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COVERED WOODEN BRIDGES IN SWITZERLAND

BY KATHLEEN WATTS

We crossed the river by a wooden bridge, roofed and covered on all sides, and nearly a mile in length. It was profoundly dark; perplexed with great beams, crossing and recrossing it at every possible angle; and through the broad chinks and crevices in the floor, the rapid river gleamed, far down below, like a legion of eyes. We had no lamps; and as the horses stumbled and floundered through this place, toward the distant speck of dying light, it seemed interminable. I really could not at first persuade myself as we rumbled heavily on, filling the bridge with hollow noises, and I held down my head to save it from the rafters above, but that I was in a painful dream; for I had often dreamed of toiling through such places, and as often argued, even at the time, "This cannot be reality."

This is how Charles Dickens described a journey in 1842. In Europe covered bridges constructed completely in wood are fast disappearing and on the whole there are few remaining which are in daily use. No wonder the Americans are justly proud of theirs and sometimes even are inclined to think that they are an American invention. In his book *American Wooden Bridges*, Eric Sloane says that the patent for the first covered bridge was issued on 21st January, 1797, to Charles Peale, the famed painter of George Washington.

The *Railroad Gazette* for 8th

October, 1886, comments: "When the Market Street Bridge was finished in 1804 it was the intention that it should remain open, free to action of the sun and air, exposed as well as to rain and storm. Judge Richard Peters, a prominent stockholder of the company which erected the bridge, was the author of the plan covering it at the sides and surmounting it with a roof. It was his opinion that if the timbers were left open and the roadway exposed to the alternate action of storms that would soon lead to decay and destruction.

"So the sides were boarded up, with the exception of spaces for windows. A long roof was placed over it, and the bridge was nothing more than a wooden tunnel, leading from one side of the river to the other." And so, as far as most experts agree, the American covered bridge was born. But in Europe the idea was much older than the eighteenth century.

Switzerland is perhaps one of the exceptions amongst the European countries in that there are a great number of wooden bridges which are used both by pedestrians and motor traffic every single day and though sometimes a new road bridge is put alongside, the old bridge is left and so they do not disappear with the same rapidity as in other countries. Indeed Eric Sloane says that in America they go at the rate of about one a day!

The Canton of Berne is particularly rich in covered bridges. That the country is mountainous including the Bernese Oberland and has many rivers and

mountain streams is perhaps one of the reasons; a love of tradition may be another. The Simmental alone, leading from Spiez on the Lake of Thun to Zweisimmen has at least eight covered bridges across the River Simme all of which are in daily use and practicable for motor traffic (for the most part) and all for farm carts and tractors.

The main road from Berne to Belp which is the Airport for Berne, has a large and important wooden bridge over the River Aare. In the town of Thun there is a bridge with a complicated wooden construction because the bridge also served as a dam to the river and the workings of the lock gates are plainly exposed. This is only to mention a few of the bridges which are well known but in practically every village where there is a river the water is crossed by a wooden bridge.

The Kapellbrücke of Lucerne, famous the world over, if for no other reason than that it appears on every poster advertising Lucerne, is used daily by pedestrians as the motorway crossing the Lake is far less agreeable. The bridge was built to serve as a barrage for the water tower which was part of the defensive system of fourteenth-century Lucerne.

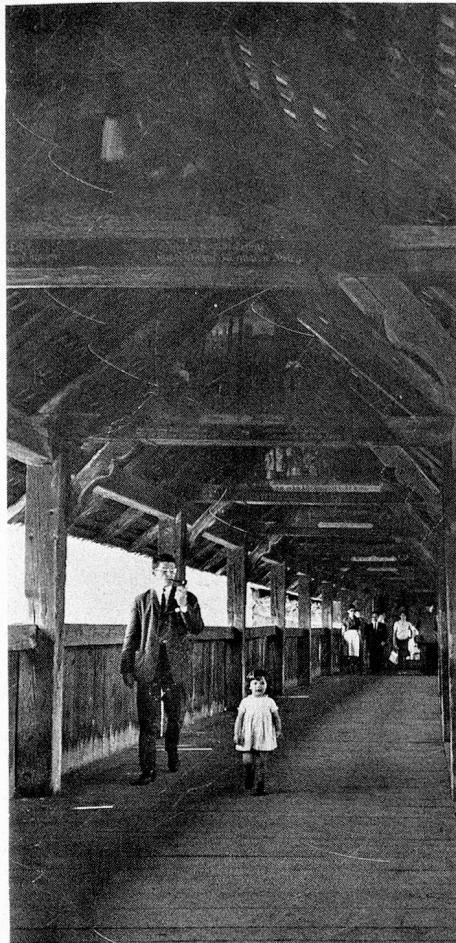
The triangular paintings which are fitted into the roof construction describe in vivid colours the building of the Abbeys of St. Urbain and Wertherstein; the visit of the Emperor Sigismund and the terrible battles and fires of the period. But there is a second covered bridge built a century later over the River Reuss, perhaps less well known but also in daily use and equally decorated with paintings of seventeenth century — 45 scenes of the Dance of the Dead.

The River Reuss flows from Lucerne to Bremgarten and Brugg where it joins the River Aare. Bremgarten, a small town which was formerly Habsbourg territory owes its existence to a fortress which was on what was almost an island in the river. It was reached by a covered wooden bridge which was built in 1597. This bridge is still in position but further down the river the beautiful old wooden bridge which was the pride of Mellingen has been removed in the interests of progress but happily this is an exception and it would be difficult to make a list of all the many covered wooden bridges still in use.

It would seem that Switzerland is alone amidst her neighbours in having such a number of covered wooden bridges. Practically non-existent in France and Southern Germany they are sometimes found in Austria and Northern Italy but not in the same quantity or use as in the Central Swiss Cantons where they remain as a delightful and artistic reminder of a bygone age.



The covered wooden bridge across the Rhine at Bremgarten. Photo by courtesy of SNTO.



Inside Lucerne's Kapellbrücke built in 1333. Photo by courtesy of SNTO.



And two more beautiful wooden bridges on photos supplied by our author Mrs. Kathleen Watts who lives in Gstaad. We are indebted to her.

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