OVER THE OLD ROADS TO PITTSBURGH

BY JOHN S. RITENOUR

Up to 1785 the Forbes military road had been used for traffic and travel between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. It had been constructed to follow as straight a line as possible, without regard to steepness of hills or anything of that sort, and therefore in the course of time it became unsatisfactory as a road for non-military uses. It was altogether too hard on horses and vehicles. So in 1785 the Assembly made provision for a new 60-foot road from the western part of Cumberland county to Pittsburgh, a distance of more than 100 miles, and appropriated $2,000 for the work—less than $20 a mile.

The surveying was done at once, and that part of the road east of Bedford was promptly approved in 1787. But it was not until May 26, 1790, that the survey for the part of the road between Bedford and Pittsburgh was sanctioned. It was opened to public use in 1791. This was known as the State road.

It passed over Laurel Ridge and the Alleghany mountains on a line almost parallel with the later turnpike. Pack horses were used chiefly in traversing its route; and it was during its existence that pack-horse transportation reached its highest point. Nothing much more than merely cutting away the trees had been done in its construction.

But still it was a valuable avenue of intercourse, and many thousands passed over it both ways before it fell into final disuse. A regular mail was carried over it by express riders in 1805. It was never piked, and except in dry seasons could not be used by vehicles. Much of the travel at that time back and forth between this city and Philadelphia, on both the State road and the succeeding turnpike, was done on foot. Covering 30 or more miles daily, a pedestrian could walk from one city to the other in 10 days, which was better time than the average pack horse made. Good inns were numerous along the route, and thus there was no lack of opportunities for food and shelter.

CARRIAGE A CURIOSITY.

The first carriage brought west of the mountains was by Col. Daniel Morgan, whom Congress had appointed Indian
agent in this section. The second carriage was brought in 1788, mainly over the Forbes road, by Dr. Schoepf, a German physician and naturalist. He wrote an account of his trip, published in Germany in 1788, in which he said his carriage was a very great curiosity among the inhabitants of Western Pennsylvania along his ride. It excited the wonder of the dwellers in lonely cabins along the road, as well as the lively curiosity of the people of Pittsburgh, where it was the principal object of interest.

“Many well-dressed gentlemen and highly adorned ladies came to the tavern to see it,” he says.

In 1805-6 there was a regular line of primitive stages over the State road from Pittsburgh by way of Greensburg and Somerset to Chambersburg, there connecting with a stage route to Philadelphia. These carried the mail also, and to many Pittsburghers the line was a great convenience. A letter written in 1808 gives a traveler’s diary of his ride from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh over this road, the most curious item of which is that, when he reached Greensburg court was in session, and “an elephant was on exhibition in the town,” which was crowded.

The journal of Mrs. Mary Dewees, who came over the State road in 1787, on her way to Kentucky, says of her stop in Pittsburgh: “Called on Mrs. Col. Butler and saw a very handsome parlour, elegantly papered and well furnished.”

Mrs. Dewees had undertaken water travel from what is now the site of McKeesport to Kentucky by a boat which, she writes, was 70 feet long. Her room was 6 x 12, with a comfortable fireplace, and a bedroom partitioned off by blankets, “which was far preferable to the conditions in the cabins after crossing the mountains. We are clear of fleas, by which we were almost devoured when on shore.”

THEN THE TURNPIKE.

Of her departure from Pittsburgh Mrs. Dewees writes: “At 11 o’clock we dropped down the Ohio, and at a distance of a mile had a full view of Capt. O’Harra’s summer house, which stands on the bank of the Allegheny river about 100 yards from the bottom of their garden. It is the finest situation I ever saw. They live in the upper end, or rather out of the town. Their house is in the midst of an orchard of 60 acres, the only one at the place, from the front of which they have a full view of the Monongahela and Ohio
rivers. At the close of the day we anchored at the lower point of McKees Rocks, under a large rock nearly 60 feet high having the appearance of just falling into the water."

The State road as an avenue of commerce with the east was followed by the Pittsburgh and Philadelphia turnpike, authorized by legislative act of February 24, 1806. The termini were Pittsburgh and Harrisburg, the road already being in existence between Harrisburg and Philadelphia. It passed through Greensburg, Somerset, Bedford, Chambersburg, Carlisle, Harrisburg, York and Lancaster to Philadelphia.

Another law authorized the Northern turnpike from the east to Pittsburgh. It crossed the mountains from the Frankstown branch of the Juniata river to the Conemaugh river, and thence over Westmoreland county to Pittsburgh. It was opened for travel in 1819, and the route it followed was about that which was known earlier as the Frankstown road.

The rivalry between these two roads delayed the building of both, as at that period the construction of one was about as much as the state should have undertaken. A statute providing generally for turnpikes had existed from 1811, authorizing the governor to subscribe $300,000 to the stock of any turnpike company that should itself have raised $150,000. It was the anxiety chiefly to get this state subscription that caused the unfortunate rivalry between the two companies that were building turnpikes to Pittsburgh, thus holding up the progress of the work. A committee finally named to decide which was the better of the two routes went over both and favored the southernmost. Popular subscriptions were received all along the line. The turnpike was finally completed in its entirety in 1817-18, although it had been used here and there in sections for more than a year.

A FAILURE FINANCIALLY.

It was a toll road, of course, and at each toll house was a pike or pole, swung across the road, to stop traffic. When a traveler paid his toll the pike was lifted and he could go on. This gave rise to the name "turnpike." These tolls were designed, of course, to provide dividends for the stockholders, but there never were any dividends. The state's shares passed eventually to the ownership of private individuals, and at last by an act of 1879, the burden of main-
taining the road was put upon the townships through which it passed.

This turnpike was well and carefully built, notwithstanding but $450,000 was spent on its 200 miles, or $2,250 a mile. It was 25 feet wide, with arched stone bridges of masonry over creeks and rivulets, and many of these are still in good condition. The bottom of the road consisted of large stones, laid according to the Telford plan, with a top covering of smaller stones, of blue rock and lime, the entire thickness of stone being about a foot and a half.

This thoroughness of construction and the magnitude of travel over the road thoroughly impressed everyone with the idea of permanence, and hence the population fast increased all along the route. Many prosperous towns and villages sprang up. Houses of stone and brick were constructed, many of which are still in use and most comfortable.

The traffic over this turnpike was very heavy. Forty-three miles east of Pittsburgh, on Chestnut ridge, the gatekeeper reported that the traffic of a year, ending May 31, 1818, which was the first year after the completion of the road, amounted to this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Vehicle</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single horses</td>
<td>7,112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-horse vehicles</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-horse vehicles</td>
<td>501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three-horse vehicles</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four-horse vehicles</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five-horse vehicles</td>
<td>2,412</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six-horse vehicles</td>
<td>2,696</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-horse sleighs</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-horse sleighs and sleds</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total in horses 38,599

On some days as many as 90 wagons passed through one of the toll gates not far from Pittsburgh. Drovers of horses, cattle, sheep and hogs went over the road to Philadelphia and Baltimore. The west raised more live stock than it needed, and the only place to market it was in the east, where it always commanded cash. A herd of cattle numbered about 150; sheep from 600 to 1,000; horses 20 to 100. When a drover put up his cattle for the night anywhere on the pike he paid 3 cents a head for their pasture. They traveled from 10 to 12 miles daily, sheep about the same, horses more, hogs 8 to 10 miles.
THE CONESTOGA WAGON

A day's journey for a wagoner with a load averaged 20 miles. He drove what was called a Conestoga wagon, whose bed was low in the center and high at each end. Over the bed were bows covered with canvas. The lower part of the bed was often painted blue and the upper part red. The canvas being white, the entire outfit made the national colors. Many teamsters were very proud of the jingling pear-shaped bells on a bow over the necks of their horses. The word "stogie," describing a popular cheap cigar, is said to be derived from "Conestoga," because it was at first home-made from home-grown tobacco, and being cheap and satisfactory became much in vogue among teamsters. From being a "Conestoga cigar" it became a "stogie." Whisky was plentiful everywhere along the pike, and any one who thirsted for it could quaff all he wanted at three cents a quaff.

It took 56 hours to go from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia by coach, and the traveler was expected to snatch such sleep as he could get in the coach while on the way. The fare was $20; sometimes less, when the rivalry between the competing lines got sharp. For short distances the fare was 8 cents a mile. About every 50 miles coaches were changed, the heavier ones being used on the mountain ridges between Ligonier and Chambersburg and the lighter ones on the levels.

The United States mail line, which carried the mail, and the People's Line, later changed to the Good Intent, were the names of the early companies that ran stages over the turnpike. Two coaches left daily and two arrived. The first to depart in the morning left at 5 or 6 o'clock, and by 10 o'clock was at Greensburg, three relays of horses having been employed. Two hours later Ligonier was reached for dinner; distance, 50 miles. The end of the next 50 miles was Bedford, but the time required to reach that place was greater, because two mountain ridges had to be climbed. The schedule of arrivals and departures all along the route was generally faithfully met, and travelers from Pittsburgh could safely rely on reaching Philadelphia in 56 hours. On the eastern end of the pike, where travel was greater, there were more than two stage lines.
RATES OF TOLL

These stages were often driven at the rate of ten miles an hour, but the usual speed was six to eight miles. There were relays every ten or a dozen miles, when new horses were put in, and these replaced in turn with fresh ones at the next station. No stops were made day or night except at relays, postoffices and taverns.

From Pittsburgh to Philadelphia the toll for a narrow-wheeled wagon and six horses was $29.30; for a broad-wheeled wagon and six horses, $19.20. The distinction was due to the difference in size of wheels. A broad-wheeled vehicle did not cut the pike as much as one with narrow tires.

The coaches were accounted comfortable vehicles of travel, being trimmed, painted and ornamented in fine style. Coach trimmers and painters in those days were artists. When a stage came from their hands its exterior was elegantly and tastefully decorated. The interior cushions and backs were upholstered in leather or plush. There were three seats, each of which would hold three passengers. Beside the driver was a seat, which in fine weather was regarded as the most desirable in the conveyance. On top of the stage, around which was a light iron guard about a foot high, others could sit if they did not mind some discomfort. When passengers were urgent a stage would sometimes accommodate 15, albeit it was designed for but 10, in addition to the driver.

The construction of the vehicle made comparatively easy riding. The body swung on leather supports, called thorough-braces, suspended from jacks on the front and rear axles. There were no springs. At the rear was a "boot" for carrying passengers' baggage. The mail bags were usually under the driver's seat.

The horses for this service were selected with care, regard being had for strength, speed and endurance, as well as for form and showiness. The stronger animals were used in the hill country. The breeds, from which they generally sprung, all now extinct, were the Murat, Winflower, North Star and Hickory.

ENJOYABLE TRAVELING THEN.

The environment of these rides—the splendid vehicle, the dashing horses, the varying scenery, the stops for meals at fine country taverns, the anecdotes of drivers and the
notes of their horns, the speed contests between rivals, the long lines of teamsters with freight wagons, the shifting panorama of lively traffic all along the road—made a journey on the old turnpike one of the most enjoyable episodes in life. But all this passed into history when the locomotive pushed its way to the forks of the Ohio. There is no more beautiful road in the country than the Pittsburgh and Philadelphia turnpike, and it must have been a charm and a delight, indeed, to the many thousands who passed over it on foot and in vehicles.

The carrying out of Henry Clay's idea of a National pike from Cumberland, on the Potomac river, through Somerset, Fayette and Washington counties, Pennsylvania, to Wheeling, and then on through Ohio to Indiana and Illinois, aroused great opposition in Pittsburgh because it was believed, and rightly, that the construction of this road would damage the trade and traffic of Pittsburgh. Results proved this to be the case. It diverted to Wheeling and Baltimore trade from the southwest that would have passed through this city, and thus justified the opposition which the project received from Henry Baldwin, who represented this county in Congress during the early stages of the scheme. The city sent all kinds of remonstrances to Washington against the construction of the national pike. Hostile meetings were held. But the road was built, all the same, and Wheeling thought "finis" had been written to the development of Pittsburgh. An editor of the time printed in his Wheeling paper:

"Poor old Pittsburgh! Your day is over. The scepter of influence and wealth is to travel to us."

WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

In time the Pittsburgh and Philadelphia turnpike succumbed to the canal, and the canal in its turn to the railroad. So the successive routes of transportation from Pittsburgh to the east have been in their order as follows: The Forbes road, the State road, the Turnpike, the canal and the railroad. To the latter will no doubt be added, after awhile, a road for automobiles, to transport both freight and passengers either for long hauls or short hauls, and maybe for both. Who can tell now? Auto transportation is in its infancy. Robert Fulton was pronounced crazy when he declared in Pittsburgh in 1811 that some day carriages would be drawn by steam power over the mountains. And long before that
Shakespeare had written, "There are stranger things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in our philosophy." In the light of the achievements of modern invention no one would dare predict now what the future holds for the auto-carriage when the people have made roads good everywhere.

About 1850, when timber was very plentiful, the building of plank roads got to be quite a fad in this region. Three sleepers of plank 12 to 14 feet long were laid lengthwise. Lumber was so abundant and cheap, and labor likewise, that roads, which were toll roads, of course, were thought to be good investments for capital not otherwise engaged. For awhile this made a fine road, but at last sun and water warped the timbers, and in the end a plank road got to be looked upon as a thing of scorn—nothing meaner for travel. Planks were pulled out and left along the road sides.

The first plank road in this locality was built in 1849, seven miles long, from the head of Federal street, Allegheny, to within a mile of Perrysville. Another was built at the same time between Allegheny and Butler. One in 1851 to Braddock. Others were the Temperanceville and Nobletown road, the Allegheny and Manchester road, the New Brighton road, one through East Liberty north to Apollo, and the longest of all from Pittsburgh up the Monongahela and Youghiogheny rivers to West Newton, and from there across Westmoreland and Somerset counties to join the National pike at Cumberland.