

This is Wendy Lestina of the Ferndale Museum for Community
Comment:

"Saving the Queen: The Story of Fernbridge," a one-hour documentary movie, produced by the Ferndale Museum and funded in part by a grant from Cal Humanities, a nonprofit state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Screening: Wednesday, July 31, 3 p.m. and 7 p.m., \$10/tickets, available at The Works in Eureka and Arcata; Green's Pharmacy in Fortuna; Ring's Pharmacy, Lentz Dept. Store, and the Ferndale Museum in Ferndale. Call 707-786-4466 for more information or to have tickets held at the door.

When the Ferndale Museum – which is the producer of this movie – first suggested we make the story of Fernbridge – in 2011, to coincide with the centennial of the opening of the bridge in November 1911 – my first thought, as the director, was "What's the story? They built a bridge, earthquakes and floods came, and it didn't fall down. The end.

What I hadn't anticipated was the richness of the real story: Not only "the power of the people" – How grass-roots politics can win when accompanied by relentless passion, good factual research, but also with a sense of adventure and a big dose of humor creating what might be called "the power of the pranks."

For 20 years, the County Supervisor from District 1, George Hindley, had been lobbying the Board of Supervisors for a bridge to cross the Eel River; during that time, daily crossings were made by ferries – huge wooden platforms pulled by cable across the river at all times during the year, carrying horse-and-buggies (filled with fancy-dressed folks headed to Eureka), herds of cattle and sheep and hogs, boxes of butter, bicycles, baby carriages, dogs ... all on that open platform, attached to a cable and pulled over the Eel, even swollen with winter rains.

Finally, in 1909, the supervisors voted unanimously to add a tax levy to the annual budget to build the bridge, and the assumption was – as the *Ferndale Enterprise* reported – "building would commence soon after the winter rains are over."

Wrong.

To the fury of everyone along the Eel River – but to our delight as filmmakers – the fight had just begun: turns out there are several places along the Eel where people thought the bridge should be located – all to help local commerce.

Ferndale, Loleta and Eureka wanted it to be sited where it is now located – and Fortuna, Alton, Rohnerville, Hydesville “and all of Southern Humboldt” wanted it to be located at the far east end of the Eel River Valley – Grizzly Bluff to Alton, the location of East’s ferry.

The battle between Ferndale and Fortuna is recreated in “Saving the Queen” in a series of scenes with people from both sides of the river playing the historical characters, including the 1909 County Surveyor man who drew the plans for the bridge, Bert Connors, who was a member of the first graduating class from Stanford – and full of himself he was, even to the extent of attempting to be the first person to cross the bridge in an automobile (an escapade local newspapers deplored as “A Daring Theft”).

Humboldt County people are known to be a feisty lot – and that truth is the thread that unites the early history of Fernbridge to the more recent past – 1986 – when a new regional director for Caltrans announced that, thanks to potential federal money, Caltrans was going to replace Fernbridge with widened lanes, and a cloverleaf of access roads – and without Humboldt Creamery, which was, unfortunately, in the way.

Saving the Queen: The Story of Fernbridge uses vintage film and interviews, as well as some amazing new video of the bridge by Brian Christensen. A moving folk song, “Eel River Queen,” was written and performed for the movie by Hugh Gallagher. It also features two Humboldt-born, nationally prominent civil engineers who describe how and why Fernbridge has survived floods and earthquakes and the battering rams of redwood logs hitting its spandrels in water that was at times (e.g., 1964) raging under the bridge at a million cubic feet per second.