

HISTORIC ROOTS

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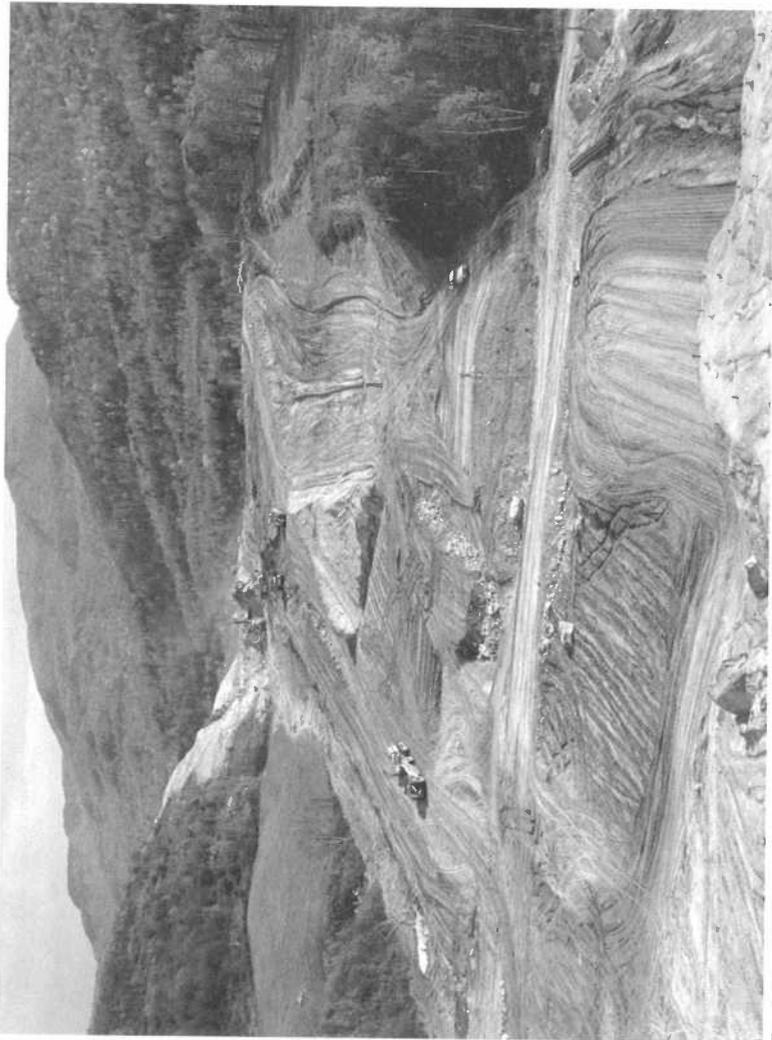
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Don Wiedenmayer

Grading the land for the Bolton-Richmond section of Interstate 89, October 1963.

GETTING AROUND

By CHRIS GRAFF

If you ask historians what was the most important event of the 20th century in Vermont, you will get a variety of answers. Some will suggest it was the flood of 1927. This killed 84 people. It destroyed more than 1,000 bridges and left more than 10,000 people homeless.

Some historians think that the most significant event was the 1965 decision to change the way the Vermont House of Representatives is elected. This decision was ordered by a federal court. At the time, each of the communities in the state, no matter its size, had one vote in the House. This meant that the city of Burlington had one vote. The tiny town of Stannard did too. Small towns had more power than large ones in the House.

The court said that the membership of the House must be based on population. This change took power away from the farmers and small towns and gave it to cities and towns, where there are more people. It also led to the rise of the Democratic Party in the state.

Other historians might have other ideas about what was important. They might mention the rise of women to political power, or the growth of the ski industry, or the 1962

election of Phil Hoff as the first Democratic governor in a century.

I would argue that the most significant event in Vermont in the past hundred years was the building of the state's interstate system, between 1957 and 1982. Why was it so important?

Well, for much of the 20th century, Vermont was an economic backwater.¹ Historian Paul Gillies says that Vermonters never really noticed the Great Depression of the 1930s, because life then was not any different from the way they had been living all along. That may be an oversimplification, but it is not far from the truth.

During the first 40 years of the 20th century, before World War II, Vermont's farmland was worn out. Young people couldn't find jobs and moved away. There was heavy competition for markets with farmers from the Midwest. Vermont's farmers could barely make a living.

Vermont's economy was only a little better by the 1950s. The biggest problem in attracting businesses, jobs, and people to the state was the lack of good roads. It took hours of driving on winding and rutted dirt roads to get from one place to another. It was hard to get Vermont's goods to markets, inside or out of the state. Nor could goods from outside easily

¹A backwater is a place that is isolated and behind the times.



Courtesy of the Vermont State Archives

Preparing a section of Interstate 91 for paving in 1960.

get to Vermont families and businesses. Big trucks were almost an impossibility.

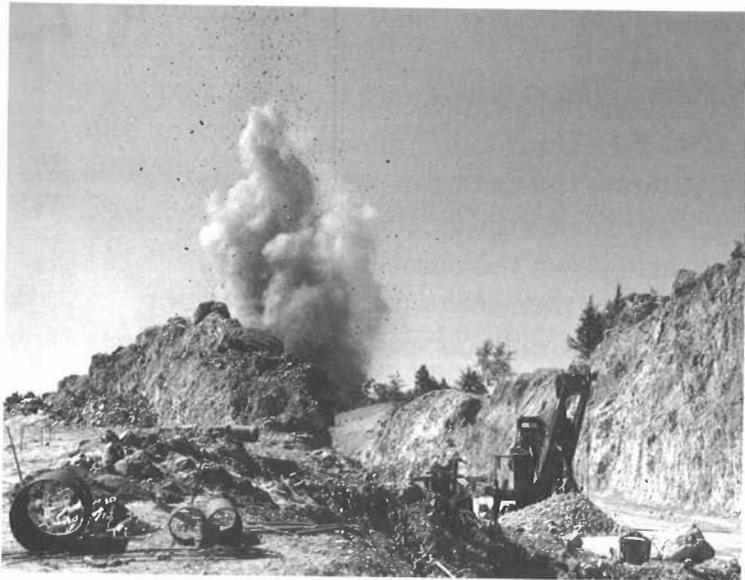
Although Vermont's scenery had always attracted some visitors, the difficulty in getting here held down the number of tourists. Vermonters themselves had trouble getting around. In winter and spring, many roads were impassable. (Some still are.) Boston and New York seemed worlds away. The interstates opened Vermont to the world.

Construction of the 320 miles of four-lane highway was a huge undertaking. The roads were built in sections. Sometimes those sections were so far apart that it was years before

they were connected. So there were, for a while in some places, pieces of four-lane highway in the middle of nowhere.

Construction of Interstate 91 began in 1957 at the Massachusetts border. The first six miles opened in 1958. The next section, to exit 1 in Brattleboro, opened in July 1959. Exits 1 to 3 opened in October 1960. Construction of a 50-mile section of I-91 began at the Canadian border in 1962. It was finished in 1976 and connected to the southern section in 1978.

Construction of Interstate 89 began in the middle. The road in Vermont begins at the New Hampshire border. But the first section



Don Wiedenmayer

Blasting through rock ledges to build the Richmond-Williston section of I-89 in 1962.

built was the five miles from Montpelier to Middlesex, between exits 8 and 9. It opened in late November 1960. The next section, from exit 9 to exit 10 in Waterbury, opened a month later. But it was nearly a year before the section from Waterbury to Bolton was completed.

Only in 1978 were both roads finished and open. A spur of Interstate 93, from New Hampshire to St. Johnsbury, opened in 1982.

The project was immense, especially by Vermont standards. To build one 23-mile stretch of highway near St. Albans took 17,000 cubic yards of concrete, 3 million pounds of reinforced steel, 8 million pounds of structural steel, 38,000 linear feet of steel piping, and 11,000 linear feet of timber pilings to support roadway and bridges.

The project was also a challenge to Vermont engineers. Until then, most had worked on small road projects and small bridges. Now they had to level hills and cut through rock ledges to design and build the roads. They also had to build 127 bridges. The twin bridges across the White River from Lebanon, New Hampshire to Hartford, Vermont on I-89 are 1,059 feet long.

The results were amazing. The roads “took us out of the sticks and put us within a day’s drive of 80 million people and right in the economic stream of the country,” says Elbert Moulton, a former government official.

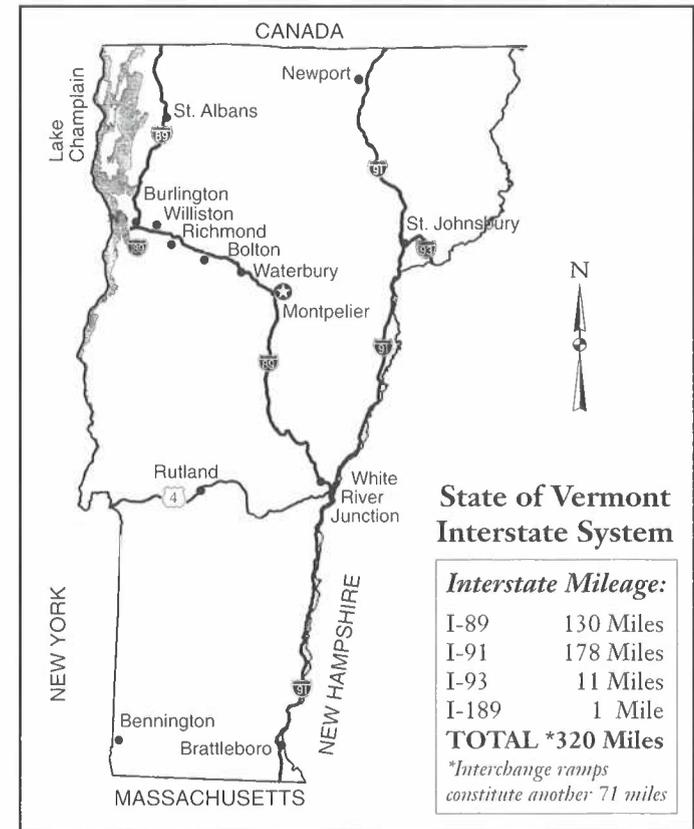
Not everyone was helped by the interstates. Route 5 in southern Vermont and Route 2 in northern Vermont, for instance, had been the main roads in their regions. Towns and businesses had grown up to serve those driving through. When the interstates took the traffic away, many of them suffered.

The interstates are mostly in the eastern and northern parts of the state. On the western side, communities like Rutland and Bennington were also hurt. They had no easy access to the new roads and so found it hard to attract new businesses.

Life in the state has become remarkably different in the last 25 years, since the completion of the big highways. Vermont's population has grown. So have its industry and its access to markets. Some say that Chittenden County's amazing growth is due to the interstates. They say that IBM, for example, would not have built a plant there without the promise of the interstate for its shipping.

The variety of goods available to Vermonters has increased. And so has the flood of tourists and skiers who contribute so much to Vermont's economy today.

We may complain about the increased traffic and the number of out-of-staters on our roads. But we do so good-naturedly. And we can't imagine life without them.



The interstates in Vermont. There is now talk about building a new interstate, running east to west, parallel to Route 4.

Rooting Around

What difference did the building of the interstates make in your town? Were those changes for the good? Or was life better in your community before the roads were built? People's opinions on this differ, so you might want to ask several. Perhaps you could have a group discussion.