

What happened to York County's

Braille nature trail?

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The trail, for the most part, is long gone.

Remnants remain, covered with crushed stone, used as golf cart paths around the property that had previously been the estate of York industrialists and is now a wedding venue.

Part of the trail that skirted the perimeter of the 35-acre property just north of Emigsville can be discerned, but it is overgrown. The section north of Shady

Lane, which bisects the property, is long gone, returned to the woods.

The trail was gone when Steve Kohr bought the property in September 2003. The previous owner, Anna Koval, told him it used to house a nature center, with hiking trails through the woods. She also told him that at one time the nature center had been the site of one of the few Braille trails in the country, a trail that permitted the blind and seeing impaired to enjoy a walk in the woods and learn first-hand about nature.

Tracing the old trails, Kohr found

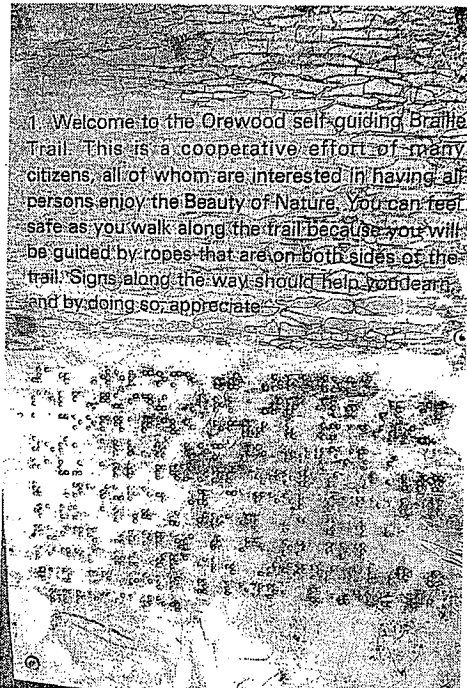
some tin plaques, mounted on wooden posts. They were trail markers with descriptions of the surrounding flora and fauna in text and stamped in Braille.

That was about all he could find of the trail.

"Everything was so grown up," he said. "It hadn't been maintained for a lot of years."

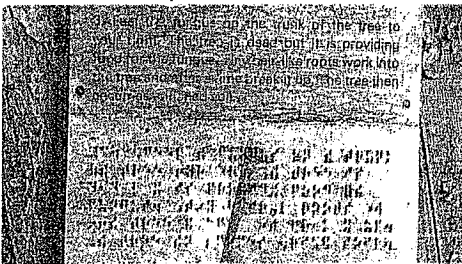
What happened to the trail is uncertain. Kohr said he believed it was closed down because of insurance concerns.

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This plaque marked the beginning of the York County Braille Trail. Established in 1970, it fell into disrepair. There was a desire to bring it back, but it looks like that won't happen.



PAUL KUEHNEL/YORK DAILY RECORD

This is one of the plaques on the former Braille trail in Manchester Township. It talks about fungus on a tree trunk.

Braille

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Local history buff Charles Stambaugh said he heard that a developer had optioned the land north of Shady Lane to build a housing development and that the trail ceased operating as those plans were announced.

The development was never built.

Stambaugh first heard about the trail's existence when he was researching the history of the property for his website, neychip.com, which documents the history of northeastern York County. It intrigued him so much that he thought about putting together an effort to restore the Braille trail, pitching the idea to Kohr. It wouldn't go much further than that.

"This is a neat idea," he said. "Why don't we have this?"

Good question. The answer isn't easy.

The trail was on the site of what had been the Oerwood Nature Center, an estate tucked between North George Street and Board Road about a mile and a half south of Manchester in northeastern York County.

The place is steeped in history. The property was once part of a 210-acre parcel granted to James Smith, a York attorney and signer of the Declaration of Independence. It has been the site of a distillery and later was the home of industrialist and developer Frederick Small. Carl Oerman, who ran the American



PAUL KUEHNEL/YORK DAILY RECORD

Steve Kohr stands along the former Braille trail, which served the visually impaired for years but since has closed. He bought the northeastern York County property in 2003.

Acme Co., a toy and furniture manufacturer in Emigsville, bought the property in 1948 and established the nature sanctuary there in 1967.

The Braille trail was conceived when James Brett, a science teacher at Northeastern High School, took a trip to Aspen in 1969, and while there, visited the Roaring Fork Braille Trail in the White River National Forest. The founder of the trail, Robert B. Lewis, a science teacher and environmentalist, envisioned the trail growing into "a network of such trails across the country in woodlands, along streams, in the mountains and even in the deserts."

Brett returned home and began work. The "sketchy idea," he wrote in *The Conservationist* magazine in 1971, "was turned into a working plan in short order."

A Scout troop from North York did a lot of the work clearing the trail and building bridges. The York Jaycees adopted it as its annual conservation project and donated money for building supplies. The Pennsylvania Association for the Blind donated the plaques. Local businesses donated other materials. The cost to the nature center was less than \$50, Brett wrote.

The 20-or-so plaques – the text written by Brett – were connected by a rope that ran the length of the three-quarter-mile

trail. The sight-impaired could follow the rope, and once they reached a plaque, could read in Braille about the area. The text described the sights, scents and textures of different areas. The ropes contained a kind of code – one knot instructed the person to feel what was on the ground, and two knots indicated a scent.

"Nature is vast and beautiful," wrote Brett, who later became curator of Hawk Mountain in northeastern Pennsylvania. "Our monumental task is to convey this beauty, this vastness to everyone. The blind, the sighted, the (developmentally disabled), the physically handicapped all need to have a closeness with nature, a closeness with their Creator. We find ourselves enraptured with new enthusiasm as each season comes upon us."

Larry Bare, a retired air traffic controller and member of the Susquehanna Lions Club, used to work on the trail. The Lions adopted it as an ongoing project, maintaining it and escorting groups from what was then called the York County Blind Center on hikes.

"It was quite an experience for them," Bare said. "They didn't know what it was like in the woods. The trail let them experience the woods and nature. They could 'see it' in their minds."

The trail operated into the '90s. Bare

wasn't sure when it shut down, or what led to its closure. He did say that there were safety concerns, that some people might trip and fall and be seriously injured.

The trail eventually returned to nature.

Stambaugh headed up an effort to rebuild the trail recently, thinking about setting up a committee to bring interested parties together to develop and maintain it. He has contacted the Susquehanna Lions Club, which had been involved in the original trail, and ForSight Vision, formerly the York County Blind Center. William Rhinesmith, the organization's president, said he was skeptical that the trail would work. For one thing, he said, getting there could be a problem. And, he said, "I don't think it'll be used all that much."

Stambaugh tried, but his plans were for naught. No one seemed interested. The Lions Club balked at getting involved. ForSight Vision declined to participate. And Kohr wasn't interested in having the trail open on weekends, something that would have interfered with his wedding business. Stambaugh says he's still interested in the trail's history but has no interest in trying to revive it.

"I really thought I could pull it off," he wrote in an email, "but I am hitting too many walls to even start."