

Bridges and Trestles

By Dick Ray

We all recognize the attraction of bridges and trestles. In the dark ages of motorcar trips, we were always thrilled to cross a long, high bridge and especially to take a photo of our cars on that bridge. Trestles were even better because there was no additional structure to obscure the view of that freshly-restored Fairbanks-Morse.

Of course, in those days a meet was three cars, no children, and experienced operators who realized that no one was guaranteeing that the weedy track was safe. Eventually, we came to realize the full extent of the dangers, especially with larger groups of people, and now the NARCOA rulebook forbids getting out of a car on a bridge in Section 3, Paragraph 3. Although getting out is allowed if there is a railing and walkway, additional dangers exist. Those dangers should be obvious, but I will go through them anyway.

Walking on the ties on a bridge or trestle is more difficult than usual because the ties are set closer and there is normally no ballast. Walking requires staring at one's feet. This creates the opportunity to trip over a guard rail or bump into someone going the other way. Trying to edge past a line of cars stopped on a bridge while carrying two slide cameras and a video camera can be awkward, even if no one opens a car door or bumps into you while getting out of their car. You will also have to edge past everyone who got out of their car to enjoy the view.

Not all bridges have the ties extending all the way to the side structure and that side structure may not be such that it constitutes a railing. The opportunity for falling should be obvious even though you are inside a large steel structure. Trestles often have no railing at all. Even if they do are you sure you want to trust the maintenance of that railing? The wooden posts could be completely rotted and the braces could be missing.

One of the least obvious dangers concerns the walkway. These are commonly built of boards supported on extended ties four to six feet apart. Who knows the condition of those boards? I have seen missing boards and surmised that maybe they broke and fell off under someone's weight. You can believe that I will never, ever walk on wooden walkways.

There are some bridges and trestles that may be reasonably safe. In New Hampshire, the bridges are completely floored so that the inevitable snowmobiles will have a safer passage. The Montreal Falls trestle on the Algoma Central Railroad has a steel walkway and railing, and is as substantial as any I've ever seen. Still, there are dangers such as the camera I saw dropped over the side.

Although not prohibited in the NARCOA rulebook or Operations Manual, stopping on a bridge or trestle is discouraged. If you do have to stop there, getting out of your car is not recommended.