

## Brothers work to save aging U.S. 79 bridge

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CLARENDON - Two young Monroe County brothers say their effort to save an 83-year-old bridge in their hometown from demolition will preserve a link to the impoverished Delta's past and boost the region's economic and cultural future.

East Arkansas may face long odds in arresting continued economic decline, but John Moore IV and Jeremiah Moore insist they are optimistic in the face of even steeper odds in rescuing the aging bridge over the White River at Clarendon.

The Moores have joined forces with city officials and others to stop the planned demolition of the historic bridge on U.S. 79 to provide time to raise money to maintain the bridge as a crossing for cyclists, hikers, bird-watchers and other outdoor enthusiasts through one of largest remaining tracts of contiguous bottomland hardwood forest on the North American continent.

"This is one of our great shots at preserving history and rebuilding our future," John Moore said. "It won't be just for Clarendon. It will be for Marianna, Hughes and Roe."

John Moore already has bucked the odds. The 26-year-old married father of two returned to his hometown two years ago to raise his family.

Many in his circumstance leave. In fact, no county in Arkansas lost more population from 2000-2010 than Monroe County, according to the U.S. Census. Monroe County began the decade with 10,254 residents. Ten years later, 8,149 people called the county home, a decline of 20.5 percent.

Moore's brother, Jeremiah, 20, is a sophomore in college.

Both are leading efforts to save what is colloquially known as the "Big White River Bridge," which they say will help reverse the fortunes of their town and the surrounding region.

"They are figures right out of Arkansas mythology," said Porter Briggs<sup>1</sup>, a Little Rock businessman and preservationist who is among those backing the efforts of the Moores. "They love it over there."

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<sup>1</sup> The archived edition of the article had spelled this as "Biggs" here and throughout the article. It has been corrected in this version.

"They are doing everything they can to find a way to make a life for themselves," Briggs said of the brothers, whose blue jeans and pickup trucks blend in with the duck hunters in town as hunting season winds down.

For now, the Moores are banking on the storied bridge that is scheduled to be removed some time this year unless they can find a way to stop it.

Opened to traffic in 1931, the double-span warren truss structure allowed travelers to cross the White River without a ferry on U.S. 79, or the Military Road, which was the first "all-weather" road between Little Rock and Memphis.

The bridge "was an impressive engineering project, as well as a vital contribution to the growth not only of Clarendon and Monroe County, but also much of Eastern Arkansas," according to the National Register of Historic Places, where the bridge has been registered since 1984. It cost \$1.5 million to build and charged users a toll to help underwrite its cost.

The register called the bridge's June 11, 1931, dedication a "tremendous spectacle, complete with a parade with bands and floats from Brinkley, Stuttgart, Helena, Marianna, Roe, Holly Grove and Little Rock."

Dignitaries on hand included Gov. Harvey Parnell; Justin Matthews of North Little Rock, a member of the Arkansas Highway Commission; and Harvey C. Couch of Arkansas Power and Light Co., which now is known as Entergy Arkansas.

The bridge was one of three similar bridges designed by Ira G. Hedrick, an engineer who studied at the University of Arkansas. One of the two other bridges, at Augusta, already has been dismantled. An effort is under way to save the third at Newport.

"I've known about that Clarendon bridge for decades," Briggs said. "To me, it's one of the most beautiful structures in the state and very historically significant. I was stunned that they were going to tear that beautiful structure down."

The bridge has been scheduled to come down for at least 15 years, when the Arkansas Highway and Transportation Department began discussions with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to replace the bridge.

Under federal law, replacing the bridge had to be done in such a way as to be "compatible" with the White River National Wildlife Refuge and the Cache River National Wildlife Refuge. The refuges border either side of the western approach to the bridge.

"A lot of work has gone into preparations for the new bridge and the dismantling of the old," said Danny Straessle, a spokesman for the Highway and Transportation Department.

The new bridge, under construction since 2010 at a cost of \$34.1 million, is being built to the south of the old bridge and is scheduled to be completed later this year.

The old bridge's western approach will be in the Cache River National Wildlife Refuge.

Under an agreement with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the bridge and approaches have to be demolished, the demolished materials removed and the right of way restored to the "natural topography," including the re-establishment of native hardwoods, according to a "compatibility determination" document the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service signed in 2007.

The refuge, established in 1986 to protect significant wetland habitats and provide feeding and resting areas for migrating waterfowl, encompasses about 56,000 acres in Jackson, Woodruff, Monroe, and Prairie counties. It is one of the few remaining areas in the Lower Mississippi River Valley unaltered by significant channelization and drainage, according to the service.

Under federal law, changes in the refuge cannot "materially interfere with or significantly detract from the purpose for which the refuge was established," said Keith Weaver, who is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service project leader for the Central Arkansas National Wildlife Refuge Complex, which includes the refuge.

The 2007 agreement, among other things, necessitated the Highway and Transportation Department to redesign the new bridge to minimize its impact on the flood plain, Weaver added.

The Moores began their effort to save the old bridge about two years ago. John Moore, who is curator of the Jacobs Park and Museum in Clarendon, enlisted city fathers, including Mayor James Stinson III.

Stinson said the city cannot afford to maintain the bridge, which is a requirement for it to remain. He hopes some way is found to convert it to a pedestrian and cycling facility, like the Big Dam Bridge in Little Rock or a railroad bridge over the Mississippi River at Memphis that is being converted to a pedestrian and cycling facility.

He and John Moore point to the growing popularity in long-distance cycling, especially, that has been fostered by the new places to ride.

"We'd like to be a part of that," Stinson said.

Moore recalled seeing several groups of long-distance riders come through Clarendon this past summer. Converting the old bridge into what would be known as the Clarendon Historic Trail would attract more of them, with the city perfectly situated at roughly the halfway point between Memphis and Little Rock, Moore said. Studies show those riders can spend as much as \$300 daily during long rides, he said.

"If it helps the Delta, bring it on," he said.

Moore has enlisted the U.S. Parks Service to provide technical assistance and helped persuade the U.S. Coast Guard to drop its requirement that the old bridge must come down within 90 days of the new one being opened to traffic. The Ecological Design Group in Wynne was drafted to develop a concept for the trail, which would involve essentially cutting the width of the western approach to the bridge from about 25 feet to 12 feet and restoring the vegetation around it.

Several meetings have been held with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials, including Weaver.

The Highway and Transportation Department has no immediate plans to remove the old bridge, but wouldn't say how long it might wait.

"It's not indefinite," Straessle said.

Under federal rules, the department is allowed to devote the estimated cost of the bridge removal - about \$740,000 - to improvements to the structure if it remains. The money, however, can't be set aside for maintenance.

"So we want to make sure if we don't tear it down, the structure is left in good hands," Straessle said.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also is open to continuing working with the group trying to save the bridge. To a point.

"We embrace their vision," Weaver said of the effort of Moore and others. "Their current proposal is not doable. But we are very willing ... to consider any appropriate and compatible activities. None of it would include retaining the existing infrastructure in the refuge.

"We remain very interested in how we might be a benefit to the local community."

**Caption: Submitted photo**

**Hikers and bird-watchers use the old U.S. 79 bridge over the White River in this rendering from Ecological Design Group of Wynne.**

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**John Moore, executive director of the Margaret Moore Jacobs Museum and Gardens in Clarendon, is helping lead efforts to save the U.S. 79 bridge over the White River. The bridge is being replaced, and Moore and others want to convert the 83-year-old span into a crossing for cyclists, hikers and bird-watchers.**