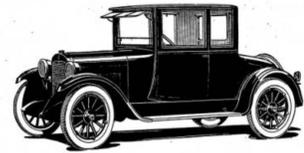


Back in the Country...
Bell Acres Stories

By Debby Rabold

The Ohio River Boulevard



ALLEGHENY COUNTY
“Public Improvements Promote Progress”

As automobiles became more affordable and popular at the beginning of the 20th century, public officials had to deal with increasing demands for better roads. Motorists would no longer tolerate poorly maintained roads deep in mud and ruts. In 1924, Allegheny County commissioners committed to a massive public works program designed to create modern infrastructure. County voters approved bond issues to finance the building of roads, bridges and tunnels. Included were a county airport and office building, as well as North and South parks, the “poor man’s country clubs”. Allegheny County was laying the groundwork for future development.

Part of the master plan called for great boulevards, radiating like spokes on a wheel from downtown Pittsburgh. The Ohio River, Allegheny River, Moss Side and Saw Mill Run boulevards were designed to bring motorists from the surrounding countryside into the city.

Business owners and local officials had been lobbying for a new road along the Ohio River, a limited access high speed highway that would bypass congested neighborhoods. At the time, heavily traveled Beaver Road was the only route connecting the riverfront communities between Pittsburgh and the Beaver Valley. Allegheny County commissioners listened and construction began in 1929. The Allegheny County portion was constructed in phases over a nearly twenty-year period by both the county public works and state highway departments.



Boulevard construction overlooking the Woods Run neighborhood (1930). Western Penitentiary Is on the far right.
(Allegheny County Public Works)

The first section of boulevard was built between Island Avenue on the North Side and Camp Horne Road in Emsworth. To avoid cross streets, which would slow travel, the bricked four lane highway was built at the edge of the bluffs overlooking the river. Nine bridges were constructed across deep ravines. Emsworth's portion of boulevard overlaid the existing Beaver Road. The boulevard opened to traffic in December 1930, with the formal dedication of both the boulevard and adjacent McKees Rocks Bridge taking place in August 1931.



The McKees Rocks Bridge shown under construction (1930). At 1 ½ miles, it is the county's longest. Until the bridge opened, ferries were used to transport passengers between McKees Rocks and Woods Run. (Allegheny County Public Works)



Ten bands, a fly over and an auto parade marked the official opening of the McKees Rocks Bridge and Ohio River Boulevard. Seen is the traffic circle with the bridge entering from the left (1931). (Allegheny County Public Works)



The boulevard's terminus at Camp Horne Road in Emsworth (1931).

(Allegheny County Public Works)

By early 1931, Allegheny County was already planning to extend the boulevard from Emsworth to Beaver County via Glenfield, Haysville, Glen Osborne, Sewickley, Edgeworth and Leetsdale. The Beaver Road, which connected the riverfront communities, had steep grades and curves and was considered too narrow. The former railroad right of way running through Sewickley and Edgeworth was chosen as the route after rail tracks had been moved closer to the river.



Through Emsworth, Glenfield, and Haysville, the boulevard was built over the existing Beaver Road. Seen is the remaining Beaver Road entering Glen Osborne (right) while the new highway follows the old rail bed into Sewickley (1937).

(Allegheny County Public Works)

With the nation in the throes of the Great Depression, public works took on added significance. Not only was road building intended to get people “out of the mud”, but it also became an important public welfare program, giving out of work men a way to support their families. County roads as well as North and South parks were built with the help of federal dollars. Federal programs paid laborers’ wages while the county covered the cost of materials.

During 1934, the 1 ½ mile Haysville to Sewickley section of boulevard was under construction. Up to 350 “relief men” worked eight months building the new roadway over the former rail bed. This section was dedicated in December 1934. The following month, a half mile extension into Edgeworth was authorized, providing eight weeks of work for 300 men.

The summer of 1937 saw the Beaver Road from Glenfield to Glen Osborne widened and graded as part of boulevard construction. The Haysville school was one of several structures lost in the process. That same year, Beaver County officials built a Rochester-Freedom highway, the first section of Ohio River Boulevard in their county.



Agnew’s Hill on the Beaver Road between Haysville and Glen Osborne was removed to make way for the new road. Also in the path was the one-room Haysville School. (1937)

(Allegheny County Public Works)

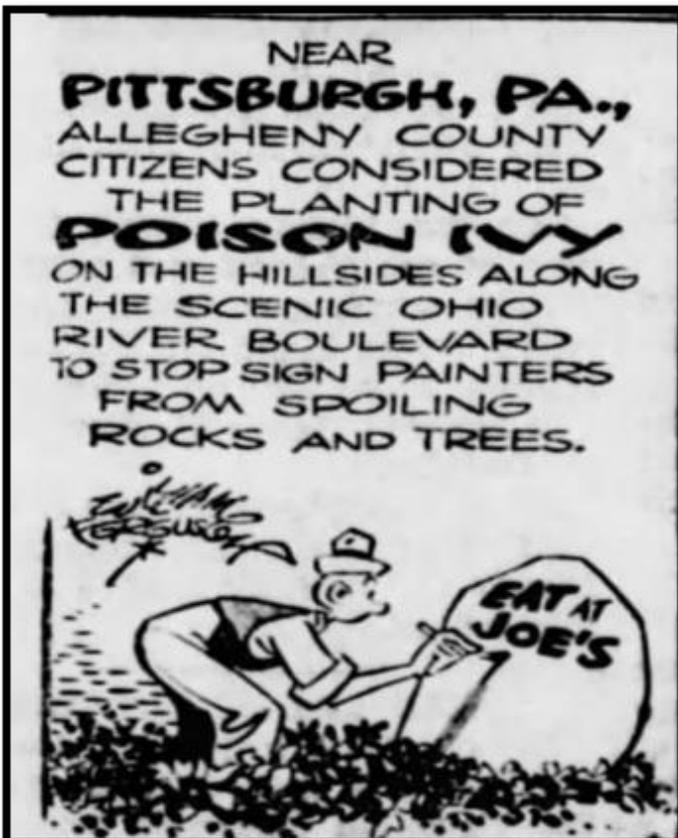


Mrs. Pontefract

One unintentional result of road building was the proliferation of illegal roadside political campaign posters and advertisements that covered trees, poles and rock faces. Having personally paid for trees and shrubs to beautify the Ohio River Boulevard, Mrs. Elizabeth Pontefract, of Little Sewickley Creek Road, made it her mission to remove the offending advertisements. Armed with a claw hammer and grey paint and assisted by her chauffer and gardener, Mrs. Pontefract continually tore down posters and blacked out advertisements painted onto rocks. As quickly as items were removed, they again appeared. What to do. In her mission to keep the roadway clear of distractions so that views of nature could be enjoyed, Mrs. Pontefract considered planting poison ivy along the cliffs to discourage would be sign painters. In 1937, Allegheny County commissioners honored Mrs. Pontefract's beautification efforts by naming a section of Ohio River Boulevard near Glenfield "Pontefract Terrace".



(Pittsburgh Press)



(Pittsburgh Press)

"We people of the Sewickley Valley are interested in the Ohio river boulevard and want to see it kept clean," Mrs. Pontefract said. "The county spent \$100,000 for shrubbery along the boulevard, the Garden Club of Allegheny county, 1,800, and I spent \$1,500 myself to make the boulevard look better. I hated to see it marred and disfigured by posters."

The section of boulevard between Emsworth and Glenfield waited until 1940 to be widened and paved, until then, motorists were driving over the 1912 Beaver Road. At the request of Allegheny and Beaver County officials, the state highway department accepted the boulevard into the state highway system the following year. No longer would the counties be responsible for building and maintaining the roadway. By year's end, the country would be at war and most road building would end due to material and manpower shortages.



Neville Island and Beaver Valley factories quickly transitioned into defense plants and the bottleneck in Edgeworth caused delays in the movement of war materials and defense workers. Because the plants were vital to America's war effort, the War Production Board approved extending the boulevard from Edgeworth Lane into Ambridge, a distance of almost three miles. The four-lane divided highway would be a joint federal-state project with the Edgeworth Lane to Ferry Street section opening during the summer of 1944. Construction of the final Allegheny County section of boulevard through Leetsdale into Ambridge took place in 1945 with the official dedication taking place in the Fall of 1946.

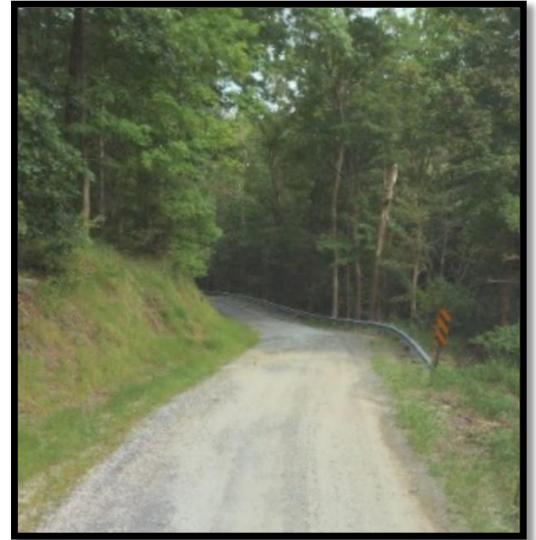


Ohio River Boulevard construction in Ambridge (1945).

(Laughlin Library)

Sewickley Township residents were not immune to the impact of boulevard construction. Despite living back in the country, residents had to deal not only with the impact road closures had on their own travels, but they also had to cope with the influx of rerouted traffic onto township roads that were not designed to handle large amounts of traffic.

During the summer of 1945, while the boulevard from Leetsdale into Ambridge was under construction, Sewickley Township supervisors discussed the need to improve Stone Quarry Road, which is today Sevin Road between Camp Meeting and Turkey Foot roads. Camp Meeting, Stone Quarry, Turkey Foot and Big Sewickley Creek roads were the detour for motorists travelling to and from Ambridge. There were numerous accidents on Stone Quarry, a narrow winding unpaved road with “no guard rails at any place”.



The road had to be widened and the wooden bridge over Turkey Foot Run replaced. “This work is necessary on account of road repairs and the new boulevard running through Leetsdale not as yet open to traffic. This road is being used as a detour to Ambridge.”

(Sewickley Township Minutes)

The Ohio River Boulevard became the major roadway connecting Pittsburgh and the Beaver Valley for most of the 20th century. Begun in 1929, the highway was built in sections over a period of nearly twenty years. In 1960, it became part of the designated PA Route 65 that today connects the cities of Pittsburgh and New Castle by way of Allegheny, Beaver and Lawrence counties.

Nowhere in Western Pennsylvania, is there a scenic route comparable to the Ohio River Boulevard. For pleasure and ease of driving, the grades are ideal; the elimination of cross streets gives a feeling of security and the numerous feeders are so located and protected as not to create a hazard. The magnificence of the Ohio River and its valley are in view at practically all times. The scenic effect of the McKees Rocks Bridge and the historic Indian Mound on the river's edge in McKees Rocks, together with the panorama of industry spread over the broad valley, produces an impressive picture.

Original document: "Description of Ohio River Boulevard" from souvenir book published by Allegheny County Public Works Department, 1931