Indiana County Parks & Trails
50th Year Anniversary
1967 – 2017

Indiana County Parks & Trails
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Indiana County Parks & Trails
Reflections on the First 50 Years

Groucho Marx once said, “Anyone can get old. All you have to do is live long enough.” There are other ways to get old, of course. A person may well “live long enough”, but the ideas of a person may live even longer. Likewise, an organization may live beyond the lifespans of its founders, so long as its idea is a good one. — Michael Schleifer

Fifty years ago, this year an idea was conceived to create a county park system for Indiana County - an idea that has served the county well over the years. The county park system has provided many enjoyable moments for residents and visitors, and has helped to improve the quality of life here in many ways.

Having an idea is one thing, turning the idea into reality is a more difficult task. The county’s park system was officially established on July 7, 1967 when the Indiana County Commissioners appointed five people to serve on the first Park Board, known then as the Indiana County Parks & Recreation Commission.

Indiana County’s effort to establish county parks dates to the early 1960s. There were proposals in the 1930s to establish a state park in the county, but until Yellow Creek State opened in 1976 the county was without a state park. There was even a proposal in the late 1930s to establish the County Fairgrounds as a County Park. Both times the measure came up for a vote it failed. Rather than wait for the state to develop a park, by the early 1960s county citizens and leaders determined it was time for the county to create its own park system.
The idea to create a county park system came at a fortuitous moment in the county’s and nation’s history. In the 1960s the federal government was funding the creation of local parks to meet the burgeoning demand for leisure and outdoor recreation activities. Indiana County was amidst a boom itself, with the development of coal-fired power plants that created new jobs and economic growth. For a time in the mid-1960s Indiana County had the lowest unemployment rate in the nation. With ample federal and state funding and the county’s economic growth, the time was ripe for the creation of county parks.

The acquisition and development of the county’s first three county parks: Blue Spruce, Pine Ridge and Hemlock Lake were accomplished largely with federal and state funding. Over the years most of the acquisition and development of the county park and trail system has come from grant funding and land donations from private citizens. The county’s financial commitment has been largely to maintain and operate the park system, funding which has historically has amounted to 2% of the county’s overall operating budget. Although highly visible in the public’s eye, the reality is that county parks do not make up a significant portion of the county tax dollars. In terms of the economic benefits generated from tourism and local visitor expenditures, the county parks and trails more than pay for themselves.

It hasn’t always been easy. There were difficult times, especially in the late 1970s and early 1980s as the county struggled with economic downturns. There was a brief time in the early 1980s when the county considered abandoning the county parks, an
idea which fortunately, never saw the light of day. Ironically, it was the county’s economic downturn that lead to the restoration of the county parks through its involvement with the Pennsylvania Conservation Corps (PCC). The PCC, modeled after the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s, employed young people, ages 18 - 25, in conservation and park improvement projects in areas experiencing economic difficulties. Through the efforts of various PCC crews much of the county park system was renovated and many popular facilities were added.

The 1990s saw the development of the county trail system, including the Ghost Town Trail and Hoodlebug Trail and, in later years, the Blairsville Riverfront Trail. The trails have proven to be popular attractions for county residents and tourists alike.

There have been periods of growth for the park system, some setbacks, but through the years the county has remained committed to providing a park system. If there is one overriding theme of the county parks it is the attention given to maintenance. Hundreds of people have worked at the county parks over the years, from volunteers to youth employees in various summer job programs, numerous seasonal employees, to a surprisingly small number of full-time employees. ‘Maintenance first-of-all’ has been the overriding theme of the effort to maintain and operate a park system that county residents can be proud of.

As we reflect on the first 50 years of the county parks we acknowledge the commitment and dedication of those before us who took the first steps to create a park system for our enjoyment.
and benefit. We also dedicate ourselves to ensuring that our ongoing efforts are a gift that we can pass on to future generations so that they, too, will always have places to enjoy and share with family and friends – it’s an idea worth recommitting ourselves to.

*Ed Patterson*

January 1, 2017

*County parks are ‘quality of life’ places to share with family and friends and a gift we can pass on to future generations. Photo by: Ginny Allison.*
Introduction

This booklet traces the history of Indiana County Parks & Trails over its first 50 years. The agency was formally established as the Indiana County Parks & Recreation Commission on July 7, 1967; although some early development work began as early as 1966.

The three primary sources of information were used to compile the booklet include: (1) the minutes and recordings of the Indiana County Park Advisory Board which have been kept since the Board’s inception in 1967. The minutes are an important source of background information on the county parks and document the decisions affecting the park system’s development, (2) a review of the extensive written record of the agency as it appeared in numerous news articles in the Indiana Evening Gazette (now Indiana Gazette), and (3) a review of the County Park’s first decade of existence as it appeared in Clarence Stephenson’s Indiana County: 175th Anniversary History.

The Essential Value of County Parks

From time to time our agency performs economic studies to measure the financial impact of our parks and trails; yet, it is the immeasurable value of these places that matters most.

What value can be placed on a family reunion that has been held for many years at the same park? How to measure the opportunity to share quality time with family, friends, even our pets, in a beautiful park setting? How to account for preserving habitat for wildlife species and plant life of special concern? How to tally a day at a park, fishing at the lake, or a ride on the
trail which often comes too infrequently in the busy lives of most people in today’s fast-paced world?

Our parks and trails are open every day of the year. We never know for certain what impact we have on our visitors, but we sense our parks make a difference in the quality of their lives, while creating lasting memories.

How Indiana County came to have one of Pennsylvania’s most extensive and diverse county park systems is where the story begins.

*Cummings Dam construction, c. 1908. The dam was enlarged in 1912 to its present size. The dam was constructed to provide water for the locomotives of the Buffalo, Rochester & Pittsburgh Railroad.*
Before the County Parks

“The outdoors has always been an important part of the American life — first as a wilderness to be conquered and settled; presently as a quiet area to satisfy a desire to be in natural surroundings. The need for recreation as a factor in the physical, mental and social adjustments of people now has widespread recognition.”

- Indiana County Open Space and Recreation Plan, 1967

The concern for providing public parks gradually grew throughout the 1900s. Prior to the 1900s public parks mainly existed in urban areas and large cities. In rural areas, like Indiana County, leisure time was limited and generally did not take place in formal park settings. Leisure and social activities combined both work and fun. Social events like barn raisings, weddings, flax scutchings, and corn husking offered the chance to mix work with pleasure. An example of this is depicted in the painting ‘Flax Scutching Bee’ by Linton Park of Marion Center. The folk-art painting is housed at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. and is the most well-known painting created in Indiana County.

Flax Scutching Bee (Linton Park, 1885) - Townspeople gather on a 19th century farm near Marion Center to help “scutch” flax, which involved taking the plant and beating it against something hard to separate the usable fibers from the unusable woody parts. Flax scutchings were often an all-day celebration.
Early Outdoor Recreation in Indiana County

Outdoor activities became increasingly popular in Indiana County by the late 1890s and early 1900s as the county became more developed and small towns and villages became established. Outdoor activities like hunting and fishing remained popular but picnics and other large social gatherings became more commonplace. As early as 1898 a new picnic grove was established in northeastern Indiana County, near Smithport and Locust, on land reportedly owned by Ida Saxton McKinley, wife of President William McKinley.

Before formal parks were established in the county, many people enjoyed summer outings at private picnic groves, usually located in a scenic spot along a nearby stream or overlook. An area outside of Blairsville that featured views of Chestnut Ridge, known as ‘Alum Bank’, was a popular picnic spot.

The development of the county’s railroad and trolley network provided transportation to outlying areas of the County and offered excursions to other regions – trips to Niagara Falls were a popular offering of the Buffalo, Rochester & Pittsburgh Railway.

In the northern Indiana County at North Point, along Mahoning Creek, a popular swimming, picnicking and camping area existed for many years. Coleman Park, a picnic grounds near the Goodville train stop, existed just outside of Smicksburg and was the site of

*Buckwheat Social Club Picnic at Goodville, c. 1907*
very large outdoor gatherings. In 1901 an estimated 9,000 people attended gatherings of the “Buckwheat Club”. Other communities throughout Indiana County had their own gathering places to celebrate holidays, especially Memorial Day and July 4th.

MANY MET AT GOODVILLE
A JOLLY CROWD OUT IN THE BUCKWHEAT COUNTRY

Tenth Annual Reunion and Picnic of Social Club Was a Brilliant Success. Indiana and Other Towns Sent Large Delegations-Two Schools to Hold Reunions-Plans for Other Social Gatherings.

As usual, Thursday, was celebrated as a holiday by the good people of the Mahonings on account of the tenth annual reunion and picnic of the Smicksburg and West Mahoning Buckwheat Club which was held in Coleman’s Park, at Goodville in West Mahoning township.

The attendance was estimated at between 6,000 and 8,000 and the great bulk of the gathering came from the northwestern section of the county. Hundreds were also there from the nearby towns along the Buffalo, Rochester, & Pittsburg railroad, and were carried to the grounds on the regular and special trains. Indiana sent a delegation of 200 on the special train which left here that morning at 7.00. The train was made up of seven passenger coaches and by the time it reached Punxsutawney it was filled.

It is estimated that more drove to the please grounds than went by rail and as a consequence, acres of ground adjoining the park were filled with rigs of every conceivable description. For hours during the early part of the day all the roads leading to Goodville were filled with long processions of buggies, carriages, and wagons filled with merry parties on pleasure bent.

As in all previous gatherings of the Buckwheats the weather man dealt kindly on this occasion, and while threatening clouds hid the sun during the early morning it proved an ideal picnic day.

Indiana Progress, August 14, 1907
Indiana Borough had no public parks in the early 1900s, but in 1906 the Indiana Borough Council approved the purchase of wrought iron benches for the ‘Old Lutheran Cemetery’, today known as Memorial Park. In 1978 Memorial Park was added to the county park system.

In the early 1900s several private parks were established including Cliffside Park north of Homer City (operated by the Bianco Family), Camp Rest-A-While (later known as Camp Indian Springs) and two trolley parks created by the Indiana County Street Railways Company: Idlewood Park near Homer City and Chestnut Grove north of Indiana. The private parks featured dance halls, refreshment stands, picnic groves, ball fields and other amusements.

Cliffside Park was a popular private park located north of Homer City on Two Lick Creek. Photo: Homer-Center Historical Society.

At Cliffside Park, boating and swimming were offered at a log dam built on Two Lick Creek. Camp Indian Springs, located near the present-day White Township Municipal Building, had a large swimming pool, playground and other attractions. In May of 1944, Camp Indian Springs was leased by the Paragon Company as a site to produce tear gas for WWII. Most of the workers at the plant were women working in support of the war effort. The company also had a plant in Derry, PA and provided bus service for the workers.
By the early 1900s the rise in industrial employment lead to an increasing interest by government in providing public parks and recreation services for workers toiling in factories, mines and other industrial settings.

By the late 1940s workers who had once worked 60 hours a week or more were now working 40 hours a week. Fewer work hours meant more leisure time and demand for outdoor recreation greatly increased. Personal incomes were also rising; people had more money to spend on leisure activities like camping, sightseeing and other outdoor activities.

**A State Park for Indiana County?**

Indiana County has a county park system, to some extent, due to an oversight on the part of the state of Pennsylvania. During the Great Depression there were rumors that a large state park would be built by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in Green Township, Indiana County.

Although the Civilian Conservation Corps constructed many state parks during the 1930s, none were ever built in Indiana County. At its peak in 1935, the CCC employed more than 500,000 members nationwide in over 2,600 camps. The camps were managed by the War Department and were operated like military camps but the men were not subject to military control. In 1939 the CCC was made part of the Federal Security Agency; by 1940 more emphasis was placed on national defense instead of conservation projects.

The CCC eventually operated three camps in Indiana County. The camps were involved in soil conservation activities, not park construction. In 1935 the SES-1 Camp at Kintersburg, near the Kintersburg Covered Bridge, was established as the first soil conservation camp in Pennsylvania.

Duties included creating tree nurseries, reforesting hillsides, installing soil control measures on farms in the Crooked Creek
watershed and installing drainage improvements on local highways. The CCC also aided in flood relief after the 1936 St. Patrick’s Day Flood. Other CCC Camps were established near Shelocta and Homer City (at the site of the present-day Homer-Center High School).

In 1938 the CCC District offices in Indiana, PA were closed. In 1942 the CCC program was abolished by Congress over the objections of President Franklin Roosevelt. By then the idea of a state park for Indiana County was largely forgotten.

A state park for Indiana County eventually became a reality in the 1960s when Yellow Creek State Park was proposed during the administration of Governor David L. Lawrence. In 1963, it was announced that 2,793 acres would be acquired along Yellow Creek for the park. The park plans included a 740-acre lake and a beach, bath house, picnic areas and other amenities, which were finally developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s.
On July 4, 1976 Yellow Creek State Park was formally dedicated and Indiana County finally had its own state park. Yet, by that time Indiana County had already spent eleven years developing its own county parks. If the state had followed through on the 1930s rumor to build a state park, there is the possibility that future efforts to build a county park system in Indiana County may have been unwarranted or deemed politically impractical.

**A First County Park Effort Fails**

In 1938 a proposal was advanced to have the County acquire the Indiana County Fairgrounds which was offered by the Mack Family to the County at cost. An effort to raise $40,000 through the subscription sale of $50 bonds fell $20,000 short. In 1939 the matter was put to a vote of the County Commissioners and failed by a 2-1 margin. An Indiana Evening Gazette editorial advocated for a re-vote on the county park issue. The Indiana County Chamber of Commerce also urged a re-vote and recommended its approval. A second vote by the County Commissioners in March 1939 also failed to gain approval. After the vote J.S. Mack stated, “Edgar and I bought the grounds at a Sheriff Sale to save them for the use of the people and maybe, someday they will be”.

Eventually the fairgrounds property included the J.S. Mack Community Center. In 1954 a million-dollar swimming pool was built. Later improvements including a large picnic shelter, playground, water slide, tennis courts and skate park were developed under the guidance of the J.S. Mack Foundation, who continues to operate the park today. The swimming pool is
now managed by the Indiana County YMCA. Prior to the YMCA’s involvement the pool was operated for many years by the Indiana Area Recreation & Parks Commission, under an agreement with the Mack Foundation.

The Indiana Area Recreation & Parks Commission was organized in 1944 to provide park and recreation programs to residents residing in Indiana. The department is funded by the Indiana Area School District, White Township and Indiana Borough. The department still exists; its focus is providing recreation programs.

Over the years there has been widespread confusion between the county park system (established as the Indiana County Parks & Recreation Commission in 1967, now known as Indiana County Parks & Trails) and the Indiana Area Recreation & Parks Commission (established in 1956). They have always been two separate agencies with different missions and funding sources, but the similarity in the names was, and still is, confusing for many.

**The Role of County Parks**

There are 3,141 counties in the United States. Nationwide about 1,200 of the counties have some type of county parks, county recreation department or a combination of both. Some counties offer extensive recreation programs, others like Indiana County
Parks & Trails, are primarily natural-resource based, operating in a manner like state parks. In Indiana County recreation programming, has traditionally been left to the boroughs, townships, school districts and YMCA. The county parks have always sought to fill in the gaps by providing parks and other services, e.g. environmental education, that are not offered by the local governments.

There has been an effort to avoid duplicating services already being provided by other agencies and municipalities. Swimming is a good example - there are no swimming areas in the county parks because swimming is offered at several community pools, schools, the YMCA and Yellow Creek State Park.

In its early years, the county did attempt to provide swimming at Cummings Dam at Blue Spruce Park but was unable to receive approval for a permit from the Department of Health. Eventually it was decided that providing swimming was not necessary since it was being offered at other locations within the county.
Early Stages: 1965 – 1975

By the late 1950s Indiana County leaders and interested citizens began to consider the need for parks. By the early 1960s they had finally grown impatient with the state for the failing to build a state park in Indiana County.

The 1967 the Indiana County Open Space and Recreation Plan predicted that, “the need for additional recreation areas is expected to accelerate, the shorter work day, shorter work week and longer weekend, coupled with the rise in personal income and transportation improvements, will continue to place a heavier demand on government to provide recreation areas”.

Isadore Lenglet Guides Early Efforts

Under the direction of Indiana County Planning Director Isadore Lenglet, detailed plans for the establishment of county parks surfaced in the county’s first overall comprehensive plan. The comprehensive plan was completed in 1967 but the open space and recreation component of the plan had been completed several years before the plan’s final adoption.

The plan estimated there would be a need for 1,425 acres of park land and open space by 1980, based on a recommended standard of 15 acres of park land for each 1,000 residents. The County’s population by 1980 was predicted to be 95,000 – a population level that the County never quite achieved.

Isadore Lenglet, as a professional planner, was keenly aware of the increasing demand for outdoor recreation taking place in the United States in the 1950s and early 1960s. He knew that federal and state funds would soon be available to allow the County to acquire and develop its first county parks. Mr. Lenglet, as the
county’s chief planner, played an instrumental role in planning and leading the effort to acquire and develop the first county parks.

The first national review of outdoor recreation did not occur until the late 1950s. The Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission (ORRRC) was established in 1958 in response to a variety of outdoor recreation problems that arose during the postwar years. National recreation assessments have continued, though not on such a large scale, since the ORRRC released its 1962 report “Outdoor Recreation for America”. The ORRC Report, as it was known, provided the foundation for the development of many local outdoor recreation areas established throughout the United States in the 1960s, including Indiana County.

Among the ORRRC’s notable accomplishments was increasing public awareness and concern for outdoor recreation beyond National Parks or National Forests. It was also the first official acknowledgment that outdoor recreation was a legitimate concern of the federal government. The ORRC Report led to the enactment of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and the creation of the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation. Funding for the LWCF came from a tax on off-shore oil production and provided important funding to help acquire and develop the county parks.

Funds were also provided by the Federal Open Space Program authorized in Title VII of the Housing Act of 1961. The Department of Housing and Urban Development Act of 1965 increased funding for open space acquisition. In 1965 the County applied for two grants: $21,045 for acquisition of the Rayne Township Park (Blue Spruce Park) and $30,172 for acquisition of the Burrell Township Park (Pine Ridge Park), along with a grant of $27,350 from the Land & Water Conservation Fund. These were the first grant funds secured to initiate the development of the Indiana County park system.

The Right Place at the Right Time

In the early 1960s three factors converged which ultimately lead Indiana County to establish its first county parks: (1) the
construction of large coal fired power plants and the rebirth of the coal industry meant that the county’s economy was booming and tax revenues were increasing – for a few years Indiana County had the lowest unemployment rate in the nation, (2) the state and federal government were funding acquisition and development of parks for outdoor recreation at unprecedented levels, mainly through the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and (3) county leaders, including Mr. Lenglet and Mr. Charles Potter, Chairman of the Indiana County Planning Commission were in place to advocate and encourage the Indiana County Commissioners to begin establishing county parks.

The County was also aided by having Congressman John P. Saylor as its representative. Saylor was known as the ‘Conservationist in Congress’ for his efforts in promoting conservation, establishing and protecting parks and, due to his seniority in Congress, for having the legislative clout to steer funds to Indiana County for park development and acquisition. Burrell Township’s Saylor Park is named in his honor.

Charles Potter, Chairman of R&P Coal Company, was in the unique position of not only advocating for parks but also being able to ensure that certain lands owned by Rochester & Pittsburgh Coal Company would remain available for purchase when park acquisition funds were forthcoming. Blue Spruce Park and Pine Ridge Park, acquired in the mid-1960s, are largely comprised of former R&P Coal Company land.
Isadore Lenglet worked as the Indiana County Planning Director until 1969 and then continued a successful career in government and education. He worked at Indiana University of PA and later in the administration of Governor Richard Thornburgh. He eventually worked as a top administrator at Duquesne University and in other government positions. His time in Indiana County government, especially his foresight in encouraging the establishment of county parks for future generations, was productive and visionary. Anyone using the first three established county parks: Blue Spruce Park, Pine Ridge Park or Hemlock Lake owes a debt of gratitude to Isadore Lenglet for their existence. Mr. Lenglet also played a key role in having White Pine Park/Two Lick Reservoir added to the park system.

Early plans included the creation of parks in three geographic locations: Pine Ridge Park in southern Indiana County, Blue Spruce Park in the central part of the county and Hemlock Lake in the north. By August 1965, the first land acquisition grants were approved for two parks, one park in Burrell Township (Pine Ridge) and a second park in Rayne Township (Blue Spruce). Project 70, a Commonwealth of PA bond program provided the funding for these acquisitions, along with matching funds from the federal Land & Water Conservation Fund.
Another state bond issue, Project 500, provided development funds for facilities at several of the parks. Early acquisition and development projects effectively utilized federal and state matching funds. Indiana County’s own financial outlay to acquire and develop parks was reasonably small, compared to the federal and state commitment.

One misconception over the years has been that the R&P Coal Company donated the park lands to the County – all lands for the two original county parks were purchased, not donated. The original acquisition for Blue Spruce Park totaled 373 acres, since then the park has expanded to 650 acres. Pine Ridge Park, at 618 acres, eventually expanded to 660 acres. Hemlock Lake, at 205 acres, was purchased by the Commonwealth of PA for the PA Fish & Boat Commission.

**Student Design Contest**

To solicit designs for Rayne Township Park and Burrell Township Park a contest was held between Penn State University students in landscape architecture and recreation. Judging of the entries, including models of the park designs, took place at Cogswell Hall on the Indiana University of PA campus on June 1, 1966.

Joseph N. Cogley, who would later serve as the first agency director, was a member of the second-place design team for Blue Spruce Park. Several other members of the design teams went on to successful careers in parks with the state and federal government. The original design for both parks featured extensive facility development, much more than would ever be fully funded or built.
By Penn State Students —
Select Top Proposals for Two County Parks

The selection of the top two proposals for the development of two county parks was made yesterday. Prepared by senior architecture students, the proposals were judged following presentations yesterday on the Indiana University campus.

First prize in the Burrell plan was awarded to a team of students headed by Donald Bartoletti. Other members of the first-place Burrell Park proposal were Frederick Hagy, Sally Roc, and William Robinson.

The second-place team was comprised of John Brown, Wilmer Burkhart, Robert McNarty and Mr. Wade. First award for the Rayne Township Park was won by a team headed by Edward Bakunas. Others on the teams are Harold Black, David Earl, and Richard Sprankle. Second award winners for the Rayne site were Norman Aubuchon, David Richards, James Lauderbaugh, Joseph Cogley and Wilmer Henninger.

First place award winners were presented with a $125 check and second place teams earned $75. The presentations were made by Commissioner Frank Barkley at a dinner conducted at Rustic Lodge.

The students at Penn State were asked to submit proposals for the development of the two park sites currently under preparation as a park of an Indiana County park system.

Indiana Evening Gazette - June 7, 1966
Robert Fenton, a Pittsburgh landscape architect, was hired to prepare the final plans for both parks. Fenton’s designs utilized many of the concepts in the student’s designs. His most creative design project was the playground at Blue Spruce Park, known as ‘Fort Ernest’. The playground included varying play levels and tower structures in a creatively landscaped setting. Eventually ‘Fort Ernest’ had to be dismantled to meet new playground safety guidelines, but in its original state, it was a unique play space.

**First County Park Construction Begins**

By 1966, construction on the Rayne Township Park was underway, the first work involved repairs to Cummings Dam and clearing of the site. In 1967 work continued, much of it being done by workers provided from the Department of Public Assistance. A grant was also secured to allow eleven journeymen of Local #66 of the International Union of Operating Engineers to dig ditches, lay drain pipe and rough in the park roads.

**FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AND UNION ASSIST COUNTY PARK PROJECT**

*These men are being trained under a Federal Manpower Development Training Act grant to operate a new type of back hoe. Under the MDTA program, 11 journeymen, members of Local 68, International Union of Operating Engineers are learning how to operate the machine and at the same time, dig trenches and install drainage pipe at Indiana County’s new Rayne Township Park. They took a ‘break’ for the photographer, but then resumed their on-the-job training. (Gazette photo by Bechtel)*
The park would not be officially known as Blue Spruce Park until 1968. During its early years of construction, Mr. Clyde ‘Bony’ Clawson worked as the park supervisor overseeing the initial site clearing, construction of the park office and other duties. James Wagner of Clymer, PA was the first full-time maintenance employee hired by the County.

All three of the original county parks were named by the Indiana County Park Board after evergreen trees in honor of Indiana County’s claim as the ‘Christmas Tree Capitol of the World’. The Indiana County Christmas Tree Growers, under the leadership of Roy Fleming, donated the first blue spruce trees planted at Blue Spruce Park.

Work also began at the same time on the Burrell Township Park, later named Pine Ridge Park. The park was officially opened on July 2, 1972. From 1972 to 1976 park employees worked off and on to construct Pine Lodge as funding became available. The lodge opened for public use in 1976 and remains in use today.

The scope of development planned for Pine Ridge Park was far-reaching. A news article by Bill Graff of the Indiana Evening Gazette in January 28, 1967 outlined plans for fourteen small lakes, four miles of roads, a ski slope with rope tow, sixty-six trailer camper stalls, ice skating facilities, a horse stable and bridle paths.

Pine Lodge, Pine Ridge Park. The Lodge was built by county employees and opened to the public in 1976.
The idea of establishing a ski slope in Pine Ridge Park is not as far-fetched as it sounds. In the 1980s the firm Sno-Engineering from Salt Lake City, Utah conducted a preliminary study for the nearby Chestnut Ridge Resort with an eye toward leasing the property for skiing and construction of a resort hotel on the property. However, the ski slope project never proceeded beyond an initial assessment.
THE OLD DAM DOESN’T LOOK THE SAME! — Filled to capacity by heavy winter rain and snow runoff, the old Cummins Dam near Ernest sports its new concrete resurfacing. Gone is the eroded look of crumbling cement and stone. Now part of the new Rayne Township County Park, the dam once served to supply water for steam locomotives of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. The Gunnite Corp. of Kansas City recently completed renovation of the dam. A new maintenance-administration building for the park is shown at upper right. (Gazette photo by Bechtel) Indiana Evening Gazette – March 16, 1967

Plans for Hemlock Lake Announced

In 1969, the County and the Pennsylvania Fish Commission announced plans to acquire and develop a 205-acre park with a 60-acre lake at Banks Township in northeastern Indiana County. Indiana County was expected to provide funding to help acquire and develop the park, but enough federal and state funding was available so that the County did not need to fund the acquisition or initial development of Hemlock Lake.
Indiana County Commissioners approved an agreement Wednesday with the Pennsylvania Fish Commission to assume operation of the new park and fish lake being constructed on Straight Run in Banks Township near Smithport.

Under terms of the agreement a 40-year pact, the fish commission will underwrite cost of constructing the dam and then stock and manage the fish population in the 60-acre lake.

The county will assume maintenance and operating costs after the lake is completed in the 200-acre park, with the county to commence development of land surrounding the park “within a reasonable length of time.” The land will be a public park and no charge can be made for park use or fishing or boating purposes.

Motorboats will be restricted from the lake. The county may establish concession stands and other public-related services within the park according to the agreement.

A Pittsburgh firm, EAL Construction Co., is currently at work building the dam.

*Indiana Evening Gazette - August 7, 1969*

Hemlock Lake was eventually added to the county park system in 1972, with the signing of a 40-year lease agreement. In 2012 the lease was extended for an additional 25 years.

The property is owned by the Commonwealth of PA. The park grounds and its facilities are maintained by Indiana County Parks & Trails, with the PA Fish & Boat Commission assuming responsibility for the earthen dam and the enforcement of fishing regulations. The PF&BC Commission calls the site Straight Run Lake, while the County has retained the name Hemlock Lake.
Parks & Recreation Commission Established

By the late 1960s Indiana County was on its way to establishing an extensive county park system, being touted by some as one of the most ambitious in Pennsylvania and the eastern United States. To oversee its operation, the Indiana County Commissioners (Patrick Stapleton, William Fiscus, Sr. and William Jones) established the Indiana County Parks & Recreation Commission on July 7, 1967.

The first meeting of the commission was held on August 16, 1967 at the Planning Commission Office in Indiana. Members of the first county park board included: Will Torrance, Chairman; Dr. William Betts, Vice-Chairman; Frank Hood, Secretary; Clyde Haag; and Edwin M. Clark, Jr. (shown in above photo). The first items of business were adoption of By-Laws and creation of a job description for the Parks and Recreation Director position. In 1968, Joseph Fry was selected to fill the position vacated by Mr. Haag.

The Commission is known today as the Indiana County Parks & Trails Advisory Board and continues to meet on a regular basis to oversee and guide the operations of the county parks and trail system. Eight citizen members, appointed by the Indiana County Commissioners, serve on the board for five-year terms.

In addition to developing its own parks, the County Park Board also took a strong interest in advocating that recreational facilities be developed at Conemaugh Dam, operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.
Joseph Cogley Hired as First County Park Director

To provide professional management to the county parks, Joseph N. Cogley, a native of East Brady, PA was hired as the first full-time director of the agency in the spring of 1968. Mr. Cogley served as director until August 1978 and oversaw much of the first site improvements at Blue Spruce Park, Pine Ridge Park, Hemlock Lake and a new park initiated in 1969 known as White Pine Park/Two Lick Reservoir. After leaving Indiana County, Mr. Cogley worked for park systems in Des Plaines, Illinois; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Boca Raton, Florida. Mr. Cogley completed his park service career in 2010.

With ample grant funding and a strong commitment on the part of the county to ensure the park system was being properly developed, the early park facilities were constructed in a first-rate fashion. Several of the facilities developed in this era: the large pavilion at Blue Spruce Park, Pine Lodge at Pine Ridge Park and several park restrooms featured hand-laid stone. The facilities were developed along the same general theme to give the parks a similar overall appearance, featuring architecture of a modern ‘rustic’ design.

Big Plans for White Pine Park/Two Lick Reservoir

White Pine Park/Two Lick Reservoir was leased in 1969 by Indiana County from the Pennsylvania Electric Company and the New York State Electric and Gas Company, who built the reservoir to serve as a water supply for the Homer City Power Plant. The reservoir was
also eventually used as the water supply for Indiana Borough and White Township. The park contained 1,665 acres of land including 500 acres of water, making it the largest of the county parks at the time. It opened to the public in 1970.

There were extensive plans to develop White Pine Park into a major recreational facility for the county and the surrounding region. Two Lick Reservoir offered unlimited horsepower boating and water skiing on its nearly 5-mile long lake with 10 miles of shoreline. A boat launch, large campground and full-service marina were all included in the park’s original plans. The scope of the plans and proposed developments for White Pine Park were impressive - especially for a county the size of Indiana County.

**Park Zoning Ordinance Created**

In the early 1970s there were increasing concerns regarding the threat of outside development on the character and environmental quality of the county parks. The opening of a surface coal mine, just outside the boundary of Pine Ridge Park, lead to the establishment of zoning districts around the parks, which included buffer and conservation zones to protect the parks and their watersheds.

The Special Conservation and Recreation Zoning Ordinance was adopted in 1973 to protect Blue Spruce Park, Pine Ridge Park, Hemlock Lake and Yellow Creek State Park. Certain types of activities are prohibited within the two zones; a Zoning Hearing Board rules on appeals and requests for variances. The ordinance falls under the jurisdiction of the Indiana County Office of Planning & Development.

The zoning ordinance has faced numerous legal challenges and has often been controversial. When it was first established there were no regulations in the ordinance concerning gas wells, which by the early 1980s became a significant land use issue during a major shallow gas well boom occurring in the County. Timbering and forestry activities on lands surrounding the parks have also
been contentious issues.

The controversy over the ordinance has continued. In 2011 the drilling of Marcellus gas wells in the Yellow Creek State Park zoning district drew a great deal of attention and public comment on each side of the issue.

For many years, the County Parks & Trails Department has recommended that the best long-term strategy to safeguard the county parks is to acquire the critical properties that are needed to protect them. The acquisition of 230 acres of R&P Coal Company property next to Blue Spruce Park is an example of securing property to protect the park as much as possible from outside development, without relying on zoning.

**Park Board and Staff Faces Early Challenges**

There were two persistent problems that plagued the agency during this time, both at Blue Spruce Park. This included the inability to receive Department of Health permit approvals to offer swimming at the park and the persistent problem of water leaking from the lake behind Cummings Dam. The agency staff and park board spent a considerable amount of time trying to resolve these two issues. Park board minutes and newspaper accounts from this era are filled with discussions of the board seeking help from professional consultants trying to find a solution to these problems.

Eventually, the plans to offer swimming were scrapped. Funding was secured to attempt to stop the leakage by applying a polymer/clay product to the lake bottom using a product manufactured by the Dow Chemical Company. However, the project never proceeded because the company would not guarantee that the product would work. The dam has had a leakage problem as far back as 1908 when it was first built by the Buffalo, Rochester & Pittsburgh Railway. In 1912 the dam was enlarged so that the water capacity would be adequate to serve the railroad.
Even with these setbacks, this era was a high point in the agency’s early existence. The initial development of the first parks was nearly completed, park attendance was steadily increasing, the parks were gaining in popularity and the county was providing ample funding to staff, operate and develop the parks. But the fortunes of the county parks were to significantly change over the next several years.
Surviving the Downturn: 1976 - 1983

Beginning in 1976 the county park budget was significantly reduced over concerns that the county park system was growing too fast and would be unmanageable. By 1977, the fortunes of the revitalized coal industry took a dramatic downturn in Indiana County, causing considerable impacts on all levels of county government. The ripple effect of the closing of many mines and the resulting loss of thousands of mining jobs and had an economic impact that would take Indiana County many years to overcome.

Coal Mining Decline Affects County

Indiana County went from having one of the nation’s lowest unemployment rates in the early 1960s to some of its highest unemployment rates by the late 1970s and early 1980s. By 1983 the official unemployment rate was over 13% and people began to leave the county in search of employment elsewhere. The loss of mining jobs and jobs in related industries, drastically affected the county’s tax revenues and its ability to continue to develop and operate its county park system.

Many early plans for the county parks had to be scaled back or scrapped entirely. At the same time the state and federal governments were reducing funding for parks. Indiana County had wisely taken advantage of the available funds in the 1960s and early 1970s – counties that did not missed the opportunity to secure significant state and federal funding. Planned recreation facility development was reduced, and the park development that did occur did not meet early expectations.
In some way, the scaling back of park development plans had a beneficial long-term impact. The parks were left less developed, more rustic and more natural. The future cost to maintain the proposed developments would have been difficult to sustain. For example, the extensive plans for Pine Ridge Park could have never been realistically maintained by a limited park staff.

Other factors were also at work. Indiana County’s population in 1960 stood at 75,366; increased to 79,451 in 1970 and reached a peak in 1980 of 92,281. By 1990, the population declined to 89,994; in 2010 the population declined again to 88,880. The population growth of the county did not happen as predicted.

**George Fatora Appointed Second County Park Director**

After the resignation of Joseph N. Cogley as Director in August 1978, in part to protest dramatic cuts in county parks funding, George Fatora of Blairsville was appointed Director of the agency. Mr. Fatora had worked as a farmer, teacher, railroad worker and, beginning in the early 1970s, as the Pine Ridge Park Supervisor.

County park maintenance budgets were significantly reduced and staff positions eliminated by the County during Mr. Fatora’s reign. Mr. Fatora guided the county parks during his five-year tenure as Director by emphasizing cost savings and asking the remaining employees do what they could to keep the parks at least minimally operating. Mr. Fatora’s philosophy was summed up by the saying “make do or do without”. By the early 1980s, full-time positions at the county parks had been reduced by almost half of the early 1970s level.

As early as 1976, one candidate for County Commissioner campaigned that Indiana County was ‘over-parked’. By 1980-81, the county parks were in serious decline - there was growing dissatisfaction by some citizens who believed that the funding to create county parks may have been wasted. Things were so desperate by 1981 that, without large mowing equipment, the Blue Spruce Park maintenance staff was reduced to mowing all the park’s extensive lawns with push mowers - which still ranks as one
of the most remarkable maintenance feats ever undertaken by the agency.

Mr. Fatora retired in August of 1983 and Ed Patterson, Assistant Director, was appointed to the Director’s positon.

**County Cancels Lease at White Pine Park**

By December 8, 1982 the low point had been reached - the lease at White Pine Park/Two Lick Reservoir was cancelled - the park would be closed as a cost-cutting measure and a concern over boater’s safety. Some limited development had taken place in the years the County operated the park, but not to the extent of original expectations. The site is operated today by a private boating club, the Two Lick Recreation Association.

White Pine Park’s critical downfall was that it was leased and not owned by the County. Because the property was not owned by the County there was always a reluctance to develop the park for fear that the lease would be cancelled and money invested in the park would be lost.

Eventually there was widespread dissatisfaction from park’s users, especially those who purchased season boating passes and who had never witnessed much in the way of major improvements.

Another management issue for the County was that the water level of the reservoir would rapidly rise and fall causing safety concerns and often making the boat launch ramp unusable. This
lead to repeated pleas from season pass holders for the County to do something, or refund their season passes.

In its final year of operating the park the County eliminated the season passes; even though the daily launch fee was increased from $3.50 to $7.00 per boat - visitors still came. A few years after the County ceased operations of the park a new water release plan for the reservoir was adopted - the water level does not fluctuate as greatly today.

**Future of County Parks in Peril**

About this same time, closed door meetings were held that included serious discussions to dissolve the county park system due to the County’s economic difficulties. One proposal offered by a County Commissioner included cancelling the lease with the Commonwealth at Hemlock Lake and offering Blue Spruce Park and Pine Ridge Park to their respective local townships. If the townships were not interested in taking over the parks the county would close the parks. Somehow the county parks system survived and this drastic proposal never saw the light of day.

The County Commissioner election of November 1983 would set the stage for a change of fortune and a rebirth of the county parks.

*Jim McQuown was twenty-eight years old when first elected as a County Commissioner in the November 1983 election. The election resulted in new county park initiatives. Today, Jim serves as the Director of the Indiana County Aging Services, Inc.*

The Indiana County Commissioners election of November 1983 offered voters a choice of three new candidates and one incumbent. All three new candidates were elected, signaling a change in County leadership - a new direction and a generational shift for Indiana County government. James McQuown, top vote getter in the 1983 election and a political newcomer, was twenty-eight years of age at the time. McQuown would go on to serve 18 years as an Indiana County Commissioner and played a vital role in revitalizing the county parks during his tenure in office.

New Commissioners Signal Change in Fortunes

In January 1984 James McQuown, Beatrice States and Anthony Hewitt began their terms of office. From the beginning of their terms all three Commissioners knew that the County parks were in poor condition, had been neglected in recent times and a major effort would be needed to turn things around. The county parks staff was encouraged to apply for grant funding to assist the county’s efforts - something the agency had been denied doing for several years under previous Board of Commissioners.

The 1983 Commissioners election was a watershed moment for the agency that helped preserve the county parks and lead to major improvements and an expansion of the park system.

A Dog Show Changes Public Perceptions

In September, 1984 the first Laurel Highlands American Kennel Club Dog Show was held at Blue Spruce Park under the direction of Club President, Merrily Duncan. Mrs. Duncan had worked at White Pine Park as a student and through her familiarity with Blue Spruce Park, she thought the park had potential as an attractive site for a dog show. Little did anyone know at the time that a dog show would provide a major assist in improving the agency’s fortunes.
The dog show was held at the park each September for the next 22 years. It was an important and well-attended special event that helped change perceptions of the public about the park, the agency’s overall image and its ability to deliver quality visitor services.

The show eventually relocated to another park because the number of dog owners and their motor homes eventually exceeded the park’s physical capacity. During its run, the dog show had broad support from the community and became a very effective way to showcase the Blue Spruce Park each fall.

The sixth annual Fall show, sponsored by the Laurel Highlands Kennel Club, will be held Sept. 10 at Blue Spruce Park, Ernest. Last year’s Best in Show winner was a Doberman pinscher owned by Bill Garnett and Dr. and Mrs. Shriver of Virginia Beach, Va. Participating in last year’s award ceremony are from left, Robert J. Moore, Best in Show judge; Mr. Garnett; Ch. Alderhemi’s Rampage; Queen Evergreen XXV Christine Kunkle; Joan Rea, chairwoman; and Victor Clementz, working group judge. Indiana Gazette

PCC Revitalizes County Parks

Park maintenance budgets were increased during this era. Ironically, the County’s poor economic condition turned out to be its saving grace, as far as the county parks were concerned. In response to persistent economic problems statewide the state
legislature and Governor Robert P. Casey created the Pennsylvania Conservation Corps (PCC) to provide training and employment to unemployed youths.

Patterned after the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s, the PCC program helped revitalize, upgrade and modernize the county park system. Because of the county’s high unemployment rate, especially among young adults 18 to 21 years of age, the PCC program was uniquely tailored to help achieve two goals: put young people to work and in the process help rebuild the county park system.

Indiana County’s first two PCC projects began in 1984: the construction of Blue Spruce Lodge and a stream restoration/fish habitat project on Tom’s Run at Pine Ridge Park. In later years, other PCC projects included the construction of the Blue Spruce Park Lakeside Center (1987), the construction of the Dilltown Access Area at the Ghost Town Trail (1992), improvements to Hemlock Lake’s facilities, major upgrades to the park maintenance centers, new hiking trails, restrooms, playgrounds and the construction of several pavilions throughout the park system to provide much needed sources of new revenue.

Eventually, almost all the county parks benefited from the PCC program. Dozens of young people worked on the PCC projects - for many it was their first job. In later years, the corps members, much like their counterparts of the CCC era, made note of the importance the PCC experience played in their lives. The PCC program created a legacy from which today’s park users still benefit.

From 1984 through 1994 ten PCC projects were completed. By the early part of the 1990s, the entire existing county park system had been almost completely rebuilt, and several new major facilities were in place. This ten-year period was one of the most
significant and productive in the entire history of the county park system, at least matching the early years when the parks were first acquired and initially developed. The new and upgraded facilities, in concert with a new emphasis on better and more frequent park maintenance, lead to increased park attendance and renewed support from the public.

**Friends of the Parks Offers New Programming**

In 1985, the Friends of the Parks began offering environmental education programs at the Indiana County Parks.

The Friends of the Parks program series was initiated by Joanne Henry of Indiana, PA who had offered a series of ‘Nature in the Park’ programs at Yellow Creek State Park in 1984, under the auspices of the Indiana County Botanical Society and other partners.

After expanding the program offerings to the Indiana County Parks in 1985, Joanne established a formal organization, Friends of the Parks, to oversee and operate the expanding program series.

The Friends of the Parks programs have attracted many new people to the county parks over the years, helping them, to learn about the parks and the natural features found there.
The Friends of the Parks series continues to operate under the direction of a board of volunteers who provide a variety of environmental education programs to the public, all under its original mission: ‘Learning More About Our Environment’.

Few counties in Pennsylvania have the environmental program offerings that are available to visitors to the Indiana County Parks & Trails and Yellow Creek State Park. As a volunteer organization, Friends of the Parks provides a valuable service that does not require funding from the county parks budget. Other than providing the use of the county park facilities to host the programs, the entire program series is supported financially by the members of Friends of the Parks.

**America’s Industrial Heritage Project**

In response to the economic downturn of the 1980s, U.S. Representative John P. Murtha asked the National Park Service to conduct an inventory of significant historic tourist attractions in a nine-county region of southwestern PA.

The outcome of the inventory was the creation of America’s Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP) which initiated efforts to preserve and promote heritage attractions in the region and, in turn, stimulate the region’s economy. Because of Congressman Murtha’s seniority and membership on the Congressional Appropriations Committee a significant amount federal dollars began to flow into the region.

AIHP was routinely skewered by the national media, particularly the Boston Globe newspaper, as an expensive ‘pork barrel project’ of little value. Congressman Murtha steadfastly supported the project and advocated for its federal funding. Ironically, in later years the federal government would establish over forty heritage areas throughout the United States, using AIHP as one of its models. The AIHP program eventually fell under the
guidance of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Heritage Preservation Commission. The State of Pennsylvania also established its own heritage park areas in the intervening years.

**Ghost Town Trail Expands County Parks Reach**

An outgrowth of AIHP study was a plan to convert numerous abandoned railroads in the region into bicycling and walking trails. Funding for trail master plans and construction became available. Although trail funding never approached what was offered to other heritage projects in the AIHP region, the trails have proven to be one of the most cost-effective and lasting legacies of AIHP. In Indiana County, the Ghost Town Trail, Eliza Furnace Historic Site and Hoodlebug Trail all received initial funding support from AIHP.

In 1991, the Joseph and Judy Kovalchick Family of Indiana, PA donated sixteen miles of abandoned railroad in Indiana and Cambria Counties which, by 1994, became the Ghost Town Trail.

*Setting the Armerford Bridge, 2009. The installation of this bridge provided the final missing link in the Ghost Town Trail. The bridge consists of nine 25-foot long segments that were bolted together and then set in place with a large crane.*

...
The Kovalchick Family’s donation was critical to jump-starting the trails initiatives in the county. The family also later donated land that was used to construct the Hoodlebug Trail Connector near Josephine, PA.

By 2009 the entire Ghost Town Trail network was completed, totaling 36 miles. In 2017 an additional 9 miles will be constructed by the Cambria County Conservation & Recreation Authority to extend the Ghost Town Trail further into Cambria County.

The Ghost Town Trail attracts thousands of visitors each year and has a significant economic impact for regional tourism. The trail was an important project that extended the county park’s reach into new areas of the county and, ultimately, lead to several other new initiatives.

A view from the Route 56 bridge overlooking the Ghost Town Trail.

**C&I Trail Council Spurs Grassroots Effort**

An important component of the trails effort was provided by the Cambria & Indiana Trail Council, under the leadership of Laurie Lafontaine. The trail council helped stimulate and organize the grass roots efforts that lead to the successful completion of
both the Ghost Town Trail and the Hoodlebug Trail. The Council continues to work on expanding the trail system so that our trails can be connected to a much larger regional trail system.

*Scenes from the Ghost Town Trail.*
The Ghost Town Trail had a synergistic effect on the park system. Meetings with various organizations, groups and interested individuals during the trail’s establishment eventually lead to several new initiatives and an expansion of the county park system.

**Major Donations Increase Park Acreage**

In December, 1995 the County Park system received two generous land donations increasing the county park acreage by 713 acres and resulting in the establishment of the county’s first two natural areas.

David and Penny Russell were Quaker Valley school teachers who had retired to the Stephenson farm near Dilltown, Penny’s family homestead. Through their involvement in establishing the Dillweed Bed & Breakfast, along the Ghost Town Trail, and their lifelong interest in conservation and the outdoors, the Russells decided to preserve their property for future generations to enjoy. Their donation of 675 acres of woodland and forested wetland in Buffington Township resulted in the establishment of the Blacklick Valley Natural Area.

At the same time the Keystone-Conemaugh Group, owners of the Conemaugh Generating Station, donated Buttermilk Falls to the County, a 48-acre tract in West Wheatfield Township. The property had been acquired by the power plant owners in the early 1960s.
People had always visited the falls, even as far back as the early 1900s when it was known as Aurora Falls, but the transfer of the property to the county parks assured that it would remain open to the public. Since the donation of the property the county has added several new facilities and improvements to the site - it remains, as always, a popular place to visit.

December 19, 1995 is regarded as one of the most memorable days in the history of Indiana County Parks & Trails. At a simple ceremony, on a snowy day at the Dillweed Bed & Breakfast, the County Commissioners and county park staff met to thank David and Penny Russell and Mr. Ed Horel, representing the Keystone-Conemaugh Group, for their generous donations to the people of Indiana County.
The establishment of the Ghost Town Trail created renewed interest in starting a similar trail in the Indiana-Homer City area. After completing a trail master plan in 1995 the county began efforts to acquire the former Pennsylvania Railroad property and convert it into a bicycle-pedestrian trail. The project was first known as the Indiana to Homer City Bicycle/Pedestrian Trail.

**Hoodlebug Trail Established**

In August, 1998 the trail was named the Hoodlebug Trail after a ‘name the trail’ contest was held. By the year 2000 the first six miles of the trail were open for use. In 2005, during the reconstruction of Route 119, the trail was extended another four miles south to Burrell Township. In 2010 the final connection linking the Hoodlebug Trail and the Ghost Town Trail at Saylor Park in Black Lick was completed. The Ghost Town Trail and Hoodlebug Trail are a combined 46 miles in length, joining the county seats of Indiana and Ebensburg. The trail also offers a physical symbol of the hard-earned efforts of many people to provide a quality trail system in our region.

**Festival of Lights Attracts New Visitors**

In 1992 another new programming initiative began – the Festival of Lights at Blue Spruce Park. Christine Brownlee, Indiana County Tourist Bureau Director and Lori Hunter of the Best Western Inn approached the park staff in the spring of 1992 to suggest starting a lights festival at the park in an effort to improve tourism to the County during the holiday season. A fund-raising campaign was initiated by the Tourist Bureau resulting in $10,000 in donations from community partners for the first lights festival. Students at Indiana High School, Indiana County Vo-Tech School, United High School and other schools constructed some of the festival’s first displays.
The first lights festival attracted many visitors and demonstrated the event’s potential as a holiday attraction. The lights festival was one of several community events that operated under the theme ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’, after the movie starring Jimmy Stewart the Indiana, PA native son. A ‘Wonderful Life’ committee comprised of members from throughout the Indiana community met for several years through the 1990s to plan and implement several other special events, including a reunion of several of the surviving cast members of the movie.

The county parks maintenance staff worked on the lights festival from its inception: installing the lights, building and maintaining displays and operating the festival on a day-to-day basis. The Indiana County Tourist Bureau assisted with promotion of the event and the festival sponsorship program.

On November 26, 2011, a ceremony was held to welcome the 250,000th visitor to the festival. Although the festival was popular the event was discontinued after the 2014 festival due to concerns about rising operational costs and the amount of time the limited number of county park maintenance employees were spending on what amounted to a four-month time-period each year.

New Sites Added to County Park System

Other sites added to the county park system during this era include: Tunnelview Historic Site, Eliza Furnace Historic Site, Buena Vista Historic Site, Old Smicksburg Park and the Waterworks Conservation Area.

*Old Smicksburg Park was added to the county park system in 2010.*
The historic sites represented a new initiative for the county parks. While all the parks have historic features, these sites were established with a primary focus on their historic resources, such as the iron furnaces, tunnels and the Pennsylvania Canal. Old Smicksburg Park is a significant historic site that also includes outstanding natural features, due to its location along Little Mahoning Creek.

Tunnelview Historic Site is another park that owes its existence to the AIHP project period. The 16-acre site preserves historic features relating to transportation history, i.e., railroads and the canal. The site was acquired by donation from the Tunnelton Mining Company, through the efforts of Clarence Stephenson, Indiana County Historian; David Bishop, at the time, manager of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Conemaugh River Lake and William Dzombak, a canal historian and volunteer at the Conemaugh Dam. Ironically, although developed as an historic site, today the site is used most frequently for another type of transportation – as a launch area for kayaks and canoes on the Conemaugh River.

In 2007 the county parks assumed responsibility for maintaining the County’s four remaining covered bridges. The covered bridges had always been owned by the County, but with the bypassing of three of the bridges with new modern bridges the responsibility for maintaining the covered bridges had been overlooked. As historic and tourism resources the inclusion of the covered bridges into the county parks maintenance program made a good fit.
The Waterworks Conservation Area represented a new type of initiative – reclaiming a former mine site for recreation and conservation purposes. The project was a joint effort on the part of the Indiana County Conservation District, the County Parks & Trails, PA Department of Environmental Protection, Ken Sink Chapter of Trout Unlimited, Indiana County Airport Authority (for wetlands mitigation from the Jimmy Stewart airport runway expansion), Indiana University of PA Department of Geography and Regional Planning, and other groups.

Two historic iron furnaces, both dating from the 19th century, were added to the park system through leases with the Cambria County Historical Society (for Eliza Furnace) and the Indiana County Historical and Genealogical Society (for Buena Vista Furnace).
Community events, like the Indiana Roadrunner’s Club Annual Race for the Trail, are popular fundraisers for many worthy causes.

Friends of the Parks programs are popular.

Fawn crossing the Hoodlebug Trail.
During the years 2012 to 2017 the park system added one new site: the Blairsville Riverfront Trail. Development of the trail was a cooperative project of the Blairsville Community Development Authority, Blairsville Borough, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and many community volunteers and trail advocates. Linda Gwinn, a member of the Park Advisory Board, played a key role in the establishment of the trail.

The 1.7-mile long trail follows the path of the Conemaugh River as it traces the outskirts of Blairsville. The trail has proven to be very popular and is one part of an on-going overall effort to revitalize Blairsville Borough. Other efforts continue to link Blairsville to the greater regional trail system.

Acreage was added to the park system during this era, including a 6-acre addition to the Blacklick Valley Natural Area, via a donation from the heirs of Bertrand Russell, a 25-acre addition to Pine Ridge Park added to the park to account for land converted for a natural gas pipeline and a 4-acre addition to the Ghost Town Trail known as the Claghorn Wetlands. Funds from the pipeline right-of-way fee were used to purchase the land.

While funding for the park system remained stable the creation of the Park Enterprise Fund provided a new method and new strategy for funding the parks. The Park Enterprise Fund is derived
from revenues collected from park rentals, right-of-way fees and other sources of income.

Prior to the establishment of the Park Enterprise Fund all revenue that the county parks collected were deposited into the County’s General Fund. Earmarking the revenues specifically for the parks has stabilized the agency’s funding, allowed it to be less reliant on general tax allocations and has provided an entrepreneurial incentive to generate revenue. Proceeds from the fund are used to upgrade facilities, purchase equipment and provide for other improvements. More importantly, the establishment of the fund has changed the mindset of the agency and allows it to function more like a business with incentives to generate revenue that will improve park facilities and services.

One important loss during this era was the elimination of the Blue Spruce Park Festival of Lights. Due to the cost of the event and the amount of time spent installing, operating and maintaining the light show (nearly four months each year) it was decided to discontinue the event after its 23rd year. Although the event was popular, the revenue generated, typically about half of what it cost to operate, was not sufficient to keep the event operating.

*Early photo of Pine Ridge Park development, c. 1967.*
One noticeable difference between the operation of the park system in this era versus previous eras is the reduced staffing levels. With modern equipment, especially faster and more efficient mowing equipment, the number of employees required in years past has decreased, while the number of park sites maintained has increased.

‘Maintenance First-of-All’

A core group of seven maintenance staff oversee 14 sites spread throughout the county. Keeping our parks, trails and facilities in good condition has been a hallmark of our first 50 years. Our employees take pride in offering parks and trails that are clean, open and safe so that our visitors will enjoy the time they spend here.

Most of the county park maintenance crew have been employed for many years; the knowledge and skill they have acquired over the years is a key reason how the crew maintains so many widespread sites throughout the county at a very high level of efficiency.

Memorial Park was added to the county park system in 1978. Many improvements have been made to the park since then, along with a dedicated maintenance program to keep this highly visible park in good condition.
Indiana County’s Best Idea

By 2017, the Indiana County Park system totaled nearly 2,500 acres at fourteen different locations. Encompassing regional parks, natural areas, regional trails, conservation areas, covered bridges and historic sites, the park system represents one of the most extensive and diverse county park systems in Pennsylvania. No county in Pennsylvania of similar population, and many that are significantly more populated than Indiana County, can claim as diverse and unique a park system as exits here. National parks are often sometime to as ‘America’s best idea’. Looking back over Indiana County’s history since the 1960s some may say that the decision to establish county parks was one of Indiana County’s best ideas and has proven to be one of its most popular decisions.

Indiana County government provides a wide array of services, but county parks and trails likely serve more people directly than any other county agency. Visitation to the county park system remains at a consistently high level.

Since the opening of the first county parks, the public has returned, year after year, to these special places - Indiana County’s very own places.
Our Parks of the Future

“Public parks have a very special place in the nation’s heart... locally loved spaces that provide millions of people with opportunities to escape, explore, rest, relax and play.” - National Trust on the Future of Parks

“If you’re on the side of parks, you’re on the side of angels. You can’t lose”. - Robert Moses

What does the future hold for Indiana County Parks & Trails? No one knows for certain, but if the past is any indicator, county parks will endure. When the Indiana County parks were first established no one knew for certain how things would turn out 50 years later.

Those who made the initial efforts to create a county park system would take pride in knowing that what they started has evolved into a diverse park system that offers many benefits to our county residents, and has, ultimately, made Indiana County a better place to live.

Besides the simple joy that our parks provide they also offer a wide range of benefits: they keep us healthy; provide homes for wildlife; offer places to socialize with family, friends and fellow citizens; preserve our history and culture, and serve as a refuge from a busy modern world.

As caretakers and stewards of these special places we can do nothing less than ensure that they continue to thrive for future generations to enjoy.
County Commissioners

1960-1964  Dee Miller  “Tiny” Everett  Frank Barkley
1964-1968  Frank Barkley  William Jones  Patrick Stapleton
1972-1976  Andy Kuzneski  Wm. McMillen  Jay Dilts
1984-1988  James McQuown  Beatrice States  Tony Hewitt**
1988-1992  James McQuown  Beatrice States  George Sulkosky
1992-1996  Tom Coyne  Paul Wass***  James McQuown
1996-2000  Bernie Smith  Randy Degankolb  James McQuown****
2000-2004  Bernie Smith  Bill Shane  Randy Degankolb
2004-2008  Rodney Ruddock  David Frick  Patricia Evanko
2008-2012  Rodney Ruddock  David Frick*****  Patricia Evanko
2012-2016  Rodney Ruddock  Michael Baker  Patricia Evanko
2016-2020  Rodney Ruddock  Michael Baker  Sherene Hess

*  McDivitt resigned from office
**  Hewitt resigned from office replaced by George Sulkosky
***  Wass resigned from office replaced by Mary Lee Cunningham
****  McQuown resigned from office replaced by Bill Shane
*****  Frick resigned from office replaced by Mike Baker
Parks & Trails Advisory Board

Christine Brownlee 1996-1997
Peter Clements 1968
Albert Darazio 1977-1978
Jane Dole 1978-1996
Joseph Fry 1968-1990
Betsy Fetterman 1994-2013
Linda Gwinn 2007-present
Clyde I. Haag 1967
B.A. Harrington 2017 - present
Delbert Highlands 2000-present
Tim Kronenwetter 2004-present
Laurie Lafontaine 1990-present
Deb Lyons 1985-2016
Randy McKeehen 2005
John McMullen 1976-present
Ken Muth 1980-1984
Donald Rogers 1969-1977
Robert Rittle 2007-2016
David Russell 1994-1999
Lewis H. Shaffer 1968-1971
John Somonick 2014-present
John Swauger 2016 - present
J. Lon Winebark 1969-1996
Clayton Winebark 1997-2003

Park Directors
Joseph Cogley 1968 - 1978
George Fatora 1978 - 1983
Ed Patterson 1983 - present
**Park Supervisors**
Blue Spruce Park: Clyde ‘Bony’ Clawson Victor Peterson Ed Patterson Gary Martin
Pine Ridge Park: Ray Winkleman George Fatora Paul Winkleman Robert Wine Steve Walters

**Park Coordinators**
Joel Dennis (also served as a Park Supervisor)
Eugene Allegre
Mike Kuzemchak

**Park Secretaries**
Janice Shaw
Barbara McCoy
Bill Kress
Arlene Fiselle
Barbara Starr
Marlene Isenberg
Erin Stewart
Kathie VanHorn

**Current Full-time Maintenance**
Joseph Mock
Luke Karp
Joseph McElwee
Glenn McElwee
Jeremy Robertson
In Appreciation:

We wish to extend our sincere appreciation to all the previous employees, not noted in the above list, who helped establish, develop and maintain the park system over these first 50 years.

We also offer our gratitude to the numerous youth employees, seasonal employees, Pennsylvania Conservation Corps members and many volunteers who served an important supporting role in our success.

Without the good work of those who are unnamed our park system’s growth and development would not have been possible.

Above: Penn State Master Gardeners maintain gardens at Blue Spruce.

Todd Bird Club outing, one of many volunteer groups that have aided the county parks over the years.
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1803</td>
<td>Indiana County created</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800s</td>
<td>Leisure activities combine work with play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800s</td>
<td>Picnic groves, fairs, large outdoor social outings popular throughout Indiana County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>BR&amp;P Railroad constructs Cummings Dam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>BR&amp;P Railroad enlarges Cummings Dam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920s</td>
<td>Trolley parks, private parks at peak popularity in County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>CCC Camps established in Indiana County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>Acquisition of Indiana Fairgrounds as first County Park fails</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>James Kendrick drowns at Cummings Dam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>State Park again proposed for Indiana County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>Mack Park established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Indiana Area Recreation &amp; Parks established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>County Planning Office, residents discuss creating parks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Yellow Creek State Park property acquired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>State/federal grants approved to acquire county park land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Initial clearing work at Blue Spruce Park, Pine Ridge Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Penn State students compete in park design contest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Indiana County Parks &amp; Recreation Commission established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>PA Fish Commission acquisition of Straight Run Dam land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Joseph N. Cogley hired as first Director of agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Lease agreement for White Pine Park announced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>White Pine Park/Two Lick Reservoir opened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Event</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Hemlock Lake and White Pine Park Master Plans completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Surface mining outside of Pine Ridge Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Pine Ridge Park officially opens on July 4th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Hemlock Lake, 40-year lease agreement with PFC approved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>County park operation budget reaches $225,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Pine Lodge completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Yellow Creek State Park officially opens on July 4th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>County park budget significantly reduced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>High unemployment period begins due to loss of mining jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Joseph N. Cogley, Director resigns, George Fatora hired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Memorial Park added to county park system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>‘Kill for Thrill’ murder at Blue Spruce Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>White Pine Park/Two Lick Reservoir leased cancelled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Election brings three new County Commissioners to office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>George Fatora retires, Ed Patterson hired as third Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Laurel Highlands Kennel Club Dog Show, Blue Spruce Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>First PA Conservation Corps grants approved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Friends of the Parks begins offering programs at county parks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Blue Spruce Lodge completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Blue Spruce Lakeside Center completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Kovalchick Family donates 16 miles of Ghost Town Trail property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Festival of Lights begins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Event</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Ghost Town Trail Master Plan completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Ghost Town Trail officially opens, first 16 miles complete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Blacklick Valley Natural Area and Buttermilk Falls donations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Eliza Furnace leased from Cambria County Historical Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Tunnelview Historic Site opens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Hoodlebug Trail named</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Red Mill Bridge completed at the Ghost Town Trail, Rexis Branch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Hoodlebug Trail opens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>230 acres of former R&amp;P land added to Blue Spruce Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Route 119 expansion, Hoodlebug Trail extension announced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Norfolk Southern Railroad donates 13 miles of railroad property to add to Ghost Town Trail, Black Lick to Dilltown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Indiana County celebrates its Bicentennial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Fred Rogers dies, memories of Buttermilk Falls recalled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Agency name changed to ‘Indiana County Parks &amp; Trails’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Hoodlebug Trail completed with addition of Route 119 extension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Additional 20 miles of Ghost Town Trail opens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Buena Vista Furnace leased from Indiana County Historical &amp; Genealogical Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Covered Bridges added to county park system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Park Enterprise Fund and Park Legacy Fund established</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2009  All 36 miles of Ghost Town Trail connected with installation of two bridges near Dilltown
2010  Hoodlebug Trail connected to Ghost Town Trail
2010  Waterworks Conservation Area completed
2010  Old Smicksburg Park added to park system
2010  Ghost Town Trail guidebook published
2010  Festival of Lights welcomes 250,000th visitor
2011  Hoodlebug Trail Guidebook published
2011  Hemlock Lake lease agreement extended for 25 years
2012  Blairsville Riverfront Trail opens
2013  Cummings Dam Geotechnical Study initiated
2014  Final season of Festival of Lights at Blue Spruce Park
2015  Sunoco Pipeline easement granted at Pine Ridge Park
2016  Six miles of Hoodlebug Trail resurfaced; Twenty-five acres of land added to Pine Ridge Park and four acres added to Ghost Town Trail
2017  50th Anniversary of Indiana County Parks & Trails
About Indiana County Parks & Trails

Indiana County offers one of Pennsylvania’s most extensive park and trail systems. Since 1967 our County residents, and an increasing number of visitors from outside the region, have enjoyed a wide assortment of recreation opportunities.

The park system includes regional parks, historic sites, covered bridges, natural areas and trails in a wide variety of settings.

To learn more about Indiana County Parks & Trails visit our website: www.indianacountyparks.org.