



## Rails to Trails: Recycling with a Twist

*How a group of people saw an opportunity to make a difference for the better*

**By Sarah DeDonatis, LNHA**

They once ran the world. Powerful engines made of casted steel and wood, propelled by steam and fueled by coal. Their presence was unmistakable, imposing locomotives dominating the landscape throughout the United States. The air being sliced by the shrill sounds of their whistles, warning people to stay at a safe distance. Then the dawn of the car, the ability for people to expand their horizons on their own as the “horseless carriage” became popular and the construction of roads soon followed. As families could afford their own form of transportation they were no longer forced to remain in their small towns.

During the hay day of the railroad, beautiful tracks crisscrossed throughout the United States in an effort to ease the movement of produce, communication and people. Once travel became more affordable and convenient the railways reacted to the reduction of demand and closed tracks that were lesser used. The effects of those abandoned tracks were quickly noticed because of the increase of garbage and weed

growth found throughout towns and farming communities. As many saw these dirty, overgrown areas as an eye sore, there were others who saw possibility. Hiking through these abandoned areas made them happy and seeing how they could visit adjoining towns gave them fun destinations to explore.



A movement began to reclaim some of the railways that were no longer used. After previous failed attempts in the late 1800's, a strong and effective movement began in the 1960's to protect and convert the rails to usable spaces. Although much attention is given to the fact that these particular trail ways all originated from the railway systems that does not hold 100% true. A lesser known form of transit that historically carried much of our country's goods were canals. These long bodies of water were flanked by

roadways called towpaths on either side allowing for mules to pull the large non-motorized barges to ports far from main trading posts. Many of these towpaths were quite wide allowing large mule

teams to handle the weight of the barges. Canals became outdated when the railroad gained popularity, however a few canal systems still exist today. These dormant towpaths had been overgrown and collecting debris, just like their abandoned rail system counterparts. Fortunately citizens overlooked the negative effects of abandonment with the likelihood of creating something even better.

The birth of the rail to trail movement is a storied one. Individuals who noticed these areas, some abandoned and some naturally being used by hikers and bikers, moved to ensure the land was returned to its people. The amazing history can be found on the [Rails to Trails Conservancy](#) site. The growth of the rail to trail movement came from the time the automobile was at its height, the early 1960's. The needs for rail and towpath travel diminished and the availability of goods became easy to obtain resulting in less tracks and towpaths in service. In the early to mid-1980's the United States government started working with conservation groups by creating supportive legislation for trail designation, creation and maintenance.



Figure 2: Near Hocking Hills, Ohio a decommissioned power line pole from the railroad

Thankfully the Rails to Trails Conservancy has been hard at work for almost 40 years preserving the history and beauty so many of these trail-ways and towpaths offer.

The undying dedication to the rails to trails cause has inspired many states to open unused trail systems for the benefit of its citizens, currently stretching well over 20,000 miles in the United States alone. As the conservancy continues to grow, they are working to create a connected trail that will allow hikers and bikers to travel across the country. For those who don't live in the United States or travelling abroad, there are trails available all over the world as well. The [conservancy](#) has provided information on some trails in other countries that travelers and citizens can enjoy. If your destination is not found in that article, a suggestion would be to contact the local tourism department to see if such trails exist in that country.

The hard work of organizations looking to preserve these beautiful landscapes by protecting and



Figure 1: Long abandoned train tunnel

reallocating railways and towpaths to trails, garnered government support and funds to upkeep the areas. Those funds translate to maintained, sometimes paved and safe trails to be enjoyed. These are perfect areas for a good workout or a leisurely stroll while enjoying the outdoors. Trains cannot efficiently travel up steep terrain, which means these trails are largely flat. Since the trails have a low grade, the lack of hills reduces strain on the body whether hiking, biking, walking or running. Previously, trains would need to stop in cities and towns to deliver their cargo, so these trails now connect to little towns allowing for fun destination trips. Rails to trails are typically defined as out and back trails and are not in a loop. This means you park your car at a trailhead, walk for a distance turn around and then walk back to your car. Please be sure to know your physical limitations before going. Listening to your body in order to turn around and head back to your car before becoming exhausted is a great way to stay safe.

***To ensure everyone enjoys the trails, there must be trail etiquette.***

- Travel on your right hand side, leaving the left for passing and oncoming traffic.
  - o When passing, announce your arrival clearly as to not startle other people.
- Trash you generate should be carried out by you and disposed of correctly.
  - o Keep the trails clean.
- Utilize the restrooms in cities or provided along the trail way.
- Always be respectful of others by keeping pets on a leash and picking up after them when they use the restroom.
- Mind your voice. Some of these trails cut behind homes.
  - o Enjoy your time but be mindful of your neighbors.

- Use these trails often to encourage their maintenance and popularity.

**A few notes about safety while enjoying these great landscapes and whenever venturing outside.**

- Some of the trails are not maintained during the winter months, meaning snow and ice are prevalent.
  - o Please be sure to wear proper foot gear to help give you traction in these areas.
- Any time you travel alone, let someone know where you are going, in case you need help.
  - o Having someone know when to expect to hear from you is always a good plan.
- Fun and safe travel is better with a friend.
  - o Hiking in pairs or more makes for great conversation and safety as well.
- Know your abilities, it is best to turn around and head back to your car before feeling tired.
- Bring water and a few snacks and have your phone fully charged, just in case.

There are many YouTube channels that offer instructions or travel advice for a safe and enjoyable excursion. One such channel is Roland and Julianna (2025), [here](#) they present a beautifully edited video of their experiences thus far and their ideas of the best locations to visit. They are not alone on this endeavor, a quick search will render many others who have visited rails to trails as their vacation destinations.

The reliance on trains for the movement of goods and travel has not all gone away. There is a resurgence of interest in train travel as an alternate means of enjoying the country. Many popular social media channels are taking their watchers along as they travel the friendly rails. With a robust revival of train travel and appreciation of taking ones time to see the sights while sleeping to the calming sway of a railcar, trains are still in demand. For those tracks that no longer support railcars, well, they now support citizens who enjoy a unique perspective.



*Figure 3: North of Detroit, Michigan a 30+ mile rail to trail*

Healthy activity does not have to be boring, especially if you have a local rails to trails conservation area near you. Try out the trail and see what it has to offer, visit a small town along the way and enjoy a celebratory breakfast or lunch while there. Throughout your trail adventure, if you are quiet you just might find yourself watching a deer grazing on grass, or see a whistle pig chewing on roots. If you think of it, take a picture or two. What a way to enjoy the hard work of great American citizens who saw an opportunity and gave you a chance to travel where once only trains trod.

**References:**

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**About the Author:** Sarah DeDonatis is an author, speaker, blogger, and voice over actress. She is an avid hiker and traveler throughout the United States and Canada. Her enjoyment for rails to trails was brought to her by a good friend who she continues to accompany while enjoying the amazing trails near her home to this day. She writes on all things 50 years old and older, with a focus on safety, security, long-term care resident information and supports and services for people who love seniors. To contact Sarah email: [web@thinksarah.com](mailto:web@thinksarah.com).

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