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“THE SHORT LINE TO THE SKY LINE”

The Boulder -Denver Turnpike: “Tomorrow’s Highway —Today”

Boulder County newcomers are quickly separated from old-timers when talking about the four lane highway that divides Superior and Louisville. Those who refer to it simply as “36” are the newcomers, while old timers call it “the Turnpike.” Both are correct, of course, but the older term is firmly rooted in both nostalgia and history. Present day U.S. 36 was a radically innovative change in Colorado road building and its impact is still felt in Boulder County today.

Travel by auto for Boulder area residents was revolutionized when the Boulder-Denver Turnpike was opened on January 19, 1952. This new “ribbon of concrete” provided a shorter, more direct route into Denver and promised to save time, money, and lives. It was touted as the first modern toll road west of the Mississippi and called a “milestone in Colorado history” by then Governor Dan Thornton.

Before the toll road was completed, motorists followed a course of primitive roads through Colorado farm land on their way to Denver. From Boulder the traveler followed State Highway 7 along Arapahoe Street east to U.S. Highway 287 at “nine mile corner,” then a series of right angle turns through Lafayette and Broomfield, eventually entering Denver on Federal Boulevard.

Driving to Denver was frequently an all day effort for people living in Superior. They had to drive a few



This 1952 view shows the cloverleaf interchange at Broomfield at the bottom. To the left of the road today is Interlocken, Flatiron Crossing, and Rock Creek. About two-thirds of the up the picture on the left is a dark spot which is Superior. What dramatic changes! Photos courtesy of Carnegie Branch Library for Local History Boulder, CO

hundred yards north of town, then proceed east on what is now known as Dillon Road to U.S. 287 at Johnson’s Corners filling station. From that point, they followed the same route into Denver. Dillon Road was an unpaved, gravel road all the way to Highway 287, containing innumerable hazards for the motorist, not the least

“The Turnpike has restored to the people the joy of motoring. No longer does one have to fight congested traffic on a narrow highway in order to drive from Denver to Boulder. Now thanks to modern engineering one can sit back and relax as his car glides over the smooth concrete pavement of the West’s most modern highway.”

-Boulder Chamber of Commerce, 1952



Another 1952 photo shows the Turnpike’s Denver beginnings at Federal Boulevard. A connection to the Valley Highway was added later. Note the orchards in the area!

of which was getting stuck behind lumbering, loaded coal trucks.

As far back as the early 20th Century advocates called for a more direct, efficient route between two of Colorado’s most important cities. Roderick Downing, a University of Colorado engineering professor, determined a feasible route on a logical, diagonal path from Boulder to Denver by way Broomfield. For years, Downing’s students were seen in the field surveying the route as a part of their practical training in engineering. The state of Colorado always rejected the proposed highway, citing cost as the stumbling block. In 1935, Downing announced the idea of a toll road as a way to finance the project, earning him the title “Father of the Turnpike.”

With the end of World War II, years of debate at the state house, and a review by the Colorado Supreme Court, the turnpike bill was passed and construction on the new “Superroad” began after a ground breaking ceremony October 16, 1950. The unpopulated area between Federal



Dignitaries are gathered in front of the KOA radio vehicle for the ribbon cutting ceremony at Broomfield January 19, 1952.

Boulevard in Denver and Baseline Road in Boulder crawled with earth movers bulldozers, and all sorts of other construction equipment. Upon completion, a ribbon cutting ceremony was held January 19, 1952 and the “first modern toll road west of the Mississippi” was officially opened for travel.

The building of the Turnpike cost \$6.3 million, and it was considered the latest in highway engineering design at the time. It was an all concrete, divided roadway with a 20 foot wide median allowing a 65 miles per hour speed limit. From Federal Boulevard to Baseline Road was 17.3 miles. This distance was eight miles shorter and than the old route. From city to city, travel time was shortened to 35 minutes with its eventual link with Denver’s new, modern “Valley Highway,” later incorporated into Interstate 25.

Drivers could only enter or exit the Turnpike at three points: Denver, Boulder, and Broomfield. A toll house was built in the median at Broomfield where users paid fees of 10 cents for Boulder to Broomfield, 15 cents for Broomfield to Denver, or 25 cents for the full Boulder to Denver trip.

In contrast to what might be the position of some today, Boulderites were enthusiastic about the new road and how it would contribute to population and business growth. Many expressed glee over Boulder’s becoming a suburb of Denver; others even suggested Denver was a suburb

of Boulder! One thing is for certain, the “Pike” exceeded expectations right from the beginning. The prediction was that 2,200 vehicles per day would use the road. The average for the first two months of usage was nearly 4,000 per day.

It was this intense traffic level that produced one of the most unusual facts about the highway: not only was it paid off thirteen years ahead of schedule in 1967, but the cost was then removed and it became a toll-free federal highway, newly re-assigned U.S. Route 36. This, explains why newcomers and old timers have different frames of reference on what to call the road.

“It occurs to me that the general attitude of the driving public on the road may be one of abandonment and disregard of the recognized rules for safe driving.” —The prophetic opinion of Robert Stearns, president of the University of Colorado, 1952.

The Broomfield toll house was manned by a “neatly uniformed” crew of state employed toll collectors. Their professional attitude is reflected in the memories of one who said, “We vowed we’d make that baby pay, come hell or high water, by being perfect to people in telling them directions, by being nice to them and treating them like human beings . . . “

The crew of toll collectors was augmented by one shaggy fellow who adopted them and became a favorite personality for turnpike users. His name was Shep, a mongrel dog who happened into the toll booth one day and stayed for fourteen years. He was well known to locals and tourists alike. He was treated to gifts by regular vacationers who came through the toll booth on their annual Colorado pilgrimages. Shep received free care from a Broomfield veterinarian and was buried in the median between the highway lanes and a stone marker placed over his grave.

In a sense, the construction of the



A ceremony on September 14, 1967 as the toll is dropped from the road. Among the notables is Denver Mayor Bill McNichols at left, Boulder Mayor Robert Knecht at right and the man last to pay the northbound toll next to him. Tolls had been taken from over 46 million vehicles by the day the fees were eliminated. Photos courtesy of Carnegie Branch Library, Boulder, CO

Turnpike not only bypassed Superior literally but figuratively. Since there was no interchange here at that time, drivers could not access highway at McCaslin Boulevard as they now can. Folks from Superior would drive to Boulder by way of Marshall or South Boulder Road. If their destination was Denver, travelers would still have to use the Dillon Road to U.S. 287 route. They could get on the Turnpike at Broomfield, but, after all, that would cost an additional 15 cents!

Today Superior locals enter the Turnpike at the McCaslin interchange and join the cavalcade in either direction. Now traffic congestion is the rule on the highway, and the future only promises more. Among the alternatives under consideration is to reinstitute a toll in order to pay for improvements.

One thing for sure is that the ‘Pike no longer rushes past the sleepy village of Superior, tucked away along Coal Creek out of the view of the hurried driver. Both the road and the town have grown beyond the wildest imaginations and are completely intertwined.

Sources: All photographs and original sources courtesy of the Carnegie Branch Library for Local History, Boulder, CO.

This issue researched and written by Larry Dorsey, editor of the Superior Historian and Secretary of the Superior Historical Commission.