



“The Snow Cruiser is here,”

my dad exclaimed as we piled into our family car and hurried to the Star Diner along newly widened U.S. Route 20 on the eastern edge of Avon, New York.





The Historian's Notebook



By John W. Percy

It was a gloomy late November afternoon in 1939. Admiral Byrd's gigantic Snow Cruiser dwarfed our '36 Chevy when we pulled into the parking lot. The crew driving it from Chicago to Boston had stopped for a meal and word quickly spread through the little village. Quite a crowd gathered to gape at the apparition.

The Snow Cruiser was the brainstorm of physicist and Antarctic explorer Thomas C. Poulter, scientific director of the Armour Institute, who looked for a better means of exploring the frozen continent. The giant vehicle was designed and built in Chicago's Pullman shops in just three months, then driven to Boston for shipment aboard the *USMS North Star* to participate in Byrd Antarctic Expedition III. It was a complete home on wheels, weighing 75,000 pounds fully loaded. When provisioned, it could support a crew of five for a full year. The behemoth was over 55 feet long, nearly 20 feet wide and 16 feet high. Each 10-foot wheel was turned by an electric motor powered by diesel engines. It had provision for carrying an airplane on its back for aerial reconnaissance.

Its huge size precluded shipment by rail or lake boat, so it was driven over carefully selected roads, much of it across Indiana and Ohio on U.S. 30. It was a very circuitous route with avoidance of low underpasses, narrow and load limited bridges and sharp turns. While en route, it was under the captaincy of Dr. Poulter. On its way it was accompanied by police and press vehicles attracting ever-larger crowds and increasingly puffed up newspaper articles. There were many mishaps on the cross-country odyssey including getting stuck in Ohio trying to ford a creek. From Pennsylvania it headed up through New York State. Passing through Western New York it appears to have traveled U.S. 20 to Lancaster, then continued eastward on U.S. 20. We know Poulter stopped near Pavilion to allow a group of blind children to touch the machine. It made many stops along the way, including Avon, where I gaped at it as an eager 6-year-old while my father took the accompanying photos.

The farther east it traveled, the more people swarmed to view it. Framingham, Massachusetts claimed over 70,000 cars

jammed the town to see the *leviathan* before it shipped out. Those of you over 75 years of age may have been among the onlookers. Tell us here at *WNY Heritage* what you saw and where you were.

Great hopes were held out for the Snow Cruiser. Upon debarking at the Bay of Whales the ramp partially collapsed under its great weight and it lurched onto the bay ice where its huge, but smooth, rubber tires spun until the electric motors overheated and it came to a halt. After more than a week's struggle the monster was coaxed to West Base where it was put aside in a makeshift snow-block shelter. It was useless for its intended purpose and was left behind when the expedition was terminated early because of World War II. It was found again, buried under many feet of snow, by a crew of the 1958 International Geophysical Year. It has never been seen since. It was speculated that the Soviets stole it but it is more likely that the ice shelf on which it was retired broke off, floated out to sea and the Snow Cruiser is now resting on the sea floor. I still have vivid memories of it nearly 70 years later. 📷