

We are writing in support of preserving the Willow Glen Trestle Bridge. The bridge is personally meaningful to us because we are two of Howard M. Smitten's surviving grandchildren. As you know, Howard was likely the structural engineer directing the Willow Glen project, having been appointed bridge engineer for Western Pacific in early 1921. We believe that his contributions to the transportation system of early twentieth-century California are significant and the structures to which he contributed ought to be preserved if at all possible.

Born in San Jose in 1878, Howard was raised in San Francisco, where his father, Lewis, was an artist as well as a painter of railway carriages. His mother was Eda St. John Smitten, who in later years would become a noted California artist specializing in landscapes and botanical subjects. Howard himself was interested in visual arts, in his case photography. He studied at UC Berkeley where he became interested in engineering and worked with Southern Pacific as a rodman. In WWI he volunteered and served from 1917-1919 in the army's 37th Engineers, doing bridge construction both in the U. S. and across France. Returning from the war, he joined Southern Pacific again but almost immediately joined Western Pacific, where he remained for 30 years. His later career was focused notably on Western Pacific's Feather River Route, and he contributed to such famously difficult engineering projects as constructing and maintaining the Inside Gateway and the Keddie Wye.

Howard's contributions should be preserved for several reasons. The Willow Glen Trestle is one of the few such bridges left in the state, and it has stood for almost 100 years. That in itself is reason enough. But add to that the fact that Howard's career addressed difficult engineering feats during WWI and afterwards on the Feather River Canyon. Men and women like Howard were dedicated, visionary professionals who helped California to prosper through a transportation system that managed to overcome very difficult geography.

Howard was indeed a visionary, if not an idealist. One of our most vivid memories of visiting our grandparents in Walnut Creek was a picture Howard had drawn that hung by the dining room table. Titled "The Bridge" and dated February 2, 1929, it is an idealized bridge seen from an angle so that it seems to soar across the frame. Under the bridge itself he had copied a famous poem by Will Allen Dromgoole, a very popular poet of the early twentieth century, titled "The Bridge Builder." In the poem, the builder is asked why he has built the bridge, and the builder responds:

"There followeth after me today,  
A youth, whose feet must pass this way.

This chasm, that has been naught to me,  
To that fair youth may a pitfall be.  
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;  
Good friend, I am building this bridge for him."

Those lines capture our grandfather's spirit: building so that others will benefit. For us, and we would hope for others, the Willow Glen Trestle Bridge symbolizes that ideal.

Sincerely,

Linda Gibson (nee Smitten)

Jeffrey Smitten