

An aerial photograph of a paved road winding through a dense forest. The road is dark asphalt with a yellow center line and shows signs of wear and some water damage. The surrounding forest is lush green. The title 'the lost high' is overlaid in a white serif font, with the word 'lost' in a green, textured font that blends with the forest background.

the lost high

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHANE LUITJENS

A man with a beard and glasses, wearing a yellow cycling jersey, black shorts, a yellow and black helmet, and blue gloves, stands on a gravel path with his mountain bike. He is looking towards the camera. The background is a lush green forest with a stone archway visible in the distance.

way

When Murray Schrotenboer heard about a nine-mile road hidden somewhere in the middle of the Pennsylvania woods, he was determined to figure out where it was.

Then he learned where it went.

Now he's finding out where it's going.

BY KATY RANK LEV




“You have to see it,”

cyclists whisper. “You can lie down on the median if you want to.” They speak of an abandoned piece of highway hidden in a Pennsylvania forest, a secret place halfway between Pittsburgh and Baltimore where you can ride a wheelie down a former interstate. The directions to it are vague—take the Breezewood exit off the Pennsylvania Turnpike, head down a wooded byway, find the dirt path next to a tiny sign in a gravel parking lot—but it’s there: four desolate lanes, with guardrails, reflector strips and saplings bursting through the pavement, the road stretching for nine miles, cutting through the mountains, surrounded by trees, silent.

It’s a post-apocalyptic mirage, the kind of thing you’d read about in a Ray Bradbury story, complete with two mile-long tunnels where bats roost and teenagers scrawl graffiti. The darkness seeping from each of them seems to carry the road’s history along with the chill—but the truth behind the ghost road is less eerie than it is economic.

THE LAND IS OWNED BY THE Southern Alleghenies Conservancy (SAC), a nonprofit organization that bought the road from the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission for \$1. A man named Murray Schrottenboer, along with an advisory committee called “Friends of the Pike2Bike” (as the road has been renamed), works to raise funds to renovate it as a bike trail. They want to secure the upper levels of the great wormholes through the mountains—destruction of drainage pipes and wooden vent coverings has allowed water damage in both Ray’s Hill and Sideling Hill tunnels—and create easy access to the road for tourists.



Schrotenboer, who chairs the committee, is a man enthralled by the space. As he guides bike tours, he pauses to drag branches off the road. He plants native Pennsylvania trees along the highway to help combat invasive species, and can recite its entire history. A transplant himself—from Columbia, Md.—Schrotenboer moved to Fulton County 15 years ago. He heard the rumors of this place, saw it on a topographic map, but didn't believe it existed until he found it when he was out on a long bike ride.

On that warm day, Schrotenboer stood outside the tunnel, noting the graffiti that faded into the darkness, listening to the echoes of dripping water. Fog rolled out of the opening, and the wind whistled and roared from within, beckoning. He paused, thinking there could be vagrants,

wild animals or sinkholes awaiting him, but ventured in without a light. "It was just such a strange, bizarre feeling to come through in the dark ... with nobody in it, completely by myself," he says.

That first time, walking his bike through the eerie silence of Sideling Hill tunnel, Schrotenboer came out the other end with a new purpose.

He bought 75 acres of land nearby, developed a bike touring company (Grouseland Tours) and a campground, and started guiding kayak and canoe trips, all the while learning more about the road's history. Headlamp on, he discovered the abandoned ventilation equipment and offices above the main tunnel. Climbing up the rusting stairs into the chamber above the driving space, he marveled at the engineering that routed away water.

Schrotenboer learned of the SAC purchase and, convinced the road could become a tourist attraction, approached the Chamber of Commerce, proposing that he—along with the other members of Friends of the Pike2Bike, who had been trimming the brush and clearing debris from the tunnels—obtain rights to the road. By 2003, Schrotenboer was steward of the trail, adding guided rides of the Pike2Bike to his touring business.



THE TUNNELS WEREN'T MEANT for automobiles at first. The cracked asphalt covers part of what was once the Southern Pennsylvania Railroad, William Vanderbilt's dream to connect Pittsburgh to Philadelphia and compete with the existing Pennsylvania Railroad. Vanderbilt's planners found an old Native American footpath following a relatively level course across the state. He convinced metal magnates Andrew Carnegie and Henry Oliver to fund a crew of nearly 7,000 men to carve a rail bed through the Alleghenies, blasting nine tunnels through the mountains. The project, which began in 1883, cost millions.

But it was not meant to be: The grueling pace of construction and the dangers of dynamite cost the project 26 lives before investors came to the conclusion that two competing railroads meant less profit for everyone involved. In September of 1885, the unfinished railroad was sold to the Pennsylvania Railroad, and the South Penn workers dropped their tools and walked away. Nature crept in and the half-completed tunnels filled with water. "Vanderbilt's Folly" lay abandoned. Just south, right before the mouth of Sideling Hill tunnel, a trace of this railway project remains in the form of a stone culvert, arching above a stream through the forest.

The road's rebirth as a superhighway began in 1937, when the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads decided to connect the country by road. Spurred simultaneously by the popularity of the automobile, the New Deal's impetus for job creation and the U.S.'s desire to build something that would rival Germany's Autobahn for ease of transportation of men and munitions, the newly formed Turnpike Commission followed Vanderbilt's path across the state. Civilian Conservation Corps workers drained the tunnels, which were still supported by oak beams. Living in camps along the 160-mile route, men worked at a frenzied pace to deliver something totally unique and absolutely American: a limited-access, four-lane toll highway. It was the fastest way from here to there for a nation climbing from Depression. Nothing else like it existed.

When the Pennsylvania Turnpike opened on Oct. 1, 1940, cars had been lined up in front of its tollbooths for days. Drivers wanted to see the service plazas, the 100 m.p.h. speed limit signs and, above all, those tunnels. There were seven on the original road from Irwin to Carlisle, and Americans had been hearing about them everywhere from the World's Fair to the pages of *Life*. Nearly 6,000 vehicles traveled the Turnpike in the first four days of operation—numbers that smashed early usage estimates and were indicative of a trend that would continue for two decades. At a time when the country had few highways and the Golden Gate Bridge was the country's lone example of a profitable toll road, the Pennsylvania Turnpike seemed like a piece of the future.

But by November of 1968, more than 200 million vehicles had wound their way through the mountains, and traffic volume was more than 24 times the planners' estimates. The tunnels, once marvels of modern engineering, backed up cars for five miles as four lanes squeezed down to two. The Dream Highway became

SAVE THE TRAILS PikoZBikes, in conjunction with Groundland Totems, leads guided tours of the abandoned Pennsylvania superhighway.

FINDERS KEEPERS (clockwise from top left)
 Geocaching; touring the remains of a building
 that housed highway construction workers; the
 Pike2Bike sign on the trail

a nightmare to drive and, by this time, other roads had adopted its innovations. To make matters worse, ground was broken for Interstate 80 just north of the Turnpike—a battle for passage to mimic the railroads’ was underway. Engineers scoured the Turnpike for solutions and determined that a 13.5-mile bypass, even with a price tag of more than \$17 million, was a more affordable option than digging twin tunnels through Ray’s Hill and Sideling Hill. Because modern cars could handle the steeper grade up and over the mountains, after only 28 years of life as a highway, the road saw its last public motor vehicle.

Every now and then, before it was sold to the SAC, the Turnpike Commission found a use for the quiet highway removed from the strip joints and noise of the new interstate. Scientists invented rumble strips there, testing the shoulder grooves at varying depths that, today, barely make a mountain bike shudder. A few miles of the road bear streaks of paint in odd patterns: the early development of reflective road lines. Sometimes, the National Guard used the space for training missions, to practice roadside bombing scenarios or guerilla tactics—put a few tanks on the crumbling black top and those trees could be anywhere. (Not surprisingly, filmmaker John Hillcoat recently used the highway as a location for the post-apocalyptic drama *The Road*.)

Schrotenboer brings his tour groups to an overgrown access road along the north shoulder, where the saplings are younger, barely concealing the skeleton of the CCC barracks. This is where the men who built the road ate and slept as they raced to finish “America’s Dream Highway” in just three years. The shiny blue metal pieces of two original Turnpike tollbooths have been moved here, sitting in between the collapsing roof beams, risking damage from vandals and nature alike.



The Friends of the Pike2Bike want to restore the tollbooths and create a parking area where visitors can drive up, make a donation for trail upkeep and then continue their journey into the past via bicycle.

For now, the trailhead at the leveled service plaza, where the merge lanes seem impossibly short and there are no hints of the Howard Johnson restaurant that used to sell fried chicken for \$1, is inaccessible to cars. Instead, visitors start at the Breezewood end of the trail, park in the dirt lot, scramble up a hill (bikes on their backs) and squeeze past the jersey barriers to access the road. It isn't easy.

But once there, they face the empty blackness of those tunnels, the hulking structures so long they can't see daylight at the other end. (Though it's not always quiet—Schrotenboer once led a group into the darkness and heard singing from

within: A local church choir was taking advantage of the acoustics.)

They climb through the massive ventilation equipment, into the shells of office spaces decorated with smashed light bulbs and missing windows, and upwards to the plenum—the space above the tunnel where workers used to scoot on carts to fix the tunnel lights and irrigation system. Visitors see nothing but their own breath in the dank air of this fearsome cave.

The legend of the road sends scout troops and cyclists in droves for Schrotenboer's “Bike into the Light” tours. They come to experience a piece of manifest destiny, a grand display of science and ingenuity slowly being swallowed by nature, unnoticed by the passing world. It's a nine-mile museum of progress and a reminder of our impermanence—rarely are the two so demonstrably intertwined. **M**

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Contact Murray Schrotenboer of Grouseland Tours (814-784-5000; grouseland.com). Riders/hikers can access it at their own risk at the corner of Route 30 E and Tannery Road in Breezewood, Penn. Lights and helmets are required and explorers are not permitted to enter Turnpike property or the forestland (all areas are posted and gated).