

BOOK REVIEWS



Idlewild: History and Memories of Pennsylvania's Oldest Amusement Park

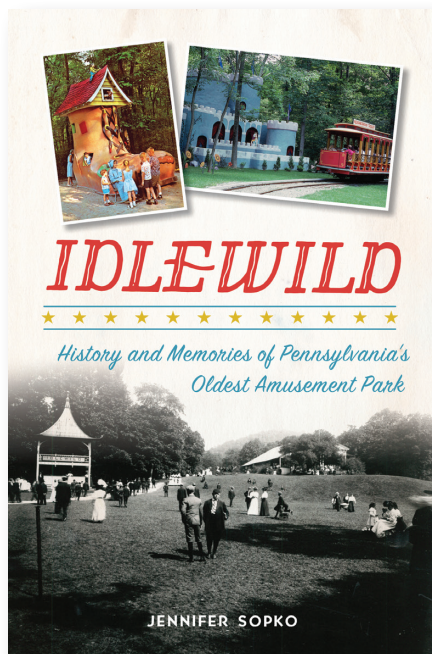
By Jennifer Sopko

Penn State University Press, 2017

The History Press, 300 pages

Paperback, \$21.99

Reviewed by Dave Hahner, historian, American Coaster Enthusiasts




Having been a resident of Southwest Pennsylvania all of my life and growing up in the shadow of the steel mills of the Homestead Works in Munhall, neighboring Kennywood amusement park was always a part of our summers in the region. However, as a child, my family always liked to take day trips to various attractions in and around the Pittsburgh metropolitan area. And chief among those attractions that we did every summer was a visit to Idlewild Park and Story Book Forest.

Although a wonderful historical book filled with photographs, *Images of America: Idlewild* by Jeffrey S. Croushore was published in 2004, it only gave us a slight glimpse into the rich past that makes up Pennsylvania's oldest amusement park and third oldest in the nation. Jennifer Sopko not only expands on what Mr. Croushore originally told in his documentation of the park, but expounds on the many different persons and forces that helped to shape the park into what we know and love today.

Pittsburgh Judge Thomas Mellon was a majority shareholder in the Ligonier Valley Railroad, a short-line railroad developed to haul coal and industrial supplies between Latrobe and Ligonier. Mellon and his family conceived of developing a beautiful recreational park to help boost passenger service on the rail line on weekends, leasing property from the O'Hara-Darlington family along the railroad's right-of-way along the scenic and tranquil Loyallhanna Creek. An agreement was made in April, 1878 and Idlewild Park was born.

Through the use of letters and correspondence from various managers, board members, residents and other key figures in the park's history, along with many never before published images of historical Idlewild Park, Sopko details almost every moment in the park's history. From its humblest beginnings during the railroad years, to its unprecedented growth under C.C. Macdonald during the

Great Depression, the necessary closure of the park for three seasons during World War II due to rationing, the addition of Story Book Forest in 1956, to the sale of the property to Kennywood Entertainment in 1983, and finally to its current ownership under Festival Fun Parks, LLC where the park is now known as Idlewild and SoakZone, no stone is left unturned by her exhaustive research.

But all of this history makes for a great read, even for the casual fan of the park, filled with amazing facts and anecdotes. The amount of detail Ms. Sopko has unearthed is astounding including the information on the park's first two carousels, the unique construction of the park's Rollo Coaster, the unusual construction of Story Book Forest and how it was conceived by the park's resident clown "Happy Dayz," Art Jennings, and the oft forgotten Historic Village of the 1970s. Rare photos of the park help to tell the full story, including the Puzzle Hedge maze from the 1890s, the short-lived Rumpus dark ride from the 1940s, the park's first auto entrance, and some of the various free acts that used to perform at the park. But tying this altogether are the memories that many have had of the park throughout the decades, which the author integrates together beautifully in a very easy to read fashion. If you are a fan of Idlewild Park, amusement parks, or Southwestern Pennsylvania history in general, you will thoroughly enjoy this comprehensive story of Pennsylvania's oldest amusement park. 

Route 6 in Pennsylvania

by Kevin J. Patrick, Elizabeth Mercer Roseman, and
Curtis C. Roseman

Arcadia Publishing, 2017

96 pages, 135 color and 25 b&w illustrations,

Paperback \$22.99

Reviewed by Kyle R. Weaver

U.S. Route 6 in Pennsylvania is a scenic drive — “one of America’s most scenic” according to *National Geographic* — but it is also a veritable outdoor museum of mid-20th-century roadside culture, and that is primarily the focus of this book. Stretching some 400 miles from the midway point of the Mid-Delaware Bridge at the border of Matamoras and Port Jervis, New York, to the Ohio line near Pymatuning State Park, it is a section of the larger transcontinental route that originally ran from Provincetown, Massachusetts, to Long Beach, California. The route’s western terminus is now in Bishop, California.

This heavily illustrated book is a volume in Arcadia’s *Images of Modern America* series that features more recent regional history of various locations with mostly color illustrations. Following the local-interest publisher’s usual two-illustrations-per-page format, each chapter begins with a brief introduction and is then carried on with the images and detailed captions.

This volume’s general introduction locates Route 6 in Pennsylvania as an isolated stretch of highway across the Appalachian Plateau in the northern part of the state. As other transportation corridors further north and south of it were constructed on the well-worn paths used by wagons, canals, and railroads through lowlands and water gaps, Route 6 was built on a 19th-century wagon road — the East-West Road — that connected the remote northern Pennsylvania boroughs and cities. The authors point out that through the years, other east-west highways have been paralleled by limited-access interstates, changing their

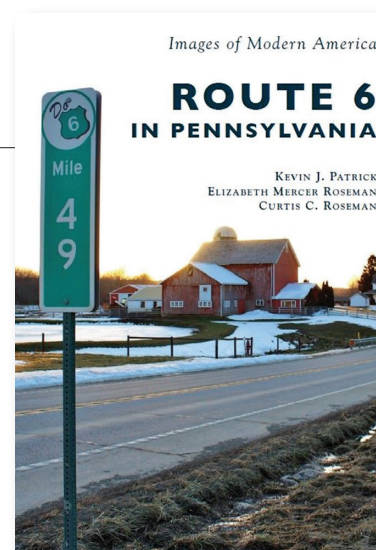
function and character, but 6 remains the primary route across its region. The authors’ thesis, therefore, is that Route 6 still essentially operates as it did 60 years ago with many of its mid-20th-century elements still intact.

The first chapter, “Assembling Route 6,” discusses the evolution of the highway, from the advent of the automobile, when in 1911 the Pennsylvania Department of Highways began rebuilding the wagon roads into a network of auto routes, to its hookup with U.S. 6 as part of the transcontinental Roosevelt Highway in 1924 and the route’s eventual rededication as the Grand Army of the Republic Highway in 1953. Images in this section show stretches of the road at various points in its auto history, including remnants of abandoned portions.

The next two chapters explore the road in sequence, following in the spirit of the Route 6 Alliance heritage corporation’s promotional call for tourists to “Do 6.” Chapter 2 covers the eastern part of the road from the New York border at Matamoras to Coudersport. Highlights of this stretch, both past and present, include Poconos resorts, the North Scranton Circle coal monument, Wyalusing Rocks, the Grand Canyon of Pennsylvania, old cabin courts (now rented by seasonal outdoors enthusiasts rather than transients), welcome signs for “God’s Country” in Potter County, and the Potato City tourist complex.

The route from Coudersport to the Ohio border is covered in Chapter 3, with stops at the Lindy Motel, the Coudersport Ice Mine, the Modernist Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired Lynn Hall, Crawford County’s truss bridges (the greatest concentration on the entire transcontinental U.S. 6), Conneaut Lake Park, and the spillway at Pymatuning Lake where “ducks walk on fish” (thousands of carp gathered there) to retrieve bread thrown by tourists.

Chapter 4 looks at the cities and boroughs through which the road passes, sorting their 19th century-built, automobile



age-modified neighborhoods into a tripartite classification scheme of commercial “Main Street,” upscale residential “Elm Street,” and industrial “Mill Street.” Here we pass through towns such as Hawley, Carbondale, Dickson City, Tunkhannock, Towanda, Wellsboro, Coudersport, Kane, Warren, Union City and Meadville. Several Main Street diners are represented in this section, including Village (Milford), Hawley, Wellsboro, and Smethport. It’s interesting to note that three diners on 6 — Red Rose in Towanda (formerly Lackawanna Trail in Stroudsburg), Fezz’s near Coudersport (was Community Diner in Bethlehem) and Gigi’s Route 6 in Corry (not pictured; was Grubb’s in Huntingdon) — were restored and moved to the route in recent years. These relocations suggest that this heritage highway is now the appropriate site for these midcentury structures after they were discarded by their original hometowns.

Although *Route 6 in Pennsylvania* is not a guidebook per se, it is an excellent compendium of succinct information that is essential for journeys through this portion of the route, both actual and armchair. Arcadia books generally have a regional focus and thus a limited local audience, but this volume will be of interest both to northern Pennsylvanians and those intrigued with travel, midcentury highways, and roadside attractions. ☀

Kyle R. Weaver is the editor of *Pennsylvania Heritage* magazine and author of numerous articles on Pennsylvania history and culture.