



History of Folsom's Rainbow Bridge/Around Here magazine/Spring 2021
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On the rainy evening of Feb. 10, 1919, F.M. Sands of Orangevale made a routine automobile drive to Folsom. At the American River, his normal route changed. Instead of heading to the old truss bridge, the road took him over a new span a few yards downstream.

Part way across, Mr. Sands stopped to roll away some small boulders. At the Folsom end, his car dropped 18 inches into mud.

And that was it. With no fanfare, no celebration, no speech-making, not even a formal announcement, F.M. Sands earned "the distinction of being the first man to drive across" the new American River Bridge at Folsom, as reported by the Folsom Telegraph a few days later. Today, we know that bridge as Rainbow.

A humble kickoff for a river crossing that would become a Folsom icon and one of the most photographed spots in the Mother Lode. Rainbow turned 102 this year, and, with a few strategic nips and tucks, she is still a beauty.

Several bridges carried foot and horse traffic, and, briefly, trains, across the river in Folsom before Rainbow was built, but Rainbow was the first designed for automobiles. The truss, erected 26 years earlier, was only 12 feet wide and could not support vehicle traffic, though cars did cross it – one at a time. The truss closed when Rainbow opened and stood like a ghost over the town until it was moved to Siskiyou County in 1931. Except for Folsom Dam Road, opened in 1955 and frequently out of service, two-lane Rainbow served as the city's only traffic crossing for 80 years.

Bridges at the turn of the last century were primarily made of steel or wood. Rainbow, by contrast, was built of reinforced concrete, then a relatively new construction material. Embedding concrete with reinforcing steel allows structures not only to support heavy weight but to bend under stress, as from earthquakes, without breaking. A reinforced concrete building in San Francisco and bridge in Golden Gate Park notably remained standing during the 1906 earthquake.

Sacramento County built four reinforced concrete bridges in Folsom in the half-decade from 1915 to 1919. Rainbow was the last, after the Orangevale Avenue Bridge (1915) and Figueroa Street and Powerhouse Canal

bridges (1916). It was also the longest. At 511 feet with a 209-foot arch, it was then the fourth-longest concrete arch span in the world. All four bridges were designed by county surveyor Drury Butler.

In 1918, the Folsom Telegraph described the emerging structure as “rising apparently out of solid rocks.” It still looks that way today with its graceful arch ascending from Folsom’s coarse granite outcroppings. The decorative pillars and open spandrels between the arch and roadway seem to frame the rugged view.

“The bridge is one of the finest in the county,” the Sacramento Union reported on Jan. 25, 1919, after the Board of Supervisors had completed its final inspection. Construction had cost \$90,000.

Rainbow was meant from the start to be a major through-crossing. According to the Telegraph, Sacramento County planned Rainbow as the final link in a “40-mile loop ... through some of the richest agricultural lands in the state.” The expectation was the stretch along Greenback Lane and Folsom Boulevard would become a famous tourist attraction. Greenback passed by olive and orange groves, and the “pretty houses” of their profitable owners, reported the Jan. 2, 1916, Sacramento Union. Folsom Boulevard, the article said, was “one of the most famous driveways of the state,” known for its “rich garden section.” Tourism and agriculture no longer define those streets, but Rainbow’s charm still brings visitors with cameras and canvases.

For one year – 1927 – Rainbow was part of the historic Lincoln Highway, the first coast-to-coast route in the United States. At the time, the road roughly followed today’s Highway 50 to Sacramento. That year, it crossed Rainbow Bridge to connect with Greenback Lane and then to Sacramento. The Lincoln Highway designation was removed in 1928 when the federal government began numbering its highways.

Today, no one knows the bridge as anything other than Rainbow, but for its first two decades, it was referred to by its official name or called simply “the bridge.” That changed in the early 1940s – some accounts say the 1950s – when George Trejo, a Folsom resident, suggested to a Sutter Street shopkeeper that the more descriptive label be used on postcards. The name immediately took hold, and the picturesque crossing has been Rainbow ever since.

Only 25 feet wide when it was built, the bridge was widened to 31 feet in 1969 and a sidewalk added. The sidewalk closed after the Lake Natoma Crossing opened with two sidewalks and viewing platforms.

In 2016, Rainbow was given a \$1 million facelift, with care taken to preserve the structure’s historic integrity. According to Folsom Public Works Director Dave Nugen, work was done on the arches, spandrels and deck, the joints were rehabilitated, and a polyester concrete overlay was applied to the roadway. Although two new four-lane bridges now serve the city, an estimated 27,000 vehicles still cross Rainbow each day.

With proper maintenance, Nugen says, this beloved bridge could continue carrying traffic over the Rainbow for another century at least.