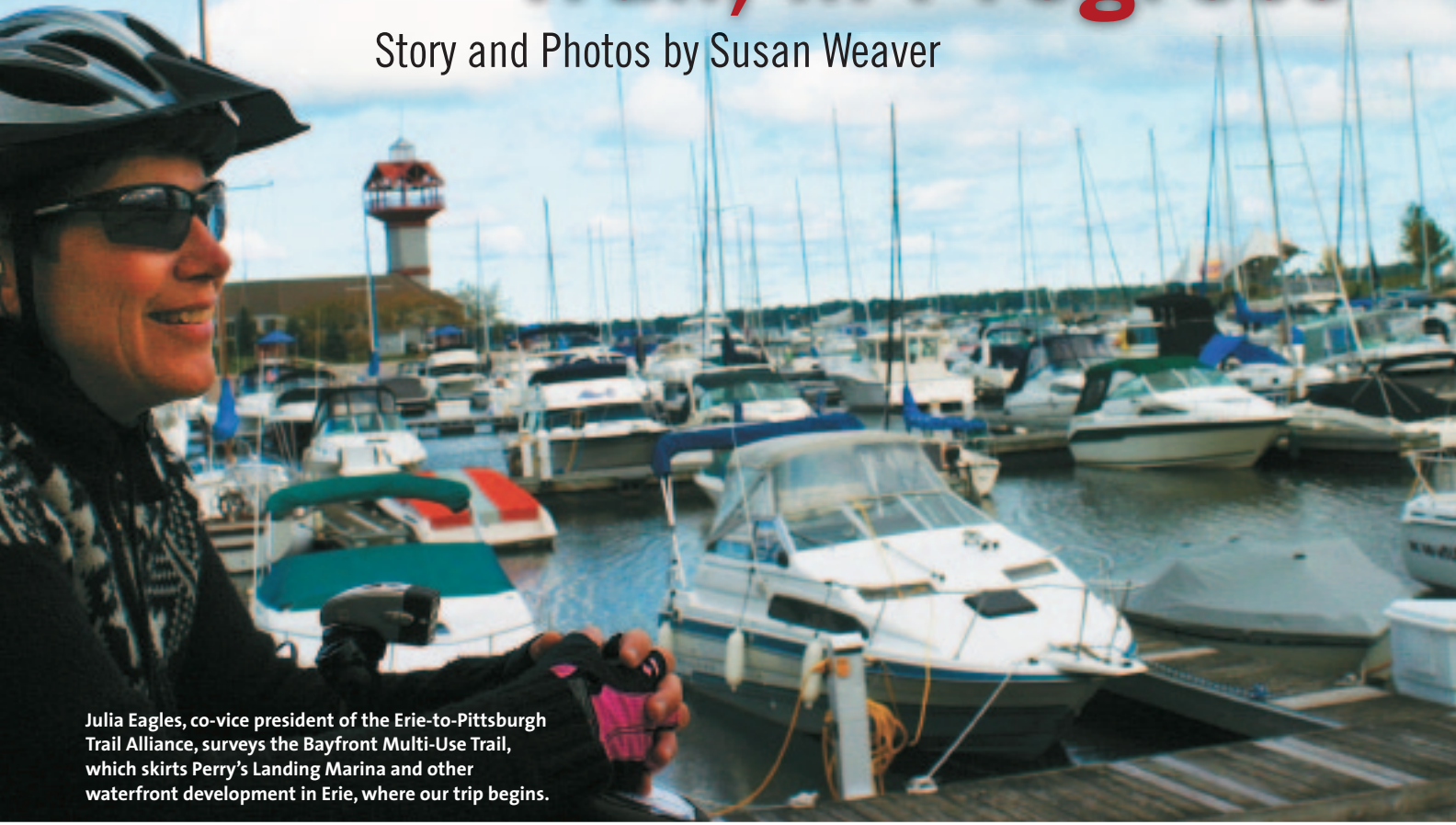


A View From the Field:

Erie-to-Pittsburgh Trail, in Progress

Story and Photos by Susan Weaver



Julia Eagles, co-vice president of the Erie-to-Pittsburgh Trail Alliance, surveys the Bayfront Multi-Use Trail, which skirts Perry's Landing Marina and other waterfront development in Erie, where our trip begins.

The emerging Erie-to-Pittsburgh Trail network is like a 260-mile puzzle with more than half the pieces in place. Named for its two Pennsylvania anchor cities, the corridor runs from Erie, on the shores of the southernmost Great Lake, all the way to triangulated Pittsburgh, where the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers commingle at “the Point” to create the Ohio. From these geographical bookends comes the trail’s catchy tagline, “Connecting the Lake to the Point.”

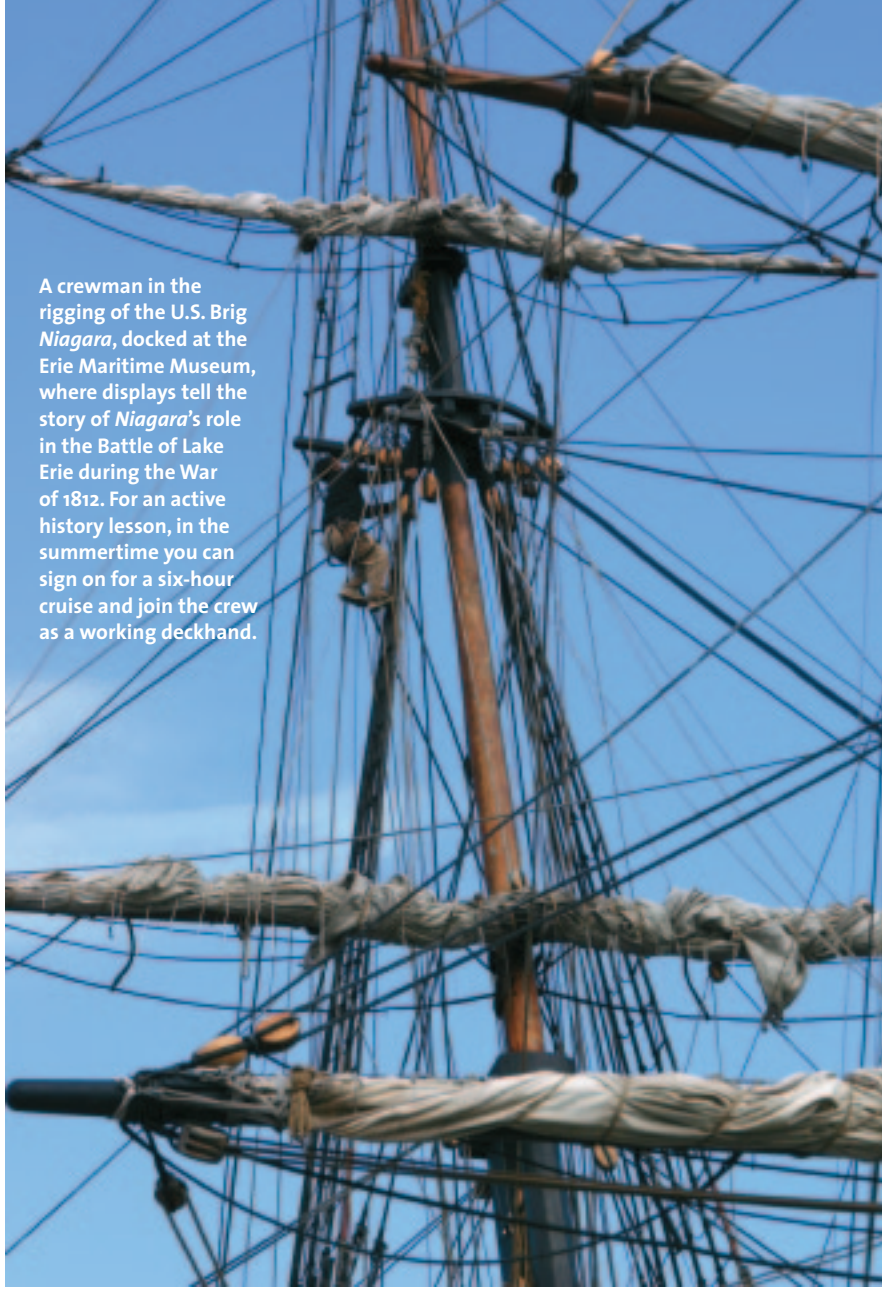
With this trail, the candle truly burns at both ends. In Pittsburgh, with its museums, bustling arts and restaurant scene, historical neighborhoods and revitalized riverfront complete with trails, you don’t have to be a Steelers fan to find

something to do. And with an eye on the big picture in trail development, the Erie-to-Pittsburgh Trail should eventually link up with the 135-mile Great Allegheny Passage, which heads down to Cumberland, Md., and then the C&O Canal Towpath trail all the way into Washington, D.C.

Like Pittsburgh, Erie has repurposed its waterfront with a new convention center, outdoor concert facility and even the county library. You’ll find a maritime museum and two-masted ship, the U.S. Brig *Niagara*, and the even taller Bicentennial observation tower. Docks and marinas fill in between, and you can see Presque Isle State Park (a National Natural Landmark) across the harbor. The park is just a short water taxi ride

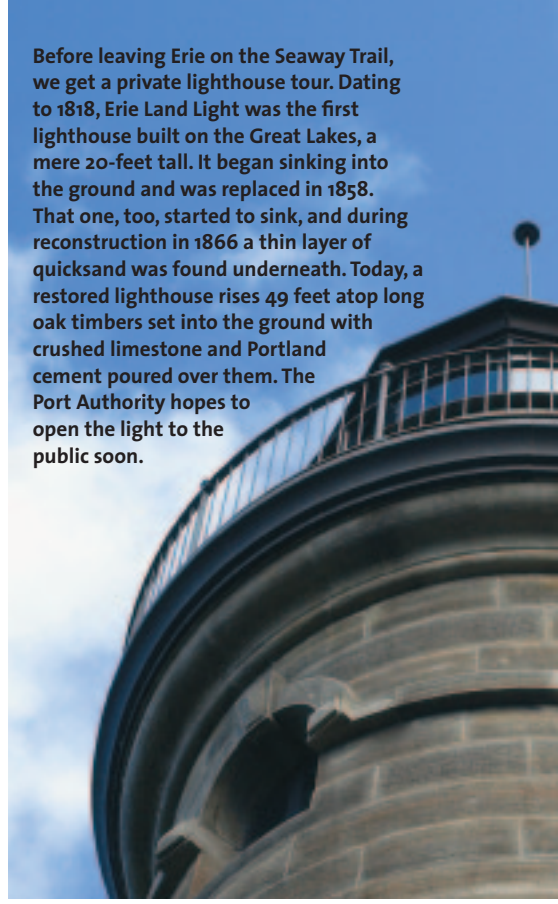
away, and your bike is welcome aboard. The start of the Erie-to-Pittsburgh Trail, the Bayfront Multi-Use Trail, guides you past all of it.

In between these cities, the trail serves up a broad sample of western Pennsylvania, past and present. I had a front-row seat while riding on Rails-to-Trails Conservancy’s (RTC) 2005 Greenway Sojourn. I pedaled past wooded, farm and river vistas and through old railroad tunnels. I explored towns—Titusville, Oil City, Franklin, Emlenton—with grand Victorian homes built with oil-boom and railroad money (this region is, after all, known as “the valley that changed the world”). I spent an hour at Titusville’s Drake Well Museum, where Edwin L. Drake drilled the oil



A crewman in the rigging of the U.S. Brig *Niagara*, docked at the Erie Maritime Museum, where displays tell the story of *Niagara's* role in the Battle of Lake Erie during the War of 1812. For an active history lesson, in the summertime you can sign on for a six-hour cruise and join the crew as a working deckhand.

Before leaving Erie on the Seaway Trail, we get a private lighthouse tour. Dating to 1818, Erie Land Light was the first lighthouse built on the Great Lakes, a mere 20-foot tall. It began sinking into the ground and was replaced in 1858. That one, too, started to sink, and during reconstruction in 1866 a thin layer of quicksand was found underneath. Today, a restored lighthouse rises 49 feet atop long oak timbers set into the ground with crushed limestone and Portland cement poured over them. The Port Authority hopes to open the light to the public soon.



About eight miles south of Corry in Spartansburg, the East Branch Trail formally opened in September 2010. The trail features an 8-foot gravel lane for equestrians and buggies next to the paved lane. Low bollards allow easy entry for buggies and the local Amish community.



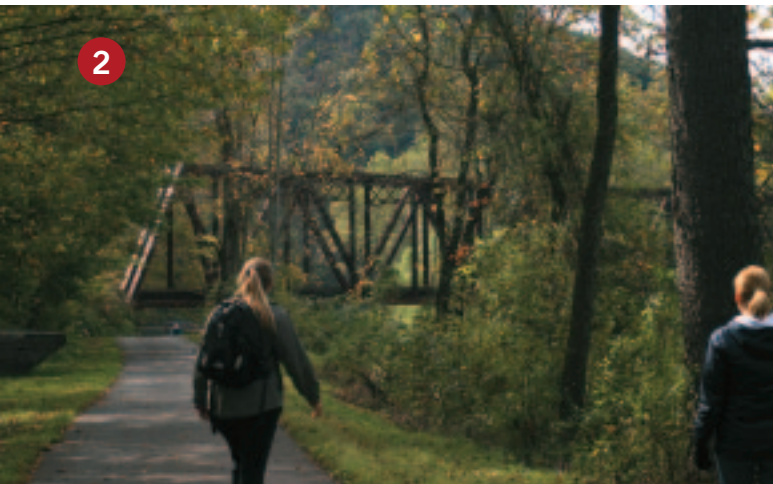
well in 1859 that launched the modern petroleum industry. There, the 1860s “oil rush” came alive for me. Nearby, along the now-lush Oil Creek State Park Trail, markers with vintage photographs helped me picture bare hillsides bristling with oil derricks.

Last fall, I returned to see the progress on this “puzzle.” With a friend I walked and cycled its paths, sometimes in the company of advocates from the Erie-to-Pittsburgh Trail Alliance. The group formed in 2007 to coordinate efforts of local trail groups and other supporters, including RTC. By now, more than 160 miles of trail are completed, including a quarter-mile-long elevated trail at Millvale near Pittsburgh last summer, as part of widening a road

and moving the railroad. A 16-year lawsuit in Armstrong County is finally being resolved, which will permit work on numerous gaps in the 34.8-mile Armstrong Trail along the Allegheny. With volunteer help, says Armstrong Trail Manager Ron Steffey, they plan to build a mile a month from April to November in 2011.

In these pages you’ll find photo highlights from my trip along the Erie-to-Pittsburgh Trail corridor. Enjoy the journey!

Susan Weaver is a cycling photojournalist from Allentown, Pa. She is the author of *A Woman’s Guide to Cycling* and an avid bicycle tourist with many trips in the United States, Canada and Europe in her back jersey pocket.

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COURTESY OF THE DRAKE WELL MUSEUM, PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL AND MUSEUM COMMISSION

1

At the southern tip of Clear Lake near the East Branch Trailhead, Platt’s Mill in Spartansburg continues to mix feed for animals ranging from livestock and deer to pheasants and rabbits. A feed mill has been on the site since 1845.

2

From Titusville, we continued south onto the 9.7-mile Oil Creek State Park Trail—opened in 1982, it was the first of the Erie-to-Pittsburgh trails to be completed. It’s hard to believe that, in the 1860s, Oil Creek was slick with petroleum and the valley’s forests were clear-cut for lumber to build oil derricks, oil tanks and housing for oilmen. In the rush for “black gold,” there were derricks here as far

as the eye could see. The northern trailhead, Jersey Bridge, is at Drake Well Museum, where you can learn plenty more about the oil era.

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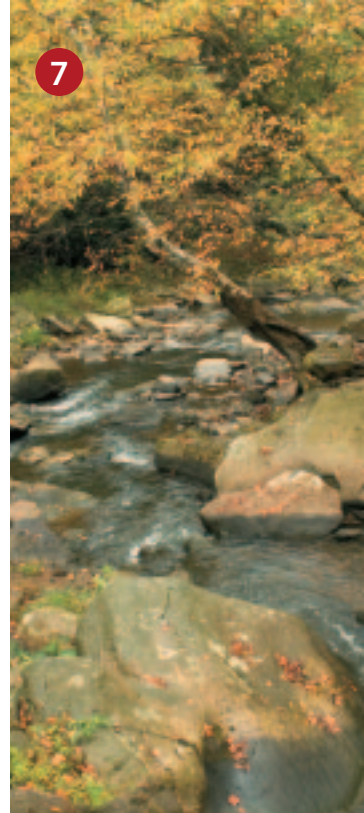
Horse-drawn flatcar on Benninghoff Run, Oil Creek Valley, 1865. Drilling began on the uplands of Oil Creek early in 1865. With the first 300-barrels-a-day well on Benninghoff Run, leases were quickly signed and drilling began in earnest. A horse-drawn railroad operated for several months before being replaced with pipelines later that fall.

4

Coal Oil Johnny’s House, also along the Oil Creek State Park Trail. The rags-to-riches-

to-rags story of John W. Steele, who grew up in this house, was legendary in the late 1900s. A poor orphan, Johnny was adopted by his Aunt Sally McClintock. The family led a meager farming existence until oil was discovered on the property. Not long after, Aunt Sally died, leaving Johnny fabulously rich. For a year or so, he lived the high life; even his horse (as one story goes) was watered with champagne. The philandering Steele made risky business deals and let money slip through his fingers. Penniless, he returned home to find his wife as forgiving as he was foolish.

Moved from its original site about .7 miles away and reassembled, the house is open by appointment for tours. A new trailhead here



DAVITT B. WOODWELL

will be completed in spring 2011, says Kim Harris, project manager for the Oil Region Alliance.

5 Truss bridge as sculpture. Five miles south of Franklin on the Allegheny River Trail, Sandy Creek Trail crosses over the path and the river. The magnificent Belmar Bridge, 1,385 feet across, was built in 1907. In 2005 it was converted into a trail bridge, with a wooden deck and railings, and many details of the old railroad bridge were preserved. A stairway from the Allegheny River Trail below lets you and your bike ascend for a view of the river. (If you want to explore 12-mile Sandy Creek Trail and you like tunnels, head east.)

6 Near Cowanshannock, we hear the dogs before we see them. Allen Dunn, a first-year musher who lives near McCauley's Falls, tells us the Armstrong Trail is great for training his huskies. "It's beautiful," he says, "especially above Templeton, where the mountains come down to the river—and the wildlife." He tells us one day a bear swam across the river, popped up over the bank, saw the dogs and took off down the trail in the other direction. "It was all I could do to hold the brake and keep the dogs from chasing him!"

7 Here's a lyrical spot just off the Armstrong Trail on a little quarter-mile spur trail. Its

name may be a mouthful for kids, but the Cowanshannock Trail is popular with families.

8 When we finally reach Pittsburgh, the North Shore Riverfront Park provides a spectacular welcome to the city and conclusion to our adventure.

For more information on the Erie-to-Pittsburgh Trail network and its regional partners, as well as a map of open and developing segments, visit www.eriepittsburghtrail.org.