Bridges you write? Most would say, "I know of only one." There is only one now, but it is actually the third one to be erected across the Arroyo Colorado. Here is the story.

The laying of track for Uriah Lott's railroad as financed by B.F. Yoakum and his associates, had reached Harlingen by 4/22/04. Its run to Brownsville awaited completion of a bridge across the Arroyo Colorado. This was accomplished by 5/2/04. Undoubtedly this bridge was a wooden trestle which was to be used temporarily until a more substantial steel one could be constructed. When the first freight/passenger train reached Harlingen on July 4, 1904, there may have been a minor celebration in the scantily-populated community as the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway train paused en route to Brownsville. We are not sure, for there was yet to be a Harlingen newspaper to record the event.

Sam Robertson, railroad subcontractor for the Johnston Brothers, surveyor, and engineer, and later founder of San Benito, years afterward reminisced about what occurred two months later. He recounted:

On the 16th of September, 1904 while laying track near Havana, just east of Sam Fordyce, "Old Man River" rose twelve feet in two hours, and I knew we were in for it. I got a handcart and six big "niggers" and started for Harlingen Junction where we had just finished a bridge across the Arroyo Colorado. I had driven piles for sub-foundations and knew pilings furnished by the Railroad Company were forty feet too short to stand a major flood because they did not penetrate the quicksand. I had built false work to erect the steel superstructure and knew the drift would accumulate above the false work and carry the bridge out and cause my friends, the Johnston Brothers, a big loss.

So, I rushed with my hand cart and niggers and picked up some more men in Harlingen and sawed the false work down and let it drop into the Arroyo Colorado. The flood started down the Arroyo within the hour after I had destroyed the false work obstruction. But the channel span was too narrow and the steel span and concrete abutments were swept out quickly. We lost eighteen miles of track and roadbed between Harlingen and Havana and about twelve miles between Harlingen and Raymondville.

This flood showed us that we would need flood protection as well as irrigation. So, in preparing my data to aid in promotion, I traced out high water marks all over the entire delta and during the flood we had engineers take approximate heights of the Rio Grande at Sam Fordyce through the Arroyo Colorado, through the Rio Tigres on the Mexican side and a gauging station at Las Rucias near the San Benito pump.

The original wooden bridge gave way in part on September 21, 1904 as continued high arroyo flows worked to undermine it. This then disrupted service to Brownsville for 28 days until repairs could be made.

Because the wooden trestle was to be temporary, it is unlikely that it resembled the often monumental wooden structures to be found crossing the numerous canyons of the west. More likely it was intermediate in height. Since railroad grades are almost always kept below 2% because anything steeper would create traction and power problems, the builders would have had to select an arroyo crossing with a gentler slope then where the pre-
sent bridge crosses. This site could have been just to the west of the present bridge. Here the banks of the stream gradually descend to the floor of the arroyo. An alternative would have been to cut the banks to allow for a more gradual descent and ascent across the arroyo. There is, in fact, a deep cut on the north side immediately adjacent to the current bridge.

The present bridge owned and maintained by the Union Pacific System is the longest span on the railroad line running from Corpus Christi to Brownsville. Its construction was completed in late September 1905. A small badly rusted plate affixed upside down to the diagonal girder at the southeast side of the bridge has the barely discernible date 1905 on it.

The bridge has a design characteristic of its construction period. It is simple, strong, unadorned, and utilitarian. It is of simple truss design and rests on two cast concrete piers straddling the stream within the banks of the arroyo. At ground level each pier measures 31' 8" wide and 9'2" deep. The piers taper to about 21' at their top platforms. The steel pier to pier portion of the bridge is approximately 228' with an additional steel span of 40' on its north end. A wooden trestle of about 224' completes the traverse on the south side. The total length spanned is then about 492'. The bridge is fifteen feet wide with an inside clearance of eleven feet. The height above the stream to the bottom of the bridge is about 38' and to its top about 81'.

This black painted bridge, now oxidized to a cinnamon-colored patina, has played an important role in the Valley's 20th Century commerce and allowed for its growth and development. Now, with the passage of the recent bond issue, its 21st Century future may be limited.