

CULTURAL HISTORY

The Mystery Pier

by Neal McLain

If you've ever driven across the Brazoria Bridge, you may have noticed an abandoned bridge pier off to the north.



Abandoned Bridge Pier, seen from Brazoria Bridge
Photo: Neal McLain

What is it?

It's the remains of the China Street Bridge, the first road bridge across the Brazos River at Brazoria. It was a steel-truss, wood-decked, center-pivot "swing bridge" constructed in 1912. The entire bridge structure could be pivoted on the center pier to allow river traffic to pass

The bridge collapsed into the river in the 1930s during a period of high water, apparently due to failure of the west pier. The center-pivot pier is all that remains today. Although the pier was once in the center of the river, erosion of the west bank and deposition on the east bank have moved the river westerly, with the result that the pier is no longer in the center of the river.

The following photo shows the bridge as it existed in the 1920s and 1930s.



China Street Bridge circa 1920 or 1930
Photo: Brazoria County Historical Museum

For those of us who drive across the Brazoria Bridge on a regular basis, the old pier is a familiar sight. It's a quick way to gauge the water level during periods of high water.



Pier from the west bank of the river, at low and high water
Photos: Neal McLain

For several years after the collapse of the China Street Bridge, Brazoria was isolated, connected to the east side of the river only by a ferry. Finally, In 1939, the Brazoria Bridge was opened. This bridge is still in use today, carrying State Highway 332 and FM521 across the Brazos River.



The Brazoria Bridge in 2004
Photo: Neal McLain

The Brazoria Bridge has served Brazoria well for 70 years. It's a recorded Texas Historic Landmark, and it's listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

But it's about to be replaced. The Texas Department of Transportation is constructing a new four-lane girder bridge just south of the Brazoria Bridge. After the new bridge opens, the old Brazoria Bridge will remain standing to provide access to a new park planned for construction on the east side of the river.

Many of the piers for the new bridge are already in place. On a foggy day, they look like the ruins of Mediaeval Gothic church.



SH332/FM521 Highway Bridge Under Construction, 2008
Photo: Neal McLain