

The Ins and Outs of the Squirrel Hill Tunnel

By Barbara Klein

The Squirrel Hill Tunnel stands as a symbol — a symbol of man's ingenuity as well as his inability to drive 55. Less than a mile long, this stretch of road has been prompting drivers to inexplicably hit the brakes for nearly 50 years.

But the inevitable slow ride that awaits us — no matter what time of day or what kind of weather — also affords an opportunity to look around. And who among us hasn't thought about leaving the car behind, opening any one of those doors lining the tunnel wall and stepping through to the other side? As I approach the tunnel this Thursday morning, I slow

down ... and take a hard left onto the island that sits between the east- and west-bound

lanes. I then proceed on foot to the front door, the wind and noise following close behind.

Foreman Larry Hoffman is obviously expecting company, and quickly ushers me inside. The tunnel's foyer is like an oversized garage. Off to the right is an office. This no-frills cubicle reminds me of a '50s-style kitchen, minus the major appliances. The same beige tile that adorns the tunnel walls is much in evidence here. The desk, chairs and phone look like they might have been unearthed back when the engineers first started excavating. The only item that appears conspicuously out of place is the computer. And according to Larry, that piece of modern machinery is just about 2 months' old.

Dressed in orange T-shirts, hard hats and neon green vests, Larry and the members of his crew — Kevin Joyce and Joe Arlet (Leonard Fulmer, it seems, is working the east end of the tunnel today) — are enjoying the relative calm of a typical commute. Right now, it's about 8:30 a.m., and nothing catastrophic or even mildly exasperating has occurred. But that can change in the blink of

a headlight.

Accidents, cars running out of gas, debris on the road, fires — anything can happen. In the event of such an emergency, Larry says, "We call 911, do traffic control and aid the people the best we can." But whenever the crew is forced to close the tunnel, no matter if it's just for a minute or two, Pittsburgh drivers tend to lose their good humor. "We have more obscenities screamed at us," Larry reports.

Considering the number of cars that rumble through the Squirrel Hill Tunnel on any given day (about 86,000, according to statistics compiled during the month of July

1998) and the average number of accidents (six) and breakdowns (32) per week, chances are Larry and the guys have heard every conceivable conjugation of foul language.

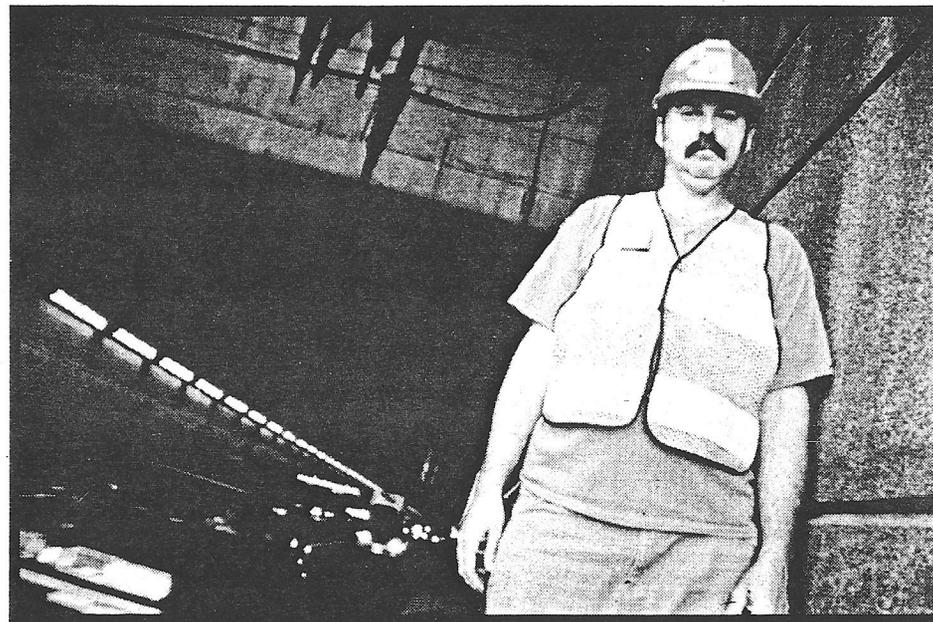
But that comes with the territory. Working the tunnel is a 24-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week, 365-days-a-year operation, Larry explains. There are three shifts: 6:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., 2:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. to 6:30 a.m. Everybody rotates times and tunnel assignments. During his 18 years of service, Larry has worked at all three local tunnel establishments — the Liberty Tubes, Squirrel Hill and Fort Pitt. Although he doesn't have a favorite location, he definitely prefers the daylight hours.

Gracious host that he is, Larry offers to take me on a tour of the place. We start by going up. The tunnel is actually a three-plus-story building. And although the east- and west-bound sides have the same setup, they function independently of one another.

On the second floor, in what looks like a big

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Photo by Jen Ulrich



Tunnel worker Leonard Fulmer

chest of drawers, is the power source for the lights and fans. The tunnel boasts more than 4,600 light bulbs, eight fans and a yearly electric bill approaching the \$200,000 mark. Cell phone companies (or at least their equipment) have also taken up residence here. They rent space so that we may enjoy uninterrupted communications with the outside world while passing through (or getting stuck in) the tunnel. Even with their stuff taking up room, the entire area is amazingly neat, clean and uncluttered.

The third floor houses enormous fans. Each one is something like 16 feet around. Their job is to force fresh air into the tunnel or draw the exhaust fumes out. Carbon monoxide levels are constantly being monitored.

"That's about it," Larry says as we head back down the stairs.

"Wait a minute. What about the doors?"

Larry sighs. I guess I'm not the first person to ask this question. He explains that if there's an emergency, like a fire, those doors offer motorists safe passage from one side of the tunnel to other. But that's it. There is no (legal) way for pedestrians to traverse the length of the tunnel.

"So how do you guys get from one end to the other?" I ask.

"We drive."

And that concludes the tour. I return to my car and prepare to pull out onto the parkway. With a few deft waves of his red flag, Larry has already stopped traffic for me.

I can hear the screaming now. ☞