Philadelphia to Valley Force – A Delightful Ride Through a Historical Section

On last Sunday we went out of town westward by Montgomery pike; shall we try the Lancaster pike this time for a change? For a round trip to Valley Forge it is easier to go out via Berwyn and return via Gulf Mills (see map) than vice versa, as you get the benefit of that long glide down Cassatt’s Hill; true, the city end of the Lancaster pike is somewhat hilly; come and see for yourself.

We get to Fifty-second street as per preceding trips and follow Lancaster avenue out; be careful as you pass under that railroad bridge; in the many years I have traveled this way, I don’t think I have ever seen the day when the road was not slimy and sticky from the droppings of that stone arch overhead.

LANCASTER PIKE TOLL-GATES.

And here is toll-gate No. 1. How many are there? Why, eight at present, but one more will be added at the intersection of Spring Mill road with the pike in the course of the present season. (“There’s luck in odd numbers, says Rory O’Moore”)

No. 2 is at the City Line; No. 3 at Ardmore; No. 4 at Bryn Mawr; No. 5 near Rosemont Station; No. 6 near St. David’s avenue; No. 7 at Strafford; No. 8 this side of Paoli.

The through rate for us is 10 cents; rates from gate to gate vary from 2 to 3 cents. We are not going all the way to Paoli to-day; for all that, ask for a through ticket, and as we spin along send up a prayer that the day may not be far distant when we won’t have to dismount eight (or none) times in the course of 20 miles to get our toll-vouchers punched.

FAMILIAR SCENES.

For having been traveled so recently as our last trip, these shady hills and dales are none the less pleasant to gaze upon, are they? Good practice, too, is a little ride away from the dead level.

Fourteen miles from start, observe a turn R to Radnor Station, and another L to where Radnorville used to be; the latter locality is now officially styled Ithan (after the creek that passes by it), so as to avoid confusion.

This very next road branching off L at a sharp angle is Church road. We must take it some day and go down to St. David’s Church, where Anthony Wayne is buried.

For, you must know, St. David’s Station, yonder on R, is not at St. David’s at all. The name was appropriated by the railroad company for their station, and as a consequence the original St. David’s now blooms for as Wyola Postoffice. “Wyola” sounds all right enough; but how about the historical memories attached to St. David’s?
PRETTY WAYNE.

In a few minutes we come to the coquettish town that has honored itself by assuming the name of Anthony Wayne. He was born in this vicinity (contrary assertions notwithstanding); in any case his proverbial valor here and elsewhere was well worth commemorating in the name of one of our suburbs.

The remarkable development of this particular suburb must go on record as evidencing the shrewdness of the Philadelphia Drexels and Childses, who laid it out in the wilderness that reigned supreme here some sixteen years ago.

Speaking about that date, of the nucleus of the present Wayne, our State Historian, Dr. Egle, remarked: “A pretty village, Louella, has sprung around the station.”

The station in those days was the Eagle; and Radnor was Morgan’s Corner; and, by the way, what man in his senses would then have dreamt of those bicycle stands in front of all these drug stores and refreshment houses? Father Time is indeed a great old fellow.

TWO ROADS TO VALLEY FORGE.

As we pass Strafford, notice a road turning R almost directly opposite tollhouse No. 7. I tried it once on my way to Valley Forge, five years ago, on the recommendation of a friendly farmer; never since have I had the courage to face it again. I may possibly libel its present condition; it may have undergone improvements like so many others; it certainly needed them.

Branching off to our right on top of Devon Hill, 17 m., is another road leading down to the valley, which was more frequently used at one time than it is now, although it has not been entirely given up, as you may see by the pneumatic-tire tracks through its clayey surface.

I have not traveled it this season; it may have been improved since last fall; but even it if has, it could not rival the Berwyn route and is only a little shorter. Should you care to explore it, you go down a roughish stony descent, up another, and down a long zigzaggy incline through woods with occasional vistas of the picturesque valley and the woody hills on the other side; then over the bridge, and past the Great Valley Baptist Church, founded as far back as 1711.

A little further, a turning R goes to Norristown (6 m.), another L to West Chester (14 m.); both mud roads.

You still keep on your downward course and wonder if any one ever rode this way in wet weather. The other side of a trestle bridge you come to a settlement consisting of one forge, and a couple of houses, one of which proclaims itself to be the “New Centreville Postoffice.”

Did you observe how seldom a country Postoffice bears the name of the locality by the side of the stereotyped “postoffice” on its sign? This compels the stranger to ask for it; and the average native, who practically never heard such a question until bicycle traveling came into vogue, is often so unprepared for it that the evolution of the desired answer necessitates no inconsiderable scratching of his head, and, as a rule, a repetition of the inquiry.

Here a friendly post tells you that Valley Forge is 2 ½ miles ahead, and that this turning L goes to Howelville (2 m.) and West Chester (14 m.).
Mark the very next post, less than ¼ mile further. By the side of it, at the corner of the field on our right, the Pennsylvania Society of the Sons of the Revolution have erected a stone with this inscription:

SIX HUNDRED YARDS N.E. OF
THIS STONE
WERE THE HEADQUARTERS OF
ANTHONY WAYNE IN
1777-78.

From this spot another couple of miles will bring you down to the Valley Creek at a covered bridge where we shall meet you by and by; for, with your permission, we choose to keep straight on along this beautiful pike.

BERWYN.

From the top of Devon Hill an easy spin takes us to another crossing of our path by the Pennsylvania R. R. track. We bear L under it and R into Berwyn (18 m.).

“Berwyn” reminds you probably of the several Welsh names to which I called your attention last Sunday. That it means “fair boundary,” and that it should happen to be just at the boundary line between East Town and Tredyffrin townships is a mere coincidence, but it is also sufficiently near to the county line to call to mind the fact that in the course of the nineteen miles we have just traveled we have been in four different counties – Philadelphia, Montgomery, Delaware and Chester.

We follow the main street, past Kromer’s restaurant on the left and turn sharp R over the steep bridge at the station.

DOWN CASSATT’S HILL.

At the end of the short road lying before us on the other side of the bridge, we turn L, take the next turn R, and here we are on Cassatt’s Hill. For a couple of miles we shall be gliding down its smooth surface. Need I further explain why I suggested taking this on our way out?

And what do you think of the landscape that meets our gaze just here at the bifurcation ere we reach the middle of the hill?

You always ride downhill carefully, don’t you?

By and by we come to another railroad track. This time it is that of the Chester Valley R. R.

We go straight over it as if our destination was yonder large farm (Cassatt’s or Chesterbrook stock farm), but opposite the gate we bear R and keep on till a signpost on our left shows us the way to “Valley Forge, 2 miles.”

VALLEY CREEK.

From this point the road may seem somewhat rough, gradually improving though it be; we are so easily spoiled by good things.

Let us be cautious going down this first hill, and it will be no time ere we strike a better stretch of road around E. J. Matthews’ beautiful residence, beyond which we cross Valley Creek, through a covered
bridge, leave on our right the Centreville road we described above, and turning L, we follow the stream along the rugged ravine through which it flows to the Schuylkill.

Many a time and oft in the course of our rambles through our unequalled Philadelphia cycling district, we might say with Longfellow:

“This is the place. Stand still, my steed;  
Let me review the scene,  
And summon from the shadowy past  
The forms that once have been.”

Few, however, are the localities more intimately connected with the very existence of this country, few are those that have played a nobler part in the history of any country than the hallowed hillsides we are now nearing as we enter this wild gorge.

VALLEY FORGE.

What tales these woods could tell Americans about the days when their liberty was bled for and won!

It was in their solitude that old Isaac Potts heard Washington praying aloud one day; it was here our forefathers “rambled for food with the beasts of the wood,” because they should not, they would not, be slaves.

How literally the vows expressed in the old-time ballad were to be fulfilled hereabouts its author surely never realized:

“With the beasts of the wood  
We will ramble for food;  
We will lodge in wild deserts and caves,  
And live poor as Job  
On the skirts of the globe,  
Before we’ll submit to be slaves, brave boys,  
Before we’ll submit to be slaves.  

The birthright we hold  
Shall never be sold  
But, sacred maintained to our graves;  
And before we’ll comply  
We will gallantly die;  
For we must not, we will not be slaves, brave boys,  
For we must not, we will not be slaves.

See that little spring on your right? It is usually noticeable by the remnants of newspapers and wrapping paper left on the bluff above it by transient lunchers. Tradition says that Washington and his starving men drank of its waters, and a small sign once stood here, with the inscription: “Washington Spring.” It has been whispered that rival interests higher up in the village had caused the removal of the inscription. This seems all the less likely as the passers-by who would feel an interest in this spring (unauthenticated though it be by historical evidence), are the very people who swell the list of paying visitors at Washington’s headquarters. Be that as it may, the spot now bears no visible name, and the
greater the pity. Patriotism of the genuine sort cannot afford to lose the stimulus even of a tradition; there is so much of the other kind among us!

Here on the left stood the old forge, at once time the only forge in the Schuylkill Valley above Philadelphia, and hence known as the Valley Forge. It was burned by a party of Hessians shorter before our army encamped here.

On the left, across the creek, is the road to Phoenixville; on the right is our road home; a few whirls of our wheels straight on bring us to Washington’s headquarters.

Visit it, and relish the memories that it will doubtless recall to your mind, apart from the pewter pots and earthenware luxuries exhibited here that were never used by Washington’s starving troops.

On returning to the cross-road a halt at Washington Inn may be advisable, after which we climb up the hill by the side of the said Inn.

On the top of it bear L. “Port Kennedy, 2 m.” says the signboard. Straight ahead is the direct road to the King of Prussia, the old Valley Forge road (see map), but this western half of it is not cyclable; indeed, it can hardly be called travellable at all; we shall fall into it by and by after a detour through Port Kennedy.

MOUNT JOY.

This hill is Mount Joy, that on the other side of the creek is Mount Misery. A local legend tells us that, in his trip to the Susquehanna in the summer of 1701, William Penn lost his way on the height, southwest of the stream, and having recovered it on the hill we have just climbed, he named the one Mount Misery and the other Mount Joy.

Of greater interest to us are the scenes that were enacted here seventy-six years later.

On the summit of the next rise it were a crime not to dismount and inspect the line of entrenchments that is supposed to have run down on our left as far as the headquarters and away through the woods on our right.

Just one minute’s walk from this along the road, do you see a clump of trees in a stony field on your right? There stood Fort Huntingdon, and the remains of it to this day will repay a visit.

Three miles southwest of this stood Fort Washington. Yonder, on your right, a resident might show you the old camp school-house.

This grassy lane L. is Washington lane; it leads to the Schuylkill, and was trodden by our Continentals; it would not take you very long to follow it to the river. A few yards to the right of where it terminates you may see a stone marked “Sullivan Bridge, 1777,” directly facing another stone on the northern bank; that is where they crossed the river.

In those woods away on the left of the road before us the alignment of the soldiers’ huts is still discernible. Huts they were, not tents; for the poor fellows, who might have been tracked by the blood of their feet as they marked over the hard, frozen ground from White Marsh to this winter quarters, were too ill-clothed to bear exposure to the inclemency of the weather under mere tents; and even in these cabins of logs filled in with mortar they were frequently compelled to sit up huddled close together, all night long, by the fireside, to keep themselves warm.
What think you of the fact that out of a total of 17,000 starving men that Washington brought here to winter, only five thousand were on the effective list, and almost four thousand were unfit for service “by reason of their nakedness!” Was there ever a more heroic struggle for right than the one that endured on this spot?

This is nothing more than a “Trip Awheel,” however, and much as I would delight in bringing under your notice other sacred relics of our noble past, I must not digress too far.

HOMeward.

Amid the gorgeous scenery that surrounds us, do you see that village by the side of a covered bridge on the Schuylkill? -- it is Port Kennedy. It once was known as Kennedy’s Hollow, after Alexander Kennedy, a poor but thrifty Irish emigrant who accumulated sufficient money to buy considerable property here in 1805.

The other side of that bridge is Betzwood. There in a fifty-acre park J. F. Betz, of our city, has probably the largest herd of captive deer on this continent.

In the village turn R up a long hill, then L into the Valley Forge road proper and down to the King of Prussia, 2 miles farther.

The old inn facing you after you have crossed Roberts’ Creek stood here in 1769. The antiquated “King of Prussia” on the sign is supposed to represent Frederick the Great, a man in great renown at the time the tavern was built.

We keep straight on, past the inn; the turning R goes to Radnor, the L to Bridgeport; and a couple of miles farther we ride carefully down a long hill to the site of the former Bird-in-Hand tavern which once gave its name to our modern village of Gulf Mills.

We go through the village; past the new “Bird-in-Hand” beer saloon (where a turn L leads to Conshohocken) and at a cross-road, a short distance ahead, our attention is attracted by a large stone standing by itself by the roadside. The legend upon it reads:

GULPH MILLS
The Main Continental Army
Commanded By
General George Washington
Encamped In This Immediate Vicinity
From December 13 to December 19, 1777
Before Going Into Winter Quarters
At Valley Forge

Close by stood the original “Gulph Mill” of 1747, which was burned down two years ago.

Here the left turn is the Gulf road, which makes a bee line for home (see map); straight on, the road is hilly but in splendid condition; and in a very short time we reach that spot on the Montgomery pike where we branched off to the Lancaster pike in our Trip Awheel No. 7, and we reach home by either of the routes described therein.

A. E.