Howard man is authority on Maryland, U.S. covered bridges

None of the historic structures remain in Howard County, but two replicas stand

By Janene Holzberg, Special to The Baltimore Sun

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During frequent day trips decades ago to the Amish markets of Lancaster, Pa., Jim Smedley became increasingly curious about the barn-like structures that span many rivers across the town's picturesque countryside, so he started learning more.

Howard County was once home to eight of these covered bridges, some dating back more than 160 years, Smedley's research shows. Two were located in Daniels, a town some people may never have heard of, and which was previously known as Alberton, and before that as Elysville.

The history buff will bring all of these examples of a bygone era to life, along with others that still exist elsewhere in Central Maryland, when he gives a talk Aug. 28 at the Howard County Historical Society Museum in Ellicott City.

Despite his enduring love for the topic, the 66-year-old retired industrial engineer admits that covered bridges "didn't really catch me at first; I just thought they were kind of a neat thing."

But since the mid-1990s, when the Baltimore native got divorced and then married his second wife, Gloria, who shares his interest, his casual hobby has become a near-obsession.

The Nottingham couple has visited 500 bridges across the country, including regular trips to Parke County, Indiana, which bills itself as the "Covered Bridge Capital of the World" with an inventory of 31. He catalogs the research from their travels on his website at mdcoveredbridges.com.

Visiting such architectural treasures "takes you away from the hustle and bustle of today's world to a slower time and to what you can imagine life was like" in the mid-19th century, said Smedley, who also co-edits a national newsletter on covered-bridges with his wife.

The popular 1992 book and 1995 movie both titled, "The Bridges of Madison County," which are set in the real location of Madison County, Iowa, also helped put the topic on many people's radar, he said.

There are 811 covered bridges left in the United States out of the 14,000 that once existed, Smedley said.
Maryland is home only to six: three in Frederick County, two in Cecil County, and one shared by Baltimore and Harford counties.

In Howard County, only two "impostors" remain in the form of a pair of "romantic shelters," which are similar in appearance to covered bridges but built to different specifications than their authentic cousins. There are 20 of these across Maryland, and the two local examples can be found in Ellicott City and Woodbine, he said.

Photographs and drawings of the covered bridges that once existed in Howard County are nearly all the physical evidence of their designs that remains. Of the eight bygone bridges, three spanned the same location over the Patapsco River in the town formerly called Ellicott's Mills. One was built circa 1850 and wiped out by a flood in 1866. Its replacement was constructed that same year only to be washed out in 1868 and never replaced. The third one was built in 1870 and burned down in 1914.

"Jim came into our library and museum to do some research, and I was very impressed when I checked out his website," said Lauren McCormack, executive director of the historical society. "He has a nice ability to explain all the aspects of covered bridges since their construction can be difficult to understand."

A 'simple' explanation

When bridge architects began adding roofs to their designs in the mid-1800s, a popular explanation for this addition arose, said Smedley. People conjectured that horses and cattle being driven across a covered bridge didn't balk like they normally would because they'd been tricked into thinking they were heading into the familiar comfort of a barn.

On the flip side, stories circulated that robbers hid in the bridges' rafters and hopped down to rob unsuspecting wagon drivers, grabbing their money and goods sight unseen, he said.

While there may have been some merit to these tales, bridges were covered with roofs and side panels simply to protect their wooden trusses and decking from the ravages of Mother Nature, he said.

"When [open] wooden bridges were built over streams, weather would rot the wood in 10 years," he said. "But when bridges were covered with roofs, they could last 100 years."

Roofs can be replaced when needed at much less expense than a bridge's truss work, which supports the deck that bears the weight of passing vehicles and must be kept in excellent condition, he explained.

But what really made covered bridges popular when they were first introduced was the opportunity they presented to lovers to sneak a kiss as their horse and buggy crossed briefly out of sight, a bold and unseemly behavior in society's eyes at the time, Smedley said.

It was this smooch-stealing that inspired the covered bridges' miniature look-alikes to be named romantic shelters by the National Society for the Preservation of Covered Bridges, he said.

Romantic shelters are typically smaller covered-style bridges that cross a stream in a park or backyard and are built mainly for aesthetic or nostalgic reasons.

The privately-owned shelter in Woodbine, called the H.P. Burdette Bridge, was built in 1980 to replace the original one erected in 1942, though there's no record of what happened to the first one, Smedley said. It is 24 feet long, constructed of barn timbers, and crosses a southern branch of the Patapsco River.
The other local shelter is easily visible at Turf Valley resort, off Route 40.

In Smedley's experience, many owners will grant verbal permission for quick visits to their structures on private property because they understand why people are interested, he said.

"Covered bridges are nearly always found in serene settings where you can hear the rushing of water and the rustling of trees," he said. "It's nice to get away from the highway."

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If you go

**What:** A talk by Jim Smedley on the history of covered bridges in Howard County and Central Maryland.

**When:** Sunday, Aug. 28 at 2 p.m.

**Where:** The Howard County Historical Society Museum, 8328 Court Ave., Ellicott City.

**Cost:** $3 for members and $5 for nonmembers.

**Information:** 410-750-0370

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