

Trips Awheel: Where to Go and How to Get There

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Cycle Route 33 (1897 – 1898 series)

**Altoona to Johnstown by Way of the Horse Shoe Curve.**

N.B. – Readers of last Sunday's trip to Altoona, please insert its mileage as 77 miles from Lewistown by the route therein described.

Altoona, the "Mountain City" (almost 1200 feet above sea level), might be styled "the Railroad City" with equal accuracy, owing its growth and its very birth, as it does, to its locomotive works and machine shops.

The way in which not a few of the natives pronounce its name recalls the original Altona, away on the banks of the Elbe, opposite Hamburg in the old country; and incidentally it reminds me of the old-fashioned German pun that was so often trotted out in connection with it a long time ago. The flourishing trade of Altona was in those days a great prejudice to Hamburg, and it was a favorite remark with the merchants of the latter city that its name was not "Altona," but (Ach Himmel!) "All-zunah" ("all too near"). It was Danish, then; it is Prussian now, and a very humble sister of Hamburg at that.

Our own Altoona was very small at that period. It was laid out exactly 48 years ago, grew into a borough in 1854 with 2000 inhabitants, became a city in 1868, and had over 30,000 inhabitants at the last census.

EN ROUTE AGAIN.

Tourists who, for any reason of their own, do not care to journey to the other side of the Allegheny Mountains in the manner hereinafter described via the Horseshoe Curve, may go out Eleventh avenue to Sixteenth, turn R. and into the Dey Gap road, and across the mountain at said gap, and turn L. about 2 m. past the Buck Horn Tavern, when they have a straight road to Gallitzin (see dotted line on map).

For us the wild beauties of those gorges around and about the Horseshoe possess an irresistible fascination, and we beg leave to travel this route once more.

EN ROUTE AGAIN.

We ride out of Altoona via Eleventh avenue and Broad street; the latter may remind us of our own Broad street, in so far as it is asphalted throughout, but the resemblance does not go much farther.

Over that little bridge we go, at the end of the trolley track, and up that short hill.

Two and a half miles from the centre of the town, where a number of hotels cluster about the Pennsylvania Railroad depot, take care to turn to the right, and we start on the fifth stage of our journey.

THE ALLEGHENY MOUNTAIN.

The noble mountain now before us is the Allegheny proper. A look at our little map, rough as it is, will suggest the fact to you that this is the only one of the mountains we have met that has not been cut into

by any river like the Susquehanna or the Juniata. The name Allegheny (Alleghany or Allegany) has been applied to that portion of the Appalachian system which extends from North Carolina to and through Pennsylvania, but strictly it belongs to this giant.

Its average height in our State may be about 1200 feet above the valleys; indeed, some seventy years ago it baffled our old-time engineers in their efforts to connect the eastern canals of the State with the western ones, until they devised the scheme of a railroad portage with inclined planes for stationary engines from Hollidaysburg to Johnstown.

You may remember an interesting article on "Early Mountain Railroads of Pennsylvania," which was published in The Inquirer last year (November 22) and which gave a deal of information on this subject.

This road crossed the mountain at an altitude of nearly 1400 feet above the eastern basin, say 2300 feet above the Delaware at tidewater. We shall travel along what remains of it farther on, when we get to the western slope of the Allegheny.

Marking this road F. would not be doing justice to it; for a clay and stone road, it is decidedly G., rolling in places, hilly in others.

#### THE HORSESHOE CURVE.

Slack up as we go down grade between two white painted farms, 3 ½ miles out. Your first view of the engineering triumph scored on the grand old monarch by the railroad men of modern days is before you.

Straight ahead the vista seems to plunge into a huge cul-de-sac opened towards us and bound in every other direction by mountains.

That cul-de-sac is the famous horseshoe of the Pennsylvania Railroad.

See that train steaming slowly round the mountain head on our L., halfway up the knob?

If you come with us you will soon be walking along that track; that is the outer edge of the curve. Won't you take a kodak memento of this, right here between these two farms?

In a couple of minutes we reach a large reservoir, and from the vicinity of its cupola you have a full view of the inside of the horseshoe, right in front of the floral representation of a horseshoe that you may see in the very background of this lovely picture, just below the level of the railroad track.

This up-to-date reservoir will surely detract from the wild picturesqueness of the surrounding panorama, in the eyes of many; its usefulness, however, will hardly be contested by the inhabitants of Altoona, who suffered so long from water famines.

We skirt one side of it and presently our good driveway comes to an abrupt end. Do you see that unspeakable track wending its way beneath yonder stone bridge? That is the continuation of our present road towards Gallitzin, over that forest-clad ridge; its horrors are known only to lumbermen; as to ordinary vehicular traffic, nobody seems to be old enough to remember seeing any on it.

Let's take this narrow path on R and carry our wheels up the railroad embankment up to a neat little station hidden from view by the trees over our head; it is Kittanning Point; here, 6 ½ m. from Altoona, two alternatives are open to us; taking the train and enjoying such glimpses of the scenery as the

company's schedule will permit us, or journeying alternately afoot and awheel around the mountain's head and gazing leisurely on the beauteous landscape as we go.

In my mind a walk, pure and simple, would be worth undertaking, even though the wagon road were cyclable. As to wheeling it, any man boasting of having ridden the whole distance from Kittanning Point to Gallitzin via Allegrippus should be set down as a lunatic, if nothing worse. In many places riding a bicycle or any other vehicle occupying the same space in a straight line is an absolute impossibility; in others the slightest dizziness, a temporary blur before your eyes, the draft of a passing train, might hurl you and your wheel down a precipice which would prove the terminus of all your trips on this planet.

Allegrippus Station (what a big name for a little thing!) is just ten miles from our start in Altoona; and Bennington Furnace is about a mile farther; call it five miles of intermittent walking and riding from Kittanning Point, the surroundings of which will remain forever engraved on your memory.

#### THROUGH TUNNEL HILL OR OVER IT?

When you reach Bennington Station you may ask what has become of our road, and no wonder, for it takes so steep and so sudden a dip on the off side of the track that you may not be able to see it. The fact is, as you may observe, the railroad track is the favorite highway for pedestrians here, and if you inquire your way awheel to Gallitzin from any bystander his first suggestion will be, "Follow the railroad."

If you do, be careful; there are two tunnels ahead; to attempt using the right hand one would be nothing short of suicidal: through the left one, on the contrary, the light of day can be seen from one end to the other, and it presents no danger so long as only two or three trains go through it daily; needless to say you should ascertain if this is still the case at the time of your passage here. If all be well you may avail yourself of this half mile underground cross-cut and emerge out of it into Cambria county at Gallitzin (13 m.). Of course you have to walk through the tunnel.

If you prefer the open air and the hill, as I did this time, make your way to yonder gaunt trestle bridge and follow the zigzag road to the left of it; it will take you up to Tunnel Hill village and down to Gallitzin, making the distance a mile longer for you by the time you meet the junction of the routes at Portage House corner, of which more presently.

#### GALLITZIN.

They call it something much more like "G'litzin than "Gallitzin."

It recalls a large-hearted missionary, the Russian Prince Demetrius Augustine Gallitzin, who labored hard in this wilderness between 1799 and 1840, and of whom it was said that "if his heart had been made of gold he would have coined it for the poor."

Good Gallitzin's remains lie at Loretto, a short distance westward from this place.

Cycling friend, should you ever strike Gallitzin on Sunday endeavor to do so at the regular meal hours. I once had the misfortune to drop here at 2 P. M. and not until I had knocked at the door of three different hotels did I discover a modest little restaurant on top of yonder bridge near the station, where a nice tender chicken was broiled for me during the few minutes that I whiled away over a dozen of choice oysters.

At the end of the village (14 m.) notice a crossing, at the L corner of which stands a small hotel, "Portage House."

If you have come through the tunnel, this is the point at which you turn L into the Summit road. We who have come through the village simply follow the main road.

Up that steep hill we climb; when nearing the summit keep straight up (avoid that tempting turn L) and on, past the coal shaft you see ahead.

#### CAMBRIA COUNTY SCENERY.

Cambria county was not regularly organized till 1807; and the first settlement ever made by a white man among the wolves and the catamounts and the human savages that roamed within the present boundaries of the county does not go farther back than seventeen years before that date, so it were ludicrous for us to expect billiard tables to ride upon; still the roads are F or G as you may see; the country is mountainous, that goes without saying; indeed Cambria has been designated the "mountain county," occupying as it does the table land between Allegheny Mountain and Laurel Hill.

Two miles ahead, at the cemetery L, do gaze at that panorama R.

#### FOR INVALIDS, AND OTHERS.

The next crossing is Summit; it deserves its name, you may think. Cresson, with its mineral springs, its pure air and lovely scenery, is close by; Ebensburg, the county seat (named after Eben, son of Rev. Rees Lloyd, who laid it out about ninety-seven years ago) is 9 miles away R on another high ridge of the Allegheny; Hollidaysburg, in Blair county, is 10 miles L.

Down grade we now go to Lilly (Lilly's or Lillys), which used to be at the foot of Plane No. 4 on the old Portage.

The road to and through Lilly is very rough this year; the weather is the cause of it, I am told. Outside the village, a brand-new road takes us away from the old level one over a steep hill and down again to Cassandra (22 m.).

#### CASSANDRA, PORTAGE, WILMORE.

Among many other things in mythology, I could never make out how it was that because baby Cassandra and her twin brother Hellenos had their ears licked by snakes one fine day while lying in their cradle, therefore, they were able afterwards to understand the language of birds.

Now, why this tiny place was named Cassandra is another source of wonderment to me. Its only connection with Southern Europe that I can find is the fact that Hungarians and long knives thrive and multiply here as though in their native element.

This, after all, is a matter of little moment on our present errand.

After passing Cassandra R. R. station, opposite Leap House, we turn L, pass by Bens Creek R. R. station (very rough and stony) and through Jamestown hamlet and down still to Portage at the foot of Plane No. 2 in the olden days. (25 m.) We leave the village on our L unless we have business at either of the hotels there, and a very fair, level road takes us to Wilmore (27 m.).

Should you be tired climbing hills, take the narrow path by the side of that railroad track L, 2 miles out of Wilmore; if not, be prepared to go up, and immediately down again, one of the steepest and wretchedest bumps on our course.

From its foot on the other side (which you can reach along the R. R. track aforesaid),  $\frac{1}{2}$  a mile of easy riding brings you to Summer Hill (30  $\frac{1}{2}$  m.).

#### A LUMBERING SECTION.

Willmore and Summer Hill have long been noted among the lumbering localities of this county. Did you observe the quantity of hard and soft lumber of all kinds that we have met? We may consider this a rough region to do business in, even at this date; but it's only

When the white frost gilds the valleys, the cold congeals the flood,  
When the swollen streams are frozen and the hills are clad in snow,

that the hardy Cambrians "range the wild woods o'er, as a-lumbering they go." Then (in the quaint words placed on their lips by the poet)

When winter's snows are melted, and the ice bound streams are free,  
We'll run our rafts to market, then haste our friends to see;  
How kindly true hearts welcome us, and wives and children too,  
We will spend with them the summer and again a-lumbering go.

Do you know what the shook or shooking industry is? Many a million strips of oak timber, properly shaped and chamfered and ready to be fitted together, has been packed in "shooks" (or sets conveniently bound or bundled together) here round about Summer Hill, and then shipped to Cuba and elsewhere, whence they return to us as barrels or other vessels filled with molasses, etc.

#### R. R. TRACK OR WAGON ROAD?

On a preceding occasion, I was induced to follow the railroad track from Summer Hill to Johnstown, a kind of route I have a decided aversion for, save when, as in the case of the Horseshoe Curve, a better view of the surrounding country may be obtained (and this seldom happens).

I was told then that the Johnstown Wheelmen patronized this track "for the fun of it," and I took it.

It may be due to a lack of appreciation on my part, but I must confess I utterly failed to realize the "fun" of this railroad tracking, of these short snatches of alternate riding and walking or of the continual crossing and recrossing of the track in search of the better (or the least bad) sidepath. The scenery is truly grand and imposing along the valley of the Conemaugh, but who can enjoy the poetry of it, from a narrow railroad sidepath, either banked up by steep rocks or perched up on the edge of a breakneck embankment with fiendish clinkers around and prosy punctures in prospective?

I couldn't, for one; and after working my way (I say "working") past Mineral Point (35  $\frac{1}{2}$  m.) and on to Conemaugh (40 m.), and reaching Johnstown at the end of twelve miles which seemed to gain in extra length what they lacked in width, I determined that on all future occasions I should chance the wagon road at any cost.

That is why, after passing under this bridge, we leave Summer Hill Station and the main part of the village on R, if you please, and keep straight on (pausing just long enough, as we cross the Conemaugh, to take a snap shot of the creek while a train is passing over yonder bridge) and pedal away on a very fair road up and down the flank of the mountain on our L to South Fork, a busy mining village (32 1/2 m.).

Here again, despite the advice of a bystander to keep to the railroad track, we turn from it at the station and face a long, straggling rise; fortunately the surface is easy riding.

Sad memories of eight years ago crowd on our minds as we gaze at the now dried up ravine beneath us, and draw near to the site of the lake, the bursting of whose dam was the cause of the Johnstown disaster.

The wide expanse you notice on R, two miles from South Fork Station, is still known as "the lake." We cross it over this bridge on R, and now for a stupendous climb, most of which you will have to do afoot, not because the road is bad, but on account of the steepness.

I never could find out any distinctive name for this hill, but if you just mention "the big hill on the Frankstown road" to any resident in this section he will at once know what you mean.

Half a mile up from the bridge a signpost informs us that that precipitous turn L goes to "Elton 5 m.," and for a full mile from this spot the cry is still upward; nor do we cease ascending till we pass that white wooden church (36 1/2 m.).

Beware of that bifurcation 1/2 m. beyond the church; the R fork goes to East Conemaugh; turn L for Johnstown.

A change for the worse occurs here; and the riding of this next stony incline needs your utmost care. Imagine breaking your wheel in such a spot as this! The nearest railroad station? For miles around you can see nothing but forest-clad gorges suggestive of nothing so little as of steam power civilization; still, you would find the latter within a couple of miles. Truly, this is a great and resourceful country.

I once labored up this next hill one very warm afternoon, wondering how I could assuage certain internal cravings before I reached Johnstown. I had passed by a couple of roadside houses at noontime without halting at either, because one looked very dusty and the other was black with smoke; and now to put it plain, I was positively hungry.

See this neat little farm house off the road on L (it is located in my notebook as 4 1/2 m. from South Fork)? You should have seen the meal of cabbage and potatoes and fruit preserves and apple pie and coffee that I obtained in that little house, and at a nominal fee!

It then took me very little time to get over this other little rise ahead and run down to the cross-road (40 m.), where the R turn goes to Conemaugh and the L to Geistown.

Through Parkstown (1/2 m. farther) the road was very loose; but 1 1/2 m. brings you to the summit of Johnstown Hill and there (if you have a camera or a soul) you dismount to take a view of the panorama of Johnstown and the Conemaugh Valley beneath you.

Do not attempt to ride down the whole of this stupendous hill, or even any portion of it without the greatest care.

The beginning of Main street, at its foot, may be set down as practically 43 miles from Altoona, by the itinerary we followed.

Do I still prefer the Frankstown road with its wild sceneries and toilsome climbs to the level railroad track from Summer Hill to Johnstown? I am free to say I do.

A.E.