

Wells Creek

Another Watershed Success Story

Wells Creek is a cold water stream situated in Somerset Township and also part of Stonycreek Township and Quemahoning Township in Somerset County. It has two points of origin. The west branch begins in the village of Geiger and flows north east about two miles to where it joins the east branch, which originates in the village of Pleasant Hill. From there it flows north through the villages of Listie, Adams, Friedens and Coleman and then on to the village of Mostoller where it joins the Stonycreek River. It is about nine miles in length and has a drainage area of about 17 square miles. It has a low gradient and for the most part, flows through bottom land, that is in some areas lightly forested. In other areas, it is shaded with willows and other riparian shrubs and brush. After it leaves Coleman it has a slightly higher gradient and is largely shaded by forest.

Wells Creek was undoubtedly a vibrant trout stream prior to the 20th century. The increasing demand for bituminous coal coupled with the abundance of it in the Wells Creek valley, the stream quickly became polluted with acid mine drainage to the point where it was dead. Five major mining operations drained their untreated discharges into Wells Creek. There were several other smaller operations that also used Wells Creek as a disposal system for their drainage.

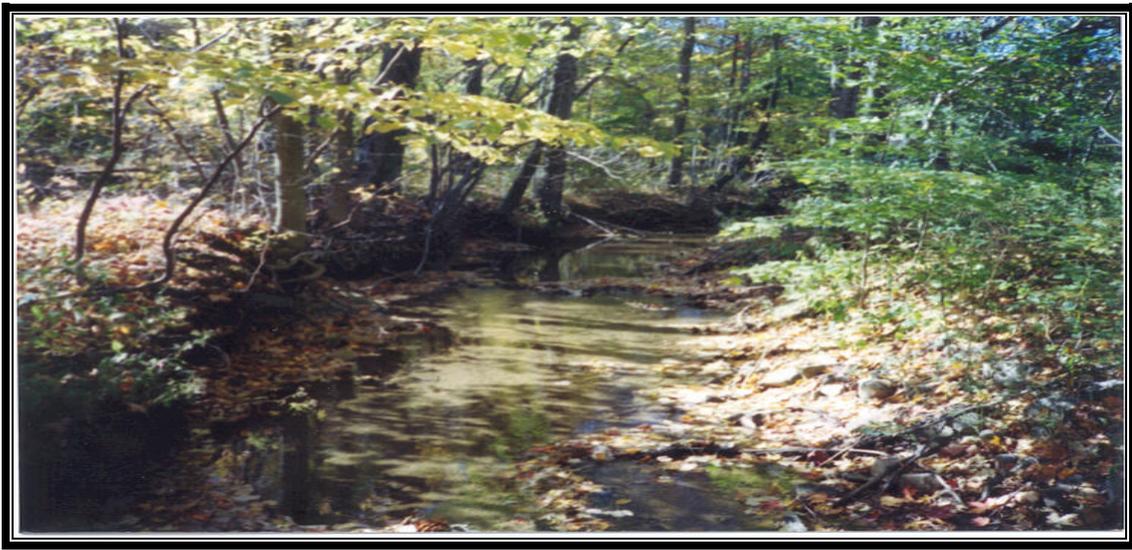


In addition, most homes and businesses located along the stream, used Wells Creek as a sewage disposal system. The stream was an open sewer for its entire length.

In 1970 the Somerset Township Municipal Authority was formed and in 1974 -75 sewers were installed from near the Somerset Borough line to a new sewage plant at the northernmost point in the township. This sewage system eliminated almost all of the raw sewage that had been entering Wells Creek. Twenty four years later, the Wells Creek Watershed Association was formed by a few interested men in Listie. Some members of the Association had been stocking trout in the stream at Listie for several years but they had to feed them since the stream could not support a food source due to AMD pollution.

The Association submitted a grant application to Growing Greener for funding to design a passive treatment system at Pleasant Hill to treat three discharges emanating from the old workings of the “Big 7” mine that had been operated by the Listie Coal Mining Company in the early 20th century. After the grant was received, the Association constructed weirs on the discharges and began sampling the water to determine the extent of the pollution.

They then applied to the state’s Growing Greener Grant Program and the Office of Surface Mining (OSM) for grants to construct the system. This involved dealing with landowners to get easements to construct the systems. After much negotiating, the easements were acquired. In the meantime, the Association conducted a membership drive which brought the membership up to more than 100. They also elected new officers and applied for a design grant from Growing Greener for two treatment systems to treat major discharges in the vicinity of the village of Adams Station and again, the negotiations with landowners ensued; one lived in Delaware and all negotiations were conducted over the telephone. Again, after much negotiation, all the easements were obtained. All the grants that were applied for were approved.



After the designs were completed, the permitting process began. The two projects at Adams were approved without much trouble but the project at Pleasant Hill was another story. One of the discharges at that site flowed onto what had been a baseball field and had formed a wetland with cattails growing in it. This forced the association to have the wetland delineated and assessed for endangered species. A grant of \$10,000 was secured from the Western Pennsylvania Watershed Program by Southern Alleghenies Conservancy to do the delineation and assessment. That brought in the division of the Department of Environmental Protection that deals with wetlands which brought in the Army Corp. of Engineers and the Fish and Wildlife Service. It was determined that there were several wetlands involved, one probably as small as 150 square feet. After many meetings and correspondence with the regulating agencies, a waiver on the wetlands was granted and construction began in November of 2003. At this writing, the treatment system has been built and only the discharge collectors, piping and grading and seeding are not completed.

The total cost of the three projects will be in excess of \$800,000. The funds were provided by Growing Greener, OSM, and Western Pennsylvania Watershed Program. In addition, Growing Greener gave the association a grant to organize the operation of the association.

Wells Creek, although it will now support aquatic life is not completely cleaned up. There are two identified AMD discharges remaining to be addressed. One known as the Beeghly mine discharge is located upstream from the confluence above Listie on the east branch. It is a seasonal flow but has low pH when it does flow. The other discharge is downstream near the village of Coleman and is known as the Ritter Mine Discharges (there are two of them). The Association plans to address both of these pollution sources in the near future. When all the major discharges are neutralized, Wells Creek will be the stream that it was over 100 years ago.

In 2004, it is planned that the stream will be stocked with trout and some access points will be identified and made more accessible so that the general public can make use of the stream. In addition, stream cleanups will be conducted when and where trouble spots are identified.

Wells Creek is also joined with Kimberly Run Natural Area which is owned by the Somerset County Conservancy in an effort to educate the public, especially young people, in the benefits to be derived from having a clean and healthy environment. In the 1930's and 40's there were several avid fishermen in the Adams and Listie areas who believed that the day would come when trout would live in Wells Creek. The future for Wells Creek looks very good.

With the future of Wells Creek more secure, the future of the Stonycreek River is also more stable. Wells Creek enters the Stonycreek in the middle of the upper gorge section of the river that provides the best angling and scenery the Stonycreek has to offer. This section of the Stonycreek has been profiled in magazines, books, and on national television for its outstanding coldwater angling opportunities. Improved water quality in Wells Creek and the Stonycreek River will help to sustain the regions recreational and economic value for future generations.