

The Montour Trail at 20: How Did We Get Here?

by John Hooton, written in 2009

The Montour Trail is a mirror of the fortunes of the rest of western Pennsylvania. It began life as the coal-carrying Montour Railroad in 1877. It added passenger service from 1902 to 1927 and later at its peak carried 7 million tons of coal per year. Coal fired the steel mills of the area, and steel built our nation and saw us through two world wars.

American heavy industry sagged after WWII, and the Montour declined to its final end in 1984. Like the Phoenix bird of Greek mythology, our Trail rose from its railroad ashes in 1984 when Peters Township bought six miles of the railbed. Peters built something new for the time -- a hike/bike trail using the old railbed -- and called it "Arrowhead."

Locals liked the idea of recreating close to home in a safe, natural environment -- they rediscovered walking and found forgotten bicycles that could work on an almost-level path. Two avid cyclists took it from there. Stan Sattinger and Dino Angelici responded enthusiastically to a request from the Pittsburgh Council, American Youth Hostels, to see what could be done with the "bones" of the old Montour RR. The founding of the Montour Trail Council in 1989 was the result.

Public meetings and letters of support from like-thinking groups (health advocates, naturalists and many others) created a growing wave of enthusiasm and commitment to get started. After a governing 17-person Board of Directors had been established and many hours of planning, writing and re-writing had been spent, the first of many grant requests was presented to the Vira Heinz Foundation for funds to purchase the remaining Montour railbed to create a volunteer-operated trail. Imagine the Board's elation when these efforts were rewarded with \$200,000!

Federal, state and local elected officials, reflecting constituent support, were quick to favor this trend, but some state officials took a bit longer to convince. According to legend at one hike/bike conference, a PennDOT-er said as he saw the agenda: "Are you sure the Secretary knows about using funds this way?" Later the Public Utility Commission ordered that most of our 18 rail-over-highway bridges be taken down (liability concerns). Then back to the elected officials and our friends in high places: at a crucial point, the governor was helpful in moderating the PUC order.

A cluster of initially 3, now 7, neighborhood Friends of the Trail groups was organized to coordinate Trail activity, gain volunteers, and perform important Trail maintenance functions. To this day, volunteer hours and donations, in cash and in kind, represent about 40% of Trail income! Trail-wide events are the engines of our financial growth, from the IKEA half-marathon and 5K races, to Burgh's Pizza & Wing 10K and the Tour the Montour ride. The Friends groups' Penny Days and other annual events also help.

Recognizing that federal and state grants apply mostly to new construction and not maintenance, five years ago the MTC Board set up the Montour Trail Endowment Fund, which, when mature, will supplement annual giving to meet this ever-increasing need. The Fund gives Trail enthusiasts an opportunity to memorialize a loved one while providing Trail support in perpetuity.

Let us recall just a few of the many milestones of growth and setback:

- The clearing of 500 scrap tires and an itinerant resident of an abandoned mobile home near Coraopolis.
- Removal of 20 years' accumulation of trash and hundreds and hundreds of spent railroad ties amid underbrush and poison ivy wherever we went.
- Rehabbing of the first Volunteer bridge at Mile 1, with many more to follow.
- Clearing the 600-foot National Tunnel, followed by Findlay with its Enlow Tunnel.
- Robinson Township (Washington County) and McDonald Trestle sections were completed with fanfare, as were the Bethel Park Branch and its eastern neighbor near Large, PA.
- A major setback was Hurricane Ivan in 2004, which knocked out eight miles of Airport-area trail, but Trail enthusiasm and cash donations of nearly \$170,000 replaced the entire loss in a year.
- Just a year ago the West Peters section with its spectacular Chartiers Creek bridge overlook was dedicated.

Happily, our need for new map supplies every two years shows that users want to see what is happening and to help our linear park continue to grow. Today we stand at about 44 miles of Trail and a membership of approximately 1,000. When the final links are complete, the "spine line" trail from near Coraopolis to Clairton will be 46 miles, and, including recently planned additional branches and connectors, the total trail length will be 62-63 miles. Our progress locally is much like the national scene; there are currently about 1,500 trails covering some 15,000 miles across the country. A happy connection with the Panhandle Trail at McDonald begins a Montour Trail network we all want to expand on!

Many hands and countless hours have brought us to this point. Yet we have much to do to acquire and develop the remaining “out-parcels” of right-of-way to meet our objectives. Help us celebrate our success and continue this worthy endeavor!

The Originals

By Bruce Barron, written as a biographical series of the MTC's founding fathers in 2019

Jack Swisher

Jack Swisher is the third who was already using the trail right-of-way before the Montour Trail Council was born. But the other two were runners. Jack, somewhat more daring, was tackling the bumpy ballast surface alongside the abandoned rail line on a mountain bike.

“I was riding some back roads in Washington County and discovered the Montour,” said Jack, who lives in South Fayette. “Like a lot of trail people, I enjoyed railroads and wondered where the lines went. It was a rough ride with all the heavy ballast, but it was neat to ride on a railroad track.”

After that, Jack's incorporation into the Montour Trail Council is a textbook example of how a fledgling organization can recruit talent. He became a member of the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, which provided its local mailing list to Stan Sattinger and Dino Angelici when they were looking for supporters. “I got something in the mail, so I went to a meeting at [fellow original] Tim Killmeyer's church in Robinson Township,” Jack recalled. “I thought the trail idea sounded interesting but didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell of coming to fruition. But I figured, why not give it a try?”

Jack's skepticism derived from the apparent lack of powerful people driving the project. “A lot of trails were being developed by governments at that time, but here was a group of private citizens—some very smart ones, but no corporate executive types who could get people to write big checks, just a bunch of ordinary Joes. But that's one of the things I've enjoyed about the Montour Trail Council. It has shown what a group of dedicated people can do.” Then an accountant at Westinghouse, where he worked for 23 years, Jack became the Council's first treasurer and served as president in 1994. Impressively, he didn't settle for offering intellectual labor; he also became a trained welder specifically to construct gates and bridge railings along the trail. His instructor was early Cecil Township trail volunteer Don Berty.

“The work of accountants is intangible,” said Jack, an amateur handyman who built his own house with help from his father-in-law, a professional bricklayer. “When you build gates for a section of trail or put railings on a bridge, you can see the results. It's a nice feeling.”

Indeed, Jack can still view his work product whenever he rides the Cecil segment of the Montour Trail, which opened in 1992. He went on to perform welding and installation on bridges along the trail's Airport Area section.

Jack retains especially positive memories of two early fundraising endeavors. In the mid-1990s, the Montour Trail Council negotiated an arrangement with sponsors of the annual Allegheny County Rib Cook-off to provide volunteers who would pour and serve beer in exchange for a financial contribution. Jack coordinated volunteer recruitment for the event. “The first year was a real hassle,” he stated, “and I spent a lot of hours on the phone. After that, we had to turn people away because everyone who did it had so much fun at the festival.”

Jack was also a lead volunteer for the early years of the Montour Trail half-marathon, arriving by 5:00 a.m. on race day to set up the water stations and race signage.

Ironically considering his profession, the only thing Jack disliked about his Montour Trail volunteer work was filing tax returns. Normally, charitable organizations hire a specialist in nonprofit accounting for this task, but Jack painstakingly mastered IRS regulations for tax-exempt entities and filed the returns himself for the first several years, saving the MTC thousands of dollars.

Now retired and enjoying time with grandchildren and great-grandchildren, Jack expressed deep appreciation for the many people who have kept the Montour Trail Council flourishing for 30 years. “When we started, we were all working so hard that sometimes we would wonder who would ever replace us if we left,” he said. “But others have come along and filled the gap, for which I am very grateful.”

Paul Mitsdarfer

The creation of oral history is typically a race against time, an effort to capture the invaluable recollections of heroes while they are still with us.

The 13 Montour Trail originals being featured in this series—the 12 members of the board established in late 1989 plus legal counsel Dick Wilson—are all still alive, but we regret not getting to Paul Mitsdarfer sooner. Paul suffered cardiac arrest in October and is currently living at a rehabilitation center, wide-eyed and full of enthusiasm but capable of only limited verbal communication.

Happily, Paul's faithful wife, Dottie, has helped us to piece together the details so that we can appropriately honor his contributions to the Montour Trail. Paul and Dottie rented a townhouse on Scott Lane in Peters Township, very close to where the Montour Railroad passed under Brush Run Road, in the early 1980s. Paul recalled seeing trains occasionally during the last year before the rail line was abandoned.

The end of train travel on the Montour gave Paul—who completed 11 marathons at places like Gettysburg, Wheeling, and Ottawa before the Pittsburgh Marathon came into existence, and who celebrated his 40th birthday with a 40-mile run—a great workout facility. Dottie, who joined Paul for some of his shorter runs, remembered having to watch out for kids zooming along recklessly on motorbikes as they jogged beside the railroad tracks.

Back then, the wooded area off Brush Run on the other side of the railroad bridge was a place for youthful misbehavior. Dottie said they found dead cats in the area on several occasions. Once they spotted two white kittens in a sack; one ran away as they approached, but they brought the other one home. "It turned out to be deaf," Dottie explained. "We had to throw a shoe at the kitten to keep it from climbing our curtains." They went back the next day and rescued the second kitten.

Paul and Dottie were serious bikers too, riding the whole C&O trail from Cumberland to Washington long before it was popular. To manage the feat with no helpers, they drove two cars to western Maryland, biked from one car to the other, and then drove to the next trailhead. "My hands and arms were shaking from all the tree roots we hit on the C&O," Dottie laughed.

The Mitsdarfers were also collectors of railroad memorabilia; in fact, Paul donated a framed photo of a Montour Railroad train that remains in the MTC office today. So between their running, biking, and railroad interests, they had multiple reasons to get involved when in 1989, through a family connection, they met Tim Killmeyer and learned about the proposed Montour Trail.

As a salesman for a company that provided customized forms to banks and other businesses, Paul had a large number of corporate contacts and used those connections to recruit sponsors during the Montour Trail Council's early years. Paul left the board after his initial term, but the Mitsdarfers remain MTC members to this day. He also participated in work parties during the construction of the Moon-Robinson section in the 1990s. Meanwhile, Dottie maintained a trail connection while working as a legal secretary in the corporate section of the Buchanan Ingersoll law firm, headed by Tom Thompson, whose wife Judy was MTC treasurer in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The Mitsdarfers also found one more way to use the trail—as cross-country skiers. When there was enough snow, they would ski along the railroad right of way for two miles to Al's Café in Bethel Park, stop for a drink, and ski back.

After they retired, Paul and Dottie bought a recreational vehicle and spent winters in Arizona, where Paul's sister lived. But their life of travel and hiking ended suddenly when Paul suffered a bleeding stomach ulcer so severe that doctors wouldn't let the Mitsdarfers drive the RV home.

About nine years ago, Paul had a cardiac arrest while hiking. He had open heart surgery, but was still healthy enough to walk the trail with Dottie until last October's cardiac event. Even now, though wheelchair-bound, Paul still displays his athletic instincts, breaking the speed limit as he rolls down his rehab center's hallways. "I keep telling him to slow down," Dottie said. "I'm afraid one of these elderly ladies is going to walk out of her room and get plowed over."

Dottie concluded, "Our lives have been enriched over the years by the people who dedicated their time to the Montour Trail. I can't thank them enough." We thank Paul and Dottie for their historic contributions and are pleased that they will now be preserved for posterity!

George Schmidt

In the late 1980s, long before rails-to-trails, Pedal Pittsburgh, Bike Pittsburgh, or bike lanes in the city, the primary advocacy organization for local bicyclists was the Western Pennsylvania Wheelmen, with George Schmidt as president.

George would say that his contributions to the Montour Trail were modest, because most of his volunteer time went to the Wheelmen. But he was an indispensable player in the expansion of bicycling opportunities around Pittsburgh. And as an original member of the Montour Trail Council board, he was the centerpiece of the strategic alliance between these two organizations.

George was such a serious cyclist that he occasionally biked from his home in Squirrel Hill to his job at U.S. Steel's chemical plant on Neville Island. When he first participated in the Wheelmen's Great Ride, he wasn't terribly impressed.

"It was basically around the North Side and didn't seem like much of anything," he said. "I made some suggestions and got placed on a committee, then on the Wheelmen board, then as president. From that point on, I spent more time organizing events and keeping the Wheelmen running than on my bicycle."

George eventually helped to expand the Great Ride to 25-mile and metric century (100 kilometers or 62 miles) options. He also organized public political advocacy after mishaps between bikers and walkers led to a proposal to eliminate North Park's bike lane, one of the few existing bike-only facilities anywhere in the county.

The Wheelmen fought off that threat and cosponsored the study that identified western Pennsylvania railroad rights of way, including the Montour, that were available for conversion to recreational trails. George remembers arranging a presentation to the Wheelmen by Hank Parke from Somerset County on converting the Western Maryland Railroad as part of a trail from Cumberland to Pittsburgh. At the time, he thought to himself, "This will never be built in my lifetime."

Leading trails advocate Tom Murphy, then a state representative, pointed out that the movement would need to demonstrate a constituency in order to secure government support. The most identifiable biking constituency at that time was the Wheelmen, so George's participation on the original Montour Trail Council board was invaluable.

Investing time and money in trails proved to be good for the Wheelmen too. "Although we were a road riding organization, the concept of bicycle trails separate from highways was very attractive," Schmidt recalled. "Our newsletter was the only monthly publication where people could get current information about trail development and bicycle advocacy, along with our regular bicycle ride schedule. By promoting rails-to-trails, we nearly tripled our membership, from 800 to over 2,000."

The Wheelmen used some of their increased revenues to give startup grants to fledgling rails-to-trails organizations like the Montour. The credibility and recognizable constituency they provided, however, proved far more valuable than the money. All the projects they supported except one (the proposed Harmony Trail in the North Hills) eventually came to fruition.

Asked to characterize the original MTC board, George highlighted its workaholic nature. Initial board president Stan Sattinger, he said, "was so meticulous and wouldn't break up the meeting until everything was resolved. I was a millwright with an early start time, so I would go home at 10:00 p.m. while they were still grinding away. But it was an extremely competent group of people."

George completed his last term as Wheelmen president in 2002 but came back for another round of service as president of the Steel Valley Trail Council in 2015. He was also a founding board member of Bike Pittsburgh.

George and wife Maggie, who served on the Pittsburgh school board for eight years, have relocated to suburban Chicago to be near a daughter and grandchildren, but his relationships with Montour Trail originals continue. Last year he joined MTC cofounders Sattinger and Dino Angelici on a bike trip from Cincinnati to St. Louis, retracing part of a cross-country route that Dino traveled in the 1970s.

"At age 69, I thought my serious biking days were over, but it turned out to be a blast and I hope to join them again this year for the next leg," Schmidt said. The Schmidts also visit and ride with fellow MTC original Bill Metzger and wife Pam at their winter residence in Florida.

George retains fond memories from long-distance rides with Metzger, who refused to let early symptoms of multiple sclerosis slow him down. "When he was on the bike, it was all I could do to stay with him," George explained. "Then when we stopped riding, he would fall off his bike. I remember telling him jokingly that he wasn't going to get much sympathy from me unless he slowed down so that I could keep up."

This past summer, George taught his grandson how to ride a bike. "That alone was worth the move to Chicago," he said. "But I do miss our friends back in Pittsburgh. The friendships we made through bicycling and working with trail organizations have lasted a lifetime."

Larry Ridenour

Ridenour, one of the Montour Trail's original 12 board members, is also remembered as one of the most crucial contributors to Allegheny County's recreational trail network. Unfortunately, that was not always a badge of honor. On one occasion, his love for trails cost him his job.

In 1996, having already helped both the Montour and Yough Trails get started on behalf of the Allegheny County Planning Department, Larry was trying to organize a trail development effort in Plum Borough. Some neighboring landowners who didn't like the idea got the attention of the Republican county commissioners, who had taken control of county government the previous November. Larry was called in for a meeting and told, "I see you have 11 years with the county, which is enough to be vested. You'd better retire, because you're going to be fired."

Larry wasn't down and out for long, however. Pittsburgh mayor Tom Murphy soon hired him to manage the Eliza Furnace Trail project, adding to his already considerable collection of trail-building achievements.

Larry and Dave Wright represented the Planning Department in the 1989 meeting at which the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy presented its feasibility study on conversion of abandoned railroads. Larry was a perfect recruit, because the opportunity brought back childhood memories.

"When I was a child," he explained, "I had a Donald Duck comic book, and one of the stories was about using an old railroad bed as a hiking trail. So this was always in the back of my mind."

As an adult, Larry pursued his love for hiking on the Appalachian Trail, which is where he got the idea of combining government land ownership with volunteer maintenance by local friends groups. While working as a planner for a private firm in Pittsburgh, he knew that the Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Railroad was declining and began thinking about its possible future as a trail. When he joined the county planning department, Larry took on riverfront and trail development responsibilities with strong support from department director Ray Reaves.

After the 1989 Rails-to-Trails Conservancy meeting, Larry became the right man for another assignment: negotiating land acquisition with Gordon Neuenschwander, the P&LE's last president from 1986 to 1993. Larry already knew him from having developed the master plan for a park in Marshall Township, where Neuenschwander was a township supervisor. Larry approached the P&LE with a simple message: "I have a deal you can't refuse. Give me two years and I will get the money to buy your right of way." As it turned out, Neuenschwander had already signed a deal with Duquesne Light to put a backup line alongside the railroad, to support construction of the new Pittsburgh airport. "But this was a godsend," Larry said, "because they [Duquesne Light] had to rebuild the decks on two bridges to run their trucks over them."

As a result, the Montour Trail Council only had to re-deck one bridge between miles 0 and 7.3. Larry remained a Montour Trail Council board member until he and Dave Wright decided to split up Allegheny County trail duties, with Dave managing Montour Trail development and Larry focusing on the Yough River Trail. There he took his vision beyond county borders, working with Westmoreland and Fayette Counties to create the Regional Trail Corporation. The RTC would then become a partner in the Allegheny Trail Alliance, developing the portion of the Great Allegheny Passage from McKeesport to Ohioyle State Park. Now retired and living in Lexington, Kentucky, Larry happily points out how times have changed: Plum Borough officials are currently advocating for the trail connection to Oakmont that he got fired for supporting 22 years ago.

Jerry Agin

Jerry Agin is almost certainly the only person who was doing long-distance running workouts on the abandoned Montour Railroad right of way in the late 1980s. As a result, his route to becoming an original Montour Trail Council board member is a bit peculiar. Jerry is a multitasking guy. He wrote his first computer program in 1962, when hardly anyone had computers. He earned a Ph.D. from Stanford and was the first outsider hired by Carnegie Mellon University when it established its Robotics Institute in 1979.

On top of that, Jerry is a serious violinist. After retiring from his computer science career in 1997, he completed a bachelor's degree in music. He plays in the pit orchestra for the Pittsburgh Savoyards (who perform Gilbert and Sullivan musicals) and has developed a software, Intonia, that helps violinists stay in tune.

And on top of that, Jerry is a runner. His most recent media coverage came in May, when he was the oldest competitor in the Pittsburgh Marathon—which he has successfully completed in nine of the last 10 years.

Around 1987, searching for new and adventurous off-road routes for his long-distance training, Jerry stumbled upon the Montour Trail. The right of way was mostly grass at that time, with some railroad ballast and miscellaneous debris to navigate.

"I started exploring the trail on foot," Jerry explained. "I got topographic maps of where it went. Each time I went out to explore, I discovered more trail and then got another topo so I could go farther. Pretty soon, my office wall was full of maps."

Jerry had traveled most of the trail when a friend told him about people who were organizing a trail council. He came to the second meeting and quickly became invaluable. Bill Metzger (featured in the July-August issue) wanted photos of the trail for early promotional materials, but the surface was not conducive to bike travel. Jerry offered to run on the trail with a camera.

"I got my wife to drop me off along the trail and carried the camera for 20 or 25 miles, taking photos all along the way," he recalled. Jerry became the council's first membership chairman and held that position for 15 years, managing the database, member communications, and the Montour Trail's initial website as membership rose gradually from zero to over 700. When he gave up that role in 2004, it took three people to replace him. He also served for many years as registrar for the trail's fall half-marathon and 5K run. In March 1993, Jerry ambitiously arranged the most unusual event ever held on the Montour Trail: a 100-kilometer "ultra" running race. Participants covered the 62 miles by running from Clairton to Coraopolis plus the Bethel Park and Westland branches—signing clipboards at the turnaround point of each branch to prove that they had gone all the way.

Fourteen people signed up for the race, but snow chased some of them away. Six runners started and three, including Jerry, finished. By ultra standards, that was a modest success, but Jerry decided not to hold the race again. Instead he arranged group long-distance running workouts that used the trail right of way.

Reflecting on his initial exposure to the trail council, Jerry said, "I thought it was a great idea. But I had no knowledge or appreciation of the legal or government side of the process. I was thinking that the whole thing would be built in five years."

When asked for a favorite memory from the early years, Jerry recalled the first trail opening, held at Cecil Park in fall 1992. The trail went east from the park at that point and a neighbor to the west was resistant to trail development, so someone posted a sign west of the completed trail reading "Do not pass beyond this point."

Jerry remembers seeing the playful Bill Metzger, presumably unhappy about the restriction, add a word to change the sign to "Do not pass gas beyond this point."

"It was a worthwhile cause and a great group of people," Jerry said of his long service to the Montour Trail Council. "I was sorry to leave them behind when I retired as membership director. The trail is a wonderful addition to people's ways to stay healthy and enhances the value of the Pittsburgh region."

That's a nice compliment from the one Montour Trail original for whom the trail's successful development actually made it less useful to his own interests!

Bill Metzger

Most bikers on the C&O canal towpath take three days to travel between Cumberland, Maryland and Washington, D.C. In 1981, Bill Metzger spent two weeks there, and his experience helped to make him an original contributor to the development of the Montour Trail.

Metzger had recently ended six years of traveling all over the country by rail, assisting with heavy equipment transports, and had launched a career as a freelance photographer in suburban Pittsburgh. When he learned about the C&O trail from an article he read, he decided that he had to ride it—regardless of the quality of his equipment.

"I had a crappy 10-speed bike," Metzger laughed, "along with a sleeping bag earned from Green Stamps, a 25-dollar Sears tent that leaked the first time it rained, and a bike floor pump all held together by rope. It looked like the bike version of the Beverly Hillbillies truck. I took the train to Altoona, biked to Cumberland, and then spent two weeks on the trail."

That means averaging about 15 miles a day on the towpath. Some days, Metzger just read and admired the scenery—and the solitude. "Back in 1981," he recalled, "when you passed someone on the trail, you stopped and talked, because it might be the only person you'd see all day."

After that, Metzger bought a better bike. Having noticed the early symptoms of what turned out to be multiple sclerosis, he was determined to keep himself in shape, so he would frequently drive to Cecil Park and then do a strenuous loop ride on the lightly traveled roads of Washington County.

When Metzger learned that the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy was conducting a study of abandoned western Pennsylvania railroads, he met with the consultant and immediately got excited, because he knew that the Montour Railroad cut straight through the hills “that I was riding and hating every inch of.”

Metzger invited his friend Stan Sattinger, a fellow Mt. Lebanon resident and Trains magazine subscriber, on a bike trip to view the Montour right of way. Sattinger was immediately hooked and became a co-founder of the Montour Trail Council. Metzger was an original board member and key promoter, developing the slide show that he and fellow original Tim Killmeyer would present to dozens of local groups. The need for the Montour Trail quickly became apparent.

“People would be amazed when they heard I was riding a bike around Pittsburgh,” Metzger recalled. “I would keep hearing the same story: ‘We lived elsewhere and rode our bikes all the time. Then we moved to Pittsburgh, nearly got killed on a ride, and put our bikes away.’” He also had to parry skeptical questions, “usually from some guy with a pot belly,” about who would ever use a bike trail.

Even while making all those presentations and serving as newsletter editor, Metzger admitted, he didn’t think building the Montour Trail was achievable. “Psychologically, our region was depressed and demoralized in the 1980s due to the loss of jobs,” he said. “I figured that this project was a great idea and that I’d stick with it until we screwed up. When we became a success, nobody was more surprised than I.”

Metzger never screwed up. He has created the Montour Trail’s maps and brochures, helped to design the logo that appears on trail mileposts, built the first set of rule signs on his back porch, and is even credited with naming the Great Allegheny Passage (although he says he got the word “Passage” from historian and trail advocate Vagel Keller).

Although he gave a lot to the Montour Trail, Metzger gained major benefits from his volunteering. His mapmaking positioned him for a job as illustrator for Trains magazine, which he has held for 14 years. And while serving on the state’s pedestrian and cycling committee, he met his wife. Pam and Bill held their wedding ceremony at the Montour Trail’s Kurnick trailhead in June 1997.

Metzger is also author of The Great Allegheny Passage Companion and is working on an update of that book, which should be released before Christmas, followed by a similar book on the Montour Trail.

The Metzgers moved to Confluence in 2002, buying a home within a quarter-mile of the Great Allegheny Passage. In 2004, due to the impact of MS on his legs, Bill switched to a handcycle, on which he has logged 27,000 miles. “I have been associated with many nonprofits and trail groups, and the Montour Trail Council is the gold standard,” Metzger stated. “That’s because we don’t have personality issues. Nobody tries to be a star.

“When we were beginning the trail, the movie Field of Dreams, with its line ‘build it and they will come,’ was popular. Well, we built it and they come. And 30 years later, they still are coming. We all can be pretty proud of that.”

Dick Wilson

Beginning with this issue and leading up to the Montour Trail Council’s 30th anniversary in fall 2019, we will feature key contributors to the Montour Trail’s success who date back to the beginning of the organization. Like most major trail projects, the Montour Trail could not be what it is today without a good lawyer. Happily, we’ve had one from the very beginning.

Long before he became a rails-to-trails lawyer, Dick Wilson was a railroad lawyer. As an attorney for the Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Railroad, he handled matters related to interstate commerce, including abandonment of rail lines.

In 1983, Congress passed rail banking provisions intended to preserve established rail corridors for possible future use. When Wilson heard about an effort to turn a CSX railroad line in Somerset County into a recreational trail, he tracked down the project leader, Hank Parke, and offered his assistance. “My primary motivation for getting involved,” Wilson explained, “was that these rail lines would make great recreational trails, especially because many of them ran for miles along scenic waterways, and it would be a waste of a valuable transportation resource to let these rights of way evaporate by reverting to their prior owners.”

Wilson’s offer was invaluable, because often considerable technical skill is needed to sort out the various ownership issues involved.

Whether the railroad actually owned its right of way or only had an easement can make a big difference in the strategy needed to turn the abandoned line into an uninterrupted trail.

That Somerset County project was ultimately successful—in fact, it is now part of the Great Allegheny Passage from Pittsburgh to Washington, D.C. When the founders-to-be of the Montour Trail Council were still in their planning stages, one of them, Bill Metzger, heard about Wilson's work in Somerset County and contacted him. Since the Montour Railroad had been a subsidiary of the P&LE, Wilson, who by then had joined the Pittsburgh law firm of Vuono and Gray but maintained close personal contacts at the P&LE, was an ideal find.

In the Montour's case, potential reversion to previous owners was not the problem, since the rail line was completely fee-owned (i.e., the railroad had actually purchased the land). Thus, the title to the right of way was secure and no rail banking was needed. Instead, the challenge was to purchase the right of way from the railroad company and place it under the control of either county government or a nonprofit entity.

As the Council became established and gained public support, the dream began to appear achievable. But one pillar of bureaucracy posed a major threat: the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission, which had jurisdiction over abandoned rail rights of way. The PUC wanted to remove any structures that it deemed to be affecting road crossings—which included all the bridges along today's Montour Trail.

When Allegheny County agreed to take secondary responsibility for the bridges in its territory, the PUC relented there, but it ruled that all the grade-separated crossings in Washington County must be removed.

Wilson saved the day by authoring a successful appeal to Commonwealth Court, demonstrating procedural defects in the PUC decision, and the court remanded the matter back to the PUC for a rehearing. "Then, instead of trying to litigate our way through the case, we made contact with PENNDOT legal staff, who were more receptive than the PUC," Wilson explained. He worked with the two agencies to establish an evaluation process that allowed most of the bridge structures to remain.

As the process continued, the Council's impressive trail-building progress strengthened Wilson's negotiating position. Initially, the PUC had felt comfortable with a county government taking responsibility for abandoned railroad bridges but didn't trust a brand-new nonprofit organization. By the late 1990s, it had become apparent that the Council, with its dedicated commitment to trail development, was getting things done even faster than Allegheny County. As a result, the PUC now treated the Council as a credible entity.

Wilson has continued to serve the Council throughout its history, participating in several hundred legal agreements. "When you operate a recreational trail," he said, "you have a 50-mile strip of property 40 feet wide, with all different kinds of uses and ownership arrangements, and everything is in a document of some type. I spend most of my legal effort on document preparation and review, making sure that whatever documents the Council signs are in its best interest and that it is equipped to fulfill what it is committing to."

He has also assisted trail projects all over Pennsylvania, including the Great Allegheny Passage and the Buffalo Valley Rail Trail from Lewisburg to Mifflinburg in central Pennsylvania. Currently, Wilson is involved with projects in Chester and Cambria Counties. Wilson has worked as a sole practitioner since 2005. He maintains an office in Ebensburg, Cambria County, but does much of his work out of his home in Oakmont. He frequently enjoys trail hikes with Lea, his wife of 25 years.

Regarding his 30 years with the Montour Trail Council, Wilson says, "I would call this easily the most enjoyable and valuable public service project I've done in my professional career. Besides, I've never worked with a more congenial group of people."

Tim Killmeyer

The Montour Trail Council officially recognizes Stan Sattinger and Dino Angelici as its founders. But back in 1989, one visionary man was actually a step ahead of them.

That man, **Tim Killmeyer**, has announced his intention to retire from trail leadership after more than 28 years of service. We can't let him out the door without honoring this true Montour Trail "original" and his inspiring story.

There is no Tim Killmeyer story without his wife, Chris, whom he met when the two worked at Louis Tambellini's restaurant on Mount Washington in the late 1970s.

Both were free spirits. Tim had celebrated his high school graduation by taking a 10-day bike trip from Pittsburgh to Lake Ontario and back. Chris, according to a 1999 Post-Gazette article on the couple, was known for jumping off roofs and swinging on a rope over the Monongahela Incline. Tim and Chris were an engaged couple in January 1980 when a minor accident turned major. Tim lightly bumped the car in front of him while in heavy traffic on the Parkway West. The impact should have been slight, but it wasn't for Chris, because of an undiagnosed congenital defect that weakened the support around one of her vertebrae. The resulting spinal cord injury left her a quadriplegic and requiring a ventilator to breathe.

Many men would have sought a way out of the relationship. Tim did not. He and Chris were married on October 25, 1980. Doctors at her rehabilitation facility in Denver predicted that she would not survive the injury for more than 10 years; she has lived for 38, with Tim as her primary caregiver for nearly all that time.

"It's hard to say you're blessed to have a wife with quadriplegia," Tim admits. But he says it anyhow. "Chris has taught me that the greatest love between two people happens when both are willing to sacrifice 100% for the other," he explained. "Her concern is never focused on her own woes, even though no one would blame her if she did focus inward, but always on family and friends."

The accident not only led to a relationship of remarkable faithfulness but also facilitated Tim's availability for his equally remarkable volunteer investment in the Montour Trail.

Because Chris's injuries occurred in an auto accident under the no-fault insurance provisions applicable in Pennsylvania at that time, her insurance company has been responsible for her medical care. During much of the 1980s—after Tim cared for Chris personally during their first nine months of marriage—insurance paid for in-home nursing care while Tim worked as a chef at various locations, finally landing as corporate chef for GlaxoSmithKline, a pharmaceutical manufacturer. In 1989, the insurance company, seeking to reduce its costs, approached Tim with a proposal. Could they pay him directly to care for Chris himself and hire nurses to cover the hours when he wouldn't be there? It was a nice offer, but Tim would have to quit his paying job as part of the deal.

"I had to give it some thought," Tim recalled. "I had a good job with benefits and college tuition assistance. But I finally decided that this way I could do more for her."

Ever since then, Tim and Chris have received an agreed-upon monthly fee. Tim cares for Chris on most evenings and weekends, and they live on whatever is left after they have paid her nursing expenses. This arrangement made Tim available for unpaid tasks, and in 1989 he had a big one in mind.

An avid cyclist since childhood, Tim used his savings from caddying at Chartiers Country Club to buy his first 10-speed bike at age 16. In his senior year of high school, on a class trip to Washington, D.C., the group passed through the Georgetown neighborhood and Tim noticed a bicycle trail occupying a former railroad bed. After he and Chris moved to Robinson, he saw the abandoned rail line along Montour Run and it reminded him of the trail in Georgetown.

The image stuck in his mind. A few years later, at a meeting on Parkway West improvements, Tim discovered that the railroad ran all the way to Peters Township and learned that Peters had already turned two miles of the right of way into the Arrowhead Trail. He contacted Peters parks director Joanne Nelson, who gave him a box of information on the project, and then scheduled a meeting to propose his idea to the Robinson Township parks board.

Before the meeting date, Tim got a call from Stan Sattinger, who explained that the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy had done a study on abandoned railroads in Pennsylvania and had selected the Montour Railroad right of way as the best candidate for conversion to a recreational trail. Stan too had called Joanne Nelson for advice, and she said she had just given her files to Tim.

As a result, Stan, Dino, and Dave Wright of Allegheny County's Planning Department ended up joining Tim for two meetings with Robinson Township. "At the first meeting," Tim recalled, "the parks board asked us various questions and told us to find out the answers and then come back. We gave them the answers at the next meeting, but then they had more questions. After that second meeting, we realized that if we had to go through the same process with 12 municipalities, the trail might never get built, and if one municipality decided against the idea we would have a big gap in the trail. So we agreed that we had to start our own organization, obtain the right of way, and build the trail ourselves."

While Stan and Dino became the main organizers, Tim called local nonprofits to schedule presentations. "I have never worked with a group that was so focused on working toward a single goal," Tim noted. "The energy and the positivity were like nothing I have ever experienced."

Keeping unity and making decisions by consensus came at a price: very long board meetings. “They would last from 6 to 11 because we’d listen to everyone’s opinion,” Tim explained. “We spent hours just on the logo. Agreeing on the 10 trail rules took two meetings.” (Tim still thinks the rules should include a 15-mile-per-hour speed limit.)

Tim was project manager for trail construction in Moon and Robinson, which he described as “nearly a full-time job” at busy times, but his most colorful early volunteer memory involved helping Bill Morphy to install a radio transmitter for trail-related communications. “We climbed the water tower by Settlers Cabin to install the transmitter. You had to climb up a catwalk on the outside, then walk across a bridge to the middle, where there was a circular frame with a ladder inside. At the top, it was like a submarine hatch—flip open a handle and you could climb onto the roof of the water tower. We were climbing freehand, way up above the ground, with nothing to lean back on. After a couple times, we found out that we should have been wearing harnesses.”

Tim also produced the Montour Trail Council’s newsletter from 1994 to 1999 and designed the Tour the Montour ride T-shirts for 14 years.

Tim briefly retired from major trail work once previously, when he became ordained as a permanent deacon in the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh in 1999. He coordinated pastoral care at Ohio Valley Hospital and then was assigned to the diocese’s office for persons with disabilities, in addition to preaching about once a month and performing many other duties at his home parish, Holy Trinity in Robinson. “Not having to punch a clock to earn money has enabled me to put a lot of thought into prayer, reflection, and meditation,” Tim said. His thought-provoking homilies typically make colorful, insightful connections between biblical content and daily life. He has also offered many invocations at trail openings and annual dinners.

During his first two years as a deacon, as the demands remained fairly light, Tim gravitated back to the MTC, taking on another visionary project: the Airport Connector, which he pursued patiently against heavy odds for more than a decade until it opened in late 2011.

“We started talking to the airport around fall 2000,” Tim said, “but then 9/11 happened and they said they didn’t want people coming in on bicycles. Dave Wright and I kept meeting with them every year, and Randal Forrester [their contact at the airport] was a cyclist himself and understood why we wanted the project. We would show him what we were thinking, and he would run it past the engineers and lawyers, which would take six months. But eventually the door opened. Now they’re building an international business park on the hill beside the airport and they’re glad the bicycle connector is there, because it will be a selling point.”

This retirement is probably for good. On top of caring for Chris, Tim’s parents are in their eighties and beginning to need more assistance, and he anticipates new demands associated with the Pittsburgh diocese’s restructuring.

“I am trying to set myself up to care for the people I love the most,” he explained. “This past year, I didn’t take a vacation and I barely squeezed in my required weekend deacons’ retreat at the very end of the year. And I didn’t ride my bicycle once. When I had free time, getting a nap took precedence over biking.”

But the Montour Trail will always be a part of Tim’s life. “Growing up in Pittsburgh’s West End, biking was how I got to know my world,” he said. “Today, there are parents in suburbia who won’t give their kids bicycles because they are afraid about riding in the street. Giving them a trail where they can get exercise and fresh air and travel from Moon to Findlay in safety is my source of satisfaction.”

“Tim played a key role in the MTC’s efforts to publicize itself during its early stages, as booking agent for our speakers’ bureau. In addition to brainstorming lists of civic organizations and agencies that might host slide show presentations, Tim had to explain what the MTC was and provide a description of this thing that was to be called the Montour Trail. After the show, his task was to request a letter of support for the MTC and the trail-to-be, which often required numerous follow-up phone calls. These efforts bore fruit that was vitally important as Tim collected more than 50 support letters. The senders were subsequently listed by name as the trail’s coalition of endorsing organizations, occupying prominent places in our early grant proposals and trail brochures.”

—Stan Sattinger

Peter Kohnke

If you’ve ever wanted to experience what the early days of the Montour Trail Council were like, go and see Peter Kohnke as he lives through them a second time.

This time, Peter is envisioning a two-mile “Central Bethel Park Trail” that would run northeast from South Park Road to Millennium Park. On our interview day, he had just visited the manager of an apartment complex behind which the trail would pass. “I’m so glad to hear about this,” the manager told him. “I look at other complexes that have trails running beside them and I get ‘trail envy.’”

Not all the responses are positive, though. At least two homeowners have told Peter they don't want a trail coming near them. But Peter's accustomed to dealing with skeptics. He's been down this path before, as the pioneer of the existing 2.8-mile Bethel Branch of the Montour Trail system.

When he started promoting the idea of a Bethel Branch in the 1990s, Peter says, "Neighbors told me that intruders would enter their backyards from the trail, steal their television sets, and kidnap their daughters. Now, when they put their house up for sale, these same people advertise that the Montour Trail is in their backyard as it will command a premium."

Peter (who worked on the Saturn V moon rocket for the Douglas Aircraft Company early in his professional career) moved to Bethel Park in 1975, two years after accepting a position with ANSYS, a major engineering simulation firm based in Canonsburg. He served there for 42 years before being reluctantly pushed into retirement at age 74.

Peter was initially recruited for the Montour Trail from the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy donor base. When he attended his first public meeting on the project, he was pleased to discover his friend from the Unitarian-Universalist church in Mt. Lebanon, Stan Sattinger, in charge. When Stan and Dino Angelici co-founded the Montour Trail Council in 1989, Peter agreed to become the first secretary; he would later serve as board president in 2001–2003.

Upon examining the available rail-to-trail conversion mileage, Peter was excited to see a section extending into Bethel Park. However, others were focused on creating what the Montour Trail calls its main line (though it's different from the railroad's main line) from Coraopolis to Clairton. There was no feasible way to extend a bike trail into Bethel Park for more than a few miles.

But when told that the Bethel Park section was less important because it "didn't go anywhere," Peter shot back, "Yes, it does. It goes to my house!"

Along with personal persistence, good science helped to make the Bethel Branch possible. West Penn Power had an electric line along most of the former railroad right of way and was reluctant to talk until researchers concluded that being near a power line did not increase the risk of cancer. In 1997, with the Montour Trail Council's blessing, Peter concluded negotiations on an easement with West Penn Power.

With strong backing from Bethel Park municipal government (which contributed substantial funds for several years) and energetic volunteers, two miles of trail were constructed in 1998–2000, but a troublesome at-grade crossing of busy Clifton Road remained. Peter posted a sign reading "Help Bridge This Gap" at the intersection, but the dream seemed out of reach until two unanticipated sources of support emerged.

First, in the aftermath of the accidental death of Century Steel Erectors field superintendent J. R. Taylor, his family, who owned the company, inquired about helping to build the bridge in his memory. The Taylors and Peter started making fundraising plans shortly thereafter.

In addition, because the site was adjacent to an elementary school, it qualified for funding from a federal Safe Routes to School program. Allegheny County and other funders pitched in, and in June 2011, seven years after J. R.'s death, Century Steel Erectors set the Taylor Memorial Bridge in place.

Peter holds another special place in Montour Trail history. When property on Pleasant Street in South Park Township, where the Montour Railroad once ran, was subdivided for residential construction in 1990, Peter personally purchased one of the lots and held it until the Montour Trail Council had enough money to buy it from him. Today, the trail east of the Library Viaduct reaches Pleasant Street by passing between two houses on what insiders long have called the "Kohnke Corridor."

Peter is tireless but realistic about his current trail pioneering efforts. "The Central Bethel Park Trail won't be finished while I'm around," he said, "but I want to get it going so that my successors can finish it."

Don't underestimate him. Although many others contributed, without Peter's leadership one of the most heavily used segments of the whole Montour Trail system might not exist today.

Stan Sattinger

In 1989, as the idea of forming a Montour Trail Council was gaining steam, Stan Sattinger and wife Jerry took a hike on what had been the Montour Railroad. The steel from the rails and the railroad ties worth salvaging had been removed, leaving a rough linear wasteland of unlevelled ballast.

"This is too much," Stan sighed as he surveyed the unfriendly landscape. "How is this ever going to become a recreational trail?" "It's meant to be," Jerry replied calmly. "It'll happen." In retrospect, Stan says, "It's amazing how much of a spiritual lift you can get from a prognostication like Jerry's."

That encouragement, buttressed by a trainload of determination and self-confidence, kept Stan going as he co-founded the Montour Trail Council and guided the Montour Trail to realization.

Stan liked biking and he really liked trains. In the 1970s, he was a volunteer crew member on a steam locomotive that pulled tourist excursions around southwest Pennsylvania. A Westinghouse engineer, Stan helped to build a replacement set of "superheaters," which add extra energy to the steam, for that locomotive's boiler.

He and Jerry had also gone on several outings with the American Youth Hostels' Pittsburgh Council. Through that connection, they learned that the AYH had tasked a dentist named Dino Angelici with pursuing the development of at least one rails-to-trails project in the Pittsburgh area.

Stan and Dino participated in various discussions about turning the Montour Railroad right of way into a trail, but it was all just talk until the two of them agreed, in Stan's words, to "take the bull by the horns, hold an organizational meeting, and see where it goes."

That meeting drew two dozen people, including many of the eventual founding board members. Stan laid down one ground rule: the organization would focus solely on the Montour.

Other abandoned rail lines, like the one that would become the Youghiogheny Trail, were also of interest, but Stan and Dino knew that just developing the Montour would be enough to keep them busy.

Stan was a fantastic nonprofit organization leader—despite his background, not because of it. "Engineering education doesn't teach nonprofit leadership," he noted. "If you had told me I was going to be a civic leader, I would have laughed you right out of the office. I just fell into the job and learned through the school of hard knocks, though I had some good knocks too."

Indeed, quite a few good knocks. With full support from his boss at Westinghouse, Stan worked a flexible schedule that permitted daytime trail planning work. (As a district aide for a freshman congressman in 1991, I can remember Stan visiting our office to educate us about the Montour Trail.) Psychologically, the big turning point came the day he picked up the mail and discovered the first grant check from a foundation. "You can't imagine the elation when I opened the envelope and saw the amount," Stan recalled.

The quality of the leadership team forming around him was another source of encouragement. In addition, Stan felt great indebtedness to two trail-building predecessors: Peters Township, which began developing the Arrowhead Trail in the mid-1980s under recreation director Joanne Nelson, and Ohiopyle State Park. "The Arrowhead Trail gave us something to point at and show people it could be done," he observed, "and many people had already experienced and appreciated the trail at Ohiopyle."

Trail originals consistently chuckle about the initial Montour Trail concept plan, which envisioned completing the job in three years. That was totally unrealistic, but as Stan pointed out, "If we had said back then that it would take 25 years, that might have dampened some enthusiasm. And the fact that it came to fruition in increments was a constant reminder to others to get with the program."

Regardless of the time frame, Stan's impact was noticed not just locally but as far away as his alma mater of Georgia Tech, where he received the Dean Griffin Community Service Award in 2007 for "working tirelessly to improve recreational opportunities and protect natural resources in western Pennsylvania."

Stan served on the Montour Trail board for 18 years, but in 2000, with the Montour Trail's management in good hands, he resumed his pioneer role, founding the Montour Run Watershed Association. His civic efforts have continued since he and Jerry relocated to Minneapolis in 2010 to live near a daughter and son-in-law. Stan performed energy assessments of buildings for the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency until last year, and his newest mission is to promote regenerative agriculture.

“That means using the right farming practices to sequester more carbon from the atmosphere into the soil,” Stan explained enthusiastically. “Other benefits include the greatly enhanced nutritional value of foods and increased retention of rainwater in the soil.” The topic driving Stan’s advocacy efforts has changed several times, but the passion and energy that enabled him to leave a lasting mark where the Montour Railroad once chugged are clearly still there. We are all blessed that he chose to make the Montour Trail his first big project.

Dave Wright

When I joined the Montour Trail Council board in 1997 as recording secretary, one portion of each board meeting tested my capacities. An Allegheny County staff member would deliver a report on real estate and engineering activities, referring to locations and properties in a way that evidenced his encyclopedic knowledge of the Trail corridor. Usually I had no idea what he was talking about, but he gave me his detailed written notes after delivering his report and patiently answered my questions.

That walking encyclopedia, Dave Wright, is still with us, and he has almost certainly given more time to the Montour Trail than any other human being.

Some of Dave’s enormous productivity has been on paid time, through his work as a civil engineer for the Allegheny County Department of Public Works. But he has also volunteered thousands of hours beyond his professional role.

Dave joined Allegheny County (initially in the Planning Department) in 1970 and has been a county employee for 44 of the 49 years since then. He worked briefly in the private sector, including 11 months as executive director of the Washington County Historical Society, but found that public service gave him greater satisfaction. “You also get more opportunities for creativity when working for county government,” he said.

One opportunity to apply that creativity opened up in 1988 when Dino Angelici, who would become a Montour Trail Council co-founder, called to ask if Allegheny County had any plans for trails. Dave took the call and explained that the county’s trail planning was limited to county parks, but that he had a personal interest in supporting additional trail development.

Dave already knew the Montour rail line quite well. A resident of South Fayette, he had seen trains traveling on the Montour Railroad before it stopped running. “I purchased a bicycle when the railroad was abandoned,” he recalled. “I wanted to go out there and bounce over the ballast before the right of way got blocked off.”

Dave became the Montour Trail Council’s property acquisition expert, reviewing deeds along the rail line to determine where the railroad fully owned the property and helping to acquire title where the railroad had only an easement and the adjacent owners could reclaim the land.

Dave’s superior work ethic was invaluable to trail development, because he found time for trails work on top of his other county responsibilities. “I went to my boss and asked, ‘Can I work on these trail projects if I get everything else done too?’ The answer was ‘Yes, just keep up with your work,’” Dave explained. “When a deputy director questioned my trails activity, I asked if there was a problem with my other work. The answer was no, so I kept doing it.” Dave estimates that during the early 1990s he was spending up to half his work hours on Trail development, while still getting everything else done.

Dave worked closely with Bob Lucas, the county’s right-of-way expert for road and bridge projects, so when Lucas retired in 1996, Dave moved into that job. His motto of “be persistent and respectful” served him well as he managed property issues throughout Allegheny County’s trail mileage. For example, the Trail from Triphammer to Piney Fork Road in South Park Township, which departs from the original rail right of way, exists thanks to Dave’s negotiation of a mutually beneficial land swap with neighboring businessman Jack Duncan.

One of Dave’s most innovative contributions to Trail development was recycling old bridges. When a steel plant in Monessen was dismantled, Dave arranged to acquire a bridge that had carried pipes to and from the plant’s boiler house. Now, that bridge carries the trail over Piney Fork Creek east of Triphammer Road. Similarly, when a tubular steel structure intended to carry pedestrians to the Johnstown Incline was rejected because the fabricator used Canadian steel, Dave got it at a steep discount. It became the Quicksilver bridge at MM 15.

Dave even obtained the bridge used in downtown Pittsburgh for scenes of the movie “Desperate Measures” before it was scrapped. When he couldn’t find a use for it on the Trail, it was given instead to a Trail neighbor, the Forest Grove Sportsmen’s Club.

In addition to walking the Montour Trail frequently with wife Susie and their dogs, Dave has biked on trails all over the eastern United States, both enjoying the scenery and picking up ideas from how other trail organizations handle issues, like signage and access. He said his favorite ride outside Pittsburgh is the Prairie Grass Trail, which passes through a combination of forested areas and cornfields in southwest Ohio.

Dave served only one term on the Montour Trail Council board, to avoid any conflict of interest with his county work, but he had a hand in virtually every Montour Trail project in Allegheny County. He vividly recalls the early challenges involved in selling the idea of recreational trails to community members and politicians — one of whom, he says, thought the best repurposing of the former Panhandle rail line in western Allegheny County would be a long line of mobile homes.

It's almost hard to imagine that Dave had time for anything else, but in addition to raising three children (adopted from Honduras) with Susie, he has also sung with the Mendelssohn Choir for 24 years.

After 50 years as a professional engineer, Dave is thinking about retiring. He says that he'd like to write a book on the history of the Montour Trail. Let's hope he does, because no one will ever know the trail as exhaustively as he does.

Dennis Sims

As it sought to promote the idea of a recreational trail circling Pittsburgh, the Montour Trail Council benefited from one especially strategic participant: a weather forecaster.

No, the trail founders didn't need their own weather connections — they needed the media connections that a professional meteorologist could deliver. That is just one of the several major contributions that Dennis Sims of South Fayette has made to the Montour Trail over 30 years.

A native of Tarentum in northeast Allegheny County, Dennis earned his meteorology degree at Penn State. He worked briefly at the county airport (for DeNardo and McFarland Weather Services) and then in Colorado before returning to the Pittsburgh area in 1983 and joining the staff of Air Science Consultants. If you know that company name, it's probably because Air Science Consultants provided precise weather information to numerous media outlets, including WTAE-TV throughout Joe DeNardo's tenure.

Both a biker and a railroad fan, Dennis watched the Montour Trail right of way near his home fall gradually into disrepair and become a dumping ground for trash after the trains stopped running in 1984. Not wanting to see a great rail route go to waste, he joined the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, hoping to find out about the potential for repurposing the Montour Railroad. He wasn't disappointed. Soon after joining, he unexpectedly received a letter from a dentist in West View.

"I wondered why he was looking for clients in the South Hills," Dennis recalled. But upon opening the letter, he discovered that the dentist, Dino Angelici, was actually inviting him to a meeting to help plan the Montour Trail. Dennis jumped in with both feet, becoming the new organization's first newsletter editor and its public-relations front man.

"The big help was that I knew Susan Davies," he said. Davies, then a weekend meteorologist at WTAE, became a strong supporter, helping to secure valuable television coverage of noteworthy trail development milestones. Davies also recommended her husband, videographer Bill Beagle, who created the Montour Trail's first promotional video.

When Allegheny County agreed to take control of the Pennsylvania and Lake Erie Railroad right of way on behalf of the Montour Trail Council, Dennis successfully pitched the story to a WTAE reporter. Meanwhile, he expanded his media influence by building relationships with local newspaper reporters, securing valuable coverage in the Washington Observer-Reporter and in community-level weekly publications.

In the 1980s, the advent of *USA Today* revolutionized newspaper production, and Dennis quickly became an expert in producing weather pages on computer software. He transferred that ability to his role as Montour Trail Council newsletter editor, which he has performed from 1989 to 1994 and again from 2008 to the present.

Dennis has been just as indispensable near home, serving as president of the Cecil Friends of the Montour Trail without interruption since 1994. "I wanted Don Berty to head the group and he wanted me," Dennis explained. "We agreed that if he would take charge of construction and maintenance, I would do the administrative work."

The Cecil Friends had plenty to do from their inception, since the Montour Trail's first four miles had opened in Cecil in 1992. That segment included the National Tunnel, which had water constantly dripping from the roof into a bed of loose rock that necessitated "walk your bike" signs at each end of the tunnel. "When we spread crushed limestone, the water just sat in there and made things even worse, which encouraged us to get it paved as soon as we could," Dennis said.

Dennis made one more unique, lasting contribution to the Montour Trail about 12 years ago. While surfing the internet one night, he discovered a website on Montour Railroad history and immediately said to himself, "These guys need the Trail — and we could use them to put up historical markers along the Trail." He tracked down the people responsible, attended some of their meetings, and suggested that the two groups link up. The Montour Railroad Historical Society officially formed in 2008 and subsequently became a recognized Montour Trail Friends group, installing informative signs on railroad history all along the trail.

As for what has made volunteering with the Montour Trail Council most meaningful for him, Dennis answered, "For me, the Montour Trail is a place to ride my bike without worrying about getting killed by car traffic, and a place for people to enjoy outdoor activity away from the hustle and bustle of the highways."

We have much to thank Dennis for — including the ongoing production of this newsletter, which has provided space to feature the amazing dedication and achievements of the Montour Trail's original board members.

Tom Dougherty

Outdoor enthusiast Tom Dougherty was in his mid-20s when he joined the local Sierra Club, hoping to find a meaningful way to get involved in home-grown conservation efforts. The club's president told Tom about another local guy's idea to transform an abandoned railroad into something more valuable. Would Tom be willing to check it out on behalf of the Sierra Club? That guy happened to be Stan Sattinger.

Tom and his bride of one year were living in Aspinwall at the time, but they had just purchased a house in Mt. Lebanon. During Tom's first phone conversation with Stan, he learned that the home he was about to move into was five doors down the street from Stan's! It was an early stroke of trail magic.

"I was 26 when I first heard of this 'brand new idea' to convert the old rail line from Coraopolis to Clairton into a walking/biking trail. After talking with Stan for just a few minutes, I knew immediately that I wanted to get involved. I was thrilled that Stan invited me to a meeting," Tom said.

He and his wife didn't have any children at that time. "Sara thought it was a really cool idea and was very excited that I might be able to help in some way. She too loved outdoor activities and was intrigued by the idea."

Tom observed that Stan was especially good at building a board with the right skill sets. "I was the youngest (some might say most-inexperienced) member of the group, but I had a lot of energy," Tom said about his being recruited to raise funds for the Trail. "Professionally I was working in public relations. I liked to sell, and my enthusiasm for the project was apparent. It was great to have the opportunity to promote something I really believed in! In retrospect, our rail-trail vision was a meaningful idea, launched at exactly the right time, with a receptive audience."

Early board meetings often focused on huge problems that seemed like deal-breakers. But the people who rubbed elbows on the board always found a workable solution through divide and conquer: "It was an amazing thing to see it all gel and come together. I never saw any group function with such passion and dedication. We had a dream and nothing was going to get in the way."

Tom made presentations and submitted proposals to countless foundations and corporations to secure funding to acquire the abandoned railroad right-of-way, and later to build short sections of the Trail. "Building low-mileage segments where possible was our way of generating widespread support in different communities — and making constant progress, because it would inspire us to keep working to get the next connecting section done," Tom added.

The young fund-raiser remained on the Montour Trail Council board for about seven years. He had two young sons when deciding to retire from the board, so he could dedicate all of his spare time to raising his growing family. Tom and Sara were often seen hiking or biking along the Trail with sons Danny and Billy, and later daughter Claire, in tow, strapped into a backpack or a bike seat. The couple had lots of happy rail-trail adventures with their kids, all as their family and the Montour Trail grew together — and they continue to do so to this day.

Though he long ago passed the Montour stewardship baton to others, Tom still believes that we all have a role to play in the Montour Trail's future. "People need to understand the fact that there is no 'they.' We, you, me, and everyone who uses the trail is the 'they,'" he said. "It's not run by a government entity. When people begin to understand this, they're more likely to contribute — their time, their money, their passion."

Many years of corporate marketing experience later, he has redirected his professional career to non-profit Allegheny Land Trust (ALT), which he chose "based on a deeply held belief that the organization's mission of 'helping local people save local land' was vital to the long-term sustainability of the Pittsburgh Region." A recent project even involved the Montour Trail when ALT, with support from the Montour Trail Council and Hollow Oak Land Trust, acquired 40 wooded, trail-front, stream-front acres in the Montour Run Valley near Milepost 0.0 so that tract will remain as woodlands forever.

Thirty years after grabbing the Montour Trail bull by the horns, the youngest original board member board is older and wiser, but still in love with the Trail. "Sara and I use the Montour Trail (and other pathways) several days a week. "Every time I'm out there, I see hundreds of people of all walks of life enjoying themselves and think of Stan and the other dedicated people he pulled together and patiently led to make the Trail a reality," Tom noted. "It's an amazing story, and I am honored to have played a small role, way back at the beginning. I am extremely appreciative for all of the volunteers who made it happen over the last 30 years and thankful for those who continue to expand, improve, and maintain the Trail today."