

Gianella Bridge (Gianelli Bridge)
California State Highway 32
spanning Sacramento River
Hamilton City vicinity
Glenn (and Butte Counties)
California

HAER No. CA-44

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
Western Regional Office
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
San Francisco, California 94102

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

Gianella Bridge (Gianelli Bridge)

HAER No. CA-44

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Location: Spanning the Sacramento River on State Highway 32 in Glenn (and Butte Counties); located just east of Hamilton City, Glenn County, California

UTM: 10.586000.44000410

Quad: Nord

Dates of Construction: 1908-1911. Altered 1937, 1954

Present Owner: California Department of Transportation
1120 N Street
Sacramento, California 95814

Present Use: Vehicular bridge

Significance: The Gianella Bridge is the oldest remaining highway swing bridge in California. It is important in local history for its relation to events in local economic and agricultural development. It is the work of John B. Leonard, one of the most important early 20th century bridge engineers. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.

Historian: John W. Snyder
Chief Architectural Historian
Office of Environmental Analysis
California Department of Transportation

Transmitted by: Jean P. Yearby, HAER, 1985

DESCRIPTION

The Gianella Bridge (also known as the Gianelli Bridge) is composed of two steel through Pratt truss approach spans, each 133 feet in length, and one steel through Pratt truss swing span, 311 feet long. The bridge rests on mass concrete piers and wing abutments. The structure carries two traffic lanes between metal beam guardrails, crossing the Sacramento River with no skew.

As built, the bridge was timber-decked. The original deck was removed in 1937 and was replaced by laminated decking with an asphalt wearing surface. In 1954 the timber stringers and laminated deck were replaced by steel stringers and an open steel grate-type deck. At that time the original lattice steel railings were replaced by the present guardrails to provide increased protection for the truss members. By 1938 the small number of required openings of the bridge led to disconnection of the electrical machinery and provision for manual operation of the swing span, an operation which required eight men to open and close the bridge. In 1972 an agreement was reached with the Coast Guard that the bridge need not be maintained for opening, but that it would have to be restorable to that condition within six months of written notification by the Coast Guard. Accordingly, the bridge has not been opened since that time.

HISTORY: THE BRIDGE

In early 1907 (and for some time prior) both Glenn and Butte Counties in Northern California had desired to bridge the Sacramento River but could not reach an agreement on funding or site. (The center of the river marks the boundary between the two counties.) Spurring the desire for a link between the two counties was a current boom in sugar beet farming. Alta California Sugar Beet Company had sited their refinery in Hamilton City, on the Glenn County side of the river, and direct access to this facility was needed by Butte County beet farmers. However, political and business leaders in Chico (Butte County) were pressuring county officials to locate the new bridge near the site of an earlier bridge a few miles downstream from Hamilton City, feeling that this would provide the shortest route from Glenn County to Chico and thus provide business from that source. Glenn County, on the other hand, sought Hamilton City as the bridge site in order to more directly serve the sugar beet refinery and their own business interests. The impasse might have proven insurmountable, but for support given to the Glenn County position by Vincenzo Gianella, a prominent Butte County land owner and businessman.

Vincenzo Gianella was born in Switzerland and came to California as a small child with his parents. He attended public schools and was graduated from St. Mary's College. After graduation, he bought a ranch on the Butte/Yuba County line near Honcut and raised stock and grain (probably barley). He gradually increased this holding to some 3,000 acres. In