

A Joppa Christmas

12/11/25 | Suzanne Freeman



LEFT: The Joppa Bridge lit up for Christmas in 2024. The 118-year-old bridge was washed away in the Fourth of July weekend flood the following summer. The community strung lights in an outline of the bridge entrance for Christmas 2025. Photo by Toni Schmid **RIGHT:** Families gathered on the Joppa Bridge to sing carols, bang drums, and enjoy hot chocolate and cookies on a Christmas past. The community plans a similar celebration on the banks of the North San Gabriel River at 4 p.m. Dec. 14, despite the loss of the bridge to the Fourth of July weekend flood this past summer. Photo by Martelle Luedecke/Luedecke Photography

Christmas lights will once again brighten holiday nights in Joppa, despite the loss of its historic iron-truss bridge to the Fourth of July weekend flood this summer. The Burnet County community will string lights where the bridge once stood and host a Joppa Christmas Village celebration at 4 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 14.

"We are planning a hayride, hot cocoa and cider, and Christmas caroling," said Toni Schmid, who is working with the newly formed nonprofit Joppa Community Association to continue the town's holiday traditions. "We are going to decorate like crazy."

The Joppa Bridge opened in 1907, facilitating easier access for farmers and ranchers to lucrative agricultural markets. It was granted a Texas historical marker in 2017. Its demise has reconnected a longtime, tightly bonded community in new ways.

Community Christmas celebrations in Joppa date from when it built its first schoolhouse in 1881 to the present. In the town's early years, through the mid-20th century, the farmers and ranchers who called Joppa home gathered at the schoolhouse on Christmas Eve, where Santa came to distribute presents. After a worship service in the neighboring church, they crossed CR 210 to see if Santa had arrived.

"Santa didn't come to our houses," said Janet Taylor Rose, a descendant of one of Joppa's founders, William Washington Taylor, who donated the land for the church in the late 1880s. "Santa Claus came into the school where we all gathered. He pulled back a curtain that was hiding the Christmas tree. The gifts were hung all over the tree, and he handed them out."

Popular gifts included dolls and covered wagons, which were passed around for everyone to see.

"We all had Christmas trees at home, but there were no presents under them," Rose said. "On Christmas Day, we went to our grandma's."

The community has grown since those early years, and now includes newcomers with families who have joined in on the holiday traditions of old with a modern twist. In this century, Christmas celebrations centered on the historic Joppa Bridge, an iron-truss bridge that connected the community center and the church at the intersection of county roads 200, 210, and 217. Each November, residents would gather to string bright lights along the trusses and then party on the wood-planked roadway with hot chocolate, cookies, and carols.

That tradition washed down the San Gabriel River in the early morning hours of July 5 as heavy rains flooded Central Texas, claiming property and lives.

"It's heartbreaking, but no one was hurt here," said Burnet resident Rachel Bryson, who grew up in Joppa and, despite fond memories of playing on the bridge, wanted to keep the loss of iron and wood in perspective. "So many lives were lost (in the flood), this seems almost irrelevant."

Bryson and Rose were two of three women with family histories tied to the Joppa community for over 100 years each who recently stood with a comparative newcomer (1972!) on the banks of the North San Gabriel River, staring at what was left of the bridge after the floods: nothing but concrete columns and a few twisted iron beams. The structure's remains rest about a mile downriver in a heap of debris, waiting for the water to recede enough so the pieces can be dragged onto dry land.

A Joppa Christmas (continued)



An undated photo of families gathered for a Joppa picnic at the Joppa Bridge, school, and church. Gatherings used to bring families from all over and featured a potluck, live music, and games. Courtesy photo

Bryson, Rose, Judi Ater Beauford, and Delbert Cain, the “newcomer,” were assessing the flood-destroyed 118-year-old bridge. It was one of three of the county’s original iron-truss bridges still standing. Its partner, the Russell Fork Bridge, located less than 2 two miles from Joppa on the Russell Gabriel Fork of the San Gabriel River, was damaged by the flood but remains mostly intact. The community hopes to restore it.

A third bridge, located on private property near Marble Falls, was relocated to Johnson Park several years ago. It is now part of a pedestrian footpath across Backbone Creek.

As the tight-knit Joppa community mourns the loss of their beloved bridge, they have begun to meet to share fond memories and plan ways to memorialize it. That depends on how much of it can be salvaged.

“We’ll be taking all the old and making something new,” said Cain, who was one of the first on the scene after the bridge washed away. He rescued the nameplate and the Texas historical marker, which had been pushed over by floodwaters.

“We have pieces of the bridge, and we can do something with that,” he said.

Removing those pieces from the river and storing them are the first steps in what is expected to be a lengthy process of planning and raising money to build a proper commemoration of the lost crossing and its impact on Joppa.

“We want to pull some unique pieces and memorialize it at the site,” said Burnet County Commissioner Damon Beierle, whose Precinct 2 includes Joppa. “The county can play a role in both. It’s our bridge.”

About six weeks after the flood, around 70 people attended a potluck

at the community center to mourn the bridge, reflect on the past, and plan for the future.

“Our meeting was fantastic,” Toni Schmid said. “It was so incredible and lovely and gorgeous because so many more young families came than ever before, and they mixed with the longtime Joppa families.”

The historical marker will be reinstalled and new informational plaques added to update the bridge’s story. The goal is to save and preserve the community’s decades of memories and leave a legacy for future generations.

“My kids will always remember—they were married on that bridge,” Rose said. “The sense of community here has always been so important with this bridge, this church, this community center. These families have been here so long. Some of us went away and lived all over, but we came back.”

“It’s our Joppa-ness that brings us back,” Beauford added. She grew up in Austin but lives on the ranch settled in 1875 by her great-grandfather Martin Luther Ater.

“We came every weekend when I was a child,” she continued. “I learned to drive here, and it was really scary to drive over that bridge. Dad said, ‘Just line up the tires and let go of the steering wheel. The bridge will do the rest.’”

“The bridge was our playground,” Bryson said. “My parents met attending the Joppa school. My mother played the piano for the Joppa Baptist Church for 60 years. After church, the kids would run to the bridge and throw rocks off it. The boys would taunt the girls, trying to get them in the water and mud in our church clothes.”

The piano her mother, Estelle Bryson, played in the church now sits unusable in a corner of the Joppa Community Center just across the road. Hymns at the church at 8425 CR 210, which continues to hold worship services, are accompanied on a baby grand. While the piano is new, the pews and pulpit are original to the 1913 building.

The first schoolhouse, built in 1882, was torn down and replaced twice on the same spot on a hill overlooking the river, just across the road from the church. The community center replaced the second deteriorating school in 1942.

The community decorated for Christmas 2025, sans bridge, in late November. A crane was rented to string lights in an outline of the bridge on the public side of the river. Residents also decorated the old burr oak and other trees along the bank. The star, which is hung each year on the bridge, was set in place as close to its traditional spot in years past.

“Since we don’t have a beautiful bridge to decorate, let’s go crazy,” Schmid said.

It is unlikely the bridge will be rebuilt, although the community holds out hope that the Russell Fork Bridge can be repaired and serve as a reminder of a shared past. For now, Christmas lights strung from tree to tree will recreate a glittering replica of a well-loved structure: the historic and picturesque Joppa Bridge.

“In our hearts, that’s what we are going to see,” Schmid said.