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Bridgeport's history rooted in crossings and connections



By Staff

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You can cross the Gunnison River at Bridgeport, about 20 miles southeast of Grand Junction and a few miles west of U.S. Highway 50, but first you have to cross the Union Pacific railroad tracks.

You also may connect with some of the region's history that passed through Bridgeport, from ancient native people to early settlers.

In the historical era, Bridgeport became important first as a construction center for crews working on the narrow gauge railroad that reached Grand Junction from the south in 1882.

For a time, there was even a train depot and post office at the site. Later, Bridgeport was a key location for access to the west side of the Gunnison River, to lands that would become important for orchards and cattle.

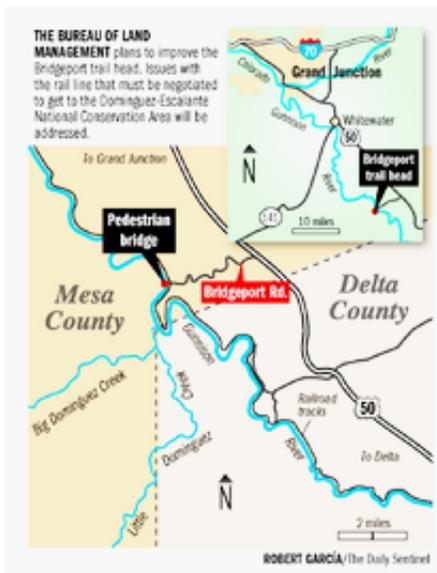
Initially, that access was primarily by trolley ferry, as shown in the photo here. But in 1906, a bridge was moved from De Beque to Bridgeport, allowing cattle and vehicle access across the river and providing a new name for the tiny community there.



But long before the first Europeans arrived in this part of the West, nearly 2,000 years ago, in fact, early inhabitants of this region were using the eastern bank of the Gunnison River near Bridgeport as a place to camp, perhaps as they migrated along the river or traveled from higher mountains to lower desert country.

These days, Bridgeport is important as a key access point for hikers and horseback riders visiting the Dominguez Creek area and wilderness lands within the Bureau of Land Management's Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area.

But there are problems with that access. It requires hikers and horses to traverse a mile of Union Pacific Railroad right-of-way along a narrow dirt road where there is little room to spare if a train rumbles past. Then those hikers and horseback riders must cross the railroad tracks to reach the pedestrian bridge installed by the BLM over the Gunnison River about a decade ago.



To alleviate these issues, there is a new effort underway to create yet another crossing at Bridgeport. This one would be a pedestrian and equestrian underpass of the railroad tracks about a mile upstream from the current BLM parking lot, near the entrance to the pedestrian bridge across the river. A new trail would be built, allowing pedestrians and equestrians to reach the underpass without traveling on the railroad right-of-way.

Just this month, Mesa County applied for a \$75,000 Great Outdoors Colorado grant to help fund engineering and design on the underpass. It is doing so with the support of the BLM and the acquiescence of the Union Pacific. If the grant is approved, a final plan for the underpass would be completed in June 2015. No date for construction of the project has been scheduled yet.

The railroad is indelibly connected to Bridgeport's history.

"There probably was a section crew living there in the early days," said John Horn of Alpine Archaeological Consultants in Montrose. His firm was hired by the BLM to conduct archaeological survey work in the vicinity of where the underpass would be constructed.



In the late 19th century, there would have been tool sheds, equipment for maintaining the tracks such as a handcart, a bunkhouse for the crew and perhaps a larger house for the foreman. Those sorts of buildings probably account for most of the structures seen on the east side of the river in early photographs of Bridgeport, Horn said.

Even the Mesa County road that now leads from U.S. Highway 50 down to Bridgeport is connected to the railroad, he said. "It shows up on General Land Office maps from 1883 and 1884. I'm sure that road was built to supply the crews building the railroad." Interestingly, those railroad construction crews apparently included Zuni Indians from New Mexico, based on 19th century rock art left in the area, said Zeb Miracle, curator of programs and advancement at the Museum of Western Colorado.

There was for a time a small train depot at Bridgeport, which was primarily used to ship fruit and cattle, Horn said. For a brief time, there was even a post office, which moved several times and was listed first as Jones, Colo., then later as Arlington, Colo., he said. It closed in 1884, well before fruit growing on the irrigated lands west of the river became prominent.

Horn's survey crew found a few historical artifacts, mostly related to the railroad, especially in spots where the alignment for the old narrow-gauge railroad diverged from the alignment of the modern, standard-gauge line. The standard gauge replaced the narrow gauge in about 1906.

In the survey work conducted last fall, the group also found evidence of at least three ancient encampments. The earliest was probably used sometime between 200 A.D. and 390 A.D., Horn said. The most recent dated from 780 A.D. to 970 A.D.

"These weren't villages, just seasonal camping spots," he said. They were neither Fremont nor Anasazi people, but hunter gatherers who migrated through the area, he added.

They may have been some of the same inhabitants who created numerous images of rock art about a mile west of

Bridgeport in Dominguez Canyon.

There likely were many more campsites in the area, but regular flooding by the Gunnison River over the centuries and the scouring activity of that flooding has eliminated much evidence.

The evidence of campsites that was found was buried under eight to 10 feet of sediment, and was reburied after the survey work was completed.

Long after those natives used the area for seasonal camping, it became important for its agricultural produce. Fred and Avery Burford began raising apples on the west side of the river in the 1890s, according to "Mesa County, Colorado: A 100-year History," by Emma McCreanor. Later, the 370-acre orchard was acquired by John Moore, who eventually sold it to his son, Frank, and a cousin, George Emerson. They converted it to peaches and marketed their produce under the name "Indian Rock" brand peaches.

The orchard was eventually sold to the Musser family and it became part of that family's large cattle operation in the Dominguez and Escalante Creek areas.

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