

The Great Allegheny Passage is a nature lover's scenic route through southwestern Pennsylvania and western Maryland. Sections like this one that's nearly halfway between Pittsburgh and Washington offer a picturesque backdrop for trail travelers.



f you're a true trail believer, what you discover at a Pennsylvania Pedal, Cycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee meeting might change your life. That was the case for Bill and Pam Metzger. They discovered each other.

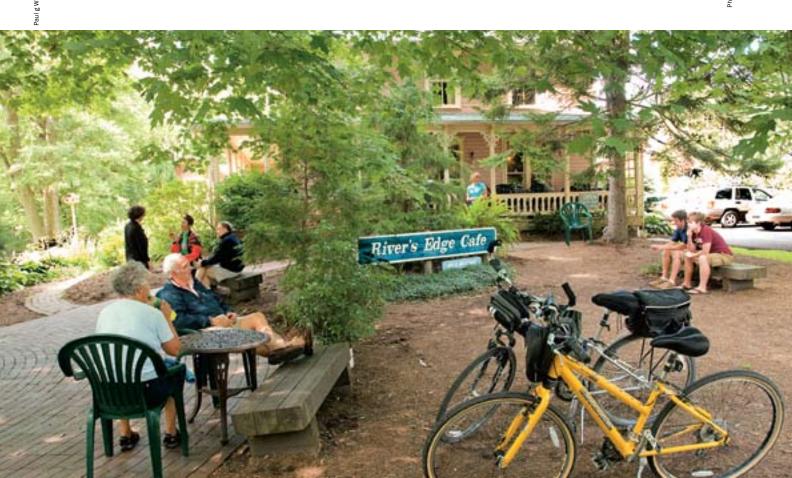
It was August 1996. He was a co-founder of the Montour Trail near Pittsburgh. She was a staff member of the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, a national trails advocacy organization. Something in that trail mix sparked a romance that blossomed after the meeting in Harrisburg.





The beauty along the 150-mile passage changes with the seasons.

In the winter, a cross-country skier near Rockwood, Pa., above, can enjoy ice formations as well as an exhilarating trek on the trail. In warmer weather, those following the passage often take advantage of the businesses that have cropped up along the route, such as the River's Edge Café, below, in Confluence, Pa.



When they married the following June—the second time around for each—they broke with the traditions of their first weddings: his an elaborate Catholic ceremony, hers a simple justice-of-thepeace affair. Instead, friends and family wore light, summer clothes and reclined on lawn chairs as they watched Bill and Pam exchange vows at the Hendersonville trailhead of the Montour Trail. A guitarist and singer duet serenaded the gathering.

"A couple of people rode through on bikes, but they weren't guests," says Pam. "It was an appropriate setting. Next to me, the trail was the most

important thing in Bill's life."

Her husband flashes his trademark gotcha-grin and adds: "We were both trail people, and it seemed to be the right thing to do. It also was cheap."

The couple moved to Confluence, a town 90 miles east of Pittsburgh, into a

home with a "down our driveway" proximity to the Great Allegheny Passage. Today, the Metzgers bike an average 10 miles daily and often more. Bill rides a hand-powered recumbent trike because he has a neuromuscular condition similar to multiple sclerosis that affects his ability to walk. Pam uses a recumbent bike that, like her husband's, has a wide seat and a comfortable backrest. On their rides, they've spotted a wide array of animals—bald eagles, osprey, a bobcat, beavers, river otters, turkeys and deer—as well as neighbors and long-distance riders.

Bill, who bikes an average of 2,600 miles a year, primarily on the passage, also put his familiarity with the trail and his background as a writer, editor, photographer, mapmaker and railroader to creative use. He penned "The Great Allegheny Passage

Companion," a mile-by-mile guide to the history and heritage of the trail.

"I thought I was as qualified as anyone to do it, and I've always had a strong interest in local history," he says. "Biking on that trail has saved my life. I had a stent placed in one of my arteries in 2004 and [biking] helps my heart. Trails are good for your physical, mental and emotional well-being."

And apparently for marital well-being as well. The Metzgers' story is one of many connected to the Great Allegheny Passage that are as varied as the modes of transportation used on the trail. Even the passage itself has a story. The internationally known and award-winning pathway meanders 150 miles through the rolling hills of southwestern Pennsylvania and western Maryland, connecting Pittsburgh to Cumberland. Along the way are tales of rivers and railroads and foundation-supported efforts to offer the public a year-round experience of the region's beauty.

It all began in 1983 with plans to extend a parking lot and improve an access path to the Youghiogheny River in Ohiopyle State Park, 75 miles southeast of Pittsburgh.

At the time, the only passage of note in the area was the abandoned right-of-way of the Western Maryland Railway, which intersected the access path from the parking lot known as the Ramcat Trailhead. Rafters, kayakers and canoeists would park their cars at the trailhead and carry their watercraft along the rough dirt path through about 150 feet of woods before they reached the Youghiogheny.

While work was being done on the parking lot and the path, Park Manager Larry Adams decided to start a bike trail by clearing a three-mile segment of the Western Maryland right-of-way that ran from the trailhead to a hiking path descending from Sugarloaf Mountain. Initially, he did not continue clearing the right-of-way any farther, but that soon changed as the trail grew in popularity.

"People began riding their bikes on it and wanted to know when it would be completed to Ohiopyle," Adams recalls. The first section, a 9.5-mile segment that runs southeast from the park, officially opened in 1986 and used part of the abandoned Western Maryland Railway.

It was the start of a movement in southwestern Pennsylvania to create a network of trails, most converted from abandoned railroad rights-of-way, which could be used for a variety of non-motorized "We were both mountain bikers. We had heard about the trail and thought we'd try it out. It was in pretty good shape but felt very isolated. I don't think we saw anyone else on it that day."

When they arrived in Confluence, they saw a For Sale sign posted on a large hemlock in front of two rundown frame houses along the Youghiogheny River. They made a \$200 down payment on the spot.

"Our friends told us the houses were too far gone to be saved," Yakubisin recalls. "They told us to push them into the river. We told them to give us nine months."

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Caren Glotfelty, Environment Program director, The Heinz Endowments

travel. It also marked a more intentional effort to unite expansion of recreational opportunities with promotion of the region's natural and built environment.

Today there are a number of trails in different stages of development throughout southwestern Pennsylvania. In addition to the Great Allegheny Passage, other regional trails include the Allegheny Valley Trail, destined to connect Pittsburgh and Erie; the Three Rivers Heritage Trail, designed to run in and around Pittsburgh; and the Montour Trail, which will link Coraopolis, a community west of Pittsburgh, to Clairton, a town south of the city.

Anna Marie Yakubisin of Squirrel Hill and her late husband, Bob Benns, took their first bike trip in June 1988 from Ohiopyle to Confluence. "It was a spur-of-the-moment decision," she says. The couple opened the River's Edge Café and Bed & Breakfast the following April. They sand-blasted the exterior wooden siding and painted it a deep rose color. The café and its oak tables and chairs occupy the first floor of the two-story house. The one-story B&B with three bedrooms is behind it. The River's Edge was the first B&B in Confluence. Since then, three restaurants and more than a dozen B&Bs and guest houses have opened in and around the town.

The growing number of trails in southwestern Pennsylvania has opened up the region to a range of visitors and economic opportunities. Along with bicyclists, there are anglers, birders, hikers, walkers, runners, cross-country skiers and snowshoers who use the trails. Some have traveled thousands of miles to cross them.

John Markle, co-owner of the Trailside, a restaurant in West Newton, has met a lot of these trekkers. Since his restaurant opened in May 2007, it has had customers from every state and more than 20 foreign countries, including China, Israel, Japan and New Zealand. Markle says the Great Allegheny Passage is popular with out-of-state and foreign visitors—even among those from the most scenic territories on earth—"because of the friendliness of the people they meet along the way. That's one comment we hear all the time. People say they also are pleased with how smooth and well-maintained the trail is. And they like the fact that it goes somewhere—all the way from Pittsburgh to our nation's capital. It gives them a sense of accomplishment, and rightfully so."

The passage got a public relations boost in 2007 when the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, the nation's largest trails organization, chose it as the first inductee into the group's hall of fame because of its "beauty, number of users, historical significance, total length and geographic diversity." Adding to the passage's appeal has been its connection to the C&O Canal Towpath that runs from Cumberland, Md., to Washington, D.C. Together, the two trails total an almost continuous 335 miles, with the exception of a few gaps, and can take travelers from downtown Pittsburgh to the U.S. capital.

The Heinz Endowments has invested \$1.5 million in grants for the development of the Great Allegheny Passage. The foundation also has joined other funders in supporting various conservation and recreational organizations whose work includes promoting development and use of land and water trails. Among these groups are Bike Pittsburgh, Friends of the Riverfront, Riverlife Task Force, Venture Outdoors, the Nine Mile Run Watershed Association and the Pennsylvania Environmental Council.

"We believed that the passage would give a big boost to this growing reputation of our region as a green and healthy place to live," says Caren Glotfelty, the foundation's Environment Program director. Last summer, she joined the increasing number of bicyclists who have traveled from Washington, D.C., to Pittsburgh on the Great Allegheny Passage. "It has put Pittsburgh on the map of bicycling destinations."

Encouraging local residents to use the region's recreational assets also is among the foundation's environmental priorities, adds Glotfelty. Tom Baxter, executive director of Friends of the Riverfront, which is based on Pittsburgh's South Side, appreciates that emphasis. "[The Endowments] understands what it takes to introduce or re-introduce the public to all the natural resources the city and region offers," he says. "There's been an amazing upsurge in local and long-distance [trail] usage...
I'm seeing more and more riders from my office window."

Alice Cottone, who retired in 2006 after 35 years as an art teacher in the Steel Valley School District, is a lifelong outdoors enthusiast. The former Girl Scout leader backpacks, camps, canoes and kayaks. She began biking as a child and started cross-country skiing in the early 1980s.

Today, Cottone is a year-round trail user. She rides and cross-country skis on the Montour Trail and the Great Allegheny Passage, which is close to her home in Munhall, a borough south of Pittsburgh. When there is enough snow, she skis about five miles, round trip, on the trail every morning from the Hot Metal Bridge on Pittsburgh's South Side to the Glenwood Bridge near the city's Hazelwood neighborhood.

"That's the great thing about retirement. I have more time to bike and ski," she says. "I get out several times a week... I love it because the passage runs along the [Monongahela] river. You see the birds on the water, the city skyline. Even though it's urban, it's a nice experience."



Bicyclist Max Kellog, above, stocks up on energy drinks at the Trailside convenience store in West Newton before returning to his 50-mile ride on the Great Allegheny Passage.

The store and adjoining restaurant do brisk business because of their proximity to the trail.

Below, joggers follow the Three Rivers Heritage Trail along the North Shore section of Pittsburgh, which is across from downtown. Work is under way to connect this trail with others in the region.



The unfinished sections of the passage total only about four miles, including a 0.7-mile portion through Sandcastle water park east of Pittsburgh. Work on these gaps has been held up by several obstacles. Among them have been challenges in obtaining money and permits to build a bridge over active railroads, and difficulties in reaching an agreement with the water park's previous owner, who recently sold the property. Completion of the entire Great Allegheny Passage is now scheduled for next year.

Other challenges have included debates over

the conversion of abandoned railroad rights-of-way into trails, a process that intensified in the early 1990s. Some individuals and groups have been concerned that such conversions would harm industrial growth along these corridors by eliminating rail service or limiting the

availability of rail lines that might be needed for economical transportation in the future.

However, Jennifer Kaleba, spokeswoman for the national Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, says rights-of-way on the Great Allegheny Passage and other trails across the country were abandoned because rail companies determined that they were no longer viable. If trail organizations had not obtained those corridors, private individuals or organizations could have purchased them and blocked access by residents and visitors. "The reality is that trail conversion is preserving these corridors for the public," she says.

Linda McKenna Boxx, president of the Allegheny Trail Alliance, agrees. She adds that the abandoned rights-of-way that are now part of the Great Allegheny Passage had little future usefulness because of the redundancy between the abandoned Western Maryland corridor and one still used by CSX Corp. In fact, CSX trains run parallel to the passage along its entire route, Boxx says.

Addressing concerns like these as well as the technical and logistical issues that arise with a massive trail project has not been easy for the alliance, a coalition of seven rail-trail organizations in southwestern Pennsylvania and western Maryland. It was formed more than 15 years ago to coordinate and encourage those working on the trail, even as many public officials and even some regional trail builders expressed doubts that the project could be completed.

"[The Great Allegheny Passage] in those years was considered a pipe dream, even by some of our supporters... They thought it was just too big, too ambitious, too hard," recalls Boxx, whose dedication to the development of the passage has never wavered. "But we were determined to make the dream a reality, and the Endowments has been with us since the early years."

Boxx, who bicycles frequently along the passage, says the 2006 renovation of the 3,300-foot Big Savage Tunnel near the Pennsylvania/Maryland border finally convinced the skeptics that the trail would be completed. The deteriorated tunnel had to be rehabilitated because there was no way around it to make the Maryland connections to the C&O Canal Towpath that link the passage to Washington. Work on the deteriorated tunnel included stabilizing the existing, but decaying, concrete liner in the tunnel; installing an aggressive drainage system; and adding lights and big metal doors that could be closed to prevent the tunnel lining from freezing and cracking during harsh winter weather.

"The opening of the Big Savage Tunnel was the key to the success of the trail," she explains. "[Without it] we would have had a nice regional trail, but not an international bike touring destination." h

