



THE FAMOUS GASCONADE

Photograph by David J. Schwartz - Pics On Route 66

The Gasconade River meanders in a crooked, northeastern flow from Wright County, Missouri, to Gasconade County, Missouri, where it meets up with the mighty Mississippi River. Known for being one of the country's most crooked rivers, the Gasconade River has many bridges intersecting its 271 miles of watery twists and turns. However, there is one bridge that stands out among the rest. Constructed between the years 1922 to 1924 in Hazelgreen, Missouri, the Gasconade River Bridge predates even the historic Route 66 that it now resides along. While Route 66 is home to many an old truss bridge, the Gasconade River Bridge has a unique multi-truss design — two steel Parker through trusses, one steel Pratt through truss and one pony truss — that marks it as unmistakably home in Missouri.

Primarily made with steel construction, exposed rivets, and its three types of trusses, this bridge shows its age in more ways than one. Rusted steel and a crumbling highway deck show the century-old wear and tear of semi-frequent river flooding, corrosive road salt, and the decades of traffic flow from Route 66. A routine inspection of the bridge in December 2014 revealed excessive corrosion and fractured critical components, a finding that led to the Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT) ruling it unsafe for normal traffic and ultimately closing it. While the bridge has remained closed to vehicular traffic in the almost decade since its closure, pedestrian and bicycle traffic has not completely ceased — despite the bridge's potentially unsafe conditions.

Due to the exorbitant cost and tedious work of constructing a truss bridge, many of them have found themselves replaced with their new-fashioned counterparts of concrete. Following the permanent closure of the Gasconade River Bridge, a new bridge was built in 2019 less than 1,000 feet downstream. The new bridge addresses the need for thru traffic in the area — especially in the instance of interstate closures leading to rerouted detours — and was met with a ribbon-cutting ceremony and antique car procession across the concrete monolith. Despite the need for it and the positive reception that the new bridge brought, locals were still vehemently opposed when MoDOT put forward plans to demolish the old bridge. The Gasconade River Bridge is one of the few remaining truss bridges, not only in Missouri, but along

the Route 66 corridor. With so many old truss bridges being demolished, the locals and Route 66 preservationists alike are passionate about the importance of preserving a historical landmark that represents a turning point — not only for Missouri or Route 66 — but for the world's history.

“There used to be hundreds of these bridges scattered throughout Missouri. Now you just don't see them anymore, they're gone,” said Rich Dinkela, the president of Route 66 Association of Missouri. “It represents so much. It represents skillsets that aren't used anymore. It was the coming of an age of America, the 1920s. We saw this entire new generation of people who were mobilized; not by horse and buggy, but by internal-combustion, engine-powered vehicles. This bridge helped usher that era in, so it's not just a bridge. It represents huge, huge steps in innovation for this country and for the world.”

The Gasconade River Bridge Guardians, a group comprised of passionate locals — among them Dinkela — was formed to ensure the bridge's survival, despite continued demolition efforts. “We convinced people across the FHWA (The Federal Highway Administration)... that we would be a good and practical owner of the bridge,” explained Dinkela. “They kind of got involved and intervened and sided with us on the occasions against MoDOT, and ultimately that's what led to us getting the bridge. If it wasn't for the Federal Highway getting involved, then the bridge would have been destroyed back in 2019.” Years of tedious work and unbreakable dedication to this 100-year-old bridge proved fruitful in September 2023, when the bridge was signed over to the care of the Route 66 Association of Missouri. With the battle for bridge finally over, the focus now turns to a hopeful future.

For the time being, the bridge will have to remain closed to public use until it is deemed that pedestrians can safely traverse its old, steel bones once more. As fences are erected and signage posted to ward off hopeful “trespassers,” plans are already in the works to eventually reopen the bridge to all those who wish to cross it on foot. Although the Gasconade River Bridge will never see the automotive traffic that it ushered across its historic highway deck all those decades ago, it will forever remain a treasured part of Missouri's Route 66 history. As for now, the old bridge is quietly and patiently awaiting the funds to care for its eventual stabilization and hopeful restoration.
