

New River Gorge

National River
National Park Service
U.S. Department of Interior

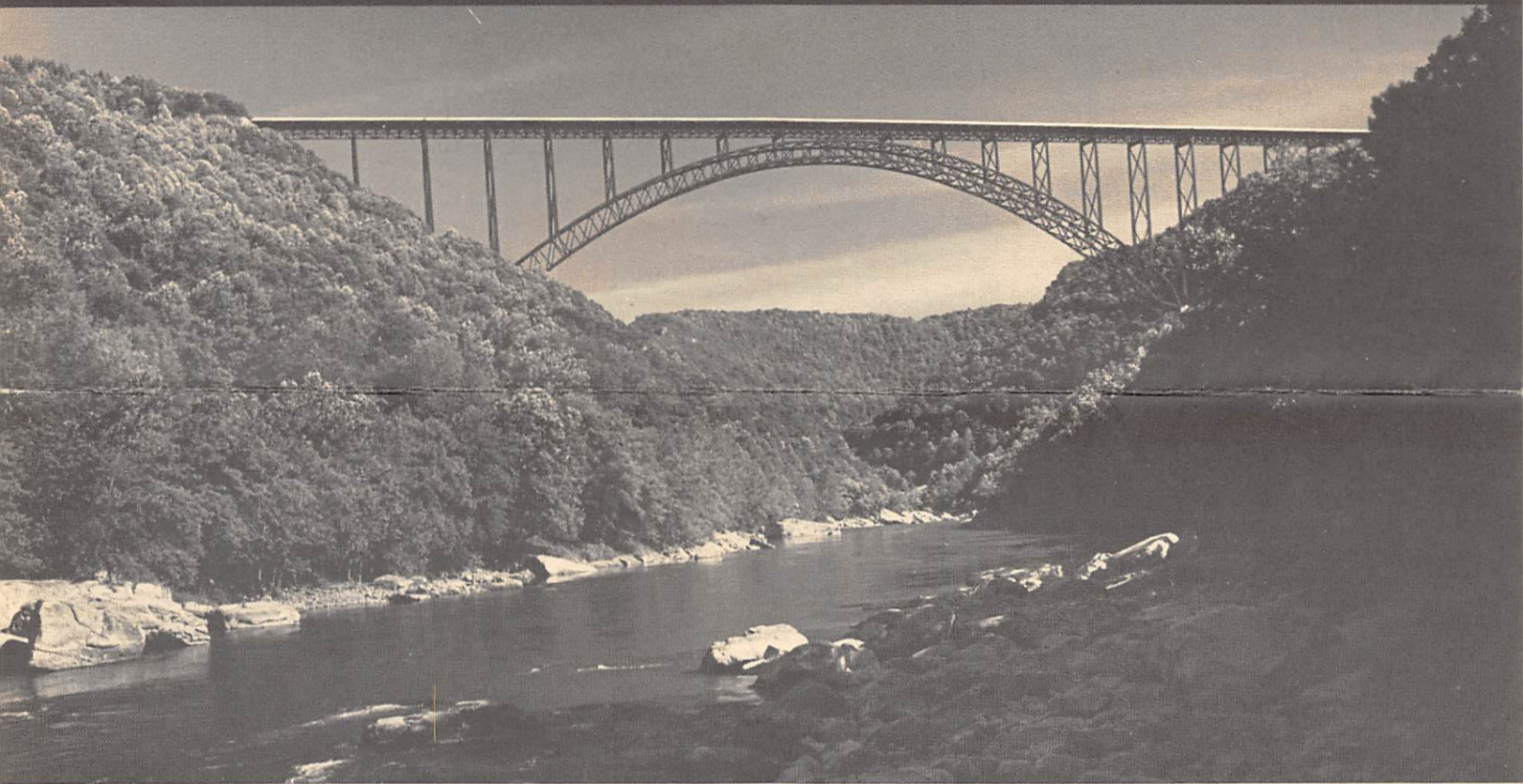


Photo by Gerald Ratliff

NEW RIVER BRIDGE

For years crossing the New River gorge meant long detours, or carefully winding your way down narrow mountain roads. It was not until the completion of the New River Gorge Bridge on October 22, 1977, that this travel problem was solved. However, the solution was not an easy one. Many technical problems had to be overcome. The bridge reduced a 40-minute drive down narrow mountain roads and across North America's oldest river to less than a minute.

The West Virginia Department of Highways, which owns the bridge, chose the Michael Baker Company to do the design. The construction contract was awarded to the American Bridge Division of U.S. Steel.

In June, 1974, the first steel was positioned over the gorge by trolleys running on 3" diameter cables. The cables were strung 3,500 feet between matching pairs of 330-foot

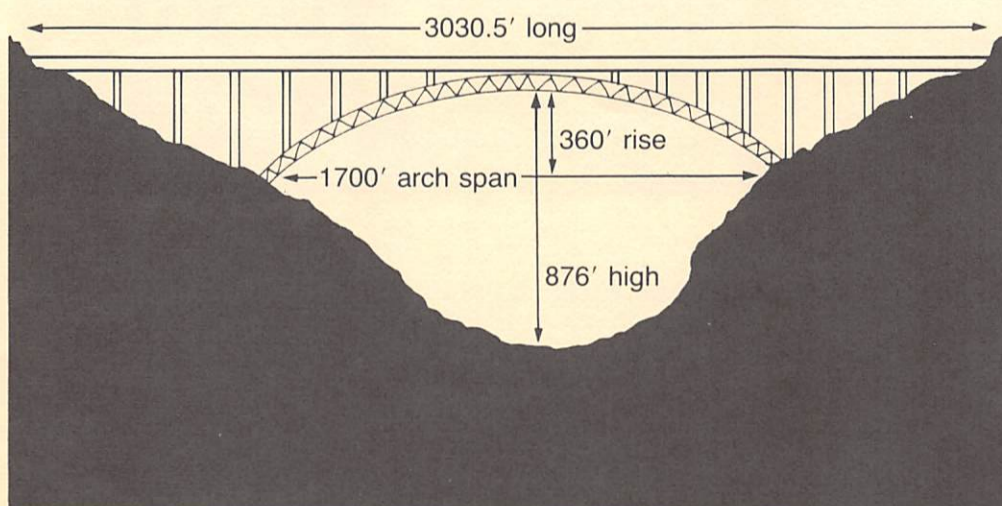
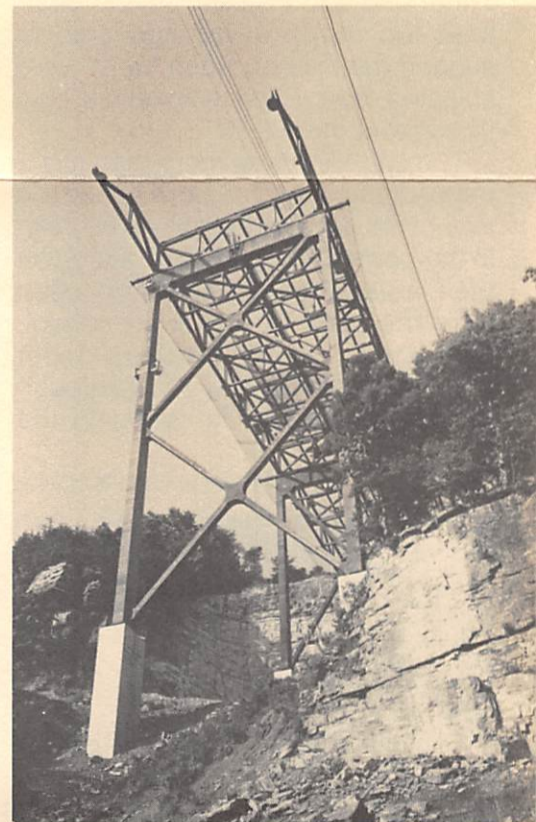
towers located on each side of the gorge. Cor-ten steel, with its rust-like appearance that never needs painting, was used in the construction of the bridge.

Arching gracefully across the New River, the bridge has the world's longest single arch steel span. It is the second highest in this country, with only the Royal Gorge Bridge in Colorado being higher.

On the second Saturday of October, the Fayette County Plateau Chamber of Commerce hosts "Bridge Day", when visitors may walk across the bridge. It is closed to pedestrian use the rest of the year.

The National Park Service operates a visitor center just north of the bridge. Here visitors are introduced to the National River, and scenic overlooks provide views of the bridge and gorge.

During construction steel for the bridge was brought into position by trolleys running on 3" cables. Photo by Don Kodak.



BRIDGE STATISTICS:

| | |
|----------------|-----------------|
| Height | 876 feet |
| Bridge Length | 3,030 feet |
| Arch Length | 1,700 feet |
| Rise | 360 feet |
| Final Cost | \$37,000,000 |
| Bid Price | \$33,984,000 |
| Weight | 88,000,000 lbs. |
| Steel | 44,000,000 lbs. |
| Concrete | 44,000,000 lbs. |
| Heaviest Piece | 184,000 lbs. |
| Arch | 21,066,000 lbs. |
| Deck Width | 69' 4" |

EARLY TRANSPORTATION IN THE GORGE

For centuries man has been looking for ways to traverse the New River's deep and narrow gorge. Over the years the canyon, rising an average of a thousand feet above the river, has proved a formidable barrier to transportation. Indian trails followed the river on either side along the rim of the gorge. Arteries connected the two main travel routes fording the New at places like Sewell, Thurmond, Prince, Meadow Creek and Sandstone.

When the first Europeans arrived they used many of these same crossings. As early as 1798 Peter Bowyer was operating a ferry in Fayette County at the now-abandoned town of Sewell. It was not long thereafter that a man named Townsend opened a ferry at Fayette Station. Gradually, other crossings were developed, but they were very slow in coming.

The completion of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway (C&O) in 1873 finally made the New River gorge more accessible. With the railroad came the coal companies, anxious to extract this "black gold" from the gorge. Men were needed to work the mines, and the formerly uninhabited gorge became a beehive of activity. Between Thurmond and Fayette Station more than two dozen towns appeared to support the miners. Soon trains were shipping New River smokeless coal throughout the world.

The C&O line was more than just a railroad; for many people, it became a way of life. It provided folks who lived in the gorge with food, mail and even their entertainment. Children often rode the train to and from school. Salesmen and peddlers from throughout the country came through the gorge, frequently spending the



C&O Station at Fire Creek with people waiting to board the westbound local. August, 1935. C&O Historical Society Collection.

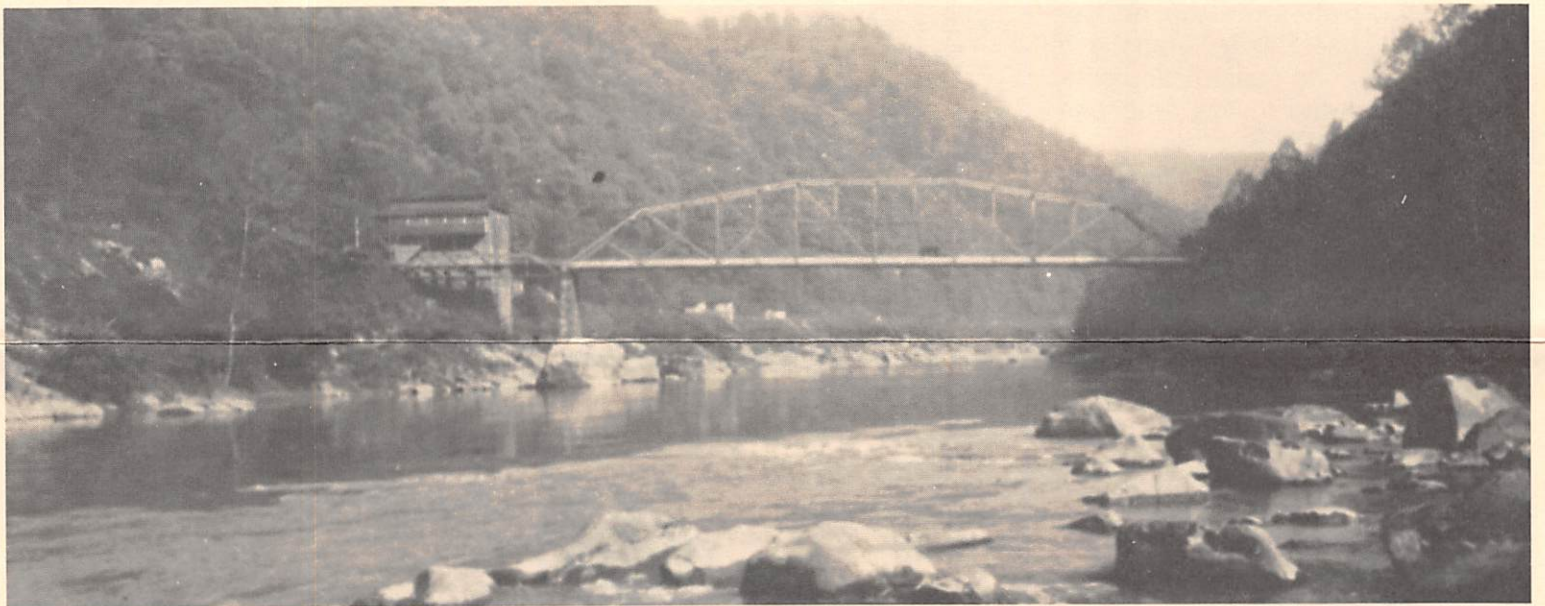
night at famous hotels like the Dun Glen and Quinimont.

The railroad gave inhabitants of the Gorge contact with the outside world, but they still remained isolated from their neighbors across the river and on the rim. Eventually, swinging bridges at Nuttallburg and Caperton provided a way across the river.

No later than 1889 a road snaked its way down the sides of the gorge to

Fayette Station. It crossed the New River on a Pennsylvania truss bridge 279 feet long and flanked on each end by short-span pony trusses. This engineering marvel of its day was built by the Virginia Bridge and Iron Company of Roanoke, Virginia. Dwarfed by the world's largest single arch steel span, these two bridges form a link in the transportation story of the New River gorge.

Bridge at Fayette Station. This engineering marvel of its day was completed in 1889 and is still standing.



The New River Gorge National River was made a part of the National Park System in 1978. A superintendent and his staff are responsible for conserving the scenic, natural, and historic value of a fifty-mile section of the New River Gorge. For further information concerning the National River contact:

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