Region's Growing Network of Rail-Trails Surges in Popularity

by Ben Cramer

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When Central Pennsylvania started to open up to widespread settlement and development in the 19th century, railroads were often the only option for the transport of goods and people. The region's hilly topography made railroads ideal for long-distance travel, but that same topography limited the railroad tracks to specific locations. Railroads require their rights-of-way to be relatively flat for long distances, and in central Pennsylvania such corridors are usually only found by following waterways. The rivers and creeks of the region, over millions of years, have carved hollows and canyons through the hilly regions, creating narrow corridors that are sometimes only wide enough for a single lane of travel. In the 19th century these river bottoms were essential for the railroads that allowed the development of the region. Of course, the era during which railroads were dominant has now passed, leaving central Pennsylvania with many unused rights-of-way. When tracks are abandoned, railroad companies often remove the iron rails and wooden ties to be used elsewhere, leaving behind narrow dirt lanes. A national rails-to-trails movement has arisen in recent years to promote the acquisition of these old lanes for public use, and their conversion into finished trails for biking, walking, and cross-country skiing. Tens of thousands of miles of recreational trails, often paved or with packed gravel surfaces, have been created in this fashion across the country. Pennsylvania is one of the leaders in rail-trail opportunities, and widespread resources for family fun and fitness are the result. One can take a leisurely afternoon stroll on a tourist-oriented path like the Jim Mayer Riverwalk in Johnstown or the Allegheny Portage Railroad Trace outside of Altoona; or take an extreme sojourn on the network of bike trails that will soon extend uninterrupted from Pittsburgh to Washington DC.

The fact that these trails were formerly railroad tracks leads to some unique benefits for recreational users, especially bikers. The rail-trails are mostly flat, with only very mild inclines, as they follow waterways. This layout, which was necessary for railroad travel in hilly areas, has resulted in trails that are both scenic and offer extended trips for those who want long-distance biking opportunities but without a lot of climbing. One surprising exception is the Clearfield-Grampian Trail, which extends between those two towns in Clearfield County. This trail, as did the railroad that preceded it, slowly but surely climbs to the top of a ridge over the course of several miles.

The importance of rivers and railroads in Pennsylvania's development has lent a historic aspect to many of these rail-trails. A good example is the Clarion-Little Toby Trail, which travels from Brockway in Jefferson County to Ridgway in Elk County. Along this trail, you can see the barely visible foundations of several different ghost towns that arose during the logging days of the late 19th century, but then disappeared along with the local forests. This trail also takes you to the site of a 1902 train wreck, plus what little is left of an earthen dam that collapsed during a 1936 flood. Here we can see both the history of resource extraction in central Pennsylvania, and how nature is reclaiming these formerly exploited areas. Another interesting characteristic of Pennsylvania's rail-trails is that they sometimes lead into canyons and river bottoms that were only wide enough for a single railroad track, and to this day still resist the

temptation of road building. A spectacular example is the Pine Creek Trail, which is one of the most outstanding tourist and outdoor destinations in the northeastern United States. This trail is more than sixty miles long and follows a former Conrail track, through mostly roadless areas at the bottom of Pine Creek Gorge (also known as the Grand Canyon of Pennsylvania) in Tioga and Lycoming Counties. Such a trail is a boon to nature lovers and recreationists, offering eye-popping scenery and communing with nature that formerly were only available to train engineers.

The widespread conversion of old railroads to recreational trails is a relatively recent phenomenon. However, the popularity of these trails and their value to nearby communities were dramatically demonstrated recently, on one of central Pennsylvania's premier rail-trails. The scenic and relaxing Lower (rhymes with "flower") Trail follows the Frankstown Branch of the Juniata River through farms and small towns in Blair and Huntingdon Counties. In September 2004, portions of this trail were severely damaged by flooding from Hurricane Ivan. Local volunteers were expecting repairs to cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, and to take years while donations and volunteer labor were solicited. But in a miracle of community spirit, Grannas Brothers Inc., a construction firm in Williamsburg, volunteered to repair and repave the trail as a gift to local citizens and outdoor lovers from around the region.

Everyone wishing to get more time outdoors, for everything from physical fitness to natural exploration to a quiet stroll, should take advantage of these rail-trails, which are rapidly growing in both popularity and length. Other noteworthy trails in the region, which have not been mentioned above, include the Houtzdale Line Trail in Clearfield County and Ghost Town Trail in Indiana and Cambria Counties. To learn more about existing rail-trails and plans for new ones, visit the website for the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. The book *Pennsylvania's Rail-Trails,* with descriptions of all the existing trails in the state, is also available at many local bookstores.

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http://pennsylvania.sierraclub.org/moshannon/OTT/OTT05-9Rail-Trails.htm