

Prof pegs path's historical value

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ELLEN O'CONNELL/Staff Photographer Bob McCullough, from left, professor of history at the University of Vermont, talks to Bob Skulsky, executive director of the Civic Partnership, during his visit Wednesday at the Greater Hazleton Chamber of Commerce. Also pictured is Mike Bloom, OSM/VISTA volunteer, and Tom Ogorzalek, of Butler Enterprises, trail volunteer.



A portion of the trail between Eckley Miners Village and the Hazle Brook Tunnel in Foster Township.

(Council Ridge, or Hazle Brook) tunnel, and picked up the abandoned Lehigh and Luzerne Switchback and used that abandoned railbed."

Ogorzalek explained the history of the area, and how he believes the path of the railroad became the bike path.

"The railroad originally was the Lehigh and Luzerne (Railroad), and connected with Lehigh Valley Railroad," Ogorzalek said. "They wanted to get to the breaker at Harleigh, but they had to tunnel through the mountain. The tunnel was giving them some problems. There was some bad rock in there. The tunnel was delayed, so they built a temporary switchback (gravity railroad) over the mountain to

A bike path between Hazleton and Eckley built around the turn of the last century may be one of only two existing paths of its kind in the northeastern United States, according to a University of Vermont professor.

Bob McCullough, an associate professor of history who teaches historical preservation and is writing a book on cycling, came to Hazleton on Wednesday to see if the 6½-mile path is still there.

"I think it's one that I walked all of my life as a kid across the Stockton Mountain," Bob Skulsky, executive director of the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership, which is overseeing development of Greater Hazleton Rails-to-Trails. "There are large remnants of it still open; from four-wheelers and quad traffic, it's not grown in."

McCullough met with Skulsky as well as Tom Ogorzalek, a rails-to-trails volunteer and local history buff who works for Butler Enterprises, and Mike Bloom, a Volunteer in Service to America, or VISTA, volunteer helping with development of the local rails-to-trails.

McCullough said he learned about Hazleton from a book titled "Cycle Paths: A Practical Handbook" written by Issac Potter in 1898, which was published by the League of American Wheelmen, or LAW.

The book reports that LAW's Hazleton chapter built the path.

"They decided in 1897 that they needed a better way of getting to Eckley from Hazleton," Skulsky said. "So they built a bike path to Eckley."

Ogorzalek brought mining maps that dated to 1904 and 1939. He was able to follow the path for its length - a portion of which mirrored an abandoned rail line.

"You can see a trace of it through the woods," Ogorzalek said. "If it was built in 1898, they probably went a little west of the

get to Eckley. That was built in 1854. It worked for two years until they finished the tunnel and they abandoned it. They took up the rails and moved them to Harleigh to reuse them.

"I think when these wheelmen came through 50 years later, they used that portion (of the railbed) above the tunnel to get to Eckley."

Ogorzalek said the Stockton Mountain and Hazle Brook Tunnel were originally named Council Ridge.

"The real name is Council Ridge, not Stockton," Ogorzalek said "You won't find Stockton Mountain on any map."

Skulsky said he found an interesting piece of information in Potter's book.

"In this publication, they're talking about the building of the cycle path," Skulsky said. "It cost \$1,300, or about \$200 a mile. Nowadays, for our hiking and biking path, we calculate \$200,000 a mile."

McCullough said the late 1890s is when bicycling started to become popular.

"When bicycles were first manufactured, they were the high-wheel bicycles ... being ridden by wealthy men," McCullough said. "By the early 1890s, the safety bicycle had been developed - two wheels, same size, chain driven, rear wheel. More and more people began bicycling, The clubs stopped being places for wealthy socialites."

McCullough said he researched the northeastern quarter of the United States - New England, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Delaware, Ohio, Indiana and Washington, D.C. - and found only one other trail that still exists - one that connected Coney Island with Prospect Park in New York.

One of the earliest trails in this area was in Wilkes-Barre.

"One of the earliest trails led from Kingston to Wyoming to West Pittston," McCullough said. "In 1887, when the state division of the League of American Wheelmen held its meet in Wilkes-Barre, they rode that path. It was eight miles. That made all of the national papers."

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