



Model "A" News

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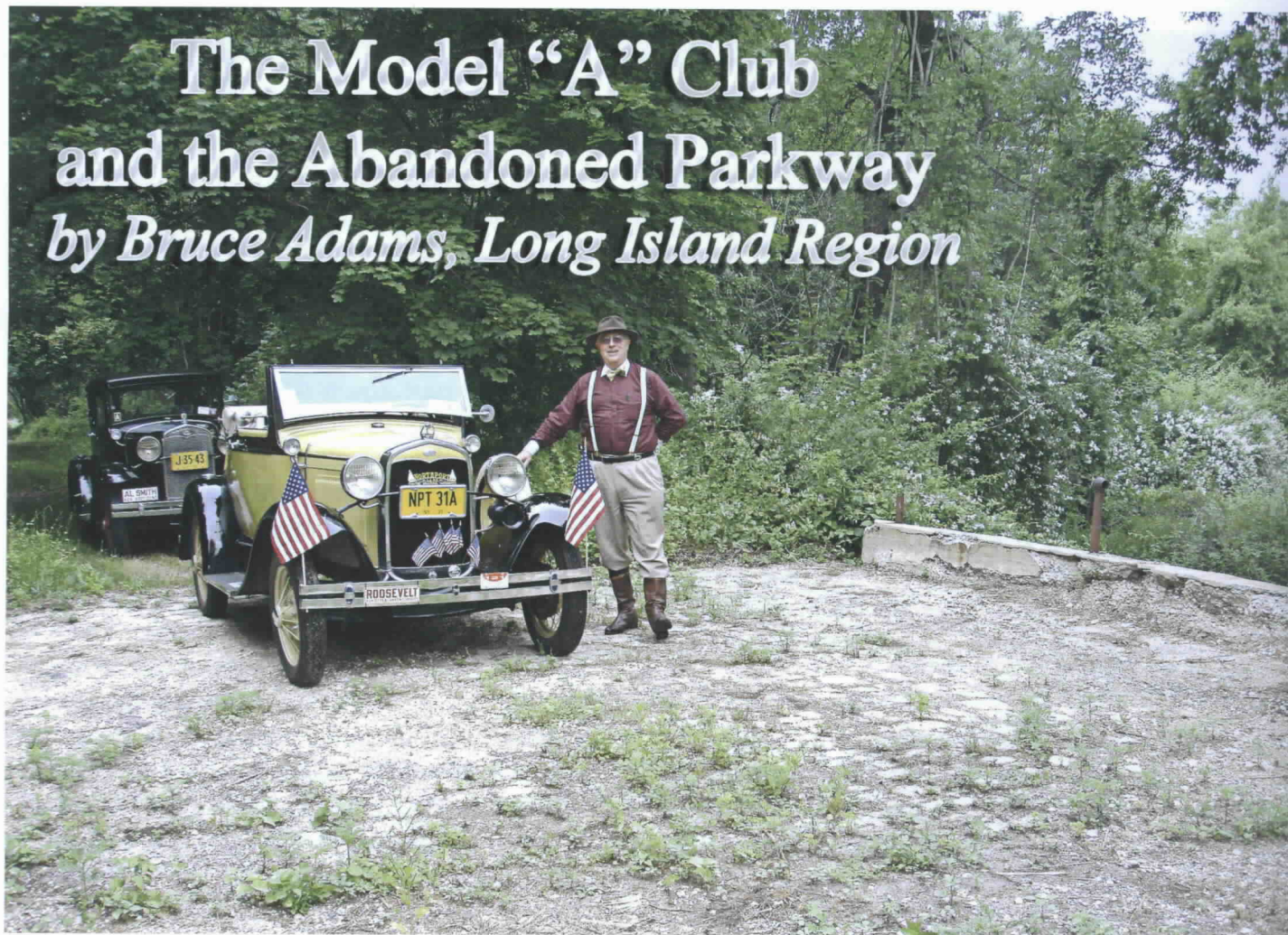
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The Model "A" Club and the Abandoned Parkway *by Bruce Adams, Long Island Region*



What am I doing out in the poison Ivy with a chain saw? It's hot, damp, and I'm really not as energetic as I was a few decades earlier. What is this abandoned highway in the woods we are trying to uncover anyway? What am I doing here? What are those concrete markers doing out in the woods and looking like tributes to some Druid deity? Why is there a BRIDGE in the middle of a forest, all alone and connected to nothing, all covered in poison ivy and scrub oak, anyway? Is this some kind of Stonehenge? Have I become an amateur automotive archaeologist?

The genesis of those questions was at a Model "A" Ford Club of Long Island meeting a year or so ago when President Walter Blessing, and local historian/member Mark Adler asked for help that weekend

clearing an abandoned highway that once went through the woods near our club's meeting place on "The Old Bethpage Village Restoration" site.

Thirty of us showed up that first day with chain saws and axes, clearing this mysterious trail, known as "The Long Island Motor Parkway."

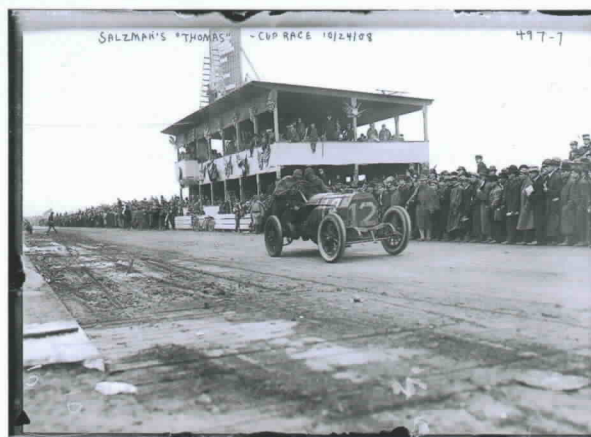
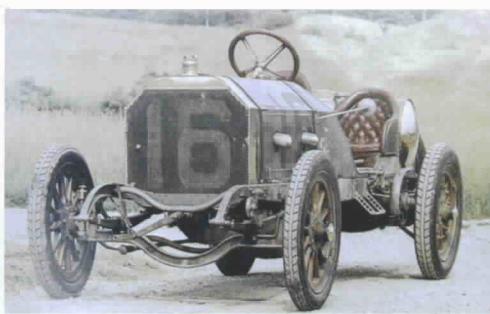
The Long Island Motor Parkway

The Long Island Motor Parkway, was, in fact, the very first limited access highway built for automobiles in the world. It was the first highway built with reinforced concrete, and it extended about 46 miles, from the borough of Queens in New York City out to Lake Ronkonkoma, Long Island. It was also the first

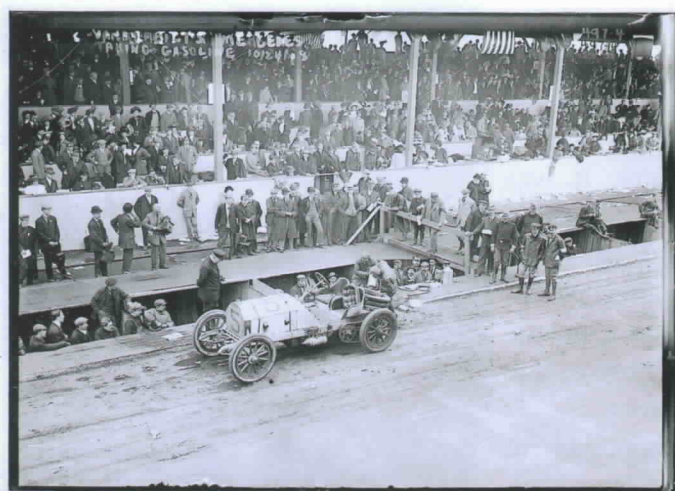
extensive toll road built for the use of automobiles. The parkway was built in 1908 by William Kissam Vanderbilt Jr., grandson of the famous railway magnate, Cornelius Vanderbilt. This privately funded highway had 65 steel and concrete bridges to eliminate intersections, some of which still exist.

Vanderbilt Cup Races

In 1904, "Willie K" decided to use his virtually unlimited funds to bring motor racing to the United States and perhaps find an American car and driver to win an auto race on an international level. He organized the Vanderbilt Cup Race and designed a thirty-six inch high, \$2,000 silver Tiffany Cup as the prize for this 284 mile race, having 10, twenty-eight mile laps across



Photos: opposite page - Bruce Adams in ERA costume on cleared bridge in woods at Old Bethpage; this page - top left - Vanderbilt Cup Race painting; center top and bottom - famous race winner Old Number 16, now at the Henry Ford Museum Detroit (courtesy Garden City Chamber of Commerce); top right - sign marker Long Island Motor Parkway; and photos of vintage races.

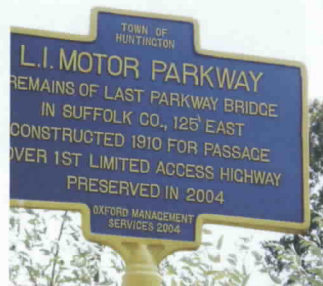


rural Long Island. During the six annual events held on Long Island, one hundred-six cars participated in 1,678 racing miles, mostly over public roads.

Following the 1906 race, however, there were just too many spectators hit by racers, so Vanderbilt swore he would build a fine, dust free roadway for racing and

for leisure driving when not being utilized for sport. This resulted in construction of The Long Island Motor Parkway in time for the 1908 Vanderbilt Cup Race of 258 miles. This race was won by probably the most famous American car and driver ever, George Robertson piloting Locomobile, "Old Number 16" to victory at an average speed of 64.3 mph on this course. They utilized the first eleven miles of the Motor Parkway, combined with twelve miles of public roads that were hopefully kept clear of spectators on race day by volunteer Spanish American war veterans and Pinkerton guards. They were, however, unable to contain the 250,000 "frenzied fans" who surged all over the track, even blocking some of the later arrivals from finishing.

These first eleven miles of Motor Parkway used for that race were but an introduction to this parkway, with



Vintage photos courtesy of Garden City Chamber of Commerce. Other photos by Bruce Adams. **This Page:** top left - toll lodge; right column: overpass and photos of tollway and overpasses being built; second row - vintage map showing location of tollway; and Long Island Motor Parkway marker,

Opposite Page top right - abandoned bridge behind back yards in Manhasset Hills, Long Island; 2nd row

its concrete overpasses, reinforced concrete roadway, banked curves, and nine toll lodges. The toll lodges were built to house toll collectors as the Motor Parkway was to be a toll road when not being raced on. Rights-of Way were purchased from farmers, secretly, establishing a highway that at times had curves forced on it by farmers unwilling to sell their land to Vanderbilt's agents.

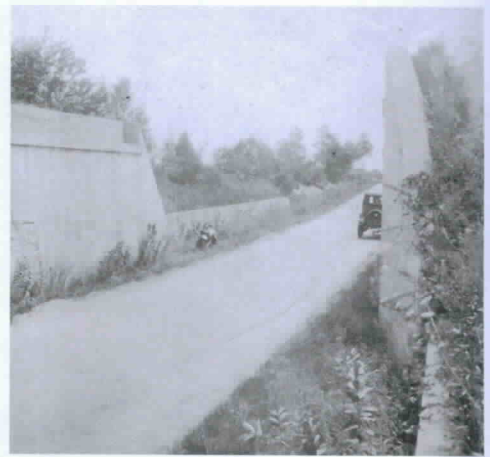
This toll road would charge \$1 each way for the 46 miles unless the driver opted for a \$50 seasonal pass, displaying a numbered "E-Z Pass" style license plate, to travel from Queens out to Long Island without the inconvenience of dust, intersections, slow traffic, or motorcycle police. Tolls were

right - piece of original pavement at "Deadman's Curve" where road banked 30 degrees to permit high speed turns; left column top to bottom - surviving bridge used as bike path bridge in Queens, New York City; abandoned bridge in back yards in Manhasset Hills, Long Island; motor parkway bridge abutment in bank parking lot; bridge found in the woods at Old Bethpage; and right-of-way near Deadman's Curve.

collected and checked at the nine "Toll Lodges," along the route. These lodges also provided gasoline and some services.

Forty miles had been completed by 1911, with extensions deeper into Queens added later. It was favored mainly by well-heeled motorists who wanted to speed out to Long Island for recreation. It was known as "Rum-Runners' Road" during the Prohibition due to its lack of police patrols.

In the 1920s, the appointment of Robert Moses as the New York State's Commissioner of Parks had a major impact to the demise of the parkway. Commissioner Moses believed that the two lane highway did not meet his standards. According to historical records, he





vowed to close it down, and told Vanderbilt he planned to build a free, four lane highway parallel to the Motor Parkway with entrances matching those of Motor Parkway toll lodges.

Moses did just that, building



way much as it was built early in the last century. The eastern most fifteen miles are now public roadways. They have two lanes with four lanes in sections, and known as Vanderbilt Motor Parkway, or variations of that name depending on the municipality.

the Grand Central Parkway and Northern State Parkways within ½ mile of the Motor Parkway in the late 1920s. Motor Parkway usage fell greatly, and in 1938 Vanderbilt gave up the highway, turning it over to Queens, Nassau and Suffolk Counties for unpaid taxes. Commissioner Moses, twisting the knife even more, took over the highway and deemed it a bicycle path, telling Vanderbilt it wasn't worthy of joining his parkway system.

The Motor Parkway Today

Now, seventy-years later, it is ironic that the Western most Queens, bicycle path section of Motor Parkway has original bridges and much of the original right-of-

The middle twenty miles was mainly converted to power company rights of way, with high tension wires now running where Model A's traveled seventy years ago. This section provides much adventure for historical highway sleuths, however.

The lighting company just put its poles, and later its towers up to keep up with Long Island's growth during the next seventy years, but didn't necessarily tear down the concrete and steel bridges, nor churn up the roadway beneath. This left bridges sitting out in the middle of parking lots and in back yards.

The banked pavement along "Deadman's Curve" still sits in the weeds under the high tension wires, banked at thirty degrees to permit high speed travel in 1908. There are markers in the middle of



Levittown showing the location of the 3,000 person Grandstand built for the 1908 race for those privileged to be at the start/finish line, again with high tension wires running alongside.

There is even a relocated Toll Lodge kept in its original state, and housing the Garden City Chamber of Commerce offices, sitting in the middle of this high class shopping area.

Model "A"s and the Motor Parkway

The Motor Parkway was thriving through the 1920s, and those who could afford the dollar a trip toll would use it to go for a spin on it. I can easily imagine young attorneys and brokers with their ladies jumping in their Model "A" roadsters and cabriolets for a spin out to dine at the **Petite Trianon Restaurant**, on beautiful Lake Ronkonkoma, forty-six miles east of the parkway's entrance.

The Petite Trianon was a first class restaurant staffed by a culinary team supplied by the famous Hotel Astor in Manhattan. Families in Model "A" Phaetons and sedans could go the numerous beaches along Long Island's North of South Shores for a weekend of fun in the sun.

Now, with the raceway gone, and the parkway in pieces, the Model "A" Club of Long Island went to work to resurrect a small portion of history. Twenty to thirty members showed up for four weekends to clear the brush from a mile segment of the parkway which went through historical Old Bethpage Village Restoration's parklands in Nassau County. President Walter Blessing and coordinator Mark Adler organized the work parties.

We found the original road bed and over thirty concrete "Right-of-Way Markers," sticking up three feet high, with the original twisted wire going through them to keep out trespassers and livestock.

The jewel in the crown was our clearing of a BRIDGE in the middle of the woods. This is believed to be an overpass constructed to permit farm vehicles and livestock to pass beneath this section of the highway. We cleared the brush and dirt from it. Piles of sawn branches were removed by the County, and the Village erected signage indicating the presence of this historic landmark.

I don't know why, but while running my chain saw, I could hear the even louder and deeper sounds of what seemed to be an unmuffled 1,032 cubic inch, four cylinder engine, delivering 120 horsepower to the chain driven wheels of "Old Number 16," racing down the Long Island Motor Parkway to victory in 1908.



Photos: top left - former Motor Parkway Toll Lodge now Garden City Chamber of Commerce offices; top right - "right of way" marker; remaining photos of Long Island Model A Club members, along with their kids, helping to clean up the areas along the Long Island Motor Parkway.