



Historical White Lake

Building Bridges

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The first bridge to span the White River was actually further up-river near the old Fehrenbach's Mill (about a mile beyond the intersection of Walsh and Fruitvale Roads.) The area was known as The Trading Post. According to several accounts, that narrow bridge served as a crossing point until the Fruitvale Development Company of Chicago began bringing resorters to Rochdale Inn at Brown's Pond. The bridge was not high enough to allow their barges to pass, so the company dynamited the bridge in the 1900s.

At the other end of the lake, near the site of the old channel, there was another wooden bridge in place. Over the years, of course, it too has been upgraded and replaced.

Some accounts indicate the first bridge built in town, at the site of the causeway, was a wooden bridge constructed in 1864, and that it deteriorated to the point that the citizens of both towns met in 1879 to make plans for a new iron swinging bridge.

An early map of the area dated 1883 actually seems to show that there were several bridges that spanned the area between Montague and Whitehall. The main bridge was located about where the current bridge is today, spanning the middle portion of the river. There were also a couple smaller wooden bridges on each side of it — to the north and south.

In August 1883, it was reported that the new bridge was damaged in some way. It had been opened to let a schooner out and either a careless captain, or the man at the control levers, or both, resulted in nearly all the iron spokes in the revolving mechanism being broken and the wheels displaced from the track. Repairs, however, were quickly made and the bridge was back in operation.

In April 1904, it was reported that the road between Montague and Whitehall had been nearly impassable for about three weeks. In places, a wagon would sink nearly to its hubs in the mud.

In July 1904, the boat pavilion was located near Bridge street on the Montague side of the lake. Sidewalks were laid leading from the pavilion to the Goodrich and Peoples Transit wharfs making it very convenient for the passengers.

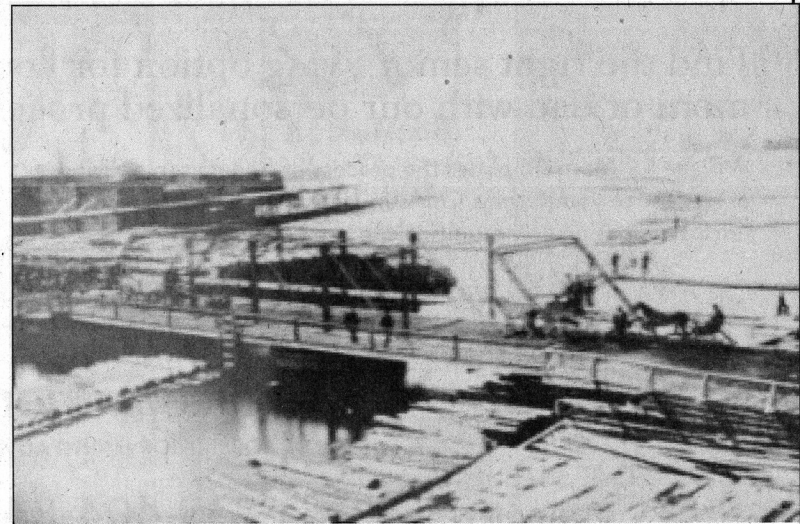
A new bridge was completed near the L. T. Covell office on the lake in Whitehall in October 1914. The rest of the road between the two towns was in deplorable shape and a disgrace to the villages. It was considered one of the worst pieces of road in the county.

The swing bridge was inspected by the State Highway Commission in July 1918, indicating that the State might soon be putting in a new bridge. Hopes were that the bridge would be wider, and the road would be repaired as well.

In December 1922, permission was given to the State Highway Department to erect a new bridge over the White River between Montague and Whitehall. The estimated cost to replace the old swing bridge was \$35,000. Foundation work on the new "Camel humpback" bridge began in November 1923. The new bridge opened to traffic in August 1924. The designer of this style bridge was C. V. Dewart, an engineer for the Michigan State Highway Department in the late 1910s. Bridges of this style were built from 1922 until 1928. The design fell out of favor since they could not be widened to handle the increasing traffic.

In 1957, a roadside park was created along the shore of White Lake on the causeway south of the bridge between the two towns. Picnic tables and benches were installed. State officials approved this action as part of the state highway improvement project.

In 1975, it looked like a new bridge might be coming. That's when the Michigan Department of Highways and Transportation requested 17-feet of city property on the west side of Dowling from the bridge for expansion of the roadway.

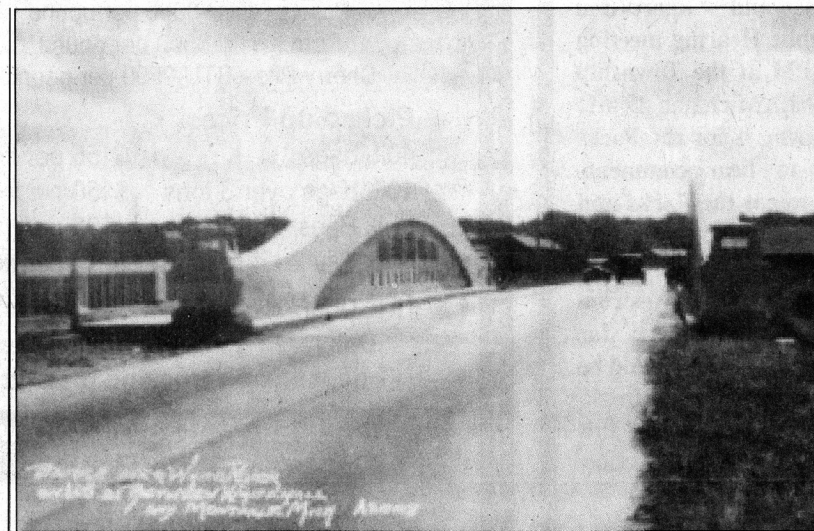


Iron Swing Bridge

The existing bridge was considered a traffic hazard because of its high walls and narrow construction and was responsible for several accidents. As part of the US-31 business route, it was judged to be inadequate for the traffic flow at the time. But nothing came of it. Hopes were revived in 1979, but were stalled once again.

It wasn't until 1986 that the iconic camel humpback bridge was finally broken up and the roadway was widened to two lanes in both directions.

On a "side" note — the causeway flower beds along the road right-of-way, which are enjoyed by so many, started in the summer of 1990. They were the direct result of the personal efforts of Montague resident and former mayor, from 1989-91, Chet Pecak. He personally planted, weeded, and fertilized the right-of-way himself. Though he died in 1996, the colorful planted curbs continue to this day, thanks in part to the efforts of the White Lake Area Chamber of Commerce and the Petunia Patrol.



Camel humpback Bridge