



EVTA member, Joe Hicks, at an old coal bin along the E&A Rail Trail.

Photo/Nancy Pierce

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Elkin & Alleghany Rail-Trail

By Nancy Pierce and Carrie Banks

The small group of hikers paused where the dirt trail ended at a big bend in Elkin Creek. Here, the Elkin & Alleghany (E&A) short line railroad once crossed the curvy creek twice before beginning its slow 15-mile climb to the base of Stone Mountain.

The hikers - members of the Elkin Valley Trails Association (EVTA) - visualized the story they had all heard a hundred times, how the engineer used to stop the train, hop out, and walk across the trestles. Then the fireman would bump the train into gear and jump off while the train crossed the bridges unmanned, rolling to a stop at the base of the hill. The fireman then crossed the trestles on foot. This

was a precaution in case the rickety bridges collapsed under the weight of the engine.

As it turned out, the bridges outlived the railroad, which was decommissioned in the early 1930s (see E&A sidebar). But they’re gone now; the ties rotted and washed out after the rails were removed to sell for scrap. Generations of Elkin kids have snuck off to swim in the deep pool formed by the bend, and some claim that during low water you can still see ties stuck in the sandy creek bottom.

Now, with NCRT’s help, a group of residents in this Surry County town just south of the Virginia line aims to build back two new

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EVTA members discuss possible bridge locations.
Photo/Nancy Pierce

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bridges for hikers and bikers. These bridges will be crucial links for the E&A Rail-Trail, which will eventually connect the town of Elkin with Stone Mountain State Park. Most of the proposed trail will follow the former right-of-way of the Elkin & Alleghany Railroad. With the Overmountain Victory Trail and the Mountains-to-Sea Trail nearby, Elkin has the potential to become a destination city for trail users, with the E&A Rail-Trail as the city's crowning jewel.

About a decade ago, a nature science society in Elkin built a little nature trail along a portion of Elkin Creek that had been tangled and inaccessible for decades. Along the way they discovered old railroad ties, evidence of rails, and coal storage bins buried under pine needles. They found stone bridge abutments, small-scale hydro dams and factory ruins, all speaking of a once-thriving commerce along the creek and the short line railroad that followed it up the mountain.

In 1911, 10,000 people came to celebrate the first run of the E&A railroad from Elkin to the town of Veneer (named after its wood products) at the base of Stone Mountain. During its heyday, the E&A ran back and forth from Veneer to Elkin, stopping at 14 factories powered by small hydro dams along Elkin Creek's 2000-foot drop to the Yadkin River near Elkin.

The E&A trains carried logs to a tannin plant and sawmills, the tannin and leather to a shoe factory, wool, lumber and cotton to furniture factories, and more logs to utility pole and railroad tie makers. Then, the trains delivered the products to the mainline Northwestern North Carolina RR in town (now a Norfolk Southern RR along the Yadkin River), sending the Elkin-made products out to the world. The E&A closed down in the early 1930s, in the wake of cheap electricity, gas and truck transportation. Most of the tracks were removed, and the easement reverted to adjacent property owners. The town of Veneer is no longer in existence.

A member of that group, Bill Blackley, a (now retired) family practice and urgent care physician, later led a group of Elkin citizens who defeated a proposed poultry manure incinerator in Surry County, on the conviction that it would damage the health and vitality of the town. After the incinerator pulled out, the group decided to stay together and work proactively to enhance the health and vitality of their town. Thus was born the Elkin Valley Trails Association, the lead organization for the rail-trail effort.

While the EVTA had experience working on other trails, they knew that a rail-trail would be a bit more tricky. The group first approached



Bill Blackley, looking at old factory ruins on Elkin Creek near a swimming hole.
Photo/Nancy Pierce

the national group, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, but that organization did not want to take on a project where the rail right-of-way had been abandoned for more than 50 years. Then they heard about NCRT and "we were so excited we could hardly stand it," says Dr. Blackley.

NCRT is helping in a variety of ways. The EVTA was ready to start fundraising to build bridges, but they did not have non-profit status and could not collect tax deductible donations. NCRT became ETVA's financial sponsor, allowing ETVA to fundraise under NCRT's supervision. NCRT is also helping the group find appropriate grant opportunities. In the future, NCRT may use its land-trust function to acquire easements as the trail leaves public land and lengthens toward Stone Mountain State Park. NCRT's expertise and resources in combination with the hard work and dedication of the local residents will move this project forward. All aboard!

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LEADERSHIP CIRCLE

We are proud to announce the creation of the North Carolina Rail-Trails Leadership Circle. With your annual donation of \$500 you will become a member of this dedicated group of supporters. Your significant financial investment will ensure that we are able to offer our assistance to North Carolina communities who need our help to create rail-trails. Leadership Circle members will enjoy complimentary tickets to all NC Rail-Trails events, including our Annual Ales for Rail-Trails 5K, and a free t-shirt with our logo. We need your support to grow and become a sustainable force for rail-trails in this state. Will you please join the leadership circle today? Please call our executive director, Carrie Banks at 919-428-7119 or email her at execdirector@ncrailtrails.org for more information or to pledge your leadership circle support.

2011 Honor Roll of Donors

North Carolina Rail-Trails would not exist without you...our supporters. As a special way of saying thank you we are including your name in our yearly honor roll. Thank you so much for your gift. Because of you...the rail-trail movement is gaining traction in North Carolina.

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Executive Director's Message

Happy New Year! This newsletter will serve as a year-in-review for 2011 and will also give you a peek at the coming attractions for 2012. I am so happy that we are publishing our honor roll of donors for the first time. This is just our way of saying thank you for your generous support. We simply couldn't function without your generous support. We are also announcing the creation of our leadership circle for donors who choose to donate \$500 or more in 2012. The creation of the leadership circle will allow us to be a sustainable organization in these tough economic times while still offering our no cost technical support to North Carolina's communities. I am also pleased to turn the spotlight of this issue on a real spark-plug of a trail project: the Elkin & Alleghany (E&A) Rail-Trail in Surry County. It has been such a pleasure to work with this community and I look forward to a year of further advancements.



Carrie Banks

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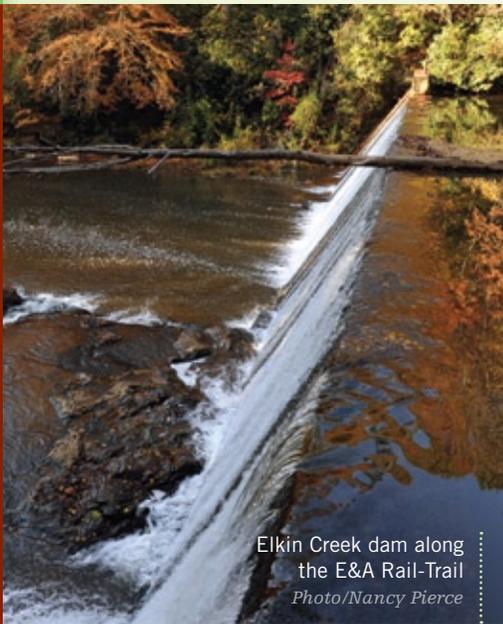
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Elkin Creek dam along
the E&A Rail-Trail
Photo/Nancy Pierce

The NCRT Board of Directors welcomed three new members at its January meeting in Greensboro.

ED LEWIS, former President of the Aberdeen & Rockfish Railroad.

ERIC WOOLDRIDGE, Director of Tourism Planning for the Watauga County Tourism Development Authority.

CLARE REECE-GLORE, management consultant and small business owner.

UPDATE: Rail-Trail Projects

Ecusta Trail, Henderson & Transylvania Counties: The planning and economic studies for the proposed Ecusta Trail, between Hendersonville and Brevard, have been completed. A public presentation of the findings will take place at 6:00 pm on March 28th in Hendersonville. The presentation will include recommendations for trail surface, width, support facilities, detailed maps, prospective trail heads and implementation strategies. Representatives from Henderson and Transylvania County will be there, as well as the media. This is a great opportunity to come show your support. The specific venue for the meeting will be determined after County officials have a better estimate of the numbers expected to attend. If you would like to attend please contact Jennifer at jenniferm@summitresults.com to RSVP.

Deep River Rail-Trails, Randolph County: The town of Franklinville has been awarded \$36,000 by the Randolph Hospital Community Health Foundation. Franklinville expects to use \$30,000 of the grant on two needed bridges over Sandy Creek. This gift brings Franklinville another step closer to the neighboring town of Ramseur, which is collaborating with Franklinville on the Deep River Rail-Trail. The remaining \$6,000 will help to fund a boat landing on the Deep River.

Dunn-Erwin Rail-Trail, Harnett County: Plans are being made for a 1.5 mile connector trail between the Erwin end of the Dunn-Erwin Rail-Trail and the Cape Fear River Park Trail (a one-mile loop trail). This connection would create 7.5 miles of contiguous trail and connect downtown Erwin to the Cape Fear River. The ~16 acre Cape Fear River Park is used regularly by walkers, fisherman and canoeists. Bringing the two trails together will increase the usage of both trails and connect the rail-trail to much needed amenities such as a bathrooms, picnic tables and a parking lot. In January, NCRT facilitated a public meeting in Erwin to gather public input on the proposal and the proposed route. The proposal was well received by the 38 citizens in attendance. NCRT and the town of Erwin have applied for \$80,000 in grant funding for the project. Fingers crossed!