



The Bridges of the Niobrara

Fifteen bridges span the Niobrara National Scenic River in north-central Nebraska. Of these, five are on the National Register of Historic Places. Two other spans, the Bryan Bridge and the Cowboy Trail Bridge lying just upstream of the western boundary of the scenic river, are also included in this narrative.

Bryan Bridge



Photo: Federal Highway Administration

Completed in 1932 and named after then Nebraska Governor Charles W. Bryan, this bridge is a 289 foot, 3-span arched cantilever truss held together by one central pin. Though more expensive than other designs (\$55,564 cost), early engineers felt such a picturesque bridge would complement the natural beauty of the river valley. Designed by Josef Sorkin, a Russian immigrant who

graduated from the University of Nebraska's College of Engineering in 1929, this bridge won the American Institute of Steel Construction Annual Award of Merit for a Class C bridge in 1932. Today it sees light local use, as most highway traffic uses a newer highway crossing just downstream. Bryan Bridge was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1988.

Chicago & Northwestern/ Cowboy Trail Bridge



Just downstream is the **Cowboy Trail Bridge** (1910), a high span that once bore trains of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad. An original grade at the so-called "Big Cut" in the river valley was too steep, and the railroad built a higher bridge and eliminated the need for a second engine to pull cars uphill to Valentine. Hikers, bicyclists and equestrians use this trail today.

Borman Bridge



The Borman Bridge is located 2.3 miles south of Valentine, past the town cemetery. Borman Bridge marks the western boundary of the national scenic river. Built after an ice jam swept away 14 bridges in February 1916, Borman is a 131 feet long pin-connected Pratt through truss. A plaque fastened on top of the bridge's end reads, "1916, The Canton Bridge Co. Builders, Canton, Ohio". Borman along with Allen (Bell),

Berry, Brewer and Carns bridges were added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1992. On a nice summer weekend local residents enjoy swimming beneath its wooden planks, while the swift waters of the Niobrara slip softly beneath the span, carrying silt and sand bound for the Gulf of Mexico. A beautiful half-mile walk from the state wildlife management area trailhead to the river bank beckons hikers just south of the bridge.

Cornell Bridge Buffalo Bridge

Two more bridges are passed downstream of Borman Bridge. The first, **Cornell Bridge**, was named after a prominent pioneer of Valentine, Charles H. Cornell, who founded First National Bank. He built a dam nearby in 1915 that provided electricity for Valentine and also bears his name. About two miles

downstream of Cornell Bridge is **Buffalo Bridge** that still sees bison drives in the spring and fall when personnel from the Fort Niobrara Refuge move the herd back and forth between wilderness pastures on the north bank and grassland prairies on the south side.

Berry (State Aid) Bridge



Likely named after Susan J. Berry, a widowed homesteader who settled nearby in 1883 with eight children, Berry Bridge (1899) was one of only four bridges intact after the previously mentioned 1916 ice-jam flood. This bridge was moved downstream to its present site at the Middle Niobrara Natural Resource District's Brewer Bridge Landing.

The rusted bases of two of the previous bridge's supports can still be seen on the river's edge just upstream of the present bridge. The current 150 foot long bridge completed in June 1921 was built by the Pioneer Construction Company of Omaha. It still carries considerable river-bound traffic in the summer months.

Allen Bridge



Located 4 ½ miles south of Sparks, Nebraska, this bridge was restored in 2003. An 8-panel, pinned Pratt through truss, Allen was built in 1903 by the Canton Bridge Company. The river ford was once called Bell Crossing. At 188 feet it is the longest single-span bridge on

the river. The total construction cost was \$5000. From the bridge one sees a beautiful 20 foot waterfall plunging directly into the river on the south bank. Smith Falls State Park is located just down river.

Verdigre (Smith Falls) Bridge



This attractive bridge was moved from its original site at Verdigre, Nebraska to Smith Falls State Park in 1996. Originally built in 1910, it spanned the mouth of Verdigre Creek for seven years, and was disassembled and moved to

Verdigre in 1922, serving traffic needs along Highway 14 until 1993. The bridge is 160 feet long, has nine panels and is pin-connected. It was narrowed to 10 feet wide for foot traffic at the state park.

Brewer Bridge



Brewer is the oldest of Cherry County's bridges (1898) still in use. It was originally located at Berry Falls and moved to its present site in 1921. The previous bridge was destroyed by the 1916

flood. The Wrought Iron Bridge Company of Canton, Ohio built the bridge for \$4,580. It is a 152 foot long, 8-panel Pratt through truss pin-connected bridge.

County-Line Bridge



County-Line Bridge is privately-owned and no longer carries vehicle traffic. Some local historians feel that the old "rocky ford" was

actually nearer to this vicinity rather than at the Bruce Mill Site at present-day Rocky Ford.

Norden Bridge



Norden Chute

The present Norden Bridge replaced the old span destroyed by a spring flood in May 1964. Its concrete supports can still be seen just downstream. Of interest is the Norden Chute and falls. In 1960 the falls were located at the east end of the chute; forty years later they have migrated to the far west end. It is not recommended that

boaters attempt to canoe the falls. The water is reputed to be over 20 feet deep in the chute and is fast and turbulent, with large boulders and unseen objects beneath the surface. On summer weekends local anglers often try their luck here for channel catfish.

Meadville Bridge



Meadville Bridge crosses the Niobrara River about 14.5 miles north of Ainsworth, Nebraska. Just before reaching the river from the south, an arched-opening in a cliff face provides a scenic vista of the rural valley below. Plum Creek

flows into the Niobrara just upstream of the bridge. The village of Meadville is located on the north bank and has a campground and river access for boaters.

**Hwy 183, Hwy 7
Bridges**

Today, modern concrete and steel bridges provide important river crossings for highways 183 and 7. There is decent boat access to the

river on the north bank, downstream side of the Hwy 7 Bridge.

McLain Bridge

This is an abandoned bridge between Highways 183 and 7 about three miles

upstream of Long Pine Creek.

Carns Bridge



Persistent winter ice finally wrecked the original wooden bridge at Carns in 1910. In the following year Brown and Keya Paha counties received financial aid to replace it with a 6-span concrete bridge (each 54 feet long) in 1913. By 1962 the river had widened and washed out one of the

bridge's spans and a long portion of the county road. Two salvaged trusses were added to complete repairs. Although the original integrity of the bridge was altered, it is still the oldest state aid bridge in Nebraska.

Hwy 137

The eastern boundary of the national scenic river is marked by this modern highway bridge. Boating/fishing

access is located on the north bank on the upstream side.
