

# Long Grove History

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## The *Bridge*, & Other Long Stories

*Wood, then iron, then a New England wrapper. A century and a half of Long Grove told through one short span over Buffalo Creek.*

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**BUFFALO CREEK · 1908** The Long Grove iron-truss bridge in 1908, taken from a photo postcard. The back of the postcard reads — *"Just enjoying a long sweet smoke at the corners."*

Previously, in part three, we ended the walking tour at the restored farmhouse in the Stempel parking lot. To conclude, we'll reflect on Long Grove's history — and the famous Long Grove covered bridge.



### *A wooden affair, then iron.*

The first bridge over Buffalo Creek in downtown Long Grove was a simple wooden affair, created in the late 1840's as a "less messy" way for area people to get to the church and cemetery — riding your horse *through* Buffalo Creek being the earlier "messy" way. It was likely a simple structure, but adequate for the occasional horse and wagon. It was not covered.

As the population in the Long Grove area grew, the crossroads became a strategic central location for goods and services. By 1900 it had become a true commerce center for area farmers, featuring two corner stores, a creamery, a hotel, a tavern, and even a town hall. **Long Grove was on the map.**

In 1902, the automobile was just starting to take hold — one for every 1,000 people in the U.S. Where does one drive their car in a horse-and-wagon world? Not very far on dirt roads, and certainly not alone — AAA was formed in Chicago in 1902 to advocate for road improvements. Clubs were formed for people to take excursions together, and Long Grove was a popular early destination for these auto enthusiasts. Perhaps in a related response, the wooden bridge was replaced in 1906 with a more modern iron truss structure — the one in the photo on the previous page.

### *The downfall — and the revival.*

Ironically, this burgeoning mobility would be the downfall of early downtown Long Grove, and later its revival. With the advent of the automobile and tractor, Long Grove lost its strategic location advantage — area residents no longer needed local horse-and-buggy shops, and were able to drive farther to larger towns to do their weekly marketing. Some shops closed up and sat empty; others tried to adapt — the smithy put in an auto garage and gas pump; the hotel was converted to a private residence.

A chance for commercial redemption came and went in 1930, when the State routed Highways 53 and 83 around Long Grove. The rationing and economics of World War II pretty much finished off what was left. By 1945, Long Grove had become a ghost town — two dirt roads crossing with shuttered buildings all around.

When the economy improved after the war, so did the roads — Old McHenry was blacktopped, and the corner stores were acquired by the wives of two local farmers who began selling antiques, hand-made dresses, ice cream, and homemade pies. Long Grove again became an interesting and fun place to drive on a nice afternoon. Its growing popularity attracted other antique dealers, and adjacent downtown residences were repurposed as additional shops.

Recognizing that expansion could hurt the charm of the quaint crossroads, action was taken in 1962: the Long Grove Village Board passed the *Historic Landmark Ordinance* — one of the first of its kind in the country. The ordinance required new construction and remodeling to conform to a certain historic style, known as the "*Long Grove Style*."

### *A toothache, and a bridge.*

Imagine the year is 1967, and your wife has a toothache. What can you do to take her mind off the pain? If you're **John Mangel**, you offer to take her for a drive over to this interesting little crossroads you've heard about, called Long Grove. That's exactly what happened — on arriving, John was amazed with how many shoppers there were and how few stores there were. *These people needed more things to buy.*

An entrepreneur, John began acquiring additional buildings and residences in town and converting them into additional stores. As fortune would have it, Long Grove's village president at the time was **Robert Parker Coffin** — an engineer and builder by trade. Many new shops were built, including some of the downtown's "anchor" shops — *The Long Grove Confectionary* and *The Apple Haus*.

When the old truss bridge began showing its age, Lake County recommended that it be replaced with a culvert. Recognizing the opportunity to further the village's charm, it was proposed instead that the life of the truss infrastructure be extended by covering it. Village President Coffin chose a famous New England bridge — the **Ashuelot, New Hampshire** bridge — as a model for his design for the new cover. So in 1972, Long Grove got its first covered bridge... or, more accurately described, its first *bridge covering*. And for the next twenty years, Long Grove was a boom town — annually one of Illinois' top tourist attractions outside of Chicago.

### *Today — and twenty years hence.*

Today, Long Grove again finds itself at a touchstone. The life extension of the bridge gained by the covering is now expiring, and the bridge will soon need replacement or major remodeling. The decline in popularity of "country charm," the economic downturn, internet shopping, and the retirements of many of the boom-era shopkeepers have all conspired to shutter stores. However, if there's one thing we've seen repeated in history, it's Long Grove's ability to attract an entrepreneur and ride the wave of a social change. *Who will be the next Zimmer or Bollenbach? The next Mangel? What theme will the downtown take?*

TO BE CONTINUED / PART FIVE



To find out — watch for Part 5, to be printed twenty years hence in the **AUGUST 2033** edition of *Long Grove Living*.