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The North Fork San Gabriel bridge in Joppa is one of two iron-truss bridges still standing in Burnet County. The Burnet County Historical Commission is holding a fish fry to raise money to preserve the structures. Staff photo by Daniel Clifton

JOPPA — They're the two last remaining stalwarts of an iron-truss bridge era of Burnet County, but without help, the structures face an uncertain future.

"They're visual reminders of Burnet County's history, and we want to preserve them so they're here in the future," said JoAnn Myers of the Burnet County Historical Commission.

The two bridges — the North Fork San Gabriel Bridge in Joppa and the Russell Fork San Gabriel Bridge just south of Joppa — are the only two left from an effort starting in 1898 to connect people and communities across Burnet County. In 1898, Burnet County residents passed a bond of \$40,000 to build iron bridges across the county. It took the county about 40 years to pay off the debt, but the economic return came back many times over.

"These were bridges, you know, that allowed farmers to get their things to town or out of the field. People got to town and kids got to school because of these bridges," Myers said. "The county did a wonderful thing, especially for the rural people, in building these bridges."

Now the historical commission and others hope residents will step up to help raise money to preserve these last two spans and get the structures recognized by the federal and state government for their historical significance.

On Saturday, Sept. 17, the commission is hosting the Fish Fry Benefit for the Iron Bridges of Burnet County at the Joppa Community Center, 8425 CR 210 in Joppa (north of Bertram). The event is 5-7 p.m. For a \$10 donation, people can enjoy a full catfish meal complete with coleslaw, french fries and homemade peach cobbler.

"We'll also have a lot more things, including a classic car show and Joppa bridge T-shirts for sale," Myers said.

There will also be local history books for purchase and a cake/pie auction.

At the heart of it is preserving these two bridges.

"We have people who remember using those bridges or even playing in the creek below them," Myers said. "So we just think it's important to do what we can to preserve them."

Neither bridge is in service as new structures have replaced them. But along with being visual reminders of the past, Myers said they can still serve more utilitarian purposes as walking and/or cycling paths.

While we take bridges for granted today, there was a time when county residents didn't have many options for crossing rivers and streams. When faced with getting their livestock, cotton or other produce from the field or to town, farmers and ranchers often had to take longer routes or, in the case of high water, wait it out.

Even for kids trying to get to school, crossing streams was sometimes a challenge.

The 1898 bond initiated a flurry of bridge construction. Crews built the North Fork San Gabriel Bridge in 1907, and residents used it until 2000 when a new bridge replaced it. The Missouri Valley Bridge & Iron Co. built the Russell Fork San Gabriel Bridge in 1911. It served the county for 94 years until a new bridge built in 2005 bypassed the older one.

Myers said both bridges are eligible for the National Register of Historic Places and Texas Historical Commission markers.

"But both of those take money," Myers said, "which is one of the reasons we're having this fundraiser."

It's also about building community recognition of the two bridges and garnering support to preserve them.

"We're losing parts of our history, and these are two very visual artifacts that we can help protect," Myers added.

While she hopes the fish fry will draw quite a few of people, Myers realized some folks might not be able to attend but still want to support preservation efforts. To do that, send donations to: Burnet County Historical Commission, ATTN: Joppa Bridge Fund, 220 S. Pierce St., Burnet, TX 78611.

daniel@thepicayune.com

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