One Tank Trip: 'The Pennsylvania Turnpike: America's First Superhighway'

Exhibit underway at The State Museum of Pennsylvania in Harrisburg

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HARRISBURG, Pa. - You get on, you get off, with E-ZPass in the glove compartment. You don't think much about it, but in 1940, driving along the Pennsylvania Turnpike was a very big deal.

"It's often said that the turnpike was America's answer to the German Autobahn, which in fact it was," said Curt Miner, senior history curator at The State Museum of Pennsylvania in Harrisburg.

A new exhibit celebrates 75 years of travel on the nation's first superhighway.

"The Pennsylvania Turnpike planted the seed. 160 miles in 1940 becomes, several decades later, translated into what is now 47,000 miles of interstate highway, and it started here in Pennsylvania," Miner explained.

The exhibit highlights a toll booth, then called ticket booth, that was in Irwin, Westmoreland County. It was part of the first 160-mile stretch.

You would have piled your family into a car, like a 1948 Packard. The one on display was sold at a dealership in downtown Reading.

Pay as you go was a new idea, and they weren't sure it would work. The average then was about one cent per mile, but the road had what others didn't. It was safe, fast and convenient.

"To really appreciate the Pennsylvania Turnpike," Miner said, "you have to know what other roadways were like at the time. They were not easy to travel, and they took a long time."

Harrisburg to Pittsburgh took seven hours. On the turnpike, the travel time was cut in half.

"There are stories of people driving from very far away to experience what no one has experienced before, which is the thrill of driving uninterrupted, without having to stop or pull over on four lanes of smooth concrete," Miner said. "Someone compared it to riding a magic carpet."
For a trip like that, you need a souvenir. Today, you can pick up "Turnpike Mike."

There was a song recorded in 1968 titled "Pennsylvania Turnpike, I Love You." It's a humorous take on both the wonders and occasional frustrations of road-tripping.

As we get on the road today, some tend to focus on the negative: the traffic, the delays, but the exhibit is a reminder that what we take for granted was once referred to by those who built it as the Eighth Wonder of the World.

It certainly changed the way we all travel.

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Pennsylvania Turnpike exhibit video: