

## *Back in the Country....* *Bell Acres Stories*

By Debby Rabold

### The Pittsburgh-Beaver Road

Well-worn paths of native peoples were the first 'roads' through the hills of Western Pennsylvania. Used for hunting, trade and warfare, they were part of a network covering much of Eastern North America. Because native peoples often traveled single file on foot, paths appeared as narrow ribbons winding across the countryside.



One well known route was the Great Path or Great Trail. Beginning in Delaware, the path led travelers across Pennsylvania to the Allegheny River. Crossing the water near Herr's Island, the path continued through what is now Pittsburgh's North Side before reaching the Ohio River. Following the Ohio's northern shore, the path led to the mouth of the Beaver River from where it headed Northwest into the Ohio country, reaching as far as Detroit.

In the years following the Revolution, native peoples' resistance to America's increasing demand for land led to frontier warfare. In 1792, a military camp overlooking the Ohio River was constructed on the path near modern Ambridge. Legionville was under the command of General Anthony Wayne whose orders were to train soldiers for warfare against native peoples. The isolated site was chosen since Wayne did not want his soldiers tempted by distractions in Pittsburgh. Wayne's troops occupied Legionville during the winter/spring of 1792-93 before moving into the Ohio country. At this time, the path between Beaver and Pittsburgh became a military road.



The Beaver Road bridge over Little Sewickley Creek was built in 1841 and widened in 1918. (Allegheny County Public Works)

Despite being declared a county road (1799) then a state road (1809), no funds were available for maintenance, making travel difficult. In 1827, it was decided to use money raised from the sale of state owned land in Beaver for road improvements. At about the same time, the old path was officially named the Pittsburgh-Beaver Road, becoming the most heavily used route into Sewickley, the Beaver Valley and Ohio country.

When asked why so many taverns stood along the Beaver Road, centenarian Captain John Anderson replied,

“That was because there was immense traffic along the road. Great strings of wagons, Conestogas, with six-horse teams coming in from Ohio and Indiana and going to Philadelphia, I guess. Big, fine horses, with bells on them. And there would be droves of cattle, and pigs, and turkeys too. The hogs were the hardest to drive and the turkeys the easiest. Men would run along beside them with a piece of red flannel on a long pole and scare them so they would crowd together and run. They would drive easier than cattle but when it began to get dark you couldn't drive them. They would fly up into the trees and roost. I have seen the fence tops all along the road for miles covered with turkeys roosting.

From: *The Village of Sewickley* by Franklin Nevin (1929)



Now a private residence, Leetsdale's Half Way House (Lark Inn) was built by Daniel Leet circa 1800 and stood on the Beaver Road 'half way' between Beaver and Pittsburgh.

(Historic Pittsburgh photo)

Continuous road and river traffic led to steady population growth along the Ohio River as well as in the back country. By mid-century, a rail line offered as many as twenty-eight daily trips between Economy and Pittsburgh, making the Sewickley Valley a desirable location for those wishing to escape the noise and grime of city living. Due in part to an influx of wealthy families from Allegheny City and Pittsburgh's East End, Sewickley became a desirable locale, ceding from Ohio Township in 1853 to become a borough.

With few exceptions, 19<sup>th</sup> century road building fell to local municipalities. Under the direction of township road masters or supervisors, men often had the option of paying local taxes with either cash or by doing road work. Roads were generally deep in ruts and mud, including privately operated toll roads.



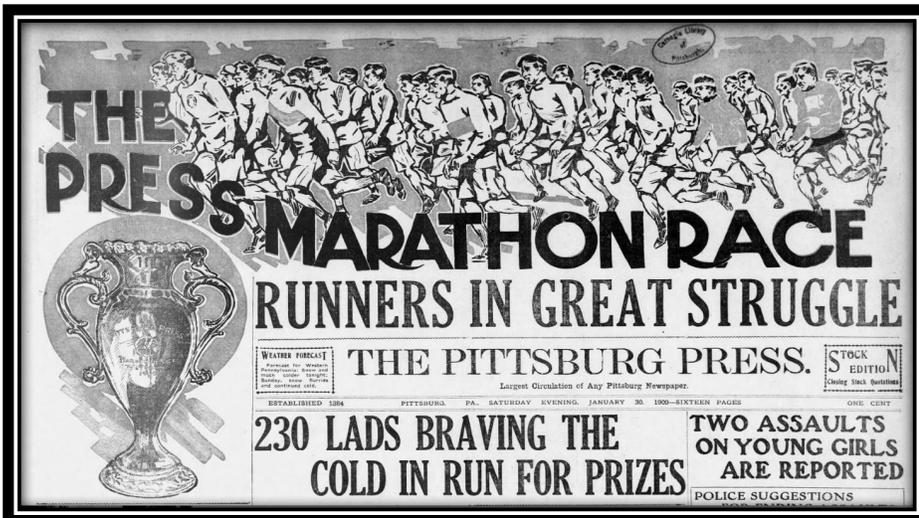
Perched on high wheels, wheelmen in the Sewickley Valley Club often raced against other clubs over Beaver and Big Sewickley Creek roads. By 1890, however, the sport changed. Low wheels replaced high wheels, making cycling safer and easier for all ages to master. Bicycling grew in popularity as a form of transportation that did not need to be fed or watered!

Mr. James B. Oliver, Mr. D. Leet Wilson and a number of other prominent residents of the Sewickley Valley, were the prime movers in an effort to raise a fund to have the **Beaver road** sprinkled twice daily from now until November first; also the Meadow road. The **Beaver road** is the main driveway through the whole Valley, the main artery through which one must pass to get to Turkeyfoot, the Big Sewickley creek roads, and in fact any of the best routes for driving through the Valley. Since the road was improved (which was done under the Flinn road improvement act), it has been so dusty as to make driving anything but a pleasure. The only remedy was to be found in the sprinkling cart. This could be had only by an expenditure of money. The cost would be about seven hundred dollars. The county commissioners agreed to give one-third of the sum, the township commissioners another third, leaving a third to be raised by the citizens of the Valley. As soon as this is accomplished dusty drives for the Sewickleyans will be no more and the Valley will rejoice. There are some of the finest turnouts in the State in and about Sewickley, and their owners will find a good deal more pleasure in their possession if they can come in from a drive without being choked with dust, as has been the case lately.

(Pittsburgh Bulletin 1 June 1901)

The push for better roads originated with an unlikely group, cyclists. During the 1880s, bicycling became a popular sport, but poor road conditions made riding difficult. Cyclists from across the nation began the Good Roads movement and were soon joined by the general public in pressing officials for road improvements. In 1895, Pennsylvania passed the Good Roads (Flinn) Act that

required counties to budget for road building. Allegheny County hired its first road engineer in 1897 and in 1903, Pennsylvania established a state highway department. Communities would now have help with the important task of road building in the new era of automobile travel.



## The Marathon

The **Pittsburgh Press** newspaper sponsored the city's first marathon in January 1909. The route chosen was over the Beaver Road from Rochester, Beaver County to the **Press** building in downtown Pittsburgh. 230 runners braved frigid temperatures as they ran over snow and ice covered

Beaver Road, which was a foot deep in mud between Haysville and Glenfield. Despite the weather, thousands of spectators lined the route to watch the spectacle and provide runners with food and drinks. The winner of Pittsburgh's first marathon was a local boy, William T. Shannon of Edgeworth who became a long-time Sewickley Township resident and is the subject of another *Back in the Country* article.

## Lincoln Highway & the Army Motor Transport Corps

One result of the Good Roads movement was the creation of the Lincoln Highway Association (1913). To publicize the need for paved roads and encourage tourism, this national organization coordinated local efforts to map the most direct cross country route using existing roadways. The selected route began in Jersey City on the Hudson River and ended in Oakland, California. Entering Pennsylvania from Trenton, New Jersey, the route passed through Philadelphia, Lancaster, Gettysburg, Bedford, Ligonier and Greensburg before reaching Pittsburgh from where it followed the Beaver Road towards Ohio. An unhurried cross country trip was estimated to take 20-30 days with 10 hours of driving each day at an average 18 mph.

Between 7 July and 7 September 1919, a convoy of 81 army vehicles of all descriptions along with 24 officers and 258 enlisted set off across the Lincoln Highway to test the mobility of army vehicles while promoting the





importance of good roads. The sight of a three-mile-long truck train was also a useful recruiting tool.

The convoy arrived in Edgeworth on 11 July, parking on Beaver Road where the men were fed by Red Cross volunteers and visited by local citizenry. Leaving early the next morning, the convoy covered the 35 miles to East Palestine, Ohio in 7 ½ hours! A war department

observer traveling with the troops was one Lt. Col. Dwight Eisenhower who experienced firsthand the connection between poorly maintained roads and vehicle breakdowns. One might assume this experience influenced his administration's support of the interstate highway system years later.

**Public Improvements Promote Progress** became Allegheny County's catch phrase of the 1920s. With financing from voter approved bond issues, the county undertook a massive public works agenda of building roads, bridges, tunnels, parks, a county airport and office building. The mission was to build infrastructure to support future development. Though rebuilt under the Flinn Act years earlier, further improvements to the Leetsdale section of the Beaver Road were completed in the fall of 1926. An entirely new Haysville-Glenfield section was completed the following year. In order to eliminate three dangerous railroad crossings near Glenfield, a new roadbed was cut into the steep hillside on the eastern side of the tracks below the Dixmont State Hospital. As a result, Glenfield's original Beaver Road was no longer connected to anything. It was renamed Dawson Avenue and reconnected to the new Beaver Road with a viaduct that remains in use.

**BEAVER ROAD**  
**IMPROVEMENT**  
**IS SANCTIONED**

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Work Ordered by County Commissioners After Hearing Delegation at Meet.

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Improvement of the **Beaver road** through Leetsdale was ordered yesterday by County Commissioners Joseph G. Armstrong, E. V. Babcock and James Houlahen, when a delegation of retail merchants representing practically every large store downtown, told the commissioners the road was impassable and necessitated vehicles going eight miles out their way to avoid it.

Leetsdale Beaver Road Construction 1926.

(Allegheny County Public Works photos)





Hillside removal on the Beaver Road (1926).

(Allegheny County Public Works)

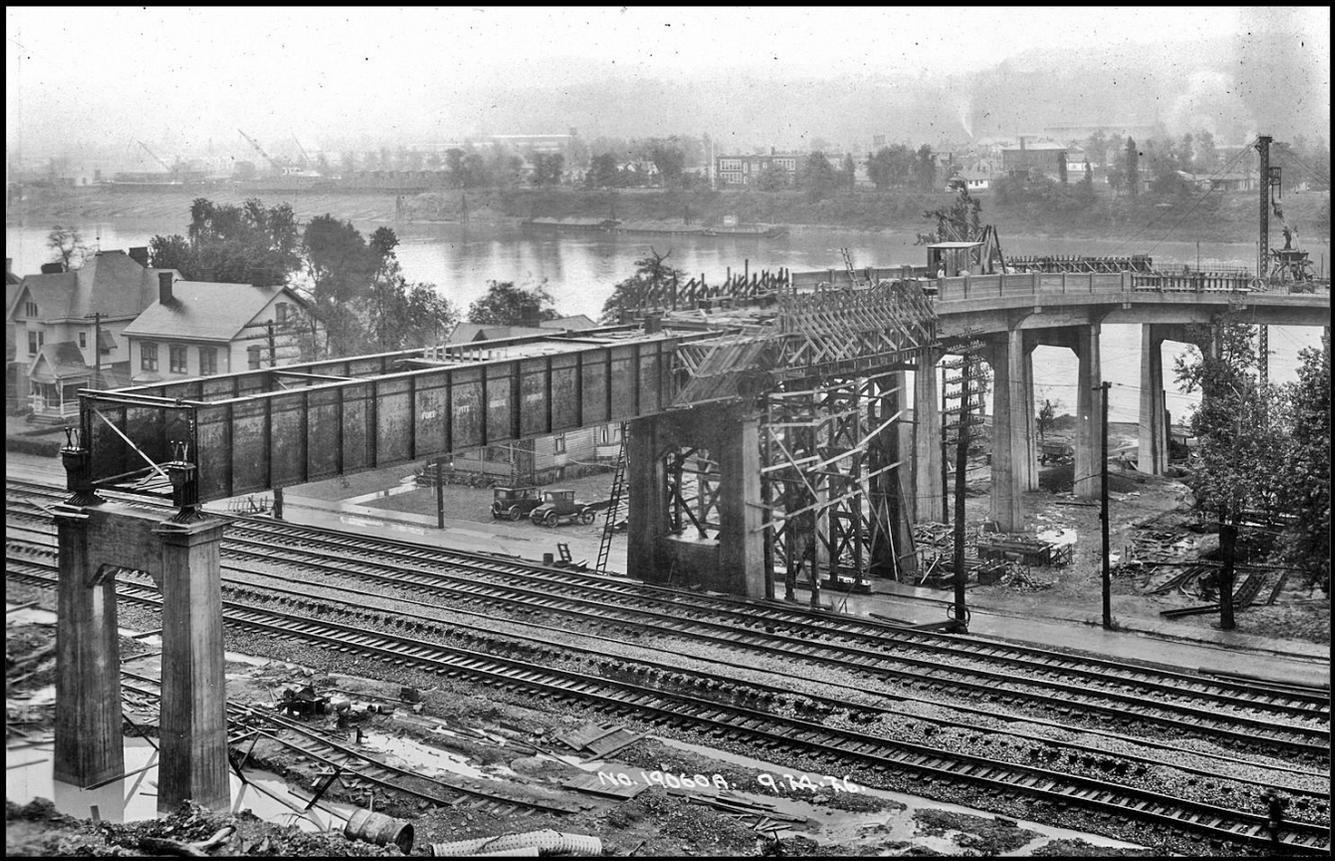


Glenfield's Beaver Road (1926).

(Allegheny County Public Works)



Allegheny County Public Works photos showing hillside removal at Dixmont. Rail cars were used to haul dirt and rock. The Glenfield viaduct connected the old Beaver Road with the new. (1926)



Glenfield's  
Beaver Road  
grocery  
(1926).  
Posted  
speed limit  
was 15 mph.



Allegheny County Public Works photos.

Beaver Road  
facing North  
in Haysville  
before being  
widened for  
the Ohio  
River  
Boulevard.  
(1935)





The new Beaver Road eliminated three dangerous railroad crossings in Glenfield-Dixmont. The new brick roadway opened in September 1927. (Allegheny County Public Works)



The opening of the final section of the newly built Beaver Road between Haysville and Glenfield in September 1927 was celebrated with a mile-long automobile parade between Bellevue and Edgeworth. Motorists could now enjoy a smooth ride into the Sewickley Valley. (Allegheny County Public Works)