

Chandler spreads the word on covered bridges

Hancock author sharing information from 'Covered Bridges of New Hampshire'

By DAVID ALLEN
Monadnock Ledger Transcript

If there's one image that perhaps appears more than any other on calendars that boast scenes of New Hampshire, it is that of covered bridges.

New Hampshire shares the longest historical covered bridge in the United States with Vermont, and in this region, Greenfield and Hancock are connected by one over the Contoocook River.

Kim Varney Chandler can elaborate on these and many others without notes. The Hancock author of "Covered Bridges of New Hampshire" came by her subject during the pandemic, and offered a presentation on the topic and her book at the Dublin Public Library Tuesday.

A school counselor by profession, she moved to Hancock in 2012, and wondered "Why is there a covered bridge here?" COVID allowed her to dive into the subject owing to the pandemic's impositions.

"In 2020, you couldn't socialize, so my husband and I went kayaking, and in doing so, I started noticing the details of these structures," she said in an interview Monday before her presentation, adding that she began looking through books on the topic, and came to a conclusion: "They weren't thorough enough."

Chandler has considerable knowledge of her topic.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ELIZABETH MOORE
Kim Varney Chandler presents her research and discusses her book "Covered Bridges of New Hampshire" at Dublin Public Library on Tuesday.

"Pennsylvania has the most covered bridges in the U.S., Vermont has 106 and we have 70 in New Hampshire," she said, adding that the longest wooden span is the Cornish-Windsor bridge spanning the Connecticut River into Vermont, a two-lane structure of 460 feet.

She started researching covered bridges at the Cheshire County Historical Society, where Executive Director Alan Rumrill suggested that she write a book based on all her work.

"I can't do that," I thought," she said, explaining that she revered books, so crafting her own seemed a

reach, but she also had a love of history sparked by professor Charles Clark of UNH, where she took two degrees.

She reached out to 200 people as part of her research.

"Ninety-nine percent of them were extremely gracious," Chandler said.

In addition to engineers, Chandler met with bridgewrights, timber framers, historical societies, towns and historical as well as state and national organizations to complete her 288-page work on these icons of New Hampshire infrastructure. She is currently presenting her work around the state and is part of the New Hampshire

Humanities Council Humanities To Go speakers bureau.

Noting that some bridges were public, some private and some required tolls, Chandler said that communities with covered bridges have special relationships with them.

"Some have community watch programs to protect them, and there are grants out there to help," she said.

One initiative she mentioned is with the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance, "Seven to Save" -- an effort to preserve historically significant structures. The need for such efforts is underscored by arson which damaged the Upside Down Covered Bridge in Franklin years ago, a triple-span wooden structure built in 1897 with Pratt trusses.

"New Hampshire is the home base for preserving these," she said, explaining that the National Society for the Preservation of Covered Bridges is based in Hillsborough. "The organization was founded in 1950 when urban renewal began to take hold in the U.S. With bigger vehicles coming on the scene, it was thought that we couldn't have one-lane bridges."

Chandler added that Milton Graton deserves credit for sparking efforts to save these structures beginning in the 1950s. His son Arnold is keeping these efforts alive at the age of 87, she said.

Chandler next hopes to tackle "lost" covered bridges in New Hampshire, which are in various stages of having seen better days. Chandler said that there could be as many as 400 in the state.

"I hope this book will give people a sense of who put the bridges there, why, and why it's still there," she said.