



July 11, 2010

Sign commemorates National Road history in Kirkersville

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KIRKERSVILLE — Rosa Lee Newkirk has lived all of her 85 years on the National Road in Kirkersville.

When she was 4 years old, the interurban line — an electric rail system from Columbus through Newark to Zanesville — stopped running after 27 years of service. "It's almost a figment of my imagination," Newkirk said.

She remembers the tracks in the road that are now paved over with concrete.

On Sunday, Newkirk added another memory of the road: the dedication of a Historical National Road Interpretive Sign in front of Kirkersville First United Methodist Church. The sign was the fifth of 60 that will be installed and unveiled on the Ohio Historic National Road, said Cyndie Gerken, president of the Ohio National Road Association. "The National Road is interwoven in its history with Kirkersville," said Doug Smith, the Licking County Commissioner who sponsored the Kirkersville sign.

The National Road reached Licking County in 1831 and came to Kirkersville in 1832, spurring growth in the state and village.

The first interurban in the United States ran between Newark and Granville. The line opened in Kirkersville in 1902, bringing electricity to a town that had previously used gas lights.

The interurban brought a growth spurt for the village that had been bypassed by the railroad that ran through Kirkersville Station, later called Outville.

Between 1913 and 1929, the Kirkersville depot was operated by Harry Clark as his Confectionery, located in the building west of the present-day Park National Bank. Kirkersville lost most of its traffic after the arrival of Interstate 70 south of the village. The sign stands next to the third version of National Road Milestone No. 236 in front of Kirkersville United Methodist Church, which originally was owned by Presbyterians, Newkirk said.

The sign was the first of four that will be unveiled in Licking County, the largest Ohio county the road passes through, Smith said. Two will be presented at 2 p.m.

Wednesday at the Hebron Administration Building and the last will be at 1 p.m. July 24 in Brownsville.

The signs were funded by a \$200,000 National Scenic Highway Fund grant — \$40,000 of which was matched by the Ohio National Road Association, Gerken said. The sign was unveiled in connection with the church's ice cream social, making it the type of event Gerken hoped for.

"This helps them learn more about their history," Gerken said.

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