

# Wonderful life: Indiana County has lots to do, no crowds

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INDIANA - It was a wonderful life growing up here, the child of a wealthy hardware store owner immune from the surrounding coal patch woes. He could have stayed and lived a most comfortable existence, but he went on to Hollywood success which he then put on hold to serve his country at war.

At the Jimmy Stewart Museum here, just down Philadelphia Street from where that hardware store once stood, you can see his military uniforms and a number of trappings from his Beverly Hills home - including the front door.

Stewart undoubtedly is Indiana County's most famous son - and he remains popular nearly 20 years after his death. But there's more to see and know in these foothills of the Alleghenies where slaves once hid and Christmas trees still thrive.

## Article Photos



Mirror photo by Cherie Hicks

The view from atop Vinegar Hill shows downtown Indiana. Jimmy Stewart's family home, now privately owned, is to the right (not seen).

"Indiana is blessed to have a quality of life that supports a vibrant community," said Denise Liggett, executive director of the Indiana County Tourist Bureau.

Christmas tree capital

The region's moniker is the "Christmas Tree Capital of the World," thanks to some shrewd landowners who, in the first half of the 20th century, saw the rise of the commercialization of Christmas and a market for the fir, spruce and other popular varieties that thrive here due to a soil made favorable by coal mining.

#### Fact Box

For more information:

Indiana County Tourist Bureau, next to Sears in the Indiana Mall

2334 Oakland Ave., Indiana

Open 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday to Friday

724-463-7505

[www.VisitIndianaCountyPA.org](http://www.VisitIndianaCountyPA.org)

They founded a national association and tree plantations were planted. And, even though other states now produce more trees, "we were the first," officials boast.

These forests also served an important, but lesser-known, purpose more than 150 years ago: Slaves escaping the South came to or through a sympathetic Pennsylvania and hid here.

#### Networking

One enslaved Virginian named Richard Newman "struck a dangerous and courageous path north to freedom" in the 1850s, according to a local history group. He made his way to Blairsville where he began a new life with the help of a free black man who was a community leader and a "conductor" in the Underground Railroad that passed through these parts.

Ten years ago, local officials organized and created its "Passport to Freedom" project that documents the area's role in protecting escaped slaves.

But you have to plan in advance if you want to visit the Underground Railroad Center, located in an understated former church building on South East Lane. It is open May through October by appointment only (724-459-5779).

"The ladies who run this are experts" and fairly accommodating, said Maria Jack, the group-tour associate for the Indiana County Tourist Bureau.

It's worth a visit to the center to find out what happened when bounty hunters came looking for Newman - the story also is re-enacted annually a few blocks away near the Blairsville bandstand. The center also houses an exhibit, "A Day in the Life of an Enslaved Child," that lets you pick up a replica of a yoke and two water buckets that must weigh 20 pounds - without the water.

## Freedom Project

"While my mother works in my Master's fields, I work around my Master's farm," reads a sign. "I bring the water, feed the chickens, walk the hills tending the cows and take corn and wheat to the mill. I work hard so Master won't whip me or sell me away. I heard him say I'm worth about \$350 now. ... Do you have chores to do at your house? How long do you work? If you get sold, how much are you worth?"

Clearly, the exhibit is geared toward children, but it'll make a grown woman cry.

The Freedom Project also created a brochure describing a walking tour of Blairsville, as well as a driving tour of the area. It's available from the Tourist Bureau and the Historical Society or download one at [www.UndergroundRailroadBlairsvillePA.com](http://www.UndergroundRailroadBlairsvillePA.com).

The drive will take you on several stops in Blairsville, including the John Graff House. A safe room was constructed in the floor of a carriage house to shelter escaping slaves and it accessed tunnels that led to the nearby Conemaugh River. The homes remain privately owned and the tunnels have since collapsed, but you can read about their history at the center.

Learn about the wider history of the area at the Blairsville Historical Museum on 116 E. Campbell St. Tuesdays through Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

While in downtown Blairsville, you might stroll the quaint downtown on Market Street, pass the bandshell and the Veterans Memorial Park to a scenic riverfront and vintage truss bridge that spans the Conemaugh. Or you can hike or bike the 1.7-mile Riverfront Trail.

If you're hungry for a quick bite, check out Market Street Pastries; the spinach quiche special is an excellent choice.

## Spirits and ghosts

From Blairsville you may look for more stops along the Underground Railroad tour as you drive north to Homer City and its Main Street. There, check out the 1-year-old craft distillery called Disobedient Spirits that uses locally grown grain and corn and offers tours on Saturdays. You can grab a bite to eat next door at Colleen's Cuisine, open for breakfast and lunch on weekdays.

Just down Main Street is the Homer City Historical Society Museum housed in a converted caboose that pays homage to the area's railroad history. In desperate need of painting, it also has limited summer hours, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturdays and noon to 4 p.m. Sundays.

It stands adjacent to the Hoodlebug Trail, a hiking, biking and cross-country skiing path that runs down to Black Lick. There it connects with the 36-mile Ghost Town Trail east to Ebensburg, which was made on old railway beds and roughly follows the flow of the Blacklick Creek. Look for historical markers at former mining towns that once dotted the line, including the Eliza Furnace at the Dillweed Bed and Breakfast.

"Our parks and trails are so plentiful," Liggett said.

Taking the Hoodlebug north you end up in Indiana; or you can drive up Route 119 to the county seat. (Those stacks along the way that look like nuclear cooling towers actually are coal-fired power plants, Jack was quick to point out).

### The Jimmy

Locals call the main attraction in Indiana simply "The Jimmy."

"He was so modest, he wouldn't let us do the museum until he was 75," said Timothy Harley, president of the James M. Stewart Museum Foundation. "The coal industry was going away and we really needed an economic boost."

The museum is home to relics from Stewart's days in Hollywood, including movie scripts, costumes and posters, along with items from his military service and his family's hardware store. Photos line the walls, including one that shows Stewart without his hairpiece.

"Most people don't know he wore a toupee," Harley said.

One room replicates his Beverly Hills office, complete with a foot stool from Bob Hope and his "Hope for a Drug Free America" campaign from the 1980s.

A small theater shows biographical movies of the star's life.

### Stars line up

Every year, Stewart's children work with the museum to honor someone with connections to Stewart, called the Harvey Award, and it brought in actress and comedian Carol Burnett in 2014. Other winners have included Janet Leigh, Shirley Jones, Ernest Borgnine and Rich Little. The award is named for the 1950 film in which Stewart befriends an invisible rabbit.

Up the street is a historical sign that marks the spot of the house where Stewart was born; it later was destroyed by fire. A few blocks away is a set of stairs that leads to the nice home that Stewart's father built - privately owned today - on Vinegar Hill. It provides a panoramic view of downtown Indiana.

A few blocks away on Wayne Avenue are the Indiana County Historical Museum, housed in the Clark House, and the Indiana Memorial Park, which is one of the most historic sites in the county. Originally surveyed in 1774, it once was a church cemetery and many graves are still located in the park. It also served as a hiding place for escaped slaves during the Civil War, and its doughboy statue was erected in 1925 by a group of citizens led by Stewart's father, Alex Stewart.

Downtown Indiana, especially along its main drag, Philadelphia Street, is a busy one and home to artisan shops and quaint cafes. The Artist's Hand Gallery and Espresso Bar features local art, workshops and more; Crouse's Cafe serves breakfast and lunch; and Benjamin's Restaurant, serves lunch and dinner inside a Victorian house divided into

dining rooms or you can choose al fresco in a lush-green courtyard this time of year. Try one of Benjamin's grilled pizza flatbreads, especially the portabella, which will melt in your mouth.

### Lively learning

Abutting downtown is today's star of this 200-plus-year-old county, the Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Known as Indiana Normal School when it was founded in 1875, IUP originally was entirely housed in John Sutton Hall, which still stands today and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

The hall houses a museum and a gallery that hosts exhibitions featuring visual arts, theater, dance and music, said Hank Knerr, executive director of IUP's Lively Arts program.

Its front yard is a grassy area known as the Oak Grove where a relic from the World Trade Center marks the university's September 11 Memorial and where students can be found gathered in nice weather. The entire 354-acre campus comprises the Allegheny Arboretum and is home to more than 75 species of trees. Red-tailed hawks have been spotted there and inspired the university's nickname, the Crimson Hawks.

On the southern edge of campus is the Kovalchick Convention and Athletic Complex, home to the Crimson Hawks basketball and other sports programs, as well as a number of concerts and other events.

### Side trips

From Indiana, roads lead in almost every direction to several quaint communities, including Saltsburg, Smicksburg and Clymer.

Clymer, about 10 miles northeast of Indiana, is named after George Clymer, a Philadelphia politician who was among the first patriots to call for complete independence from Britain and signed the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. The borough is home to the Clymer Days Festival every September that has a milk-chugging contest and fine Italian dining at Luigi's Ristorante.

Saltsburg is about 20 miles west of Indiana and, as its name implies, was the salt capital of the country during the 19th century, thanks to geologic forces millions of years ago. Cheaper sources elsewhere led to the salt industry's demise, but this borough has maintained a history of its origins that also relied on rails and canals for early transportation.

### A taste of salt

You can take a walking tour to check out nearly 30 historical buildings in the downtown historical district, framed in part by the Conemaugh and Kiskiminetas rivers. Among them are the Stone House and the Andrew A. Taylor House, a Federal style structure, both from

the 1830s. The Olde Salt Restaurant has a breakfast buffet from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. every Sunday that features eggs made to order, homefries and more.

Smicksburg is an Amish community about 25 miles north of Indiana comprised of 21 businesses in a scenic setting reminiscent of Lancaster County. Don't take pictures of the Amish, but do buy their goods that range from hand-made furniture and decor, homemade fudge, gifts, primitive crafts, antiques and repurposed treasures, pottery and other artwork. There are several restaurants, including homestyle cooking at the Olde Tyme Diner, a bed and breakfast and a winery.

If you have time, take the circuitous route north from Indiana to Smicksburg and check out one of the four covered bridges constructed in Indiana County during the 19th century. The Thomas Covered Bridge, on the road with the same name, spans Crooked Creek and is the only one open for motor traffic. Built in 1879 by Amos Thomas, the bridge was completely reconstructed in 1998 for more than \$1 million.

The Visitor's Bureau has a driving tour for the covered bridges, as well as other walking and driving routes and itineraries based on your likes, from history to wineries, spirits and craft beers and even trendy folk art.

#### Outdoor pleasures

Like most of Pennsylvania, Indiana County has its share of recreational activities, including the 2,981-acre Yellow Creek State Park near Penns Run. It is along one of the first byways in the state, the Kittanning Path, which was used by the Delaware and Shawnee nations and early settlers. Today, the 720-acre Yellow Creek Lake has a sand beach and accommodates boaters, anglers, birdwatchers and more.

Just down Route 422 from the state park is a golf course that looks typical, but is home to a new fad called foot golf, in which you play golf with your foot and a soccer ball - and large holes. Cherrywood Par 3 Golf Course also offers "fling golf," in which you fling the smaller ball with a special club, lacrosse style, to get it in the traditional holes.

The area is home to a number of resorts and country clubs, including the scenic Chestnut Ridge Golf and Resort.

"An outstanding lineup of outdoor adventures brings visitors from all over to share in the scenic beauty on land and water," Liggett said.

And, in case of inclement weather, the recently opened Philly Street Escape Room in downtown Indiana "challenges your mind to solve clues to free you from a locked, themed room," said Liggett.

"Lots to do here with no crowds to fight," she added.

Mirror Life Writer Cherie Hicks is at 949-7030.