

# Ghosts of Drawbridge

*Bruce MacGregor*

Historic photos, Bruce MacGregor Collection  
1983 photos by Author



If you saw it in the 1980s, Drawbridge was like a false front movie set for a Zombie thriller. In an 80-acre plot of marshland located in the southeastern corner of San Francisco Bay, a moldering collection of cabins lay disintegrating and sinking into the marsh. A railroad track—once the mainline of the South Pacific Coast narrow gauge—bisected the cabins along a mile of tidal marsh called Station Island. The community of Drawbridge—named after the two railroad bridges that brought trains onto the island—lay trapped and isolated between the bridges. To say the place was off the grid was putting it mildly.

The draw bridges were the key to understanding why Drawbridge even existed. For over a century the bridges kept two waterways navigable. The northern bridge crossed Mud Slough, a passageway from the bay to Warm Springs Landing, about half a mile east of Station Island. The southern bridge crossing Coyote Slough provided navigation to Dixon Landing, about a mile east of the island. In 1875 when the bridges were built, both landings were important commercial outlets for shipments of hay and grain. The railroad built a small depot and residence mid-island. A single bridge tender walked the track to either bridge and, upon a whistle signal from waiting boats, cranked the bridge open—like a turnstile—by manual capstan.

For a decade, the bridge tender had Station Island to himself. However, by 1889 the South Pacific Coast allowed two passenger trains each day to stop on flag—a convenient way for duck hunters to reach what the timetable called the “Alviso Drawbridge.” The flag stop became popular. By 1900, hunters clubs bought property and built cabins for weekend stays; and families built vacation homes with names like “Clambake,” “Recreation” and “Prowlers.”

The heyday of Drawbridge in the teens and twenties saw the community’s development peak with about ninety structures, including Sprung’s Hotel (which provided rooms, groceries and, according to one version, a few call girls). Then came the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the beginning of a steady exodus of hunters and families, neglected upkeep to cabins, and the steady process of subsidence—the slow but unstoppable sinking of structures into the mud.

If it was possible to get further off the grid, Drawbridge was headed in the right direction. By 1979 there was just one permanent resident remaining. But there were visitors. A kind of romantic fascination with Drawbridge had begun, perhaps a reaction to the cultural and social changes brought on by surrounding Silicon Valley. Photographers, journalists and writers began to collect stories about Drawbridge, a virtual gathering of ghosts.

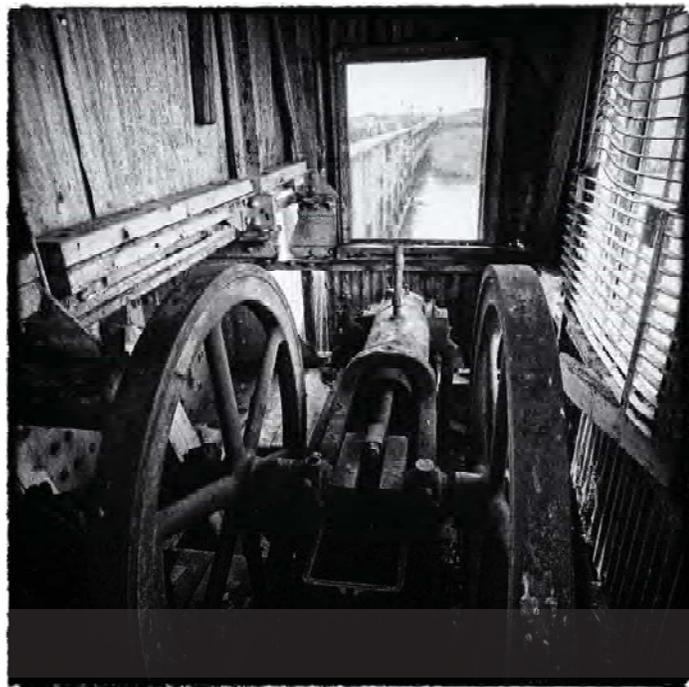
One of those stories was about the bridges themselves. Amazingly, one draw bridge remained in 1983. It was the northern bridge—a steel girder bridge over Mud Slough built in 1904 as part of a program to upgrade the line for standard gauging. For two years, from 1904 to 1906, the new bridge still carried narrow gauge trains. Shortly after the 1906 earthquake the rails were widened, and narrow gauge operation joined the growing fraternity of ghosts haunting the site. But the 1904 bridge survived. Still spanning Mud Slough in 1983, this same bridge had truly

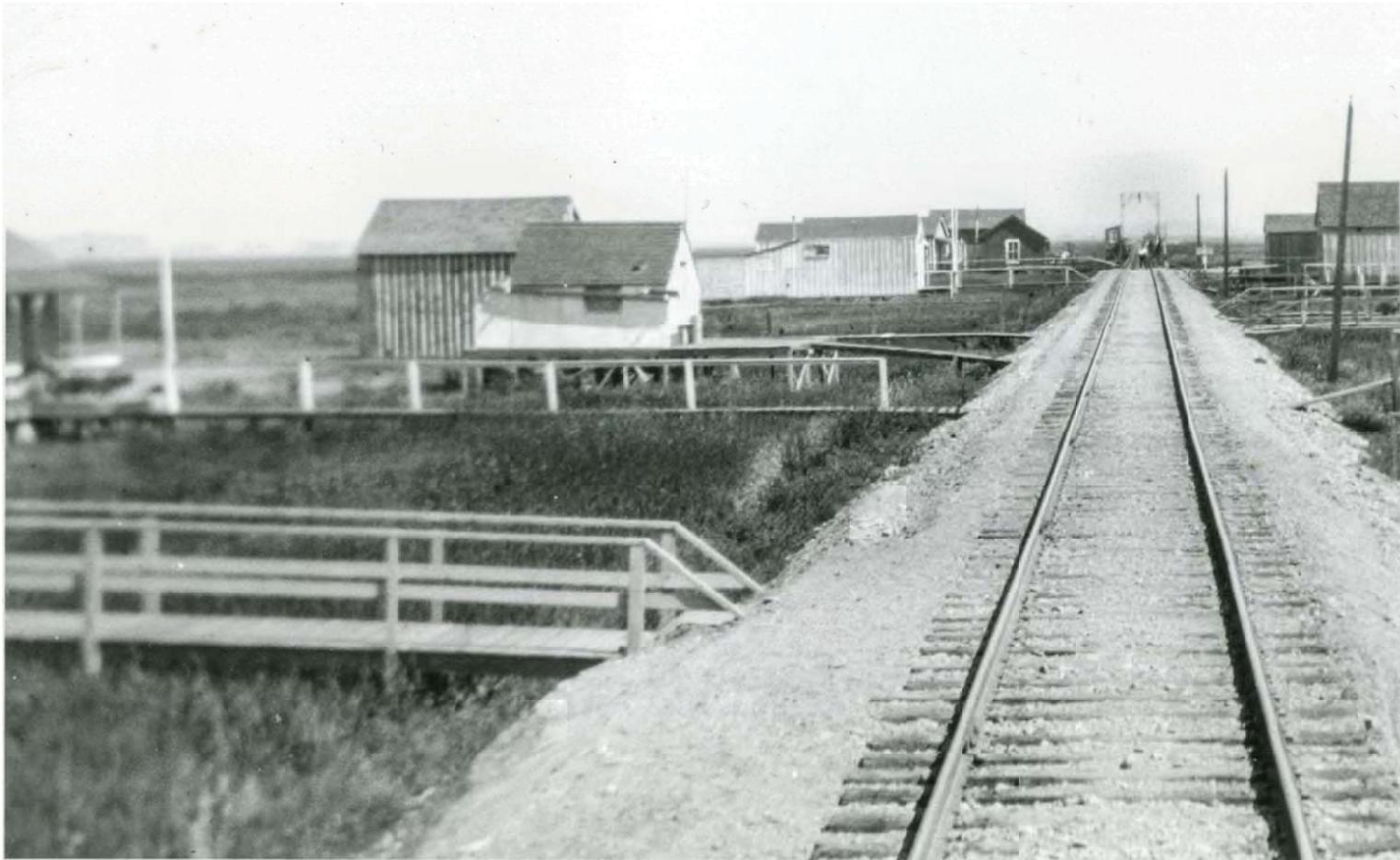
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become the stuff of legend. By then it had become the only surviving track structure anywhere along the original route that had been used by narrow gauge South Pacific Coast trains.

And stranger still, even in 1983 the draw bridge had to remain operable in the unlikely event a boat required access to the waters of Mud Slough east of the bridge. Federal laws were clear... it didn't matter that years had passed without the bridge opening. Or that the mechanism that operated the bridge had rusted in the rising salt water of the bay. Or that the joints in the rails had been permanently bolted together. Or that the bridge tender had long ago left the island, grown old and died.

It only mattered when a dredge named the *Mallard* showed up in June 1983, requiring passage through the draw. Just as it had 105 years before, the railroad had a legal obligation to open the bridge.

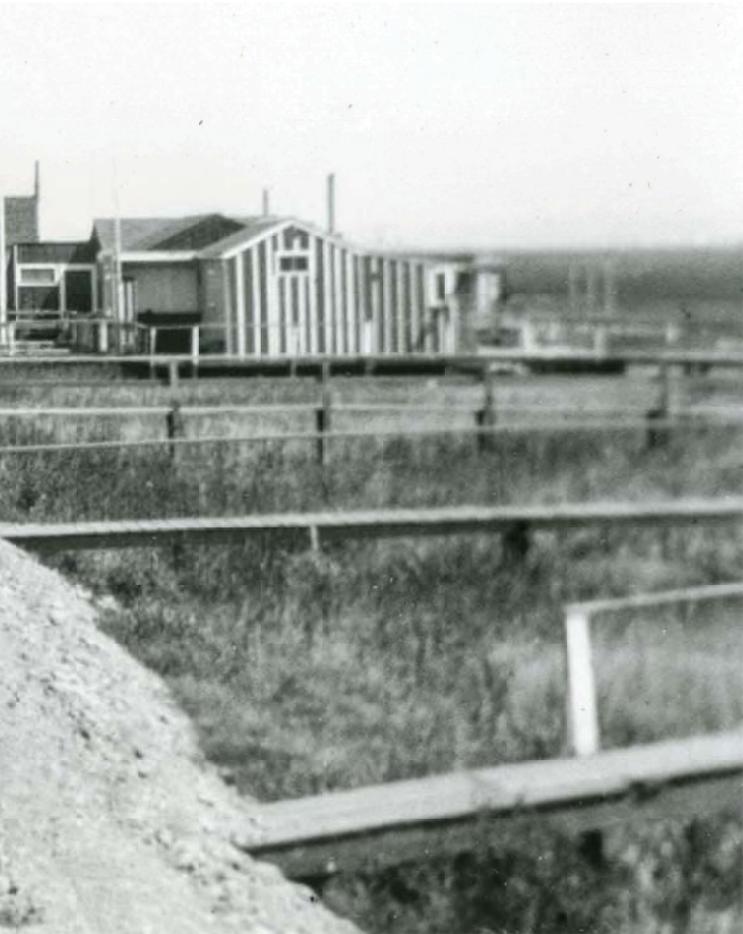




In this rare, 1909 view on the right, photographed from the platform of a passing train, the camera sweeps north across Mud Slough and the 1904 bridge. The steel girder drawbridge is just five years old, and displays three running lights used for nighttime navigation of passing hay scows and yachts.

*Robert McFarland photograph from the collection of Arnold Menke.*





In this 1909 panorama on the left, the 1904 Mud Slough bridge appears in the distance, while new cabins line both sides of the tracks. Often, family cabins like these were sited on the north end of Drawbridge, while gun clubs and Sprung's Hotel were located on the southern end of the community.

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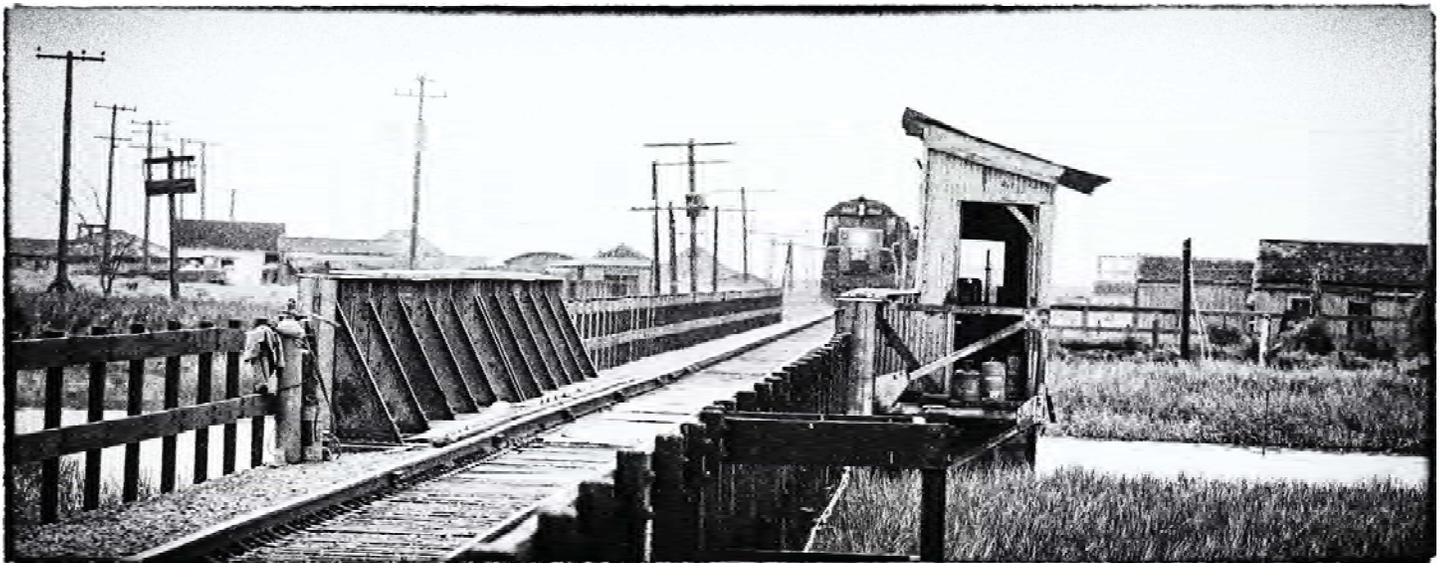
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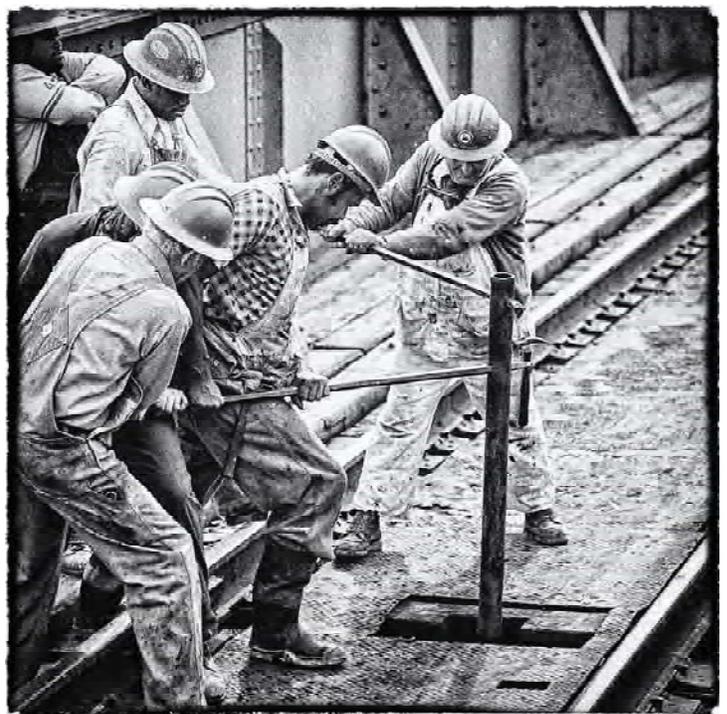


Cargill (formerly Leslie Salt) actually called the Southern Pacific's dispatcher weeks ahead of the day it needed to get the *Mallard* through the Mud Slough bridge. Owned and operated by Cargill, the 1936 dredge was on a mission to repair remote levees used in Cargill's solar salt production network. When the day came, Southern Pacific was prepared for the request—or at least thought it was.

About 10 am on a June 1983 morning, an SP maintenance crew cracked the first track bolts at both ends of the 1904 bridge. Of the 16 bolts that had to come out to completely loosen the bridge rails, track crews first removed only 8—leaving just enough bolts to let the last freight train safely cross the bridge. Storming out of Santa Clara, an hour later the northbound freight hit the bridge at almost 40 mph. The rails seemed to dance a jig under the moving wheels, but the 8 bolts and the joints they tightened held firm.

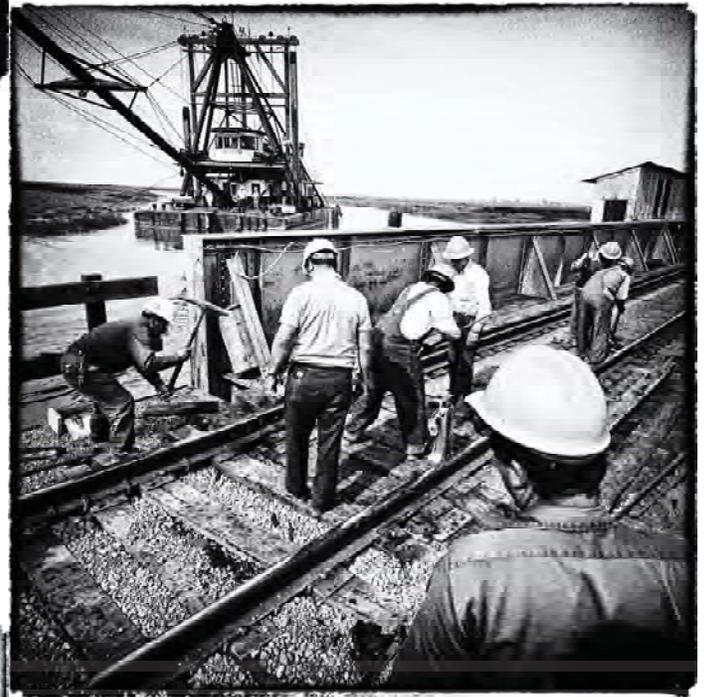


With the *Mallard* anchored just west of the bridge, track crews quickly removed the last 8 bolts, and put their muscle power to work trying to turn the bridge's capstan by hand. It stubbornly refused to move an inch. An auxiliary gasoline engine was fired up in the bridge's engine room, engaged with the turning gears, and gunned. The bridge still didn't move.





Track crews grew frustrated. They crawled over the span trying to inspect every gear and bearing for damage. But by noon, tidal waters covered most of the bridge's sub-structure, making it impossible to look for debris trapped in the mechanism. Brute force was the only alternative. The track boss placed a call to Santa Clara for a rail-mounted wrecking crane.

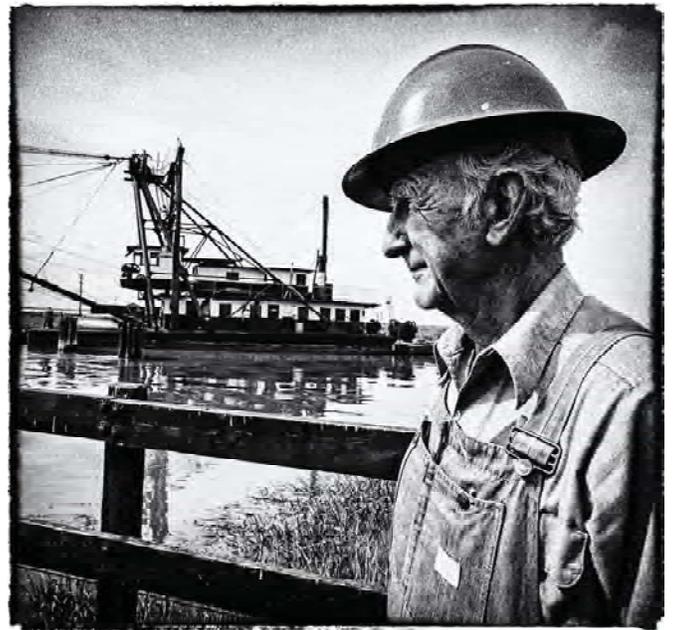


With rail traffic backing up north and south of the bridge, the rail-mounted crane arrived during the lunch hour. The crane wheels were clamped to rail on Station Island, its cable extended securely to a clamp on the south end of the bridge. Rotating the boom on the crane, an operator literally tried to jerk the bridge loose. The bridge stubbornly refused to move.



The crew of the *Mallard*, watching the show from a ring-side seat, couldn't resist making a simple suggestion. Why not hook its dredge bucket to the north end of the bridge? If the rail-mounted crane and the dredge both pulled in opposite directions at the same time, twice the leverage would be exerted on the frozen mechanism. At that point the SP track crew had little to lose by trying.

A skiff with an outboard motor was employed to carefully position the dredge bucket at the end of the bridge, where it was chained in place. On signal, the crane and the dredge both yanked on their ends of the bridge. With a groan, the mechanism broke loose. For the first time in years, the draw opened a few inches... then a few feet. The bridge's gasoline engine ran full throttle until the bridge was turned at right angles to the track. Like a crack in the fabric of time, Mud Slough lay open to navigation.

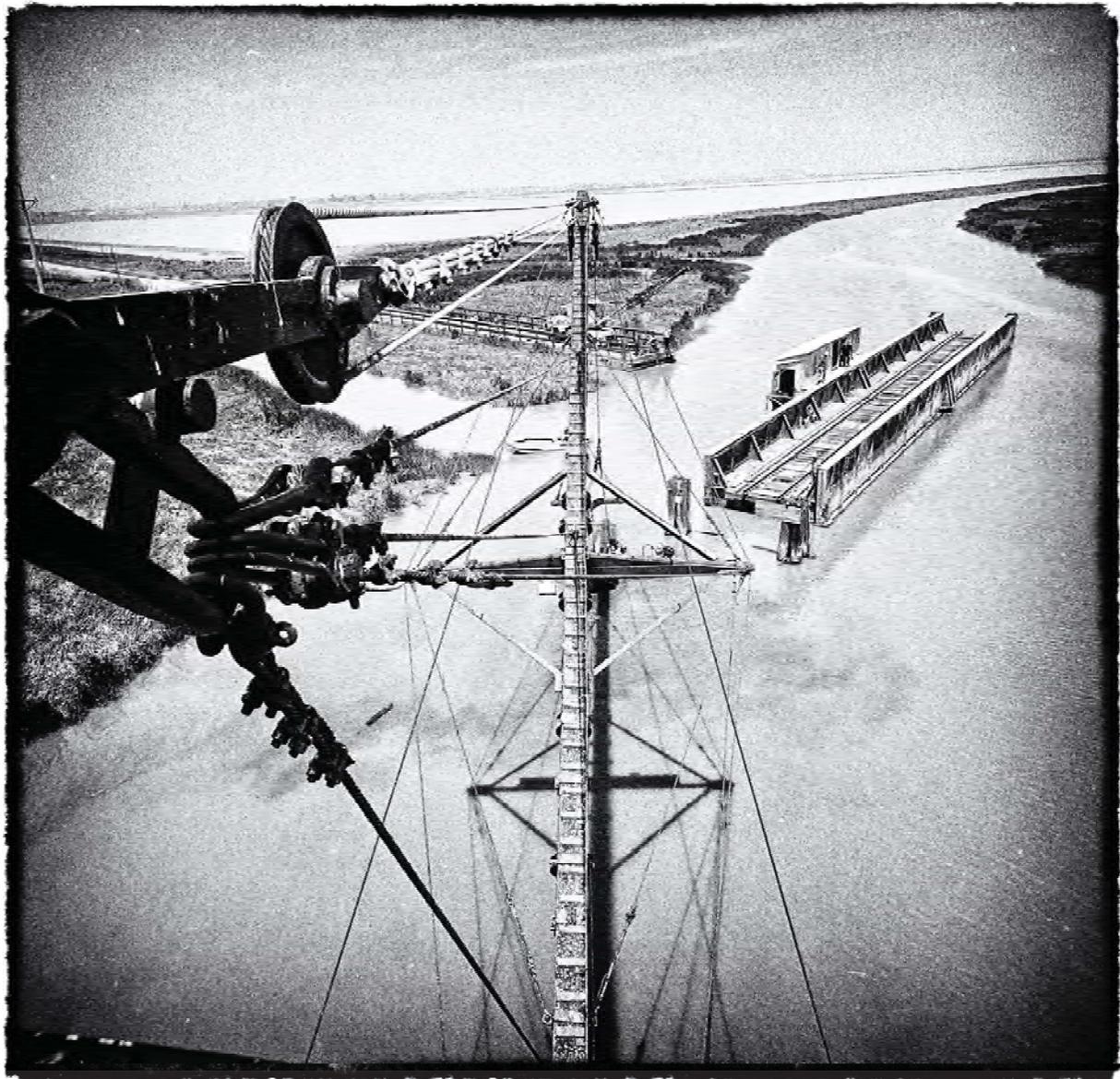


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The *Mallard's* unusual steering system is also its propulsion. Using the movable boom, the pilot guided the dredge bucket into a position in the exact compass heading he wanted to go, let the bucket out on its cable, then lowered it until it grabbed mud at the bottom of the slough. The bucket acted like an anchor. The pilot then winched in the cable, dragging the *Mallard* in the direction of the open draw.

This was the scene in the *Mallard's* wheelhouse at about 2:00 in the afternoon. One toss of the bucket at a time, the pilot guided the *Mallard* through the Mud Slough draw.



In four more years the entire track through the marsh, and the mile across Station Island, would be elevated higher on layers of rock ballast. The 1904 bridge, almost underwater at extreme high tide, was removed and replaced with a new bridge. As the relics disappeared, the legend grew. Completely surrounded by Silicon Valley and the exploding high tech industry, Drawbridge had become—literally and figuratively—the Bay Area's only ghost town.

**PLEASE NOTE:** Today Drawbridge is part of the Bay National Wildlife Refuge and has no public access.

