

## Legends of Freeborn County

### Bridge's rebuilding leads search for answers

by Bev Jackson

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The Bancroft Bridge on West Richway Drive near the public boat landing was replaced in 1997. That area has an interesting and unusual history. A check of the museum's archives uncovered the following information.

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One item suggested that possibly Lt. Albert M. Lea and the U.S. Dragoons forded that portion of the stream while on their surveying expedition in 1835, and an 1878 plat map shows a road crossing the water in the same general area of the bridge location. There is also an updated photo of a very fragile looking wooden bridge.

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A 1910 photo shows men fishing from a sturdier structure, still wooden but with the road built further into the channel from either side. so the bridge itself is shorter. Another photo showing the most recent bridge, with those wonderful wooden sidewalks, appeared in the Tribune in the late 1950's.

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The 1978 Albert Lea Township plat map shows the farm on the west side on the channel belonging to Washington Lea, who is not mentioned in the 1882 History Book, but there is a delightful biography of the landowner on the east side of the channel.

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It reads like this: "Ole O. Stive was born in Norway on the 7th day of May, 1842. He came with his parents to America in 1850, settled in Dane County, Wis., until 1853, then moved to Wineshiek (sic) county, Iowa. They came to this county in 1857, and located in Bancroft where Ole resided with his parents until 1859, when he returned to Wisconsin and worked in the pineries.

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"On the 13th of May, 1861, he enlisted in the Fifth Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry and served four years and three months. He then returned to his home and lived with his parents until 1868, when he married Miss Ingeborg G. Bottolfson on the 20th of December. They have had seven children, six of whom are living. In 1873, they bought a farm in Albert Lea Township, and have since made it their home."

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While reading that brief bio I couldn't help but wonder about the farming practices in the 1870's, if the channel was used as a water source or easy transportation, and when that very first bridge was built.

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Then my thoughts wandered to "When Lt. Albert M. Lea and the Dragoons forded the stream, just how deep was the water?" It wasn't until 20 years later that George S. Ruble built the saw and grist mill and the dam at the north end of Lake Albert Lea thus forming the shallow swampy area into Fountain Lake. Maybe in 1835, what we now call Bancroft Channel was only a small stream, easily fordable."

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As I thought about the changes that have taken place in the last 160 years, I wondered if there are any trees near the new bridge that date back that far. If they could talk, what an incredible story they could tell.