

Van Buren Bridge Fun Facts

The Van Buren Bridge was built in 1913 and was the first bridge across the Willamette River in Corvallis. It was built with funds raised by a City of Corvallis bond measure (combined with private and county funds) passed November 22, 1912. Oregon women had just won the right to vote on November 5, 1912 so it was the first time women could vote in Corvallis.

When the bridge was completed it served mainly horse drawn wagons.

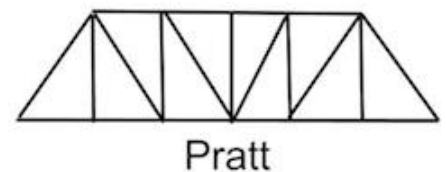


The sign on the bridge reads: "A \$25.00 fine for riding or driving over the bridge faster than a walk or for driving on the bridge at one time more than 25 herd of cattle or horses."

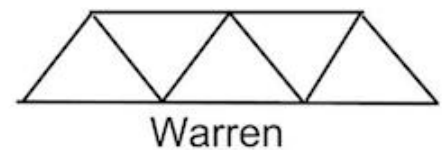
The bridge was built by the Coast Bridge Company and designed by Portland engineer Andrew J. Porter. Bridge components were chosen from a catalogue designed to fit the crossing necessary and it was put together on the site. The bridge is probably one of the last Oregon bridges to be selected from a bridge brokerage firm offering catalog bridge components.

The Oregon Department of Transportation bought the bridge in 1938 when the Albany – Corvallis Road became Highway 34.

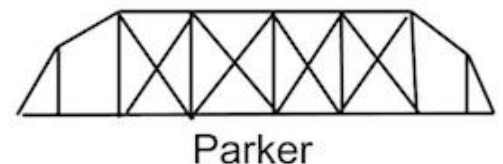
The Van Buren Bridge has three different through trusses. It starts with the pin-connected steel **Parker through truss** (171') on the Corvallis side, then has a combination pin-connected and riveted steel **Pratt through truss center-bearing swing span** (249'), and ends with a **Warren pony truss** (57') on the Linn County side. The total length of the steel spans is 534'; adding the two approach spans make it 708' long, the length of two football fields. Originally it had a riveted steel Warren pony truss on the western Corvallis side but it was destroyed by the 1962 Columbus Day storm. See if you can see the truss types when you are looking at the bridge from the park or when you are on the Harrison Street Bridge looking at the Van Buren Bridge.



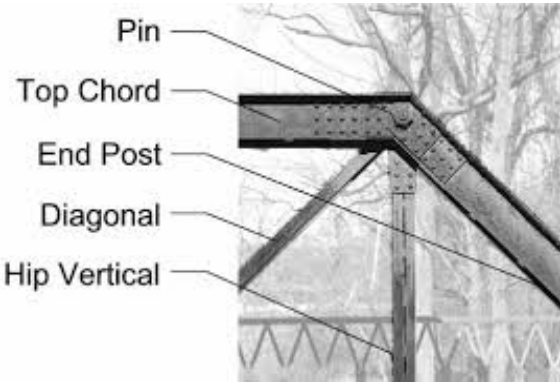
Pratt



Warren



Parker



The Van Buren bridge is the only vehicular pin-connected center pivot swing span bridge in Oregon and the third oldest vehicular bridge across the Willamette River. Only two vehicular bridges in Portland, the Hawthorn Bridge (1910) and the Steel Bridge (1912) are older. It is considered eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. Look for the pins on the bridge.

The Van Buren Bridge is unique because it is a moveable bridge. There are three main types of moveable bridges: **vertical lift** bridges, where the roadway remains horizontal but rises to let vessels pass; **bascule** bridges, which use counterweights to draw spans upright and away from the path of the vessel; and the **swing span** system, where the span swings aside to provide clearance. The drawing below shows what the Van Buren Bridge looked like when open. It took six men to open it with a 17-foot wooden turning key. The spans swung to clear 102 feet on either side for boats to go through. The key is in the ODOT Region 2 District 4 office in Corvallis. The bridge was last opened in 1960.

Drawing by David Livingston

Opening the bridge

A 17-foot long wooden "turning key" was inserted through a hole in the road deck onto a shaft that engaged a gear mechanism to pivot the bridge. The bridge turned on a 24-foot diameter circular gear of 300 teeth mounted on the central concrete pier. The entire swing span balanced on 42 steel rollers as it rotated.

It took several men to rotate the turning key, using either of two drive shafts. The "high gear" shaft allowed the bridge to be opened in 50 revolutions of the turning key. The other shaft was a lower gear, opening the bridge in 150 revolutions.

This 1912 drawing shows the Coast Bridge Company's design for the bridge. The bridge was manufactured at the factory in Portland and the parts were then shipped to Corvallis, where it was assembled on the concrete piers. Other materials were provided by Corvallis firms, including the Corvallis Lumber Company, Buxton and Sons, and J.R. Smith Hardware.

A windy adventure

When closed, each end of the swing span rested on two steel rollers that sat on top of cast iron "shoes" mounted on the concrete end-piers. Gravity latches held the bridge closed. During a fierce windstorm on January 25, 1914, the latches loosened enough to allow the wind to blow the bridge off its shoes... at just the moment when a local boy was crossing on the center span.

Local boat tenders eventually heard the cries of George Way, a dishwasher at the Julian Hotel, who was stranded on the open span. At "no small risk" to themselves, the boatmen managed to reach the bridge and engage the mechanism to close the bridge and bring the young man to safety.

The river level gauge
You are here

Few other interesting features on the bridge for you to look for.

