

THE OLD MILITARY BRIDGE ON SANDY CREEK

BY

RICKEY ROBERTSON

Until 1940, many of the settlers and homesteaders who lived in or near southeast Sabine, southwest Natchitoches, and northern Vernon Parishes would need to travel to Leesville, Many, and Natchitoches for various supplies. The shortest route to travel would be across present day Peason Ridge. The route that was taken led these travelers across Sandy Creek. Near Sandy Creek were the farms of Rilla Dowden McInnis, Houston Dowden, and Billy Dowden. Houston lived on one side of the creek and his brother Billy on the other. These brothers and their sister had large farms that bordered Sandy Creek. The road came right by the Dowden Farms. To cross Sandy Creek there was a ford where travelers could ride their horses, drive their wagons, or vehicles across. But during rainy weather, Sandy Creek would overflow and the ford was inaccessible for travel, sometimes for days.

In 1940 the US Army came into Louisiana to conduct corps versus corps level training. As these army units scattered out on maneuvers, engineer units began working on the rudimentary road networks of the region. Engineers began grading and shaping roads, hauling gravel, installing culverts, and most important, building much needed bridges across creeks and streams. The army engineers saw an immediate need to build one of these bridges on Sandy Creek near the Dowden farms. The engineer units brought in equipment and bridging materials and built a large wooden bridge over the creek. Now, instead of fording the creek, all types of civilian vehicles, and even large military vehicles including tanks, could cross Sandy Creek. This bridge would be very important in the future for this area.

Beginning in September 1941, the US Army conducted the Great Louisiana Maneuvers throughout Louisiana and eastern Texas. These are still to this day the largest maneuvers held by the US Army. Units going to and fro continually crossed the bridge during advances and retreats onto Peason Ridge. According to W.E. Dowden Jr., during the maneuvers a tank from one of the armored units ran off the edge of the bridge and plunged many feet into Sandy Creek, killing supposedly 3 crewmen. After the maneuvers the US Army decided to take all the farms and homesteads on Peason Ridge and make Peason Ridge Artillery Range from these lands. Sadly, the Dowdens were forced to leave their old home places and crossed the bridge over Sandy Creek one last time.

For years and years the old bridge stood over Sandy Creek. The military would use it on occasion and hunters would cross it to get to areas where they could deer, squirrel, turkey, and quail hunt. But over the years, the old bridge made of wood began to deteriorate, so several years ago the US Army sent an engineer unit to remove the bridge planking for safety purposes. But even though we can't cross the old bridge any more, we still have the old piling and bridge abutments to view. They continue to stand as silent sentinels to a time slowly passing into history. Let us always remember the old bridge known to us local folks as the "Billy Dowden Bridge" !

Photo captions:

Pic00116....The old ford located on Sandy Creek used by travelers near the Houston and Billy Dowden homesteads.



Pic00117...Looking across Sandy Creek towards the Billy Dowden homestead the old bridge abutment for the old military bridge is still standing.



Pic00118...The old bridge pilings and abutment is still standing on Sandy Creek that was built by the US Army in 1940.

