

## Bridges from the Past

| BY SENATOR JIM JEFFORDS |

**IN 1837, THE PEOPLE OF PITTSFORD, VERMONT,** contracted 19-year-old Nichols Powers to build a bridge over Otter Creek. Due to his youth, the town demanded that his father agree to pay for any wasted materials. Young Powers silenced the critics when the bridge went up without a flaw and without wasting any of the valuable timber. The bridge remained there for 94 years. The only reason it went down was because Pittsford decided a modern metal bridge would be safer. Yet some said the bridge was as strong that day as the day it was built, especially after seeing that it supported the 20-ton machine that helped to demolish it. **POWERS WENT ON TO BECOME** one of the greatest builders of wooden bridges that the world has ever known. He built hundreds of covered bridges from Maine to Maryland, and at one time held claim to the majority in New York and New England. **MAYBE HIS GREATEST ACCOMPLISHMENT** was the two-lane Blenheim Bridge in New York, originally labeled Powers' Folly. Few believed the 210-foot span would handle its own weight, let alone traffic. Before removing the scaffold that supported the bridge during construction, Powers stood in the middle shouting, "If she goes, I'll go with her!" The bridge handled daily traffic until the 1930s. It remains a landmark, one of the longest single-span wooden bridges in the world. **UNFORTUNATELY, CONSIDERING WHAT** Powers went on to accomplish, few people recognize his name outside the small community in which he began his career. Many of our covered bridges are suffering the same fate. Where once thousands of bridges spanned our nation's waterways, today fewer than 800 survive. **WITHOUT PROPER MAINTENANCE,** accurate information, or sufficient resources, we may lose the few remaining covered bridges. Caring for these national treasures is beyond the capacity of the towns and counties that own them. Diminished collective knowledge and general distrust of covered bridge dynamics have caused other problems. Ironically, even today a covered bridge can be more appropriate than its steel counterpart. Anyone whose car has lived through the New England winter knows what

salt does to metal, but salt has little effect on wood. The only thing that weakens wood is moisture, and safe beneath their vaulted roofs, many covered bridges have lasted more than 150 years. **TO PROTECT THESE VALUED LANDMARKS,** I introduced the National Covered Bridge Preservation Act in 1998. This legislation, which became law that year, directs the Secretary of Transportation to maintain a list of historic covered bridges, develop education and history programs, and

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research the most appropriate techniques for protecting covered bridges. Since the passage of that legislation, more than \$18 million has been spent to preserve these national treasures. **THE FUNDS HAVE GIVEN** states, historic communities, and preservationists the means to protect this legacy. Covered bridges are not simply relics of the past, they are majestic symbols of our rural history. And in the midst of our busy, frantic lives, they are reminders of a simpler time, of an era we must preserve and remember.

Senator Jim Jeffords has represented Vermont in the U.S. Congress since 1974. Elected to the House of Representatives that year, he won his Senate seat in 1988. He is the ranking member of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee and serves on the Senate Finance, Veterans' Affairs, and Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committees. He also serves on the Senate Special Committee on Aging.