

Confronting history on two wheels

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By Dick Beamish , Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates

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For good reason, the Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor that runs through the Adirondack Park is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The railroad that began operating on this line in 1882 opened the Adirondacks to millions of health seekers and visitors in the decades that followed. (Rail service ended in 1972, with passenger service ending in 1964.) This was also a mind-boggling engineering feat: The 120-mile line through forests and wetlands, over streams and across lakes was completed by Dr. William Seward Webb and his army of laborers in just 18 months.

Equally mind-boggling is the position taken today by two otherwise rational and worthwhile organizations, Historic Saranac Lake and Adirondack Architectural Heritage. Both groups insist that the rusting rails and rotting ties should be preserved for historic reasons - not recognizing that it is the railroad corridor itself and its associated buildings that are historic, not the standard-gauge rails and ties that continue their inevitable decay. These historic preservationists fail to see that removing such obstacles and converting the rail bed into a recreational "rail trail" could do more than anything to celebrate the history of the corridor and its defining role in the Adirondacks.

My wife Rachel and I have bicycled on rail trails from Maine to Michigan, from Quebec to North Carolina. Aside from providing us with easy, peaceful, traffic-free exercise, often in a lovely natural setting, these trails have opened a window for us on local history. Interpretive signs, kiosks and restored station houses tell the story of the railroads, the early settlers, the industries that prospered here, the wars and other historic forces that shaped the region.

Article Photos

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A young family learns about an historic iron ore blast furnace on Pennsylvania's Ghost Town Trail, one of more than 2,000 rail-to-trail conversions around the country. (Photo — Patricia Tomes)

Just think what a recreational trail on the Adirondack corridor could teach us. The Lake Placid depot's museum is a good start, with its 1929 steam engine and antique caboose. In Ray Brook, riders could learn the story of the tuberculosis sanatorium that once flourished here for TB sufferers of limited means, and learn about the Olympic village that housed athletes for the 1980 Winter Games - before both became state and federal prisons. Then on to Saranac Lake, once a world-renowned center for TB treatment whose remarkable history, if properly presented, would captivate travelers.

Rachel and I once rode the tourist train from Saranac Lake to Lake Placid. As the tracks skirted Saranac Lake's Pine Ridge Cemetery, an announcer told us we were passing the graves of Norwegian sailors who had come here during World War II. But when we looked for the graves out the window, the train had already passed the spot.

Later we did some research and visited the cemetery on foot. These sailors had been at sea when the Germans invaded their country, so they headed for a safe harbor in New York. Some of the crew were diagnosed with tuberculosis and sent to Saranac Lake in hope of "curing." TB was often a death sentence then, but on the grave markers we saw that one of the sailors had lived for many years after the others. We learned he had married a local girl and made Saranac Lake his home. The little Norwegian flags marking the 17 graves were put there by a resident of the village who has cared for this plot over the years.

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In the generations to come, such nuggets of history could be shared with the literally millions of bicycle riders who will utilize this corridor during the 21st century and beyond. All that's needed is some well-worded, visually engaging signage.

Just down the corridor from the cemetery is Saranac Lake's renovated Victorian train station - a building just begging to become a small museum celebrating the career of Dr. Edward Livingston Trudeau and highlighting the truly unique history of this mountain village. It was Dr. Trudeau who put Saranac Lake on the map as America's first fresh-air treatment center for TB. Right now, however, the interior space in this wonderful building is essentially going to waste.

From here, bicycle riders could pedal around the village, checking out the "cure cottage" architecture with their "cure porches" where patients rested in "cure chairs" and breathed the pine-scented air. Once again, interpretive signs at significant buildings, complemented by the restored Saranac Laboratory and with guided cure cottage tours conducted by Historic Saranac Lake, would bring to life this compelling chapter in Adirondack (and U.S.) history.

Between Saranac Lake and Tupper Lake, a 19th-century milestone of American conservation could also be commemorated for passing bicyclists. Interpretive stations could explain how the "forever wild" Adirondack Forest Preserve, which borders much of the corridor, served as a 19th-century model for wilderness preservation in the United States. Bikers would discover how the adjoining St. Regis Canoe Area became a motor-free paradise for paddlers, thanks to the pioneering Adirondack Park Agency in 1972.

In the replicated train station at Tupper Lake Junction, riders could learn about the logging and railroading days when this hardy Adirondack community was the state's most important center for lumbering. From there riders could bike a couple of miles (mostly on a spur trail) to the Natural History Museum of the Adirondacks (Wild Center), where visitors can experience another aspect of the region's history.

The lessons to be learned by bicycle or on foot along this historic corridor are virtually limitless. So isn't it time for our historic preservation groups to see the potential and seize (rather than resist) this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity?

Dick Beamish lives in Saranac Lake and is the founder of the Adirondack Explorer magazine and a board member of Adirondack Recreational Trail Advocates. This commentary also appeared in the most recent Explorer.