

Ghost Town Trail



by Ralph Scherder

photos by the author

Walking or riding the Ghost Town Trail, Indiana County, is about more than just recreation. It is a journey through history, the story of how an area once an epicenter for coal and ironmaking industries was all but forgotten, and then reclaimed. Now, almost 100 years after the many towns along its course were abandoned, the Ghost Town Trail was acknowledged as a National Recreation Trail in June 2003 and named Pennsylvania's Trail of the Year in 2020.

The Ghost Town Trail is a 32-mile trail that runs from Saylor Park in the town of Black Lick to Route 422 in Ebensburg. There are also two extensions—the Hoodlebug Trail, which connects Black Lick to Indiana, approximately 10.5 miles, and the C and I Extension near the town of Vintondale, another 12 miles. All of the trail, with the exception of the C and I Extension, is surfaced with crushed limestone for a smooth bike ride or easy

walk. The C and I Extension is currently undeveloped, still consisting of remnants from the old railroad bed, but there are plans for resurfacing.

The history

Indiana County's coal industry boomed in the mid-1800s. The Eliza Furnace operated between 1846 and 1849 producing over 1,000 tons of iron annually. Located near the trail's halfway point outside of Vintondale, Eliza Furnace is considered one of the best-preserved hot blast iron furnaces in Pennsylvania. Another hot blast iron furnace, the Buena Vista Furnace, was built in 1847, and is located on the trail about ½-mile west of PA 56. Both sites

have historical markers that tell the story of the coal industry in this area and the role each furnace played in that industry. These markers are worth stopping to read while on a bike ride.

In fact, almost every placard along the trail tells an interesting story about something that happened in that particular location. For instance, along the C and I Extension, you can read about a train robbery gone bad and the potential for hidden treasure in that area. And near Black Lick, you can read about the trolley lines that used to shuttle people from town to town and how crossing the creek along the Ghost Town Trail was the most harrowing part of the journey.

The trail passes many other historical sites including Bracken, Armerford, Lackawanna No. 3, Wehrum, Scott



Every year, more than 60,000 people visit the Ghost Town Trail between May and October. The mile post markers are just one of the unique items you will find here during a visit.

Glenn, Webster, Beulah, and Claghorn. The coal industry began to decline in the late 1800s but held on for several more decades. And then, one by one, mines closed and each little town was abandoned. By the beginning of World War II, the people had moved on and the structures they left behind slowly sank back into the earth. Of all of the towns, Wehrum was the largest and is where you will find the only house still standing from that era.

The trail follows the path of Pennsylvania Railroad's Ebensburg and Black Lick line. In 1991, the Kovalchick Salvage Company donated 16 miles of the former line for the creation of the Ghost Town Trail. Additional donations in 1993 and 2005 by the Cambria & Indiana Railroad and others extended the Ghost Town Trail to its present length.

Access points

The main stem of the Ghost Town Trail has seven main access points, or trailheads, with ample parking and information available at each site, including mileage charts. The trailheads are Saylor Park, Heshbon, Dilltown, Wehrum, Twin Rocks, Nanty Glo, and Ebensburg.

Perhaps one of the greatest aspects of the Ghost Town Trail is that once you park and set out on the trail, you have a quality outdoor experience. Only in a few places, such as when you pass through one of the towns, does the road come close to the trail. So, you may want to plan which access point you want to go to ahead of time. On several occasions, I have burned a lot of time driving from one access point to another trying to decide where to start.



Historical markers along the trail offer stories of the area's history.



The Ghost Town Trail, Hoodlebug Trail, and C and I Extension combine for approximately 46 miles of quality hiking and biking.

Of course, this part of Indiana County is beautiful, so even the circuitous routes between points do not seem bad.

Once on the trail, though, I enjoy the opportunity to immerse myself in nature and enjoy the scenery and any wildlife I encounter along the way. It seems there are always deer nearby, or frogs in the boggy areas, or a plethora of birds flitting in the tree branches. More than anything, the Ghost Town Trail is a great place to go to clear your mind and focus on nature's beauty.

Fishing opportunities

Most of the good fishing in this area can be found close to the Hoodlebug Trail near Homer City. Within a short drive of the trail, you will find Yellow Creek, Little Yellow Creek, and Laurel Run, all of which are stocked with trout. And there is Yellow Creek Lake, which offers a lot of warmwater fishing and boating opportunities.

Blacklick Creek, which closely parallels the Ghost Town Trail from Black Lick to Vintondale, suffers from acid mine drainage. If you look upstream as you cross over the North Branch Blacklick Creek using the Main Street Bridge in Vintondale, just across the Cambria County line, you will see what appears to be fountains of water. These are actually boreholes that were drilled into the creek bed, and the water gushing out at a rate of 1,080 gallons per minute is the acid mine drainage that renders Blacklick Creek virtually lifeless during its entire 25-mile course. But, it will not be that way much longer.

Construction of an acid mine drainage treatment facility is scheduled to begin in mid-2021 and be completed in 2022. Hopefully, this will change the dynamics of Blacklick Creek the way similar projects have improved other Cambria County streams. For example, active treatment facilities on

Lancashire No. 15 and Barnes & Tucker Mine 20 have turned the headwaters of the West Branch Susquehanna River into a viable wild Brown Trout fishery. The same could happen to Blacklick Creek.

At a glance, Blacklick Creek is a beautiful stream filled with huge boulders and deep pools. It is the perfect backdrop for the Ghost Town Trail. As you ride or walk the trail, you can hear the constant flow of the nearby river, a soothing sort of melody that adds to the overall atmosphere. To have that stream running clear and clean again would be a major attraction and economical boost for the small towns along its course.

Past cleanup projects have already helped the South Branch Blacklick Creek, which joins the North Branch just outside of Vintondale. Although the South Branch is not stocked by the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, several local sportsmen's clubs raise funds to stock trout in the sections around town.

In July, I crossed the foot bridge over the North Branch Blacklick Creek and looked down at the stream and saw trout gathered around some debris that washed up against the bridge abutment. The trout had come from the South Branch, which is clean but warms up too much to support trout in the summer. Unfortunately for the fish, the water pumping up out of the abandoned mines on the North Branch Blacklick Creek is cold enough but too polluted to support the fish. On a brighter note, if everything goes as planned, the North Branch Blacklick Creek as well as the main stem Blacklick Creek will soon flow both cold and clean enough for trout year-round.

The Ghost Town Trail is a great place to find solitude, beautiful scenery, and abundant wildlife. Throw in some great nearby fishing opportunities, and there is something for everyone. ☐