



Six days on the rail trail

Plenty of interesting sights to see – and people to meet – on the long walk from Guelph to Goderich

STORY AND PHOTOS BY PAUL BOREHAM

Boots were laced up, the tent and sundry items gathered, and it was out the door for a six-day walk through the heart of southwestern Ontario to the shore of Lake Huron. Blame the Guelph to Goderich Rail Trail, a 127-kilometre trek through farmland and forest dotted with a succession of quaint towns and villages. I couldn't resist.

Goodbyes were said at the River Run Centre in Guelph and city paths followed to the start of the trail on Silvercreek Parkway, north of Woodlawn Road. From here, the smooth rail bed shot off like an arrow toward 12 towns on its westward run. All aboard for Ariss, West Montrose, Elmira,

Wallenstein, Linwood, Millbank, Milverton, Moncton, Walton, Blyth, Auburn and Goderich.

Canadian Pacific Railway operated the Guelph-to-Goderich line from 1907 to 1988, with passenger service ending in the early 1960s. The rails, ties and most of the stations and bridges were removed after its demise. Guelph's CPR station stood behind the war cenotaph, along Cardigan Street, until 1983. The former rail line, which is as wide as a road right-of-way (except for a short spur track leading out of Guelph), was bought by the province in 1990 for use as a possible utility corridor.

In the meantime, Wellington County and the Region of Waterloo joined hands to lease their sections of the line for use as a recreational trail. Steward groups

established the 45-kilometre Kissing Bridge Trailway from the outskirts of Guelph to Millbank by 1998. At the opposite end, the 13-kilometre Goderich to Auburn Trail was developed by the Maitland River Trail group. These have become finely dressed with stone chips and run as smooth as silk through the countryside.

The 70-km stretch in the middle, however, through Perth and part of Huron counties, was left to the whims of the birds, the weeds and the farmers whose land butts up against it. Finally, in 2015, people arrived with work gloves and a dream.

A trail group called G2G Rail Trail Inc. is working with established groups to oversee completion of the whole trail, including developing the neglected stretch. The volunteer-based charitable organization

envisions a world-class pedestrian corridor to Lake Huron.

A major hurdle was crossed in 2015 when the province granted G2G available leases and permission to build the trail through Perth and Huron. But with new bridge installations estimated to cost \$3 million, it's a large task. Members are busy planning and raising funds to bring the old rail route back to life. Part of my mission was to view its progress.

Day 1

The destination for Day 1 was West Montrose Family Camp, 15 km down the line on the Kissing Bridge section. It wasn't long before bikes started passing, and families eyed my large backpack with curiosity. The smooth, wide path lined with woods dipped down to a swampy area, where a creek trickled under a small bridge. I knew this would be the extent of hills on the former railway line; it would be straight and level most of the way.

In Ariss, a small donkey and two horned goats shyly approached a rustic fence as if to welcome me. It was one of those days where black clouds threaten one minute and sunshine bursts through the next and ricochets light all around.

Past Ariss, nature came alive. Yellow gold-enrods painted the sides of the trail in long swaths, mixed with Queen Anne's lace and a variety of flowers, short and tall. Shrubs drooped with berries and wild grapevines with their deep purple fruit. Apple trees were loaded with tasty fruit. The sounds of crickets and cicadas buzzed and ticked while butterflies flitted, grasshoppers jumped and birds winged back and forth.

Nearing the Grand River, rain started to fall and all I could do was step under a tree, put on my Tilley hat and wait.

The bridge over the Grand was out, so I followed steps up to a road, past a backyard chicken coop overflowing with hens, and turned at Wellington Road 86. At the highway bridge, cars and trucks

whipped by like missiles on a deadly mission. Upriver, the cement piers that once supported the rail bridge stood naked and forlorn.

The campground was downriver, and my campsite was next to the riverbank, with the famous covered Kissing Bridge looming across the lowland.

As darkness settled in, I heard the clip-clopping of a horse and buggy and saw its shadowy form across the river, guided by a small light. It transported me to another time and filtered into my dreams.

Day 2

Dawn light streamed over the floodplain and licked part of the red bridge as I ate breakfast and packed up. This would be a long day, 30 km to Anna Mae's Bakery and Restaurant in Millbank.

Wellington Road 86 was choked with cars heading to workplaces as I turned back to the trail, free from commitments as I headed for Elmira. This was another

popular section as several bikes passed – one with fishing gear. Fields spread out beyond my little ribbon. The corn was tall, healthy and in full tassel while elsewhere stubbly fields remained from the wheat harvest a couple of weeks earlier. Vegetable patches were squared-out here and there, with farmhouses and barns right behind.

Mid-morning, I relaxed on a bench in downtown Elmira, sipping coffee and chatting with an elderly lady as the odd horse and buggy wheeled by on the street. I was now in Mennonite Country.

Elmira residents have spruced up their section of trail with a line of trees dedicated to loved ones, with several from the Martin clan. I followed these out of town. At the outskirts, a man and two young girls were busy putting worms on their hooks off a small bridge.

Every couple of kilometres, the trail came to a crossroad with a stop sign, and a metal gate to keep vehicles out. Nearing Wallenstein, one of these gates was adorned

by Mennonite children whiling away the morning. A little girl, wearing a purple dress, scarf and fancy shoes, shyly darted away, returning after I gave a wave. Two boys wore suspenders; one had a straw hat. I felt as if these three beaming faces were the welcoming committee for the area.

Arriving in Wallenstein, an enterprising person had put out a cooler full of soda pop – \$1 each – below a small hill. At the top, I stood at the corner of the busy highway as a horse and wagon carrying workmen turned in front of me, complete with clinking sounds, the hard rolling wheels and the clip-clopping. I started to reach for my camera, but I couldn't destroy the moment.

Lunch awaited at the general store across the road.

With the bridge out across the Conestogo River, a short detour led along the highway and turned onto a gravel road. At the trailhead, a family was just returning from a hike and they regaled me with travel stories and chit chat. They kindly topped up my

water bottle and I was off again.

The way to Linwood passed many farms and I could hear the distinct sound of a generator outside one barn. Colourful clothes flapped on lines outside quiet homesteads. The path continued wide and carpeted with small stones. Once in town, I found a bench near the library and snoozed.

Linwood's general store and restaurant was just a short walk away. The young women who took my order and cooked my hamburger spoke in an exotic dialect that was probably Pennsylvania Dutch. As I walked back to the trail, licking an ice cream cone, someone shouted from their porch, "Would you like to buy a horse?" Chuckling, I told him I wouldn't know how to operate it.

The stone chips on the trail suddenly ended about an hour out of Linwood, and a grass and earth path took its place. Small ruts lined the path. Through a dappled forest, the light turned a golden colour

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and a hush descended on the scene. As I approached the next sideroad, I turned and saw the form of a horse and buggy coming up slowly behind me. I felt compelled to ask them if I could take their picture.

The cook from the Linwood restaurant was driving, with two other women by her side. They were heading home. "We don't like people taking our picture," she said. "But you're welcome to when we pass." And so I did, and watched them trot up the road and turn up the long driveway to their farm, wondering all the while what their life was like.

As I continued toward Millbank, a teenaged girl, walking barefoot, passed and offered a warm hello. A few minutes later I was standing on a large bridge on Millbank's doorstep, looking down on a stream seven or more metres below.

This new pedestrian bridge was installed in 2014 through the leadership of G2G, and it's the start of the effort to reconnect the 13 towns along the former railway line. People

can now walk or ride in and out of Millbank instead of taking a detour along roads.

The fact that there was a huge wind turbine planted at the back of Anna Mae's Bakery did not register any warnings in my mind when I asked permission to camp there for the night at the edge of a pasture field. The rotating propeller screeched at two-second intervals, softly at first but intensifying a hundred-fold during the night as I tried to sleep directly below it.

Day 3

Anna Mae's breakfast special fired me up for the start of Day 3.

Millbank marked the end of the Kissing Bridge section. The G2G organization had just begun clearing the 70 km of rail bed from there to Auburn, installing signs at crossroads. I knew it was going to be rough-going through this section.

Maps of the route, showing detours, were available on G2G's website, so I had these close at hand. But I planned to push

through as much as possible. Perth County lay ahead, with a 20-km hike through Milverton, ending at Moncton. The new sections are named after the counties they run through, with the first section called Perth Harvest Pathway.

Right off, a short detour around an overgrown patch led to a brand new G2G trail sign, then it was westward bound, straight as an arrow. Here it started more like a wagon trail, with the original gravel bed lining the ruts.

At the next crossroad, a trail sign showed a detour route. I pushed on, however, even wriggling through a series of makeshift barbed wire fences. Someone, or something, had been using the trail. The vegetation was clipped short and the impressions of the railway ties were clearly visible. After a small woodlot, I found out why when I encountered a flock of sheep. The band of munchers was agitated by my presence and I felt like an intruder as I slipped through a gate.

A closed sign greeted me at the next crossroad as well. This time I went on tentatively. The land receded sharply below the rail bed and, within moments, I came to a full stop at the concrete lip of a bridge abutment. A small river wound below. I marvelled at the wide gap missing from the rail bed, where a bridge once stood. I scrambled down the bank and hopped across the river to the road on the other side.

A fence blocked the way ahead so I followed roads into Milverton. A small table and chair were waiting for me outside the general store. The day was heating up, so the shady spot was appreciated.

Heading on from Milverton, the path was rough and weedy, but it was walkable ... that is, until about halfway to Moncton.

At a crossroad, the next section of rail bed disappeared completely among shrubs and weeds. A G2G trail sign suggested a detour, but a voice inside barked at me to keep going.

My body became a magnet for burrs. Nearing the end of this section, I resorted

to walking along the first row of a cornfield. Trying the rail hump again, a groundhog hole toppled me to the ground and I had to laugh. Finally, I got a soaker hopping over a stream to the next road. The next several minutes were spent on my bum, picking out all the burrs.

The good news was that from there, the trail improved markedly, with scenery stretching forever across farm fields and past the odd herd of cattle. The plains of Perth County were, indeed, flat as a pancake. It was mesmerizing.

In Moncton, I had arranged to set up the tent on a resident's property at the edge of town, but I was early and relaxed in Lions Park for a few hours. It was a good place to recuperate.

Day 4

I packed up early and made my way through the paved streets of Moncton to the park, with a stop at the general store. Day 4 was another 20-km hike, ending at

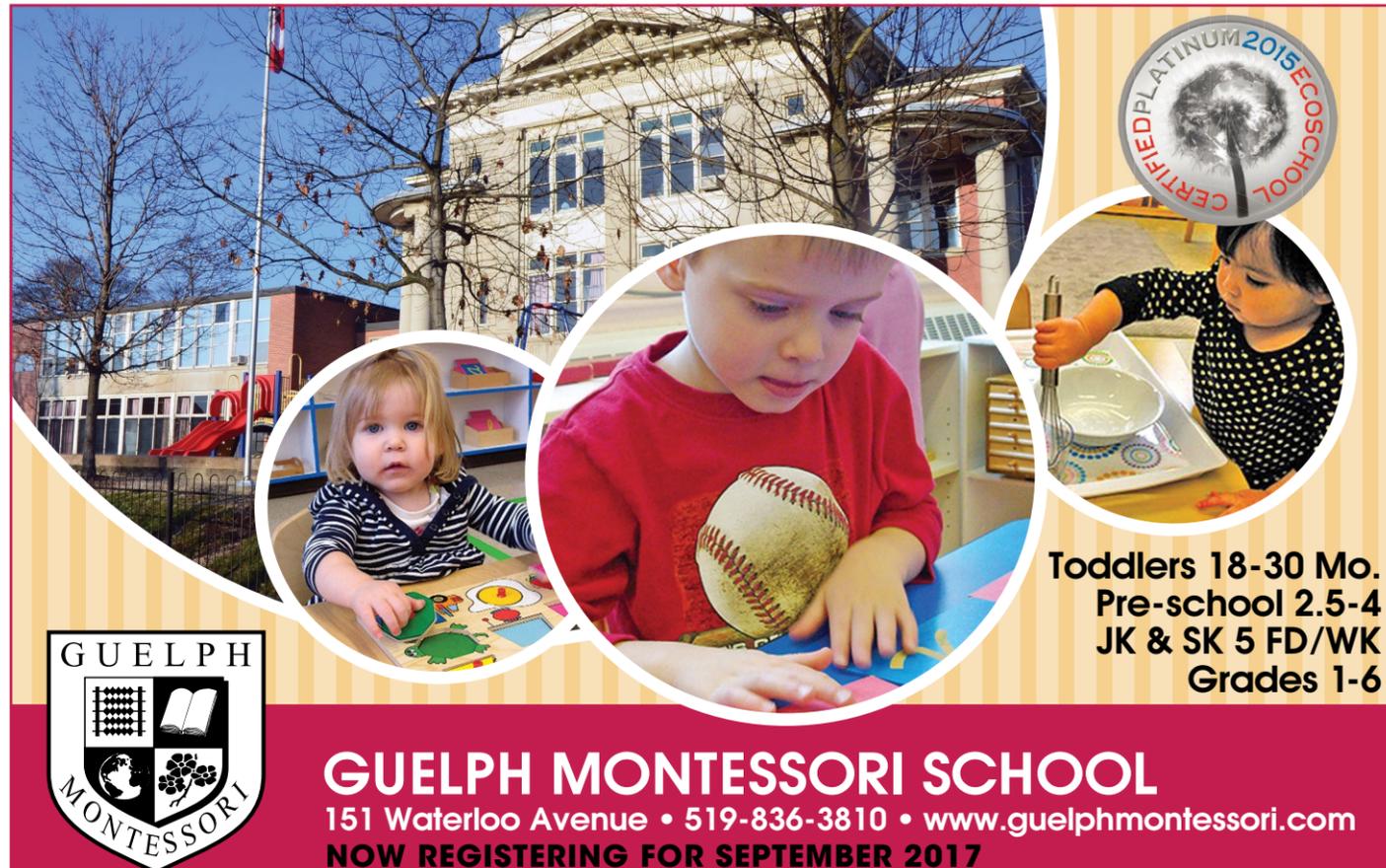
the small hamlet of Walton. There were no towns along the way.

The rail bed was visible at the edge of the park as I enjoyed a leisurely breakfast.

The path led smoothly out of town and progressed to wildness. Tall, dew-covered grass surrounded bald ruts obviously made by ATVs. Dogwood shrubs crowded the path and thickets of trees speckled the sides. Fields rolled out in a never-ending sea of green, punctuated by farm buildings and silos.

Across two intersections, the path became one with the surrounding farm fields before entering an avenue of corn planted against the railway hump. Near the county line, I came to a stretch of railway bed cleared of all vegetation, obviously the start of the trail group's efforts.

G2G petitioned Huron and Perth counties to adopt their respective trail sections as the counties along the Kissing Bridge portion have done. With no success, the group has taken the task on itself.



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Goderich Marina

Rolling along on the new section, the Lake Huron Route, an image of the “left to the birds” stretch was developing. The abandoned railway bed was an obstacle for farmers. In many areas, right-of-way fencing was gone, crops crowded the hump and large machinery used the bed as a laneway. In areas that were left alone, vegetation had firmly taken root, and some of these kept me busy tip-toeing through poison ivy.

The flat landscape slowly bubbled into wavy hills. After a long spell hiking in full sun, a line of tall evergreen trees swallowed me in its shady bosom. The path had been scraped and had an uncharacteristically smooth layer of earth. It was a perfect spot to set my pack down, take off my boots and socks, and lie on the cool ground.

As Walton neared, the path was lined with stone chips and the rail bed shot inside an extensive forest area. Swampy pools lay in pockets and an inviting quarry pond lay off to the right side like a sparkling gem.

In Walton, I had arranged to set up the tent at the Walton Raceway, owned by Chris Lee, an executive G2G member. As I connected with him by phone, two black pigs came running and squealing out onto the trail and racing like crazy ahead. My heart beat fast as the thought of wild boars came quickly to mind. But no, I learned later they had escaped their pen at a nearby farm.

When I arrived at Lee’s farmhouse next to the raceway, a storm was brewing and he

quickly offered me a trailer for the night. He also invited me to a supper for raceway employees, celebrating the completion of a weeklong event. The food, beer and conversation were a treat.

Rain started banging the metal roof as I lay down to sleep, safe and dry inside.

Day 5

In the morning, I jumped into the quarry pond, washing four days of grime away. It was heaven, just like I thought. Next I stopped at the Walton Inn for breakfast, and then it was off for Blyth, the shortest hike at 13 km.

Lee strongly advised taking a short detour from Walton to the next crossroad. Some adjacent landowners have expressed trespassing, privacy and bio-security worries. I set off down a gravel road before reconnecting with the rail bed.

With only four intersections to cross, it didn’t take long to reach Blyth. The condition of the trail was improving with each step west, and the poison ivy had taken a hike. The plains were gone, replaced by gently rolling hills and pockets of woodlot. The path was well-trodden. I found out why when a young woman buzzed by on a motocross bike, wearing a helmet. She was the first human I’d seen on the trail since Millbank.

In Blyth, a comfy room at the Queens Bakery apartments was a perfect place to get organized for the last day.

Day 6

With 30 km to go, I packed up and left before dawn. The trail’s stone chips were just visible enough to show the way out of town. When the sun rose above the spreading cornfields, it beamed through the mist-laden air in a spectacular show of orange and yellow rays. It was a fitting start to the final day.

A major detour awaited near Auburn, around the upper reaches of the bridge-less Maitland River, but Lee had given instructions on how to wade across and save time. The rail bed descended slowly through thick forest into the rugged Maitland River Valley and then dipped gently down to the river.

I found the knee-deep rapid Lee had mentioned and waded across in bare feet, slowly but surely, holding my boots. The feel of the water and the joy of reaching the other side gave me a jolt of satisfaction.

A short walk led to the formal start of the well-established Goderich to Auburn Rail Trail and, suddenly, people were passing regularly again, mostly on bikes. It was as if I had arrived somewhere. The first person stopped and asked if I’d hiked all the way from Guelph. “I thought so,” he said, smiling. “How does it feel?” I didn’t know what to say. The images of horses and buggies, the gorgeous countryside and the people and small towns all flooded my mind. I felt overwhelmed -- but in a good way.

As I walked the last few kilometres, the trail was alive, vibrant and well-groomed. Five cyclists came toward me and slowed, from the Goderich way. Saddle bags were loaded up and I could feel their excitement. “We’re off to Guelph,” the leader said.

Finally, I stepped toward an opening in the trees and there shining on the horizon was the blue water of Lake Huron. About an hour later, I arrived at the shore after a long, winding descent across the Menesetung Bridge, past the marina and salt works. Waiting for me was my brother-in-law, Charlie McRae. We enjoyed ice cream cones on the crowded boardwalk before he took me home. 



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