

Ronnie Miller grew up in a holler in Clay County in the 1950s and '60s. It was a time when almost everybody was poor like him, but nobody really knew it. Coal mining was king, and the county was full of the stuff. For many Appalachians then, running water was a luxury, and outhouses and dirt roads remained the norm.

It was also a time of swinging bridges — suspension bridges that swayed anywhere from 20 to 50 feet over a river or creek, anchored on either side of the gully. The bridges served as byways and shortcuts for pedestrians who needed to get from one place to another, especially after heavy rains sent water funneling down the hills and creating floods below.

A PIECE OF HISTORY

“Back in the '50s, Clay County had more than 40 of these bridges,” says Miller, who helped found Stay in Clay, a group that formed a few years back in an effort to boost tourism and pride in the county. “It was a way to get back home, basically. We didn’t really have good roads until the '60s, and there weren’t any school buses. We walked to school. Because of our terrain, we had more of these bridges than anybody in the state.”

The bridges’ construction goes back to ancient times when Incans first built them for similar reasons. Pioneers and Appalachian settlers

continued the tradition out of necessity. “Everything here was located around the rivers, even when I was growing up,” Miller says. “A lot of our schools were around the river. Many of them had a swinging bridge going off to it, and we kids loved walking across. It was just fun.”

But as roads and other infrastructure improved, the suspension bridges that had once been a vital part of the county’s transportation system slipped out of mind and began to rot. Most lacked maintenance, and others disappeared.

BRINGING THEM BACK

The historic value of the bridges came up after Stay in Clay formed nearly 10 years ago. The group — short on money, but long on enthusiasm — decided to find ways to get the bridges operational. They took private donations and received steady funding from the local tourism commission. Then they set about repairing as many bridges as they could.

When Miller started leading the bridge reconstruction effort about four or five years ago, only three of the bridges were walkable. Today, in Kentucky’s “Land of Swinging Bridges,” pedestrians can walk in the footsteps of old-time Appalachians on about eight of the county’s remaining swinging bridges. A few others will undergo construction, depending on funding.

LINKS TO THE PAST

Clay County's swinging bridges offer visitors a step back in time

Story by JEN CALHOUN | Photography by MELISSA GAINES



“I hired a local contractor that can pretty much do anything,” Miller says. “This was right up his alley. I had him work on the best ones first, so we could get them up and running. We put them back to the way they were, at least to that configuration.”

From there, state highway bridge inspectors tested them for strength and safety. “We ask that only pedestrians — and maybe their dogs — walk the bridges,” Miller says. “There’s an 800-pound limit for travel, or about four people. That’s our suggestion, and it’s on a list of rules that are posted on all of the bridges.”

STAY IN CLAY

Bridges aren’t the only passion for the Stay in Clay group, which recognizes that rural Appalachian history can be just as fascinating and beautiful as ancient ruins and European churches. The group also promotes a quilt trail and a tour of weathered barns in the region, both of which stand as reminders of hard-working farmers from past times.

Miller says Stay in Clay wants to show visitors and locals alike the richness of their history and heritage. They want people to see the resourcefulness and determination of the people who lived there. But they also want to give their county a boost. “We just want it to do good,” Miller says. “It’s one of the most beautiful places in the world. We just want good things for it.”



Gail and Ronnie Miller look over the water on the Antepast swinging bridge in Clay County.



Goose Creek swinging bridge is located in downtown Manchester.

PEACEFUL RETREAT

Clay County's swinging bridges offer breathtaking views for visitors, especially during the fall leaf-peeping season. To find out more about the Land of Swinging Bridges, visit claycountykentucky.org or find them on Facebook. The website offers names, driving directions and information for each bridge, as well as many other tourist draws in Clay County.