

## Renaissance Musings

*Thoughts on an array of vastly interesting topics!*

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### Elkhead Stone Arch Bridge, Grundy County – A Fall from Historical Grace

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Sometimes history is only a few feet away. Sometimes history just looks like a pile of rocks. Sometimes it is a mystery.

So it is with the old Elkhead Stone Arch Bridge (Elkhead Bridge) on the Pelham-Altamont Road (US Rt 50). Approximately 5.2 miles north of highway 41 along State Route 50 on a long right-hand curve (headed north), the highway crosses the Elk River. Just west of the current bridge is what remains of an old stone bridge that was in use until the new highway was built.



Two stone arches from of the Elkhead River Bridge on the east side of the river are barely visible through the brush.

In July 1977 the bridge described as the Elkhead Stone Arch Bridge (Elkhead Bridge) on the Pelham-Altamont Road (US Rt 50) was nominated to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The two sections of text below are the description and a statement of the significance of the bridge as they appeared on the nomination form that was submitted and approved.

#### **Description in February 1977**

“The Elkhead Stone Arch Bridge spans the Elk River about one hundred yards south of the confluence of Laurel and Jay creeks in western Grundy County. Built on the Pelham-Altamon Road in c.1900, the longitudinal axis of the structure is oriendted along a west-southwest—east-northeast line.

“The six-span bridge gracefully arcs over the creek and bottom. The round voussoir arches, which are constructed of wedge-shaped, native limestone blocks without employing a prominent keystone, vary in diameter from approximately ten to twenty-five feet. The cut and coursed limestone superstructure rises to a maximum height of about fifteen feet above the water level. The earth-covered roadbed, which is approximately fifteen feet wide, runs between stone curbs. Traces of a steel rod railing remain attached to the curbs at the western end of the bridge.



The Elkhead River Bridge as it looked in 1977. (The image is a scan of an email of a PDF page from a printed document.)

“Nearly thirty years ago the Elkhead Bridge was replaced by a modern concrete bridge, and the old bridge has deteriorated considerably. Portions of the second, third, and fourth arches from the western approach have crumbled on the northern side and are in imminent danger of completely collapsing. The stonework at the water line, however, appears to be structurally sound.”

### **Statement of Significance (February 1977)**

“There are only five or six stone arch bridges still standing in Tennessee, and these are almost all single-or double-span structures. The notable exception is the unique six-span Elkhead Stone Arch Bridge, which served the needs of the local residents from about 1900 until a modern concrete bridge replaced it shortly after 1947. The Elkhead Bridge was a vital link in the road connecting the village of Pelham to Altamont, the county seat of Grundy County.



Although the area is overgrown and littered with brush, the site of the old bridge is a historic and potentially beautiful spot.

“That Elkhead Bridge has withstood the periodic flooding of the Elk River and nearly eighty years of highway traffic attests to the skill of the engineer who designed the bridge and to the craftsmanship of the stonemasons who built it. Efforts are presently underway to form an organization to stabilize and ultimately restore the deteriorated structure and to develop around it a park or picnic area.”

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On July 28, 1986, The National Park Service, Chief of Registration received a letter from the Deputy State Historical Preservation Officer notifying them that “the Elkhead Stone Arch Bridge has collapsed completely and, therefore, no longer retains the qualities under which it was listed” and that it should be “removed from the National Register of Historic Places.”

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While this was “no more” than a basic stone bridge, it did represent the efforts of skilled stonemasons and it served the county for nearly 50 years, and it could have been a proud piece of Grundy County history had it been preserved. Not just every “old” structure is accepted for the National Register of Historic Places. The river and the area around the old bridge are a beautiful area and would have made a marvelous park and picnic spot. As it is, in another 50 years, other than a few rocks scattered around, there will be no sign of this unique bit of Grundy County history.

Sometimes, history is just lost, altogether.

About/Contents

The Elkhead Bridge in Grundy County was once on the National Register of Historic Sites, but it is no more.