

## An Identity in Crisis The Viaduct

Colby citizens are currently grappling with the reality of the slated 2003 demolition of the viaduct on K-25 (Range Avenue). Issues of traffic safety, train delays and property alterations have left many people questioning the wisdom and necessity for the change.

What many local people may not realize is that this is not the first viaduct at that location. When the Rock Island was built into Colby and on west in the summer of 1888, a large bridge was built over the railroad tracks. According to local historian, Vern Dimmitt, "The floor of the bridge was made of oak planks four inches thick and twelve inches wide and the iron tires on buggies and wagons had cut ruts in the timbers causing much repair work. There were wooden banisters on either side." That viaduct was torn down in the early 1900s because it had been deemed unsafe. Dimmitt stated, "That left a span of 30 years when Colby had a most dangerous railroad crossing."

However, the one accident noted by Dimmitt occurred on the viaduct in February or March of 1898. Dimmitt wrote, "What might have been a serious accident occurred last Thursday night. While crossing the bridge over the Rock Island Railroad the team became scared and shied to one side of the bridge grade, upsetting the buggy and rolling the occupants down the bank. Fortunately no one was injured."

With the Great Depression came several government programs. These programs provided work for the unemployed and numerous improvements for communities nationwide. These programs are often referred to collectively as WPA programs. One of these programs was the NRA or National Re-employment Administration. It was through this program that road improvements were made on No. 25 (K-25) beginning with plans introduced in early 1933.

The *Colby Free Press-Tribune* reported, "Included in the plans for this highway is a huge overpass to lift traffic above the Rock Island crossing at the northwest corner of town. In addition to the overpass itself this project will demand a tremendous grade reaching a half mile north of the railroad crossing to the four corners with a regular grade all the way. This huge grade will be 100 feet wide at the base and taper up to the roadbed. There will also be some grading on the south side of the overpass extending as far as Seventh Street.

"It has been suggested that rather than delay the construction, or the beginning of construction until next summer, it would be a good idea to begin with this great grade north of the Rock Island overpass immediately and afford work for possibly one hundred men during this time when employment is so very badly needed. It is argued that possibly a sufficient number of men might be put at this task that the present tremendous drain upon the county poor fund might be somewhat lessened" (1/13/1933).

But the project was still on the drawing board when the newspaper noted that bids would be let for the project on September 12. "Thus are Governor Landon and Highway Director [Harry] Darby keeping their promise that the first work to be let under the 10 million dollar federal allocation would be in western Kansas" (CFPT 8/30/1933).

When the bid was awarded, the project only included road work north of Colby. "It is supposed that this 5-mile stretch is all the work on this highway that will be done as unemployment relief work, but it is indicated that the highway will be completely rebuilt, at least to the four corners a half mile north of Colby. A buyer for the state highway commission has been buying the necessary right-of-way from the county line to the four corners, and it is evident the road will be finished that far at least. To complete it into Colby requires a solution of the question of a viaduct over the Rock Island track and the widening of Range avenue to afford a satisfactory junction of this highway with US 40-N [later US 24]" (CFPT 9/13/1933).

The question was further explained the following week, "The plan of bringing the railroad crossing east a few blocks and the highway in over some other street has been

abandoned, so considerable effort and red tape will be required in getting a viaduct over the Rock Island railroad at the present crossing and widening Range avenue to accommodate a highway of modern proportions. The commission must get a special allotment of money from the government to build the viaduct. The building job cannot be forced onto the railroad, it appears, so it will be undertaken as a state project" (CFPT 9/20/1933).

And, almost immediately, work began, "Contractor R.F. Hall, head of the Hall Construction Co., of Manhattan, is in Colby this week getting work started to fulfill his contract for culverts and grading on highway No. 25, the Atwood stage road. [Hall had previously done some grading and culvert work at Brewster in the spring].

"From the list of eligible labor compiled by the re-employment committee, Mr. Hall has selected 43 men to begin the preliminary work and may extend his operations to include about 20 more when the work gets under way all along the route. His contract requires that all possible labor, both skilled and unskilled, shall be recruited locally.

"The construction of this grade, which will be done with hand work and teams as much as possible, will require several weeks to complete. The contractor is using a considerable number of horses which he owns himself and will use local teams as much as possible to complete his needs for power.

"Because it is stipulated that thirty hours per week is the maximum for a man in NRA relief work, Mr. Hall is working the men in two shifts of five hours each per day. One shift works from 7 am to noon, and one from 1 pm to 6 pm, six days per week. It is possible that this plan may become quite widely adopted in industry within a short time because of the great surplus of available workers and the insistence of the federation of labor upon the 30-hour week" (CFPT 10/4/1933).

The question of the viaduct was solved swiftly, "Evidently the necessary preliminary details have been worked out by the State Highway Commission for building a viaduct, for the right-of-way buyer, Frank Cleland has been ordered to proceed with the business of buying the extra ground that will be needed to accommodate the structure" (CFPT 11/15/1933).

"The big concrete overpass will be a considerable job, since it must be built to a considerable height to allow room for Rock Island trains underneath. The earthworks which can be done during the winter months will keep a large number employed and then there are other projects which are in the process of working out so that the future prospect of unemployment is not doleful as it was once" (CFPT 11/22/1933).

It was just a matter of months before the project was taking shape. "The viaduct is practically completed but is not opened because of the paving work. A great deal of excavation was necessary to prepare a bed for the pavement. When completed it will furnish a sweeping rise to the top of the viaduct and then a great vantage point for looking over the country. The tremendous fill on the north side is settling very well" (CFPT 5/30/1934).

"After many delays the state highway commission is moving forward with the project of graveling state highway No. 25 from Colby to Atwood. Heavy travel on the highway has packed the surface well. The addition of gravel will make an all-weather surface. Possibly the commission will go ahead with its present plan of oiling the highways after gravel has been on for a year or two and eventually No. 25 will have a black oiled surface of the type that has proved highly satisfactory in northwest Kansas the last few years" (CFPT 9/5/1934).

Late in the year, bids were being let to finish paving the viaduct. "Two blocks of Range avenue were paved shortly after the completion of the viaduct, but at Sixth streets the grade up to the viaduct began and it was necessary to wait for the grade to settle before putting concrete upon it. The bids will be opened January 4 at the office of the county clerk of Osborne county. Labor on this project will be selected by the National Re-employment Service and the minimum wage for unskilled labor is set at 45 cents an hour" (CFPT 12/19/1934). *Further research in the 1935 newspapers did not produce any information regarding the actual paving of the viaduct.*

Over the last 65+ years the viaduct has been the subject of some debate regarding its

purpose and perceived safety features. There has been concern about the high rate of speed at which southbound traffic comes over the viaduct into town, the increased number of semi-trailers and the dangers of pedestrian and bicycle traffic.

But the viaduct is a fixture, its character defines Colby along its northern perimeter. The viaduct has created an interesting neighborhood configuration nestled next to its southern grade and a beautiful wilderness area, Tenderfoot Park, at its northwest border. This park has been an outdoor classroom for school children and a familiar retreat for local boy and girl scouts. The Audubon Acres area of affluent homes north of town has achieved a remote flavor due to the boundary created by the viaduct.

But like the old wooden bridge, the concrete viaduct faces demolition in a new century. Last year the Kansas Department of Transportation contacted city and county officials regarding its plans to remove it in 2003.

Last June, when Chris Bieker, county road supervisor, brought a proposed contract with KDOT to the Thomas County Commissioners, concerning the detour on Highway K-25 while the viaduct over the railroad is being removed. He noted that there was mounting opposition from Colby residents (*CFP 6/6/2001*).

But by fall, it seemed to be a 'done deal'. Preliminary plans brought to city hall by Rex Fleming, road design leader from Topeka, showed designs for the bridge being removed and how the road would be brought down to an at-grade crossing with the railroad tracks. It also detailed widening of the road at the railroad tracks and temporary easements with properties that would be affected (*CFP 10/17/2001*).

A week later, Steve Rucker, KDOT project manager for the K-25 viaduct removal, met with Colby officials and representatives from Kyle Railroad, whose tracks the viaduct covers. He emphasized that the plan eliminated the need for 17 properties to be condemned for right-of-way and was much less expensive than a new viaduct.

The viaduct project, this time around, has not drawn much community support. The planning has been, and removal work probably will be, a long drawn out affair unlike the efficient process that enabled its construction. The whole project lacks anticipation and enthusiasm.

While Colby will probably adjust, it's certainly another blow to the community's character . . . what could even be called a crisis of identity.