The Rice Lake Bridge

The Rice Lake Bridge was constructed by the Cobourg & Peterborough Railway in the years 1853-54. The goal was to link the two towns, for the purpose of hauling sawn lumber from Peterborough to Cobourg harbour. The lumber would then be exported to Oswego via lake schooner, its final destination being the wholesale lumber market in Albany, New York.

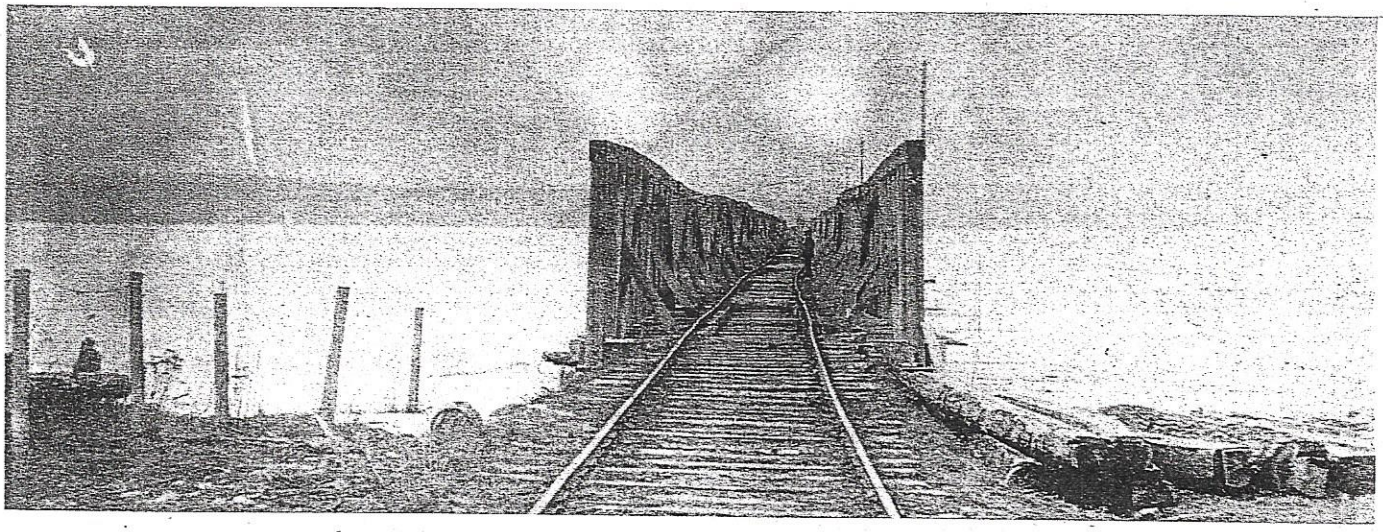
The C&PR chose to build their rail line directly across Rice Lake (rather than around it) in order to ensure that they would have the shortest route from Peterborough to the "front" – ie the north shore of Lake Ontario. The C&PR was in fierce competition at that time with a proposed line from Port Hope to Peterborough, and the C&PR felt that a longer rail line around Rice Lake, via Bewdley, would put the line at a distinct disadvantage with its rival.

In addition to building their line across Rice Lake, the C&PR took on additional risk by maintaining that their line must reach Peterborough *first* (ie before their Port Hope rival). And so to speed up the construction process, the crossing was built as a 2.6 mile long Temporary Wooden Bridge. Such a Wooden Bridge would only have a life space of about ten years, so the plan was to "fill in" the Bridge to form a permanent earthen Causeway within that period of time.

The Wooden Bridge took two forms. In the shallow parts of Rice Lake, it presented itself as a Trestle Bridge, with sets of 6 piles driven into the lake bottom at 14' intervals. In the deeper part of the Lake, it presented itself as 33 sections of 86' long Truss Bridge (the Vermont version of Burr's Truss, to be precise). The design also called for a 120' foot long rotating Swing Bridge in the centre channel, but it does not appear that the Swing Bridge was ever built.

As if building the world's longest bridge was not enough of a challenge, the C&PR elected to take on even more risk by "fast-tracking" the construction of the line – again, in an effort to ensure that the C&PR reached Peterborough before the Port Hope line. Certainly the "cost plus" contract enabled construction on the C&PR to begin at the earliest possible date, but it also meant that the total cost of the project would remain unknown until its completion.

Money problems arose during the line's construction - as might well have been expected, given all of the risks that the C&PR had taken on. There simply wasn't enough money left available (the C&PR had already borrowed roughly $1 million) to build the line as it had originally been designed. So at least one key



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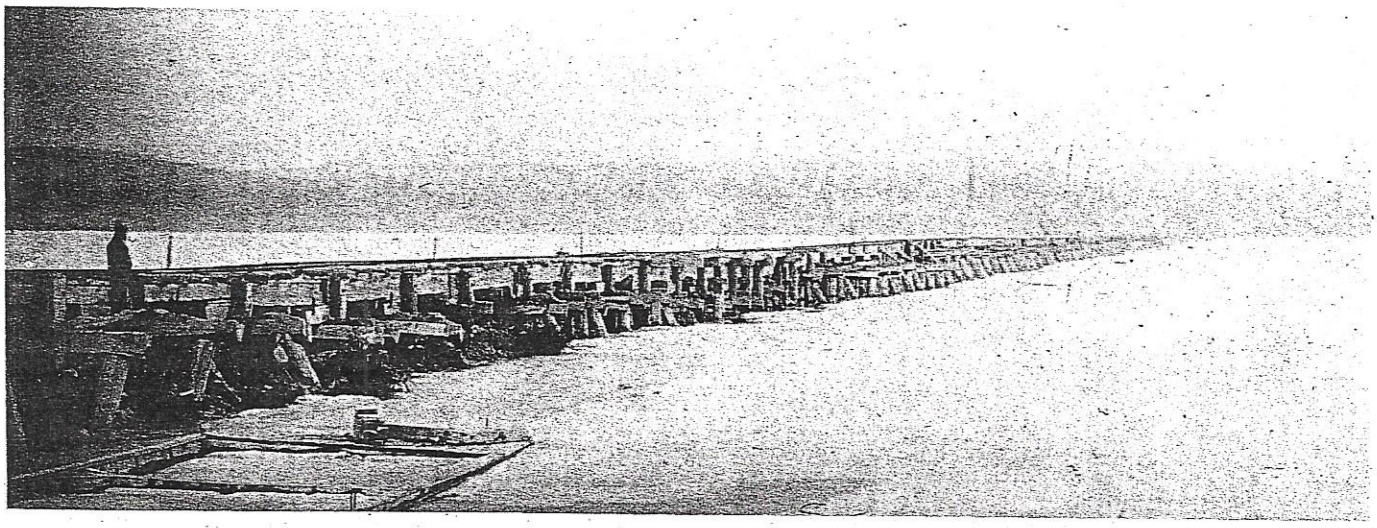
Cobourg and Peterborough Railway Co.'s railway bridge, built across Rice Lake in 1854.



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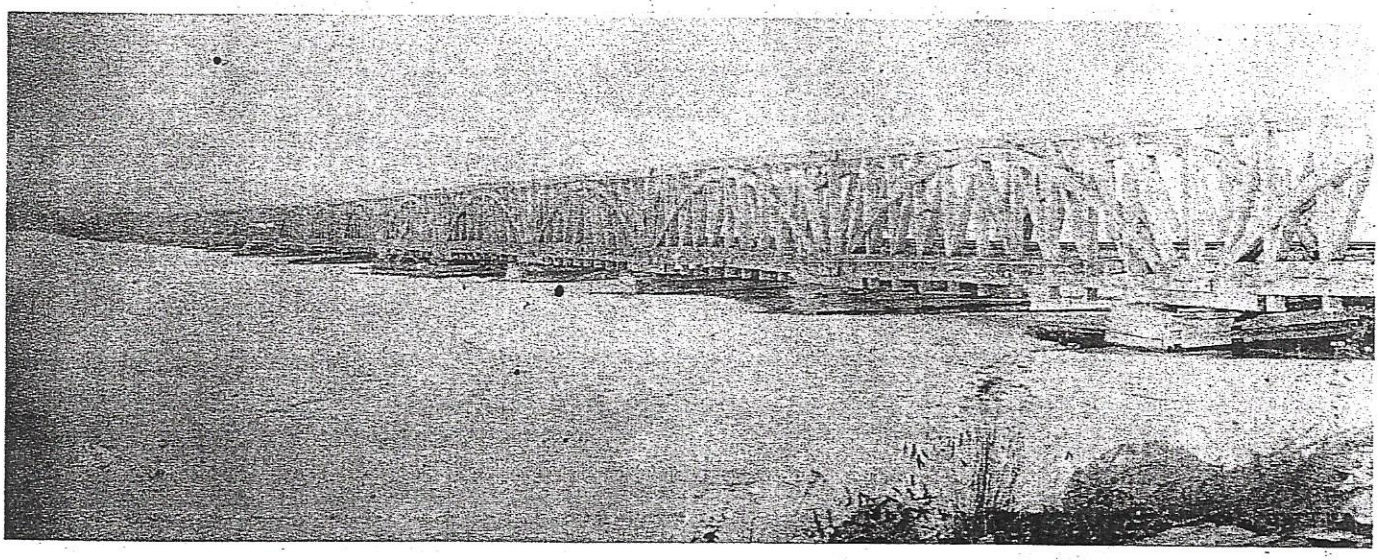
The 4-km structure had piled trestle construction at each end.



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It had bowstring truss spans and 36-m (120-ft)-long swing bridge across main navigation channel. Subject to ice damage bridge was abandoned in 1860 and dismantled in 1861.

aspect of the work was deferred - that being the underwater embankment of the Trestle Bridge. This embanking was needed to support the piles against of the force of winter lake ice.

Without the embankment, the Trestle Bridge was at the mercy of the lake ice. And so not surprisingly, the Bridge was heavily damaged in January, 1855 - just three days after the first train journey to Peterborough. It took four months to repair the Bridge, at great expense.

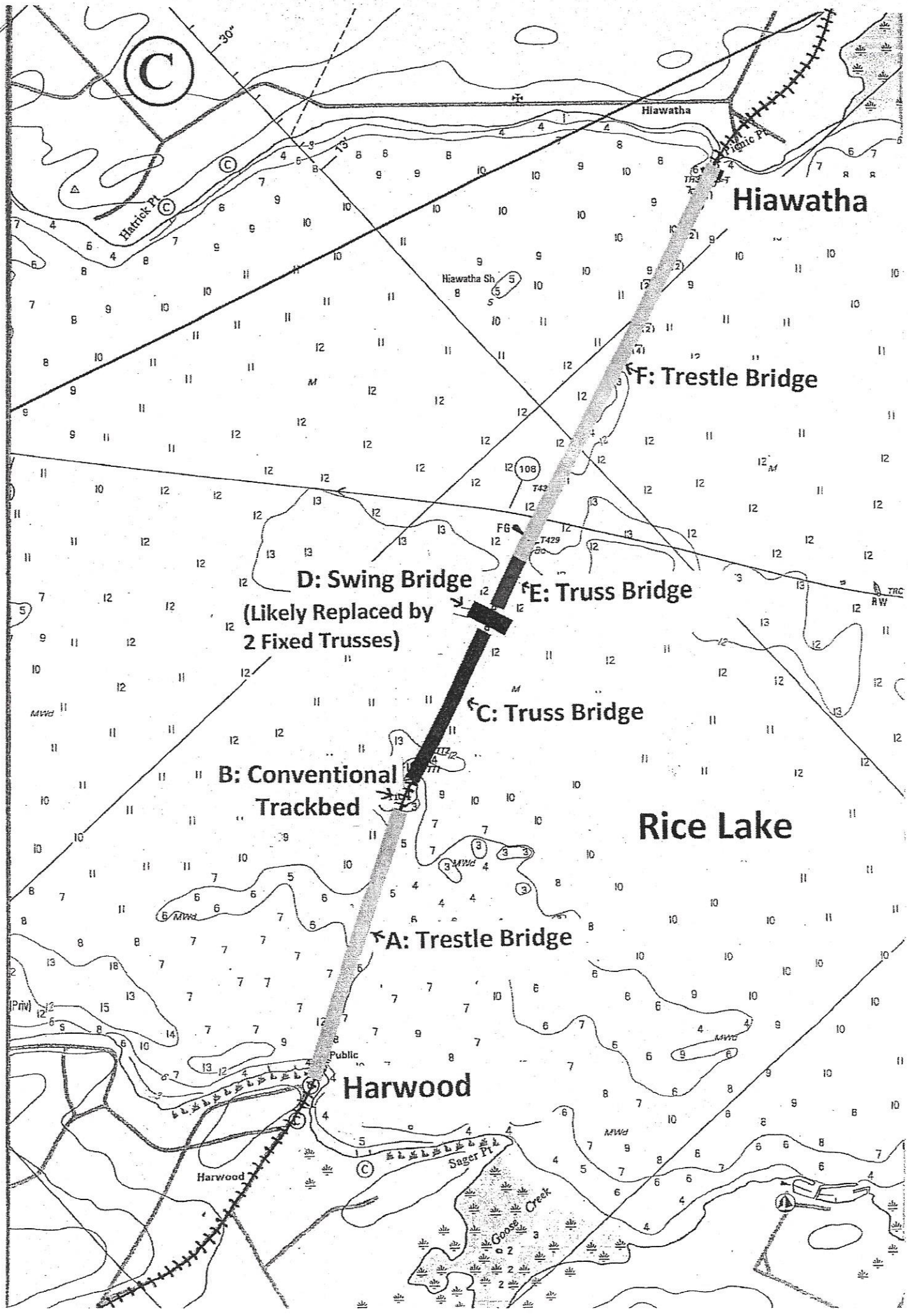
Over the next several years, efforts were made to stabilize the Bridge by building the underwater embankment and the permanent earthen Causeway. But, again, owing to financial difficulties, this work was never completed, and each winter the Bridge suffered more damage from the ice.

By 1859, the Railway's financial difficulties were such that the main bondholder had managed to gain control of the line. But rather than come to its rescue, it soon became obvious that this bondholder had essentially given up on the C&PR, and wanted to ensure its demise. He had been an early backer of the C&PR, but lately had put his money into the Port Hope line. And his goal now was to see the C&PR put out of action, so that his Port Hope – Peterborough line might prosper. He took active steps to assure the Bridge's collapse, by instructing that its bolts be removed. This had the desired effect: sometime during the winter of 1861-62, sections of Truss Bridge floated away down Rice Lake, and the rail line to Peterborough was severed.

Ten years later, under new ownership, an attempt was made to rebuild the Rice Lake Bridge, and finish building the Causeway, restoring the line to Peterborough. However, the Depression of 1873 intervened, and the work was never completed.

The legacy of the Rice Lake Bridge today is that boaters on the lake must remain attentive at all times, lest they lose their propeller – or worse. That is because the remains of the Rice Lake Bridge are still lurking just below the surface of the water, a century and a half later.

George Parker, Cobourg. April, 2018


Hiawatha
Hiawatha
F: Trestle Bridge
D: Swing Bridge
(Likely Replaced by
2 Fixed Trusses)
E: Truss Bridge
C: Truss Bridge
B: Conventional
Trackbed
Rice Lake
A: Trestle Bridge
Harwood
Harwood
Hiawatha Sh
Hatrick Pt
Sager Pt
Goose Creek
Public
Priv