

THE BRAZOS LIFT-BRIDGE INCIDENT

The Brazos bridge is a lift railway bridge with 98 feet of clearance above the Napa River. The lift structure remains in the elevated position except when a train passes. There is a fully furnished apartment atop the lift that provides accommodations for the bridge keeper. Originally, built as a swing bridge, it was converted to a lift bridge. On several occasions the bridge has not been in the proper position to receive trains, resulting in locomotives plunging into the river. The regional railway utilizing the bridge has episodically been active and inactive. The bridge was refurbished and reopened in 2009 in order to serve trains from the California Northern Railroad that accesses the railway system operated by the North Coast Railroad Authority and the Northwestern Pacific railroad near Schellville to the west.

In 1983 a train known as the Schellville Turn, which went from Oakland to Suisun-Fairfield then on to Lombard (Napa Junction) was tied down, but the air bled off and it rolled away railroad east (geographic west) toward the Brazos drawbridge on the Napa river, which was always left open for boat traffic. The result was two geeps "taking a bath." Railfan Gene Poon was in the right place at the right time and shot the slides. Here is Gene's story:

I went to Martinez to photograph a westbound SP passenger extra. It turned out to be an officers' special: SDP45 #3201, a sleeper, and two business cars; not worth the effort, though it's a good photo. While waiting, I heard the Schellville Turn on the radio with the Suisun Bay Bridge tender, and decided that since the passenger train was a disappointment, I'd follow the Turn over the hill into Lombard and onto the NWP, which I was then documenting in its last wholly SP-owned era. I lived, and still live, in Sonoma County, so it was a roundabout way home.

After snapping a nice shot at Creston and another at Napa Junction, I drove ahead to position myself on the opposite (west) bank of the Napa River. I never had gotten a photo of a train on the bridge, and here was a chance, in perfect lighting. It was a long wait. My scanner batteries went dead, so I just sat there and enjoyed the warm afternoon. The owner of the property where I was waiting would come out to chat every now and then.

Suddenly a company van drove up and stopped at the east approach to the bridge. The SP employee shooed a couple of kids off the bridge. The owner's wife was on the balcony of their home and she shouted to us, "Did you hear what he said? There's a runaway train coming!" I looked at the homeowner, and we decided this was too weird to be true. I remember even saying, "Nah. Couldn't be!"

But it was true. The two engines, SP3781 and 3424, rolled onto the bridge at about 20 mph, the lead one shattering the timbers which form a fender to protect the bridge from water traffic. I had my Pentax up to my eye, and fired off a sequence of five shots, two of which were perfectly timed photos of the 3781 and then the 3424 hitting the water. The 3781 wound up submerged. 3424 remained with one end hung up on the bridge, an alarm bell clanging inside its empty cab.

I'm sure my old friend Capt. Gillam of the SP Police, with whom I worked on several occasions (I was a local police officer at the time), checked out my story carefully in light of the possible 'railfan contribution' to the incident.

Next day, there was a big crowd present as two big cranes on barges lifted the 3424 off the bridge where it had hung up. The SP Police let me onto the opposite end of the bridge to photograph the lifting of the 3424 out of the river at dusk, after a long day's underwater work. The 3781 took longer; I had gone home, very tired, by the time it was fished out at about 3 a.m.

David P. Morgan of TRAINS, when he learned that I had the photo sequence of the splashdown, called me with an offer I couldn't refuse. Anything to keep those photos from going to Carstens, I guess.

The photo sequence is still posted on my office wall. It gets a lot of comments. A thousand sets were sold to various SP employees and officials from as near as Oakland to as far as New Orleans.

Graham Henry also recalled the incident:

I was working for the SP as a maintenance of way electrician at that time. We were getting ready to call it a day, as we worked 7 to 3:30, when the phone call came in that there were two units in the river! My first thought was, "Baloney! There's no way two units could be in the river without destroying the bridge." When the bridge was in full lift, which is where it was kept except when a train wanted to cross it, I could touch the counterweights with my outstretched hand. I am 5-11.

As it turned out a signal maintainer had picked up one of the engine crew and they took off after the two units. The maintainer let the crewman off so he could try and get aboard to stop the two units and raced to the bridge to lower it.

The crewman was unsuccessful in his attempt to board it. The maintainer arrived at the bridge and unlocked the control cabinet and pushed the button to lower the bridge. I have done this myself on more than one occasion. As the bridge started down (it's 90-plus feet above the river) the two units entered the bridge circuit and tripped a relay which shuts off all power to the bridge. This stopped the bridge from coming down and the lesser of two evils took place. The units went in the river. If they had hit the counterweight it would have badly damaged the bridge. I understand one unit had just been rebuilt a short time before the swim.

I was one of the SP employees who bought a set of Gene's pictures.



