



Looking Back *Joyce M. Tice*

# A Grand Highway for the Republic

Automobiles, or horse-less carriages as they were first called, took over as a means of transportation in the early twentieth century faster than paved roads could be built to accommodate them. A cross-country trip was an ordeal marked by begging farmers to drag the car out of the mud with a horse team. The idea of a paved road was as pie-in-the-sky as commercial space travel is to us now.

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The first plan for a cross-country highway was to be 4,060 miles from Portland, Maine, to Portland, Oregon. The name Roosevelt Highway was given in 1919 to commemorate Theodore Roosevelt. The Pennsylvania section from Port Jervis to Erie was built from 1923 to 1925 across the Northern Tier. In many parts of the state, engineers cut new roads instead of following the old state roads or farm-to-market roads. Here in Sullivan Township, several older roadbeds were abandoned in the new design.

The *Wellsboro Gazette* reported in 1924 on the Mansfield-to-Mainesburg section: “There will be nothing more than a seven percent grade on this route, although we would say that there is plenty of that. The engineers reported that they could not get a seven percent grade on the other routes.”

Route 6 as a numbered route, originating in Provincetown, Massachusetts, was begun as a transcontinental highway in 1925. Crossing Pennsylvania, it followed the newly built Roosevelt Highway. That name was eventually applied to all of Route 6 as it continued across the country to Long Beach, California.

John A. Tice of Elmira Heights grew up in the Gray Valley section of Sullivan Township in Tioga County. That section of Roosevelt Highway was paved one lane at a time in 1924. Before the first lane’s pavement had set, chickens crossed it leaving a trail of little chicken tracks. When the other lane was paved, the impression of the chicken tracks remained on one side only. As a young boy, John would stand in the middle of the highway pondering how those chickens could have come up out of the middle of the road to walk across. In that era

a child could stand in the middle of the road a long time before having to move for traffic.

In 1953 Route 6 became the Grand Army of the Republic Highway. All fourteen states through which it passed marked it accordingly. Indiana is said to have a hundred markers with this name, but I have only seen one in Pennsylvania—just inside Potter County facing the westbound lane.

Ken Smith grew up and still lives in Mainesburg. He recalls that in the 1950s, storeowner Ray Cook became a dealer for go-carts and would allow the kids to ride them on Route 6

after about six in the evening. By then almost all traffic was cleared for the day. The kids could ride safely and without competition from vehicles. A generation later in 1976, Ken’s daughter, Annette, was tragically killed in front of their house while crossing Route 6.

The level of traffic everywhere has increased tremendously and continues to do so. Road repair and construction are as much a part of summer as sun screen lotion and lawn mowing. We sit and fume at the delays, but I composed the start of this month’s column while stuck on Route 6 outside Mansfield. At least we don’t have hub-cap-deep mud as travelers did a century ago.

Most long distance traffic now follows the interstate system. Route 6 is primarily used by lo-

cal traffic in our area. It is designated as a bicycle route, and the Pennsylvania Route 6 Heritage Corporation has installed new mile markers across the state.

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Bicycle route and mile markers along U.S. Route 6 in Tioga County, Pennsylvania.

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