

When Christmas Came to Thorn Creek Bridge

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It has taken me some time to reconstruct this story. Fragments have come together slowly from diverse sources—crumbling newspapers, church records, a shoebox full of yellowing letters, and a few odd diaries. I have followed every thread to its end and done my best to reweave this tapestry, a story unraveled by time itself. It began with a photograph—a brittle, sepia-toned photograph discovered while doing some research in the basement archives of the Thorn Creek courthouse. The photo was remarkable enough, but it was the simple inscription written on the back which teased my curiosity. In elegant cursive lettering, was written this cryptic note: “When Christmas Came to Thorn Creek Bridge.”

This is the story behind that photograph...

Construction on the Thorn Creek Bridge began during a gray and dismal week in late autumn. The weather was befitting since the bridge had been planned under a dark cloud of disagreement and suspicion. The prevailing mood around Thorn Creek was as gloomy as the sky itself and nobody quite knew how to fix it. What started as a simple splinter of opinion quickly festered into an ugly wound of division. The villagers of Thorn Creek really had no choice about replacing the existing, crumbling bridge which spanned the creek and connected the village. Everyone was in unanimous agreement that a new covered bridge was needed. Sadly, this was the only point on which everyone could agree.

This division crept in when the sturdy people from both sides of the creek exchanged ideas about how many lanes the new covered bridge should have. Some were for keeping a single-lane bridge for the sake of economy. The rest were for a wider, double-lane bridge for the sake of convenience. One half declared that two lanes were an expensive extravagance which was quite unnecessary, given the size of the village. They insisted that a single-lane bridge had adequately served their small, tucked-away village quite nicely. The other half thanked them for pointing out that a single-lane bridge had obviously hindered the growth of their community. This shifted the discussion to the question of “what was so wrong with the size of the community?” The debate raged on until one of the local preachers wearily proclaimed from his pulpit on a Sunday morning that even Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” paled in comparison to the thorny problem of Thorn Creek Bridge. Strange, that a structure meant to connect people should serve to drive a solid wedge of separation between them instead.

Finally, a truce was forcibly called by the rapidly changing autumn weather which resulted in a reluctant and unhappy compromise: A two-lane covered bridge would be built, but it would be considerably simplified from the originally proposed design. Neither side was very happy over the decision and few made any effort to hide their feelings. Someone even took the liberty of changing the bridge plans by adding a long, rail-fence divider right down the middle of the bridge. It was supposedly aimed at

separating the two lanes for safety sake, but everybody knew that the divider was really meant to say much more.

Thus began many years of bitter resentment which set itself into the bones of the people who continued to pass each other inside the bridge without so much as a smile, wave or nod. For years, the sad beginning of Thorn Creek Bridge stayed fresh in the minds of the local population. Eventually, it was rarely spoken of anymore. Even children who had been too young to remember the incident grew up with only a vague awareness that the abundance of local hard feelings was somehow mysteriously connected to “that bridge.” While travelers often stopped near the bridge to admire and comment on its beautiful simplicity, the local villagers had long since run out of things to say about it. After all, everything that could be said had been said—and many times over.

And then, whether by accident or Providence, something happened inside that covered bridge which changed nearly every person in that small village forever.

It began on a cloudy day in mid-December when Hezekiah Hoover, a local farmer, had just purchased a wagonload of used farm items and was hauling them across Thorn Creek Bridge. Between the noise of the creek and the rumble of his stout wagon, Hezekiah never heard the muffled thud behind his rig. Unknown to Hezekiah, a wooden hay-box had tumbled off his load and landed right in the middle of Thorn Creek Bridge. A short time later, while unloading his cargo into a shed, he realized that the hay-box was missing and headed back down the road, hoping to find it along the way. And this he did. As Hezekiah approached Thorn Creek, he saw the silhouette of his box sitting on its four stubby legs in the middle of the covered bridge. At that moment there was a sudden breaking in the clouds which caused brilliant light to wash across the bridge. It spilled through a window and poured over the hay-box, bathing it in a warm pool of light. He squinted and saw something else—the box had been empty when he loaded it only an hour before. Now, it brimmed with clean, dry hay, and a pure white cloth was draped across the top.

Hezekiah experienced a strange sensation—something he had never felt while crossing the bridge. It was an odd sensation of peace mixed with guilt. He had been one of the loudest supporters of the “two-lane” group and now his hay-box was blocking one of those lanes. It would have to be moved. And yet, he could not bring himself to disturb it. Then quietly, as if carried to his mind on an early winter breeze, came these words: “And they wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger.”

A restrained smile softened Hezekiah’s lined face and he climbed down from his wagon with an idea. Reaching into the back, he grabbed several items that had not yet been unloaded and walked up to the manger. He would not move it. In fact, he would continue what some unknown person had already begun. Carefully, he draped a saddle blanket over a beam behind the manger. Next to that he added a wooden pitchfork and bucket. As Hezekiah climbed into his wagon and turned for home, the first delicate snowflakes of the year began to fall gently around him. For the first time since the bridge was built, he actually thought it looked beautiful.

About an hour later, widow Ruth Perrington approached the bridge in her black carriage. Being a widow, Ruth had learned how to “make do” and naturally fell in line with the “single-lane” group. She stopped at the entrance of the bridge and, with a fierce

look on her face, saw something blocking her lane. She paused for nearly a minute brooding over what to do and then did what no one else dared to do. She was not about to clear the rubbish from her rightful lane so she pulled crisply into the opposite, oncoming lane and entered the covered bridge. As Ruth rattled up opposite the manger, she stopped and studied it with a look of startled recognition. Overcome with an odd feeling of peace tinged with shame, she impulsively stepped from her carriage to take a closer look. Mrs. Ruth Parrington had very little of this world's goods to her name. But among those few items was a length of old, thick rope which her late husband had kept stowed under the seat of the carriage. Without a second thought she fished around for the coil of rope and carefully climbed through the rail-fence divider. She draped the rope over one of the tines on the pitchfork behind the manger and, with that simple act, felt freer than she had in many years. The bondage of her bitterness dropped away simply, much as the rope she just laid aside. Ruth began to think that, perhaps, a two-lane bridge may not have been such a bad idea after all.

It was about this time that Jacob and Gertie Scott pulled up to Thorn Creek Bridge in their rig. They wanted to cross but found widow Perrington blocking their lane. Jacob and his wife had made some very vigorous noise in favor of the two-lane idea. They had even made some memorable visits to promote their views. At least Ruth still remembered them. Previously, Ruth and Gertie had often taken tea together—a practice which stopped abruptly the day the new bridge was started. Even now, as Ruth seated herself in her carriage, she could feel a cold chill blow through the bridge from Gertie's direction. But her own heart had already begun to thaw and by the time she pulled out of the bridge and into the falling snow she was smiling warmly. Then for the second time in one day, Ruth did something she thought she would never dare do. She spoke to Gertie Scott.

“Good thing the bridge was built with two lanes,” Ruth chirped. “The other lane seems to be blocked.”

It wasn't much, but the implication could have filled a book. And then, Ruth nodded “good day” and continued slowly down the lane as the Scotts entered the covered bridge in stunned silence. Ruth waited until she thought it was safe and then looked back. The Scotts had stopped in the middle of the bridge. But more than that, they had climbed through the rail-fence divider and were placing some object near the manger. Ruth's vision blurred a bit as she turned and hastened toward home.

So began the gradual awakening of the village on both sides of Thorn Creek Bridge. In such a small community, word spread with predictable speed and soon everybody was making excuses to cross the bridge whether they really had any place to go or not. And over the next two weeks a remarkable thing happened. The east-bound lane of Thorn Creek Bridge was transformed as the trappings of a Bethlehem stable began to accumulate around the manger.

Someone gilded the floor with golden straw while others brought the common items of a barn—a wooden shovel, several rough burlap bags, leather horse tack and a shepherd's staff. There was a rough wooden crate upon which others had placed a clay water pot, a worn child's drum, and a few carpenter's tools. In the window sill sat a container of fragrant perfume right next to a wooden mallet which rested upon several long, wrought-iron nails. Next to this was a crude crown of thorns, crafted from one of the thorn trees growing near the bridge. And there was more—much more.

Some objects had private meanings which only a few people were meant to understand while others were meant for everybody. Perhaps the most poignant were two sets of bridge plans—one for a single-lane bridge and one for a much fancier double-lane bridge. Both were unrolled and tacked side-by-side on the wall, and both had the words “I am sorry” written across them.

All of this would really have been enough for anybody, but another miracle was yet to unfold. With utter spontaneity, on Christmas Eve, the village gathered itself inside the bridge as if it were observing some well-established tradition. No announcements had been made, no invitations sent—no organized effort of any kind had occurred. They simply assembled. They talked. Some laughed together. Others cried. There were handshakes and hugs and healing. There was a private invitation to tea and a glad acceptance. And there were dozens of other, similar redemptive acts. In fact, the man who supposedly thought up the rail-fence divider brought a saw, and together they cut it down. They cheered and they laughed and when someone began to sing Silent Night, they all sang together with one voice. Even the creek beneath them was frozen into hushed silence as if the miracle happening overhead had left it speechless.

That Nativity didn’t need any painted, wooden, cut-out figures: the villagers became the cast. And, truly, the most important Figure of all had stepped among them.

Some skeptics said that the folk just needed an excuse to break ranks and set things right—that a bridge-blocking manger did the trick. It wasn’t the manger, of course. No manger ever claimed that sort of power. The humble cradle of long ago simply held the Truth, which is the only thing that will ever *really* set any of us free. Perhaps the manger on the bridge was meant as a special echo of that Truth, designed just for the folk who needed it the most.

Happily, each year thereafter in early December, the Nativity was faithfully reassembled in the east-bound lane of Thorn Creek Bridge and remained there until well past Christmas. It was often said that a warmer Christmas tradition had never been established. And truthfully, whenever the bridge was blocked by someone pausing inside to remember the Christ child, all others waited patiently outside. For none of them ever forgot—it was because of His humble birth that two lanes became one and a sturdy fence of division...came down.