

William Marvel

Roads North

Months before my father retired from the Navy, he sent my mother and me up to Davis Hill, where he had grown up. I suppose he wanted to see whether we could survive a New Hampshire winter, and somehow we did, although my mother clearly did not appreciate trading tropical Key West for snowbound South Conway. My father came home in the spring, and we met him at the Boston & Maine Railroad depot in Conway, where Route 16 now crosses the tracks. The weather must still have been cold, because I remember him wearing his dark blue great coat when he stepped down on the rough oak platform.

Those were the final days of passenger rail service to Conway, 80 years after it first began. Soon afterward, an orgy of new road construction began along the Route 16 corridor, probably to accommodate all the people who were being forced to drive instead of taking the train. State contractors swung the highway around West Main Street, razed the railroad depot, and redirected traffic straight onto Main Street at the high school. They removed a few of the sharper curves in Albany, as well as unwinding the serpentine segment around the shore of Chócorua Lake.

State road builders also shortened the tortuous stretch between Center Conway and Conway, encountering some difficulty when Lev Lowd refused to let them demolish the home where he had lived all of his 70-odd years. Lev sat in his front yard with a double-bitted axe across his knees and dared the bulldozer operator to come ahead — which he didn't. Eventually a DOT official arrived to negotiate, and they compromised on moving the house back a few rods to a new foundation, besides building Lev a new barn.

Today the police would just call in a SWAT team and shoot the old man, rather than waste time. Free movement for the automobile takes precedence over nearly everything, despite the environmental hurdles that road designers lament so dolorously. No matter the cost in dollars or destruction, the state seems genuinely convinced that any impediment to traffic flow must ultimately yield to road expansion — even if that impediment consists of the serenity and contentment of whole neighborhoods, or the natural beauty of an entire region. Only

the politically powerful are ever exempted from the hum of 18-wheelers or the stink of exhaust fumes, and often even they cannot prevent it.

The Conway bypass has polarized this town for decades. From the outset the more numerous and more influential citizens of North Conway and the West Side wanted the onus of the traffic shifted as far away from them as possible, which is why the North-South Road ended up east of Route 16. Now, predictably, those dominant factions promote the argument that only the plebeian outskirts of Conway, Center Conway, and Redstone need to bear the burden of bypass construction: North Conway's portion of the sacrifice would consist of having all

**The Conway bypass has polarized
this town for decades.**

the traffic funneled to its doorstep.

One need not drive far on New Hampshire's roads to wonder why the state should build any new ones. Much of Route 16 and Route 28 sorely needed resurfacing two years ago, and they need it a lot more now. Between Conway and Eaton, Route 153 has essentially collapsed, and is causing hundreds of thousands of dollars in suspension damage. Even if the bypass were initially paid for by manna from Washington, we already can't afford to maintain as much asphalt as we have.

The wisest answer to maintaining existing infrastructure is to substantially increase the gas tax. That will simultaneously raise revenue and help discourage driving, and each would help. Let the truckers complain: If it weren't for the weight and width of their rigs our roads wouldn't be so badly pulverized, and our villages could have their trees and lawns back.

If not for trailer trucks, bypass lobbying might never have gotten very far: A Berlin iron hauler was one of the foremost instigators. If they had to pay their real share of the demand for new pavement, most long-haul trucking companies would disappear, leaving the more efficient railroads to handle their cargo again. Without the big rigs monopolizing transportation, a spike in the price of gasoline would be less likely to cause universal inflation, and our roads would be a lot safer. Only country music fans find romance in the trucker's endless routine of highways and hemorrhoids, but who doesn't love the lonesome whistle of a locomotive?

William Marvel lives in South Conway.