

Welcome to modern-day Bridgeport *Oklahoma, that is!*

A look at our namesake from across the Red River

by Keith Bridwell

The next time you find yourself becoming critical of the town you call home, take a short break to count your blessings, because except for location and acts out of our control, we could share the fate of our sister city in Oklahoma.

Bridgeport, Oklahoma is situated just north of Interstate 40 and a still-used portion of U.S. Route 66 in the west-central part of the state, at an altitude of 1,500 feet, in the middle of farming country.

At its peak in the early 1900's, Bridgeport was home to more than 3,000 residents and more than 75 businesses, including two banks, two hotels and a prosperous flour mill. Over the years, five newspapers have served the town.

Two rail lines crossed near the town, and in the late 1890's and early 1900's, Bridgeport appeared poised to become a major shipping center for that area of Oklahoma.

A bitter fight over water in the early 1900's, however, started the disintegration of the town.

Chrystobel Poteet, in the article "Bridgeport by the Canadian" (*Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 2) noted: "People found that water on the west side of Bridgeport was clear and pure while that on the east side, where most of the business buildings had been erected, was filled with gypsum crystals. Instead of trying to find a way to bring good water to the east side a bitter feud developed. The depot was on the west side near the river but a long hill had to be climbed to reach the post office on the east side. To get mail distributed more conveniently business men on the west side contrived to move the post office one night during dark hours. A two story brick building was erected hurriedly on the west side for a bank.

The big three story frame hotel was also moved to a corner location on the west side. Merchants on the east side became so embittered that many of them, in 1902, moved their buildings and stock to Hinton."

Today, only about 100 people reside in Bridgeport. Several of their homes have been built in the last 30-40 years. Several others live in older mobile homes within sight of the vintage 40,000-gallon elevated water tower - the lone signal visible from Interstate 40 that a city ever existed at the location.

The post office has long since ceased to be used. Only one church - the First United Methodist Church - is still in use, but members have gingerly maintained the almost-100 year old structure.

The only other public building in the town still in use is the community center, located just a block west of the Methodist Church.

Older homes - several of which were obviously real showplaces in past years - stand abandoned in the tall grass of former yards, and are scattered throughout the village. Today, the town of Bridgeport occupies just one-half square mile in territory.

Median age of the residents is 38 years, but the settlement is considered "a rural retirement community," according to John W. Morris in his book, "*Ghost Towns of Oklahoma*."

The 2000 Census showed that median income per household in Bridgeport was \$18,906, compared with a national average of \$41,994. Per capita income was just \$11,380, compared with \$21,587 nationally.

Those Census figures show average rent for a home in the town was \$275, compared with average homeowner costs of \$600 per month.



STILL A THRIVING MEETING PLACE, the First United Methodist Church of Bridgeport, Oklahoma - built in 1907 - is one of just two vintage buildings still in use in the west-central part of the state. The town derived its name as a layover spot for those who wished to cross the Canadian River at a low-water crossing just north of town, or be ferried across it during times of high water. An Oklahoma City businessman built a private suspension bridge over the river in the early 1920's, and charged \$1.00 for cars and \$1.50 for trucks to cross. That and later bridges were washed out in floods, and the state government built a modern bridge in the 1950's just downstream. When a portion of U.S. Route 66 was moved a mile south in 1933, Bridgeport was effectively isolated. Businesses and residents left, causing the town to become a ghost of itself.

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Average commute time for Bridgeport workers is 31 minutes. Only eight of the residents age 25 and older hold a bachelor's or advanced college degree.

Fourteen percent of Bridgeport residents report German ancestry, while 27 percent report Irish heritage.

Although the rerouting of U.S. Route 66 in 1933 moved the highway from Bridgeport one mile south of town, that was just the latest in a string of

events which caused further decay of the village.

Oklahoma City businessman George Kay built a suspension bridge over the Canadian River in 1921, and charged motorists \$1.00 per car and \$1.50 per truck to cross. Route 66 motorists were reportedly outraged, and evidently enough of them complained to elected officials to cause the state to purchase the bridge in 1930, and the fee was dropped.

The state already had plans to build another structure - the Pony Bridge - downstream, however, so the Key Bridge fell into disuse and was finally sold for scrap.

The Pony Bridge is famous for its 38 trusses that form a nearly 4,000-foot span. It is still the longest truss bridge in Oklahoma.

Now referred to as the Ca-

nadian River Bridge, the west end of the span appeared in the 1939 classic film, "*The Grapes of Wrath*." (The scene when "Grandpa" died and was buried.)

John W. Morris says in the book, "*Ghost Towns of Oklahoma*": "In 1898 the Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf extended its tracks westward and built its bridge near the toll [suspension] bridge. The Enid and Anadarko Railway north-south lines, built in 1901, used the same bridge. In 1907 the railroad bridge was demolished when a freight car jumped the track and struck a span of the bridge. This train, carrying cars of livestock and household goods belonging to German emigrants, fell into the sandy river bed. The heavily loaded cars immediately began sinking into the quicksand.

"Men trying to save the

livestock opened the car doors. Out flew ducks, chickens, and geese to the Bridgeport side of the river. The engine, coal car, and caboose were all that was saved. "To this day the other cars with everything inside as well as the middle section of the bridge lie buried somewhere in the shifting sand of the Canadian River bed." The bridge was replaced the next year but in 1914 was washed away during a flood. A new railroad bridge was again built. Later, in 1939, the track south from Bridgeport was abandoned."

To reach the town, travel U.S. Highway 81 from Bowie, Texas to Chickasha, Oklahoma, then U.S. 62 to Anadarko, then north on U.S. 281 through Hinton to just north of Interstate 40. Turn west on U.S. Route 66 for one mile, then north for a mile.



SEEN BETTER DAYS - The Bridgeport, Oklahoma post office stands alone in what was once the bustling business district of the Caddo County town.

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The community center, left, and the First United Methodist Church, right, are the only two vintage structures still in use in Bridgeport, Oklahoma.

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Each of the 135 boxes inside the Bridgeport post office is identified with hand-lettered numbers, but more than 20 years have passed since the customer service window was in use. The door is secured with an open padlock, and only dust and spider webs greet customers in the lobby now.

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Facts at a glance -

- 20 miles east of Weatherford, 20 miles west of El Reno, 48 miles west of Oklahoma City, 86 miles east of Texas panhandle;
- Population - 100, Households - 46; Donkeys - 1, Dogs - 1+;
- 19.4% of population living below poverty line;
- Latitude - 35.546N, longitude - -98.384W, elevation - 1503';
- Caddo County supported George W. Bush in 2004 election;
- U.S. Route 66 rerouted away from Bridgeport in 1933;



A ONCE-GRAND OLD HOME PLACE sets abandoned just west of the Bridgeport business district after the original "mother road" of U.S. Route 66 was moved to bypass the town by almost a mile. The city was once home to more than 3,000 residents, but just over 100 now reside in the ghost of its former prominence.

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