

Covered Bridge TERRITORY

Parke County famous for festival surrounding historic bridges

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
JULIE CAMPBELL

Ask any Hoosier to name what comes to mind when you say “Parke County,” and you’re likely to get the same answer — covered bridges.

Thirty-one covered bridges, to be exact.

About 1.2 million visitors flock to this western Hoosier county every year for its world-famous Covered Bridge Festival in October. (This year’s festival is Oct. 10-19.) In fact, Parke County is known as “The Covered Bridge Capital of the World,” because no other location on the planet possesses as many covered bridges as this idyllic county in the middle-of-nowhere, Indiana.

When I first visited the festival more than 30 years ago, I was all about the shopping — vendor after vendor offering crafts, sweatshirts, signs, purses, homemade Amish baked goods and whatever else your heart desires.

Tiny towns named Bridgeton, Mansfield, Mecca, Montezuma and Rockville filled with food trucks serving festival food favorites such as corn dogs, lemon shake-ups and elephant ears.

But these days, my husband and I go to Parke County to discover more about our state’s rich history, as seen in the amazing artistry, construction and longevity of these iconic bridges.

West Union Bridge, built in 1876 over Sugar Creek, is one of our favorites. At 315 feet in length, West Union is the longest remaining covered bridge in Parke County.

While the county no longer allows cars to pass through West Union, we took advantage of the gravel drive that leads to the bridge, where you can get out and observe this amazing example of 19th century ingenuity and craftsmanship up close.

As you walk through the bridge, something magical happens — you travel back in time for a



Built in 1861, Jackson Bridge is the oldest standing bridge in Parke County.

Building a covered bridge required precise craftsmanship inside.



WHERE IT'S AT

Parke County is directly west of Indianapolis near the Illinois line. It's about 110 miles from Anderson.

West Union Bridge is the longest covered bridge in Parke County, spanning 315 feet over Sugar Creek.





LEFT: The view from under West Union Bridge illustrates the bridge's sturdy construction that has withstood the test of time. RIGHT: This cemetery near West Union Bridge includes gravestones from the Civil War era.



As you walk through the bridge, **SOMETHING MAGICAL HAPPENS** — you travel back in time for a minute or two, taking in the same sights, sounds and smells that travelers did back in the late 1800s. "

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The inside of West Union (and really all the bridges in the county) is just as beautiful, if not more so, than the outside. Sturdy beams crafted from 150-year-old wood crisscross and bend their way through the bridge. Tiny windows allow for a bird's-eye view of the creek below.

On a desolate road just a short drive from West Union bridge, we found a pioneer cemetery. Some of the stones date back to Civil War and even pre-Civil War times. Most likely, several of the men buried there helped build the earliest of the sturdy bridges in this county, proud of their craftsmanship and labor of love.

Did they ever dream their bridges would stand the test of time 100 to 150 years later?

Reading the inscriptions on the gravestones, I imagined what life must have been like for these Indiana pioneers. Some of them were young mothers, some soldiers, and others were children. They walked or rode in wagons over the bridges in the county, laughing, dreaming and living the simple life — a poignant reminder to

savor each moment, to enjoy the immense blessings of life while it is still ours to live.

After driving the country roads in search of bridges, we visited the town of Rockville — a great place to refuel, shop and experience Parke County's history. At the center of town sits the historic Rockville courthouse, surrounded by quaint gift shops, antique stores, bakeries and cafes. During festival time, the square comes alive with food vendors, living history presentations and crafters selling their wares.

Fascinated by a chance to stay behind bars in what was once the county jail, visitors from all over the country are drawn to Rockville's Old Jail Inn. If a night's stay in a cellblock isn't your idea of a good time, you can still indulge in a glass of wine downstairs in the Drunk Tank Winery.

Parke County is also home to two of Indiana's popular state parks, Turkey Run and Shades, as well as Raccoon Lake State Recreational Area and Rockville Lake Park. There are plenty of activities for outdoor enthusiasts as well as history buffs and shoppers.

You don't have to visit Parke County during festival time to see the bridges. In fact, if you don't like crowds, you might want to pick another time to visit this historic county. Either way, you're in for a treat. ■