

BRIDGES

to the **FUTURE**

Clay County's swinging bridges are at the forefront of regional revitalization

Text and Photos by Abby Laub

OF all the places I would expect myself to be on a stormy Monday afternoon in early June, swinging high above a creek in Clay County, while contemplating bridge engineering and the sanity of my profession, was not one of them.

"Margy likes to make the bridges swing," murmured Stay in Clay co-founder **Betty Jo Morris** as she stood at the end of the swinging bridge, grinning at me but clutching the railing as though she might fall off at any second.

The rain held off long enough for Morris' partners in Stay in Clay, **Margy Miller** and **Vanda Rice**, and I to embark on a whirlwind swinging-bridge adventure in the petite Morris' huge, white four-door pickup truck with a "Cowboys For Christ" lanyard hanging in the mirror. It became obvious within seconds that these women have more pride in their county—including the swinging bridges—than most people will ever have living even in places that get glorious reviews from the media.





Above, Goose Creek Swinging Bridge; right, Stay in Clay partners, from left, Margy Miller, Betty Jo Morris and Vanda Rice

Clay County has not exactly had an easy time lately. The women described losing the coal industry as an enormous obstacle and begrudged national politicians for empty promises. In 2014, *The New York Times* ranked Clay County as the hardest place to live in the United States, statistically speaking. Dead last. Clay County has a meager median household income, low education levels and high disability rates.

The women agreed that the rating felt like an unfair “gut punch” made by people who don’t know the county at all.

The pride is unmistakable. People in Clay County are survivors, and they take care of their own.

Before coal was mined there, Clay County had logging and a booming salt works (Historical Marker #531 in the county commemorates the Goose Creek Salt Works that was destroyed by Union troops in the Civil War). Manchester, the county seat, was the hub of business in the region for years and is home to several of the county’s famous swinging bridges that allowed people to pass over the area’s countless meandering creeks while workers crossed with salt and logs.

Goose Creek, one of the county’s three rivers (along with many smaller creeks and tributaries), flows directly through Manchester. A park honors the salt works and hosts the annual Salt Works Arts & Crafts Festival. Historic cabins—including the Jesse Cotton cabin, which according to legend dates back to the 1790s—sit along the river, and a nearby trail



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leads to the Goose Creek Swinging Bridge.

The suspension footbridge originally was constructed to replace the old wagon bridge that was washed away in the flood of 1947. Goose Creek Bridge connects the area’s history—the Heritage Pavilion on the Square to the Warrior’s Path trail on the other side of Goose Creek. Warrior’s Path also happens to lead directly to the Goose Creek Salt Works Pioneer Village. The Warrior’s Path, the main artery of a series of trails used by American Indians to travel between the area north of the Ohio River and the mountains of east Tennessee, is partially paved, and Morris is working as a volunteer aside from her full-time job to make Manchester an officially designated Kentucky Trail Town.

We crossed Goose Creek Bridge, which leads straight to downtown Manchester—a convenient way to cut to the other side of town without getting in the car and crossing the river. Plus, there is beautiful scenery. There are no distractions—unless you are afraid of heights. The narrow bridge swings 40 or so feet above the river.

“The bridge downtown was closed because of disrepair ... I was always dreaming of ways to improve downtown and get people to come back,” Miller said. “Reopening the bridge was my dream, and these were the roots of Stay in Clay. I wanted to cross the bridge and wanted other people to be able to use it. I knew it would be a unique thing to have in our town.”



These women love the swinging bridges, and I quickly discovered why. The experience was unique and breathtaking.

“I love the swinging bridges—have been fascinated by them since I was a child,” Miller said. “They represent history because they harken to a time when people drove across the creek to get to their houses. Later came low-water bridges that crossed the water, but if you had too much rain, you couldn’t get into or out of your house unless you had a footbridge that swung high above the raging water.”

All three of the women are Clay County natives and can remember crossing swinging bridges over fast-running, swollen rivers.

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pleasure and beauty of the river, the trees, the rocks. Especially the bridges out in the country—there are some of the most gorgeous scenes you could ever see around and under them.”

Visitors taking a tour of the eight marked swinging bridges on the trail could easily find areas to kayak, fish, swim, raft, tube and bike. There are endless possibilities, and it is these types of adventures that Stay in Clay is trying to promote. And gaining official Kentucky Trail Town status would not hurt, as it would allow for more easily accessible recreation. Rice said Stay in Clay has the full support of local officials, and the public momentum is there. People want it, and visitors have easy access off Interstate 75.

Many of the bridges are still in the process of being refurbished, and public officials and private residents are coming together to make Clay County a tourism destination. The Land of the Swinging Bridges exhibit at the Kentucky State Fair took first prize last year, and thanks to the efforts of these volunteers and others, the tide is turning.

“We are working very hard to become an official Kentucky Trail Town, and our swinging bridges, our rivers, our trails and our history are very much part of that effort,” Morris said. “I think as locals, we sometimes take our swinging bridges and trails for granted, since we have always had them. Until we see them from a new perspective and from someone else’s eyes and watch their reaction as they visit and walk a swinging bridge for the first time—to



see their excitement, it opens our eyes to the beauty that we take for granted.”

Morris drove us around some other high points of the county, including immaculate campgrounds, kayak locations that truly would be hard to beat around the state, public parks, and a visit to the mind-blowing Red Bird Petroglyph. The county has much to see and enjoy.

Other crossable swinging bridges include the Old Homeplace, OBI (short for Oneida Baptist Institute), Rooster Branch, Red Bird, Sextons Creek and

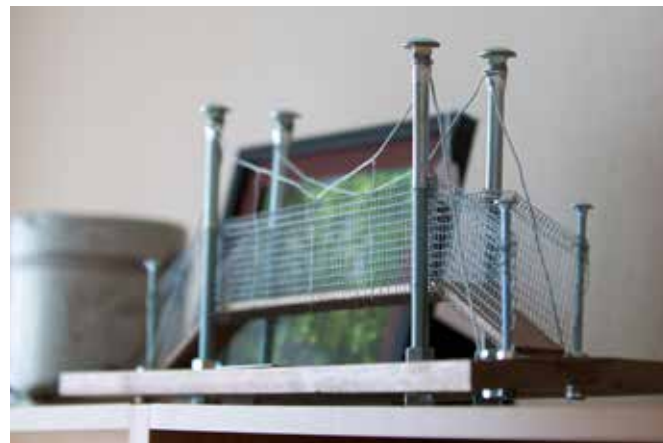
Bullskin Creek. Rice said there are dozens more swinging bridges in the county, but they are not passable.

The noteworthy views and interesting architecture of the bridges—each one just a little different—make them a treat to cross. ➔

SWING BY

Volunteers at the Manchester Visitors Center on Main Street have painstakingly put together a beautiful exhibit of bridge photos and information, including swinging bridge maps, trail maps, driving tours, history tours, river tours and other valuable information.

Visit claycountykentucky.org to start planning your trip.



Above left, Clay County bridge model—part of the Land of Swinging Bridges exhibit that captured first prize at the 2014 Kentucky State Fair; above right, Rice discusses an image of a bridge above a swollen waterway

From Goose Creek Bridge, we enjoyed a scenic drive to the Frazier Road Swinging Bridge. On the way, Miller, Rice and Morris chatted about kayaking and fishing on the creeks and a recent 5K that took runners alongside yet another scenic creek. The spectacular scenery is everywhere, and it is not hard to imagine why these women either stayed in or returned to Clay County, much of which is part of the Daniel Boone National Forest.

I was surprised at how the Frazier Road Bridge just sort of appeared out in a field. This, like many of the other swinging bridges, was built by families who needed them to get to their houses in high water. Unlike the wooden-and-metal design at Goose Creek that arches downward, this bridge is all metal and has an upward arch. And, it is bouncy. It was there that I got a taste of Miller’s mischievous love for bouncing visitors and understood why Morris was more content to just walk partway up the

bridge’s ramp. Only wide enough for one person at a time to safely stand across it, this bridge offers panoramic views of the river and surrounding farmland capped by rolling Appalachian hills.

The Frazier Road Bridge is in better shape than a lot of the others, which fell into disrepair as the need for swinging bridges was lessened with the improvement of roads and bridges. Some fell down and were lost altogether.

“As a child, I saw the few that were left,” Miller said. “They were both nostalgic and scary. I always wanted to cross one, but they were dangerous, so I never got to.”

As we approached the Frazier Bridge, Miller slapped her leg and exclaimed, “Look at how good that looks! I’m telling you: This is the most awesome one of them all.”

“You’re in for a treat,” Rice said with a smile.

Miller added, “The thrill of crossing gives way to the

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