

Roadside America and the Engine(s) of Progress

Along the rolling, bucolic stretch of I-78 between Allentown and Harrisburg, billboards entice travelers to exit at Shartlesville for “Roadside America: The World’s Greatest Indoor Miniature Village.” A local institution since 1953, this attraction features remarkably detailed, handcrafted, miniature scenes of American history, industry, and progress, arranged in a sweeping, eight-thousand-square-foot tabletop tableau.¹ The life’s work of creator Laurence T. Gieringer, Roadside America, with its emphasis on models of regional landmarks and locales, serves as a multifaceted material-culture “text” through which to explore key relationships between energy sources and Pennsylvania’s lived history.

Gieringer, a native of Reading, was born in 1893, the first son of Anna and Charles H. Gieringer. Charles, a harness maker by trade, had the distinction of owning the first automobile in the area, a three-wheeled vehicle he drove from Connecticut to Reading in an overland trip that took just over twenty-two days.² Years later, Laurence would relate the indelible impression left on him by his father’s journey and the dawn of automobile travel in a how-to article on building model gas stations.³ This intersection of model making and energy, especially as it relates to transportation, was established early in Gieringer’s life and fully realized in the vivid and kinetic model landscape he created.

Inspired by a boyhood ambition to re-create local landmarks in miniature form, the attraction is designed so that the visitor encounters discrete periods of Pennsylvanian and national history on a single plane, creating a patchwork quilt of Americana past and present. Guests walk around the model, their tours guided by the complimentary brochure that draws attention to scenes of note from the dawn of the republic to the “modern” (circa 1960) era. Signs ringing the model invite visitors to push buttons activating vignettes within the scenes: two frontiersmen saw a log, circus performers parade in their camp, a hot-air balloon soars high over a

¹ Peter George, “Roadside America: An Institution along Route 78,” *Village Chronicle*, n.d., 56, clipping courtesy of Dolores Heinsohn personal archive. Though the current location of Roadside America in Shartlesville dates to 1953, the model has long been a regional sensation, being publicly exhibited in one form or another since 1935.

² Don Ambrose Agius, *The Story of Laurence T. Gieringer and His Roadside America* (Kutztown, PA, 1961), 18–19.

³ Laurence Gieringer, “A Gas Station,” *Model Builder*, Sept. 1946, 17–19.

baseball diamond as crowds cheer in the bleachers. This vibrant tapestry is interwoven with tableaux illustrating numerous uses and sources of energy in the development of American industry, travel, and communications technologies. While scenes of early frontier settlements show the use of water-, horse-, and manpower, it is in the richly detailed depictions of the coal, petroleum, and electricity industries that Roadside America shines—literally.

Particularly striking is the scale model, “sponsored” by the Reading Iron Works, of the Philadelphia and Reading Anthracite Colliery.⁴ This marvelous miniature features a cross section of the mine’s tunnels as well as a replica of the Locust Point coal breaker, which was, at the time of the model’s construction, the largest of its kind in the world. The rail yard abutting the coal works emphasizes the interconnectedness of the coal industry in Pennsylvania with the country at large, as tiny cars wait to be filled with the extracted anthracite and race across tracks spanning the length and breadth of the model. Likewise, the oil refinery model harks back to the dawn of the American petroleum industry at the Drake Well in Titusville. The miniature Esso filling station with automobiles lining up at its pumps, located in the downtown section of the village of “Fairfield,” illustrates the connection between the fuel and its uses.

In Roadside America, electricity is presented as a marker of modernity and progress. The miniature power plant, touted in the tour brochure as having “every brick . . . handcarved in complete detail,” is situated at the center of the display, from which it appears to provide the energy to power the brightly lit movie theatre marquee in Fairfield as well as the interior lights of the village’s residential and commercial districts.⁵ This illumination is brilliantly displayed during the “Night Pageant” that occurs every twenty minutes, in which the lights in the room housing the model are dimmed in a simulated sunset. As Kate Smith’s “God Bless America” plays over the public address system and pictures of Jesus, angels, and patriotic scenes project onto a back wall near a fluttering American flag, the sections of the model representing modern America blaze brightly while colonial and pioneer scenes fall into darkness.

The dynamic models of Laurence T. Gieringer’s Roadside America vividly depict energy development and its numerous manifestations

⁴ Agius, *Story of Laurence T. Gieringer*, 77.

⁵ Roadside America, Inc., *Pennsylvania’s Roadside America Incorporated: The World’s Greatest Indoor Miniature Village*, n.d.

throughout central Pennsylvania's history. The interconnectedness of energy and history is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the model trains that crisscross the model. Steam, electric, and diesel engines share the same tracks, racing through towns whose streets teem alternately with horse-drawn wagons and automobiles, telegraph wires and telephone poles. These anachronistic juxtapositions underscore the technological development enabled by harnessing these energy sources while connecting such innovations to the land and people from which they derived.

This optimistic depiction of energy development and applications is due in part to the particular moment in history captured by the landscape of the attraction. After Gieringer's death in 1963, no additional models were added to the display, making the attraction a virtual time capsule of midcentury America. Thus, an unambiguous narrative of progress is not complicated by more recent developments, such as the disasters at Centralia and Three Mile Island or controversy surrounding the fracking of the Marcellus Shale. Likewise, the unintended consequences of transportation fuel innovations are, literally, outside the borders of the display; the America of Roadside America is absent suburban sprawl, deforestation, or mountaintop removal mining. Gieringer's America is one of innovation and potential—a tableau of a promise that had yet to be broken.

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