

The Bridge

By Den Ardinger

There is a mysterious little wooden footbridge near where I live in Western Pennsylvania that has a story that has never been told. Perhaps the time for that is coming very soon.

It's not a long bridge. Its span isn't more than fifty feet although I have never measured it. It crosses a small natural stream of ever flowing spring water. The strange thing is, no one can ever remember it looking any differently than it does today. My grandfather said it looked the same when he was a little boy and he said his father said it looked that way when the family first arrived in the area. No one can ever remember it needing repaired.

Billy McKibbon said his grandfather told him that his grandfather said it was there when they arrived and at that time there were very few farmers in the valley. There is no record of the Indians ever building it although the oldest county history mentions that the Indians had a legend that said the spring waters had curing properties.

To the best of anyone's recollection, no one has ever had the water tested. There was the strange lady with the green thumb who lived up the road who was commonly seen collecting some of the water near the bridge in a jug and carrying it back to her place in the evening. She told her neighbors that she used it for "different things" but didn't go into details.

It was common to see deer and other animals drinking there yet everyone knew it wasn't sportsman like to hunt there in the fall. For some reason, it was considered "off limits" for hunting anywhere near the place for miles around.

I can vouch for this story personally. Gary Hendricks told me that he had fallen one day while playing in the woods with his brother Jim and he badly hurt his arm. Jim was helping him back to their house about a mile away. The path took them over the bridge. He said that as he crossed the bridge, his arm stopped hurting and by the time they got home, it was just like new. There wasn't even a mark although he said it was badly bruised and swollen just after he fell. No one doubted the story. It was just one of those things that was accepted as part of the local lore.

Although not considered a "lover's lane," the bridge was said to be enchanting for couples who proposed there. This topic came up while the neighbors were sitting around talking at a community picnic one day. It aroused so much interest that Rich Harden made an announcement on the public address system asking that any couple that had proposed on the bridge to come forward and sign the roster he had placed on the table. To everyone's amazement, at the end of the day there were eighty-one couples that had signed their names. The dates spanned four generations. Until then, no one was aware of just how popular the bridge was. Another amazing thing is that no one could name a single

divorce among any family that started out in that way. Naturally, this again added to the bridge's lore yet no one thought it unusual. It was just the way things were.

My special interest in the bridge began several decades ago. I was at the courthouse for other reasons and was looking through the old records. Just for curiosity, I decided to look up the name of the original European settler on the land around the bridge. In this area, the first immigrants applied for a warrant on the land. It was then surveyed and finally the commonwealth issued a deed. Two centuries ago, at the time the first European settlers arrived just prior to the Revolutionary War, this process could take years. I spent several hours looking through the old tomes and studying the original surveyor's maps. Not surprisingly, some descendants of the original families were still living on the land after all these years.

What I found most interesting, however, is that no warrant had ever been applied for by anyone for the area around the bridge or along the spring. How could that be? It was a beautiful area, well watered, timbered, and ideally located near much of the community. Yet, surprisingly enough, several thousand acres had never been claimed.

Many of the original European settlers had been Scotch-Irish and it was well recorded that they quickly claimed the best land along the watercourses as they migrated into the area from the east in the 1770s. How could such a prime piece of property have been overlooked, I wondered?

This thought was on my mind for several weeks afterwards when one day I ran into the elderly Mrs. Pinchon who used to be our librarian. She and I had been friends all my life and we used to trade books back and forth since we had so many common interests. I asked her about the place and why she thought it had never been settled. We were standing on the sidewalk in front of a restaurant and she said we should have something to drink if we were going to get into a discussion as deep as this one was lining up to be.

Although I had never known it, she also had a lifelong interest in this very subject. Her interest was from a different vantage point, however. She was not interested in why no one ever bought the place. Her interest was in what the place could do on its own.

I didn't quite understand what she meant at first and I must have given her a quizzical expression. She patted my hands twice and leaned closer to me. "Have you ever noticed how old the trees are there?" she asked. "The timber there has never been harvested. Never. Those hardwood trees are over 500 years old. No other place in the county has been left undisturbed like this. I know. I checked a long time ago. Did you know that there has never been any coal mining done in that area? Never. None has ever been done on the surface and no deep mining either. I checked the maps. Have you ever once known the spring to not be flowing? Ever? Have you ever seen a place with so many wildflowers throughout the year? Have you ever known a place with so much color as sunlight drifts through the treetops?"

I had never heard nor considered these things before yet they seemed to fit into the mystery surrounding the bridge. How could such a place exist without some company wanting either the minerals or the timber after all these years?

She told me a story of two of her childhood acquaintances, both bullies of a sort, who got into an argument at school and challenged each other to a fistfight. Not wanting to fight on school grounds, they proposed to meet at the bridge after school and have it out once and for all. The day passed quickly and when school let out, a good many in the class followed the two into the woods and to the bridge. As the two squared off, they found that they had lost their interest in fighting each other. Much to their own surprise, they shook hands instead and sat down and talked things out. They became life long friends from then on. She looked me in the eye and assured me the story was true. She even married one of the boys years later, John Pinchon, and he told her that he couldn't explain what happened that day any better than she could. He said he just couldn't fight at the bridge.

"Do you believe in mystical places?" she asked in a hushed tone while glancing around to ensure no one else was listening. "I believe we have one here. It's not recorded as such. It's not a tourist attraction. It doesn't even have a special name. However, I believe the bridge is a portal, a gateway of sorts, to a very peaceful place where only good can come of things. I've believed this for a long time although I've never told anyone that until now. I believe the entire area is watched over by a higher force that knows only good. Only positive things can happen there. No harm can come to anyone or anything near the bridge."

I had to think about that a little. If it were so special, why wouldn't everyone have heard of it long before this? It would be famous and written about in books. The term 'mystical' belonged to places like Stonehenge or Shangri-La. I was confused. The bridge didn't look out of the ordinary yet I had to agree that it certainly was very peaceful there. But being peaceful didn't make it mystical, of course. Saying that it is "mystical" places it in a class with leprechauns, elves, fairies, and a host of other folklore beings that many did not believe in.

We sat and talked a long while. She knew a lot about the bridge. More than anyone else I knew or had ever heard of before. She said that she thinks that the reason people don't openly know about the place and write newspaper columns about it is because there is a "veil over the people that live near it." They are not even aware of the powerful energy surrounding them and because of this veil, no one talks, writes or expounds upon the bridge the way one would think they would.

We ordered dinner and she continued telling me one amazing story after another about the bridge and the area around it. "When I first started looking into the oldest land records, she said, I studied the families that settled here first. Among the first group were three brothers, the McCandless's, who purchased the land on three sides of the bridge in the 1770s. The brothers were all Freemasons and a number of their descendants still occupy the farms to this day. I found one note in the genealogy files that suggested that

they may have been the builders of the bridge. I have always felt that they understood what was there and recognized the 'magic' in that area. In a way, they were among the earliest protectors of the secret."

"A few years after John died; she continued, I awoke one night with a terrible pain in my side. I called for an ambulance and was taken to the hospital. I was there three days but the doctors could find nothing wrong with me even though they performed test after test. They finally decided on exploratory surgery since the pain simply would not go away. They found nothing but it did alleviate the pain somewhat. I was discharged and taken home.

"Nine months later the pain came back. It was the worst pain I have ever had in my life. I made up my mind that I was prepared to die this time and if that was so, I wanted to die by the bridge. How I made my way there I'll never know but somehow I did. I knew I was in bad shape but I was mentally prepared for the end. Once there, I took one sip of the water from the stream and I lay down next to it. I must have fallen asleep immediately. When I awoke hours later, the pain was completely gone." She touched my hand lightly..."Not only that. The surgeon's scar from the year before was gone too!"

Over the years, she said she has had some discussions with others about the bridge but that no one had ever followed up on it before. She said that she believed that the reason I was asking about it now is that I may be "awakening" to its powers. I didn't know what she meant exactly but she said that there were always a select few who were aware of the unique properties of the bridge but they always wisely kept it to themselves.

"The bridge is a secret place. I believe that mankind is going to need its magnificent power at some time in the near future. When that time comes, you will know what to do with the knowledge of its existence. Until that time, learn from it. Walk its paths and sit by the stream. Drink its water. When the time is right, you will know what to do."

That was the last time I spoke with Mrs. Pinchon. She died peacefully in her sleep a few weeks later. I never forgot our conversation that day and think back upon it often.

I did as she suggested and I walk the paths of the local forest every day without anyone noticing or making comment about it. One day, while sitting by the stream, I noticed a white quartz stone shining in the water. It was almost as though it called out to me. I picked it up and examined it closely. Strange as this may seem, it said that it wanted to go with me. I put it in my pocket. Later that day, I stopped by the local cemetery to visit Mrs. Pinchon's grave. I talked to her as I always did and I showed her the crystal that seemed so warm in my pocket. I bent down and placed it on the ground near her headstone.

The years of time passed quickly and I noticed that every time I stopped by her grave, there were wildflowers in full bloom there except during the coldest months of the winter. By now, I did not find this so unusual. My daily walks had begun to reveal the secrets.

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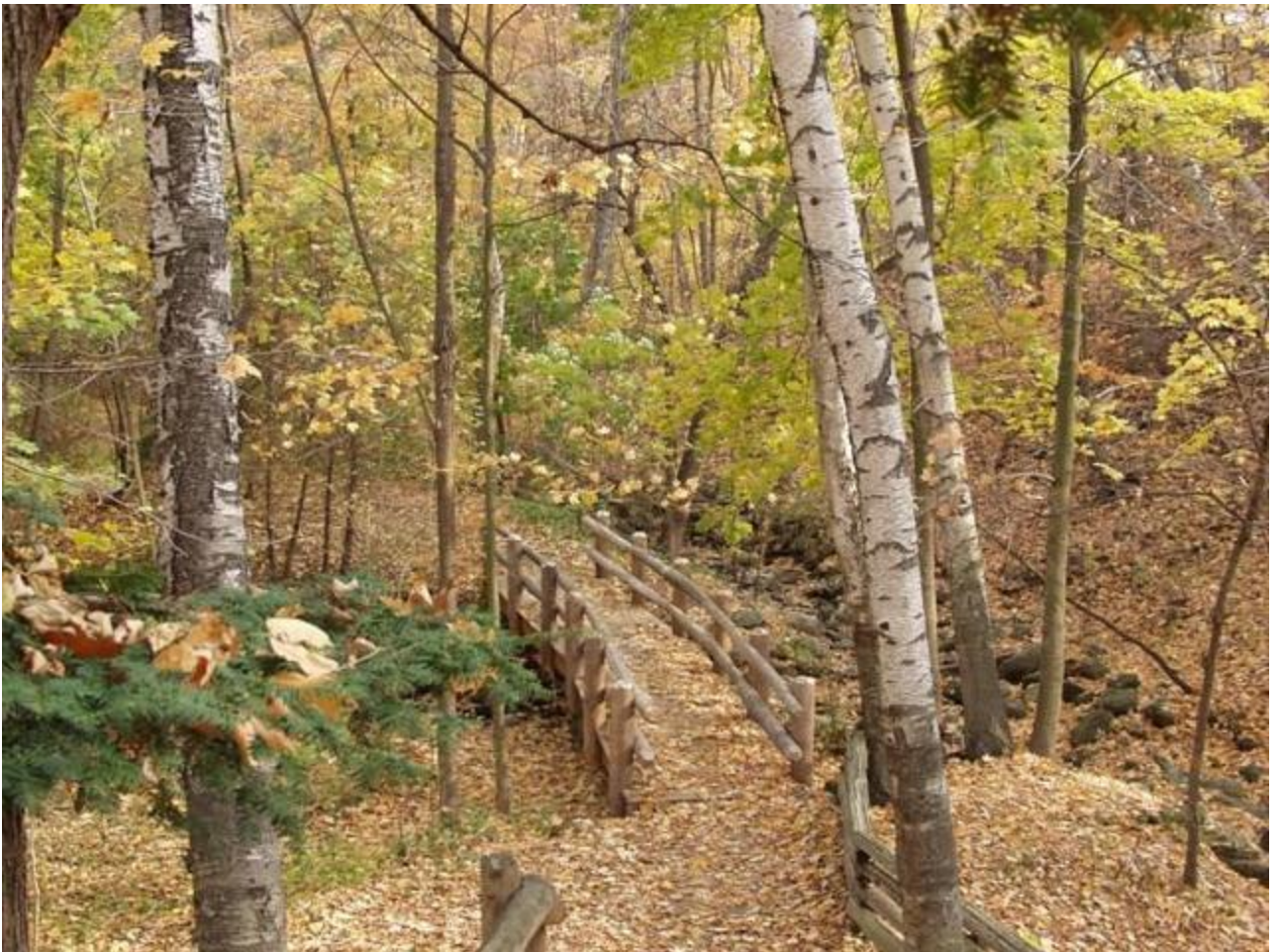
I now believe that the bridge really is a very special place. It is there, waiting, and known only to a few. When things are at their worst in the world, it will reveal itself. When its power is needed and can be used only for good, it will be there. It is powerful, timeless, and if used correctly, a portal to a better world.

A year after Mrs. Pinchon passed, I became interested in tracing my family genealogy. I was not surprised to find that I descended from Revolutionary War veteran, Alexander McCandless, one of the original brothers to settle the land, nor was I surprised to find a keen interest in joining the local Masonic Lodge. This is just the way things were.

I do not know how many others have awakened now to its presence. I seem to see more young couples coming to the bridge these days although it is never what you would consider crowded. I observe the trees and the animals as I make my way through the forest. It's a beautiful and peaceful place...and always will be.

"In an infinite universe, all things are possible."

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