

# Crossing the Kootenai

The Bonners Ferry riverfront today is quiet compared to the bustling center of activity it was during the 1860s gold rush. Picture prospectors and pack trains, traders and supplies, all gathered here waiting to be ferried across the river to continue their journey to the Wild Horse claims in British Columbia. This crucial river crossing became the community of Bonners Ferry.

By 1905, a wagon bridge spanned the river and the first train crossed the Spokane International Railroad bridge in 1906. The Wild Horse Trail became a wagon road and eventually Highway 95.



Edward L. Bonner and two other Walla Walla men traveling the Wild Horse Trail in 1864 knew a good business opportunity when they saw it. They negotiated an agreement with Kootenai Chief Abraham and were granted the right to operate a ferry by the Idaho Territorial Legislature. Toll rates were \$1.50 for loaded pack animals, 50 cents for a person on foot, and 20 cents each for sheep and hogs.



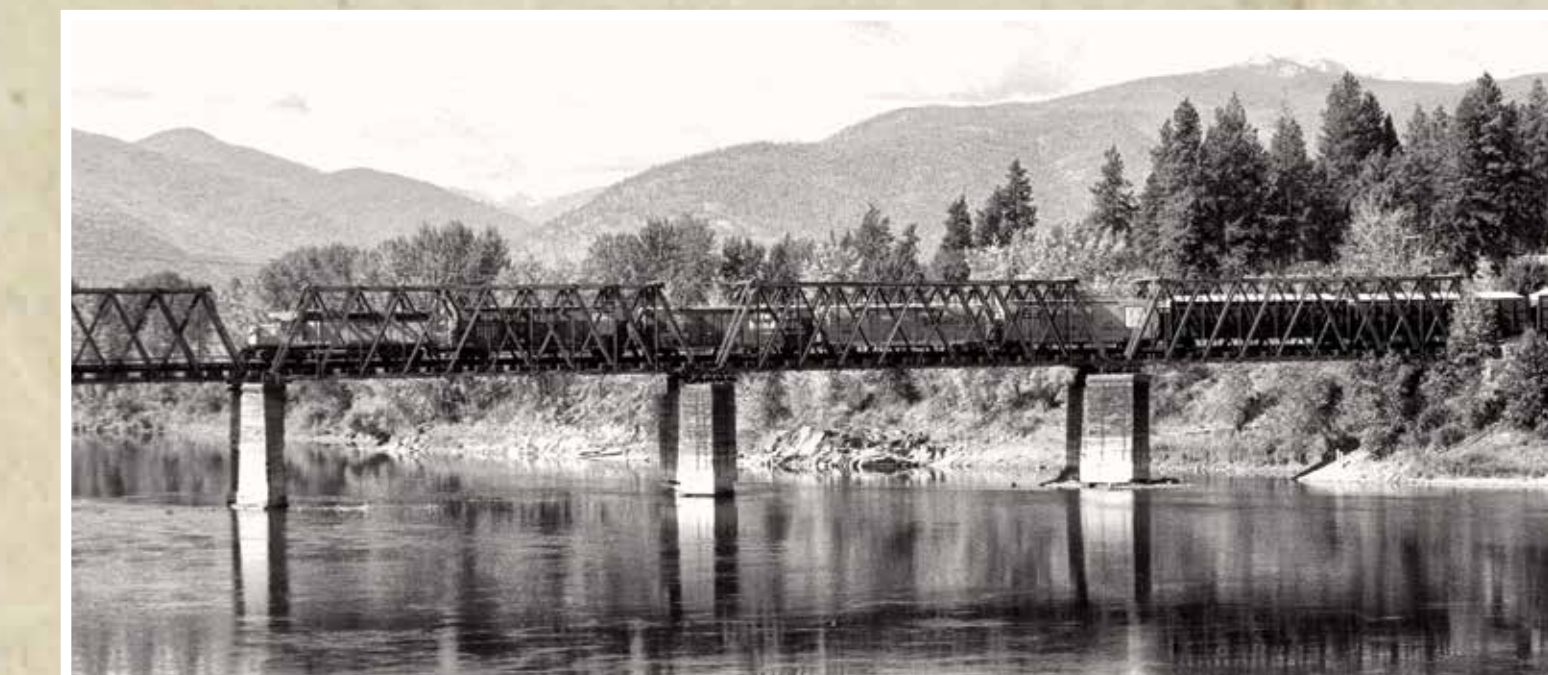
This photo of Bonners Ferry gives a "birds eye view" showing both the Spokane International Railroad bridge (left) and the 1910 bridge (right).



The Kootenai people traveled the rivers and lakes of this region for thousands of years in their unique sturgeon-nosed canoes crafted from white pine. The valley was a maze of cottonwood forests, lakes, mud and shallow waters, and canoes were the best means of travel. The meandering river was both a travel route and a rich area for hunting and fishing.



The first steamboat on the Kootenai River, the Midge, was pushed, pulled, shoved and carried overland from the Northern Pacific Railroad station at Kootenai, east of Sandpoint, and launched at Bonners Ferry in 1884. Steamboats, like the S.S. Alberta (left) also carried passengers and products between Bonners Ferry and communities to the north until 1905. The Kootenai Valley Railroad bridge, built in 1899, was a turnstile type bridge which allowed sternwheelers to pass through.



The first train crossed the Spokane International Railroad bridge in Bonners Ferry in 1906. The old bridge collapsed during the construction of a new bridge in 1985, dumping eight cars into the Kootenai River.



The low water bridge built in 1905 was impassible during high water in spring and early summer. When the center of the bridge was under water, the ferry filled the gap. Dynamite was used to break up logjams and the bridge had to be repaired every year after floodwaters receded.



The 1910 "high bridge" was constructed of wood and steel. Unable to raise \$1,100 for a wooden sidewalk on the bridge, citizens were told, "You will have to cross the bridge in the middle or walk along the side." A woman was once knocked off the bridge by a careless driver. Signs on the bridge limited speed to no faster than a walk for horses and 10 miles per hour for motor vehicles. The weight limit was six tons.

When the five-span steel girder and concrete bridge was completed in 1933, it was Idaho's longest bridge. One hundred-fifty men worked five-hour shifts to complete the \$200,000 Public Works project in a record-setting four and a half months! This new bridge included the pedestrian walkway its predecessor lacked. You are standing on the approach of the old 1933 bridge.



Plans for a new concrete bridge began in 1982. The four-lane construction began in 1983, and a single lane opened to traffic in 1984. The \$9 million bridge, spanning 1,378 feet, was dedicated in May, 1987. Each new bridge was constructed to the east of the preceding one. As a result, the bridge no longer aligns with Main Street.

All photos courtesy of the Boundary County Historical Society.

