Pennsylvania Turnpike turns 75 years old

The nation’s first superhighway opened Oct. 1, 1940

By Scott Beveridge  September 26, 2015

Not long after the nation's first superhighway opened 75 years ago, travelers along the Pennsylvania Turnpike were known to park their cars in its grassy median, where they would spread out picnic lunches

“People traveled the Turnpike specifically to sightsee,” said Renee Vid Colborn, manager of media and public relations for the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission.

Colborn said there were “no rules or regulations” regarding traffic on the Turnpike after it opened Oct. 1, 1940, and it quickly became the must-see highway in America.

Its developers wrongly predicted it would attract 1.3 million vehicles each year, as the actual traffic counts on the road in the early years turned out to be 2.4 million vehicles a year. That equaled 10,000 vehicles per day on the highway when it was just 160 miles long and ran between Irwin and Carlisle.

Pennsylvania selected the project in 1934 under a federal project designed to help to pull the nation out of the Great Depression, following a route that had been constructed for an unfinished railroad known as “Vanderbilt’s Folly.”

The nickname refers to Cornelius Vanderbilt, who ran New York Central Railroad, and his abandoned attempt begun in 1882 to compete against Pennsylvania Railroad by developing the Southern Pennsylvania Railroad between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg. Vanderbilt had walked away from the project after tunnels were forged into the Appalachian Mountains, voids that had been overtaken by bats by the time the Turnpike project came along.

The toll road continued to be a “big deal” into the 1960s, recalled Peggy Conklin, 83, of Washington.

“We just had little roads around here,” Conklin said.

A trip on the Turnpike required “a couple of days” of planning before you set out in your car, Conklin said.

The rest stops in those days were all Howard Johnson restaurants, she said.

“That was a big deal, too,” she said.

Eventually the highway was extended in 1950 to Valley Forge, and the corridor from Irwin to the Ohio line soon followed, according to the Turnpike.

An increase in the number of vehicle crashes on the road in the 1960s led to a number of safety improvements, which included better drains and widening the road and its medians.

The highway had an 80-mph speed limit after other improvements were completed in the 1970s.

The 1980s and 1990s saw further pavement expansions by the Turnpike Commission, including the beginnings of the development of the 60-mile Mon-Fayette Expressway, a portion of which follows a 17-mile corridor in Eastern Washington County.
The commission is now developing the Southern Beltway between Pittsburgh International Airport and the Mon-Fayette Expressway near Finleyville, and laying the groundwork to finish the Mon-Fayette from Large to Monroeville, Colborn said.

The network of roadways now attracts 198.5 million vehicles a year, which amounts to about 544,000 per day, she said.

“With the increased amount of traffic we have on the roadway today, it is clear that the Turnpike has become more of a day-to-day form of travel in addition to the leisure and vacation trips,” Colborn said.

“Since the opening of the Pennsylvania Turnpike in 1940, we have seen many communities sprout up and grow near the interchanges. New Stanton in Westmoreland County first comes to mind,” she added. “The business parks and retail shops that have opened around interchange areas like New Stanton have boosted economic development all across Pennsylvania and continue to do so.”

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