Naturally: Blacklick Creek Watershed and resilience

By James Lafontaine Special to the Gazette 5 hrs ago

The Appalachian Divide in Cambria County separates the headwaters of the Blacklick Creek Watershed from waters that flow eastward to the Susquehanna and on to the Chesapeake Bay. On this side of the Divide, Blacklick Creek makes its journey to the Conemaugh, Kiski, Allegheny, Ohio, Missouri and Mississippi rivers.

In the fall of 1970, a young man raised in a Massachusetts city met a woman — soon to become his wife — who took him on galloping horseback rides across abandoned strip mines, coal tipples, farm roads, lumber roads and ancient paths — some traveled by American Indians only a hundred years earlier. On one of these paths a herd of startled deer froze for a moment and then fled into the woods. This young man was raised in a city where nature was a river polluted by the textile industry. This was the first time in his life that he had seen deer in the wild.

Without realizing its importance, this horseback introduction to the Blacklick Creek Watershed shaped my life for the next 50 years!

Together Blacklick Creek, Two Lick Creek and Yellow Creek make up the Blacklick Creek Watershed. It covers half the land area of Indiana County. All three watersheds suffer from environmental damage that occurred over the course of a century. The story of the Blacklick Creek Valley best exemplifies the tale of all three.

In 1893, the Pennsylvania Railroad Company extended the Ebensburg & Cresson Branch to Vintondale and later to Blacklick (Saylor Park.) Before the railroad entered, the area was a vast wilderness. There were no farms and very few houses.

In Clarence Stephenson's History of Indiana County, he recounts stories of canopies of trees so dense that travelers referred to them as "Shades of Death." There were occasional dense patches of rhododendron and mountain laurel, but beneath the canopy it was mostly clear. The creek, filled with fish, ran with sparkling water, and was at peace with the land. Panthers and elk, wildlife now long gone, could be found there.

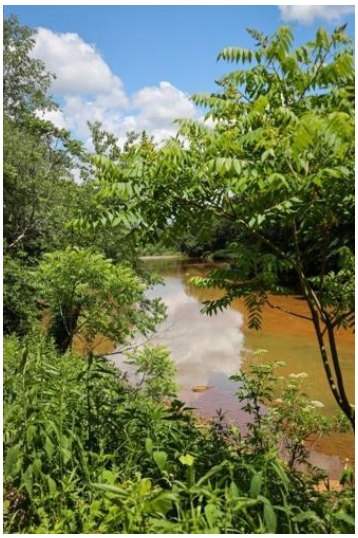
The railroad meant opportunity. There was timber for lumber and coal for making steel, as well as heating and powering industry. People hoping for a better life flocked to the Blacklick Valley and towns sprang into existence. Hillsides were completely stripped of trees.

Cuts into the hillsides became mine portals. Mining upslope assured that water entering the mines would drain into the creek. The people who were lured by prosperity were exploited like the land. Low wages, company housing, company store, dangerous underground work, coal and iron police to control them.

Sewage from the towns ran into the creek like the acid water from the mines.

The forest habitat was now destroyed and life that needed it disappeared. Water that entered the mines absorbed sulfur, iron and other metals. This water spewed into the creek and turned it red and dead. The mines became economically depleted and people and most towns vanished. The creek continued to suffer.

In 1977, a fierce thunderstorm hovered over Johnstown and burst Laurel Run Dam and others. The water devastated everything in its path and submerged Johnstown.



This storm also rained down on the Blacklick Valley. The creek swelled and moved huge boulders and clusters of trees downstream. And then the creek, as if in a rage, washed away three railroad bridges and thus evicted the railroad from its banks.

By now, nature had regrown much of its forest, but the creek continued without life. The mine operators abandoned the mines without taking responsibility for the continuing damage. During the same year as the flood, the Pennsylvania Bureau of Abandoned Mine Reclamation was granted authority to begin addressing our state's abandoned mines. From wilderness to a human lifetime of ruin, the creek cried out for its life. A generation of people asked whether recovery could occur in their lifetimes. Indiana County is not alone in Pennsylvania with environmental damage left to heal. This work has yet to become a top priority.

In 1991, the Kovalchick family donated several miles of the now abandoned rail corridor along Blacklick Creek between Dilltown and Nanty Glo to be used as a “Rail Trail.” The name Ghost Town reflected the fact that many towns and their people no longer existed. The thought of attracting people to this otherwise beautiful place shed light on the many miles of “red and dead” creek. Hence the Blacklick Creek Watershed Association was founded to investigate what could be done.

Over the next 30 years the long process of studying, building passive treatment systems and, finally, an active treatment system is producing hopeful results.

Huge bony piles that drained acid leachate have been reclaimed. (Bony piles are waste coal, separated during the mining process.) Water that falls on them leaches into the streams and water table. Through the combination of passive treatment systems, bony pile reclamation and the active treatment plant built by BAMR, 25 miles of Blacklick Creek is being recovered. There are now black bears in the woods and otters in portions of the creek, along with beaver and macroinvertebrates. Trout fishing in the North and South branches of the Blacklick is real. Blacklick Creek can now support life. More than deer live there to greet a stranger.

The work is not done. There is much more to do to remediate Blacklick, Two Lick and Yellow creeks. Consider getting involved. To learn more, investigate the Blacklick Creek Watershed's website, BCWA.org.

James Lafontaine is a co-founder of the Blacklick Creek Watershed Association. The Naturally columns are brought to you each month by The Indiana Gazette and Friends of White's Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in our area.