

BIG HOLE RIVER BRIDGE
(Divide Bridge)
Spanning the Big Hole River
On Power House Road
Divide Vicinity
Silver Bow County,
Montana

HAER No. MT-144

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
Southwest System Support Office
National Park Service
P.O. Box 728
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87504

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
DIVIDE BRIDGE

I. INTRODUCTION

Location: Big Hole River Bridge
(Divide Bridge)
Spanning the Big Hole River on
Power House Road
Divide vicinity
Silver Bow County, Montana

Quad: Dewey, Montana (1996)

UTM: 12/359965/5068718

Date of Construction: 1914

Present Owner: Butte-Silver Bow County
Butte, Montana

Present Use: Highway Bridge

Significance: The Divide Bridge is significant for its association with the joint development of the infrastructures of Beaverhead and Silver Bow counties along the Big Hole River in the years before World War I. Designed and built just prior to the standardization of steel through truss bridge designs by the Montana State Highway Commission, the design of the bridge anticipated those standards. The bridge is an excellent and intact example of a simple riveted Warren through truss with sloping upper chords. All of the original design features of both the main and approach spans are intact and unchanged. The bridge retains its original appearance, materials, and feeling; there have been no significant changes to the setting of the bridge since 1914.

Historian: Jon Axline, Montana Department of Transportation
August 2011

II. HISTORY

Meriwether Lewis provided the first written description of the Big Hole River in 1805. The Corps of Discovery reached the confluence of the Beaverhead and Big Hole rivers about 28 miles southeast of the Divide Bridge on August 4, 1805. Lewis christened it the Wisdom River and described it as a “bould Rappid & clear stream it’s bed so broken and obstructed by gravel bars and Islands that it appeared to me impossible to navigate it with safety.” The Lewis and Clark Expedition spent a little over a day in the area. Sergeant George Shannon explored up the Big Hole to the vicinity of Divide, about three miles east of the bridge.¹

Unlike the upper Missouri and lower Yellowstone rivers, no significant Euro-American contact with the native inhabitants in southwestern Montana occurred for many years after the Lewis and Clark Expedition passed through the area. Fur trapping brigades from both the Rocky Mountain Fur Company and American Fur Company frequented the area, trapping beaver as they went in the 1830s. Contact between the trappers and the Indians was not always peaceful. In October 1832 a Blackfeet war party ambushed and killed most of the members of an American Fur Company brigade on the nearby Madison River. With the decline of the fur trade in the 1840s, Euro-American activity in the area consisted of a few men wintering cattle in the nearby Big Hole Basin for trade on the Overland Trail to the south. In 1861, Lieutenant John Mullan briefly considered constructing a road between Fort Laramie and the Deer Lodge Valley that would have, he believed, followed the Big Hole River in the vicinity of the Divide Bridge. Congress declined to fund Mullan’s proposed road. Within a year, however, southwestern Montana would transform from a remote wilderness to one of the most populated areas in the northern Rocky Mountains.²

In July 1862, John White and several other prospectors discovered gold on Grasshopper Creek about 42 miles south of the Divide Bridge. The mining camp of Bannack appeared almost overnight as hundreds of miners from the diggings in Idaho and elsewhere poured into southwest Montana to exploit the new strike. From Bannack, other prospectors fanned out across the region in search of richer bonanzas. In May 1863, they discovered a particularly productive strike on Alder Gulch 55 miles southeast of the bridge. Within just a few months, a rumored 10,000 miners worked the gulch’s gravels and patronized businesses in the new mining camps of Virginia City, Nevada City, and other settlements lining the gulch. Although fabulously rich, the best claims had been taken by the beginning of 1864. In the cyclical process that characterized the gold rush era, prospectors once again took to the hills looking for new and richer gold strikes. Additional gold strikes were made at Last Chance, Confederate, and Ophir gulches north of the Big Hole River and along with smaller creeks at a host of locations around southwest Montana.³

Although regularly used as a travel corridor by Indians for generations, the rugged Big Hole River canyon prevented its extensive use by Euro-Americans as a short cut between the Alder Gulch mining camps and the Deer Lodge valley. Instead, a road lead north from the Dillon area

along the river to Divide and then proceeded north over Deer Lodge Pass to Silver Bow Creek and Butte. By the late 1860s, however, some men began prospecting the Pioneer Mountains south of the river in search of rich lodes, while a few others worked marginal placer claims next to the Big Hole. In 1868, John Vipond discovered a rich lode in the Pioneers southwest of the bridge. By 1872, several hard rock mines were operating in the mountains, producing primarily silver. Rancher D. S. Dewey established a small community along the Big Hole River directly north of the Vipond Mining District in 1872. Called Dewey after its founder, the settlement is located about four miles west of the Divide Bridge. It functioned as a lumber camp, the site of several arrastras and stamp mills for the mines, and was a supply center for the mining district. By 1885, the settlement was the site of three stamp mills, charcoal kilns, a hotel, saloon, slaughterhouse, and post office. Dewey was served by a narrow gauge railroad that provided a connection to the Utah & Northern Railroad at nearby Divide. Dewey prospered until 1895 when the federal government's demonetization of silver caused the near desertion of the Vipond district.⁴

There was sporadic placer mining along the Big Hole River in the nineteenth century. In the late 1880s, Butte attorney Peter Dolman began buying up placer mining claims along the river in the vicinity of Dewey. A hero of the Civil War, Dolman came to Montana from Missouri in 1881 and invested in mining properties in the Butte vicinity along with real estate in the Mining City. Dolman worked the claims just enough to keep his title to them, "the fact that he found no gold did not matter, for his scheme was to sell the placer ground for a townsite." Other speculators also established or purchased placer claims along the river. These included Frank Corbett, Ernest Trask, and John Wellcome, who established the Aurum Placer on the north side of the Big Hole River at the bridge site in July 1895. On the south side of the river, Harry Turner filed on a 15 acre placer claim in August 1897. Unlike Dolman, however, these claimants acquired the land in advance of a major dam project in order to profit from it rather than any gold that might have washed its way into the river.⁵

In 1897, The Butte City Water Company, owned by Butte Copper King Marcus Daly, constructed a dam and powerhouse on the Big Hole River just downstream of the Divide Bridge. The company pumped water to Butte from its operation on the river. In August 1897, a consortium of Butte businessmen led by Henry Byllesby and Harry Turner, formed the first Montana Power Company to construct a dam and hydroelectric plant on the Big Hole River. The company planned to provide electricity to Butte for use in the mines and for domestic purposes. The company began construction of a rock-filled wood crib dam on the river approximately 4,000 feet upstream of the Divide Bridge in January 1898. High water in the spring of 1898 pushed the dam downstream about fourteen feet, ending the company's original plans. In November 1898, however, the company reorganized after securing funds from Butte General Electric Company and the Missoula Mercantile Company to construct a more substantial dam at the site. Work on that structure began in October 1898 and was completed by December 1899. The second Montana Power Company acquired the complex in 1913. High water destroyed the dam in 1927 and it was not rebuilt.⁶

Just after the completion of the General Land Office survey of the township in 1917, work began in earnest by the Montana Southern Railway to construct a line up the Big Hole River to the community of Wise River and thence to the Elkhorn Mining District in the mountains south of that settlement. Capitalist and former Lieutenant Governor William R. Allen incorporated the Butte, Wisdom and Pacific Railroad in 1913 to build a railroad to his mining properties in the Pioneer Mountains. Less than a year later, in 1914, he reincorporated it as the Southern Montana Railway and, three years later, the Montana Southern Railway. Construction of the line began in 1917. After a hiatus caused by the First World War, construction of the short line resumed in 1918. At first, construction of the railroad west from its connection to the Union Pacific Railroad station at Divide proceeded smoothly, but once the construction gangs reached the narrow Big Hole River canyon, they were forced to blast through the canyon. Traces of the old railroad are visible on the hillside above the Divide Bridge. Allen completed his 38-mile narrow gauge railroad in November 1919. Production in Allen's mines, however, never met his expectations and the line operated only sporadically for much of its existence. The lack of business forced it into receivership in 1923 and it ceased operations for several years. The failure of the Montana Power Company's Big Hole River Dam in June 1927 washed out a large section of track between the dam and Divide (sparing the bridge). The power company partially repaired the track, but didn't rebuild its dam. A booming national economy at the end of the 1920s regenerated Allen's enthusiasm in his mining properties around Coolidge. He reincorporated his railroad as the Montana Southwestern Railroad in 1928. The following year, however, the national economy collapsed and so did Allen's dreams of revitalizing his mining properties and railroads. The Montana Southwestern Railroad never again operated. By the mid-1930s, he had sold the line's rolling stock and torn up the tracks.⁷

The road along the south side of the Big Hole River had long served as a travel corridor for generations of Indians in southwestern Montana. John Mullan proposed building a road between Fort Laramie on the Overland Trail. Although never built, there is some evidence that the Big Hole Canyon provided a shortcut between the Montana-Utah Road's Butte branch and the Deer Lodge Valley in the late nineteenth century. After the development of the mines in the Vipond district and the establishment of the community of Dewey in 1872, the road became better established. The completion of the Utah-Northern Railroad (later Oregon Short Line Branch of the Union Pacific Railroad) in 1881 and the establishment of a station at Divide, the road became even more regularly traveled. By 1915, it was a county road and designated a state highway by the Montana State Highway Commission. In 1938, the Commission and the American Association of State Highway Officials officially designated the route State Highway 43. The Divide Bridge was incorporated into the highway system and remained a part of it until 1968 when Highway 43 was rerouted to the south side of the river, negating the need for two river crossings. Since then, the Divide Bridge has once again functioned as a county-owned structure.⁸

The Divide Bridge

County commissioners from Beaverhead and Silver Bow counties began meeting in the winter of 1914 to discuss the replacement of a bridge across the Big Hole River near Divide. The existing bridge, a wooden structure built in the late 19th century, was failing and had “been for a long time throwing a scare into people during the season of high water when the river reaches nearly to the floor of the bridge.” The commissioners agreed to share the cost of building a new bridge and appropriated \$10,000 to do so in March 1914. The counties advertised for the construction of a new bridge in May 1914. The commissioners stated in their advertisement, that they would consider bids for both concrete and steel structures and make their decision based on the bid prices. On May 29th, the commissioners met in Dillon and opened bids from 21 hopeful contractors. Of those, the lowest bid for a concrete bridge, from the Nelson and Pederson Company, was for \$12,051 or about \$3,000 higher than the high bid for a steel bridge. Consequently, the commissioners awarded the project to O.E. Peppard of Missoula for his low bid of \$8,988 to build a steel bridge at the site. The company began construction of the bridge the following month when the high water subsided. Peppard completed the project for Beaverhead and Silver Bow counties in early December 1914. The contractor utilized the old wagon bridge as a detour bridge until he completed the new structure. Thereafter, Silver Bow County donated its half of the bridge to Beaverhead County, which stored the structure at an unknown location. The new Divide Bridge provided access to the Butte City Water Company pump house downstream of the structure and the Montana Power Company’s hydroelectric company’s powerhouse upstream of the bridge. In 1938, the State of Montana assumed responsibility for the bridge when the American Association of State Highway Officials and the Montana State Highway Commission placed the old county road on the Federal Aid highway system.⁹

III. THE BRIDGE

A. DESCRIPTION

The Divide Bridge consists of a steel single-span, camelback Warren through truss main span and a Warren pony truss approach span. The bridge has a 230-foot total length with the 155-foot main span and the 75-foot approach span. The main span is 16 feet wide with a 15' 8" roadway width. The approach span is 16 feet wide with a roadway width of 15' 6". The bridge rests on concrete abutments and a concrete pier.

Substructure

The bridge consists of two concrete abutments with wingwalls.

Abutment No. 1 (north) is approximately 18 feet wide and 11 feet in height. The abutment is 13 inches thick. A 6' x 5' wood box is attached to the west of the north abutment. A five inch diameter pipe pierces the box and was once utilized as a natural gas conduit. It is no longer

connected to anything and is non-functioning. The west wing walls is twenty feet in width and tapers from 11 feet in height where it is attached to the abutment to five feet at its west end. The wingwall is 13 inches thick. The east wing wall is seven feet in length. It is eleven feet in height where it is connected to the abutment and tapers down to six feet in height at the east end of the structure. The wall is 13 inches thick.

Abutment No. 2 (south) is approximately twenty feet in width and eleven feet in height; it is 13 inches thick. The west wing wall is seven feet in length. The wall is eleven feet in height where it connects to the abutment and tapers down to eight feet at the west end. The east wing wall is three feet in length and eleven feet in height where it connects to the abutment. It tapers down to nine feet at the east end of the structure. Both wing walls are 13 inches thick.

Pier No. 1 is a solid structure. It is approximately eleven feet in height (visible above the water level of the river) and 22 feet in length. The pier has a corniced cap and an iron ice breaker has been bolted to the upstream side of the pier.

Superstructure

The main span of the Divide Bridge is a single-span riveted camelback Warren through truss. The span is 175 feet in length and 16 feet wide with a roadway width of 15' 8". The bridge consists of ten panels each 17' 6" in length. The lower and sloping upper chords of the main span are comprised of laced channel sections with batten plates. The lower chords are 17" x 10" and the upper chords are 18" x 12". The upper chords have continuous steel plates riveted to the top flanges of the channel sections. The vertical and diagonal members are 16" x 6" laced channel sections. The top struts of the bridge are laced angle sections. The top lateral and sway braces are angle sections. The portal braces are also angle sections. The bridge's endposts are connected at the north abutment and pier by cast steel rocker bearings.

The deck is supported by nine steel I-beam floor beams riveted to the vertical members of the truss. The abutments and floor beams support seven lines of 5" x 10" steel I-beam floor stringers that are spaced approximately 20.33" apart. The bottom lateral braces are steel angle sections. The deck of the bridge is poured concrete and the roadway is flanked by curbs raised 5" above the level of the asphalt overlay. The deck is flanked by steel angle section-type guardrails that are riveted to the vertical members of the truss.

The approach span of the bridge is a 75-foot riveted Warren pony truss. The span is 16 feet wide with a roadway width of 15' 6". The truss consists of five panels, each 15 feet in length. The trusses are seven feet deep. The bottom and upper chords are laced angle sections. The upper chords have continuous steel plates riveted to the top flanges of the channel sections. The upper chords are 12" x 6". The structure's vertical and diagonal members are laced angle sections. The endposts are connected to the south abutment and the pier by cast steel rocker bearings. The deck is supported by nine steel I-beam floor beams riveted to the verticals. The floor beams support eight lines of 5" x 10" steel I-beam floor stringers. The poured concrete deck has raised

concrete curbs. The deck is flanked by continuous steel lattice-type guard panels. The panels are 30" in height.

Material

Research in the Beaverhead and Butte-Silver Bow County Courthouses revealed no figures for the amount of steel used in the construction of the bridge. The steel was, however, fabricated by the Illinois Steel Bridge Company of Jacksonville, Illinois.

B. MODIFICATIONS

Other than an occasional asphalt overlay of the concrete deck, there have been no significant modifications made to the Divide Bridge since its construction in 1914. The bridge is situated at its original location and the setting of the site is mostly intact.

C. OWNERSHIP AND FUTURE

The Divide Bridge is currently owned and maintained by Silver Bow County. The Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) programmed this off-system bridge for replacement in 2010. Mitigation for National Register of Historic Places-eligible bridges are treated under the terms of a Programmatic Agreement (PA) that was implemented in 2007. The Divide Bridge will be replaced in 2015.

IV. BIOGRAPHICAL MATERIAL

O. E. Peppard

Obert E. Peppard was one of the most prolific of the Montana-based private bridge contractors operating in the state in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Born in Lansing, Michigan in December, 1855, Peppard was the son of a bridge builder. In the 1870s, the family relocated to Red Field, Iowa, where Obert learned the trade from his father. In 1881, he set out for Alaska, working his way across the country at a variety of construction jobs. By 1882, he was the supervisor of bridges and buildings for the Northern Pacific Railroad's Missoula Division in Montana. During his tenure with the railroad, Peppard oversaw the construction of several bridges on the railroad's Philipsburg and Bitterroot branch lines.¹⁰

By 1889, however, Peppard had decided to go into the bridge business for himself. That year, he obtained contracts from Powell County to construct two bridges across the Clark Fork River at Gold Creek and Deer Lodge (both bridges had been demolished by 1982). Over the next three decades, Peppard built bridges in western Montana, including the first Higgins Avenue Bridge in Missoula about 1892 and nearly every vehicular bridge across the Bitterroot and Blackfoot rivers. Between 1907 and 1917, when he closed his bridge-building business, Peppard built at least 27 bridges in the Treasure State.¹¹

Increasingly strict quality and economic controls by the Montana State Highway Commission and a downturn in the economy of many of the eastern Montana counties where he was most active, compelled Peppard to close his bridge-building business in 1917. Instead, he and his son went into the farm implement business and opened stores in Missoula and Spokane, Washington. Unfortunately, in 1920, Montana and much of the West was struck by a severe economic depression that resulted in the abandonment of 20% of Montana's 55,000 farms. Peppard subsequently closed his farm implement business and lived for the rest of his life on the income derived from his apartment building property in Missoula. When Obert E. Peppard died on September 25, 1929, the *Daily Missoulian* praised him as "one of the best known bridge builders and contractors of western Montana."¹²

V. FOOTNOTES

1. Gary E. Moulton, ed., *The Definitive Journals of Lewis & Clark: Through the Rockies to the Cascades*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 40, 54, 61.
2. Bernard DeVoto, *Across the Wide Missouri*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), 89; Don Spritzer, *Roadside Guide to Montana*, (Missoula: Mountain Press Publishing Co., 1999), 197; Lyman C. Pederson, JR, "Warren Angus Ferris," in Leroy R. Hafen, ed., *Trappers of the Far West*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 265; Merrill G. Burlingame, *The Montana Frontier*, (Helena: State Publishing, 1942), 264; James McClellan Hamilton, *History of Montana: From Wilderness to Statehood*, (Portland, Oregon: Binfords & Morte, 1957), 141.
3. Burlingame, *The Montana Frontier*, 84, 87; Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder, and William L. Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, Rev. ed. (Seattle: University of Washington, 1991), 64-65, 67.
4. Muriel Sibell Wolle, *Montana Pay Dirt*, (Athens, Ohio: Sage Books, 1963), 61, 64; *Montana Place Names from Alzada to Zortman*, (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2009), 68; Dale B. Robertson, *Encyclopedia of Western Railroad History*, Volume 2 (Dallas: Taylor Publishing, 1991), 326.
5. Montana Land Tract Books, volume 40; Wolle, *Montana Pay Dirt*, 64; *Progressive Men of the State of Montana*, (Chicago: A. W. Bowen, 1902), 606; US Census Records, 1900.
6. Isaac F. Marcossen, *Anaconda*, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1957), 56; Newton Carl Abbott, *Montana in the Making*, (Billings: The Gazette Printing Company, 1964), 423; Cecil H. Kirk, *A History of the Montana Power Company*, (Pleasant Hill, Oregon: Donn B. Kirk, 2008), 55, 56, 57, 60, 225.
7. Robertson, *Encyclopedia of Western Railroad History*, 2, 326; Thomas T. Taber, "Short Lines of the Treasure State: The Histories of the Independently Operated Railroads of Montana." Unpublished manuscript, April 1960, 2-7; Wolle, *Montana Pay Dirt*, 65.
8. M. J. Steere, *History of the Montana State Highway Department, 1913-1942*, (Helena: State Highway Commission, 1943), 53, 54.

9. Commissioners' Journals: Beaverhead County, book I, pp. 255-56, 259, 260, 261-62, 280 (2 March 1914, 14 April 1914, 21 April 1914, 29 May 1914, 9 December 1914); "Dillon News," *The Anaconda Standard*, 3 March 1914; "To Consider Proposition for New Big Hole Bridge," *The Anaconda Standard*, 29 May 1914; "Silver Bow-Beaverhead Bridge Contract is Let," *The Anaconda Standard*, 30 May 1914; "Missoula Builder Gets Big Hole Job," *The Anaconda Standard*, 30 May 1914; "Many Steel Bridges," *The Dillon Examiner*, 15 December 1915; State Wide Highway Planning Survey, *History of the Montana State Highway Department, 1913-1942*, (Helena: Montana State Highway Commission, 1943), 54.
10. Frederic L. Quivik, *Historic Bridges in Montana*, (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, 1982), 39, 41; "O.E. Peppard Passes After a Short Illness," *The Daily Missoulian*, 26 September 1929.
11. Quivik, *Historic Bridges*, 39, 41; "O.E. Peppard Passes," *The Daily Missoulian*, 26 September 1929.
12. Quivik, *Historic Bridges*, 39, 41; Malone et al., *Montana*, 281, 283.

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B. PERIODICALS

C. NEWSPAPERS

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D. MISCELLANEOUS

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Helena, Montana.

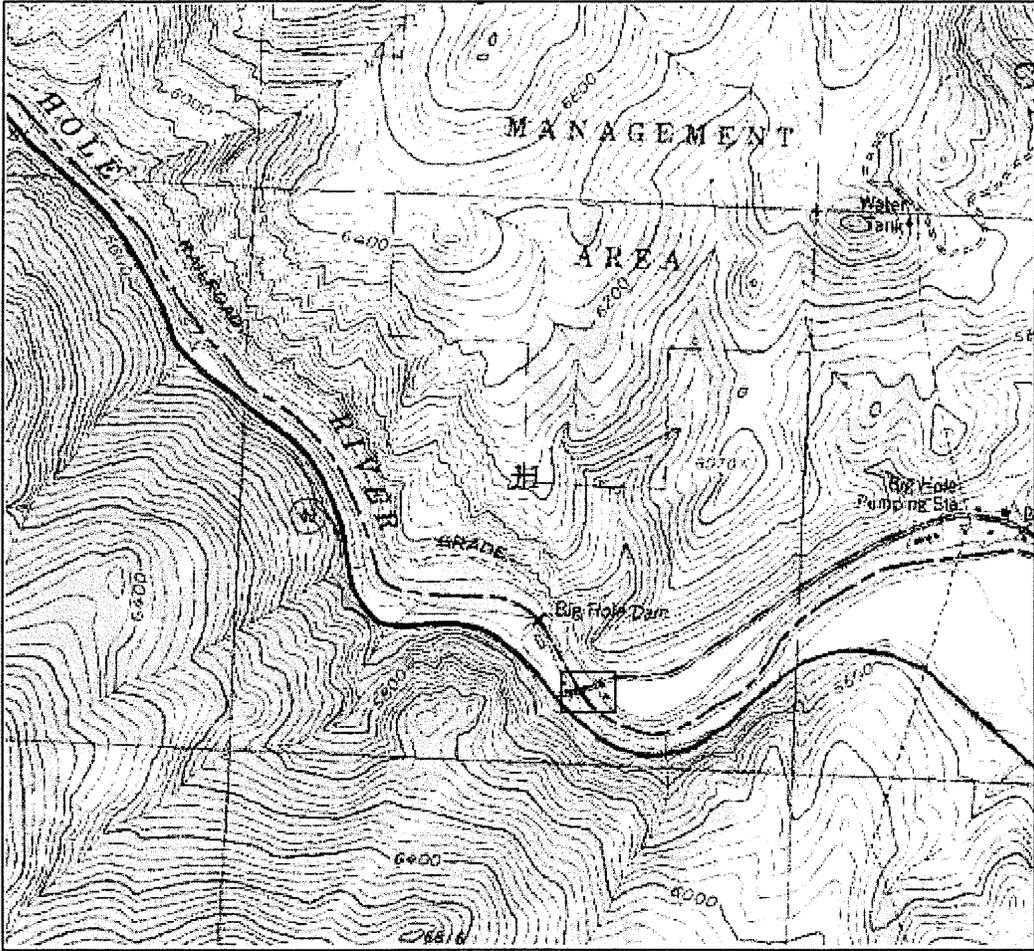
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