

**Eric Lidji:** Today is July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017. I'm Eric Lidji. This is the Great Allegheny Passage Oral History Project. I'm speaking to Larry Ridenour and we are at the Regional Trail Corporation Headquarters in West Newton, Pennsylvania. So, why don't you start by you telling me the P&LE story. How you met the president of P&LE?

**Larry Ridenour:** Okay. At the time that we knew that building this trail was a tremendous opportunity and we didn't want to miss it, I had designed a garden for the president of P&LE about five years before that. So, at the time this all came about, I was working for Allegheny County and I saw the potential. And, the president of P&LE, Gordon Neuenschwander still had control of over 100 miles of right-of-way. Forty-five miles was on this Youghioghney section owned by the P&LE, and then 55 miles of the Montour Trail was also owned the P&LE. I met with him and I explained the potential and he was very positive about it. We ended up getting it appraised and coming up with a number – I think it was \$210,000 or something like that – for just this section of the P&LE. So, we got over 100 miles of railroad right-of-way that we could turn into trails.

**Eric Lidji:** Could you explain railbanking?

**Larry Ridenour:** Railbanking was a law that was passed by Congress, that, in effect, was trying to preserve all these rights-of-way that were put into effect, probably 100 years ago when the railroads were developed. The railroads, quite often, would go to the landowner and get him to sign a right-of-way deed which said that as long as we use your property for a railroad, we have the right to use it. And, if we ever abandon the railroad, it reverts back to you. So, railbanking was a provision of this law that went into effect, by the Federal government, that it would not revert. Now, if any of this trail is needed for a railroad in the future, we would have to give it up. But, but that has only happened once or twice since 1986 and the likelihood of that happening here is very remote because on the other side on the Youghioghney River, all the way down to Cumberland, Maryland, the CSX has a very active freight line and passenger line. It's the main passenger line between

Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C. But, on the other side of the river, it was only used for hauling coal and all the coal mines are gone, and there's just the coal towns, the little coal towns along the way. So, we were able within 90 days, I think, or something like that, to railbank this section from McKeesport to Connellsville.

**Eric Lidji:**

When you first approached the P&LE, what was the vision of the trail at that point?

**Larry Ridenour:**

Well, we had this study that was done for Western Pennsylvania, and we knew that we could get the- the Montour was a good option because it provided a 55-mile right-of-way around the southern half of Pittsburgh region, from Coraopolis on the Ohio River to Clairton on the Mon River. That was 55 miles. Then the other one was 45 miles from McKeesport down to Connellsville and those are the ones we wanted. Malcolm Sias is the Parks and Recreation Director for Westmoreland County, and he's continued onward. He's the head of, probably, more than 50 miles of little pieces of trail over in Westmoreland County, but ten of the miles of his county, is here in Westmoreland County, here in West Newton. So, again, when we first got this thing together, Malcolm and the fellows from down in Fayette County...we realized that we had three counties we had to deal with and that's how we put together the Regional Trail Corporation, and why we put it together.

**Eric Lidji:**

Was there a vision of Pittsburgh to D.C. at that point, or was it seen as being a little regional trail that would connect these three counties?

**Larry Ridenour:**

We were just working on these three counties and just getting down to...we wanted to get to Ohiopyle, I think because that first nine miles was built by the State of Pennsylvania and went through Ohiopyle State Park. And, we had the vision of just going that far. But then, when Linda Boxx came along, she expanded that vision because she's from Westmoreland County, but she was in contact with Hank Park who was very instrumental in getting the Somerset County section. Then,

one thing led...What she did, which expanded everything- we continued to have monthly meetings at the Regional Trail Corporation, but then Linda added onto that another monthly meeting of the ATA, which is the Allegheny Trail Alliance, and that included the State of Maryland and Somerset County and then all three of these counties, as well. So, she really was the person who expanded the vision to get to Cumberland, Maryland.

**Eric Lidji:**

Was there a national Rails-to-Trails movement at the time? What was the impetus to create this trail if there wasn't a larger vision?

**Larry Ridenour:**

There wouldn't have been any trail here. There was a person that I worked for when I first got out of graduate school, a city planner by the name of George Beckman. There was a program called Project 70. It was a funding program where the government would come in and give communities money to do a comprehensive plan for their community. Well, George, when I came here to Pittsburgh and worked for him for ten years and I kind of learned- I mean, my background is landscape architecture, but in working with him for ten years, I was able to, like, on-the-job-training, become a community planner – a planning consultant. And, one of the projects that he did was in this valley here – the Youghiogheny River. He had half a dozen communities and he saw the potential, someday, of this Youghiogheny being a trail. And then, nothing ever became of it. Then, fast forward about 20 years and this opportunity came up, and we jumped on it.

**Eric Lidji:**

Could you talk a little bit about the relationship between the Montour Trail and the Yough Trail, and the way that ideas got passed back and forth?

**Larry Ridenour:**

Yeah, okay. Whenever the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy completed this summary report of all the rail trail potentials in Western Pennsylvania, myself and an engineer by the name of Dave Wright were part of a group- and Bill Metzger was part of that. We were only 12 of us when we started to get together on a monthly basis in the evening. We had Bill who knew all

about railroads, we had some other people that were just a whole mix of people and we were very lucky- this Dick Wilson, this attorney, he was in there. So, we had Metzger, we had me, we had Dave Wright, a couple other people. This is all in Allegheny County.

Then, what I brought to the table was the fact that I knew the president that owned 100 miles of right-of-way within Allegheny County, including Westmoreland and Fayette. So, we started meeting and we had some help from this Eric Dugale and from the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, but we were the ones who started to put it together. I think I mentioned earlier that we got it in the nick of time because if we hadn't gone to the railroad, they would have given the right-of-way on the Montour to this coal company. They were stripping coal and they wanted to use it for a haul road. And also, at the same time, they were building a backup power line to the Greater Pittsburgh Airport, which did come to pass because we could be compatible with that. But, we had input into the design of the power line and, consequently, they had to build the bridges to get their power poles along the right-of-way, so they built the bridges and we got all that for free. And then, they built single poles with pretty attractive poles. We share the right-of-way with the...I don't know what power company it is. Along that line was whenever Dave Wright and I decided we're going to separate.

But, with the money I got in my budget- he was in the engineering department and I was in the planning department. And, I got \$30,000 a year to use on trails. That was sort of the nucleus of how we were going to develop all this stuff because we got other additional money, too. And, at the time, Tom Murphy was a state representative in Harrisburg for a section of a district in Pittsburgh, so he was a good benefactor. He started getting 50% matching grants for the Montour, and he wasn't involved in the Yough Trail at all until a little later.

So, we started to match up the money. I don't know where the private money came from at that point. Tom Murphy was involved in that. So, we were using the county money and the

state money, and using local municipalities – their road crews – to build sections of trail, and we also used volunteers to do bridges. So, in a way that was a training ground or prototype for how we did this. This started a little bit later. I'd say maybe a year later.

**Eric Lidji:** When you say “this,” what are you referring to?

**Larry Ridenour:** What?

**Eric Lidji:** When you say “this,” what are you referring to? You said “this” got started a little later.

**Larry Ridenour:** The Yough Trail – this section. And then, at that point, Dave and I decided, “Well, you take care of the Montour, and I’ll take care of this.” But, he still used money that I had because he didn’t have any money in his county budget. I would give money for materials. Like, Moon Township was one of the communities that said, “Well, we’ll use our equipment, you give us the money for the stone and some of that stuff.” So, then I used it down here with Elizabeth Township and a couple other townships.

**Eric Lidji:** So, when you say “volunteer,” you mean that municipalities were volunteering their crews to do this work that you had bought the materials for?

**Larry Ridenour:** Yes. But, there was also just regular volunteers. By this time, we were building a local support organization or a friends group, if you will. Like, on the Montour, there’s probably five or six trail groups, localized. They get together and they could do sections of it, and section, and section. So then, when the Yough Trail section started, I was putting all my money here, most of it. I had to give him \$10,000 a year or something like that. So, this thing started to snowball. And, you know, you heard the stories.

But, all the counties, and particularly Allegheny County – the Democrats had control of the county for 50 years. And, I think in 1996, the Democrats lost the courthouse. Because then it

used to be three county commissioners and it was always two Democrats and one Republican. Well, at this particular time there was two Republicans and one Democrat and they came in and immediately eliminated the planning department. They knew this was coming, so they moved me into the engineering department with Dave Wright so the commissioners couldn't find out where I was. But, I was busy trying to get other rail trail opportunities in Allegheny County, and I couldn't keep my mouth shut.

I mean, I can't even remember the township north of Pittsburgh, and we had some real opposition. The railroad wanted to give us the right-of-way, but some of the local people put up such a fuss. And, I was there championing the cause of Rails-to-Trails and there was a guy sitting in the audience that had a Ford dealership, who also gave money to the Republican Party. And, a week later, he wanted my head on a plate, and he got it. So, I lost my job with the county and that same day that Mayor Tom Murphy called up and said, "Hey, Larry, I got a job for you. Don't take anymore-." So, I didn't lose a day's work; I started to build other trail sections.

**Eric Lidji:**

For the city?

**Larry Ridenour:**

For the city. And then, Linda had some influence over there in Westmoreland County, and having a background as city planner and a regional planner and all this stuff, I had an opportunity to work for the Johnstown area and put together a master plan for 12,000 square miles, which was from the Kiski River all the way over Somerset County in that whole big section in there. And, it was to put together five existing conservation districts into one regional plan, and that was because, you know, Linda's influence when she got me that job. But, they wanted me to move out there and I didn't want to move.

**Eric Lidji:**

To Johnstown?

**Larry Ridenour:**

Yeah. So I said, "No, you've got to find somebody else." Then I went to work for – this is not about me – but I went to work

for the Steel Industry Heritage Corporation, which is in Homestead, and that was mostly funded by the National Parks Service. They have a whole system. Just in the National Parks they have these National Heritage areas, and they had put together one called the Steel Valley, and it included all of the historical assets along the Mon River and the Allegheny River down the Ohio River.

So, they hired me and I worked the last five years of my career, I worked for the Rivers of Steel. And I was the one who tried to get – and it was difficult to get – a right-of-way through the Mon Valley and through McKeesport. And, I worked almost five years and then I retired. And then, Jack Pollack then got hired by Linda to pick up on that and do the rest of it, and the Steel Industry Heritage got out of the picture.

But we were trying, mightily, to get through all of that industrial...I guess the last 15 miles from McKeesport up to Station Square, or to the city line, because, by then, Tom Murphy had built a trail on both sides of the Mon River. Then, the Hot Metal Bridge that connects across, that's all up in the city, but I worked from the city line all the way down to the connection with the Youghiogheny River Trail, just south of McKeesport.

**Eric Lidji:**

If the P&LE goes all the way into Pittsburgh, why couldn't the right-of-way just be continued all the way into Pittsburgh?

**Larry Ridenour:**

Because, at the time, what had been the P&LE was used by the county as a commuter rail line from McKeesport to downtown Pittsburgh, and they were using that. And, you still had, through all that industrial area...well, even after they stopped using that, it went on the wrong side of the river. It didn't match up with anything. But, also at that time, the Regional Industrial Development Corporation, which was an entity of Allegheny County, we were well established as a rail trail, so when we went to talk to them about right-of-way – you heard this story – they gave up enough right-of-way for us to build that trail. And then, Jack was the one who got those bridges across the active railroad, and the ramps...you had

the ramp up and across the active track, and then ramp down for the bikes. We had to build two of those.

And then, he had the hard work of getting to- like, I told the story about the fact that we had an agreement over the last nine miles of the P&LE, but then the P&LE went bankrupt in less than six months and any agreements that were six months prior were null and void, so we lost it. So then, he had to do the legwork to putting all that together. I don't know how much we spent building a concrete barricade between the trail and this steel salvage underneath the 10<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge. That was all going to part of the P&LE that we were going to get, but we were six months late. And, within that six months, we lost that. I had that deal signed by the president of P&LE. He was still alive, but he was just a vegetable at that point, but the company went bankrupt.

**Eric Lidji:**

Could you talk about how the RTC got started and the meeting of the three counties?

**Larry Ridenour:**

Well, when we started to do the planning and put this together down along the Youghiogheny River, we saw that it went through three counties. So, Malcolm Sias and Jack Pollack were the key people in Westmoreland County that were into this that really were representatives from day one on this stuff. They weren't involved in the Montour at all, and they weren't involved in those initial meetings, but, in order to get down to Connellsville, we had to these other two counties, and somehow we contacted them, and those are the guys that showed up.

Whenever we started to meet with the county commissioners, they did not want to have the liability. So, with the advice of this attorney, Dick Wilson, he said, "Well, what you probably should do is form a corporation, nonprofit corporation, of three counties and assume the liability, and then the county commissioners will deed..." The county commissioners gave us some money based on the appraisal that we made, so it was very [inaudible 0:24:17.7]. When we took that appraisal to



the railroad and said, "This is what it's worth," they didn't even bother doing their own appraisal. They said, "Okay, fine."

And, in the meantime, then – mostly it was Malcolm and myself and somebody from Fayette County – we went to all three counties together, we went to all three county commissioners. At the time, each county had three county commissioner-type of government, and we presented the project to them, and that's how they said, "Well, we'll buy into this as long as we don't have the liability," and then it was Dick Wilson that had helped and plus we had other input from other people. We put together the bylaws and the document to form the Regional Trail Corporation as a nonprofit. But this guy, Dick Wilson, would be a good person to meet up with because he was very helpful. And, he was involved in one of the first 12 that started to work on the Montour. So, he worked both on the Montour and on the Yough. Now, we did pay him for some of the work that he did on this trail, but I think all though, I don't think he ever charged, and whatever he did charge was small. It wasn't big bucks at all.

**Eric Lidji:** Are we good, or do you need to get going?

**Larry Ridenour:** How much more do you want to...?

**Eric Lidji:** How long is a piece of string, as they say? Why don't we stop here and we can always pick it up on the phone or something if you...

**Larry Ridenour:** Yeah, okay.

[end 0:26:05.9]

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