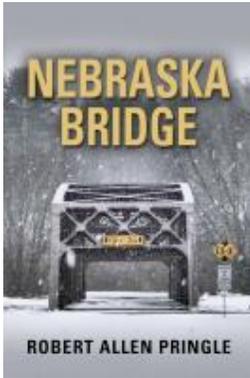


NEBRASKA BRIDGE



ROBERT ALLEN PRINGLE



Nebraska Bridge is a tale of a small town in Pennsylvania that disappeared in a truly horrific way. The events and consequences are described. The lives of a few survivors are documented, along with their interaction with certain historical figures.

Nebraska Bridge

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NEBRASKA BRIDGE

Robert Allen Pringle

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First Edition

Chapter One

Willie Ruffner was keeping watch, the house and shed becoming visible in the misty fog of the early morning. At the age of thirteen, he was experiencing the incredibly complex feelings of what must only be true love, first love, only love. It was hopeless though, and he knew it.

He heard McNabb's rooster crow, announcing the glory of dawn. Soon, he would see all the glory in the world, embodied in the form of one Miss Kathy Perrine. The backdoor opened, and he observed her mother exit and hurry to the outhouse.

He was back in the tree line, hidden by the low bushes that grow along the edge of the field and forest. He didn't feel like he was doing anything wrong, he had never even heard the word "voyeur" before and he probably wouldn't for several years. It was 1936, the Great Depression was in full swing, but the people inhabiting the group of buildings known as the town of Nebraska in Forest County, Pennsylvania, managed to eke out a precarious living along Tionesta Creek.

The men were loggers, sawyers, river men, and a blacksmith, whose name just so happened to be Smith. Hard muscled men of little patience for nonsense and foofarra, men who prayed their bodies would last until times were better. Hope, for them was a pleasant dream that once in a while, they indulged.

The women were solid, plainly dressed. They tended their homes and children as best they could. They made their own soap, and sewed clothes for the whole family, and managed to keep the older members comfortable. The town boasted a small store where credit was the rule, rather than an oddity. On payday, once a month, the bills were settled. Some paid in full, some the balance carried. There was a Methodist church, and the storekeeper did the preaching, mostly about the sin of Debt, the sin of Coveting, and the greatest sin of them all, Alcohol.

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Willie's father had lost his leg when a log rolled unexpectedly in the woods, but could walk with the aid of a homemade, solid wood contraption that was held on with thick leather straps. Mack Collins himself carved it out of a large cherry limb. He earned a stipend pumping the bellows at the smithy. He was a good man, who accepted his misfortune, and endured the constant pain in silence.

His mother was a big boned woman, strong as a man, a survivor, who kept her hair in a tight bun that wisps of light brown escaped from as her day wore on. She and Willie tended the chickens and pigs, the eggs were nice, as for the pigs, a sale or trade was sometimes arranged.

The backdoor opened again, and there she was! She walked directly to the privy, a shawl wrapped around her shoulders. His heart beat a little faster, as he imagined her hoisting her dress to sit. At school she sat behind him, and that created misery. Of course he had never made his feelings known to her, but every now and then, he caught her looking his way and quickly averting her eyes. He watched as she made her way back to the house, he could smell the breakfast her mother was preparing. It was time to go.

Willie had to sit in the front of the class, as he couldn't see very well and there simply wasn't any money for eye doctors or glasses. He could see up close, but anything more than a foot away was blurry. The teacher, Miss Longnecker, wrote large on the blackboard to accommodate him, and another child with poor sight. There was talk that if elected for a second term, President Roosevelt was going to improve the schools, but Peggy Longnecker wasn't holding her breath. Not in an obscure town of two hundred souls on a backwater creek, besides, he was a democrat.

Eleven students, and only two the same age, none over fifteen, it wasn't much of a challenge. She had graduated from Normal School in Buffalo, New York, without any romantic prospects and an unappealing job as a waitress. She took the first opportunity to teach. She lived in a two room shanty out behind the school, a small bed, a table, and one chair, it was what could be called "Spartan" accommodations. There was a flat topped, potbelly stove for cooking and heat. She was lucky, some folks got by on much less.

Firewood was part of her pay, so the mill would load a small wagon for her and deliver it. That event occurred yesterday after school, and as the students were busy reading their assignments, that was what she was thinking about in the quiet of the classroom. She had noticed that Joe Weaver had been getting 'volunteered' for the chore. She had stood and watched as he stacked the wood by the side of her little house, "I notice that you always seem to get this job now," she said, "doesn't your boss like you?"

"Hard to tell with him," Joe spoke over his shoulder, "he's a decent sort, but you never know what he's thinking." He stacked the last piece and turned to her, "Speaking of thinking, I was wondering if you might like to take a train ride into Tionesta with me sometime, maybe get a cream soda at the drugstore, my treat." Joe thought the fairly good looking, young woman might make a good catch, and he baited the hook.

Peggy blinked. "I'll have to think about that, Mr. Weaver, I don't usually do such things."

"I see," Joe looked down at his feet. He raised his head and said, "Would you be more comfortable if other people went along?"

"Possibly, you must give me some time to think about this. I don't enter into other people's lives casually. Now, if you will excuse me..."

Joe watched her walk away. He noticed that she stumbled a wee bit when she reached the corner of the shack. When he turned around to gather the reins of the wagon horse, he smiled. The seed was sown.

'Oh my God, I almost fainted!' Peggy thought to herself, 'A DATE! The man asked you out on a date, and you-are-rude to him. I'll never have children. I'll never have a home, you IDIOT.' In the seven months she had been in Nebraska, no one had actually talked to her, except of course the storekeeper, but he kept it all business. At church everyone was polite, but formal. Not one person had asked her a personal question.

That was fairly normal behavior for the townsfolk. They were a tight knit community, all employed by the same man, and distrusting of any strangers. Especially one who was teaching their children, after all, she might be a

republican. Peggy's problem was that she was from the big city, Buffalo. There, she had several friends and many acquaintances. She enjoyed socializing, and being out and about. She wasn't quite sure what their problem was. Peggy knew that she was a perfectly good person. There was absolutely nothing wrong with her, she was a respectable, educated, somewhat good looking young woman and if they wanted to be old poops, then so be it. So be it when Joe Weaver took her by complete surprise, she reacted badly. She sighed.

For Willie, being in the front row at school meant he was one of the last kids out the door. He was a little surprised when he saw Kathy waiting on him.

"Willie, my pa wants to come over to your house tomorrow after supper, I think he wants to trade something for a pig."

"Uhh..." Willie stammered, totally tongue tied.

"He wants to butcher one, now that fall's coming on. I don't know what he wants to trade, but he must think your pa will want it. Anyway, I have to come along and...Willie! Did you hear me?"

"Uhh...y-y-yeah, I heard you."

"Well? Are you going to tell him or not?"

"Uhh...y-y-yeah."

She looked at him with an exasperated frown, "I gotta go, see you tomorrow." With that, she turned on her heel and strode away. Willie stood there like a statue, horrified, elated, his stomach doing handsprings. 'Oh God,' he thought, 'she's coming to my house!' He had to pee.

Chapter Two

McKensie Collins was sitting at his desk, an ornate creation of solid walnut; griffons were carved into the desk drawer fronts. He was getting old, his left hand shook a little. He was watching it, willing it to be still, and not succeeding. He had made a significant fortune in his years at Nebraska, logging, oil and natural gas, not to mention the small gauge railroad that ran to Sheffield.

In 1880, when he arrived there, the town, a mean three building affair, was called Lacytown. He was present when Mrs. Lacy's aunt and uncle arrived for a visit from Omaha. They kept talking on and on about how much they enjoyed Nebraska, and how gosh darn wonderful it was, that Mr. Lacy finally had enough and said, "Well, we'll just name *this* place Nebraska and you can shut the hell up about it."

Recently married, and a young man with an inheritance, Mack discovered a small fortune in virgin growth hemlock and hardwoods. The Tionesta Creek was deep enough to float logs down to the Allegheny River. This was a perfect opportunity, product, accessibility, and the means to transport it. He filed claim on several hundred acres, hired a crew of loggers, skidders, and rafters, built a shack, and went to work.

It was incredibly hard work. They would cut down the enormous trees, with double bit axes and crosscut saws. Some of the old oaks were eight feet in diameter. Then they would saw them in lengths, loading those on sleds, teams of horses or mules pulled them down to the creek. In the spring when the water was high, they would lash them together, making rafts.

The river men took over, poling the rafts down Tionesta Creek to the Allegheny River where other men would form larger rafts, and float them on down. Those fellers had to be nimble and quick. Sometimes the ropes grew slack and the logs would spread apart some. If you were unfortunate and stepped in the wrong place, it was enough to break an ankle or leg. Drowning was not uncommon, and the men knew the risk. Each man earned two dollars a run.

Nebraska Bridge

Collins made money, he had a road built along the creek to Tionesta and then built a post office, which expanded to a general store. The town grew. Well built homes were being erected, along with cruder structures for temporary living. An acquaintance, Joshua Arner, saw an opportunity and built a sawmill in Nebraska. Complete with a single saw blade, twelve feet in circumference that was sharpened once a day. Collins erected a boat house and the men employed there built barges to haul the cut boards, studs, and railroad ties. The barges were then sold in Pittsburgh, or Cincinnati.

Mack, not to be outdone, built a small gauge railroad to Sheffield, where a tannery was in operation. There, he purchased land and began a crude refinery operation and sold the gas and oil at the store. He also had the natural gas that leaked off his wells piped into Nebraska to service the homes and businesses. Both of those commodities were fairly unstable, sometimes the natural gas had too much pressure, sometimes it barely flowed. The gasoline... well, you never knew if your motor would run like hell or just sputter. The oil was fine though, always a clear honey color. He hadn't wanted the refinery anywhere near Nebraska, where he had built a comfortable home. There was always the risk of explosions, and it smelled bad. Sheffield already smelt bad because of the tannery. He figured it wouldn't matter much.

There was another operation running not far from town that produced a much finer product, corn liquor. Mickey O'Day was the farmer who grew the corn and distilled it. Prohibition had been repealed three years earlier, but O'Day's Everclear was still in great demand. Occasionally, a federal investigator would make an appearance, poke around in the woods for a couple days, and then silently move on. Some fellers just have the touch to make the very best, and the luck that good graces earned them.

Collins was sitting there thinking that soon he would have to move on. The old growth trees were almost gone on his leases, the second growth still had ten years left before the harvest. 'Maybe in another fifty years,' he thought to himself, 'hell, my sons will be too old by then.' He knew that when the logging was done, so was the town of Nebraska. At least as far as he was concerned, he began to think of Florida.

By the end of the Great War he owned every building and property in Nebraska. He charged rent to his employees of \$2.00 a month, taken out of their wages. His number two man, Charlie Klinestover, and his five foremen lived rent free. A shrewd way of insuring loyalty, not that he needed to do that as he was kind and generous, and considered each inhabitant of the little town his friend.

At Christmas he made sure everyone got a gift, relevant gifts. As everybody knew each other and most of everybody's business, it was easy to discover the needs of people. Twern't too many secrets kept in Nebraska. A man might get a new deer rifle, or a new pair of work boots. The ladies could receive a bolt of good cloth, or a new wood burning stove. The children all got a full bucket of mixed candies and oranges.

Mack Collins always went full tilt for Christmas. Making sure the store had fresh fruit and toys on hand, and credit for all was approved, (within reason of course). After church services on Christmas Day, all went to the boat house where a large meal was served and the gifts distributed. One year after all the names were called, he heard a child crying. The four year old daughter of one of the brakemen had not heard her name called. She had been overlooked. This was understandable because the brakeman, Marion Greathouse had eleven kids, and his wife looked like they were trying for an even dozen.

Mack and the storekeeper, Harry Deal, checked the list, and then discovered that all the candy buckets were gone. She had been forgotten. Mack gathered the little girl up and accompanied by Mr. Deal, not to mention, damned near everybody else, marched out the door and down to the store. While the door was being unlocked, he told little Edna that Santa must have left her gift at the store.

He took her over to where the dolls were displayed and said, "There it is."

"Where?" asked Edna.

"Why, it's the doll you want the most. Now point it out, you're the only one who knows which one it is."

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The whole town applauded.

He had two sons, Everill, and Thomas. After graduating from Princeton, Everill was sent to Oregon. That was where Collins Timber had holdings of over one million acres. There, and in the state of Washington also. Everill proved to be a good businessman, and wrote that he really liked living in Portland. Married now and with four children, Mack decided to give him complete control of those holdings, retaining an income of twenty percent of profits for himself and his wife. That alone would keep them well into their retirement. Now, to deal with the question of Thomas.

Thomas Collins was a problem. He had grown up rough and tumble in Nebraska, a daredevil, he was game for anything, and believed himself indestructible. Where Everill was content to read and observe, Thomas was racing canoes, leaping off bridges, disappearing into the forest for days, and causing some perplexity or another. He was sent to Yale.

He graduated next to last in his class because he thought himself smarter than his professors and at times proved it. When America entered the war against the Kaiser he enlisted as an officer, and saw action in France. Mostly in the muddy, bloody hell of the trenches. He jumped at an opportunity to join the Army Air Corp, and learned to fly. However, by the time he got to his company there were only two weeks left in the war. He never even saw a German plane, except wrecked on the ground.

He returned to his father's home and drank for about a year.

Then one morning he walked into the dining room and announced that he wished to go to work. Mack put him in charge of a road crew, and they built straight south to the Clarion county line. The state then decided to construct an iron bridge over Tionesta Creek, first floored with wooden planks that sounded like drum rolls whenever a buggy crossed over, then they replaced it with concrete.

It was a nice bridge, a sidewalk on each side. Fishing from the bridge on Sundays, when the traffic was light became popular. The railroad bridge that Mack Collins had built was just up the creek a couple hundred yards or so, but it wasn't easy to walk across. Everybody referred to the new bridge as the "Iron Bridge" and Mack had a picnic area cleared on the south side.

Thomas became restless, he took a train trip out to visit his brother and meet the new members of the family. Everll's wife had produced two more heirs to the Collins fortune. He was fairly disappointed in the state of Nebraska, mostly flat, no trees to speak of, boring. He didn't see the connection with his home town. Of course, he didn't know the story either; the subject had simply never come up. He was intrigued however, when the train came to a stop in the open vastness of Wyoming.

A herd of fifty or so antelopes were spotted, and some of the passengers climbed up on the car roofs with rifles and opened fire. He was told by one old timer that they used to shoot buffalo and Indians like that from the trains. The antelopes sped off, and after much shooting and claims of seeing one drop, they were gone. He hadn't seen one go down, or even falter. 'Strange way to target practice,' he thought. The shooting had reminded him of the trenches, and he returned to his seat to brood. He didn't know that it would be twenty five years before he saw the town of Nebraska again.

Mack never talked much about his early days in Nebraska. He stayed in his shack there during the work week, while his wife and children lived in Tionesta. The Lacy's had been there for twenty some odd years when he arrived. They were reasonable folks, and he, and his workmen got along with them well, especially, sixteen year old Fancy. Then one week, as they were prone to do in the summer, the men camped out on the job site, returning on a Saturday evening.

What they found when they returned was a mystery. The Lacy's were gone, the dogs too. When they finally decided to enter the home the next day, they found nothing amiss. They found the same in the barn. The tools were stacked neatly, the house in good order, it was as if they all stood up at the same time and walked off.

Those men that were good hunters scouted around for tracks, trying to find some trace, but it had rained. They found nothing. Mack rode into Tionesta and alerted the sheriff, who returned with Mack and twenty men to search. About a mile into the forest they found them, naked, and very dead. The sheriff fired two shots in the air.

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Virgil, Eleanor, and their two daughters, Fancy, and twelve year old Lucy lay on the wet leaves. Their poses were bizarre, Fancy was flat on her back with her legs far apart. Her mother had her face buried in her daughter's crotch. Both had their throats cut. Virgil had apparently penetrated Lucy from the rear. She lay across the top of her sister's chest. Her throat was cut also. Both of Virgil's forearms were slashed from elbow to wrist, he lay on top of the pile. They saw his bloodstained knife beside Lucy's leg.

The men were horrified, and stood there mute as they stared at the baffling sight. Their clothes were all folded neatly, and stacked at the four direction points, North, south, east, and west. "Jesus," someone muttered.

"I don't think Jesus had a hand in this," said Sheriff Ronald Hunter, "looks like Virgil went crazy, and killed them all... after doing other things."

"I don't know Hunter," Mack said, "Eleanor wouldn't just let this happen. Both those girls had enough sense to run away, Virgil wasn't able to catch them."

"Maybe he had them tied up?" quipped John Reese the newspaper man, looking up from his notebook, in which he had been furiously writing.

"You see any ropes John?" Sheriff Hunter replied, an edge coming to his voice.

Some of the other searchers were approaching, they called out to them. "It's as if, they all thought that doing this was a good idea." Mack spoke in a soft voice.

"Well, it's plain damn crazy, that's what it is. Mack, John, I'm going to call this a triple murder and suicide. That's the only thing that makes sense, Virgil just plain went crazy. That is how you will write it up John and none of this sex stuff either. We'll just forget about that, out of respect."

They agreed and shook on it. Before the other two men arrived at the scene, Mack yelled back to them, "We need a wagon brought here, we got four dead bodies. Go get one now."

One of the men called out, "Is it the Lacy's?"

“Yes, damn it, now get moving!” Mack yelled back. The two men looked at one another then turned and left. He and the sheriff then went to the bodies and moved the mother beside the daughter. They had a problem with the other two. When they went to separate Virgil and Lucy they found that they were stuck, like what happens to dogs at times.

“Sweet Jesus.” Reese exclaimed, “This is a bit of a pickle.” They pondered the situation for a bit then the sheriff picked up the fallen knife.

“We’ll have to dress the bodies,” he said, as he cut them apart. They did. The dogs were never found.

Chapter Three

Willie had told his father about the upcoming visit and possible trading, and after dinner his pa speculated on just what John Perrine might have to offer. His mother wondered which pig she had to catch, and informed Willie that he had to help rid up the house before school the next morning.

“John’s a fair man,” Willie’s father, Walter said, “I’ve never had a problem with him.” John Perrine worked at the sawmill as the operator, and was well liked and respected. “He’ll probably want that one year old with the black ears, that’s a fine pig, healthy and fat.” Willie looked up, he liked that pig.

His ma, Tilda turned to him, “Did she say if her mother was coming also?”

“I don’t remember,” Willie said.

“A fine one you are,” she replied, “well we know Kathy’s coming, I think we have enough sugar and molasses to make cookies.” Willie smiled.

He had a hard time sleeping that night. Thoughts of Kathy Perrine filled his head. Did she like him the same way he liked her? Would she let him hold her hand, kiss her? Butterflies filled his stomach as blood filled his penis. He had it bad.

The next morning in the school yard he told Kathy that they were expected after supper, and even managed to smile. Kathy smiled back. He was a little giddy as he took his seat for class. He wasn’t paying any attention as Miss Longnecker was addressing the class about seasonal changes.

“Willie?” Miss Longnecker was looking at him, as well as the whole room, “Answer the question, what does the Earth do as it spins to cause the different seasons?”

“Uhh, Uhh...”

Kathy shot her hand up, "Kathy?"

"It tilts on its axis."

"Correct, now, what is a good sign of fall, Henrietta?"

"The leaves change color," the seven year old said.

Miss Longnecker smiled, "Yes, and beautiful colors, now what else..." Willie sat there embarrassed. He wondered how he could ever impress Kathy if he kept acting like a dunce.

Kathy was glad she could take the heat off Willie. She had noticed he was daydreaming a lot lately. She liked Willie, and with them being the same age they were natural allies. She had a crush on sixteen year old Cecil Klinestover, but he paid no attention to her, like she didn't exist. She was beginning to lose interest in him anyway, as he was gone most of the time, off logging. At least she would get to talk to Willie this evening. Willie was her friend and he *was* beginning to get handsome.

The weather had a hand in fate that day. After Mr. Perrine chose a black spotted, three year old sow, and was invited in for coffee, it began to rain. Willie and Kathy stayed in the barn. Willie was feeling good because the pig he liked was going to be staying right there.

"The only reason I had to come along is that I have to follow the pig home and prod it along with a stick," Kathy broke the silence.

"Still have to catch it and put a rope 'round its neck," Willie had a doubtful note in his voice.

"Oh I'm sure you can do that easy," Kathy offered.

"I don't know, Ma usually catches them." He looked at her, "I caught some before, and I can probably catch that one."

"You gonna try?"

He had a funny feeling come over him, and then he smiled and said, "For you, right now."

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He got a length of old boat rope and tied a slipknot in it, like he had watched his mother do many times before. He took his jacket off and looked out at the pen. It was sixty feet long and thirty feet wide, muddy, shitty, now slippery wet.

He spotted the hog at the far end, standing in the cold rain like the dumb animal it was. He stepped up to the gate, and entered. He got soaked three steps in, his shoes fouled with mud and manure. He stopped in front of the now wary pig. Holding the rope in both hands he raised it in the air and yelled “Yip, Yip.” The pig looked up, and Willie dropped the loop over its head, caught!

He was thinking, ‘that was easy’ when the sow took off at a run. He had a good hold on the rope, but the sudden jerk caused him to slip and go down face first in three inches of very nasty mud water. Kathy started to laugh. He tried to get up in a sprinter’s stance but his flat bottomed shoes slipped again, splat. He rolled over and gained his feet, and cleared a handful of something out of his ear, he was mad now.

The wet clay mud was like ice, he began to move like he was skating. Kathy had stopped laughing, and watched in amazement after she saw the look on his filthy face. The pig was now in the far corner near the gate, its leg muscles twitching. He approached, his arms held out to his sides.

The pig took a step; Willie moved to cut it off, then another move, and another faint. The sow wove its head back and forth, and then started to turn around. That’s when Willie pounced; he dove right on top of the pig’s back and grabbed the coil. His momentum carried him off its back, and his fall pulled the pig off its feet. Willie sat up and made a grab for the trailing rope. He lunged for the wood fence, and managed to tie it off before the squealing pig could get up. He swiped his hand across his face, went through the gate and into the barn.

Kathy was looking at him with her mouth open, and her eyes bright. “Are you okay?” she asked.

He nodded, still catching his breath. “Uh huh.”

“When you got pulled off your feet I thought it was funny, but then...” she walked up to him and pulled a handkerchief from her coat pocket, wiped his lips off, leaned in, and kissed him. Not ten seconds later, his ma and Mr. Perrine came into the barn.

“Why was that pig squealing like that? Oh my word, Willie! What happened to you?” His ma asked with astonishment.

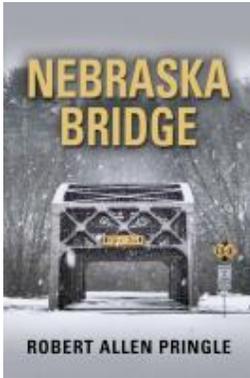
“I caught the pig,” he smiled.

John Perrine was looking at his daughter, who was looking at Willie, who was looking at his mother, who said, “Well I never...”

Later, after the Perrine’s had gone home, leading a now docile sow, Willie had to wait in the barn for his mother to heat water for a bath. She had him strip naked and run in the house. She gave him privacy for his wash. As he relaxed in the warm water, with the good smell of homemade soap wafting around him, he thought about that kiss.

The next day he endured some good-natured teasing from his classmates. It didn’t take long for news to spread in Nebraska. He received more of the same when he stopped at the store to pick up his mother’s order. Old Harry Deal kept grinning at him, like to make him nervous. The pig catching had become a fond tale, embellished with an hour long battle between wily sow and boy. ‘Thank goodness,’ he thought, ‘nobody knows about that kiss, or we’d be married with six kids by now.’

Kathy knew about it of course, but she kept her distance at school. The night before on the way home, she had told her father all about the pig catching event, and had him guffawing ‘til tears came down his cheeks. She knew the next day might be hard on Willie, but he seemed to take it in stride. She was seeing a new side of Willie that she liked.



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