

Pennsylvania Turnpike turns 75

ERIE, Pa. (AP) —At one minute past midnight on Oct. 1, 1940, drivers who had been lining up since 6 p.m. to be among the first on the Pennsylvania Turnpike started their engines.

Turnpike commissioners expected about 12,000 people to drive the first 160 miles of the turnpike over its first weekend. As many as 10,000 people a day showed up instead and sent home "Greetings from Pennsylvania Turnpike" postcards with images of the road's tunnels, service plazas and toll booths.

The nation's first superhighway 75 years ago was a sensation. People came from across the country to drive four lanes with limited access and no stop signs or red lights for 160 miles, all the way from Irwin, near Pittsburgh, to Carlisle, outside Harrisburg.

"As one turnpike commissioner said many years ago, it was sort of the eighth wonder of the world," said Curtis Miner, senior curator of history and fine arts collections of the State Museum of Pennsylvania in Harrisburg.

Miner, who is finishing a State Museum exhibit on the turnpike's construction, evolution and legacy, said, "People were astonished that we had pulled this off, that it was possible to get on a highway and drive uninterrupted for miles and miles and miles."

The turnpike cut the travel time between Harrisburg and Pittsburgh in half, to three and a half rather than seven hours.

"That was remarkable," Miner said.

Daring drivers made the trip even faster. The turnpike opened with no posted speed limit, and drivers reported going as fast as 90 mph.

"It was America's answer to the autobahn," Miner said.

Planners meant to extend turnpike to Erie

The Pennsylvania Turnpike was conceived in the 1930s as an alternative to the Lincoln Highway between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. Now known as U.S. Route 30, the two-lane road followed old wagon routes up steep mountain

grades and through passes that were often dangerous in fog, rain and snow. The going was also slow through each of dozens of small towns.

"To really appreciate the impact the turnpike had, you have to understand what automobile travel was like before it opened," Miner said. "The Lincoln Highway was a national road, but that doesn't mean traveling on it was convenient or easy."

Going through the Allegheny Mountains instead became the focus of highway planners. With almost \$70 million in federal grants and loans, Pennsylvania hired private contractors to build the turnpike and pledged to repay the loans with turnpike tolls.

The work that began in October 1938 included seven tunnels, some of those partially dug in the 1880s for a railroad that never came to be. An estimated 15,000 workers built the highway, 300 bridges, service plazas and other structures in just two years.

In the 1950s, the turnpike was extended to Valley Forge, the Ohio line, the Delaware River and Scranton. The Pennsylvania Turnpike Northwestern Extension Act of 1953 would have extended the highway to Erie and built an east-west spur between the Ohio and New York state lines. The plan was scrapped when the federal government authorized funding for 41,000 miles of interstate highways in the turnpike's image, including Interstate 90 in 1959 and Interstate 79 in 1965.

"The 1956 interstate highway act basically ended the era of the Pennsylvania Turnpike tolling the state," Miner said.

Fueling commercial and leisure travel

Pennsylvania's trucking industry in 1940 urged members to boycott the turnpike because of the high tolls -- \$3 to \$10, based on truck weight, from Irwin to Carlisle, compared with \$1.50, or less than a penny per mile, for cars. But savings in travel time and fuel consumption quickly got truckers on the road.

Commercial drivers today can opt to use an interstate instead to avoid tolls that have risen sharply since 2008 and will increase again on Jan. 1, to \$56.60 for tractor-trailers making the 160-mile drive between Irwin and Carlisle.

"We run essentially a math problem based on destination and what's the best route to take. Sometimes, even with the cost of tolls, that ends up being the turnpike because it's the shortest miles," said Harold Bender, general manager of Team Hardinger, an Erie-based trucking and warehousing company. "It could also be another route when the miles are similar but there's no toll."

For the rest of us, the toll will increase 6 percent in 2016, to \$19.40 along the original stretch of turnpike. Drivers paying by debit or credit card through the turnpike's electronic E-ZPass system pay less.

The turnpike collects about \$900 million in tolls annually, including about \$450 million earmarked for Pennsylvania Department of Transportation transit and multimodal programs across the state, Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission spokesman Carl DeFebo said.

Leisure travelers who drive the turnpike only occasionally or for short distances are least bothered by tolls. Miner's family in the mid-1950s moved from McKeesport, near Pittsburgh, to suburban Harrisburg and drove the turnpike regularly.

"We were constantly going back and forth to family still back there in McKeesport. That was true for many, many families," Miner said. "There are lots of personal stories about how the turnpike kept families together."

And in the days before high gas prices, Sunday drives frequently were on the turnpike.

"I remember as a kid the family setting out Sunday afternoons from Carlisle to the Midway (Service) Plaza in Bedford for Howard Johnson ice cream cones," Miner, 53, said. The Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission originally leased service areas spaced along the turnpike to Standard Oil, which sold gasoline at the plazas and contracted with Howard Johnson for food and souvenir sales.

"Everyone has a turnpike story if they're from Pennsylvania," Miner said.

Turnpike stories: Erie movers and shakers

Although the nearest onramp to the Pennsylvania Turnpike is about 100 miles away, Erie residents drive the highway and have helped to shape it.

The first female member of the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission, which governs and operates the road, was Erie's Bonney Daubenspeck, appointed by then-Gov. Tom Ridge in 1997. Daubenspeck had previously served on the Erie-Western Pennsylvania Port Authority and Pennsylvania State Transportation Commission.

She died in January 2014.

Erie native Barry Drew was recently nominated to the commission by Gov. Tom Wolf. Drew is a former Erie city solicitor and was Erie County director of administration during the Judy Lynch administration.

Legislators have not yet acted on his nomination.

Turnpike stories: Erie drivers

Today more than three times its original length at 551 miles long, the Pennsylvania Turnpike earns mixed reviews from local drivers.

State Rep. Pat Harkins, of Erie, D-1st Dist., is a turnpike fan. Harkins drives various stretches of the turnpike two or three times a week, to and from Harrisburg and more often between Harrisburg and committee meetings in the Philadelphia area.

"The turnpike is an antique, but it's an antique that is constantly being revamped and remodeled to be quicker and easier to drive. And to me, it's very safe," Harkins said. "There's always a police presence. Traffic is always flowing even if there's an accident, and there's always someone available if you have an accident or a breakdown."

The scenery along the turnpike is worth the trip, Harkins said.

"Just to see the change of seasons is spectacular," he said. "With farmlands and mountains and windmills, it's sometimes surreal."

John Oliver, president and chief executive of VisitErie, the region's tourism promotion agency, seldom drives the turnpike on frequent trips to Harrisburg, preferring Interstate 80 and Route 322 instead.

"I just think I-80 is the faster route," Oliver said.

In winter, though, Oliver said that he sometimes prefers the turnpike. "It's just far enough south that it can get rain rather than snow, or less snow."

The turnpike through its 75 years has been crucial to Pennsylvania tourism, Oliver said.

"It made travel from one destination to another in the commonwealth much easier. And it made Erie as a visitor destination so much more accessible to the rest of the state," he said.

Harkins doubts that the legislators today would invest in something as revolutionary as the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

"The sentiment wouldn't be there today, with everyone wanting to cut costs and spending," Harkins said. "I admire the stick-to-it-iveness, I guess you'd say, of the people who had the foresight to invest in the turnpike and invest in the future of transportation. They changed our world."

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