

ESSER'S CROSSING AT WESSON, TEXAS

CONTEXT

Esser's Crossing on the Guadalupe River, situated along one of the first safe river road crossings, became site of an important way-station. It played a vital role that provided crude, but a safe shallow solid rock bottom river crossing for pioneers and their ox-drawn wagons and horse-drawn carriages. The town of Wesson sprang up adjacent to Esser's Crossing as a post office. Although Esser's Crossing and Wesson eventually became a ghost community, the frequently used river road crossing served almost one hundred and fifty years as a place designated for safe passage into the northwest portion of the state from New Braunfels and San Antonio towards Johnson City and Fredericksburg. The route eventually was the only high water bridge over the Guadalupe River on the farm to market road until the newly proposed nearby Veterans Highway 66 was completed in 1936. The new highway became the American Legion Memorial Highway 281. Before this highway from San Antonio to Johnson City was built, river road crossings played an essential role in early northwestern county history. These crossings were Specht's Crossing, Esser's Crossing and Remmler's Crossing, all part of the Spring Branch area. (see Attachment 1)

OVERVIEW

A century has passed since the first public high water bridge was erected over the Guadalupe River known as Esser's Crossing and a government post office served a tiny community in northwestern Comal County called Wesson, Texas. This postal station was conducted by Charles Beierle, Sr. between 1893 and 1907.¹

Esser's Crossing on the Guadalupe River, located nineteen miles northwest of New Braunfels² on present-day Farm to Market 311 and two miles east of US Memorial Highway 281, was one of four such crossings used by the German farming and ranching community of Spring Branch. Spring Branch was founded in 1852 by the Dietrich Knibbe family living four miles west of this crossing. The general post office at Spring Branch was established in July 1858 and served twenty-five years until the Wesson Post Office was established in 1893. After the Wesson Post Office closed, the Spring Branch post office then served this area from 1907 until present.³

As early as 1850, this flat rock bottom river crossing on the Guadalupe River was first known as Henderson Crossing Settlement for Hensley G. Henderson who sold his property in 1852 to James Henderson who then sold his holdings and left this area by 1860.⁴ In 1858 a German emigrant by the name of Charles Esser (1827-1902) (see Attachment 2) homesteaded and purchased property near the crossing along this stagecoach trail and then provided a public way-station. Being civic minded, Esser served as a voting judge, justice of the peace, school teacher and was the primary person responsible for bringing the post office to the area in the 1890s.⁵ The Fredericksburg Road was blazed as early as 1858 and later named the Fredericksburg-New Braunfels Road, the New Braunfels-Blanco Road and finally FM 311.⁶ Esser's place was established along this old wagon trail.

In 1867, Comal County built a new road from Blanco to New Braunfels and it was to pass through the Twin Sisters peaks. Erdmann Elbel, Dietrich Knibbe and Charles Esser were three local men who marked the most convenient and practical route from New Braunfels following the old Fredericksburg Road to the new county line with Blanco.⁷ Another mention of the crossing in the Comal County Commissioners Court minutes in 1873 was, "Fredericksburg Road, beginning at the Public square in New Braunfels, thence by Klappenbach, Jentsch, Brehmer, Loeffler's place to Smithsons Valley thence to Esser's Guadalupe Crossing thence Schaeferkoeter's place on Rebecca Creek to the County line."⁸

The Charles and Henrietta (Knetch) Esser homestead still stands along the road, about 0.3 miles east of the river crossing site where the Esser's maintained a way-station for weary freighters and wagoners traveling along this lonely stretch of road between New Braunfels and Blanco and then on to Fredericksburg.⁹ Hermann Seele's travels in Texas included in May 1860, "at Charles Esser's place, a good midday meal, with a hearty appetite, we gratefully accepted and ate these meals." Seele continued, "The fording of the Guadalupe was not without danger because of the high water. The river flowed through our carriage while we drew up our legs and sat with our suitcase on our knees. Our good horses, however, brought us safely to the security of the bank."¹⁰

With flood conditions, it could take several weeks or more for the water to return to its natural state and these travelers from Smithson Valley or Spring Branch bound from

either Blanco to the north or San Antonio to the south had to wait to cross for long periods of time. Whenever the crossing on the Guadalupe River was flooded, teamsters drove to Fischer's Store, Devil's Backbone or Purgatory Road to cross over the 1887 Faust Street Bridge in New Braunfels.¹¹ It became the County Commissioners responsibility to provide a safe crossing by building a high-water bridge to span the Guadalupe River. This bridge would be the second bridge of its type in the county. According to a newspaper article in 1903, residents disputed over the need for a bridge over the river crossings at Cranes Mill, Remmler's Crossing, Esser's Crossing and Specht's Crossing.¹² The County Commissioners Court selected Esser's Crossing in 1904 to receive the bridge, on now FM 311, from Smithson Valley to Spring Branch, at a cost of \$12,498 by the Grover E. King Bridge Company of Dallas, Texas.¹³

Although the land at the south side of the bridge site was actually owned first by Henderson heirs, in 1876 it was sold to Sebastian Beierle and his heirs. Sebastian's son, Charles Beierle, Sr. (1855-1936) became the first and only Wesson Postmaster and conducted the office out of his homestead from August 2, 1893 to December 14, 1907. (see Attachment 3 and 4) With no record that Comal County procured ownership or right of way of such land for a road or bridge at Esser's Crossing, today it is maintained by the State of Texas and known as the FM 311 Guadalupe River Crossing. After the construction of the bridge, agricultural products, cotton and grains, were brought to the New Braunfels market from as far away as Johnson City.¹⁴

The 1904 wrought iron, wooden wagon bridge construction was comprised of two main spans known as Pratt (whipple) truss spans, flanked by two smaller spans. The Whipple truss style bridge design was popular in the mid-to-late 19th Century. These trusses were connected by a pin and hanger system, which was the common method of the time. The spans were supported by iron beams encased in concrete piers. The flooring had four-inch thick wooden planks laid across the width of the bridge held in place by the iron formed supports with some space between boards for wet weather conditions. (see Attachment 5) An example of this style bridge is the Faust Street Bridge in New Braunfels where it was known as the first high-water bridge in the county.¹⁵ Typically this bridge was designed for one-way traffic at a time. In 1905, a sign was placed at each end of the bridge forbidding fast driving, riding and driving more than ten

head of cattle or horses (livestock) at one time.¹⁶ Over the next fifty years, this bridge had to be maintained and repaired whenever necessary.¹⁷ (see Attachment 5)

It was reported after World War I and about 1925 that American soldiers from Fort Sam Houston marched to New Braunfels and then to Esser's Crossing at Spring Branch, where they camped over-night and then marched back to Fort Sam Houston the next day. Carmen Beierle-Rittmann recalls that at age of 4 or 5 she saw rows and rows of tents and soldiers at this site.

Esser's Crossing 1904 bridge became one of two crossings along the upper Guadalupe River designated as Official USG (United States Geological) Stations in 1923, the other being at Comfort, Texas. This station gauge location was Latitude 29° 51' 40", Longitude 98° 23' on the right downstream side of Esser's Crossing bridge on FM 311, two miles southeast of Spring Branch Creek and 7.2 miles downstream from Curry's Creek. This gauge remained in operation for almost three quarters of a century until it was replaced with an electric gauge monitored by satellite. Area residents served as gauge attendants to record yearly data records between 1923 and 1995. These records indicated the essential need for constant improvement of road crossings on the river and the necessity of Canyon Reservoir which was completed in 1964.¹⁸ (see Attachment 6)

The 1904 bridge was later condemned and a low water bridge was built just upstream of the site in 1954. In 1976, the County Commissioners ordered the 1904 abandoned bridge to be removed due to trespassers, floods and fire damage.¹⁹

Later, when forced to replace the 1954 low-water bridge due to increased traffic and usage between towns, the high water bridge of today was completed. In August 1978 when only the pylons for the bridge had been erected, a hundred year flood occurred. Later that year the bridge was completed and the USGS gauge was then connected to the new bridge.²⁰ (see Attachment 7)

SIGNIFICANCE

In the mid-to-late 1800s, thousands of pioneers, particularly German, came to Texas and settled in New Braunfels and Comal County. From there, they continued to other communities like Spring Branch, Blanco, Johnson City and Fredericksburg. The hill country area was plentiful with wildlife and water resources which suited the ranching and agricultural industries. Transportation of goods and people was an

important link between the communities and contributed to the prosperity of the region. Crossing the rivers which were the lifeblood of the communities was of importance. Natural rock crossing fords were sought out and way-stations sprang up along these routes. These hill country rivers were prone to flooding which posed problems and halted the transport of people and goods. High-water bridges were necessary to work with these natural environmental elements and they contributed to the success of the area which prospers to this day. Although the area of Esser's Crossing and Wesson, Texas is now a ghost town, it's place in history that contributed to a large migration and success of a people must not be forgotten.

This information has been compiled by Brenda Anderson-Lindemann, Helen Weidner and Carmen (Beierle) Rittimann in honor and memory of their dear friend and fellow historian, Vera (Peel) Haag of Kendalia, Texas. Vera began this project in the late 1990s because her husband, Allen Haag, was a descendant of Charles Esser, Sr. Vera died in 2000 but her dream was to procure a Texas Historical Marker for Esser's crossing.

¹ Lindemann, Brenda Anderson, *Spring Branch and Western Comal County, Texas 1858-1998*, Omni Publishers, Bulverde, TX, Chapter IV, pg. 103-104.

² Haas, Oscar *The New Handbook of Texas*, Vol. 6, pg. 885-886.

³ Lindemann, Chapter III, pg. 39-101.

⁴ Haas, Oscar *The New Handbook of Texas*, Vol. 6, pg. 885-886.

⁵ Comal County Land Deeds, Book E, pg. 790 #3174.

⁶ a. Haas, Oscar, *History of New Braunfels and Comal County, Texas 1846-1946*, pg. 77-78.

b. *Neu Braunfelsener Zeitung*, New Braunfels, TX, December 28, 1860.

c. Comal County Commissioner Court (CCCC), Minutes, 1858 Book.

⁷ CCCC Minutes, Book D, pg. 43.

⁸ a. CCCC, Road and Bridge Records, refers 74 times to Esser's Crossing from 1858-1976.

b. CCCC Minutes, Book 1873.

c. *Zeitung*, August 7, 1863, pg. 1.

d. *Zeitung*, February 10, 1871, column 4-6.

e. *Zeitung*, April 4, 1873.

f. *Zeitung*, December 25, 1895.

⁹ Lindemann, Chapter IV, pg. 103-104.

¹⁰ a. Lindemann, Chapter 1, pg. 22.

b. Hermann Seele translated by Edward C. Breitenkamp, *The Cypress and Other Writings of a German Pioneer in Texas*, U.T. Press, Austin, TX, Chapter Travels in Texas, pg. 143-149.

¹¹ CCCC Minutes Book 1, pg. 280.

¹² *Zeitung*, September 4, 1903.

¹³ a. *Zeitung*, March 10, 1904, pg. 2.

b. CCCC, Minutes, Book 1, February 17, 1904, pg. 280.

c. *Zeitung*, August 18, 1904; September 22, 1904; December 1, 1904 now refers to "at Wesson".

¹⁴ a. Haas, Oscar, *The New Handbook of Texas*, Vol. 6, pg. 885-886.

b. Lindemann, Chapter V, pg. 242.

¹⁵ Texas Historical Commission Marker 1999

Same or similar construction as the 1887 Faust Street Bridge in New Braunfels, Texas taken from the THC marker text for description. Local residents Charlie and Helen Weidner and Carmen Beierle-Rittiman, indicate that the construction was similar when comparing photos of both bridges.

¹⁶ a. CCCC, Minutes, Book 1, pg. 362.

b. *Zeitung*, March 2, 1905.

¹⁷ a. CCCC, Minutes, Book K, September 1909, pg. 151.

b. CCCC, Minutes, Book 1, February, 1917, pg. 315.

c. CCCC, Minutes, Book M, 1922, pg. 400.

d. CCCC, Minutes, Book Q, 1947, pg. 484.

¹⁸ Lindemann, Chapter VII, pg. 284-286.

¹⁹ CCCC, Minutes, Book Y, pg. 97.

²⁰ Lindemann, Chapter VII, pg. 290.