



Discover America

Newsletter of the American Discovery Trail Society

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ADT Featured Trail Old Plank Road Trail



A biker rides along the lush prairie grasses in the Dewey Helmick Nature Preserve.

Photo courtesy of Jim Nugent

Each of the local trails that comprise the American Discovery Trail brings a unique story of hard work and dedication by the people of that area to bring it into being. The Old Plank Road Trail (OPRT) in northeastern Illinois is a shining example of what time and effort can accomplish.

This 21-mile paved recreation and nature trail follows along what was once the Michigan Central Rail Road (MCRR) between East Gary and Joliet on the ADT's northern branch. The railroad, built in the 1850s, was called the Joliet Cut-off because it allowed trains to avoid going through Chicago and was one of the first rail connections between Illinois and the East Coast.

But before it was a railroad, it was developed as a plank toll road.

The Illinois legislature passed an act in 1849 to develop a plank road from Oswego to Indiana by way of Joliet. Although the entire road was never built, by 1852-3 the plank road was constructed between Plainfield and Joliet. Soon the government began allowing plank road companies and railroads to exchange rights-of-way and cross state lines. By 1855, the plank road had become a railroad line.

Although it took only 6 years to build the Joliet and Northern Illinois Railroad, it took over 20 years to return the railroad line to a trail. When rail service over the line ceased in 1972, the first moves were taken to buy the right-of-way and convert it to other uses.

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Trails Save Ecosystems

Often trails are appreciated for their recreational or transportation benefits. But trails can also be the impetus for preserving unique environments by bringing people to them and educating them about their values.

The Old Plank Road Trail has accomplished just that. What was initially seen as an old abandoned rail corridor with scrubland bordering it was viewed in a new light when the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory showed local residents how many pieces of original prairie still existed along the right-of-way.

Despite being so close to a major metropolitan area, some areas of the Old Plank Road Trail had never been cultivated. Because the original right-of-way was purchased only a couple of decades after the first settlers came to the area, much of the land was still in its original state. Native tall grass prairie will now remain untouched, as it has been for centuries.

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A native bright yellow compass plant

Photo courtesy of Jim Nugent

New Maps and Guides Now Available Online

The long-awaited new trail guides are now available through the American Discovery Trail Society website, with maps to follow soon. The Society has been working for years on an updated format for its trail data books and print-on-demand maps.

The trail data books are now available in an electronic, PDF format downloadable immediately after ordering. These turn-by-turn trail descriptions include mileage between turns, landmarks, and latitude/longitude of every waypoint, as well as general route information. The descriptions are written in an east to west direction of travel.

The data books are now available on both a state-by-state and a regional basis. For the states where there is both a northern and southern route or where the route splits (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Colorado), all route segments within the state are included. State Data Books are only \$5 each.

For the long-distance traveler, Regional Data Books include the same information as the State Data Books, and cover the country in four segments: Delaware to Cincinnati; Cincinnati to Denver (Southern Branch); Cincinnati to Denver (Northern Branch); and Denver to California.

Trail information is also available in a GPX format that can be downloaded to a GPS or compatible software. These files are also only \$5 per state, or you can purchase both the state trail guide and GPX information for just \$7.

Through a partnership with the online map company Offroute, the American Discovery Trail route across the entire country will soon offer a series of 1:100,000 topographic U.S.G.S.-based maps. The 18-inch-by-24-inch maps will be printed on durable waterproof material.

There will also be an option to generate a custom map anywhere in the country. When you order your maps online, Offroute will generally print and ship them to you on the same day.

Visit www.discoverytrail.org and have a look at these new products today!



Tinsel, the Weimaraner, stayed warm and dry while his people worked hard digging new trail.

Photo courtesy of Pat Hayes

Ohio

By Pat Hayes

We had an excellent work party at Scioto Trail State Park and Forest on April 15–19. We started Wednesday by moving the trail off the bridle path between Bethel Hollow Road and Stony Creek Road and onto 2791 feet of higher and drier ground. Work on that section was completed on Thursday except for some McLeod work that was finished on Friday. On Saturday and Sunday, we added another 1988 feet of new trail, once again moving it from bridle trail to foot-traffic-only trail.

We had a total of 30 volunteers from Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Kentucky working over 532 hours to build and blaze over 4700 feet of new trail.

We gained a new Scioto Trail maintainer in Shane Cooke, a lineman for American Electric Power. After helping to build the new trail, and with some instruction from master blazer Susie Hulls, he blazed the new trail.

The only discouraging incident that took place was finding fresh horse hoof prints on one

of the new “Foot Traffic Only” stretches of trail. In defense of the riders though, we had not yet put the “Foot Traffic Only” decals on all the Carsonite posts.

We were well fed thanks to Herb and Susie Hulls again turning out excellent meals from the chuck wagon and we were clean at the end of the day due to the portable hot shower.

Ohio state coordinator Pat Hayes again represented the ADT Society at the Adventure Summit, February 20–21, at Wright State University in Dayton.

The event drew over 5000 outdoor enthusiasts from all over the Midwest. Ann Bancroft, polar explorer, educator, and lecturer was the featured speaker at the two-day expo. There were demonstrations and clinics by experts in areas such as snowboarding, skiing, cycling, kayaking, climbing, and others as well as representatives from many organizations and businesses spreading the word about their products and services.

California

By John Fazel

It is with great sadness that I report the passing of the American Discovery Trail’s friend, Brian O’Neill, superintendent of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA). O’Neill helped in developing the American Discovery Trail as it passed through the San Francisco Bay Area to its terminus at Pt. Reyes National Seashore, also part of GGNRA.

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A portable shower is worth the wait after a day of working on the trail.

Photo courtesy of Pat Hayes

National Discovery Trails Act to be Reintroduced in Congress

As this issue of the newsletter was going to press, our legislative effort to authorize a new category of long-distance trails to be known as National Discovery Trails, and to designate the American Discovery Trail as the first of these new trails, was moving forward in the 111th Congress, as Rep. John Sarbanes of Maryland plans to introduce the National Discovery Trails Act.

The bill aims to create a nationwide system of interconnected pathways with the American Discovery Trail as its backbone. At press time, we do not have a bill number, but we will soon be contacting our membership to ask for your help on the bill. The national discovery trails legislation has always been a bipartisan issue, and we will be seeking cosponsors of the bill from both parties. This could be the year that the legislation passes both the House and the Senate, **if we can demonstrate enough grassroots support.**

You can help! Ask your representative to become a co-sponsor of the National Discovery Trails Act. As soon as the bill is introduced, the ADT Society website – www.discoverytrail.org/news/issues – will contain information to help you do just that, including how to contact your representative and sample letters that you can modify to add your personal touch. Hard copy letters or phone calls often receive more attention than e-mails, but a quick e-mail letter can definitely help if that is all you have time to do. Ask your friends and family to do the same. The more people who contact their representatives, the better our chances.

Why do we want this designation? We need the designation to fully mark the ADT. Without it, we are in legal limbo and many federal and other land managers will not allow us to mark the trail on lands they administer. This designation adds legitimacy and visibility to the trail and will result in much more use and *support*. It will supply a missing link to the National Trails System by providing the connections of a coast-to-coast trail.

California

(Continued from page 2)

A memorial for O'Neill was held at Crissy Field in San Francisco, which is the same location where we had our big event when the American Discovery Trail Adventure Team completed its cross-country journey on Sept. 2, 2000.

O'Neill was one of the keynote speakers for the Discovery Trail's Grand Opening as well as for our Rockport Trail Blazer Day at Ft. Mason on Sept 22, 1992. That, by the way, was the very first National Trails Day with the other big celebration being held in Washington, D.C.

O'Neill was a continuing leader and champion of the ADT, parks, open space, and trail organizations throughout the country. He was a strong influence with the Bay Area congressional delegation regarding legislation, including the American Discovery Trail.

We have lost a true friend.

Iowa

As the Iowa Trails Council celebrates its 25th anniversary, efforts are underway across the state to improve and expand their trails.

Raccoon River Valley Trail Association members spoke to the state legislature

seeking stimulus money to finish their trail, calling it a shovel ready project. The association has helped to raise almost three-quarters of the cost, purchased the property, surveyed it, built bridges, and hired an engineer. All that is left is grading and paving.

Rachel Garst of the Whiterock Conservancy is promoting a 16-mile trail that would connect Coon Rapids to the cities of Bagley and Laynard to become part of the American Discovery Trail. She argues that the semi-active railroad right-of-way would be an even safer route for ADT users because it would take the trail off a lightly used road.

The Southwest Iowa Planning Council is recommending improvements for bringing the T-Bone Trail into the city of Atlantic.

Missouri

A ribbon-cutting was held on June 6 to celebrate the opening of the Mississippi River Overlook near St. Louis. The 40-foot tall viewing platform offers amazing views of the Gateway Arch and St. Louis skyline. The opening celebrates the realization of the dream of the Gateway Arch architect, Eero Saarinen, to create a memorial embracing both sides of the Mississippi River.

For those who prefer biking with others,

the Missouri Department of Natural Resources sponsored a five-day, four-night tour of our nation's longest developed rail-trail, Katy Trail State Park. This year's ride started in Clinton and traveled east to St. Charles at the rate of 35 to 65 miles per day. Shuttle transportation was also available. For information on future events, see www.katytrailstatepark.com.



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A monarch butterfly feeds on the nectar from the milkweed plant.

Photo courtesy of Jim Nugent

Ecosystems

(Continued from page 1)

The ecosystem of the tall grass prairie consists of over 200 native plants, flowers, and grasses. These, in turn, support over 2,000 species of animals, birds (175 and counting), insects, and microorganisms that are normally seen only in this type of environment. The tall grasses can reach 8 or 9 feet in height and below the ground their roots dig several feet deep to tap moisture during times of drought. The Nature Conservancy has stated that the tall grass prairie is “the most diverse repository of species in the Midwest [and] ... habitat for some of the Midwest’s rarest species.” Shooting star, wild bergamot, prairie phlox and the compass plant are just a few of the plants growing along the trail. Blue herons, egrets, mink, muskrats, and many other animals all reside in this

friendly terrain or the Dewey Helmick Nature Preserve, a nearly 13-acre tract that contains prairies and wetlands and borders the Old Plank Road Trail.

Trail people often appreciate nature and are willing to work to preserve it. The Old Plank Road Trail Association works with the local forest district on Prairie People Work Days to help restore natural areas within the county. Activities include seed collecting, brush removal, prairie planting, garbage pickup, and more. Volunteer trail sentinels can bike, walk, in-line skate, or cross-country ski along the trail to make sure the trails remain enjoyable for all by assisting visitors and reporting problems. Thanks to these volunteers and the trail, we can still, at least in places, look out over a sea of grass and feel the wonder of the first homesteaders.

Did you Know?

If you are looking for some more reasons to get active, consider these statistics about the benefits of getting out of your car and exercising from the www.bikesbelong.org/newstats website:

- Fourth-grade boys who bike or walk to school have lower body mass indices and body fat than non-active commuters. Kids who actively commute to school are also more likely to remain at a healthy weight.
- Thirty to sixty minutes of daily physical activity such as biking to work is associated with lower blood pressure.
- Bicycling is the most popular outdoor activity for American youth. In 2008, Americans aged 6 to 17 went on 1.15 billion bicycling outings, averaging 74 outings per bicyclist.
- Americans spend more on transportation than any other category except housing. On average, 18% of household expenditures are for transportation.
- The Virginia Creeper Trail generates \$1.59 million in annual spending, supporting 27 full-time jobs.
- Land use plans that include non-automobile transportation improvements and more comprehensive policies to guide development are positively associated with both transportation-related and leisure-related physical activity.

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Four recumbent bikers enjoy the Old Plank Road Trail. Photo courtesy of Jim Nugent

Old Plank Road Trail

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First, the Will County Forest Preserve District organized a group of 14 municipalities to request a federal grant. The grant was turned down but local residents started using the abandoned railroad as a walking trail.

Next, the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory showed how many original prairie remnants still existed along the abandoned right-of-way. This created interest in the area and by 1980 a citizens group formed a trail association.

Later, a county planning consultant produced a plan for the right-of-way. He was concerned that the project name, "Abandoned Penn Central Railroad Right-of-Way" wouldn't inspire people so he pushed for a name change. Recalling the history of the rail line, the name was changed to "The Old Plank Trail" so citizens could remember the past and envision the future for this land. Things appeared to be looking up.

Then another setback happened. A title search of the original deeds found reversion clauses that might impede its rail trail conversion. That's when the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) stepped in. They investigated condemning the land and building a bikeway.

But this got the attention of some local opposition who decided to organize. This caused IDOT to disengage from trail acquisition activities in the area. By the mid-1980s, local voters had passed a ref-

erendum opposing the use of tax dollars for building the trail.

One might think that these setbacks would have discouraged trail proponents. But as opposition grew, supporters became galvanized. National and local conservation groups got involved and a special support group called the "Old Plank Road Trail Association" was formed to raise public awareness, publish a newsletter, and hold special events. Finally in 1988, voters approved a \$50 million bond for forest preserve land acquisition. At last there was money to buy the trail corridor.

Still citizens on both sides of the fence (trail?) continued to battle. Opponents convinced the state legislature to restrict county forest preserve powers but the governor was able to amend the overly restrictive bill.

At long last, in 1992, the county forest preserve was awarded \$1 million from the Illinois Bicycle Grant Program and the 20-mile stretch of Penn Central right-of-way was finally bought for \$3.2 million. Trail construction began in 1996 and by 1997 the first 12 miles were paved and the trail was finally opened with a ribbon cutting ceremony.

Persistence and hard work paid off. The results of all the efforts of the many trail supporters for those many years are now being enjoyed by thousands of people, including American Discovery Trail users.

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American Discovery Trail Society Annual Membership Meeting to be Held on August 29 in Omaha, Nebraska



The American Discovery Trail Society’s annual membership meeting and board of director’s meeting will be held August 29 in Omaha, Neb., near the site of the newly completed Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge over the Missouri river. The bridge has become part of the ADT route where it links Iowa and Nebraska.

The ADT Society annual meeting is open to society members and all are invited to attend. The meeting will be held at the beautiful, environmentally friendly National Parks Regional Headquarters located at 601 Riverfront Drive in Omaha and will begin at 8:00 a.m.

It will be followed immediately by the annual board of directors meeting at the same location. Officers and directors will be elected and general business conducted.

Quotes from ADT hikers:

“Started the ADT and so far I am loving it, but suffered a setback. Will resume shortly, because my feet are getting the trail itch again. Thanks to the staff of the ADT for helping out and I will be more than happy to promote this organization as I travel this wonderful trail!”

Howard Lee

“On April Fools Day we started walking across the country on the American Discovery Trail. . . . Our comprehensive plan has two phases: Don’t quit for two weeks, see how it goes. . . One of the joys of the hike so far has been the abundance of wild flowers and flowering trees along route. ”

Rick & Jenny Putnam

“Today is our 40th anniversary and I thought we should do something really special to celebrate. ‘Do you have anything in mind?’ Paul asked. ‘Well, actually, I do,’ I replied.

And so goes this crazy plan to walk across West Virginia a small section at a time.”

Paul & Sharon W.

Making Connections...

Coast to Coast

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