The old Vanderbilt Parkway crosses Grand Central Parkway at Great Neck Bridge

THE GRANDDADDY OF SUPERHIGHWAYS

by DAVID KAHN

paintings by HARVEY KIDDER

ONLY GHOST CARS bearing legendary drivers now take the turns and shoot the dips of a deserted highway that wriggles across half of Long Island. Half a century ago, those cars, those drivers, and that road were among the most famous in the world. Today, only the road remains—a weed-grown ruin, abandoned, dismantled, and forgotten in the backwash of progress.

This is the romance of the Vanderbilt Motor Parkway—a road which is considered the granddaddy of modern highways and whose story reads like a Barney Oldfield diary.

The Parkway which helped create the Golden Age of the automobile found its origin in a young millionaire's passion for speed. William Kissam Vanderbilt Jr., twenty-five-year-old grandson of the railroad magnate, lived for the newly discovered thrills of motoring. In 1903, he streaked over the sands of Ormond Beach at better than ninety m.p.h. to set a speed record for the mile. That same year, at Eagle Rock, he set a hill-climbing mark.

Vanderbilt believed that the best way to improve a car was to subject it to the rigors of racing. But speeding in those days labored under the difficulty of finding a suitable raceway. The ruts and twists of ordinary unpaved roads forbade their use, and

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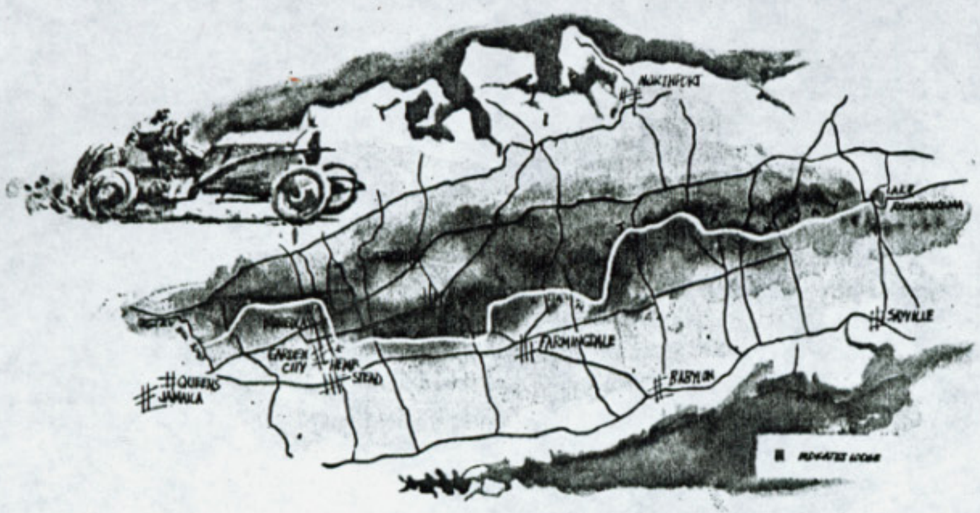


Though mostly abandoned and overgrown with shrubbery, the Vanderbilt Parkway still follows the old route shown in the map at the left, sometimes bridging modern highways and sometimes, as in the scene near Mineola (right), passing underneath.

besides they were usually cluttered with nervous pedestrians and panicky horses.

Vanderbilt finally hit upon the idea of constructing a speedway for himself. In 1902, he announced his plans for a private "racing track" which could be used by the public when no racing was in progress. It was reported that neighbors were "enthusiastic over the new sport of automobiling and many will join with his project."

Four years later, Vanderbilt had interested enough wealthy men in his project so that he could set up the Long Island Motor Parkway, Inc., with a capitalization of $2,000,000. The certificate of incorporation is noteworthy, for it includes a statement that the purpose of the corporation was "to construct . . . roads . . . for vehicles (not running on rails) propelled by self-contained mechanical means"—probably the first declaration in the world that a road strictly for automobiles was to be built.

Soon, a right-of-way averaging one hundred feet wide was being acquired. It swung generally east-west across central Long Island, from what is now Fresh Meadows to Lake Ronkonkoma, for a total length of about forty miles. Construction was actually started in the spring of 1908 near what is now Levittown. White concrete was poured onto a carefully prepared roadbed to a depth of three inches. Although the road was originally fifteen feet wide, this was soon found too narrow and a three-foot shoulder was added to each side. A spike fence was supposed to keep pedestrians, horses, and small boys from the roadway.

The Motor Parkway became the marvel of the nation. Almost certainly it was the first road in the country to be built as a paved thoroughfare; it probably was America's first concrete road of any length. In Vanderbilt's single-minded passion for speed, he prohibited trucks, horses, and pedestrians on his Parkway, he banked its curves, did away with a speed limit, landscaped its right-of-way. Most important of all, he eliminated all intersections and grade crossings by means of over-and-under passes, permitting access only through gates at certain points. Many of these highway "firsts" have since become standard features in current road-engineering practice—the reason why the Vanderbilt Motor Parkway can claim the title of "Granddaddy of Superhighways."

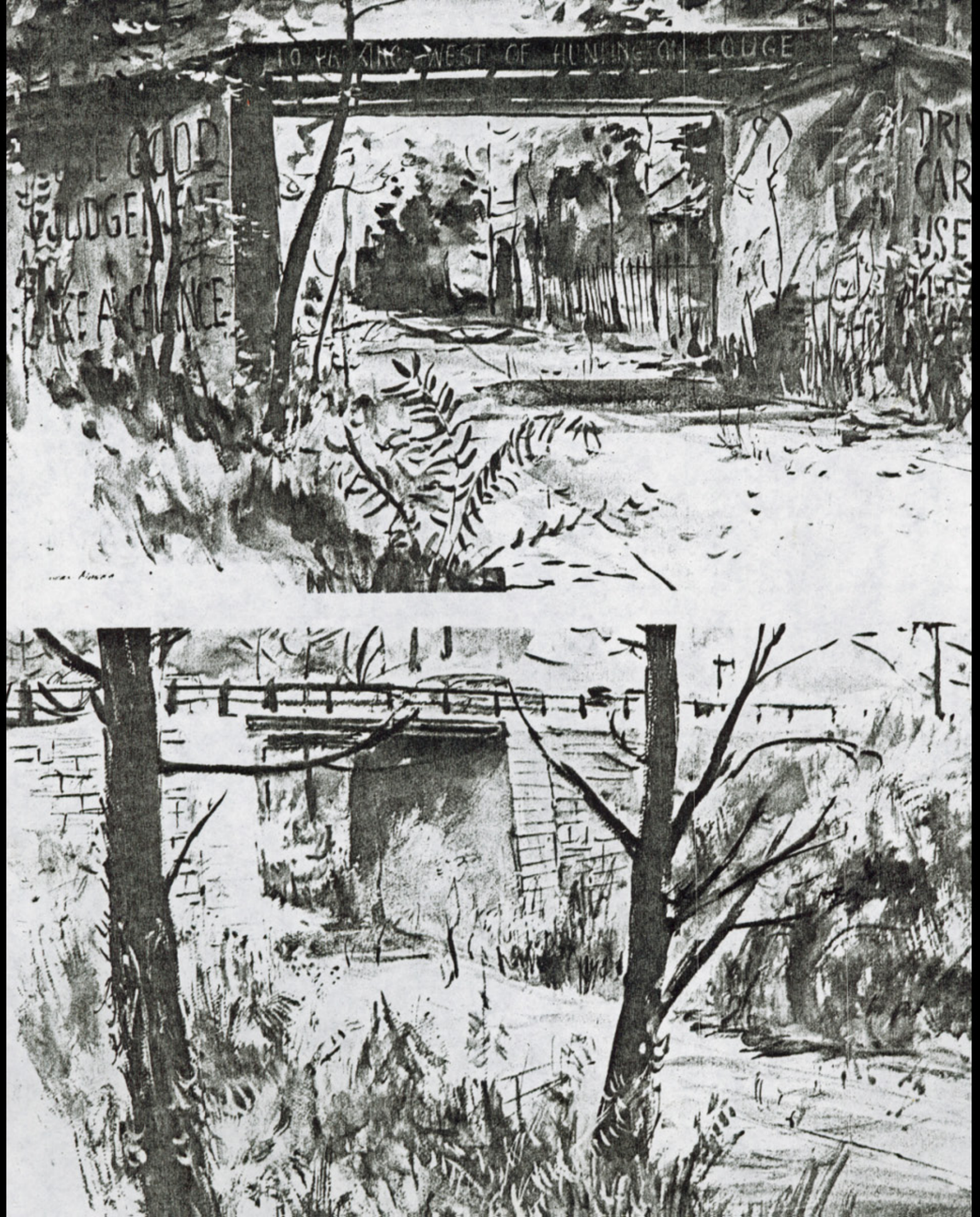
By the fall of 1908, ten miles of this fabulous road had been built. Vanderbilt decided to use the completed portion as part of the course for the fourth running of the race for the Vanderbilt International Automobile Cup. This immense sterling silver trophy, thirty-one inches high, was designed to stimulate car design through racing. Three previous Cup races had been held on roped-off public roads on Long Island, where fatalities among spectators impelled Vanderbilt to build a private parkway.

Early on the misty morning of October 24, sixteen racing cars were revving up at the starting line. Their names read like a roll call of automotive pioneers: Chadwick, Thomas, Isotta, Matheson, Renault, Knox, Mercedes, Acme, and Locomobile. Their horsepower ranged from 40 to 120. Six of the cars were foreign, ten American. Ahead of them stretched eleven laps of 23.46 miles each, ten miles of it on the new Parkway, the rest on public roads. In the grandstand about them, and lined along the route, were a quarter of a million unruly spectators. The hundreds of socialities—many of whom had come to the race after attending all-night parties in New York—lent a fashionable air to the crowd.

At 6:30 the watchers shouted as the first car—driven by a daredevil named Jim Florida—shot off eastward down the Parkway, followed by the others at sixty-second intervals. The crowd did not have to wait long for the thrills it had come to see.

One of the Mercedes, driven by Foxhall Keene, caught fire. Enveloped in the flames, he drove like a fireball and continued to gain on the others. The

Passing under Grand Central Parkway→


TO PARKING WEST OF HUNTING LODGE
GOOD
JUDGE
AT A GLANCE

heat finally forced him to stop and put out the fire, after which he climbed back in, badly burned, and continued the race. In one of several close shaves, two cars roared together over "Death Curve and Dip"—a tortuous, six-hundred-foot stretch consisting of several curves, a bridge, and an underpass—only inches apart and only feet away from spectators who had violated the rules to swarm onto the course. Toward the end of the race, Florida had to hit a touring car to avoid barreling through a mass of people.

The winner, George Robertson, Number 16, an American driving a 120-horsepower American Locomobile, streaked across the finish line in 4 hours, 48.2 seconds for an average speed of 64.39 m.p.h. (Robertson died in July, 1955.) His victory gave a boost to the young American automobile industry, which soon overtook its foreign competitors on the way to its present supremacy.

Races in the following two years followed generally the same exciting, crowded, sophisticated pattern of the first. They were won both times by the same driver in the same car at nearly the same speed: Harry Grant in an American Locomotive Company Alco at 62.7 m.p.h. in 1909 and at 65.18 m.p.h. (a course record) in 1910.

Then the Vanderbilt Cup races moved away and the Parkway found itself bereft of its most spectacular attraction. But soon it was caught up in the new enthusiasm for automobiling and prospered mightily.

It catered to the growing crowds of Sunday drivers. The Motor Parkway was the only road in the New York area on which Dad could take the family for a smooth, dustless, police-free ride in the country. The only entrances and exits were at the eight toll stations scattered the length of the Parkway. This effectively eliminated horses, pedestrians, and cross-traffic and kept the road clear for the pleasure driver. Signs warned drivers to "Use good judgment. Don't take chances." Prices for the marvelous ride varied from time to time and differed at each tollgate. At the Great Neck tollhouse, early in the twenties, for instance, a two-way ticket cost $1.10 (tax included), eastbound cost 75 cents and westbound, 45 cents. One old toll-collector remembers that two men working that tollhouse in 1921 collected $3200 on a single weekend.

But the Parkway served more than just pleasure drivers. Those who had to get somewhere on Long Island in a hurry found it the answer to their prayers. This practical aspect of the Parkway became so important that author Rex Beach immortalized it in a vivid description in *The Auction Block:*

. . . it was not until it had swept onto the Motor Parkway that the girl fully understood what her host had termed fast driving.

Then it was that the chauffeur let the machine out. Over the deserted plains it tore, comet-like, a meteor preceded by a streamer of light. It swung to the banked curves with no slackening of momentum; it devoured the tangents hungrily; the night wind roared past, drowning all other sounds. Crouched immovably in his seat, the driver scanned the causeway that leaped into view and vanished beneath the wheels, like a tremendous ribbon whirling upon spools. . . . The finger of the speedometer oscillated gently over the figure sixty, and she dropped back with a gasp. They had been running thus for a long time.

Great Neck Lodge on the old Parkway→

Here the Parkway—famed in story if not in song—reached the apex of its renown, as, during the lush twenties, it carried 120,000 cars a year. But suddenly the Depression hit, and construction on the present network of Long Island highways was begun as a relief measure. The Parkway could not stand the competition of these modern, free highways. By 1937, when a director of the Motor Parkway Corporation checked its traffic, he passed only four cars on the entire road.

On June 16, 1937, Vanderbilt surrendered to progress and offered the Parkway to the public. Part of the road was converted into a bicycle path; part was simply abandoned; part was incorporated into the local road network. Although kept in good repair, this stretch is seldom used by local traffic and thus is a perfect raceway for the hot-rodders who keep alive the Parkway's heritage.

Now the once-busy Parkway meanders through quiet woods, each year losing more of its famed pavement to the oblivion of vines and dead leaves. It spans modern highways with bridges on which trees and undergrowth almost hide the faded white line. Telephone poles march down the center of a banked curve on which tires once screeched; housing developments flank the proud macadam, making it part of their backyards and allowing children to play where hurtling motors once roared.

The Parkway did not fall to so sorry a state because of any fault in its construction or design. It was strangled by the one thing it could not fight: the progress which had brought it into existence. But during its lifetime, it pointed the way to the future so surely that it earned for itself the honorable title of "Granddaddy of Superhighways."

Today you can stroll down the abandoned sections of the Parkway, through woodlands and open plains, through echoing underpasses and over narrow bridges. The sighing of the grasses and the muted hum of the distant traffic whisper to you of the days of past glory, and suddenly you can see a ghostly Locomobile as it rockets past you and disappears down the straightaway. ■

Through backyards north of Hempstead→