

Thousand Steps view is worth the effort

By GARRISON CROW
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After a gruelling trek up the Thousand Steps trail, an underestimation of the total, there is nothing quite like taking in the views of Juniata River Valley for miles in both directions.

The trail was built early in the 20th century so Harbison-Walker Refractories workers could get to the large supply of ganister rock which resides on the top of the mountain.

The company also built a narrow-gauge railroad track to the top of the mountain so the stones could be brought back down by the ton. The old stone engine house still stands on the top of the Thousand Steps and is itself worth the hike to see.

Those taking the hike should be aware of the challenge they face — it's no leisurely stroll. There are actually 1,043 steps rising to an elevation of 1,715 feet. But do not feel bad for the quarrymen who had to take a daily hike up the steps to get to work. Back in 1921, they got 17-21 cents per ton of rock they moved each day. That's equivalent to \$2.16 to \$2.67 today. The workers averaged 15-20 tons of rock per person to be loaded onto the railcar taking the stone down the mountain.

The only pay hikers get now is the good feeling of pushing oneself hard and the scenic views at the top of the trail.

Thankfully, every 100th step is numbered, so hikers can get a sense of their progress as they traverse the rugged and irregularly cut stone steps.

For those who make the summit, beautiful views of the entire valley await. Once at the top of the steps, those who go right and follow the trail will get a bird's eye view of Mount Union. Those who go left will find the old engine house and a view of Mill Creek with the Juniata River flowing into it.

While not for the faint of heart, there are many other

trails connecting into the Thousand Steps.

"The Thousand Steps is part of the Standing Stone Trail system," Matt Price executive director of the Huntingdon County Visitors Bureau, said. "The Standing Stone Trail connects Cowans Gap State Park in the south to Greenwood Furnace State Park in the north. At Cowans Gap, it connects to the Tuscarora Trail and at Greenwood it connects with the Greenwood spur of the Midstate Trail."

Combined, these trails form part of the Great Eastern Trail. The latter trail system is a large network of trails which, when completed, will parallel the Appalachian Trail from Florida to New York a little more to the west.

The president of the Standing Stone Trail Club, James Garthe, explained the draw the trail may have for hiking buffs coming to the area.

"It's a big deal in the hiking community because it gives long-distance hikers a new route to try and it has its own beauty different from the Appalachian Trail. It's being formed right now," he said.

Price echoed this idea and put it in a national perspective.

"There are trails being developed all over the country, but the Great Eastern Trail is going to be one of the next most popular long-haul backpacking trails," Price said. "The Appalachian Trail has been in existence and has been used a long time, and what people are finding is that the trail is starting to feel a little overused. There is a need for a parallel network of trails."

And one part of that trail system will be Huntingdon's own 77.6-mile Standing Stone Trail, and part of that Standing Stone Trail is the Thousand Steps.

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