

WALKING THE CREEK

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Like Street — one of more than 20 such crossings — and meets its first man-made obstruction, a small earthen dam behind 390 Elmcrest Drive. Water gurgles as it struggles to exit from a standpipe that carries it from a broad pool to the stream bed beyond.

As it moves on its generally southeastern course, Toby's Creek gains mass from countless small tributaries that feed into it. Soon, the stream bed is six feet across, and the banks are steep. Here, behind the Elmcrest development, the creek runs parallel to a dirt road built to service a pump station for the Dallas Area Municipal Authority.

And this is the beginning of the indignities that have been inflicted on Toby's Creek over the years, since it appears before the road was built the flow must have spread out in this low-lying space, its water being purified as it seeped slowly through the swamp.

The first worn-out tire appears here, soon to be followed by many more. And an odd culvert, about 20 feet long, lies in the bed, the water directed through it, but nothing passing overhead.

The banks grow steeper now, and the flow quickens. Sewer basins protrude from the stream bank, about 100 yards apart as the stream approaches the pump station.

Merle Thomas has run a produce stand near the creek for more than 60 years. Since 1972 it has been located where Toby's Creek meets Memorial Highway, near Payne Printery. Until the mid-1940s he grew green tomatoes on land he leased from Howard Wardan. Then someone suggested a fresh produce stand would be popular and he built his first six by eight foot stand a few hundred yards away.

As the creek turns parallel to the highway, a clue appears of how powerful the innocuous looking stream can be. Barely a mile from its source, it passes through a culvert that is about 8 feet wide by 6 feet high. Most of the time, the waterway looks puny by comparison, but it can rise amazingly quickly in a hard rain, such as during last month's flooding associated with the remnants of Hurricane Ivan.

Litter, litter everywhere

Because it now runs alongside a busy roadway, the stream banks become incredibly littered here, with a hubcaps, fast-food packaging, beer cans and other detritus of modern civilization staining the landscape.

As it approaches the Meadows Nursing Center complex, the stream zigs sharply left, then zags right, through a 75-foot-long culvert that deposits it behind the Dallas Agway. After meandering beside it not into a pond on the Meadows property, it heads back toward the highway.

Many people think the duck-filled stream that crosses between the Meadows Center and Pickett's Charge restaurant is Toby's Creek, but it is not. That waterway is fed by runoff from the Meadows' pond, and a small tributary that runs down from the area of the Fern Knoll cemetery.

The real Toby's Creek hugs the highway in front of Pickett's before swinging hard left to go behind Hilbert's Equipment. From there it continues straight to its next highway crossing, near A.J.'s Beverage.

When it reaches the center of Dallas, Toby's Creek begins a series of twists and turns that take it beneath buildings and highways, through concrete-lined sluiceways and past venerable stone walls.

Crossing Memorial Highway (Rt. 415) at Lake Street, the creek flows underground much of the distance to the Dallas Post Office, about 500 feet in all. On the way, it emerges briefly on the western side of the highway, only to disappear beneath Fino's Pharmacy, confined by 15-foot-tall concrete walls. The water is next seen on the eastern side of Main Street, gurgling along between White's Appliance and the Bufalino Law Office. Finally, it again runs through a tunnel below the highway, flowing into a channel defined by now-hidden but beautifully cut stone walls that take it about 150 feet away from the roadway, behind the post office.

At that point, the creek takes a sharp bend to the right toward Mill Street, where it will again cross under the highway, but not before passing below a tumbledown bridge made of old railroad ties that connected two parcels of land that once housed the Agway store, and before that the Hildebrandt-Frantz mill. Early maps show a mill pond here, fed by Toby's Creek and a small tributary that runs through a marshland off Upper Demunds Road before tumbling down to the center of town.

At many highway crossings such as this, metal or plastic pipes carrying water and gas are suspended over the creek.

For the first 50 feet after it reaches the western side of the highway, the stream runs in a 15-foot-deep channel lined by concrete walls. When the concrete ends, the creek widens and several different materials are used to keep the bank from sliding into the stream, with varying degrees of success.

A little below Wendy's restaurant, the bank becomes soft and vulnerable to erosion. At several points, the guard rail has begun to lean toward the

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POST PHOTOS/RON BARTIZEK

Merle Thomas holds his hand at about the level Toby's Creek water reached in the 1972 Agnes flood. He has operated a produce stand near the creek for nearly 60 years.

All things considered, we'll opt for 'Toby's'

By RONALD BARTIZEK
Post Staff

Is it Toby's, Toby, Tobey's or Toby? Looking through historical resources, you can find all those names for the stream that flows through the heart of the Back Mountain.

On a map of Bedford Township, from the early 1800s, several streams and creeks are shown, but only two

toby's creek

are named: Harveys and Tobys, neither using an apostrophe. To this day, Harveys Lake appears to be incorrect by the terms of strict

English usage. So does Clarks Summit, the Lackawanna County town named

after its first preacher. F. Charles Petrillo, a lawyer with a keen interest in local his-

tory, provided several references for the name. In one of them, both Toby's and Harvey's are used, and so is Harvey's Lake.

One of the earliest publications, Pearce's Annuals of Luzerne County, falls on the side of Toby's, and so do we.

So, who — or what — was Toby? The answer to that is as murky as the water in the creek during a spring flood, but here are some of the historical legends:

- Toby was an elderly Native American who lived in the area in the middle of the 19th century. According to Petrillo, a Wilkes-Barre newspaper, the Luzerne Union, described a Toby's Cove, and other references say he lived somewhere near the creek, but in the Wyoming Valley.

- Toby is a contraction of Tobyhanna, a Native American term for alder or birch-like tree. Or, it could refer to a Tobyhanna Creek in Monroe County, although that seems the most farfetched possibility.



This hidden stretch, across from the Sheetz convenience store, illustrates both the beauty and abuse of Toby's Creek. An uplift of shale forms the eastern bank, where trash and debris interrupt the flow of water.

TOBY'S CREEK

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cats," he said.

The creek provides drinking water to deer, bear and other wildlife in more wooded areas such as Trucksville, while the wetlands between the Meadows and Route 415 is home to birds, turtles and "spring peepers," little frogs that "usher in spring with a wonderful chorus of chirping or peeping," Chamberlain said.

Although the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission doesn't stock the creek, some residents have done so on their own.

Adamchick, co-owner of Pizza Perfect in Trucksville, began in 1992 to stock Snake Creek, a tributary of Toby's Creek, with trout for children to catch during fishing season.

Each year he would purchase \$600 worth of trout, he said. Part of the money came from a collection jar that Adamchick would start shortly after Super Bowl and the rest would come out of his own pocket.

Just before trout season, Adamchick, with the help of volunteers from fire and police departments as well as nearby businesses, would prepare the creek for delivery of the trout from a Bear Creek hatchery.

"We enjoyed cleaning up the creek," he said.

But he stopped stocking the creek two years ago because too many adults used nets to remove fish from the creeks.

"Adults ruined it for the kids," Adamchick said.

Unfortunately, many human habits and attitudes negatively affect the creek.

"For years Toby's Creek has been treated as a nuisance," said Chamberlain, of the conservation district.

"It has been channeled, piped, redirected and filled in. For years, residents and businesses have filled its banks and elevated its flood plain, attempting to acquire more level land to the rear of their property," he said.

All of the changes made to the land by humans have affected animals' mobility and quality of life.

"Wildlife attempting to use and enjoy the creek must traverse highways, parking lots, steep banks, and chain link fences to do so," Chamberlain said.

"The lack of wildlife corridors, a stream buffer zone, greenways and open space along the creek, and a conduit to and from wooded or natural areas diminishes

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Dr. Dale Bruns

Dean of the College of Science and Engineering at Wilkes University

wildlife populations of both songbirds and animals."

Items like a stream buffer zone act as "vegetated filter strips" between a body of water and areas that could contaminate it such as parking lots, chemically treated lawns, plowed fields, barnyards, or junkyards, he said.

"A natural stream buffer not only provides a corridor for wildlife but it provides an ecosystem for habitat and food sources for wildlife ranging from birds to mammals," Chamberlain said.

Another problem involves stormwater runoff and what it carries.

Jim Stout, an officer with the Fish and Boat Commission, said that like most waterways, Toby's Creek is at risk from construction pollution from residential developments, industrial pollution from retail gasoline stores or industrial development, or pollution caused by vehicle accidents.

"They generally get stressed by the activities around them," he said.

Mark Carmon, community relations' coordinator at the Department of Environmental Protection, agrees that growth in Back Mountain communities can potentially impact the creek.

"Stormwater is the largest impact," he said. "It comes from everywhere — parking lots, drainage ditches, rain gutters. Different points of impact can be more harmful than just one." The DEP is working on developing stormwater management plans with counties, he said.

Luckily, programs exist to reverse the damage and monitor any potential problems. A major but basic step in renovating the creek is by cleaning it.

Chamberlain said that his district recommended Toby's Creek as a potential cleanup project for the Wyoming Valley Watershed Coalition's annual Streamside Cleanup program. Then they planned and coordinated the cleanup with Dallas Borough officials, he said.

During the cleanup, volunteers collected 35 cubic yards of junk

from a 900-foot section located behind the Commonwealth Telephone building, Chamberlain said.

"The creek has become a depository for trash, tires, and garbage," he said.

The weeds that hid all of the garbage were another problem. Through a Chesapeake Bay Foundation grant, the district provided seedlings, technical support and assistance to Dallas Borough's road department, which is trying to control invasive plants such as Japanese knotweed and multiflora rose, Chamberlain said. The seedlings, he said, would be used for enhancement, bank stabilization, and screening as well as to prevent invasive weeds and shrubs from choking the creek's banks.

The creek will also be marked with blue PennDOT-approved identification signs, Chamberlain said. The district and the Pocono Northeast Resource, Conservation & Development Council is helping Dallas Borough acquire the signs.

The district also created a conceptual site plan for a Greenway/Rail trail behind The Commonwealth Telephone building on Lake Street in Dallas. It then presented this plan to both Commonwealth and College Misericordia on behalf of Dallas Borough and the Anthracite Scenic Trails Association in hope of gaining their support, Chamberlain said.

So far the trail group has developed the Back Mountain Trail along Toby's Creek from Luzerne to N-Mart in Trucksville and continues to convert the abandoned Lehigh Valley Railroad grade into a trail.

During a recent hike on the 2-mile trail, Chamberlain said he didn't encounter any litter or trash. That, he said, illustrates an unseen benefit of the trail.

"Having a linear park attached to your property or business may increase property value and the profitability of a business. The people who utilize a trail often treat it as if it were their own and keep it clean."

While some work on beautifying the creek's banks, others con-

cern themselves with monitoring water quality.

A research proposal by Dr. Dale Bruns, dean of the College of Science and Engineering at Wilkes University, led to the start of the Environmental Monitoring for Public Access and Community Tracking (EMPACT) program in 2001.

Created under the Heritage River program and initially funded by the Environmental Protection Agency, EMPACT "integrates GIS (geographic information system) software, computer mapping, and environmental assessments of watersheds with real time water quality monitors," Bruns said.

By using measuring equipment called sondes, the team collects information on items such as dissolved oxygen, acidity, nitrates, and ammonia, he said. One of four sondes was installed by the Dallas Area Municipal Authority, which offered some security since vandalism was a concern.

So far, the team hasn't found any surprising data.

"Toby's Creek has a fair amount of suburban development but its water quality looks reasonably good at this point," Bruns said.

The most interesting find, he said, were "salt spikes" from snow melt runoff and the salting of roads. "But I cannot say that levels were severely high to impact aquatic life," he said.

The community can easily see EMPACT's findings by visiting displays at events such as Earth Day, the Wyoming Valley River-Fest, or watershed demonstration projects with the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Bruns said.

At these events, EMPACT displays items such as the global positioning system, sondes, and samples of aquatic insects, "all of which help to provide environmental education to the public about the causes and solutions to water quality problems in our region and watershed," he said.

Several EMPACT websites also exist. "In our grant, our web material was intended to be a critical part of our education and outreach programs," Bruns said.

The conservation district also works with sponsors, communities, watershed associations and schools "to promote awareness, appreciation, education, and sensitivity to all our natural resources," Chamberlain said.