

# Elm Fork Bridge

*Historical Narrative researched and written by Morgan Gieringer and Zachary Richardson  
for Texas Historical Commission  
Recorded Texas Historic Landmark Application, Denton County*

## I. Context

The Elm Fork Bridge is one of only two iron/steel bridges in Denton County remaining in its original location on public land and which is also eligible for a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark (RTHL) marker. Other remaining bridges are on private property or are obscured from public access, while the Elm Fork Bridge is a highly visible landmark along the popular Ray Roberts Lake State Park Greenbelt. Completed in 1922, the Elm Fork Bridge was the longest bridge in Denton County at that time. The bridge is located on the Sherman Highway (also known as Sherman Drive), an important feeder road and mail route between the growing northern Denton County communities of Denton, Aubrey, and Sanger.<sup>1</sup> The Elm Fork Bridge facilitated better automobile access to the Federal Building (United States Courthouse) in Sherman, of the Sherman Division of the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Texas. Improved automobile travel via modern bridges and roads in Denton County was increasingly important in the 1920s, when the use of motor-driven vehicles surpassed travel by horse-drawn wagons and buggies.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the Elm Fork Bridge represents an important part of Denton County's transportation history, particularly the rise of automobile-oriented transportation systems in the 1920s.

The road on which the bridge is situated is one of the original wagon trails leading out of the city of Denton.<sup>3</sup> The Texas Legislature formed Denton County from a portion of Fannin County in 1846. An early settlement was established on the Elm Fork branch of the Trinity River in 1847 when members of the Sullivan family lived in the area before moving to the Sanger

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<sup>1</sup> Denton County (Tex.) Historical Commission, *The Historical Iron Bridges of Denton County, Texas* [pamphlet] (Denton, Tex.: Denton County Historical Commission, 2006?).

<sup>2</sup> Clarence Allen Bridges, *History of Denton, Texas from Its Beginning to 1960* (Waco, Tex.: Texian Press, 1978), 327-329.

<sup>3</sup> Bridges, *History of Denton*, 71.

community in 1887.<sup>4</sup> John Ramsey (Jack) Sullivan (1836-1912) built a cattle ranch, Smokey Ridge Ranch, near the bridge in the 1890s, one of a number of prosperous cattle and horse ranching operations in Denton County at the time. Horse ranching remains a major industry in Denton County. Over 300 horse ranches exist today in Denton along an area of well-drained, gently sloping, loamy soil perfect for raising horses.<sup>5</sup>

Sullivan's Smokey Ridge Ranch was located four miles east of Sanger, Texas, and the property is now mostly covered by Ray Roberts Lake.<sup>6</sup> The 2,000-square-foot home built by the Sullivan family around 1872 (the oldest known house in Denton County) was saved and moved in the 1980s. Denton resident Mike Cochran owns the home which now resides in neighboring Cooke County.<sup>7</sup>

The Elm Fork River was dammed in the 1920s to form Lake Dallas. The later expansion of Lake Dallas into Lewisville Lake and the construction of Ray Roberts Lake provided improved flood control in Denton County.<sup>8</sup> In 1990 the Sherman Highway, now called FM 428 as well as Sherman Drive, was widened and the bridge was bypassed. However, the bridge remained in its original location to become a pedestrian bridge and part of the Ray Robert Lake State Park Greenbelt, between Denton and Ray Roberts Lake, through a sublease from the City of Denton.<sup>9</sup>

## II. Overview

In 1921 Denton County Engineer T. E. Huffman sent a notice to contractors for bids on Denton-Sherman highway improvements which included concrete paving and bridge construction. The notice announced plans to construct a "roadway steel truss bridge" 250 feet in length.<sup>10</sup> The contract was awarded to the Denton Construction Company which began work on the bridge in 1922. Concrete piers and abutments were installed in early March 1922 while crews

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<sup>4</sup> Gray, Eunice Sullivan, *The Story of Sanger, 1886-1986*. Denton, TX: Denton County Historical Commission, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> North Texas Horse Country, <http://www.horsecountrytours.com/didyouknow.shtml>.

<sup>6</sup> Gray, 1996, *Story of Sanger*, 159.

<sup>7</sup> Cheryl Welch Hastings, "Old house gets new home," *Denton Record-Chronicle*, October 15, 1987, 4A.

<sup>8</sup> "\$26,000,000 Garza-Little Elm Project to Create One of State's Largest Lakes," *Denton Record-Chronicle*, August 19, 1951, [29].

<sup>9</sup> Denton County (Tex.) Historical Commission, *Historical Iron Bridges of Denton County*.

<sup>10</sup> "Classified Advertisements," column 3, *Denton Record-Chronicle*, November 7, 1921, 5.

waited for the shipments of steel to arrive later that month.<sup>11</sup> Steel on the bridge shows the manufacturing stamps of Carnegie, Illinois and Bethlehem Steel manufacturers. Elm Fork Bridge was located in Denton Precinct 1 overseen by Commissioner J. F. Morgan.

Crews began work installing the middle span (100 feet) and last span of the bridge in mid-April, 1922.<sup>12</sup> By early May of 1922, all of the bridge spans were in place and the bridge was able to withstand high water from Elm Creek.<sup>13</sup> The bridge on the Sherman Highway was opened to traffic on Saturday, July 22, 1922 as the largest bridge in Denton County at the time. However, construction crews had to finish work on the shoulders of the bridge approaches as well as the concrete piers and abutments before the structure was officially accepted by Denton County authorities.<sup>14</sup>

Elm Fork Bridge is located on FM 428/Sherman Drive approximately 4 miles west of Aubrey and crosses the Elm Fork of the Trinity River. FM 428 was originally known as a wagon road called “Sherman’s Drive,”<sup>15</sup> and later “Denton-Sherman highway”<sup>16</sup> or “Denton-Sherman road.” The bridge is located on the property of the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, Fort Worth District; the land is maintained by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.<sup>17</sup>

The main span of the Elm Fork Bridge is a Pratt through-truss (100 ft. long). The east and west approach spans are Warren pony trusses with verticals (each 70 ft. long.)<sup>18</sup> The length of the largest span is 100 feet. The total length of the bridge is 250 feet, and the deck width is 16 feet. Earlier iron bridges, such as the Old Alton Bridge (built in 1884) in south central Denton County, could only accommodate one-way traffic, but the Elm Fork Bridge was built for two-way traffic. In 1990 the Sherman Highway (now known as FM 428 or Sherman Drive) was widened and the Elm Fork Bridge was bypassed by the new road. Despite this, the bridge remained in its original

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<sup>11</sup> “Steel Beginning to Arrive,” *Denton Record-Chronicle*, March 28, 1922, 8; “Nineteen Years Ago,” *Denton Record-Chronicle*, March 28, 1941, 10.

<sup>12</sup> “Final Road Work in County to Be Completed Soon,” *Denton Record-Chronicle*, April 13, 1922, 1.

<sup>13</sup> “Strike and Weather Has Delayed Road Work,” *Denton Record-Chronicle*, May 9, 1922, 4.

<sup>14</sup> “Elm Creek Bridge on Sherman Highway to Be Open Saturday,” *Denton Record-Chronicle*, July 20, 1922, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Bridges, *History of Denton*, 71.

<sup>16</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, April 22, 1922

<sup>17</sup> “Ray Roberts Greenbelt,” last modified July 20, 2012, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Fort Worth District, <http://www.swf-wc.usace.army.mil/lewisville/Recreation/Trails/Bike.asp>.

<sup>18</sup> “FM 428 Through Truss,” last modified August 19, 2011, Bridgehunter.com, accessed June 21, 2013, <http://bridgehunter.com/tx/denton/bh49377/>.

location beside the new road, to later become a pedestrian bridge and part of the Ray Roberts Lake State Park Greenbelt between Denton and Ray Roberts Lake.<sup>19</sup>

In 1846 John, Dan, and Dave Strickland came from Missouri to Collin County to join William Twitty's company in the Mexican War<sup>20</sup>. On returning from the war in 1847 they settled in northern Denton County. They were joined in 1856 by the Sullivan family which included nine sons and two daughters in addition to parents Charles Lee (1810-1868) and Elizabeth Hammons Sullivan (1811-1888).<sup>21</sup> The settlement was situated near the northern county line and extended down the Elm Fork to the Clear Creek branch of the Trinity River. The Sullivan family traveled by wagon from Missouri, carrying gold with them to pay for the 420 acres between the Elm Fork and Isle du Bois Creek, land that would become the Sullivan Settlement. Many of the log cabin homes built by the settlers were located in the area which now includes the Lake Ray Roberts Greenbelt.<sup>22</sup>

Some early reports of settlement in the Elm Fork area mention encounters with American Indians. The Sullivan Settlement may have been visited quite often by Indians from the northwest that were raiding along the creeks. Significant raiding occurred in 1868 along Big Elm Creek (i.e., the Elm Fork of the Trinity River) and in other parts of Denton County.<sup>23</sup> Eunice Sullivan Gray writes that "Indians came east of Sanger in the early days, particularly in the wooded areas of the creeks" and that the 1868 raids forced the Jack Sullivan family to move into Pilot Point five times that year.<sup>24</sup> Possible Indian tribes that may have raided or settled along the Elm Fork in Denton County include the Keeche, Hainai, Tonkawa, Caddo, Comanche, and Kiowa.<sup>25, 26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Denton County (Tex.) Historical Commission, *Historical Iron Bridges of Denton County*.

<sup>20</sup> Edmond Franklin Bates, *History and Reminiscences of Denton County* (Denton, Tex.: T. Wheeler Printing (Special bicentennial reprint), 1976), 72

<sup>21</sup> Eunice Gray, Steve Renner, and Kate Armstrong, *Oral History Interview with Eunice Gray* (Denton, Tex.: University of North Texas Oral History Program, 1987), 7.

<sup>22</sup> Gray, 1985, *Story of Sanger*, 27-28, 84.

<sup>23</sup> Bates, *History and Reminiscences of Denton County*, 72-73, 291-293.

<sup>24</sup> Gray, 1985, *Story of Sanger*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Bridges, *History of Denton*, 7-13.

<sup>26</sup> "Ray Roberts Lake Information," last modified August 3, 2011, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Fort Worth District, <http://www.swf-wc.usace.army.mil/rayroberts/Information/index.asp>.

John Ramsey (Jack) Sullivan (1836-1912), one of the nine sons of Charles Lee and Elizabeth Sullivan, left the Sullivan Settlement to join the 11<sup>th</sup> Texas Cavalry during the Civil War.<sup>27</sup> After his discharge due to paraplegia he returned to the Elm Fork area to farm and raise cattle.<sup>28</sup> He began building a home in 1878 on the south side of Pilot Point road, facing north, beside Elm Fork River. The home was a two-story house built by Mr. McGuire of Jefferson, Texas.<sup>29</sup> Jack R. Sullivan was one of the founders of Denton County National Bank in Denton, a director of Sanger's first bank, Farmer's and Merchant's, and a director of the Red River National Bank of Gainesville. At his ranch, Smokey Ridge, Jack R. Sullivan bred Durham cattle that bore the brand A Bar.<sup>30</sup> Ranching and agriculture were major industries in Denton County at this time. In 1860 Denton County had 4,780 residents and over 20,000 heads of cattle. Railroads entered Denton County in 1880 allowing cattle to be shipped to market.<sup>31</sup> In the fall of 1897 Jack R. Sullivan shipped 13 loads of cattle to markets in Kansas City, Missouri.<sup>32</sup> Nancy Jane Sullivan, daughter of Jack R. Sullivan, married William E. Partlow, the first mayor of Sanger.<sup>33</sup>

The Elm Fork Bridge was the site of Ku Klux Klan initiation ceremony in 1922. A newspaper account from the time states the following: "Knights of the Ku Klux Klan held an initiation ceremony last night from 8 to 11 o'clock near the new steel bridge over Elm Creek on the Denton-Sherman highway, which is not yet open to traffic. Between twenty-five and thirty candidates were initiated, the ceremony being witnessed by S. M. Richardson, superintendent of the Record-Chronicle linotype department, who was picked up by three men in an automobile while he was on the public square and carried to the scene."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Gray, Renner, and Armstrong, *Interview with Eunice Gray*, 4; Eunice Sullivan Gray, *The Story of Sanger, 1886-1986* (Denton, Tex.: Denton County Historical Commission, 1996), 159.

<sup>28</sup> Gray, Renner, and Armstrong, *Interview with Eunice Gray*, 3-4; Gray, 1985, *Story of Sanger*, 19-20.

<sup>29</sup> Gray, Renner, and Armstrong, *Interview with Eunice Gray*, 2, 5; Gray, 1985, *Story of Sanger*, 19.

<sup>30</sup> Gray, 1996, *Story of Sanger*, 159; Gray, Renner, and Armstrong, *Interview with Eunice Gray*, 49.

<sup>31</sup> E. Dale Odom, "DENTON COUNTY," Handbook of Texas Online (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hcd06>), accessed July 18, 2013. Published by the Texas State Historical Association

<sup>32</sup> Gray, 1985, *Story of Sanger*, 21; Gray, Renner, and Armstrong, *Interview with Eunice Gray*, 49.

<sup>33</sup> Texas Historical Commission, "Partlow, William E., First Mayor of Sanger," Official Texas Historical Marker in Sanger, Texas (Austin: Texas Historical Commission, 1976), accessed June 21, 2013, <http://atlas.thc.state.tx.us/shell-kword.htm>.

<sup>34</sup> Dallas Morning News, April 22, 1922.

### III. Significance

At the time that construction began on the Elm Fork Bridge the population of Denton County was over 35,000 and 2,683 automobiles were registered within the county. Within another five years the number of cars would increase to 5,749. In his *History of Denton, Texas*, historian Clarence Bridges calls this increase in automobiles “one of the amazing developments of the 1920’s.”<sup>35</sup>

The rise of automobile traffic brought many changes to Denton County. Parking places were marked around the square in 1923 and a special traffic officer was employed by the city in 1924. In 1926 four traffic signals were placed in the City of Denton and one-hour parking limits were imposed.<sup>36</sup> A spot traffic survey conducted in 1923 found that nine out of ten vehicles on Denton city streets were motor driven. Just 18 years earlier there were less than ten automobiles in the entire county. Denton County residents voted for highway bonds in 1919 and by 1921 there were 36 different road projects underway within the county, the construction of the Elm Fork Bridge being one of them.<sup>37</sup> The Elm Fork Bridge was built to accommodate two way automobile traffic. Today the bridge still serves a valuable purpose as a pedestrian bridge along the Lake Ray Roberts Greenbelt trail.

The Ray Roberts Lake/Lake Lewisville Greenbelt Corridor is a 20-mile multiuse trail system (10 miles for hike and bike use and 10 miles for equestrian), beginning at the Ray Roberts Lake Dam in the north and ending at the headwaters of Lake Lewisville to the south. The trail follows the heavily wooded, riparian corridor along the banks of the Elm Fork of the Trinity River. The Elm Fork Bridge, in its original location near the center of the Ray Roberts Greenbelt, has been smartly repurposed as a pedestrian bridge to accommodate hikers, bicyclists, and others using the trail system for recreation. The bridge allows access to the east and west sides of the Elm Fork.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Bridges, *History of Denton*, 327-328.

<sup>36</sup> Bridges, *History of Denton*, 329.

<sup>37</sup> Bridges, *History of Denton*, 329.

<sup>38</sup> “Ray Roberts Lake State Park: History,” Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, [http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/state-parks/ray-roberts-lake/park\\_history](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/state-parks/ray-roberts-lake/park_history).

The Ray Roberts Greenbelt opened on National Trails Day, June 5, 1999 as a wilderness recreation area for bicyclists, hikers, horseback riders, and kayak and canoe paddlers. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the cities of Dallas and Denton provided funding for the Greenbelt project. The \$3 million project took more than 16 years to complete, having begun in 1983 when the two cities asked the Corps of Engineers to conduct a feasibility study for a greenbelt corridor between Ray Roberts Lake and Lake Lewisville. The Greenbelt property, including the Elm Fork Bridge, is currently maintained by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, which acquired the property in 1984 through a lease made with the Secretary of the Army and a sublease from the City of Denton.<sup>39, 40</sup>

Settlers in the Elm Fork area established log cabin homes and later modern homes in the area. Jack Sullivan, a descendant of the original Sullivan Settlement, contributed to the development of the Sanger community and to the growing ranching industry of northeast Denton County where horse ranching remains an important industry today.

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<sup>39</sup> “North Texas Greenbelt Opens National Trails Day June 5,” May 10, 1999, A Natural History of North Central Texas (NHNCT.org), accessed August 14, 2013, [http://www.nhnct.org/nature/ntexas\\_greenbelt.html](http://www.nhnct.org/nature/ntexas_greenbelt.html).

<sup>40</sup> “Ray Roberts Lake State Park: History,” Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, [http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/state-parks/ray-roberts-lake/park\\_history](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/state-parks/ray-roberts-lake/park_history).

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