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Adventures in Toll Collecting: From Woodstock's Zonked to the Malodorous Chicken Truck

Author : David Gurliacci

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The new \$3.9 billion Tappan Zee Bridge is now open to traffic. But already demolished is the site of my favorite summer job.

For three summers during my college years in the 1960s, I worked as a toll collector for the New York State Thruway on the Tappan Zee Bridge and later at the New Rochelle toll barrier.

It wasn't the sexiest of gigs, but the pay was good and I sure learned a lot about people on the road.

An elderly couple once stopped at my Tarrytown booth and asked: "which exit is Niagara Falls?" I reviewed

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my official NY Thruway Map (remember those?) and said, “That’s exit 50, sir.” Reassured they were heading in the right direction, they then asked, “Is that exit on the right or left?” I responded, “Bear right for 389 miles. You can’t miss it.”

The Woodstock festival happened during one of my summers in the booth. Of course, nobody expected a half-million kids would show up for the upstate event, especially the folks at the thruway.

But after the festival started, thruway officials realized the mobs would eventually be heading home, clogging the bridge. Because the music was expected to end late on Sunday, many of us temp-collectors worked overtime into the wee hours of Monday morning.

Of course, the music didn’t end until Monday, and the usual morning rush hour carried as many burned-out hippies as it did business commuters.

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I remember one station wagon that pulled in my lane, caked in mud up to the windows and stuffed with a dozen zonked-out kids.

“Hey man,” the driver said with eyes that struggled to focus. “We don’t have any money” (to pay the 50 cent toll). “How about these instead?” He handed me an orange and a warm Coke.

Most days, life as a toll collector on the Tappan Zee was a delight, as I was usually assigned the outside lane, also known as “the country club” because of its green vistas and views of the mighty Hudson River.

The job wasn’t very demanding and gave me plenty of time to listen to the radio — my eventual career path. But then I was transferred to the night shift at the New Rochelle toll barrier.

Overnights on the New England Thruway (I-95) were dominated by trucks — hundreds of them. Most feared by all toll collectors was one vehicle — the chicken truck — heading to the Hunts Point Market that usually came through about 4 a.m.

This flatbed truck was piled high with open chicken coops stuffed full of terrified live birds on their way to their demise at markets in New York City. Careening down the highway at top speed, the chicken truck left

in its wake a plume of noxious effluent of chicken feathers and bird poop. So when the truck slowed to a stop to pay its toll, this cloud of gas and seepage would continue into my lane.

As old-timer toll collectors warned me, when the chicken truck chooses your lane, close your windows and door. Wait until the driver is ready with the toll money and open your door only wide enough to accept the cash, then seal yourself in the booth and don't breathe.

Now with E-ZPass, the chicken truck doesn't even slow down and toll collectors can all breathe easier.

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Jim Cameron has been a Darien resident for 25 years. He is the founder of the Commuter Action Group and also serves on the Darien RTM and as program director for Darien TV79. The opinions expressed in this column are only his own. You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com

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