

# How tiny Tennessee town built its bridges back after Helene

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USA TODAY NETWORK – TENNESSEE

POGA, TN – When two of the bridges connecting Poga, Tennessee, to the rest of the world were destroyed by floodwaters from Hurricane Helene, residents of the tiny rural community knew no one else was coming to save them.

So they built their own bridges. It wasn't so much a choice as it was a necessity. In addition to turning the community into an island, the flood left residents without power, water and cell service. It left many with trauma, too.

But after surviving a disaster that killed 18 people in East Tennessee, rallying was what they had to do.

Poga – pronounced Pogey – is comprised of just 258 homes and businesses, according to Carter County Assessor of Property Shane Simerly. Before the disaster, the community was characterized by its stunning natural landscape, surrounded by the Blue Ridge Mountains and inside the Cherokee National Forest. Its buildings are nestled across the area's ridges and valleys, and along the banks of the Elk River.

The river, which flows into nearby Watauga Lake, is gorgeous. It also was the source of unimaginable damage on that Friday in September 2024.

With overwhelming Helene damage spread across six states, the remote community wasn't at the top of the outside world's priority list. Repairs were slow to come, so residents took matters into their own hands, creating a make-shift system of infrastructure and emergency services to ensure their survival.

In the months the residents worked to rebuild, replacement bridges have come and gone, emergency services have evolved to meet locals' needs and a nearby road that connects Poga to the Carter County seat of Elizabethton has undergone repairs. But folks who live in Poga believe it will be years before life returns to the way it was before.

## 'Everybody knows everybody'

"Up here, everybody knows everybody," said Bob Trivette. He owns Bob's General Store, plus an adjoining wrecking service and an excavation service in the town, just a few miles off the North Carolina border. Trivette is also a constable in Carter County's sixth district.

As if to prove his point, Elk Mills-Poga Volunteer Fire Department Chief Mike Walsh walked into Trivette's store while the Knoxville News Sentinel, part of the USA TODAY Network, was there.

Trivette called him over to chat, and Walsh sat down. It wasn't long before Walsh had ordered a bologna and cheese sandwich and opened a bottle of Dr. Enuf, a Johnson City creation that's a local favorite. There was a sense of calm in that routine action, something that's been rare since the fall, when the flood created a seemingly endless series of chaos and challenges.

Heather Hartley, an employee at Bob's General Store, put the sandwich together in the back. When the Elk River swept through the area on Sept. 27, she was working at the store, which is accessible only by Poga Road.

The raging floodwaters destroyed two bridges on that route. Each bridge was 230 feet long and built in the late 1950s.

When the bridges collapsed, Hartley and others in the approximately one-mile span between them were cut off from the rest of Poga, which extends northwest and southeast of the store. Hartley was stuck there for about 36 hours and stayed with a neighbor overnight as she couldn't get back to her own home with the bridges gone. During that time, the cut-off area, home to about 20 people, took on a new name after store owner Trivette: Bob's Island.

"It kind of surprised me," Trivette told the News Sentinel. He's a quiet man, and matter-of-fact. For everyone else, it was a natural moniker. He heard about it when he was unloading supplies from a Blackhawk helicopter. The boxes were labeled "Bob's Island."

## 'Middle of a war'

To connect Bob's Island back to the rest of civilization – the route to North Carolina on one side, and Tennessee on the other – Poga residents rallied to install makeshift bridges, using semi flatbed trailers donated by Trivette. The first was put in within 48 hours of the Helene flooding, and the second within 72 hours.

Carter County Commissioner Jason Clawson, who lives in Poga and is also a volunteer firefighter, said the first hours after the flood were the most intense as



**This temporary bridge at Tennessee's Poga Bridge 1 crossing was donated by Troy Henry, owner of Roadrunner Bridge in Greenville, Texas. The bridge was placed on top of semi flatbed trailers.** CAITIE MCMEKIN/KNOXVILLE NEWS SENTINEL

he and others sprang into action. "We started going door to door to people's houses," Clawson said.

"We were throwing water across ditches and creeks, and throwing food because their driveways were going, the water was still so swift. ... The people in this little area here, we're running into everybody, and it was just absolutely terrifying. Woke up in the middle of a war. I've never been to war, but that's what it felt like. It's changed my life forever."

Clawson and Fire Chief Walsh came together early on to put in substitute bridges in addition to working on the ground to lend a hand to their neighbors.

Along with other local leaders, they coordinated emergency services, food and supply deliveries – including generators and oxygen – and conducted check-ins on neighbors because communications systems were cut off.

There was immense pressure on those community leaders as volunteers and residents looked for guidance in the wake of Helene. "Everybody called (Walsh) with everything," Clawson said. "He was the leader in the community, the one that everybody went to."

Trivette's flatbed-bridges provided the first step toward restoring a semblance of normalcy, although they were a far cry from the secure bridges that were there before. With the temporary bridges' unforgiving width of about seven feet, Clawson said, locals mostly traveled by utility task vehicle, although some took their cars.

Driving anything bigger required lining up with the bridge nearly perfectly. "You had to hit it really good with your car to go across," said Clawson. "If it's your only way, you'll do it. You'll make a way to do it."

Since then, the replacement bridges have changed several times, with each version serving as a marker for repair progress.

A little over a week after the Sept. 27 flood, Troy Henry, owner of Roadrunner Bridge in Greenville, Texas, drove 15 hours to Poga after hearing about the damage. Henry brought his son, Matthew Henry, and parts of a bridge that could be assembled onsite.

On his first trip, Troy Henry brought enough materials to work on one bridge site, where Poga Bridge 1 used to be. The semi flatbed trailers were turned sideways – parallel with the bank – allowing for a wider bridge surface. Henry's bridge was assembled on top of them, with the trailers as support.

He returned in December to place a temporary bridge at the Poga Bridge 2 site, also free of charge.

"He paid the shippers. He drove up here with his son and was down here, helping (in the) cold, hanging off the side, down in the water, bolting this thing together," Clawson said. "I mean it was just absolutely crazy."

Locals helped with those installations, too. "This community is strong," Clawson said. "We have brought ourself back."

## 'Where's Poga ... on that priority list?'

Clawson expressed his doubts about when the community would see permanent bridges again when massive interstate ones were washed out. "We've lost bridges throughout (six) states," he said. "Where's Poga going to be on that priority list? I think if we got (new) bridges in five years, it'd be amazing."

With the wider temporary bridges rigged up, cars could travel between parts of Poga more easily. But the Elk River threatened Henry's bridges, too,

which were closer to the water compared to the original bridges that were destroyed during Helene.

At a Dec. 16 Carter County Commissioners meeting, Carter County Mayor Patty Woodby announced plans for the county to replace the temporary bridges donated by Henry with new temporary bridges, a more long-term stopgap measure intended to last two years. The new, county-provided bridges, along with coinciding work to carve out the bank, would allow first responder vehicles, such as fire trucks and ambulances, as well as snowplows, to cross safely, she said at the meeting.

But before those could be installed, rain once again spelled trouble in Poga.

On Dec. 29, the river rose again, threatening Henry's temporary bridges. "The upper temporary bridge (Bridge 2) is still standing, however the road to it is washing out, causing concern to us if we need to reach citizens," Sheriff Mike Fraley shared in a statement posted on Facebook by the Carter County Sheriff's Office.

By the end of January, the county had installed its own temporary bridges – the third iteration of makeshift crossings. Those bridges and the road leading to them were paved Jan. 29.

Trivette said the community's initiative in creating its own bridges pushed local leaders to respond. "If we waited on the county, we probably still wouldn't have no bridges," he said.

The county was able to use FEMA's Public Assistance Expedited Project Funding for its temporary bridges, Sonya Shows told Knox News. Shows is vice president of Schaus LLC, a company the county hired after Helene to serve as project management during cleanup and to offer assistance on FEMA guidelines to ensure the county receives federal disaster funding.

The expedited funding is based on estimated cost, which is \$1.4 million total for both temporary bridges.

"Carter County is anticipating the cost to be 100% reimbursable under the Public Assistance Program with FEMA for emergency protective measures," Shows said in the email. The county's temporary bridges will be leased until the original bridges can be rebuilt.

The county-provided bridges sit at a similar level to the bridges that flooded in December, and locals worried that the flooding that hits like clockwork each spring would exacerbate the issue. It's not unusual for the water to rise by 10-15 feet, Trivette said.

## No timeline for replacements

The Elk River, like so many others in the region, was forever transformed by Helene. "You could set me out in this river, and I wouldn't have a clue where I was at," said Clawson. "It's so different. It's so much wider and flatter. It takes so much less now to flood."

With the initial safety worries resolved, the economic ones have set in. Semi-tractor trailer trucks still aren't able to cross, which presents a problem for Trivette as a business owner. Deliveries to his store depend on a semi, he said. Without one, he has to pick goods up almost every day in Elizabethton, a drive that for months has taken 50 to 90 minutes because of other road damage caused by flooding.

The good news is that the state of Tennessee and FEMA have approved \$10.77 million to go toward replacing the bridges, but so far only the engineering bid has been awarded. Engineering – the designing and planning of the bridges – is expected to be completed in August, at which time the county will begin accepting bids for construction,

Shows said in an email. There is no timeline for when construction will be completed.

"We've always been the last one to get anything. We get the crumbs of what's left over," said Poga resident Alex Mathews, who helped build back alongside Walsh and Clawson, including work on bridge installations. "It's always been that way."

If you look through past editions of the Elizabethton Star or the Johnson Press, you'll see last names like Trivett (spelled without the "e" then) and Clawson as far back as the 1930s at least, and those predecessors faced similar challenges in their era.

Folks in Poga needed a road to run through it so they could travel to the rest of Carter County. In a little-trafficked area, it took years for the process to be completed, and stopgap measures like gravel were used before the road was finally paved.

In 1958, the Elizabethton Star reported the new Poga Road was almost completed, as was one of two new bridges being built – the same ones destroyed during flooding in 2024.

## 'Our community is very resilient'

A severely damaged road caused trouble for current Poga residents, too. U.S. 321, north of Bob's General Store in an area called Elk Mills, had a chunk of roadway destroyed during flooding, rendering the route dangerous to travel by car, and unusable once roadwork began.

After eight months of driving long back routes, residents will be able to use the road again when it reopens, expected to be sometime in late May or early June, Tennessee Department of Transportation spokesperson Mark Nagi told the News Sentinel in an email.

That road work on U.S. Route 321 took place near where the Elk Mills-Poga Volunteer Fire Department once stood, before it was washed away by the raging Elk River.

For Fire Chief Walsh, along with department members Mathews and Clawson, losing their building was devastating.

The station was the heart of the community, Clawson said. It served as everything from a birthday party venue to a shelter when locals lost power. "When that was gone, that shook our community and especially our members," he said.

The firefighters were able to save all of the trucks but one, although a few members almost died trying to get it out, Clawson said.

While it was dangerous trying to rescue fire equipment from the flood, longer-term it was dangerous for the community to be without a fire department. Solving that problem was another instance of Poga's resiliency, strength and endurance.

Between late October and early November, a new, temporary fire station was built on Clawson's property. With community help, construction took just five days, Clawson said.

It will be in place until a new permanent fire department facility can be built. By mid-February, a location had been selected, and Walsh said he was hopeful work on it would be completed this summer. A second fire department substation built after flooding at the other end of Poga will continue to operate along with the new one.

Road and bridge outages put an additional burden on the fire department, but members adjusted and readjusted to keep their neighbors safe. "When it comes time to get bridges in, or it comes time to get something to somebody, or it comes time to get a patient out, it's the people in this community that join together and go and do what needs to be done," Clawson said.

Staying flexible and working through unique challenges were standard for Poga residents even before the flooding. It's what you sign up for by choosing to live in – or being born into – such a remote area. "Our community is very resilient, and we've always been that way because of where we're at," said Mathews. "We've learned to live that way. We've adapted."

In the weeks following the flood, Mayor Woodby told Knox News the response after the hurricane reminded her "just how resourceful our mountain people are."

Day by day, life starts to feel a little more like the way it was before Helene – or at least as much as it can.

"I don't feel the same at all since this has happened and, you know, different mental state, and just not back from it," Clawson said. "I don't think any of us are. It'll never be the same. Life will never be the same."