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Keeping the Lincoln Highway alive

A tiny bridge over an insignificant creek in the middle of the flat, Iowa prairie. But if a bridge could talk, what stories it could tell!

The Lincoln Highway was one of the first transcontinental roads conceived and built to cross the full width of the United States. The brainchild of automotive entrepreneur, Carl G. Fisher, the plan for a cross-country road from New York to San Francisco, was launched in 1912.

By 1924 the route stretched 3,142 miles and passed through 14 states, 128 counties, and more than 700 cities, towns and villages. It was far from today's Interstate standards and the official road guide offered advice for getting help if you encountered trouble. For example near Fish Springs, Utah, *"If trouble is experienced, build a sagebrush fire. Mr. Thomas will come with a team."*

Just outside the town of Ralston in Greene County, Iowa, the highway passed over Otter Creek on a small bridge constructed in 1924. Of course, almost 80 years later, time and traffic had taken their toll and in the early 2000s plans were developed to repair the bridge. For a variety of reasons those plans were put on hold for almost 15 more years. By then the bridge's narrow width and deterioration had become critical and load restrictions made it increasingly difficult to service the adjacent biodiesel plant. In 2016 the WHKS engineering team was asked to design a replacement bridge.

The structure and deck were easy enough, but the railings proved a challenge. With the historic significance of the bridge, the local community wanted it to match the look of the old one. Unfortunately, the original design of the railings, unique to Lincoln Highway bridges, wasn't up to current crash and safety standards. With some creative design, innovative engineering and a bit of concrete dye to mimic almost 100 years of weathering, the team was able to develop new railings that visually matched the originals while meeting today's requirements.

And now there is a brand-new bridge over that creek in the Iowa prairie that looks like it did in 1924. But it performs like it should in 2024.

