

A Tranquil Run of the Creek

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Cedar Run, Slate Run, Gamble Run, Darling Run, Jerry's Run... Who was doing all that running back in the 1840s when they named every little stream 'n holler in the Pine Creek drainage? And why was it that everything had to move quickly, at race track speed? Why all that running around when you're in the countryside and life ambles only as fast as the seasons can heat up or cool down the earth. Couldn't the villages been named Sit Back on the Stoop and Lick your Ice Cream, or Carefully Peruse each Fly before Buying? Or, Hang Here for a While to See if this Trickle of Water Reaches the Creek? I guess these names wouldn't fit on the train depot signs. Or else, they'd distract the railroad crew so much that the trains, laden with freshly cut virgin pines, wouldn't reach the saw mills in Philadelphia and other eastern seaports to be turned into seafaring ships or homes for wealthy urbanites.

My impressions of the "Grand Canyon of Pennsylvania," where my partner and I spent an early May weekend, were definitely one of movement, but hardly one of running or racing. The waterway that runs down the middle of the valley can be over 100 feet in width, which, in my book, would qualify it to be a river. But, the locals and the detailed maps of northern Pennsylvania call it Pine Creek, maybe to imply that it moves gently and sparingly most of the year. We saw a few riffles here and there, but no significant drops of elevation to cause rapids. And, the fly fishermen that pepper the river and its banks along the 50-mile section we visited were in no hurry. They sauntered casually along the riverside trail and down the banks to water's edge, ready to spend the day in the water. They were dressed to stay a while, with brown rubber waders that acted like boots climbing up their bodies and turning into overalls to cover their chests. Overtop they wore tan vests, with enough bulging pockets to hold their fishing line, boxes of flies, hooks and maybe a sandwich or two. And, hanging off their backs was a short-handled net, looking like a paddle ball racket with loose floppy strings.

Nor were we in much of a hurry. We had come to ride our bikes on the Pine Creek Rail Trail, one of over 100 rail trails in Pennsylvania and 1500 throughout the United States that had once been a railroad line conveying freight – logs, coal and iron ore, in this case – long distances during the Industrial Revolution. Now, nature's bounty uprooted can travel more efficiently in large container trucks along sleek interstates to reach all corners of the continent. The heavy, laboriously-laid railroad ties and thick iron rails that sat atop them have been ripped up and hauled away. In their place is a tame path of crushed gray gravel, perfect for the spinning wheels of thick-wheeled bicycle tires or for Vibram-soled hikers out for a breath of fresh air at the bottom of the high-walled, wooded valley.

Early spring along the trail proffers signs of the rich greenery to come as the days lengthen. Clusters of May apple crowd the forest floor, poking out of the cool earth like dark green party parasols. At first they are slightly wilted, but then, as they age, they gradually lose their droopiness to become mature leafy umbrellas. Next to the runs and other low-lying areas, skunk cabbage takes the opposite form. Its dark green pleated leaves open up into inverted cones, forming whirls of invitation that want to suck you in - until you're close enough to perceive the odor for which they are named. The slate-lined cliffs on the inland side of the trail are moss-covered, with water

droplets seeping out one drop at a time. I raise my head to consider the long view, focusing on the tall hillside across the creek. Oaks and maple leaves are just beginning to green out, and as I scan my eyes up the valley walls I note that the trees on lining the rim are still in winter silhouette, with branches bare and grey. No need to rush.

While Pine Creek Gorge is recognized as a National Natural Landmark by the National Park Service, it retains its quiet ease as a resource for local sportsmen and women. Along the banks are a mix of rundown fishing camps, newer but still modest weekend cottages, and well maintained access areas with parking lots and interpretive signs for fishermen and day recreationalists. Taking advantage of the multiple entry points are paddlers in bright red, yellow or blue kayaks and canoes loaded to the gills with camping equipment and/or fishing tackle. Their downstream passage is tranquil, only occasionally upset by bursts of current-inspired alacrity, and we find that atop our two-wheelers we outrun them easily. No one cares. It's simply an observation, one of many allowed us as we maintain our constant pedaling along the flat trail. We are all here to take in the feel of the clear and shallow river, possibly called creek since water levels are rarely sufficient to darken the bottom. All is in stasis, with no reason for haste nor perturbation.