

Most of the time, living is easy by the creek

By CAMILLE FIOTI
Post Correspondent

Over the bridge and through the woods is a quiet little row of houses tucked safely away from the noise and traffic of Route 309 in the "notch" between Luzerne and Trucksville.

Cross a small bridge over Toby's Creek on the west side of the highway and you'll enter the tiny neighborhood known as Birch Grove. Todd Calkins has lived in the grove for eight years. He never had a problem with water damage from the creek. His home, built by his father-in-law out of hemlock, sits high up on a ledge and overlooks the creek and the highway.

"I've never experienced flooding, but it can get pretty high and violent sometimes," he said. The narrow road that runs along the front of the homes and out to the bridge used to be a trolley line, according to Calkins. Before the age of refrigeration, ice was transported from Harveys Lake to Wilkes-Barre on the trolley. At some points, it would cross the road and run alongside the Lehigh Valley Railroad, the bed of which is now the Back Mountain Trail.

Toby's Creek crosses the highway in several places, too. On the east side, it flows under Dr. Francis Collini's office at the intersection of Route 309 and Center Street in Shavertown. Susan Collini, Dr. Collini's wife and office manager, said they haven't had any problems with flooding or water leakage since they bought the building in 1995.

"Knock on wood, we've had no water from the flood, but we've had to rebuild the parking lot and restructure the



FOR THE POST/CHARLOTTE BARTIZEK

Alexandria Krebs lives and plays beside Toby's Creek in Shavertown. Two weeks ago, the stream, swollen by rains from remnants of Hurricane Ivan, lapped at the top of the channel.

walls because of erosion. It's been a real investment," she said.

A few hundred feet below Dr. Collini's office, on North Main Street, is another section of houses with a scenic view of the creek in their front yards. Each house has a private bridge that is maintained by the owners.

Beside the stream, Leean

Malacavage and her husband Mark have a private "beach for two" complete with sand, seagulls, striped canvas beach chairs and nautical signs. "We sit on the bank every chance we get," she said.

Noise from the highway is a non-issue to her. "The creek really helps block out traffic noise. We don't hear much unless someone really loud goes

by and honks the horn."

Their front yard is beautifully landscaped with a variety of flowers and shade-loving hostas spilling over the creek's banks. "We've worked really hard, but we've had fun with it."

The Kingston Township road department maintains the grass and snow removal up to the Malacavages' bridge. White lights draped across both sides light up and welcome guests when they throw a party. "We joke we're going to put up a brick wall and make the bridge a drawbridge."

Matt Krebs has lived on South Main Street for 18 years. The creek flooded two years after he moved in. Luckily he didn't have water in his basement, but some of his neighbors did.

The creek makes a sharp curve just before the beginning of Krebs' front yard and travels towards the back of the property. He was able to drop his flood insurance because there hasn't been a flood in his section for 100 years.

Krebs commended Kingston Township for the upkeep of the grass and roads along the creek in his neighborhood. "They do an excellent job. I don't think they have to do all of that, but they do." He pointed out that he sees kids fishing on the banks quite often. "There's a lot of fish in there," he said.

Below where it exits the Back Mountain, the creek is stocked every year by The Toby's Creek Fisherman's Association in Luzerne. James Kelly Sr., Luzerne Mayor, said every May, brothers Jim and George Riley, members of the association take up a collection from businesses and residents, then use the donations to purchase trout and stock

the creek for the annual trout derby. The three-day event attracts large numbers of kids hoping to catch a fish of their own.

"By the end of the weekend, most of the fish are gone," he said. He believes the creek could use more attention, though. "Here in Luzerne, Toby's Creek was a source of income to a lot of people."

More than 100 years ago, grist mills were big business along the creek. According to Mark Albrecht, President of the Anthracite Scenic Trails Association, William Trucks Sr. one of the early settlers of Kingston Township, operated mills along Toby's Creek. Trucksville was later named after him.

Albrecht has been on the trail council for 10 years. One of the projects he is most proud to be a part of is Keep Pennsylvania Beautiful Day.

"We've been very abusive to our little creek," he said.

In order to make amends, Boy Scout troops and community volunteers have worked the last few years to clean up the trail, which runs parallel to the creek. With the help of PennDOT, they've hauled away washing machines, re-



Toby's Creek

Our hidden resource

frigerators and about 85 tires.

"The kids kept finding them and finding them. They literally rolled them from areas of Luzerne Borough to Kingston Township. Despite how much we've abused and neglected our little creek, it still runs pretty darn clean. Hopefully the trail will be one more thing that will remind people of our beautiful little creek."

NEXT WEEK

Elsewhere, streams and rivers have become engines of economic and cultural progress, and the same thing can happen here. The Post talked to people close by and far away who have committed themselves to restoring and utilizing waterways for recreation and as lures to attract tourism and new residents. And we talked to local public officials and leaders of organizations who have a vision of the tremendous asset Toby's Creek can become.

WALKING THE CREEK

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stream, and gullies have been dug by runoff water. Aside from posing a risk to the highway, the unstable bank allows a great deal of silt to get into the stream, covering the rocky bottom with sediment.

A brief peek at the past

A little further down, the creek moves away from the roadway, leaving room for brush to grow and stabilize the bank. Here, the creek's original rustic character is revived, and the water flows over scattered slices of shale.

But the reverie doesn't last long. Just below the former Pizza Hut, a massive coarse concrete wall shoves the stream nearly 90 degrees to the right, sending it behind the 309-415 shopping plaza. The rocky stream bed widens considerably, to 20 feet or more, as it passes behind the plaza and the Uni-Mart convenience store.

On the other side is a spectacular glade where ferns cover the ground beneath tall hardwood and fir trees that reach skyward for the sun. The tranquil scene is spoiled only by a pile of discarded appliances at the edge of the glade.

As Toby's Creek turns back toward the highway below Uni-Mart, it narrows where it passes a stagnant pond covered with algae that is separated from the creek by as little as 15 feet.

Again turning parallel to the busy highway, the stream bumps up against rip-rap that keeps it from undermining the road.

A few hundred feet ahead, an area of neatly clipped grass separates the highway and creek. Carl Gladey, who operates a barber shop at the corner of Main Street and Route 309 cuts the grass and picks up litter, even though he doesn't own the property, a state right-of-way.

"Maybe I'm crazy, but I just like to keep it looking nice," he says.

And he's noticed that when the roadside is clean and neat, people seem to toss less litter.

Now the creek takes a sharp left turn, and yet again runs below the highway. As it passes alongside Offset Paperback, Toby's Creek is well-controlled, flowing gently by a two-acre mowed field, complete with a bench where workers can enjoy lunch in serenity. It's hard to imagine that 60 years ago this same area was home to one of the liveliest entertainment centers in the region, Fernbrook Park, where Guy Lombardo once played and roller coaster riders screamed.

Red stakes are stuck into the ground here, marking the limit of jurisdiction for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which regulates waterways and adjacent wetlands. Any proposed disturbance of the ground between the

stakes and the creek would need approval from the Corps.

The creek then disappears into thick underbrush, where it slows and spreads out to create a large swampy area dotted with cattails.

A boost to the flow

Within the next 100 feet, the stream is swollen by its first major tributary, Trout Brook. Running about four miles from a pond near Demunds Corners to its juncture with Toby's Creek just above Lower Demunds Road, Trout Brook has a reputation for filling up quickly in hard rains, flooding fields along its path.

After it crosses under Lower Demunds Road, the larger Toby's Creek runs directly behind Pen-Fern Oil Co. — really directly, as the right bank is the concrete foundation of the building. Soon, it enters one of its loveliest stretches, and its first link with the Back Mountain Trail, which parallels the creek most of the way from Fernbrook to Luzerne.

After flowing over a small dam made by someone who propped shale on its edges, the stream bubbles over a rocky bed, through dense forest. The trail, built on the former Lehigh Valley Railroad line, is set about 10 feet above creek level. The combination of babbling brook and distance from busy Route 309 makes this a very pleasant walk or bike ride.

As it nears Franklin Street in Shavertown, the creek is hemmed in by walls that protect properties along its banks. Some of them are stone, both old and new, and others are made by combining stone and railroad ties. A few are



Because the passages through the Back Mountain are often narrow, Toby's Creek closely parallels the highway in many spots. This bank, across Memorial Highway from Wendy's, shows serious erosion from runoff water that flows from the roadway and into the creek.



of the "Gabian Wall" type, in which stones are kept in place by a heavy wire mesh.

After the creek again crosses below a road, this time North Main Street, it makes its way back to the highway. From Cook's Pharmacy to beyond Center Street, a narrow channel controls the flow, which begins a steeper elevation drop that will eventually take it to the Wyoming Valley, and the Susquehanna River.

Here is evidence of the creek's relentless attack on its banks. A section of the wall separating the creek from the parking lot at Snowdon Funeral Home collapsed two years ago. Rather than rebuild it, the business chose to create a rock-covered slope that held up well in the recent floods.

Just prior to entering a tunnel under the Center Street bridge, the creek has eaten several feet into the foundation of a concrete wall that lines the east-

ern bank. It seems only a matter of time before the wall comes tumbling down.

The tunnel is about 15 feet high and 12 feet wide, dimensions that seem extravagant most of the year, but are necessary when the normally docile stream swells with runoff from heavy rains, as it did in the 1972 Hurricane Agnes flood and again last month.

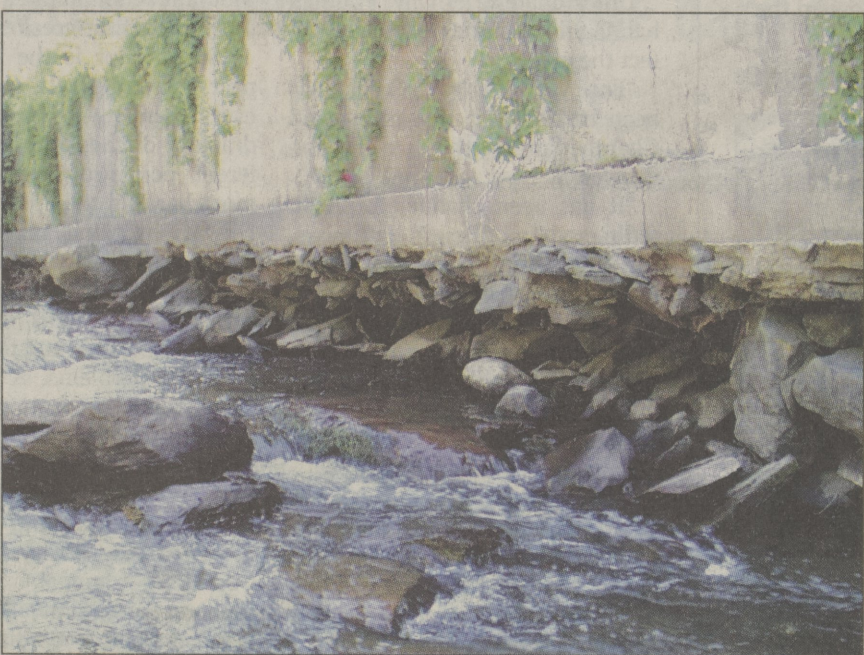
Next week: Toby's Creek grows stronger, and passes through secluded woodlands that hark back centuries, as well as evidence of early settlers' influence.

DO YOU HAVE ANY TOBY'S CREEK STORIES?

At different times and places, Toby's Creek has been a fishing hole, a natural sliding board and an engine of industry. If you have any stories to tell or pictures to share, we'd love to hear and see them. They may be published in the weeks following the completion of this series.

You can contact us many ways:
By e-mail (best): thepost@leader.net
By phone: (570) 675-5211
By mail: The Post, 15 N. Main St., Wilkes-Barre PA 18711
Items may also be dropped off in our locked box at the Uni-Mart convenience store, across from the Dallas Shopping Center.

No matter how you contact us, please include a return address and phone number, so that we can follow up with you and return items.



POST PHOTOS/RON BARTIZEK

Toby's Creek has eaten away at the footing of a concrete wall on its eastern edge at Center Street in Shavertown that protects buildings from its storm-swollen flow.