

# An Historic Bridge Burns

By Frederika Northrup Sargent

Ed. Note: This article, originally published in the Vermont late in 1932, is particularly apt today, with the resources to maintain Vermont's remaining covered bridges in apparent decline. Mrs Sargent, now 95, grew up near the edge of Sheldon Village. Though rightly claimed a Fairfielder her ties to Sheldon are strong, as evidenced by the spirit in the following:

"April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1932, Sheldon, Vermont. Fire Sweeps out the two stores, post office, barber shop, blacksmith shop, creamery, one house, old horse sheds and bridge."

Just another bit of newspaper print. No, I don't suppose that sounds so all-fired important; but that old historic bridge is gone. And from that news item to this I haven't seen even one little posie offered up in its memory.

You see, it was like this. It was back in the early days- we're not just sure of the date, but it was still in the days of the aristocracy of physical strength, that the settlers on the banks of the Black Creek held an important session in the village store, and there the knights of the nail keg and the tobacco-juice-sharpshooters concluded that as long as the Creek was there they would naturally need an adequate and suitable bridge.

When they planned to build a bridge, they decided to do the job up brown and have a jim-dandy. It wasn't going to be so narrow that you would be snagging your neighbor's wheel hub in passing. It was going to be one of those double tracked affairs. After they got their plans drawn up they picked the best timbers in town. And they were slick. Did you ever note them? Some were twelve or fifteen inches through. You could see where they were hewn out and fitted together. Those old beams were kind of human, and they seemed to take a great deal of pride in the way they stride that river. The abutments were powerful solid. Nobody ever had to worry, no matter how far the ice backed up the river in the spring, but she would stand up to the racket.

The moment you had clapped your eyes to that bridge you'd have called her a beaut. She was high enough for a load of hay to pass through easy. And the cattle never bothered a mite to cross her, 'cause they never knew they were going over a river, they just thought they were going in a barn door. And those sides, where they used to post all those pictures of folks who were running for office. Those pictures told the story of a lot of political careers. They were put up in pride and enthusiasm, then bye-and-bye they'd suffer from the splashes of mud in the eye, or the loss of a lower jaw or an ear, and then the wind would kindly swirl the disfigured remains down the river or someone would put up another picture and that would start the whole performance over again. The boards just inside were where those bright colored circus posters went, with the men on the trapeze, and those circus ladies perched in a most insecure and reckless fashion on the hip of a mighty good looking, beplumed work horse. What time didn't do to those posters, Mayo Cut Plug cards did, with the aid of Fair signs, Ladies' Aid chicken pie suppers and Kendall's Spavin Cure. Didn't need a New York Times colored section to tell what was going on. That old road-hyphen has given protection to folks when the wind was blowing forty knots or when it was raining. That was a good time to rest your horses and get your extra coat out from under the seat, and spread the horse blanket over the bags of grain to

keep them from getting soaked. Lots of problems of state have been thrashed out there while waiting for the storm to pass over. It was good horse sense they were talking, too. They didn't pretend to know much but they knew more than a lot of folks who are so anxious to have us hear what they think they are thinking. They know the fundamentals - that the man who has the money, is the man who has to pay. You found out who had the money, and then made him want to pay. That wasn't so hard, just show him how he is going to make more money by it, and he is interested. Those conferences under the old bridge lantern were pithy and logical. Speaking of the lantern: to keep that filled, polished, the wick spruced up and lit at the right time was an important matter in town. It had to be taken up in town meeting.

The old bridge has mighty pleasant memories for those who knew and loved her. It has been a lovers' lane for many a couple, who waited for the mail to be changed. Or for others, more timid, it has served as a lover's post office. For the old bridge had many an obscure crevice where love letters might be concealed and exchanged without the scrutiny of the inquisitive eye of the village postmaster. But at that, the bridge was not free from watching for across the way, the old Beechnut Block maintained a daily shift of store-stoop setters who held the self-appointed offices of village critics and chaperones.

But what about the historical part? Well, it was back on November 19, 1864, that the bridge had one of its outstanding days. Captain Young with about a score of rebel Raiders came riding past Dream Lake through the St Albans Woods into town. They had robbed the banks in St Albans and were trying to make a beeline back to Canada. They tried to rob our Missisquoi Bank, but everything was locked up tighter than a drum. But why bother! They had plenty from robbing the other. They scoured the town for fresh horses. They must hurry, for Captain Conger and his party were right after them. The bridge was their hope. They set fire to it, but - what was that? They mustn't wait a minute longer! They rode off confident that the fire would quickly consume the bridge and leave them a quiet trip back to Canada. The old bridge fooled them that time, it had too much to live for! The Rev. Mr. Hawley easily put out the fire and when Captain Conger came, the bridge was right there for them.

How times have changed from that day of the Rebel Raiders in '64 to that night when fire broke out in one of the village stores. For a while the old bridge hung on - it seemed to kind of tremble in the excitement and heat of it all. I rather like to feel it was human enough to think: "I've stood freshets floods and thaws, Rebel Raiders and other town fires, but I've been lonesome lately. I don't somehow fit into this impersonal age, I don't even know the person who turns on the electric light, that took the place of the mellow lantern glow. And people? I haven't made a new acquaintance for a long time. Autos bounce in one end, and bob off the other, What's this? The old horse sheds and blacksmith shop going? Then I want to go too."

It seemed sort of glad to be free. A fireman from a neighboring town wanted to know where the water supply was. One of the natives quickly said, "Hell, what do you think we got a bridge for?" Just then there was a shower of sparks as if the old bridge was giving an emphatic snap of satisfaction at the reply, a quick and brilliant finish to that monument to pioneer toil and association.