

# Surprises abound along the creek

*Editor's note: This is the second of two parts documenting a walk down the entire length of Toby's Creek in the Back Mountain. The first appeared in last week's (Oct. 10) issue of The Post.*

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After winding from its source near Irem Temple Country Club to Shavertown, Toby's Creek disappears for nearly 100 feet in a tunnel under the Center Street bridge, which is supported by a handsome stone arch. It then runs parallel to Route 309 for a few hundred feet, kept in place by a concrete wall that is 12 to 15 feet tall.

The stream swings left before making a wide loop back toward the highway. Here it is again rocky in the bottom, and the banks are covered with some vegetation, but that hasn't completely stopped erosion.

As the creek turns to the west, it is kept away from the highway by yet another concrete wall, but one that curves gracefully, a pleasant departure from the straight-sided sluiceways that have been seen until now.

After crossing below the highway through a standard-issue bridge, the flow widens and slows considerably. This is another spot where, if it wasn't for the din of passing traffic, the stream could be rolling through remote woodlands. It is wide and shallow, with the rocky bed that is seen when sedimentation is kept under control. But it also is marred by fallen trees, brush and garbage.

With its increased volume, Toby's Creek looks here to be deep and fast enough to support fish, although none are visible. There's plenty of the pesky Japanese knotweed on the banks, though. It has the look of bamboo, and its hollow trunk is easily broken, yet this invader has become an unstoppable presence.

Very shortly, the creek again approaches the highway, the water flowing over huge, one-piece slabs of shale, some showing many layers. Large rock outcroppings loom over the western bank of the stream as it nears the next bridge.

When it emerges on eastern side, the creek is confined by concrete walls and a collapsing old stone wall. Banks here are lower and covered with trees that appear to be no more than 25 years old.

Behind the former Rave's Garden Center, the creek takes a sharp right turn, eroding the eastern bank hard by North Main Street, causing guard rails to lean toward the stream. While rock and concrete have been installed to protect the bank, it looks far from secure.

Shorter stone walls on the highway side are beginning to fall apart, but seem to still be doing their job, since the force of the water runs to the other bank.

Soon, stone walls line both sides of the creek, narrowing the flow and protecting a house along North Main. One homeowner has set a patio set and horseshoe stakes next to the stream, another a wooden swing — these folks are clearly enjoying life by Toby's Creek.

Again a cement wall nearly 10 feet tall guards the highway side of the creek. All along this section, large concrete pipes dump storm runoff from the roadway and parking lots into the creek, one of the reasons it rises so quickly in a heavy rainfall.

Now the creek passes under North Main, then runs past several homes whose owners have landscaped both banks and set out hammocks. Pretty stone walls guard the banks here, but they also show signs of wear and tear. One-lane wooden bridges, some for cars, others just for walking, connect these families with the rest of the world. One has wrought iron fences along each side, and another has lights strung on the sides, creating a festive look.

After it leaves the homes, the creek channel widens to perhaps 20 feet, and is well-contained by the hillside on its eastern side.



Sunlight streams through the Harris Hill Road bridge. Just beyond, the creek tumbles over a huge slab of sandstone. This is where early mills were built to take advantage of the rushing flow.

The old Lehigh Valley Railroad line is clearly visible on the eastern bank above the stream. The bed of cinders that held the tracks is still largely in place and discarded ties are scattered here and there. But the steep bank is thick with cinders that have been washed off the bed, and some have made it into the creek.

Toby's Creek again crosses under the highway, following the old South Main Street, which is now only a dirt path.

About 100 yards from the crossing, someone has built a rock dam. Combined with the increased flow, this has created a fairly large pool, but whether it is for splashing or fishing isn't clear.

A short stone formation on the eastern bank looks as if it could have been the foundation of one of the many mills that once took advantage of the creek's flowing waters.

Another old foundation is visible as the stream swings left to approach Route 309 yet again.

A little further on, the remnants of the former main thoroughfare through the Back Mountain appear — lengths of rusted guard rail, an old, broken-down stone wall and some concrete blocks that must have been needed to keep the stream and roadway apart.

After it crosses under the highway just below N-Mart, someone has cut down a stand of Japanese knotweed, in a futile attempt to snuff out the tireless invader. But there's a lot

more work to be done; the entire western bank between Route 309 and the stream is a tangle of knotweed, almost to Harris Hill Road. And as unwelcome as this plant may be, its roots hold together a steep bank that might otherwise be washed into the stream.

The creek bed in this area is marked by sharply angled outcroppings of shale, evidence of geologic activity that took place before recorded time. Here, one can imagine dinosaurs and mammoths traipsing down to get a drink from the clean water.

The flow of water picks up here, and except for some trash, there is a natural feel to the creek and its banks. Insects and tiny fish become visible near the bridge at Harris Hill Road. And the realization creeps in that there haven't been any discarded tires marring the stream for some time.

The bridge, a marvel of stone construction that looms at least 25 feet above the creek, is showing its age. A Gabian wall has been installed on the eastern side, but a mortared stone wall on the other bank appears to be holding up well.

After it exits the bridge, Toby's Creek flows over a massive, smooth stone, where generations of brave youngsters have slid down into the pool below on hot summer days.

The remains of an old foundation jut from the west bank, possibly from a mill built by either William Trucks or Jacob Rice in the early 19th century. According to historical accounts, William Trucks built a gristmill and sawmill "at the falls of the creek, where the water dropped some 15 feet from a rocky ledge." This seems to be that place.

The stream widens and slows now, dividing around a 200-foot long island that is covered with trees and brush. Huge globs of discarded mine waste, probably dropped somewhere upstream years ago to shore up the bank, have been washed down by floods and deposited here.

From this spot to Carverton Road, about a quarter mile, the creek seems barely disturbed. Devoid of trash, it flows swiftly toward a solid wall of rock that shoves it 45 degrees to the east. This is perhaps the most impressive natural barrier the stream has confronted, and it hasn't budged in centuries.

Throughout this stretch, Toby's Creek appears to follow its natural path, perhaps having grown too robust for man to tame — at least the men of 100 years ago.

The remnants of two more stone foundations are visible on the western bank about 100 yards above Carverton Road. One, at creek level, appears to be built without mortar, indicating that it is older than the other, which sits up at road level.

A little further on, a classic and beautiful arched stone tunnel feeds a tributary beneath the old railroad line. It is held in place with a key-stone, and the floor over which Snake Creek flows looks like cobblestone. Sadly, this impressive piece of architecture and construction is visible only to those willing to risk tumbling down the bank to see it.

This is the largest tributary since Trout Brook joined Toby's Creek in Dallas Township, and its contribution during a storm can be quite impressive.

As it passes the old Kingston Township municipal building at the corner of Route 309 and Carverton Road, Toby's Creek's flow has been slowly but surely eating into the soft bank between it and the building. The only thing that appears to be averting disaster is the oft-scorned

## VISION

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fits to the towns it flows through. But, "We need to change the mindset of the community," he says.

While he doesn't think the municipalities should be originators or managers of a watershed association, he hopes other groups or individuals will step up and take on such a challenge.

Moskovitz said the borough would be eager to help a watershed group or coalition of groups interested in developing and preserving the Toby's Creek watershed area. He said the Growing Greener grants could be used toward this end.

**"I feel there is a lot of potential for a Toby's Creek watershed association."**

Josh Longmore  
Watershed specialist, Luzerne County  
Conservation District

The idea of municipalities helping infant watershed associations is not new, explains Josh Longmore, watershed specialist for the Luzerne County Conservation District. Butler Township sponsors the Oley Creek Watershed Association with "Growing Greener" funds and so does Conyngham Township.

If a new watershed association hasn't yet received non-profit status, a town can help, notes Longmore. "As long as the towns are not the leaders of the associations, because then the public thinks of the association as an arm of the government."

Longmore imagines a watershed coalition for Toby's Creek made up of diverse interested groups.

"I feel there is a lot of potential for a Toby's Creek watershed association. There are very willing municipalities along the creek, there's plenty of neighborhood technical help, students at the colleges are a tremendous resource, and Pa. American Water Co. has a large vested interest in the watershed area, because Huntsville Reservoir is within the Toby's Creek watershed area," he says.

He also feels that a coalition group would help coordinate the different groups, so they don't work on the same projects.

One eager potential member organization is the Anthracite Scenic Trails Association, developers of the Back Mountain Trail.

"I'm very aware of the water; it's a fantastic amenity," said Judy Rimple, the group's executive director.

The trail runs parallel to the creek for much of its length, following the old Lehigh Valley Railroad bed. Rimple said ASTA would like to develop access points for trail users to get closer to the creek.

Right now, ASTA is seeking bids for a feasibility study on an "urban greenway," a walking path from the center of Dallas to College Misericordia. "That is all along the creek bed," Rimple said. "That may be one of the strongest urban area parts we have." The college and Pickett's Charge restaurant have already committed to granting easements.

Mark Carmon, spokesman for the local office of the state Department of Environmental Protection, says the more involvement, the better.

"Getting people involved and aware is more than half the battle," said Carmon, who has lived in the Back Mountain for most of the last 40 years.

While other Luzerne County streams have gotten a lot of attention, "That stretch from Dallas to Luzerne is kind of an orphan."

One nearby good example is the Bowman's Creek Watershed Association, formed when the Noxen-Monroe Sportsmen's Club and the Stanley Cooper Chapter of Trout Unlimited became interested in protecting Bowman's Creek. The group is supported by 12 municipalities and the two counties that Bowman's Creek flows through.

The Bowman's Creek Association receives "in-kind services from municipalities, technical help from DEP, and assistance in applying for grants from state representatives," says Dorn White of Noxen, one of the founders. He is in the process of helping to starting another area watershed group on Tunkhannock Creek.

Not all the municipalities along Toby's Creek are ready to plan a new future for the waterway. Kingston Township Manager Eddie O'Neill says it's premature to talk about the creek as a recreational resource. "Basically, we're trying to identify problem areas."

One of the worst is North Main Street in Shavertown, where the creek jumped its banks in September, sending a stream of water down the street and into the parking lot at Cook's Pharmacy. And the creek is gradually eroding the eastern bank between it and the old township building, at the intersection of Route 309 and Carverton Road.

"Right now, it's a liability," O'Neill said.

It's possible, though, that making better use of the creek — once it's no longer a threat — could be included in a comprehensive master plan that has been authorized by the Back Mountain Council of Governments, he said.

Dallas Township Secretary Len Kozick said the creek has not been on the supervisors' radar screen, since only a small segment of it is in their township.

Correspondent Charlotte Bartizek contributed to this article.



## Toby's Creek

Our hidden resource



POST PHOTO/RON BARTIZEK

This gorgeous arched stone tunnel carries Snake Creek under the old Lehigh Valley Railroad bed, behind the Uni-Mart off Carverton Road. The floor of the tunnel appears to be cobblestone.

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