A Road to a Park

This issue we have a two-part follow-up to our Summer 2011 story about Henry Tranter and the opening of the Penn and Lincoln highways in 1930. I ended that column by asking if anyone knew what became of Tranter’s niece, Mary Eleanor Hershberger, who cut the road-opening ribbon.

First I heard from George C. Smith who said he’d known “Hershey” while attending the University of Pittsburgh in the late 1940s. Then amazingly I heard from Bill Tranter, who said Henry was his grandfather ... and that Mary was his cousin ... and that I should call her! It’s not every day you get a chance to call someone from an 81-year-old photo, so this was pretty exciting. But sure enough, Mary is an interesting, upbeat woman who does recall a bit about that big day.

“I wasn’t sure what to do. One of the governors leaned over to nudge me when it was time. Cutting the ribbon was a big deal with all the kids at school, but it faded away in a day or two.”

Tranter was known as “the father of good roads” in the region. Grandson Bill recalls:

Henry lived across the street from my family so I saw him every day. I went everywhere with him. He and my father liked to drive around. Sometimes they asked directions just so they could talk to people.

Henry passed away in 1940, two years before grandson Bill was born. As for Mary Eleanor, after graduating and working for Alcoa, she married (now McKinley) and moved to the Baltimore area. She’s been there nearly 60 years. “Incidentally”, she says, “I still have the scissors I cut the ribbon with.”

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Joseph Conn sent a news clipping from 1930 describing the highway dedication ceremony. Joe researches and writes about now-defunct Rock Springs Park that was the pride of Chester, West Virginia. The beloved amusement park down the Ohio River was a regular summer visit for many Pittsburghers. The rerouted Lincoln Highway/U.S. 30 took drivers right past the park.

A postcard in Joe’s book of the park’s Ferris Wheel shows it topped by a sign that reads “See 3 States.” This led Joe to the 1930 article about the three states — West Virginia, Ohio, and Pennsylvania — dedicating the new highway.

The article in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette detailed the day ...

At the point where two great national highways converge at Imperial Junction, Pa., governors of three states met ... to participate in a celebration marking the completion of the last link of the Lincoln highway, connecting the East and West, by hard road....

The gathering of more than 5,000 persons, who came in automobile caravans from Ohio and West Virginia, met the
Pennsylvanians there and weathered the discomfort of a chilling drizzle, while governors and state highway executives of the three states took part in the commemorative program....

“Sculptured marble and imperishable bronze are fitting memorials to some great men,” [W.V.] Governor Conley declared, “but I believe that Lincoln himself would approve the monument which binds into a closer unit the union he so dearly loved.”

The celebration ended with the ribbon-cutting: 2
Annette Wehner, 6, of Chester, represented West Virginia, and Francis Jacobs, 11, of Steubenville, representing Ohio, held the ribbon across the point where the two highways meet. Little Mary Hershberger, 5, of Pittsburgh, niece of Henry Tranter, road builder, wielded the scissors which snipped the ribbon. Governor Conley and his party were guests at a luncheon at Rock Springs Park, Chester, where the exercises were originally scheduled to be held.

Instead, the dedication was held at Imperial Junction followed by a banquet for 1,000 guests at Pittsburgh’s William Penn Hotel. The Lincoln Highway Association was represented by president Frank Seiberling and vice president/secretary Austin F. Bement.

Joe grew up in Chester but by the time he was old enough to visit Rock Springs Park, it had closed, and in 1974, it was demolished to make way for a new bridge to carry the Lincoln Highway and U.S. 30 over the Ohio River. Today’s drivers speed through Chester in seconds, not knowing they are atop what was once “The Showcase of the East.”

1 “Three States Celebrate in Road Opening,” Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, October 18, 1930.
2 Joe located an obituary for Annette Wehner, “Miss West Virginia” in the photo. Born 1924 in Chester, she held a Master’s in Education from the University of Pittsburgh and had taught in the administrative management and business education department at Robert Morris University. She passed away in 2004.

Corrections
In the Fall 2011 magazine, the label for the 18-star flag on page 28 described a different flag in the Keim collection. The caption should read: The outer ring of 12 stars embraces an inner ring of 6 stars. It is an “unofficial” flag since the Flag Act of 1818 increased the star count from 15 to 20, and stripes were reduced from 15 to 13. In 1812, the official flag had 15 stars and 15 stripes.