

Here is a bit of history on the Musketawa Trail written by trail advocate, Joel Mikkelsen

From Railroad Corridor to Rail Trail Corridor

In the early 1990's, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources purchased an old railroad corridor running from the east side of Muskegon, passing thru Ravenna and ending near the small town of Marne in Ottawa County. Soon after the purchase, a series of public meetings were held culminating in the writing of a master plan for the "Ottawa-Muskegon Trail"

In 1995, the DNR contracted with a Youth Corp group to start the construction of railings and decking on the 13 railroad trestles along this 26-mile corridor. The DNR purchased treated lumber and other supplies for this trestle work. By the end of the summer, a 20-foot trestle was completed. It was named the "Bridge of the Giants" the railings were 6 feet tall.

After a phone call to the DNR, Harold Drake, Joel Mikkelsen, and Dean Rook met in Ravenna in April 1996 to plan the formation of a "Friends of the Trail" group. A May meeting in the Ravenna Village Hall was attended by 30 interested people including four enemies of the trail. It was a stressful yet productive meeting. The first order of business was to continue the trestle construction. The DNR supplied the plans and the lumber left over from the previous year.

On the second Saturday of June 1996, about 14 people met at the Sullivan trestle to learn how to construct the railings and deck for a 22-foot railroad bridge. There were three obstacles to this first work project: understanding the DNR's plans, 14 people who had never worked together, and no work crew leader. By the end of a long hot day, the first trestle was 75 percent completed.

Much was learned that first day, more skills and knowledge were acquired on the next two rather small bridges. The DNR's plans were modified and a work crew leader emerged. We also learned that it did not matter what day of the week a project was scheduled, we simply should expect above normal temperatures and a million mosquitoes. Additionally, we discovered that no two trestles were built alike.

The fourth trestle was an 80-footer over the Rio Grande Creek just north of Conklin. The volunteer work crew liked this project. The heat, mosquitoes, poison ivy, two Saturdays and one evening after our regular jobs, the trestle was ready for bicycle, horse, and pedestrian use. We now had a system down so the next six trestles ranging from 15 to 36 feet were at most one-day projects each.....and before we knew it, the summer was gone.

The 120-foot bridge over Black Creek on the east side of Muskegon was saved for the cool days of October. Weatherwise, we picked a perfect eight days. Our plan was to work two Saturdays plus two evenings in between. Phil Wells of the DNR joined us for the first day. This work crew of six or seven people finished the job at 5:00 p.m. on the second Saturday. Gary DeKock was one of our dedicated volunteers and the first official user of this completed trestle as he rode his bicycle to and from the work site that day.

On that beautiful autumn day, we started the practice of driving a silver railroad spike after we completed each major project. After 11 trestles and a thousand hours of volunteer time, we drove our first silver spike into the deck of the Black Creek Trestle. Twelve bridges done with one to go.

That last railroad bridge was at the midpoint of the trail in Ravenna. It was 216 feet long and 43 feet above Crockery Creek. The DNR had planned to contract out the major project but after seeing the quality and quantity of work done by the volunteers from the Friends of the Musketawa Trail, our seasoned work crew was offered the challenge.

Our goal was to complete this trestle during the 30 days of June 1997. To accomplish this, we brought in a few blue-collar workers from the West Shore Snowmobile Council. The DNR made a few design changes and had a state prison crew build the decking in 10 x 12-foot sections at their facility. After the decking was transported to Ravenna, we were ready to get down to some serious work. A total of 25 people donated over 250 hours to complete this major project. We appreciated the use of a front-end loader from the Village of Ravenna to set the sections of decking in place. Time to drive our second silver spike.

July 1997, saw the first paving on the Musketawa Trail....only a demonstration mile in Ravenna but such an important mile. We could actually see what our finished trail would look like. Eldon Pusey, our oldest volunteer drove

the third silver spike. Compliments to William Porteous and the Crossroads Trail Committee of Reed City for coming up with the idea of the demonstration mile.

Tree plantings, seven picnic tables and many bird houses were fall and spring activities. Before the grading, gravel, and paving of the east half, 11 miles, we replaced the bulkheads where culverts went under the trail. Remember the wind storm of May 31, 1998? It certainly left its mark on the trail corridor in the area near Conklin. We cut up a lot of free firewood that June. During August and September 1998, the paving crew stayed just ahead of the bicycles and roller blades. Finally, we had a real trail, 12 miles of pavement plus three parking lots. A beautiful Sunday afternoon in late September was the setting of a dedication ceremony, ribbon cutting, trail ride, and the driving of a fourth silver spike.

The spring of 1999 was a year of discontentment as we learned that a paved trail, limited snowfall, and studded snowmobiles are a poor mix. No paving on the west 12 miles of the trail would be done until a solution to this problem was found. Attempts to get a ban on the use of snowmobiles with studded tracks were unsuccessful. In March 2000, a trail design change was agreed to allowing trail construction to restart that summer.

This new trail design called for a paved trail for bicycles and roller blades and a parallel gravel trail for horses and snowmobiles. The result was a trail 20-22 feet wide making tree and brush removal a necessity. We worked hard in August and early September to stay ahead of the grading and gravel. Our work was rewarded with a paved trail from Marne to Muskegon...the longest paved rail trail in Michigan. So on September 30, 2000, we sponsored the original Gold Spike Trail Tour. This event included the driving of a very long gold spike at the midpoint of the Musketawa Trail.

It is amazing what a group of dedicated volunteers can accomplish. We now set our sights on connecting the White Pine, Musketawa, and Hart-Montague Trails.



Building trestle over Crockery Creek



Building of a bridge in 1996



1996 Ribbon Cutting dedication ceremony of the opening of the Musketawa Trail

Thank you Joel Mikkelsen for putting this together.

Photos from Ed Holovka archives