Driving Out

Today the Long Island Expressway extends the full length of the island, and it takes about two hours to drive from Manhattan to the Hamptons. Half a century ago, it was very different. Here is how you drove out from New York City to the Hamptons in 1960.

You went out to your car parked right there on the street in front of your Manhattan apartment, and you drove to the entry of the Queens Midtown Tunnel through heavy traffic—the traffic lights were not yet coordinated—hoping there wasn't a tie-up in the tunnel itself. Cars back then were not built as well as they are today and often broke down. When that happened in the single-lane tunnels, they had to be towed. That presented big problems.

At that time, New York City considered itself the center of the world, and it took that responsibility very seriously. It was the largest city in the world in terms of population. It was where world leaders had decided to build the United Nations. The Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building were the tallest and second tallest buildings in the world, and

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surely there were more skyscrapers assembled in Manhattan than anywhere else. And in terms of money and the arts—with Broadway, the New York Stock Exchange, Greenwich Village, and Madison Avenue—there was little doubt who was number one. The New York Yankees played here, for heaven's sakes.

One thing New York City was not, however, was fun. People would get arrested if they opened a sidewalk cafe. There were not yet banners and ribbons and great busloads of tourists from all over the world. Times Square, not yet family friendly, was a place of prostitutes and peep shows. There were many good neighborhoods around town to be sure, but there were also metal garbage cans that often overflowed, slums filled with immigrants, bad neighborhoods where it was dangerous to walk, and parks filled with weirdos. You didn't go into parks at night. There was also dog poop on the sidewalks. People didn't think anything of it.

In the business district, people wore suits and ties to the tall office buildings, they came in at nine, worked hard, and left at five, left town for the suburbs on filthy public transit systems, and had their two-week vacations in the summertime at the beach. A colorless man named Robert F. Wagner was mayor. There was another man, an exciting man named John F. Kennedy, who was president of the United States. But he was not from here.

And so you would get away to the Hamptons. You would drive through the tunnel and out the newly completed western end of the Long Island Expressway (called Grand Central Parkway), over the booming factories and workers' row houses in Queens—the big neon signs read BALLANTINE

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and RHEINGOLD and WONDER BREAD—and past Flushing Meadows Park, the place where buildings would soon go up for the upcoming 1964 World's Fair. On the right, you could see the art deco red-brick abandoned structures of the 1939 World's Fair—wasn't it wonderful that New York City had been chosen for a World's Fair *twice* in just twenty-five years? And on the left there were the new structures of the new fair going up—rocket ships pointed at the sky, stadiums, flying saucers held twenty stories in the air by steel pylons, modern domes, and walkways. As you drove through these two fairs—one from the past and one from the future—you drove along the construction of what was surely the largest arrangement of overpasses and underpasses and turnoffs in the world.

You continued on through the outer reaches of the borough of Queens, the superhighway a great sunken gash in the landscape amidst the shattered remains of the road it replaced, the Horace Harding Parkway, just a service road now.

Just past Huntington, the road ended, dumping you off onto the Northern State Parkway. Now you could continue along in a sylvan setting, woods on both sides of the road for a while, and then through villages and farms as you drove out east, until even the parkway emptied into the rather rural serenity of central Long Island. You continued on through a series of two-lane roads with occasional traffic lights in the village centers.

On one occasion, in 1958, my mother and father came to the end of the Northern State Parkway and onto a brand new road that had just opened called the Smithtown Bypass.

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It did exactly what it said it did. It bypassed the village of Smithtown by swinging around it to the south and then back up further to the east of the town back on the Jericho Turnpike again. There was absolutely nothing on this road, for its entire twelve-mile length, except for one thing. About halfway, at a particular turnoff, there was a single commercial structure—the first highway fast-food place I had ever seen—called Carvel. We always stopped. At this point, we would have traveled over two hours from the city, and it was a welcome break. My sister and I would get out from the back and run over to the counter to order a swirl of vanilla or chocolate ice cream in a cone. Our parents would follow.

The view in every direction from that Carvel, basically barren and very lightly inhabited, was typical of all of central Long Island at that time. Some of it was farmland. But most of it was nothing at all. Just miles and miles of flat open fields and scrub oaks. The suburbs of New York City had spread out onto Long Island, but hadn't gone all that far out yet. Houses were going up in places with names such as Huntington, Syosset, and Farmingdale, but beyond that—nothing, except a few bars, bowling alleys, delis, hardware stores, and some feed stores. Along this stretch, however, there were often big highway billboards, all identical, that read PATCHOGUE—LARGEST DOWNTOWN RETAIL CENTER ON LONG ISLAND. The suburbanites were coming. As they tumbled farther and farther out, this sign expressed the hope that little Patchogue—a big farm town—would become the center of commerce throughout this large, barren area.

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There was a historical explanation for all that nothing in the center part of the island. In colonial times, the Dutch had settled Manhattan and Brooklyn at the west end. And the English New England settlers, coming across in boats from Connecticut, had built villages on the eastern end of Long Island, most notably in the Hamptons. Neither had bothered the other.

Indeed, one of the landmarks in the center of Long Island was Pilgrim State, a grim mental hospital that looked like something out of Dickens. It rose up out of the gloom ten stories high in the middle of nowhere—a facility built in the nineteenth century, far away, I suppose, beyond the eyes and ears of a big city that didn't care about those inside it. Now suburbia was coming. Maybe ten, maybe twenty years away. Would Pilgrim State survive?

My sister and I would look out from the back seat of our parent's car at this facility as we drove along—from ten miles away we could see it across the fields—and it was a scary thing indeed.

We could also roll down the windows of Dad's tailfinned 1959 Buick sedan, look up and see military aircraft in the sky. This was the era of the long, drawn-out Cold War battle with the Soviet Union. These fighter planes glinted in the sun and emitted a thundering roar as they flew by. Often, you could see they were fully armed with guns and missiles. And sometimes you could watch them do tricks and rolls in the sky. These planes were from the Grumman Corporation, which had a 22,000-acre facility just west of Riverhead where

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they built and tested warplanes for the Pentagon. At this time, the F9F fighter planes, sleek black jets, would be put through their paces and eventually find their way to the flattops of Navy aircraft carriers. Of course, here on the ground, we were told, in the woods of Mount Sinai, there were Nike Missiles. If the Soviets launched a nuclear attack, we were just the push of a button away from a full retaliation.

As you got farther and farther out into eastern Long Island, the roads got even narrower, if that was possible, but at the same time you began to pass down the main streets of some very different sorts of villages. These were beautiful New England affairs. They included Eastport, Center and East Moriches, and Westhampton Beach, each more charming than the one before it. Scattered throughout them as you drove, in the inlets from the big bays to the south, the headwaters came up to the highway between the towns—thereby defining their borders—and allowing the creation of smelly duck farms, long coops of low buildings housing the ducks, grassless stretches of waterfront where they could run around quacking noisily by the thousands. Separating them from the main road was a low turkey-wire fence, often—and especially on windy days—pasted with duck feathers. Cars would stop and kids and parents would get out into this fetid stink, and they would throw bits of bread at the ducks.

To the north, all roads ended at Riverhead, the solid county seat right where the headwaters of the Peconic River meet Peconic Bay. Riverhead had courthouses and administration buildings, lawyers' offices and busy restaurants and department stores. Riverhead was a thriving agricultural market town as

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well—second only to Patchogue—with produce from the farms brought there and either sold in a big country market or shipped out aboard the freight cars of the Long Island Rail Road to New York City.

In any case, after a three-and-a-half-hour drive along the south shore, you would arrive at this 50 mile long peninsula they called the Hamptons, a series of even more magnificent set-piece New England colonial towns. Bordering them on the north were the beautiful harbors and inlets of Peconic Bay; to the south, the Atlantic Ocean. I soon learned, after we settled in this community, that the local population consisted of farmers, fishermen, merchants, and service people, along with a few artists and writers who just wanted peace and quiet. As for those who drove out from New York City in the summertime, there were only two groups. One of these groups consisted of the "500," the Blue Bloods, who lived sumptuously with servants, friends, and family from June to September in giant mansions behind hedgerows down by the beach. The other was the tourists, mostly white-collar or blue-collar workers and their wives and children, out for their two-week vacations.

Of course, these summertime visitors drove the local economy. The locals suffered high unemployment during the winter. Many went on welfare.

And, as I soon discovered, the tourists were not interested in the Hamptons. They were more interested in a resort and motel town at the very end of the Hamptons called Montauk. The Hamptons were just among the things in their way to get out there. To give an example of how important Montauk

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was, consider this: On the border of Montauk and Amagansett (one of the Hamptons), the owner of the newly built Driftwood Beach Resort, Sam Weissbein, moved heaven and earth to get a coveted 668 (Montauk 8) telephone exchange instead of a dreaded 267 (Amagansett 7) exchange. He was ten feet into the Amagansett fire district. Who would come to his resort if people reading the travel sections of newspapers in Manhattan saw all the ads for the beautiful Montauk resorts, but the Driftwood resort seemed to be in Amagansett? Where was Amagansett?

And so, we drove that year of 1960 through downtown Southampton, Water Mill, Bridgehampton, East Hampton, and Amagansett, zoomed out of town to the east of Amagansett, and almost immediately drove down a hill onto a long, flat, straight-as-an-arrow two-lane road that headed for Montauk. Immediately on heading down that hill, the weather changed—remember this was before cars had air conditioning—and suddenly it was five degrees cooler, damper, and saltier. To the left and right were low dunes, and beyond them—unobstructed by trees back then—on either side, the water. Napeague Harbor was on the left, the Atlantic Ocean was on the right, and, particularly in the mornings, a salty fog would roll in, sometimes even masking the hundred or so billboards that lined the side of the road right there, advertising one or another of the different attractions in Montauk.

Very often at this time, and simultaneously with this, the reach of the New York City AM radio stations—this was before FM—surpassed their limits. Reception would

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fade when you came down the hill from Amagansett onto the long straight Napeague. And then there were just the stations from Connecticut.

In just a few hundred yards, the billboards ended and then you could continue down this road, straight for six miles, through a barren wasteland of sand dunes.

After that, the road climbed up into a series of hills and woods to run for the next three miles along the top of a cliff, sharing the views of the Atlantic Ocean with a variety of summer resorts with names such as Wavecrest, Panoramic, Umbrella Inn, Gurney's Inn, Surf and Sand, and the Breakers.

Finally, eleven miles past Amagansett, you descended to the Main Street of downtown Montauk proper. There were clothing stores and real estate offices, souvenir shops and ice cream parlors, a pharmacy and general store (now owned by my father), a liquor store, bars and restaurants, several fish and tackle shops, two churches, and more motels.

In downtown Montauk, particularly along the ocean, were resorts with names such as the Atlantic Terrace, the Ronjo (in Hawaiian motif), the Sands Motel, the Maisonettes, Neptune Motel; restaurants with names like the Shagwong, Trails End, and the Montauk Diner, as well as several gas stations and a miniature golf course.

In an odd way, however, the downtown looked like a Wild West town. The buildings, for the most part, were undistinguished; there was neither street furniture nor sidewalks. And there wasn't even curbing. You just pulled up in front of where you wanted to go.

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Also, there were often people on horseback downtown. People from the two ranches out to the east toward the lighthouse often came to town that way. They'd just tie up and take care of their business.

Montauk, in this sense, was a world of its own. Also, as a peninsula fifteen miles long and five miles wide, it seemed to be, geologically, almost a little world in miniature. There were cliffs and dunes, a fishing village full of boats, a lighthouse, a golf course, a yacht club, miles of unpaved rumrunner roads through the woods, a center of town with a small lake where people went out in sailboats and rowboats. There were lots of clam bars. It had the aforementioned two ranches with cattle on them, giant dunes that moved as the wind blew the sand up one side and down the other, a big old hotel on a hill, a boardwalk and surf club on the ocean, ponds, harbors, and miles of beaches. The shiny new motels and inns beckoned. And there were a whole lot of happy sport fishermen. Montauk, it was found, was the "Fishing Capital of the World," with its fishermen holding more titles for record-size fish than any other place anywhere. It was also, with its ocean breezes, "ten degrees cooler than New York," which in the age before air conditioning meant quite a bit indeed.

In those days, in the travel sections of the Sunday editions of the six daily newspapers in Manhattan, there were sometimes two full pages of small advertisements from motels and hotels in Montauk announcing those facts and beckoning families to drive out for a vacation by the sea. COME TO MONTAUK!

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