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Photographs / Images: Camp Clarke Bridge over the North Platte River near Bridgeport, built by Henry T Clarke in 1876

## Mr. Clarke's Long Bridge



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**T**HE CAMP CLARKE BRIDGE WAS ONE OF Nebraska's nineteenth-century engineering marvels. Henry T. Clarke built the massive, sixty-one-truss, wooden bridge over the North Platte River, a few miles west of present-day Bridgeport, in the spring of 1876. Nearly half a mile long, the bridge was a vital link in the trail leading from the Union Pacific Railroad at Sidney to the gold mining camps in the Black Hills of Dakota. Ponderous ox trains hauling thousands of pounds of foodstuffs and supplies for mining camps and Indian agencies, stagecoaches carrying mail, gold, and passengers, and U.S. Army columns all used the bridge. Here the bar is up, allowing a stage to pull onto the bridge.

Omaha businessmen who hoped to profit from the Black Hills trade engaged Clarke, a Bellevue, Nebraska, freighter and bridge builder, to erect the bridge. It was completed in about two months, and the first wagons crossed it on May 13, 1876. Clarke recovered his costs by collecting tolls. A small settlement, including a hotel, blacksmith shop, post office, and corral sprang up near the south end of the bridge. A military blockhouse was erected at the north end. The complex was named Camp Clarke. By 1880 railroads extended to the Missouri River in Dakota Territory and use of the Sidney to Black Hills Trail and the Camp Clarke Bridge declined. ☐

JAMES POTTER