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A Brief History of the National Society for the Preservation of Covered Bridges

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Although the National Society for the Preservation of Covered Bridges is the oldest covered bridge society still active, it wasn't the first.

By the late 1920s Indiana's wooden covered bridges were disappearing at an accelerated rate. In response to this, the Executive Committee of the Indiana Historical Society appointed a committee to investigate, document, and promote the preservation of Indiana's remaining covered bridges. The Covered Timber Bridge Committee was established in March of 1931 with Robert B. Yule, an engineer with the Indiana Highway Commission, as its first chair. The committee sent out survey forms to county surveyors and sought donations of covered bridge photographs and information from the public. By February 1938, they had documented 202 covered bridges within the state. These collected statistics, histories and photographs on Indiana's bridges were maintained in comprehensive files and available for researchers in the William Henry Smith Library at the Indiana Historical Society.¹

In the October 1938 issue of Highway Magazine, R. B. Yule stated, "The committee hopes to have several good examples of covered bridge construction in parks or on secondary roads preserved for the use and interest of several generations to come."²

In 1940, the Ohio Historical Society formed a similar Covered Bridge Committee with John Diehl, a civil engineer from Cincinnati as the chairman. Diehl is responsible for creating the system of numbering covered bridges that we still use today.

On March 7, 1950, Leo Litwin (1909-1987), a classical pianist with the Boston Pops and George B. Pease hosted the first meeting of covered bridge hobbyists in the Boston area with 16 people in attendance. That group evolved into the Society for the Preservation of Covered Bridges by the end of the year with Litwin as president and Pease as Secretary-Treasurer. One of the group's early goals was to save the Taft Bridge in Dummerston, Vermont by having it moved to Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts where it still stands today.³

By 1952, the ever-increasing popularity of Richard Sanders Allen's "Covered Bridge Topics" caused him to reach out for help with the printing and distribution of the newsletter. Allen started printing Topics in April 1943 to share his interest in covered bridges with his friends. Topics went on hiatus after the 17th issue in late 1944 while Rick served in the military. Eugene Bock of Anderson, Indiana prepared the revived Topics which was released on V-J Day and distributed it to Rick's original list of recipients plus historical societies and libraries throughout the US and Canada. Due to the sudden increase in popularity, Allen and Bock needed to start charging a subscription fee to cover their expenses.⁴ Over the years, interest in Topics grew to the point where Rick was becoming overwhelmed with the publication and mailing of each issue. The SPCB offered to take over the publication. The Summer 1952 issue was the first one as the official publication of the Society for the Preservation of Covered Bridges.

¹ Indiana History Bulletin, Volume 69, Number 1, March 1998

² Indiana History Bulletin, Volume 69, Number 1, March 1998

³ Covered Bridge Topics, volume 37, number 4 (Fall 1979)

⁴ "The Story of Covered Bridge Topics" essay by Eugene R. Bock, March 1946.

The Saturday Evening Post issue of November 28, 1953 included an article on covered bridges featuring Richard Sanders Allen and the SPCB. The article resulted in a flood of new members increasing Topics subscriptions from 115 when the Society took over publication a year earlier to over 400.

Early in 1954, the group voted to incorporate. On August 9, 1954, a group of officers assembled at the State House in Boston to receive the corporate charter from the Secretary of State. "National" was added to the group's name at that time. The charter listed the Society's purpose as:

- To preserve covered bridges.
- To gather and record knowledge of the history of covered bridges.
- To collect and preserve pictures, printed and manuscript matter and other articles of historical interest concerning covered bridges.
- To do all things, alone or in cooperation with other persons or corporations, necessary or advisable to carry out any or all of the foregoing purposes and objects.

In 1956, the group met another of its goals by producing the "Guide to the Covered Bridges of the United States" which was followed by the first *World Guide to Covered Bridges* in 1959 where each bridge was assigned a number based on the system developed by John Diehl.

Current president, David Wright joined the Society in 1983. In the fall of 1989, he succeeded M. Marion Mayer (formerly M. Marion Bonnet) who had led the Society since 1972. David has been an outspoken proponent of using traditional means and methods for preserving our historic covered bridges.

Current *Topics* editor, Joseph Conwill, joined the Society as a teenager in 1967. In addition to being the editor, a position he has held since the fall of 1992, Joseph has spent countless hours organizing the Society's photograph collections in Westminster, Vermont. As a result, the Society's largest collection donated by Richard Sanders Allen is stored in archival-safe protectors and arranged in a series of file cabinets by state and county. Joseph has also spent the past few years scanning the various slide and negative collections.

Beyond the NSPCB, there are presently a number of State covered bridge societies. They include:

Theodore Burr Covered Bridge Society of Pennsylvania, founded in 1959

The Ohio Historic Bridge Association, founded in 1960 as the Southern Ohio Covered Bridge Association

Indiana Covered Bridge Society, Inc., founded in 1963

New York State Covered Bridge Society, founded in 1966

The Covered Bridge Society of Oregon, founded in 1978

Vermont Covered Bridge Society, founded in 2000



Presentation of corporate charter, August 9, 1954. Left to right: Charles H. Watkins, NSPCB Director; Edward J. Cronin, Massachusetts Secretary of State, Charles Wilson, NSPCB Director; Leo Litwin, President; John Brooks, NSPCB Attorney; and Roger D. Griffin, NSPCB Treasurer

NSPCB Presidents:

Leo Litwin, 1950 to ????

More research is needed for years between 1954 and 1966

Mrs. Richard P. Bonney, ended Fall 1966

Herbert K Richardson, Fall 1966 to Fall 1969

Richard P. Bonney, Fall 1969 to Fall 1970

Arnold L. Ellsworth, Fall 1970 to Fall 1972

M. Marion Bonnet (later M. Marion Mayer), Fall 1972 to Fall 1989.

David Wright (Fall 1989 - present)

Topics Editors:

Richard Sanders Allen (April 1943-Summer 1945)

Richard Sanders Allen/Eugene Bock (December 1945-Spring 1952)

Leo Litwin (Summer 1952-April 1971)

Richard P. Bonney (Fall 1971 - April 1973)

Joseph Cohen (July 1973-Summer 1992)

Joseph Conwill (Fall 1992-present)