

The Susquehanna and Tioga Turnpike

Contributed by David R. Kline

Introduction

Remnants of the Indian trails were disappearing at the turn of the 18th century. Indians traveled single file on foot following paths of least resistance with no regard for who used the trail next. They did not trade and rarely communicated with other tribes. There was no need for decent roads; Indians did not build houses, bridges or roads for future use.

The few existing trails were fit only for walking because of fallen timber, heavy underbrush, murky swamps, narrow valleys choked with laurel and hemlock, deep gorges and high mountains.

As settlers moved in during the 1700's, horses and wagons became a common sight, but roads simply followed the Indian paths and were only wider, not better.

A trip to Elmira from the south utilized both the Susquehanna (water) and faint, almost forgotten, Indian trails. "Breakneck," near Towanda, got its name from cows falling from the difficult river trail and provides an idea of the difficulty of a north/south trip.

Early Development

Travel to the east after 1787 followed a route from Berwick to Mauch Chunk, then used the Lehigh River into Philadelphia. Completed in 1789, it permitted commerce between the Susquehanna and the Delaware and many immigrants after 1790 came to this area via the Lehigh-Nescopeck Highway. After 1813, that route generally became the Susquehanna and Lehigh Turnpike, terminating at Nescopeck.

Evan Owen purchased land in what is now Berwick in 1769 and, by 1780, a town evolved. Initially called Owensville, the town was laid out in 1786. The town eventually was named for Owens's birthplace, Berwick Upon Tweed, England. Berwick was incorporated in 1818, the same year as the completion of a covered bridge connecting Berwick and Nescopeck, a 1,256 foot long, 28-foot wide structure built at a cost of \$52,435. The bridge was destroyed by ice in the winter of 1835-36. The second of four bridges (1838-1904) was mostly financed by private capital; in 1904, an ice flood destroyed it.

Pennsylvania started opening public highways in 1800 and surveyed a "state road" from Wilkes-Barre to the New York State border at that time.

The "Original" Turnpike

A Pennsylvania act signed March 28, 1806 authorized construction of turnpikes. In 1807 a company called the President, Managers and Company of the Susquehanna and Tioga Turnpike Road incorporated to build a turnpike from Berwick to the Tioga River at Elmira, New York (at that time called Newtown) by the "best and nearest route."

Men who built the road lived in shanties and moved as work progressed. Amos Ellis built a shanty boarding house in 1816 and unsuccessfully tried to start a town where the Loyalsock crossed the turnpike. Early maps called this area New Thurington. Later called Shiner's Mills, the place never contained more than a half-dozen buildings. The stone walls of the Ellis cemetery are in almost perfect condition today.

The men who built the turnpike were predominately German as were the first settlements, and many descendants of these hearty people continue to live in the family homesteads. (Settlements made later, between 1840 and 1855, were mostly by the Irish, many of whom had been employed on the construction of the North Branch canal.)

As construction completed, wagons of leather, bark and hides used the road. The turnpike was always rough, muddy and filled with potholes in summer and icy and dangerous in winter, partly because beavers flooded low-lying land. A frequent turnpike solution was the corduroy road: sizeable logs about seven feet long were laid side by side at right angles to the supporting log rails beneath. Some of the corduroy turnpike roads on Painter Den property, used for almost 100 years and subsequently abandoned almost 100 years ago, are still in useable condition.

The narrow turnpike usually didn't permit two rigs to pass and upsets were common. Vehicles sometimes froze fast in the winter or stuck fast in the unrelenting mud of summer. Some hills were so steep that men had to walk their horses up the slopes.

Tolls for a two-horse vehicle cost more than one with a single horse; tolls for animals driven over the route varied according to "critter."

Stock in the turnpike sold in subscriptions of \$100, with 10% payable at purchase, the remainder in installments. Tollgates were erected to provide revenue until the stock was retired. One tollgate was at Watson Place "at the top of the mountain," named for "Watson," the first and only keeper, a six-foot, four-inch tall man who was, allegedly, a deserter from the English Army during Perry's victory on Lake Erie. He married and reared a family, had a small farm and died about 1852. The tollgate probably was in the vicinity of Robinson Lake (later called Long Pond and now called Ganoga Lake).

The turnpike was moderately used, especially in the spring of the year when hundreds of raftsmen from Pennsylvania and southern New York returned from rafting trips on the lower Susquehanna. Plaster from New York State frequently floated down the river on barges. The rivermen would then return to Towanda and points north via the Turnpike.

The turnpike was the shortest distance from Berwick to Elmira. Part of the road was on 400 acres donated by the state and part on large land holdings of the corporation. Road construction started in Berwick and went north until completion in Elmira in 1825.

The turnpike was one of many turnpikes built in Pennsylvania:

- the 62 mile Lancaster pike connected Philadelphia with Lancaster in 1794,
- the Easton and Wilkes-Barre Turnpike, chartered in 1802,
- the Wilkes-Barre and Bridgewater Turnpike running through Tunkhannock and Montrose,
- the Wilkes-Barre and Providence Plank Road Company to Pittston in 1851.

By 1832 the state led the nation in improved roads, with over 3,000 miles.

As early as 1810, the Susquehanna and Tioga Turnpike was considered the first good wagon road in this part of the state.

The "New" Turnpike

Supplementing the act of 1806, laws involving the turnpike were passed by the Legislatures of 1812 and 1815. Using land purchased from Evan Owens in 1791, Andrew Shiner (1757-1844) contracted to improve the road at \$1,150 per mile with extra for bridges, half of which was payable in land at \$2 per acre. He hired subcontractors for \$800 per mile and \$4 per acre if they took half of their pay in land.

The Susquehanna and Tioga Turnpike started in Berwick following a route over Jonestown Mountain to the town along Huntington Creek named for early settler Benjamin Jones, the first postmaster of the Fishing Creek Post Office. Jonestown was first settled about 1809.

The road continued through Cambra and Fairmount Springs in Fairmount and Huntington townships, Luzerne County. In this portion of the turnpike, even with the donations of some land by the state, investors were never repaid. After a few years, the road closed as a turnpike and eventually reopened as a public road.

The turnpike then followed an exhausting, serpentine route up Red Rock Mountain, passing near Ganoga Lake (then called "Long Pond"), crossing what is now Painter Den property, to the Loyalsock about a mile below Lopez. In Sullivan County it separated Davidson and Laporte Townships from Colley Township. The "pike" on what is now Painter Den property was first built in 1809.

Andrew Shiner operated a sawmill, and later a gristmill, where the Turnpike and the Big Loyalsock crossed. This area was known as Shiner's Mills, and he was the postmaster. The narrow road went past the present town of Mildred on Birch Creek in 1810 (and, as improved by Andrew Shiner, in 1818). Construction completed to the Bradford County

line that year, crossing near the Heverly settlements in Overton Township, and then continued over Huckleberry Mountain to Monroeton, then to Towanda and Elmira.

The road reached Elmira in 1825, thirty-five years before Abraham Lincoln's election to the Presidency.

Andrew Shiner laid out the town of Shinersville north of the present village of Mildred in the vicinity of what is now called "Sugar Hill" about 1823, selling lots for \$35 each. Shiner eventually disposed of his holdings in Sullivan County and moved to Berwick where, for awhile, he was gatekeeper at the covered wooden bridge over the Susquehanna between Berwick and Nescopeck.

The Berwick and Towanda Turnpike Company began running stages in 1827. Stagecoaches ran from station to station over a number of "stages" of the road, usually with fresh horses at intervals of about twelve miles. A major exception, of course, was the relatively short distance up Red Rock Mountain.

The man who drove the four-horse stagecoach was the greatest man on earth in the minds of residents along the stage route. Ordinarily a driver had charge of one team only, and he both cared for the horses and drove the stage.

The stages ran twice daily leaving Berwick in the morning and later stopping for lunch and changing horses at the Long Pond Tavern, a log house standing just north of the present stone house at Ganoga Lake. This tavern was for many years a mecca for hunters and fishermen.

The next long eight-mile ride crossed Painter Den land and was called the "Road to Hell" because of its bad construction and very bad land it traversed. The part that crossed Painter Den property was referred to as the "Devil's Mile." Imagine a stagecoach jostling over the hilly, rocky terrain and understand the derivation of that name.

Eight miles from Long Pond stood Schrifogel's Hotel, where passengers spent the night before proceeding on their journey. The stage south left Schrifogel's in the morning, with lunch at Long Pond, arriving at Berwick in the evening. Another popular resting-place on the turnpike was Paynes, later called Fairchild's Hotel (or Tavern), at Bahr's Hill south of Dushore.

Salaries in the area were low. The teacher in the schoolhouse in Cherry Township in 1820 received one dollar per week, plus board. On farms, a good workman received seventy-five cents a day during haying and harvesting and fifty cents a day was considered ample the rest of the year.

Countless numbers of our ancestors, whose names we no longer even recognize, once rode across the turnpike watching the wily fox and the timid flight of the deer while listening to the strange sounds of the owls and the snarl of the painter (mountain lion).

Most of the early turnpikes were poorly constructed and few had sufficient revenue to pay for their maintenance. As a result, many were abandoned and others were so poorly maintained that they were condemned or taken over by the township through which they passed. A common belief was that "an ordinary dirt road was a bad road because it was generally impassable six months in the year, but an abandoned turnpike was even worse because it was bad all the time."

The turnpike over Painter Den property was vacated under an act of June 7, 1907, after serving the area for almost 100 years. An eight-mile stretch of the road starting at the Township Line and the present Route 487 was called "useless, inconvenient and burdensome."

Routes off the turnpike are still used today. They include:

- the 1821 road to Eagles Mere,
- the road to Wyalusing, known as the Payne Road,
- the plank road to Thorndale, joining the Lopez area to Nordmont,
- three roads to Laporte.

Epilogue

Travelers on today's modern highway system scarcely think of the road, let alone its construction, its maintenance or how it got there in the first place. It is important to remember that quality of life as well as the growth of culture and commerce usually rests on the development of a sound transportation system. The Susquehanna and Tioga Turnpike, from its humble beginning, was, in part, a precursor of today's 43,000-mile national interstate highway system