



Early tourist postcards of the Mohawk Trail feature “the wigwam,” the Whitcomb Summit, and famous Hairpin Turn on the way down to North Adams.

Heydays along the Mohawk Trail

Lauren R. Stevens

Engineering that was remarkable for its day in 1914 created automobile passage over the forbidding Hoosac Mountains, second in these parts only to boring a railroad tunnel through the same rock some four decades earlier. But my interest is more in the context of the construction. When you set out for an automobile ride, is it the trip itself, seeing the sights and stopping occasionally for snacks and gifts? Or is it your goal to avoid towns and get to your destination as soon as possible? The centennial of the Mohawk Trail automobile road defines that issue.

Nowadays traffic on Route 2, the Mohawk Trail, only faintly approximates what it must have been like for 40 busy years after one of the first scenic highways in the United States opened. The trail, which officially winds 65 miles between Williamstown and Orange, in Massachusetts, was dedicated 100 years ago, on October 22, 1914, setting off, I trust, suitable celebration this year—but maybe not a pageant.

My initial interest in the Mohawk Trail was an effort to recreate the 100-mile-long Indian footpaths that joined the Connecticut and Hudson valleys by following the Deerfield and Hoosic rivers. This route opened up a major way to Canada via the Owl Kill and Lake Champlain. It was used by Indians, eighteenth-century white warriors like Ethan Allen, Benedict Arnold, and Henry David Thoreau, among others.

The footpath recreation project began when Michael Linde of the National Park Service, who was working with the Deerfield and Hoosic watershed associations, noted that it appeared such a trail could be created. I then taught a Winter Study at Williams College, sending students out to explore a route on a relatively snowless January 1992. They came back enthusiastic, noting that the section along the Deerfield River already existed, although overgrown. Maps drawn by David Costello, one of the

highway engineers, showed the original Indian trace, which mostly followed the path that the class proposed. Then the two watershed associations worked with several not-for-profit and government entities to get it on the ground. Other groups, notably the Manice Center, Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, the Student Conservation Association, and Berkshire Natural Resources Council later became driving forces. I'm happy to report that with only two short breaks you can walk off-road from the town of Deerfield to North Adams, with more to come. Call it the Mahican-Mohawk Trail to honor both tribes.

The Mohawk Trail was a product of the love affair Americans have had with the automobile since Henry Ford made it popular. The trail defined an era when roads connected towns and encouraged leisurely travel with the opportunity to stop here and there to savor the local scene. Those days ended for the Mohawk Trail in 1957 with completion of the Massachusetts Turnpike, which drew traffic away from Route 2 and signaled locally that highways were to avoid towns and get drivers to their destinations as quickly

as possible, as the Interstate system does.

In Colonial days, almost all European arrivals in Berkshire County came from the south, so former residents of Connecticut settled most of the towns. Williams College's original ties, presidents and tutors, were not with Harvard but with Yale. A few of Dutch descent trickled in from the west, as did Indians, but the Hoosac Mountain was a barrier to the east, surmounted in Colonial and early Republic days only by a narrow, steep, twisting carting trail that followed an Indian trace. Indeed, someone's oxen fell to its death in the section passing through what's now Mohawk Trail State Forest.

Originally the Mohawk Trail was a state road project to get automobiles 16 miles over the Hoosac Mountain, connecting North Adams with Charlemont in a



The "Improved Order of Red Men" erected this "Hail to the Sunrise" statue in Charlemont in 1932 "in memory of the Mohawk Indian," who, incidentally, would not have been admitted to their order.



An imaginative font incorporated various views of the trail in this postcard.

Tripadvisor

dramatic way. Contrary to instinct, the section runs more north-to-south than west-to-east. It includes the six miles along Cold River that Tropical Storm Irene washed out in late August 2011.

The state did not intend to create a historic icon, as Robert I. Quay explained in his 2004 Williams College thesis, “Mohawks, Model Ts, and Monuments.” The Indian association seems to have sprung from a pageant director’s notion, based perhaps on the phrase “old Mohawk war-path” in Arthur Latham Perry’s *Origins in Williamstown* (1894). It is hard to know for sure what Perry meant by the phrase, though.

If you happen to take a stroll in the Hopper on the western side of Mount Greylock, you will cross a bridge near the beginning of the Money Brook Trail. And if you look closely you will see a small plaque dedicating it to Quay, who was active with the Williams Outing Club. Quay’s plans immediately after graduation were to take an extended bike ride in the southwestern United States. Unfortunately for this promising young historian, an automobile struck him—a sad end for someone who added so much to the history of our highway.

That highway follows ancient Indian paths, although not as closely as the foot path. The Hudson Valley was Mahican homeland, however, and the Berkshire area through which the trail passed was Mahican hunting grounds—or possibly even the site of more permanent dwellings. During the Colonial period, the Mahicans—defined to Anglo history in large part by their opposition to the Mohawks who made the Mohawk River their base—went from being the dominant presence along the Hudson to a position subordinate to the Mohawks, who dispersed, departing almost

completely from there by the nineteenth century.

So, then, how was it that the Indian path became the “Mohawk Trail”? Although Mohawks occasionally passed over the Hoosac Mountains, they really had little connection with the area. The answer derives from who named it. That probably had something to do with a seventeenth-century Mohawk raid on the Pocumtucks in the Connecticut Valley, which removed the Indian presence from the Deerfield area in timely fashion for the arrival of settlers of European extraction. They took over the farming fields the Pocumtuck had cleared in some of the richest alluvial soil in New England. Although early on the Mohawks were seen as more friendly to the Dutch and English settlers, it was the Mahicans who, in their reduced state, settled at Stockbridge, fought for the British against the French and later against the British on the side of the would-be Americans.

Perhaps Perry misspoke. Yet even if you read James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*, which sides with the Mahicans, you have a sense that the Mohawks in general had better public relations, or at least were more exciting than their rivals. They did win, temporarily, after all. So the name Perry dropped was appealing to those who organized a massive “Pageant of the Old Mohawk Trail,” celebrating the opening of the automobile highway.

Although the state had no idea of titling the road, a historian of the time, Judge John Aiken, contributed by describing an “immemorial pathway” and C.Q. Richmond, a prominent North Adams businessman, may have been the first to call the improved road “The Mohawk Trail.” His idea was that the pageant should raise enough money to create and install a very large statue of an Indian on one of the summits of the Hoosacs. He contacted Margaret MacLaren Eager, of Deerfield, who was a professional pageant director.

Such community pageants were popular early in the 20th century. They tended to follow largely the same themes, all the while asserting the unique history and privileged nature of a town—a paradox indeed. The pageant program tells the story, in case the thousands in attendance can’t hear the unamplified spoken lines. The pageant started with the receding waters of the glacial Lake Bascom, personified by young girls as the Spirits of the Waves. The First Indian, played by prominent Adams resident Theodore Plunkett, paddled across an (actual) pond. The sun rose. The Spirit of the Pines pointed out the trail, which Plunkett ascended. Indeed, the “old trail” was tied into virtually every scene.

The North Adams Lodge, Loyal Order of the Moose, a fraternal organization that had been formed recently and was limited to Caucasian men, played most of the Indians. The actors wore dark-colored long

underwear to indicate skin color. In no case did Indians play Indians, although descendants of early settlers often played their ancestors. For instance, John Rice, sixth-generation descendant of first Charlemont settler Moses Rice, played his ancestor. The next scene depicted the treachery of the Pocumtucks, which drew the Mohawk over the trail for revenge. The building and capture of Fort Massachusetts followed. And then came early settlers, and so forth, the area getting better and better through the stages of agriculture, industrialization, immigration and modern times, ending with a depiction of peace.

The clear pattern, as with most such New England town pageants, was an almost straight line of improvement from savagery to civilization, with all the benefits appertaining thereto. The pageants credited the Indians with starting the process and did not dramatize the violence. It was not as though Europeans drove out the original inhabitants; rather both peoples were simply playing their parts in a manifest destiny, thus serving as a balm to any spectators whose consciences might have been tender.

This historical interpretation was compounded, when the highway opened, by the fascination Americans held for a time of romantic visions of Western Indians and the closing of the American frontier. "Wyoming Bill's Wild West Show," which insisted on historical accuracy, had wowed a North Adams audience a week before the pageant. After the 1890 declaration from the Census Bureau that the United States no longer had a Western frontier, Frederick Jackson Turner declared (in 1893) that up until that point the entire history of the country was that of colonizing westward. First the newly arrived European found himself inadequately prepared, then he mastered Indian skills, then gradually he transformed the wilderness—not to reclaim Europe, but to create something new, informed by wilderness and Indian roots. Something American.

Western expansion fascinated the country precisely because it seemed to be over. The pageant picked up the theme: that somehow the settling and civilizing of western Massachusetts were of the same nature, only earlier, as the settling and civilizing of the West were all part of the grand scheme of this country's destiny. If we were to sum up the colonial adventure in the greater Hudson Valley in one word, it would be "Beaver," yet a quite different creature might depict settlement of the West. There were similarities, of course: Indians were driven out everywhere and modern highways often seemed to follow ancient Indian paths, simply proving, once again, how the country needed to move from the crudeness of Indian days to the marvels of 20th century engineering.

Thus in the pursuit of glorifying the local area, the Indian portion of the massive "Pageant of the Old Mohawk Trail," which played to more

than 10,000 spectators on four occasions at Hoosac Valley Park, near Hodges Cross Road in North Adams, in June of 1914, gave the wrong tribe a starring role and confused area history with westward expansion. The Mohawk name stuck and the account inspired entrepreneurs, like Charles Canedy, who established themselves along the Trail. Canedy, a photographer for *The North Adams Transcript*, built a gift shop and cabins at Whitcomb Summit and at the present Golden Eagle site on the Hairpin Turn.

Quay's thesis rightly cautions against making fun of the dozens of funky tourist stops, based on his experience of interviewing descendants of some of the people involved in establishing the Indian-themed restaurants, cabins, and gift shops along the trail. In a combination the entrepreneurs attempted to make a living by serving the public. They created enjoyable holiday outings for people unlikely to own a great camp in the Adirondacks or waterfront property in Manchester-by-the-Sea.

As the brochure writers saw it, automobile drivers could educate themselves by recapitulating the pioneer experience. They drove west up and into the wilderness of Hoosac Mountain in the town of Florida and descended into the civilization of North Adams. Although there was no overall plan, individual entrepreneurs established a linear, Western-theme-park of Indian-made souvenirs along the way. They even considered asking real Indians from Maine to set up camp along side the trail during the tourist season to manufacture the ornaments, moccasins and headdresses. Apparently the real Indians declined.

Concerned about the proliferation of billboards and perhaps of shops along the scenic route, efforts soon began to maintain the view shed. This led in 1921 to the state legislature establishing the Mohawk Trail State Forest along both sides of the Cold River and the trail. The Civilian Conservation Corps augmented the original campground there with cabins in the 1930s.

Another trend of the times is encapsulated in the title of a series of guidebooks called *See American First*. A combination of nationalism and anti-Europeanism, facilitated by the coming of World War One, the sentiment swept the country that America had as much or more to offer than Europe anyway. This popularized the driving adventure from Boston west 125 miles over a road that while much-improved contained steep slopes, sharp turns, and was not paved with asphalt nor plowed until 1929—finally giving Floridians a break from shoveling the highway in the winter. Automobiles of the day provided their own sense of adventure, given the tendencies of radiators to boil over, tires to flatten, and engines to sputter.

The pageant's expenses tamped down the proceeds and, for that

matter, bookkeeping seems not to have been careful, so Richmond's large Indian statue at, say, Whitcomb Summit, was never built. But in a way, it was. The Indian theme culminated, as Quay points out, with the erection of a 28-foot Indian, in Plains-style garb, that in 1954 gave the name Big Indian to a souvenir shop in Shelburne—accompanied by a Western Indian tepee and a fake horse pulling a fake wagon presumably across the Western plains. Quay suggests that an Indian inappropriate to this area was not the result of ignorance; rather it was a deliberate attempt to capitalize on the dramatic and immediate Western story, with the Mohawk Trail as prologue. The Indian statue arose, however, shortly before the MassPike opened, so the shop, which recently changed its name to Native Views, “with special respect for the Native American people,” joins the pageant as bookends to the heydays of the Trail.

Other anomalies abound. The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks erected “The Elk on the Trail” in 1923 which, if not Indian-themed, to the casual passerby might represent a wilder day in the Wild West—although the model for the animal itself dwelled in the Bronx Zoo. In Charlemont stands “Hail to the Sunrise,” the statue of a Mohawk Indian erected in 1932 by the Improved Order of Red Men, a fraternal organization limited to white men—Indians need not apply. The group has not been able to substantiate its claim to descent from the disguised patriots who dumped tea into Boston Harbor. In 1961 they placed Indian busts on the Mohawk Bridge over the Deerfield River.

The pageant featured the Indian and French attacks on Fort Massachusetts. The current memorial to that fort, an outpost on the Indian trail, is located adjacent to the Price Chopper supermarket in North Adams. A tree is a replacement for the one, felled by Dutch elm disease, planted by historian Perry to commemorate the fort. The chimney is left over from a replica of the fort, erected in 1933 as part of a trail-inspired historic revival.

So the so-called Mohawk Trail may not be a satisfactory reminder of the Indians and Colonial days, but it serves as an apt reminder of the days when driving was, well, more enjoyable. The late Fred Stocking, a colleague in the Williams College English department, remembered driving the trail with his father. The most powerful gear in the family Model T was reverse, so he and his father would climb from North Adams to the Western Summit—backwards. Now that's fun! □

Bob Quay was kind enough to acknowledge my assistance with his thesis, but its assistance in this paper dwarfs any help I may have given him. LRS

Book Reviews

Robert Frost's correspondence: the early years

Reviewed by Lea Newman

Celebrated poet and international icon Robert Frost was a neighbor of ours in the greater Bennington community from 1920 to 1938 when he made his home in South Shaftsbury – and he returned here on a more permanent basis in 1963 when his ashes were buried in the Bennington Center Cemetery near the Old First Congregational Church and directly behind the Bennington Museum. It is therefore most appropriate that the long-awaited publication of the first volume of the definitive edition of the collected letters of Robert Frost should warrant a review in this journal, published by the museum and designed to showcase articles of interest to the museum's region.

The letters collected in this first volume were written between 1886 and the early months of 1920, ending before Frost purchased the Peleg Cole house later that year and moved his family into the building that is now the Robert Frost Stone House Museum at 121 Route 7A in Shaftsbury. Readers will have to wait for the second volume of this series to see the letters written during his time among us, but this first volume offers essential insights into the formative years that made him the quintessential New England poet who would become known around the world.

What these letters reveal above all is Frost's determination to become a published poet in the face of overwhelming odds. Nowhere is this more clear than in the lengthy correspondence he maintained with Susan Hayes Ward, the poetry editor of the New York *Independent*, who in 1894 published the first poem Frost ever placed as a paid poet. In his first letter to



Robert Frost and his writing board.
Courtesy of Robert Frost Stone House Museum

her, in reference to his difficulty in getting his poems accepted, he asserts an amazing confidence in himself as a poet. He claims: “even in my failures I find all the promise I require to justify the astonishing magnitude of my ambition.” The fact that his first book of poetry did not get published until twenty years later – and that he had to go to England to find a publisher – attests to the dedication he maintained during those two decades of disappointment and frustration.

This first volume covers those twenty years of failure and the fourteen subsequent years of success during which he saw the publication of three well-received books of poetry and the appointment to a teaching post at prestigious Amherst College. As a result these letters present a cornucopia of immense variety. At one extreme we have his first letter to Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry* magazine, sent to her from England in 1913, when he was so little known that he felt compelled “to say that I am an American and not an Englishman, for fear being the latter might be a bar to your consideration.” At the other extreme is the letter he sent to the Amherst College Alumni Association in 1920, in which he announces his decision “to leave teaching and go back to farming and writing.” It turned out to be a temporary resignation because he returned to Amherst College repeatedly, but at this point he was an established poet and confident enough of his ability to support his family primarily through his poetry that he could boldly assert his independence.

To fully appreciate this meticulously documented volume, however, readers would benefit mightily from a close reading of its preface and introduction before embarking on the journey through the letters. Here the editors state their main goal. They intend to clarify the context of each letter by taking into account to whom Frost is writing and the situation that prompts the correspondence. To assist the reader on both counts, they provide headnotes and footnotes to accompany the individual letters as well as a “Biographical Glossary of Correspondents” and an objective and detailed chronology that covers the years the letters were written. For readers unfamiliar with the details of Frost’s life story, the chronology will aid in grasping the full significance of many of the letters.

For more experienced Frost readers, this edition of Frost’s letters will provide a corrective perspective to the edition that preceded it, Lawrence Thompson’s 1964 *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*. In his introduction Thompson describes the letters in shockingly negative terms. According to him, they reveal Frost’s persistent “gloom, jealousies, obsessive resentments, sulking, displays of temper, nervous rages and vindictive retaliations.” In contrast to this biased pejorative approach, the editors of the current edition allow the letters to speak for themselves, enabling readers to come to know