

By Teresa Heinz Housel

Just around the bend on 57th Street in New Richmond, the old Richmond Hotel stands as a beacon to the village's past as a major transportation point along the Kalamazoo River and the Chicago and West Michigan Railroad.

New Richmond's era as a busy lumber town ended when the Interurban began running between Holland and Saugatuck in 1896. However, the village's swing bridge remains, a testament to its bustling past.

The bridge joins 27 other historic sites along the Allegan County Heritage Trail. Opened in 2003, the 122-mile route extends from Plainwell/Otsego to Allegan, Fennville, Saugatuck/Douglas, Hopkins, and Wayland.

Kevin Ricco, the Allegan County Parks and Tourism director, said the trail showcases Allegan County all year long. "We wanted the trail to be something that just wasn't a spring or summer trail. Seasonally, the trail changes," he said.

Fall visitors can enjoy colorful leaves and fruit-picking. Winter offers outdoor activities such as skiing, while summer brings wildflowers and rolling green hills.

Ricco said an Allegan County Tourist Council sub-committee developed the trail's concept in 1998. After finalizing the route in 2000, they hired an interpretive planner to help package the sites for tourism.

The trail is designed to be driven in a clockwise direction, but people can start anywhere, Ricco said. All sites have interpretive signs.

The Allegan County Heritage Trail guidebook has photos and descriptions, while a two-disc audio CD set includes oral histories that visitors can play while

travelling the route. Ricco said, “We used historians who were born and raised here and could draw on their true life stories.”

Their stories shape Allegan County’s history that speaks to new generations through sites such as New Richmond, a former POW camp near Lake Allegan, and Allegan’s ghostly tales.

A Riverside Transportation Hub

Although the depot served by the former Chicago and West Michigan Railroad no longer exists, New Richmond’s still-active tracks are owned by CSX Transportation and cross 20 to 30 trains daily over the steel bridge spanning the river.

The railroad bridge is paralleled by the historic Fifty-Seventh Street Bridge, the oldest remaining vehicular swing bridge in the country. Built in 1879 by the Milwaukee Bridge and Iron Company, the 422-foot bridge’s round mechanism in its bottom middle allowed it to swing open so boats could pass. It was closed to motor vehicles in 1997 and converted to a pedestrian-only bridge in 2003.

The bridges are centerpieces of New Richmond’s Bridge Park. The park’s vibrant wildflowers surround the walkways with different vantage points of the peaceful setting.

A Meadow's World War II History

Southeast of New Richmond, foundations are all that remain of wooden barracks that housed German POW's during World War II.

Originally a farm, the barracks were a Civilian Conservation Corps camp in the 1930s. The Army-style camp housed 250 POW's captured in North Africa and brought to Michigan in 1944. The U.S. government assigned the soldiers to help with the fall harvest because many American men were away fighting the war.

"I love the story of the POW camp," Ricco said. Although he said the prisoners got along with the locals, some prisoners tried to escape by swimming across Lake Michigan. They mistook Lake Allegan for Lake Michigan, however, and the men were quickly captured.

Ricco recalled a touching moment during the site's Heritage Trail marker dedication ceremony in 2007, when a POW interned at the camp spoke to the audience. The POW, Gerd Linderman, later moved to West Michigan and still lives in the Grand Rapids area.

The barracks became a Boy Scout camp after the war. By the early 1990s, the state tore them down, Ricco said.

Today, visitors can reach the foundations through the meadow with plants such as lilacs that were planted by the former occupants. The quiet setting invites one to imagine how the POW's coped with their new surroundings.

Allegan's Ghost Tales

Located in south-central Allegan County, Allegan is known for its historic buildings and the 2nd Street Bridge over the Kalamazoo River. The city's Old Jail Museum and Regent Theater are also familiar to area ghost hunters.

A former jail and sheriff's house, the Old Jail Museum was constructed in 1906 and replaced a previous jail on the same spot. The jail was used until 1963, when a new jail was built nearby. The 20 cells are located on different floors in the building's back portion, said Allen Philley, the Allegan Historical Society president.

Although Philley said he has never encountered a ghost in the building, some people report hearing footsteps and cell doors slam shut, seeing a mannequin's clothing mysteriously switched, and observing streaks of light.

Kathy Conder, co-founder of Michigan Paranormal Encounters, said she experiences changing energies within the building. "The minute I cross over to the jail side, I feel a whole different energy. I get a feeling of being watched on that side," she said. Conder added that one time when she and her daughter were alone in the building and playing cards in the former sheriff's office, her daughter heard footsteps upstairs.

Similar to the Old Jail Museum, the Regent Theater has a haunted reputation. Originally a livery stable in the late 1800s, the building became a Buick garage in 1902, and began offering vaudeville performances and silent movies in 1919. The non-profit Old Regent Theater Company saved the building when it was slated for demolition in 1990.

Ghost hunters regularly visit the restored Art Deco building. In recent years, a West Michigan Ghost Hunter's Society investigator reported being touched by an unseen cold hand in the lobby. In 2009, ParaVizionz, a Midwest-based paranormal investigation team, reported hearing footsteps, knocks, and voices around the stage and balcony.

Skeptics may discredit the paranormal testimonies, but regardless, Allegan affirms the county's rich history. "There are plenty of towns that have been recreated to look historical," Philley said. "Allegan hasn't been built to be historical. It just remained historical."

For more information, visit the Heritage Trail's website at:
<http://www.allegancounty.org/heritagetrail/>