



Historical and Educational Benefits

Dr. Helen Steussy
Chair, [Healthy Communities of Henry County](#)
Feb 2004

Have you ever read Raintree County, the dramatic best seller from the 1940s set here in Henry County USA? This is the place... "which had no boundaries in time and space, where lurked musical and strange names and mythical and lost peoples, and which was itself only a name musical and strange."

Have you noticed the clock face on the FUN playground and wondered why? "For Raintree County is not the country of perishable fact. It is the country of enduring fiction. The clock in the Court House Tower on page five of the Raintree County Atlas is always fixed at nine o'clock, and it is summer and the days are long."

Or maybe you've read A Girl Named Zippy - a true story about growing up in Mooreland, Indiana. Ask Donnie Hamilton about Catherine Winters or the tales of the haunted bridges and byways of Henry County. Henry County has a richness of place that many of us overlook in our day-to-day lives. And it's this authenticity that draws people to a location. The chain stores and food places are the same here as anywhere else. We need to realize what it is that makes our place unique and worth cherishing more than anywhere else.

Our history goes back to the mound-building Indians from long ago. Does anyone think about why it's called the South Mound Cemetery? We have an Indian Mound between the New Castle High School and Baker Park. And even the triangle of land north of the high school where I played my neighborhood baseball games is an old Indian mound.

Henry County history includes the route the Conner family used between their settlement at Connersville and the now famous Conner Prairie. And how can you mention history in Henry County and not mention our most famous son, Wilbur Wright? The man who brought flight to the world started his youth as a bicycle repairman. How appropriate now to link our community to others with a bike path near his very birthplace. Our more recent history includes the heritage of manufacturing – from pianos to iron bridges to cars. Healthy Communities hopes to tie the east and the west sides of our county together with a bridge over 3 that was built in New Castle in the early 1900s. We have an old time picture of this bridge with a young boy fishing off it just like Mayberry RFD. The Raintree Trails will do more than provide a path for walking and biking. These trails will provide a journey through the history and the legends of Henry County. People who visit our trails will learn, through signs and vistas, what makes Henry County the unique and authentic place it is today. And when they realize what a special place we have, the visitors will want to return and our families will have a place they want to stay.

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Economic Benefits

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"We're all out of biscuits!"

That's when I realized the economic benefits of trails for a community. I was on a week long bike ride through rural Indiana with my daughter, Alex. We are notoriously slow bike riders, so in this group of 500 bikers we were often the last to show up at the Mom and Pop cafes located along the bike routes. And we always heard the same answers - out of biscuits, home made pies, fresh pasta.

Not that they hadn't been warned. The organizers of this bike ride knew that many people bike to eat and they would warn each cafe owner to make extra food on the days our ride was coming through. Imagine the face on that restaurant owners face when they were told, "You will have 400-500 HUNGRY bike riders coming by your cafe between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. on June 20." We would give them enough business for a year in that one afternoon.

And even more beneficial, many of the bike riders would return at later times to enjoy these special places with friends and family. Being at the intersection of State Road 3 and Interstate 70 has advantages and disadvantages. One disadvantage is that cars zipping by at 70 miles per hour may not notice the charms of a local deli or shop.

A renovated downtown alone may not bring people back. We need a way to slow people down so they can notice the pleasures to be found off the highway. A system of bike trails centered on downtown New Castle can be that final touch that puts together the downtown renovation efforts. Restore the Castle Theater. Build a new library. Get new shops and cafes down near the lovely Arts Park. And then connect it all with a series of biking and walking trails and you have a real place to live and visit. Is it only an advantage to the Mom and Pop businesses? I'd say no. Bryan Coates, head of the EDC is one of the first to recognize that having trails in our community helps sell us as a livable location – the kind of place people want to live and locate their businesses. Trails may not bring in the mega factories, but these kinds of amenities, parks and an active art scene can attract the smaller, information-based businesses of the future. Look at the Monon Trail. Talk to the mayor of Indianapolis and he will tell you that the Indy Greenways is the best thing they've got going for Indianapolis. When they are wooing new investors and new businesses to the Indy area, the Monon is the top highlight they are sure to show new prospects.

Building trails is one of the best things we could do to encourage economic development in New Castle and Henry County. Just be sure to make more biscuits!

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Environmental Benefits

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I grew up in New Castle, just one block from Chrysler High School, and I never knew the gentle trill of a bluebird or the fascinating rattle of a kingfisher. I had never seen a meadowlark or a bobolink except in a coloring book my Mom bought me. Now I know that bluebirds, kingfishers, meadowlarks and more hover right outside the borders of our town. Of course, when I grew up there were empty lots everywhere – right on Parkview drive was the meadow with the wild strawberries. And somewhere down in Castle Hills Drive was the frog and tadpole pond.

Many kids these days have lost that easy connection with nature. When schoolkids visit our land in Westwood they are often unfamiliar with the simplest aspects of the natural world. One little girl didn't even know that the bright yellow flowers and the "puff balls" were both called dandelions.

The Indianapolis trails system, including the Monon Trail, have a motto – Bringing Neighborhoods to Nature. You see, these trails are more than strips of asphalt. Many communities call their trails Greenways or linear parks. The trails are a corridor for wildlife. Lined by native trees and wildflowers, they provide a pathway for wildlife free from the lawnmower, plow and car.

In the past Henry County was composed of small family farms each separated by a hedgerow of trees and shrubs. These linear paths provided home for birds and butterflies throughout the year. Now the farms have grown and the hedgerows have faded away.

Our birds are hungry for shelter, berries, and a place to raise their young. Where can a caterpillar make his cocoon safe to develop into a beautiful butterfly? Researchers have discovered that wildlife diminishes in parks that are set like islands in a landscape. Parks need to be connected by corridors of greenspace so the animals can move from site to site.

All over the country linear parks are being promoted as the best way to provide natural space for wildlife. And the trails provide a way for our citizens, especially our children, to meet the bluebirds and the butterflies that also call Henry County their home.



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Social Benefits

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I see my parents age and their world slowly contracts. As I was growing up our home was bustling with kids and neighbors. When we kids left home a circle of activity left my parents. No more PTA meetings or school events. They were no longer as connected with the high school band, theater or sports. Then Dad retired from his years at the hospital – less connections. As more and more friends make the obituary page my parents' lives have become emptier still. Now they can go days with no more interaction than each other and the television.

I've discovered by watching how people age how important social connections are to people. Our communities need that third space – not home, not work – where people can interact on a casual level. We need to treasure our current public spaces like the New Castle Parks and Memorial Park and we need to find new ways to bring people together.

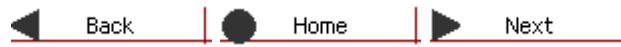
I once heard then mayor of Indianapolis, Stephen Goldsmith, extolling the wonderful Indianapolis Trail System. He often said it was the best thing he did in his tenure as mayor of our capital city. And he talked about how the trails bring the city "social capital." Trails bring people of all walks of life together –walking, riding bikes, pushing strollers, etc... And there is something about trails that creates an open atmosphere where people talk and visit. At a mall people may focus on the shops and displays, but on the trails there is more personal interaction.

Some developments in the east for older Americans have recognized the need to bring older people out of their homes to interact. They require sidewalks and a central post office so people have a way to get to know each other. Front porches are a necessity for people waving to their neighbors.

And socialization isn't just for the elderly. I read a wonderful speech by the Mayor of Bogotá, a man who "led the transformation of his city's attitude from one of negative hopelessness to one of pride and hope." This man truly believed in the need for cities and communities to protect their pedestrian park spaces.

In the speech he said, "If only children had as much public space as cars most cities in the world would become marvelous." This man led his city in the creation of more than 1300 parks. They invested in water and sewer systems. But beyond education "we didn't have a higher priority than public pedestrian spaces: pedestrian streets, sidewalks, greenways, bicycle paths, metropolitan parks, neighborhood parks and plazas. Spaces for people but above all, spaces that demonstrate respect for the more vulnerable of society's members:

the poor, the old and the children."



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Health Benefits

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Ask your doctor! I did, and every doctor I've talked to in Henry County acknowledges the people of Henry County are too sedentary. What does that mean? We don't move enough.

And it shows.

Our rate of obesity is high even for Indiana and we see the health consequences every day. Henry County has a very high rate of stroke and heart disease. And one of the best ways to prevent these illnesses is pure and simple exercise. The treatment is inexpensive and easy. It just takes a pair of comfortable shoes and a place to walk.

Did you know cancer is also related to increased obesity. Breast cancer and colon cancer, both seen way too often in Henry County, are associated with obesity. All over the country we are seeing increased Type 2 Diabetes due to the increasing obesity of our population. The side effects of this diabetes can be devastating from loss of eyesight to foot ulcers and even amputation.

How can you prevent diabetes and lessen the consequences if you already have it? Exercise. So often we see women suffering from the consequences of weakened bones from osteoporosis. A simple fall can end up with a broken hip and the need for a major operation. Many women have exquisite back pain –from the fractured vertebrae in their backs from osteoporosis.

What can prevent osteoporosis? Would you guess weight-bearing exercise like walking helps build bone structure and prevent these devastating fractures? Arthritis causes so much pain as people struggle with simple life tasks. Again as prevention exercise helps keep the weight off of your knees and feet helping prevent the development of arthritis.

Sleep problems? Every hospital I visit is now adding sleep labs as we recognize the effects of sleep disorders among our population. And every lecturer I hear mentions that most sleep disorders could be prevented by losing weight.

Exercise helps lift depression.

Exercise can bring people together for positive social interactions. And what is the most effective way to get a sedentary person to begin to exercise? Simple walking. Maybe a mile, maybe just half a mile to start.

And medical research has even shown what a community needs to get more people walking. We need a place to walk that is:

1. Attractive
2. Convenient
3. Safe

Now I love Baker Park and it warms my heart to see all those people walking past the FUN playground getting their exercise. But medical statistics show we are not walking enough. So let's add to the wonderful amenities of this community by adding a trail, maybe a series of interconnecting trails. And give everyone a new place to walk, to ride, to rollerblade and to enjoy the beautiful outdoors of Henry County.



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