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Interview with Phil Samuell

Maggie Higby

Phil Samuell

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Interviewer: Maggie Higby

Interviewee: Phil Samuell

Date: Thursday, January 26th, 10:00am

Place: Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Depot, Mt Vernon, Ohio

Maggie Higby: So, our project is on, uh, rural life and community life in Knox County. And, uh, there are fourteen of us in the class and we've each been assigned a place - or a space - in Knox County that is particularly meaningful, we thought. Um, so things like the Alcove, um...uh, post offices, the Woodward, um...uh, Friday Night Football games is one space. Ah...

Phil Samuell: The bike trail's a great spot.

MH: Yeah, the bike trail is one.

PS: It is a nice space.

MH: Yeah. So, um...we're - it's going to culminate in an exhibit that will go up in the Buckeye Candy Building -

PS: Okay.

MH: -which you'll be invited to...um, we have a - someone working with us to design the space, and we'll each do a panel. That's sort of a, uh, profile of each of these spaces with pictures and a short blurb about it and quotes from the community.

PS: Okay. I have lots of pictures.

MH: Great. Oh yeah, that would be really useful. Are they in jpeg form or are they a - ?

PS: Whatever you want.

MH: Okay.

PS: In my former life I'm a photographer.

MH: Okay...yeah, thus the picture that I found online.

PS: Oh yeah. Yeah.

MH: Yeah, okay. So let me just...introduce ourselves. I'm Maggie Higby, um...it's January 26th, 2012, a little past 10 am, interviewing Phil Samuell, who was the former chairman of Kokosing Gap Trail, Incorporated. Is that right?

PS: Yes.

MH: So, I understand that you were sort of the brains behind the gap trail. How did -

PS: There's a guy in town who calls me the "father" of the gap trail.

MH: The father of the gap trail!

PS: And since he hired me - he's a Kenyon graduate - he says, "I'm the grandfather of the gap trail." He says I hired you here. Um...

MH: So, how did you decide to do that project?

PS: I went to the county commissioners, and said, "We need to convert this space into something useable...um, it's collecting trash -" It was an abandoned railroad right away, the tracks were gone, the bridges still existed. Um...but people would just go down and throw their stoves or, you know, it was - it was not being used and anybody could buy it. And I said, "We need to turn it into a useable space. A linear park." And...at the time I went to the county commissioners, I didn't know that there was an organization that was devoted to just such projects. But I quickly found out that there was. Rails to Trails. And one county commissioner named Richard Mavis, who's now the mayor of Mount Vernon, he could visualize what this was going to be. And a lot of people have trouble

visualizing something that could be. But he had no trouble doing that, and really embraced it. And he and I took this project on. The other two county commissioners were - eh...one was against it. But, three people, all you need is two votes. So I had the two votes, and we could move forward. So we found out there was money available. When you buy gasoline, you pay a federal tax on every gallon you buy. And state tax. And so, some of that federal gasoline sales tax money was being used for alternative transportation projects...bike trails. So, we tapped into that fund. Because Knox County is not a rich county, we would not be able to afford to buy the property and pave it. So Mr. Mavis and I tackled this on. And it was hard going. Um...

MH: Because the community was not supportive, or -?

PS: Well, the community had a hard time visualizing. Um...adjacent landowners had a real hard time. They said, "That property belongs to me." And, you know, "People are going to trespass," and "My cattle are going to be raped," and - oh yeah, we heard everything. We heard every imaginable excuse not to do this project. But we forced ahead. One landowner even sued to stop us. Yeah...and he lost. Um, I mean it does take people who are visionary who can say, "Yeah, I think this is going to be good." And as I say, a lot of people have a hard time visualizing it, but now that it's built, people have come up to me and said, "You know, I was opposed to this project, but I think this is the best thing that ever happened to Knox County." I've had that come to me many times. Now, I didn't know what to expect on usage. I was not a park person, I was not a bike person, um...So we got this built, and I was head of this non-profit group that maintained it, raised the money. The county didn't have any to put into it. Um...so I raised the money and we would - we bought chainsaws, we bought mowing equipment, you know, and we maintained this trail. We bought a pick-up truck that - to carry our crap around, um...And there - there were people who were using the trail who would say, "I'd like to donate to that." So we could raise money from users and others, um, to maintain this property - this long, skinny park. Um, and so we even built a maintenance building, it's down in Gambier, next to the caboose. It's got all the chainsaws, all the equipment that we maintain the trail with is in there. And, um...that's how it got started. And then I was spending enormous amounts of time -

MH: With maintenance, or -?

PS: Oh yeah. Every weekend. Yeah, tell my wife, "I'll be down at the trail." That didn't go over well. I mean, after awhile I was just down there so much - uh, I was putting in hundreds and hundreds of hours of work. And so she finally said, "This is really not good." And so I gave it up.

MH: Mm-hmm. Did you pass the baton? There's now a new chairman?

PS: Yeah.

MH: Who is -?

PS: Randy Cronk. He teaches at the Nazarene. He's a professor. He was on the board, he was the vice president so...okay, Randy, time to step up. Um...but during my tenure we built the restroom in Gambier, raised the money, we built it; built that maintenance building. I thought we needed a steam locomotive, I went out and got the money, moved one. And it's become a popular thing to climb on and, you know, kids love it. A lot of the kids now don't know what steam locomotives are. And now they can go down and climb on one. Feel it. To me, that locomotive's like a piece of sculpture, so...climb away. And I promoted that trail quite a bit, I mean, I would go to conferences and -

MH: Before it was built or -?

PS: Before – uh, while it was built. Oh yeah. Rails to Trails would have conferences, they'd ask me to speak, so I'd go. Um...

MH: And how did that go over? Were people enthusiastic?

PS: Yeah. Yeah. The mayor and I – he's the mayor now – the commissioner. We were invited by other towns and counties; "Come speak to us, how do we get one of these?" So we would go and give our advice – our experience, really – to these other communities so that they could do this too. Um...it's turned out to be a great project. It's well-used. Well-used. And I like, sometimes, just to go down and watch people using it.

MH: Do you yourself use it?

PS: I used to. I – I inline skated. And the woman I work for, Ariel, she also skates. And so we would skate ten miles a day. And it was critical that we went out and skated.

MH: So that's the majority of the trail...?

PS: Yeah we would go from Gambier up to Howard – a little bit further – and back. Uh, the Mount Vernon end is well-used. So we would skate that way, although that's my favorite section of the trail, to go to Mount Vernon. Um...and then I noticed around Kenyon – Kenyon's campus that the bike shelters were getting mighty full. And I think the reason why was the trail. Students stop by that thing and they'd say, "Oh I'll bring my bike back." And those things are jammed now.

MH: Mm-hmm. Yeah, yeah, it gets very full, I can tell you – around Kenyon, anyway.

PS: Yeah it's a great place to go. I mean, you can just hop on your bike and go off into Knox County. It's beautiful. Um, and it's quiet. If you've had a stressful day you can bike off your stress or skate off your stress or run off your stress. Um...so it's been a good project. And I'm glad I did it. And then the mayor said, "Maybe we should do this." Because he knew I could get things done. So, I took this one on. And now I'm working on another park.

MH: Oh, in Mount Vernon?

PS: Yeah, I'll show you.

MH: Oh, that'd be great. Um...so, when you, uh, you said you have to be visionary to imagine this sort of thing. When – before it was built – did you have hopes of what it would do for the community?

PS: No. I had no idea. I thought this was a space that could be used by the public. I didn't know how much it would be used. Ten people a week? Ten people a day?

MH: So how did it exceed your expectations now that it's built?

PS: Blew them out of the water. Um...my expectations were low. Um, I mean I wanted to provide a really nice park. Well-maintained, flowers popping up in the spring, picnic shelters, water fountains, restrooms...uh, an easy place to park if you have to drive to it. Um...just to make it easy for the user to have a great experience for an hour or so.

MH: Mm-hmm. Um, so now that it is a central part of the Knox County community, really, how do you feel it enhances the community life?

PS: Well, it's like this park I'm working on. You always – I think the price to be on earth is to leave it a little better than you found it. Um...so, I think it has truly enhanced the quality of life. If you're an outdoor person, you like to walk or skate or jog, this is a safe, good place to do it. We've got water down there, I put in wheelchair charging outlets for people who are in wheelchairs, they can charge up their electric wheelchair and go off. Um...we've got restrooms, you know, the amenities, very basic; I mean, we don't have a

lot of money. Uh...so I think it – it's truly enhanced the quality of life for people in Knox County. Or for people who come to visit. Um...we get a lot of out-of-town visitors to the trail. And that has a lot of effect on the economy. I mean, people will come and stay a night. There are people in this world who do nothing but bike trails, so they plan their vacations around bike trails. So, when they come here they stay all night, they do the trail, and they move on to the next one. So that happens. Um...I mean, I don't think we're infringing on anybody's rights. I mean, if I'm on skates I don't get off the trail. I don't trespass. [laughs] Come on! Um...and all the fears that people had, they didn't come true.

MH: That's nice. Yeah, it must be nice to hear people say, "I thought it was a bad idea but now I'm so happy that it's done."

PS: Yeah. Yeah it's nice.

MH: Um, was there any sort of opening ceremony when it was first built.

PS: I don't think so. We did it in two parts. We did it from Mount Vernon to Gambier; we bought the entire railway, and then for construction – because we didn't know what to expect, how to maintain it – so we just did this four mile section. And then a couple years later we did the rest of it.

MH: And when the first four mile section was built, um, were people pleasantly surprised at that point?

PS: Yeah, because we had, uh...overlooks built, and benches on the trail. A local, uh, Lion's Club, they wanted to put these benches on the trail. What the hell? Put 'em up. So we had benches on the trail, and basic amenities. We didn't have water fountains or – we had parking lots. But that was about it.

MH: And how did the, uh, Brown Family Environmental Center, uh, interact with the trail as it was being built? Not at all? But now it – it sort of surrounds it?

PS: Yeah.

MH: Mm-hmm. Um, so, it was finished in 1991 is that right? Or it was started in '91?

PS: I think...19...80.

MH: 1980.

PS: Let's just call the mayor. He's going to know better than I am.

MH: Was he the – he was the county commissioner for the entire -?

PS: [on the phone] Hey, it's Phil. Is Dick around? Okay, thanks. Bye. He's in a meeting.

MH: That's okay. No worries. But –

PS: I'll get that back to you.

MH: -But you did just pass the twenty-year anniversary this – this summer?

PS: Yeah.

MH: How did that feel?

PS: It was good. Yeah. I did a poster, and then I did this other poster. Did you see the poster?

MH: No.

PS: Oh. Well I'll get you one. Um...

MH: A poster for the anniversary?

PS: Yeah.

MH: Was there any sort of celebration?

PS: No. No...I did the first anniversary poster, and we made a big deal out of it, we got the paper. We brought attention to it, and it brought in a lot of money, because I had a

printer in Columbus donate the printing, and the paper. So we had no expense except the design. And then on this next anniversary poster, same thing; they printed them for free...which is amazing. And I had the design cost, and we had an outside designer do the design from some photographs I sent to him. And, since I'm no longer in the organization, I thought they really didn't take advantage of calling attention to the poster, i.e. calling attention to ourselves. Saying, you know, all the people – people have volunteered to work on this and look at it now.

MH: Yeah. That's great. Um, who were some of the other people who were intimately involved? I know you mentioned the mayor...

PS: Dick Mavis is clearly – he took his share of...criticisms during public meetings. People would stand up and do this – and a lot of people, I mean, you can't go home and think, "Well that was a good meeting." Um...there are people who thought, "This property belongs to me and I don't want strangers going through my property." Well, it's not your property, we bought it. And you could have bought it, but you didn't. Um...so at one time trains were going through here. Um, what's the difference now: people on bicycles? Um...they thought the world was coming to an end, because the bike trial was coming – oh yeah, I'm not kidding. Um...I'll get those dates and e-mail them to you.

MH: Yeah, that would be great. Um...there were how many people on the board?

PS: Um, I guess I got eight or ten.

MH: And they were community members who were interested?

PS: Oh yeah. Yeah. I got skilled people. I mean, I learned how to use a chainsaw from one of the guys on the board. I mean, I never used a chainsaw, and this guy knew how. He'd show us and then I was good at it; I could clean it, and put new chains on and...you know. In the winter I would organize these chainsaw gangs. We'd pile in the pick-up truck and go to a section of the trail and just trim like crazy, because it was winter and the leaves were gone. So we kept all this growth from coming in, um...we'd keep an umbrella shape to the trail. And, um, you don't want any growth coming up to the asphalt because the roots will then buckle the asphalt, so we kept that growth away. We kept the big trees trimmed and then we'd have storms where trees would come down. We'd all pile in the truck and go. Um...we worked until the mess was cleaned up. Um...Randy's quite good at this now. He's got a company now called United Precast. They do concrete products, they cast them. So they have these big, large trucks and very skilled guys and Randy gets one of these trucks out there and he gets on the bridges where logs have come down the river and jammed up against the piers. They'll hook onto these logs and throw them all the way over to the other side.

MH: Wow!

PS: Oh yeah, he's – I know. But you have to keep that clear, or – or the bridge will suffer. So he's very good at that. I mean, it's a lot of work to maintain this park. And there are people who come down, throw trash, I mean, you know, they just don't respect the park. So we pick up a lot of trash. Um...there's vandalism, but that's everywhere. Um...I mean, people use and abuse the park. Um...we'd like to change that culture. Make it better than the way you – the way you saw it. But that's a hard –

MH: Yeah. Yeah, it's hard when not everyone shares your vision. Um, would you recommend, as far as the project goes, getting in touch with anyone in particular to talk about the bike trail?

PS: You could talk to the mayor.

MH: The mayor. And Randy? Would Randy be a good person to talk to?

PS: And Randy. I'll get you that information.

MH: Thank you.

PS: Do you use the trail?

MH: I use it all the time. It was integral – I was training for a marathon my freshman year, I'm a senior now – um, and I ran so many miles on that trail, I can't tell you. It was really great. Even in the winter when it wasn't cleared, I would use it. It's amazing. And I have friends who bike there all the time. Yeah., it's great. Um...that's all that I have, do you feel like there's something I missed?

PS: [laughs] I mean, I could talk about the trail all day.

MH: Yeah. It's a great project. It really is.

PS: Yeah, well, I'm working on a project now that will connect that bike trail to this park.

MH: Okay. Great. Do you have maps, or uh, preliminary things?

PS: I'll show you the park, it's upstairs.