of 1931. The magnificent new bridge was completed in April of 1931, through the joint efforts of Texas and Oklahoma, after their offer to purchase the Colbert Toll Bridge and two others was rejected by the toll bridge company. But its use was blocked by an injunction obtained by the Red River Bridge Company in Federal Court in Houston. Soon the controversy led to a confrontation involving the governors of both states.

First some background history. Colbert's Crossing had its beginnings at least as early as 1853, when B. F. Colbert obtained from the Chickasaw Indian Tribe a charter for a ferry across Red River. With language typical of Indian treaties, the charter was to last "as long as grass grows and water flows." The toll was \$1.00 for a two-horse wagon, \$1.25 for a four-horse wagon, \$1.50 for a six-horse wagon, 25 cents for a man and horse, and 10 cents a head for loose cattle or horses. Immigration was heavy through 1871 and 1872, and the number of wagons crossing each day varied from twenty-five to two hundred. The boat ran on a cable across the river and could make a round-trip in twenty-five to forty minutes.

In 1872, the first Missouri-Kansas-Texas (Katy) train crossed the new railroad bridge across the Red River into Texas, and on September 23 of that year the city of Denison was established. Colbert soon built a wooden bridge across the river, but it was washed

away in 1876. Then the Red River Bridge Company was established, with most of the stockholders being Denison residents. They claimed that in 1875 a franchise had been given to Colbert by the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations for perpetual use to operate a ferry, and that they had purchased this franchise, which extended two-and-one-half miles on either side of the bridge they constructed. Their bridge served until the historic flood of 1908, which also destroyed the MKT railroad bridge located farther west. The replacement bridge built by the Bridge Company became highly profitable as auto traffic increased in the 1920s and '30s. The toll had risen to 75 cents for one-way or \$1.00 for a round-trip.

As auto traffic increased, highway commissions of both Texas and Oklahoma decided it was time to free their citizens from the burden of paying tolls by buying up all the toll bridges between the two states. However, stockholders of three of the bridge companies refused to sell. The two highway commissions then agreed to build free bridges at the location of these toll bridges and thus force them out of business. In 1927, Senator Jake J. Loy of Grayson County shepherded through the Texas legislature a "free bridge" bill that empowered the State Highway Department to make some settlement with the bridge owners. This bill passed in the record time of twelve minutes, and it greatly advanced the career of Loy, who went on to serve several terms as Grayson County Judge.

Bowing to the inevitable, the toll bridge company finally agreed to sell for payments totaling more than \$200,000. There was to be an initial payment of \$60,000 and fourteen monthly payments of \$10,000 each. The new bridge was authorized under a contract for just under \$240,000, and construction began May 14, 1930. This triple span was to become the crowning feature of Grayson County's first new concrete highway, voted in as part of a bond issue in 1929, before the Great Depression hit. However, as the new free bridge was nearing completion in April of 1931, the owners of the toll bridge company had not been paid as promised. On July 10, 1931, before the new bridge opened, their lawyer obtained a temporary injunction in the U.S. District Court in

Houston, prohibiting use of the bridge on the grounds that the Texas Highway Department had not fulfilled the settlement agreement. In obedience to the injunction, Texas Governor Ross Sterling ordered barricades erected at the Texas end of the bridge. Signs at both ends of the bridge warned that the bridge was closed by court order.

Then entered Oklahoma Governor William H. Murray, known as “Alfalfa Bill.” Born in Grayson County, Texas, in a small community named “Toadsuck” on the outskirts of present-day Collinsville, Murray had run away from home at age twelve. He did farm labor, chopped wood, punched cattle, sold books, taught school, and practiced law. Having settled in the Indian Territory, he got into politics, helped write the Oklahoma Constitution, became Speaker of the Oklahoma House of Representatives, served a term in the U.S. Congress, and served as governor of Oklahoma from 1931–35. To say he was colorful would be an understatement. He smoked long cigars and loved a good fight. He escalated this little dispute into a war.

On July 16, 1931, Governor Murray ordered an Oklahoma Highway Department crew to plow up the approaches to the Colbert Toll Bridge on the Oklahoma side of Red River, making it impassable, and then had the crew remove the barricades from both ends of the new bridge. Alfalfa Bill opened the free bridge by executive order, asserting that Oklahoma’s half of the bridge ran lengthwise, north and south across the river; moreover, he claimed that the state of Oklahoma owned both banks of the Red River under the Louisiana Purchase Treaty of 1803, and contended that since the injunction issued by the U.S. District Court in Texas failed to name Oklahoma, he wasn’t bound by its terms. He then invited the public to cross the bridge, and the response was enthusiastic to say the least. *Denison Herald* reporters counted 493 vehicles crossing in a forty-five-minute period, and estimates were that during a twelve-hour period, more than 3,000 vehicles crossed and recrossed the bridge. The exhilaration at finally being able to cross the Big Red without paying a toll bordered on hysteria.

Former Grayson County Judge Jim Dickson, who was county auditor in 1931, recalled that he was in a lodge meeting in Sherman when someone came in and excitedly broke the news that “The Bridge” had been opened for traffic. Judge Dickson said he and the others were caught up in the excitement. They quickly adjourned the meeting, put on their hats, jumped into cars and drove rapidly up to Red River, where they were among the very first to cross the free span. He emphasized the charge of excitement they experienced as a result of the opening of the bridge. But the celebration was premature.

Texas Governor Sterling, viewing “Alfalfa Bill” Murray’s actions as defiance of the federal court order and an insult to Texas, immediately sent a detachment of Texas Rangers to re-erect barricades at the bridge and keep it closed until further ordered. In charge was Ranger Captain Tom Hickman, whose many publicized encounters with bank robbers gave him an international reputation. Meanwhile, the bridge company lawyers went to a federal district court in Muskogee, Oklahoma, and on July 24 a federal judge enjoined Governor Murray from blocking the northern approaches to the toll bridge. However, Governor Murray was not to be outdone. Acting a few hours before the injunction was issued, he declared martial law in a narrow strip of territory along the northern approaches to the toll and free bridges. He argued that this action placed him, as commander of the Oklahoma National Guard, above the federal court’s jurisdiction. He ordered five companies of Oklahoma National Guardsmen to the north end of the bridge, stating that the bridges were to be defended “against all authority except the President of the United States.” He dared the courts to take any action against his blockade of the highway leading to the toll bridge. The Oklahoma Guardsmen included a machine gun platoon and brought along a howitzer. They pitched camp on the north ends of both the free bridge and the Colbert Toll Bridge, with the howitzer and machine guns strategically placed. By now the *Dallas Morning News* coverage of these events included daily front-page stories and pictures.

In response, the Texas Rangers were reinforced by two additional Rangers and four Grayson County Sheriff's deputies. The Rangers' only armaments consisted of their .45 Colt revolvers. The *Dallas News* reported that some Texans, in an excessive display of state pride (or perhaps levity), claimed the odds favored the Texas Rangers. Armed with an antique revolver, Governor (or "General") Murray visited the "battlefield" and set up a tent on the banks of the Big Red, from which he inspected the troops and continued to govern the State of Oklahoma. Now each side was dug in, ready for battle. The situation was tense. A miscue could lead to a violent confrontation.

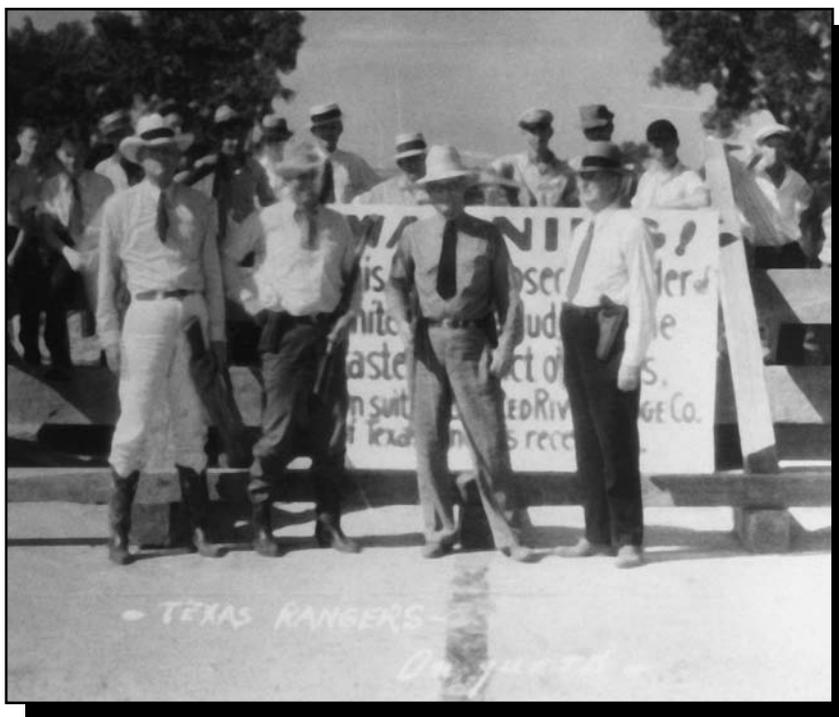
Having the toll bridge shut down as well as the free bridge was a major inconvenience, and local residents found a detour. Soon informants advised Murray that traffic was being routed across a toll bridge owned by the Kansas Oklahoma & Gulf Railroad, five or six miles downstream, at a location called Carpenter's Bluff, east of Denison. Determined to keep the pressure on and force a settlement, Murray ordered his troops to plow up the approaches of that bridge also.

In summary, the objective of the Rangers was to keep traffic on U.S. 75 from crossing the new bridge. Their Oklahoma counterparts kept traffic from entering the Sooner State on a toll bridge owned by a Texas company. The net result was that on the heavily traveled highway that ran from Galveston in the south all the way to Winnipeg, Canada, in the north, traffic ground to a halt.

Local citizens in particular were upset. The closure of the bridges, the shutdown of traffic, and the potential danger galvanized people in the affected area. Public meetings were held in Sherman and Denison on July 20 and 21. Resolutions demanding the opening of the free bridge were passed and sent to state officials. On July 23, 1931, an editorial cartoon drawn by the well known artist John Knott appeared in the *Dallas Morning News* with the headline, "Situation Tense on the Red River Front." At this point the *News* reported that "Alfalfa Bill" suggested a novel solution. He said the women of Texas and Oklahoma could solve the

impasse and get the bridge open if they would meet there for some quilting and gossip. Undoubtedly, this was intended to send a message that he was open to a peaceful solution. However, Texas Governor Sterling was not receptive, calling the proposal “tomfoolery.”

At this time the Adjutant General of Texas was William W. Sterling (no relation to Governor Ross Sterling). He accompanied the Texas Rangers to the south end of the free bridge and oversaw the erection of a stronger barricade than the one which had been destroyed by Governor Murray’s men. Displaying a sense of humor as well as downplaying the seriousness of the “bridge war,” Adjutant General Sterling sent a message to Murray, which can be paraphrased as follows: “If you are sending a brigade of Oklahoma National Guardsmen to the free bridge, I will have the four Texas Rangers remain on duty there; if you send only a regiment, I will allow two of the Rangers to return to Austin.” He then returned to Austin and directed operations from there.



The Texas Rangers arrive

The only shooting that occurred resulted from the Texas Rangers amusing themselves with target practice. They used their Colt .45s to split playing cards and strike matches at twenty paces. The only casualty of the war came when an Oklahoma guardsman fell and ran his bayonet through his leg. This led to a short truce, as Rangers helped carry him over the bridge to the Texas side and then rushed him four miles to the nearest hospital in Denison.

On July 23, 1931, the Texas legislature, meeting in a special session, passed a bill which granted the Red River Bridge Company the right to sue the state in order to recover the sum claimed in the injunction. Governor Sterling immediately signed the bill into law. The bridge company then joined the state in asking the court to dissolve the injunction. Finally on July 25, Judge Kennery made an armistice possible. He dissolved the injunction and permitted Texas to remove the barricades. One of the first cars across the free bridge this time was the black limousine carrying the triumphant governor of Oklahoma.

With the barricades down, the Texas Rangers went home. However, on July 27, Governor Murray announced that he had learned of a plot to close the free bridge permanently, and he extended the martial law zone to the Oklahoma boundary marker on the south bank or Texas side of the Red River. Oklahoma Guardsmen were stationed at both ends of the free bridge, and Texas newspapers spoke of an invasion. The Oklahoma Guard refused to leave because Judge Kennery had not decided whether to make the dissolution of the injunction permanent. On August 6, he did make it permanent, and the guardsmen returned home. The war was over, and the Red River Bridge was assumed to be forever free of tolls. That is, unless the legislature sees fit to extend the current pattern of rapidly expanding toll roads to include another bridge over the Big Red.

The delayed opening celebration for the free bridge took place on Labor Day, September 7, 1931, but there was little enthusiasm. Local newspapers described it as a day of “good fellowship and feeling.” Miss Jeanne Murray, daughter of the governor, broke a bottle of Red River water on the bridge, saying “I dedicate this

bridge in the name of the governor of Oklahoma.” But the governor of Oklahoma was not there; neither was the governor of Texas, nor even Senator Jake Loy, who started it all with his Free Bridge Bill back in 1927.

The legal war dragged on in the courts, as the toll bridge owners sought payment for their losses. Eventually they negotiated a new contract with Texas for \$165,000, but that one was later repudiated. They also won a judgment against the state of Oklahoma in the amount of \$168,000, but that was reversed by a federal appeals court. Finally, in 1938, peace was assured when Texas handed over \$50,000 for full title to the toll bridge. Oklahoma also agreed to a settlement but never paid off.

The “bridge war” was brought back into public attention in the late 1930s when *Life* magazine reported (Nov. 21, 1938, page 11) that Hitler was using the incident for propaganda purposes. Photos of the armed Texas Rangers at the barricades were published in German newspapers with commentary suggesting that there was “continuous civil war” in the U.S.A. Nazi propagandists presented the bridge controversy as a dispute between the governors of Texas and Oklahoma, as evidence that the U.S. was not a nation but “a chaos of little states with different laws.” Actually, as this paper shows, the dispute was between the owners of the toll bridge and just about everybody else.

In the mid-1950s, a new bridge was built near the 1930s span. U.S. 75 traffic was divided, with northbound using the new bridge and southbound on the old one. In 1960 the old toll bridge was closed to traffic because of its poor condition. Later the bridge burned when a natural gas line underneath it caught fire. The north truss of this bridge fell into the river during the fire. By the time the old three-truss bridge that sparked the controversy was destroyed in 1995, hardly anyone in Grayson County remembered the “Red River Bridge War” of 1931.

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Wagon Train on break, but ready to go