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The Ghost Town Trail

by Stephen S. Howie



Courtesy Indiana County Parks



Deep within the western Pennsylvania countryside once known for its abundance of coal, iron ore, and timber, atop one of the rolling hills of the Blacklick Valley, there is a neglected Russian Orthodox graveyard, its chalky stones jutting out in all directions like the splayed fingers of a buried giant. The cemetery, abandoned in 1930, has stood through the boom years and weathered through the bust, the earth sliding forward to give it a better view of what once was a thriving industrial valley where 50-foot saws cut 80-foot trees, steel elevators dropped men down into the earth while furnaces bellowed steam and pumped coal fumes up into the clear blue sky, and dome-shaped coke ovens were lined up like white blisters along the valley floor below.

Top: Modern travelers pedal the Ghost Town Trail Near Dilltown.

Above: In 1906 workmen from the Vinton Lumber Co. posed for this photo on the Blacklick and Yellow Creek railroad.

Historic Photographs Courtesy of Leona Clarkson Duza

But today, if you push aside the mountain laurel that obscures the view from the cemetery, you'll see bikers and joggers where there once were sawyers and miners, people wearing not lamp-lit hard-hats but blue jeans and sweaters, all enjoying a quiet pedal back into time along the Ghost Town Trail.

Opened in the fall of 1994, this 15.5-mile trail of crushed limestone is part of America's rails-to-trails movement, which is working to reopen nonfunctional rail lines as bike paths. The Ghost Town Trail weaves and glides along Blacklick Creek, under the wooded hills that first drew the railroad, past towns that were long ago dismantled or left to rot. Tracing its path gives riders and walkers a glimpse of the area's industrial heritage, of the men and women whose ghosts and spirits may still



Courtesy Indiana County Parks

The Ghost Town Trail crosses creeks like Laurel Run on restored trestles.

haunt the stone foundations scattered across the rustic terrain. The western trailhead is in Dilltown, a small community nestled in the hills of western Pennsylvania,

about an hour east of Pittsburgh. A wooden pavilion greets visitors with picnic tables and rest rooms.

Riding along the trail out of Dilltown, the first thing that strikes the eye is not the original industry that made the area famous, but a more recent boom in Christmas trees. Until recently, Indiana County laid claim to the contended title of "Christmas Tree Capital of the World." Lending credibility to that claim is a Christmas tree farm that extends out to the right of the trail, almost from its inception.

As the homes start to fade away and woods close in on either side, the neat rows of plump Christmas trees give way to Blacklick Creek, its rocky bottom orange from the residue of 70 years of mining. The edge of the trail is littered with piles of railroad ties, a reminder that it, unlike the creek, is still in its infancy.

Around a few turns is one of the best views on the trail of Chickaree Hill (on the horizon to the right), infamous in the area 60 years ago for its high-quality moonshine.

The first ghost town comes four miles along the trail, and is designated by a blue sign that simply states: "Wehrum."

During its prime, Wehrum was a booming mine town of 600 people. A mining complex with six smokestacks loomed over the Blacklick. Behind it stood four rows of houses, a company store, and a bank. Next to the mining

complex sat a small passenger train station and a freight station, where coal was dumped into Pennsylvania Railroad cars with names like "The Mountain Goat."

Today, the only reminders of Wehrum's existence are two brick columns from the mining complex that jut up from the undergrowth and a solitary home visible through the trees on the left.

Past Wehrum, the Blacklick weaves away from the trail, and a more concrete reminder of the area's mining past comes into view on the right—a sixty-foot hill of black coal powder, streaked orange and white.

A possible source of this historical reminder is Lackawanna No. 3, a towering eight-story mining complex that used to stand near the halfway point of the trail. The mine, built in 1899, was funded by coal barons including Warren Delano III, the maternal uncle of Franklin D. Roosevelt. It included eight experimental coke ovens and a four-story coal washer.

Just past Lackawanna No. 3, the trail and Blacklick Creek both fork. Although the trail's most impressive standing structure, the Eliza Furnace, is just past the split to the right along the main path that continues past Vintondale to Nanty Glo, take the time for the four-mile Rexis branch side-trip, which has plenty of unspoiled woods and a wealth of history.

It was on this branch of the Cambria and Indiana Railroad that one of the region's most notorious train robberies occurred in the fall of 1924, on the passenger train known as the Stump Dodger. On board, two local officials were transporting a small safe containing more



Before You Go

This article would not have been possible without the help of local historian Denise Weber, who has published an engaging and comprehensive book about the Blacklick Valley's heritage entitled *Delano's Domain: A History of Warren Delano's Mining Towns of Vintondale, Wehrum and Claghorn, Volume I: 1789-1930*. To request a copy (\$23, plus \$3 shipping; PA residents add 6% sales tax), please write to Weber at 291 Olive St., Indiana PA 15701.

For brochures and maps of the trail, contact Norcam (the local nonprofit community development corporation) at 814-948-4444.

Getting There

There are three parking areas for the Ghost Town Trail, all accessible from US 22 between Blairsville and Ebensburg (the latter lies about 22 miles north of Johnstown on US 219). To reach the westernmost trailhead, in Dilltown, take PA 403 north from US 22.

To reach the Rexis branch parking area, take the Vintondale exit from US 22 and drive north to Vintondale, then turn left on the main street. The parking area is three-quarters of mile along on the right.

The easternmost trailhead, in Nanty Glo, is in the parking lot at the rear of the Blacklick Valley Ambulance Station and the local fire hall. To get to Nanty Glo, take PA 271 north from US 22.

than \$33,000—the payroll for the Colver mine. According to news accounts, two well-dressed foreign men boarded the train at Rexis. When the train stopped en route to pick up another passenger, the foreigners pulled out guns and made off with the payroll. Two men were later arrested and convicted of the crime, but only \$3,000 of the stolen money was recovered. The safe and the rest of the money have never been found.

The Rexis branch continues along the north branch of the Blacklick Creek, past clusters of mountain laurel along the riverbank and sloping hills of hickory, sugar maple, oak, and, infrequently, fir. The side trip ends abruptly, overlooking a wide stretch of the Blacklick. The bridge that used to span the creek was destroyed by the 1977 flood. Trail officials plan to replace it this fall.

A quick, slightly downhill ride back to the trail fork brings riders to the Eliza Furnace, one of Pennsylvania's best-preserved iron furnaces and the site of one of the Blacklick Valley's most talked-about ghost stories.

The furnace, a solid, 50-foot stone structure topped by iron bellows, was built in the mid-1840s with the financial backing of David Ritter, an English businessman interested in extracting ore for iron production from the mountains along Blacklick Creek. The furnace went into operation in 1845, but difficulty transporting the iron and the poor grade of the local ore led to its closure in 1849.

Legend has it that Ritter hanged himself at the front of the furnace after his young son fell into it and burned to death. Local believers say that on cold winter nights when the moon is full, you can still see Ritter's body swinging from the furnace entrance. Ironically, Ritter's business partner, Lot Irvin, is also believed to have committed suicide, hanging himself at the site of another failing furnace in Mercer, Pennsylvania.

Entrepreneurs who followed Irvin and Ritter into the Blacklick Valley seem to have learned from the fateful business decisions of their predecessors and turned their attention from iron ore to the rich coal veins and abundance of timber in the region.

Vintondale, the largest town along the trail, was built around the turn of the century to house workers for the local timber and coal industries. By 1906, it had a population of more than 3,000, and was quickly gaining a repu-

tation as a wild town, with plenty of fights, murders, and hard living.

Vintondale has outlived its fiery reputation as well as the downfall of the coal industry, and is now a quiet village nestled into a wooded hillside. Rising over the rows of modest, A-frame homes is the spire of a Russian Orthodox Church topped with a characteristic golden onion-dome. It serves as a reminder of the Eastern European immigrants brought in a century ago to mine the coal and cut the timber, many of whom outlasted the boom and remained after the natural resources of the area had been depleted.

The final section of the trail, from Vintondale to Nanty Glo, includes some of the area's most striking countryside as well as a final ghost town and one more local legend. The trail climbs into the woods up a slight grade, and massive rhododendron bushes share sunlight on the hillside with an assortment of sugar maples, hickories, and birches.

To the left, down a steep drop, the Blacklick Creek has transformed from a wide, lazy river to a narrow, rushing torrent of white water and rapids. The land has changed with it, from quiet rolling hills to jagged cliffs and fields littered with rocks.

Little remains of Bracken, the trail's last ghost town. But down the rocky hill through the trees, riders might catch a glimpse of the Lady in White, who has reportedly haunted the area ever since she was killed in the early 1900s by her lover. According to local news reports, the ghost has been known to appear in the back seats of cars—so tandem owners are forewarned to always ride in twos.

The trail comes to an abrupt end in the town of Nanty Glo, whose name is a Welsh phrase meaning "streams of coal." Towering over the town, black across the horizon, is a slag heap that could pass for another of the valley's rolling hills if it had any trees, a reminder of a heritage of mining and industry that has left its mark on the land and on the people who still haunt the towns and their remains along the Ghost Town Trail. ■

— Stephen S. Howie is a Pittsburgh newspaper journalist and freelance writer.