

Spider bridges central to rural transport web

Imagine long legs stretching out over a creek bed and you will get the idea of how early settlers improvised building spider bridges,

writes AUDIENNE BLYTH.

HINTERLAND BRIDGES

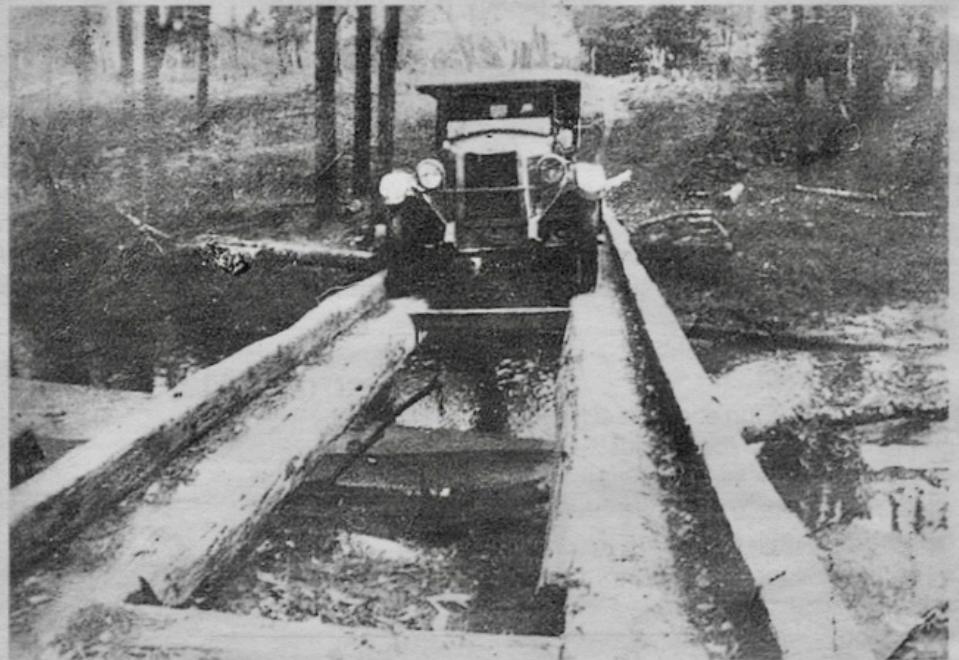
Crossing like Spiders

As we all know crossing Hinterland streams can be hazardous. In the early days of the automobile, the 'spider' bridge was devised specially for those, narrow-tyred autos. There were thousands of straight trees in the hardwood forests and plenty of skilled axemen in the area.

Bridges were built in the Kenilworth, Obi Obi and Conondale districts in the 1920s. Jack Ferris of Bankfoot House remembers his younger brother building bridges in the Conondale area at this time.

The first spider bridges had the guard rail on the outside of the runners as the cars had only single tyres on the wheels. Around 1935 guard rails were put on the inside as well. This made it tricky when you had a car with dual wheels as you would have one wheel hanging over the water.

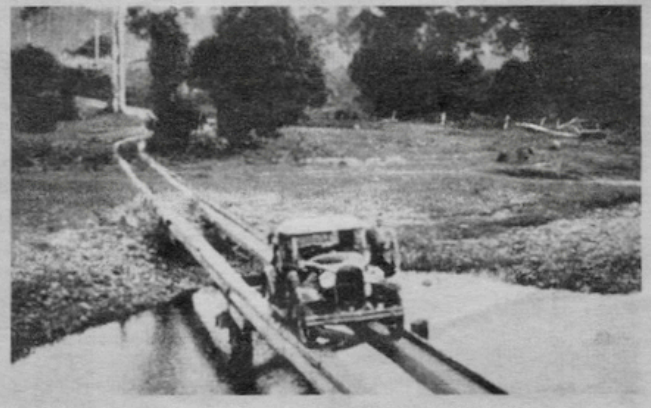
(Photos courtesy of Sunshine Coast Libraries and Ron Hoddinott. Information from Maleny Historical Society).



(Top) Obi Creek spider bridge crossing described as "an inexpensive skeleton construction designed to offer little resistance to flood waters."

(Above right) Spider bridge over the Mary River at Conondale in the 1920s. There were on the spot penalties for drunken driving or for driving without due care and attention.

(Right) A 1928 Chevrolet 4 carefully crosses the spider bridge over the Obi Obi Creek in the Obi Valley. Guard rail is on the outside. We think the man on the running board is George Collyer, a station master at regional stations including Pomona and Cooroy. George's grandson is Ron Hoddinott, the owner, with his wife, Andrina, of The Terraces Watch and Clock Shop in Maleny.



Kenilworth Museum has evidence of an early method of crossing Coolabine Creek - two logs were bolted together and placed in the creek bed (upstream from the current bridge).

These logs stemmed some of the flow and vehicles were able to cross by driving down to the creek bed and up the far bank.

In 1951, Arthur Tanner of Kenilworth recalled that necessity was the mother of invention. With the advent of motor vehicles in the 1920s when the district had no bridges, two halves of logs were laid across boggy gullies for a vehicle to cross.

This led to what became known as spider bridges, a lifeline for farmers in the rich Kenilworth dairying and agricultural district. Without them, the farmers and their produce were stranded.

In heavy rains and floods, creeks would become torrents. Debris and fallen trees crashed into spider bridges, in spite of the strong buttresses to keep the bridge safe and ward off damage. Farmers made necessary repairs with the same solid, rough-hewn timber used in construction which came from nearby farms.

Drivers and passengers related the scary experience of crossing a spider bridge. Drivers lined up the running boards. Guard rails, centre runners and



IMAGE: Sunshine Coast Heritage Library

Car crossing a spider bridge over the Obi Obi Creek in 1935.

decking were sometimes added extras, almost luxuries. Passengers often preferred to walk across. Prayers and curses might have been heard.

In 1928, Maroochy Shire Council agreed to fund three spider bridges over Obi Obi Creek, an economical proposition, as three could be built for the price of one bridge.

Previously, a party of state and local government officials, on an inspection tour of "the back country" (Kenilworth) before providing funding for bridges and roads, experienced first-hand the difficulties of driving across a spider bridge.

The first two cars negotiated the crossing but the third, with lower

mudguards, wedged against the guard rail.

Passengers, including the only two ladies on the tour, were asked to disembark while the running boards were packed to increase their height, so allowing the vehicle to pass.

Careful and exact driving was necessary with no room for error as the drop to the creek bed was about three metres. Those who walked across found that great care and balance was required.

In 1929, the Minister for Agriculture and Stock, Mr H. F. Walker, visited the area to open the three new spider bridges and said that their cost was £300 of which £210 had been raised by donations and voluntary labour of farmers.

He praised the "self-help principle of farmers".

Love's Sawmill at Kiamba advertised sawn timber running boards for spider bridges. No doubt farmers were buying these to make the spider bridges safer.

By the 1930s, the council was having to consider wooden bridges on piles to replace spider bridges. These, in turn, have been replaced by concrete bridges.

In 2020, few wooden bridges remain in the district - and certainly no spider bridges.

✂ Audienne Blyth is a member of the Nambour Historical Museum, open Wednesday to Saturday 1pm-4pm.



IMAGE: Sunshine Coast Heritage Library

Coolabine Creek spider bridge, 1936. It was replaced by a wooden bridge in 1939 and the high-level concrete Houston Bridge in 1964.



Spider bridge over the Mary River at Conondale 1935