

Rare Sulphur Creek Trestle photo finds home at Archives

By Rebekah Davis

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Wind whistled through the leafless branches near the construction site as the photographer set up his tripod and his wide-angle lens. He waited for the daylight to shine at just the right angle to illuminate the scene, and then, with a snap, Theodore Gubelman captured history.

It was likely late winter, 1864, when Gubelman, a photographer from New Jersey, took the photo of Union troops rebuilding Sulphur Creek Trestle in Elkmont after Confederate troops had destroyed the railroad bridge in 1863. A century and a half later, the photo, a carte de visite that is the only original photo of the trestle from the Civil War known to exist, has found its new home at the Limestone County Archives. Today, the original is in the Archives' secure storage and a poster-size enlargement of the 2.5-by-4-inch photo hangs in the Archives reading room, available for research and reproduction.

According to Frances Robb, an Alabama expert in historic photography, records of Gubelman's life, as well as field reports from the Civil War, point to early 1864 as the date of the photo. Gubelman opened his gallery in Pulaski, Tenn., in January 1864, and returned to New Jersey later that year, and the bridge was destroyed again Sept. 25, 1864, during the Battle of Sulphur Creek.

Between 1859 and 1860, the Tennessee and Alabama Central Rail Road Company, chartered in 1853, constructed a railroad from the Alabama-Tennessee state line to Athens and the M. & C. R. R. Junction, near Decatur. Between November 1863 and February 1864, the line was repaired between Nashville and Decatur by U.S. forces commanded by Brigadier General Dodge. As of Nov. 11, all of the bridges between Columbia and Athens were out, some if not all destroyed by Confederates.

"I have the honor to report the duty performed by this command in repairing the railroad from Nashville to Decatur," Dodge stated in his Feb. 23, 1864, report to Major R. M. Sawyer at the 16th Army Corps Headquarters in Pulaski. "The command arrived at Pulaski November 11, 1863, and was soon after scattered along the railroad from Columbia to Athens, and details of working parties placed to work on all the bridges, every bridge on the road being out."

Dodge listed 'Sulphur Springs trestle' among the many bridges replaced, including three in Athens, two over Swan Creek, and one over Swan Creek Swamp.

Dodge noted, "At each of the bridges good, sustained earth-works or stockades have been built to protect troops guarding them. The work upon them has been immense, and the works are very creditable ones... All the work has been done by soldiers of this command and negroes pressed in the country, and when the amount of work done is considered, and the unfavorable weather is taken into account, I think it must be looked upon as very creditable to the command."

In Gubelman's photo, men can be seen on top of the trestle and walking below it, and construction materials are scattered along the creek banks. Dodge praised these workers in his report.

"I cannot speak too highly of the industry, alacrity, and interest the command has shown in taking hold of and finishing the work," Dodge said. "No emergency could arise but what some officer or man could be found to meet and master it."

Seven months later, the soldiers met an emergency they could not master, in the form of Nathan Bedford Forrest and his Confederate troops. The Battle of Sulphur Creek was the bloodiest battle

in North Alabama, with 200 Union soldiers meeting their death, and the trestle and fort destroyed.

The photo itself was one of the rare Gubelman photos to survive. After his death on Oct. 31, 1926, his sister burned his paper negatives and his son sold his glass plates to a local used glass buyer for \$8 per 1,000.

The photo is now at the Limestone County Archives thanks to the Friends of the Archives, who purchased the photo from an area collector. Sales of reproductions of the photo will benefit the Friends of the Archives in their support of the Limestone County Archives, including the acquisition and care of historic treasures such as the Sulphur Creek Trestle photo.

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