The Old Toll Gate

As you drive to the south end of the Village of Portville today, through southern New York State, you will see a unique structure at the intersection of Route 417 East and Route 305 toward Pennsylvania. This building was once part of a landmark called the Old Toll Gate. The other part of the structure was a gas station. The following is based on information published in The Portville Review in 1929 and 1931, as well as, an article by Waldo Pettinati in The Bradford Era in 1986.

One hundred years ago, travel was very difficult. The lumber business in this area was just beginning. Heavy loads were being hauled, by horses, oxen, or mules, up and down the Allegheny River and Oswayo Creek Valleys, where roads were hub deep in mud for half the year. Lumber was a readily available material, so the idea of a hard road, either plank or corduroy, was destined to become a reality.

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If you were traveling through Portville on "Old Route 17" (now 417) and the section that was called the Oswayo Road, on your way to Ceres and Shinglehouse and other points south, you would have traveled on plank roads, built of slab wood, flattened, and laid lengthwise across the ruts. It was muddy in the spring and dusty in the summer.

It is unknown when this road was built and who built it but it was at the junction of the road following the Allegheny River and the road that was called the Oswayo Road that a toll gate was established.. After paying a fee, a pole that had been dropped across the road would be lifted so that freight and horse-drawn stage coaches could pass.

Lewis Putnam recalled that his grandmother told him that as a young girl in the 1860's, she sat in a shed and took the tolls for that road. Constant repair must have been necessitated by heavy loads and shod horses. Floods were a constant menace. The flood of 1865 washed out many sections of the plank road. Stopping to pay a toll ended in the 1920's when the first blacktop road in the area was built and the road was then supported by public taxation. The existing toll gate at that time was turned into a residence and for many years stood on its original site.

Near the site of the toll gate was a pond that had been formed by a dam in the Allegheny River that backed up the water of the Oswayo Creek. It was in this pond that logs were held until the Mersereau Mill, that was located at the junction of the Oswayo Creek and the Allegheny River, was ready for them. In the winter when it was free of logs, it was a popular ice skating pond. When the dam was removed, the pond went dry. However, during times of high water, carp would be marooned there and offered an opportunity for fishing. Almost all of the vestiges of the dam were removed during the construction of the dikes in 1950.

Along with the development of the automobile as something more than an experimental horseless carriage, came the need for better roads. By 1910, hundreds of miles of road had been built of a new material called Portland cement. As Americans took to the road in their new vehicles, road stands selling gasoline, as well as food and merchandise, began to appear along the highways. It was not until the late 1920's that a concrete road replaced the old worn out macadam road that went through Portville.

In 1924, a young man still in his twenties came to Portville. Rexford G. Lawrence was born in Kushequa, PA, and orphaned at an early age. Living with his older sister for many years, he quit school at Mt. Jewett High School after 10th grade and worked at various jobs. He then became a patrolman for the Tidewater Pipe line company and walked their line from Rixford to Williamsport for five years. According to

Rexford G. Lawrence

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his biography, he came to Portville "with less than two thousand dollars, a reputation for paying his bills promptly and an almost endless amount of enthusiasm."

Rex bought the Toll Gate property from Herman Buckles, did some remodeling of the existing structure, and opened a service station. He called it "The Triangle." Later, when it became a stopping place for hundreds of motorists he decided to change the name to the original name that had been established years ago –"The Old Toll Gate." Later, he recalled his struggle during his first months. On many days, less than five gallons of gas were sold but his wife Eleanor's tea room business was a great help. Perseverance was eventually rewarded and the business began to show life.

Gradually, Lawrence began filling in the previously mentioned pond so that the land was suitable for building. In 1930, he moved the old building to a new location. He erected a new building that housed a private office, "The Old Toll Gate Tearoom," managed first by Wallace Gibson and later by Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Brooks, and what were referred to as "commodious rest rooms." The official opening was on June 27, 1930. Two bus lines began making weekly lunch stops. "Hundreds of bus passengers take lunch here each week and carry the fame of fine food and this busy corner to distant cities and states. Hundred of miles from here one hears of Portville and the "Old Toll Gate."

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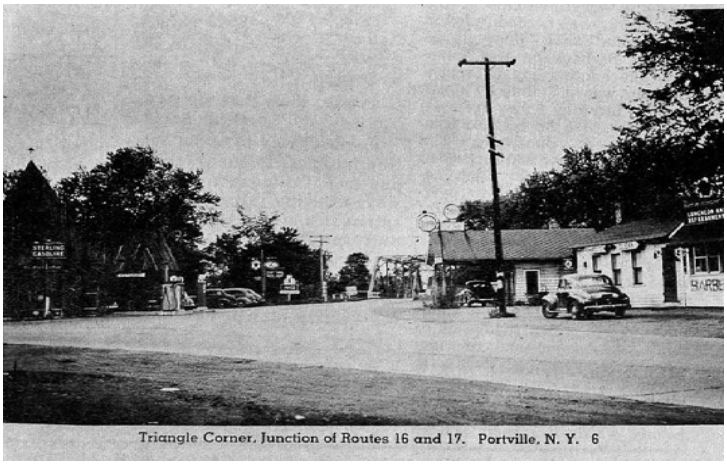
A June 1930 Portville Review article describes the new "artistic" building. "It is designed to represent the architecture of an early day . . . a main center section built of yellow pine and finished in a style called batten . . . simply shellacked and on either side of the central portion, rises a steeply gabled wing which is constructed of logs with the back left producing a log cabin effect. The windows are of the old-time small paned variety while the doors are mostly solid with small paned glass upper sections. The fastenings are of the thumb-latch type used in pioneer days. The main room is 40 by 20 feet and is to be used as a lunch room. It is fitted up in the most modern fashion, with a long lunch counter running along one side of the room and small tables on the other side. It has a huge, up to date steam table for keeping foods hot, and every other modern convenience for quick and efficient service. In the wing toward the Eldred road are located the commodious rest rooms where no expense has been spared to make them attractive. In the other wing are Mr. Lawrence's offices and the kitchen. The lighting fixtures are reproductions of old lamps and lanterns, while in some instances they are the real thing, found by Mr. Lawrence in a diligent search of the surrounding country.

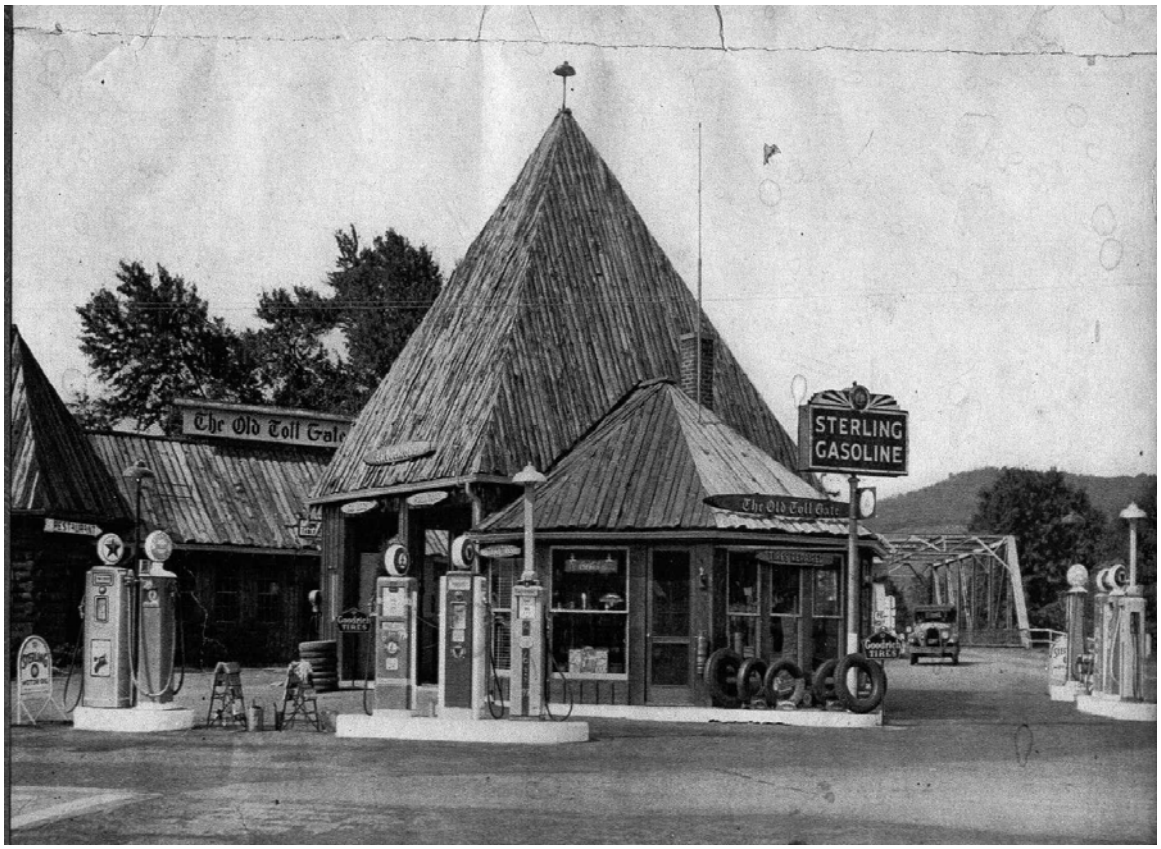


A photo from the 1930's shows a busy "Triangle Corner," with two service stations and two restaurants. The "Old Toll Gate" service station and restaurant is on the left with another service station and "Red and Trudy's on the right. The bridge over the Oswayo Creek is in the center of photo.

In the late 1940's a fire destroyed the Old Toll Gate Service Station, leaving the restaurant unharmed.

Today the Toll Gate Restaurant is being restored by owner Fred Caya.

Photo of the restored Old Toll Gate Restaurant Building, April 2006



The Old Toll Gate Restaurant and Filling Station c. 1935