

**MOVING FORWARD – APPRECIATING THE PAST**  
**The Original Over The Hill Gang**  
**Early 1990's to around 2005**  
**By Donna Morrison**

Around 1990, a group of West Newton area residents became interested in improving the former railroad area near the Youghiogheny River, West Newton, PA. This group of men and women, the Original over the Hill Gang (OOTHG), formed the forerunner of the Westmoreland Yough Trail Chapter (WYTC). They met weekly and gave selflessly of their time to create and improve the quality of our trail. They provided manual labor, expertise, fund raising, and often their own equipment resulting in the basis of the current trail we see today.

The purpose of this article is to pay tribute to them and to their accomplishments. By interviewing them on the phone or in person, I discovered a hard-working group of men and women who displayed vision, team-work, tenacity, and endurance unparalleled in many corporations.

According to [www.inwestmoreland.com](http://www.inwestmoreland.com) “Plans for the River Trail began in 1990. Local citizens, trail groups, and government officials led by the National Park Service formed a task force and prepared the concept plan for the YRT. In 1991, Allegheny, Fayette, and Westmoreland counties formed the non-profit Regional Trail Corporation with a mission to acquire, construct, and manage the trail.”

They wanted to transform the abandoned rail beds into a readily accessible trail for biking and walking. This group, consisting of many of the current-day members of the Westmoreland Yough Trail Chapter (WYTC), identified the means to make this happen. Meeting on an “as needed” basis, ruminating about current and projected resources, the **Original Over The Hill Gang** began a journey developing the Westmoreland County portion of the Yough River Trail. The WYTC section of the GAP, consisting of 10.5 miles of crushed limestone is visited by many local, regional, and international visitors each year and is the result of the hard work and perseverance of **The Original Over The Hill Gang**.

The efforts of the current WYTC Original Over the Hill Gang began as a committee in the early 1990's in conjunction with Downtown West Newton Inc. (DWNl) under then President Ed Collins. Jack and Marilyn Cusick, current members of the Original Over the Hill Gang (OOTHG) invited Bell Telephone to a meeting resulting in the phone company contributing monies to start the trail. John Duskey from the Charleroi Bell Telephone Company provided the public relations needed for growth and development. Also, Larry Ridenour of Allegheny County Parks and Recreation, made a presentation at the West Newton Senior Center to engender support before construction began on the trail.

Eventually the WYTC and DWNl split into two groups. WYTC members began meeting at Cedar Creek Park. During the transition, Dave Hamilton served as President. As time went on, Dave's interest shifted towards Trail maintenance, and Rowan Reid assumed the position of first WYTC President. Other OOTHG Presidents include Ron Bobby, Harry Morrison, and Carol Bobby.

Jack Cusick, the first Membership Chair and first Treasurer of the WYTC, coined the name "Westmoreland Yough Trail Chapter." According to Dave Hamilton, "Jack set the foundation for the WYTC." Around 1991, an informational meeting was advertised in the local West Newton newspaper (Times Sun) about the new bike trail. Rowan Reid said that he and Mary Reid attended the McKeesport meeting. Jack and Marilyn Cusick, Caz and Terry Liszewski, and Dave and Dot Hamilton (among others) attended the West Newton meeting and encouraged others to join. Ralph and Cindy Sprague, the original owners of The West Newton Bike Shop, provided support and leadership for trail development. Ralph and Cindy were the first Poker Run Chairpersons. (Jack and Marilyn Cusick assumed the position as Chairs for many years, followed by Ron and Carol Bobby.)

The West Newton section of the GAP continued to grow due to its dedicated volunteers, county and state officials, and local companies. According to Ron Bobby, in 1994, the Trail ran from Cedar Creek to West Newton. Larry Ridenour contacted Westmoreland County to secure funding to clear the trail. Also, Larry arranged for a group of unemployed workers to clean the railroad Right-of-Way. Caz Liszewski and Ed Collins organized the first work party. Larry brought string

mowers. Members of the OOTHG contributed in many ways. Rick Bianchi gave his time and use of his personal equipment (backhoe) to clear the trail. Rick's employer supported his efforts with additional funds. Rowan Reid said "work was done early in the week and was not a weekend thing." Bill Kretchun, (now deceased) with Jack Prpich, Paul Hamilton, Al Moore, Franklin Reese, Jim Ritenour, John Moran, Joe Harash Sr., and Blair Hayduk were regular workers on the trail. Caz Liszewski said "people took it on their own to volunteer because they felt it was their civic responsibility if the trail was to succeed." He continued "the biggest factor for the trail's success was its volunteers." "The retirees were interested in their community, and something to do," according to Rick Bianchi.

The OOTHG identified some of the early obstacles and challenges such as funding, equipment, and volunteers. ISTEA was a significant source of federal funding for roads and bridges, parks and recreation initiatives. According to Chapter 10: Funding Sources, <http://atfiles.org/files/pdf/bikepedfundMD.pdf> "ISTEA (the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act) in 1992, is now viewed as the federal Act that initiated a major policy shift in federal funding priorities making federal funds much more accessible for state and local bicycling and walking facilities and programs." Bob McKinley wrote grants and secured funding from this source (and others). Also, State Senator James Mandarino secured state monies for trail cleaning and development.

A continuing problem was that "the rail bed needed to be cleared of debris. There were old tires and garbage all around the trail, which consisted of ballasts" according to Dave Hamilton. Dave had extensive mining experience and was skilled at re-directing water and improving the composition and formation of the trail. Rick Bianchi commented "cleaning drains alongside the Trail was a problem." Jack Cusick was in charge of Right of Ways. Caz Liszewski mailed letters requesting people to clean the trail. Caz commented "the biggest problem was informing local people of the challenges and getting them to work." Harry Morrison added "washouts were common. Rick Bianchi was instrumental in bringing equipment such as backhoes, and flat beds, or anything else necessary to get the job done. There was no schedule for maintenance as it exists today. The OOTHG found the equipment needed to accomplish a task, and Rick Bianchi gave

selflessly of his time and technical skills to make major improvements.” Also, as part of maintenance, trail usage information was gathered by placing counters along the trail. Rick Bianchi and Harry Morrison performed these tasks in the beginning.

As the Trail progressed, the Regional Trail Corporation (RTC) hired its first Manager in 1994, Bob McKinley. According to Caz Liszewski, Bob “made it happen. He was creative and energetic and loved working with local, regional and state personnel to identify grants and to write grant proposals for the Trail.” Bob loved to reach out to Harrisburg for resources and was successful in securing grant funds of \$22,000 for the first tractor. Bob McKinley and Larry Ridenour were Trail Pioneers! Bob worked closely with contractors who were responsible for a specific section of the trail.

According to Mary and Rowan Reid “the fascinating thing was that the OOTHG was a unique collection of people from all walks of life and backgrounds who never in a million years would have run across each other, and certainly never have had a ‘common denominator’ before meeting ‘on the trail.’ Case in point, at the time, Jack Cusick was a recent retiree from Bell Telephone; Rick Bianchi, a skilled mechanic, was retired from IBM; Dave Hamilton was a retired miner; Caz Liszewski retired as a mechanical engineer from Westinghouse; and Bill Kretchun retired from West Penn Power. Ron Bobby was still working as an educator, Rowan Reid was working in sales for the heavy duty trucking industry, and Harry Morrison was still employed at a local college as a Computer Science professor.”

Others commented that “the Gang infused its synergy, diverse skill set, camaraderie, and drive for a common purpose. The members became good friends.” Caz Liszewski reminds us that using the GAP-WYTC Trail is free. This is not the case in other states.

Also, the OOTHG women were instrumental in leadership and support roles throughout the Trail’s development. They orchestrated fund raising events such as the yearly Poker Run, provided cookies, and worked side by side with the men during trail clean-up. Some served in leadership positions, such as Carol Bobby (President, VP, Secretary, and Poker Run Chairperson- with her husband Ron), Mary Reid (Secretary), Dorothy Hamilton (Poker Run), Carol Bianchi (Secretary),

Marilyn Cusack (Secretary) and Terry Liszewski (Trail monitor Chairperson since 2000), and Donna Morrison (Poker Run). All worked on the Poker Run. Kim Beadling was the first secretary.

The WYTC would like to acknowledge the **Original Over The Hill Gang** and thank them for their 20+ years of service!

**Rick and Carol Bianchi**

**Ron and Carol Bobby**

**Jack and Marilyn Cusick**

**Dave and Dorothy Hamilton**

**Paul Hamilton**

**Joe Harash Sr.**

**Caz and Terry Liszewski**

**Bill Kretchun**

**Bob McKinley**

**Al Moore**

**John Moran**

**Harry and Donna Morrison**

**Jack Prpich**

**Franklin Reese**

**Rowan and Mary Reid**

**Jim Ritenour**