

“Like taking a picture of a roof”

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(May 28 2008) Nathan Holth (<http://historicbridges.org/>) and I just finished doing some photographic documentation of the State Street Bridge in Bridgeport Michigan and decided to stop at the Bridgeport library with the outside chance they would have some old pictures of the State Street Bridge. After describing to the librarian what we were looking for she made a quick dash to the back of the library and came back with a news print booklet and turned to a picture of the bridge, a grainy black and white picture taken in April 1998. “Well, that’s not actually what I had in mind,” I told her and launched into my often repeated tale on how there were few pictures taken of historic metal truss bridges. Something I discovered from years of rummaging through piles of old pictures and postcards in antique stores and local transportation offices is that our ancestors took few pictures of their local iron truss bridge. They took pictures of their horse, barn, house, front porch, and even the outhouse, but rarely did they point a camera toward the local iron truss bridge. When I finished my spiel, the librarian, with a slight mischievous smile, said “It’s like taking a picture of a roof.” Yes, I thought, that summed up the attitude many of our forefathers probably had about the local iron bridge. It appears our forefathers simply looked at a bridge as a tool to get goods and services across the river, and when the bridge was worn out, as with any tool, it was replaced with a better tool. J.A.L. Waddell, author of “De Pontibus: A Pocket-Book for Bridge Engineers (1908), wrote in his chapter “Aesthetics in Design”: *“In regard to the ornamentation of bridges by adoption of elaborately artistic approaches, but little has yet been done in America, the reason being that any money so expended has evidently no utilitarian purpose, and consequently to the eye of the solely practical man appears to be entirely wasted.”*

Today it is difficult to convince many people of the value in saving a historic metal truss bridge or to convince them there is something beyond the truss design and the engineering heritage of a bridge that’s worth saving. When a historic iron bridge is restored it is often difficult to convince engineers that replacing an original riveted floor beam with a modern wide flange beam will destroy a valuable record of the craftsmen. Just as Waddell suggested, for the solely practical man the effort appears to be entirely wasted.