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Backyard wilderness

Dr. Ronald Simonsen, guest columnist

When I was approached by Kirk Johnson to become a member of the Board of the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness (FAW), I said I would be honored to serve and that I "will do what I can." For more than 70 years my roots have been in Warren, Pennsylvania. From my home on Park Avenue, with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins up and down the street, my early world was mostly 'Glade.' (I still have vivid memories of getting my head stuck in Glade Run's concrete bridge rail on our walk home from church one Sunday.) I spent my formative years 'exploring' along the Allegheny and hiking our beautiful hills.

Though now I've ventured beyond Glade Run to traveling around the world - west to Vietnam and east to Khazakstan - throughout my life's experiences, I've never forgotten the importance of the back yard in which I began my journey. Over time, many others have journeyed along Glade Run in Warren County. We know our Native American brothers explored here shortly after the valley was rearranged by the massive floodwaters of the last retreating ice age. We stand on distinctive flat beds of sediment unlike the folded and deformed Appalachians to our east. Well known to miners and drillers, the Allegheny Plateau slopes a little, so

that the coal in Clarion County and to its south has eroded away in Warren County, leaving oil, gas, and timber.

In the four counties that make up the Allegheny National Forest, there are perhaps thousands of ideas on how to prosper in this critical time for our small communities which are besieged by economic turbulence. We are surrounded by poverty, and

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many of our children have moved away. A few individuals can prosper from timber, oil, and gas, but the majority of people need a new strategy. Our leaders linger in conflicting postures, while most of us wait for a plan that will lift our communities out of the present lethargy and confusion. I have come to realize that part of the answer to this economic uncertainty is wilderness protection.

Historically, we know that the original settlers started to market timber, and in 100 years our hills had been stripped of their virgin white pine and hemlock. Iron and steel fabrication followed the oil industry, and by the mid-20th Century, my father and

his fellow workers were producing gigantic industrial pressure vessels for the Manhattan project. I believe this was the peak of heavy manufacturing in Warren. But before that, in 1911, the land surface, then considered worthless, was recognized by early environmentalists as at imminent risk of catastrophic erosion. Beginning in 1923, much of this land was pur-

chased for the creation of the Allegheny National Forest. It is on a portion of this land that FAW proposes to establish legislative protection.

Wilderness, defining a value understood by many to transcend objects of lesser permanence and beauty, may now become our

most valuable enduring resource. This resource needs federal protection if it is to serve as a means of prosperity for the people of this region. FAW has proposed eight tracts of land in the Allegheny National Forest, a total of almost 55,000 acres, for wilderness designation. This designation would preserve these wild places - from Tracy Ridge and Chestnut Ridge in the northern end of the forest to the Clarion River area just west of Ridgway in Elk County - a great thing for the eastern United States. Future generations will be able to enjoy them, free from development - their beauty forever preserved. This wilderness will also drive tourism, as these areas of the national

forest will be set aside for use in hiking, fishing, backpacking and birding, etc., thus providing a perpetual boost for the local economy.

A recent economic study, The Esolen Report, made several recommendations for moving our economy toward a successful tourism industry confirming that FAW's proposal is not unfounded. This new found tourism is something that will help Warren County to prosper and will share with others what I have loved so much about my home.

Let's fast forward and see what might be possible with this new economic outlook and ideas suggested by the Esolen Report. Warren's stately homes and the Victorian downtown become the permanent summer home of a world class symphony. Our leaders invite this merger and collaborate with our sister city to provide a 2,500-seat performing center. Support staff and schools fill now empty buildings, and patrons shop, dine, lodge, and explore. The hills across the Allegheny River remain beautiful, but life in Warren has changed - for the better. You know this will last and impact future generations even if they only stop to clear their minds and heal their souls.

Can all this happen? It is my dream.

This is why I am here - doing what I can.

Ronald Simonsen, MD, is the President of the Board of Directors of the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness.

