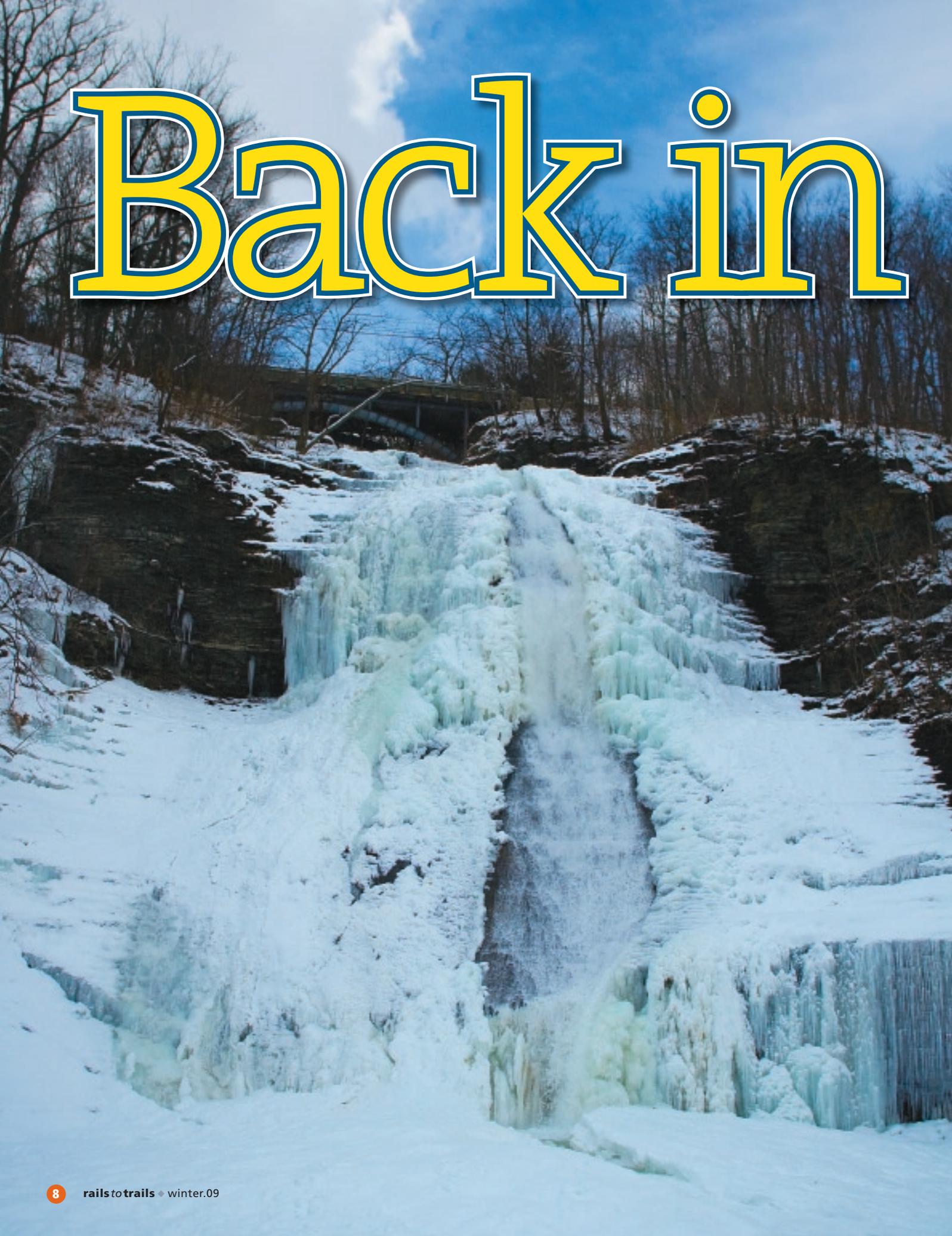


Back in



Action

New York's Catharine Valley Trail

By Dante Petri

Photos by Joe Delano

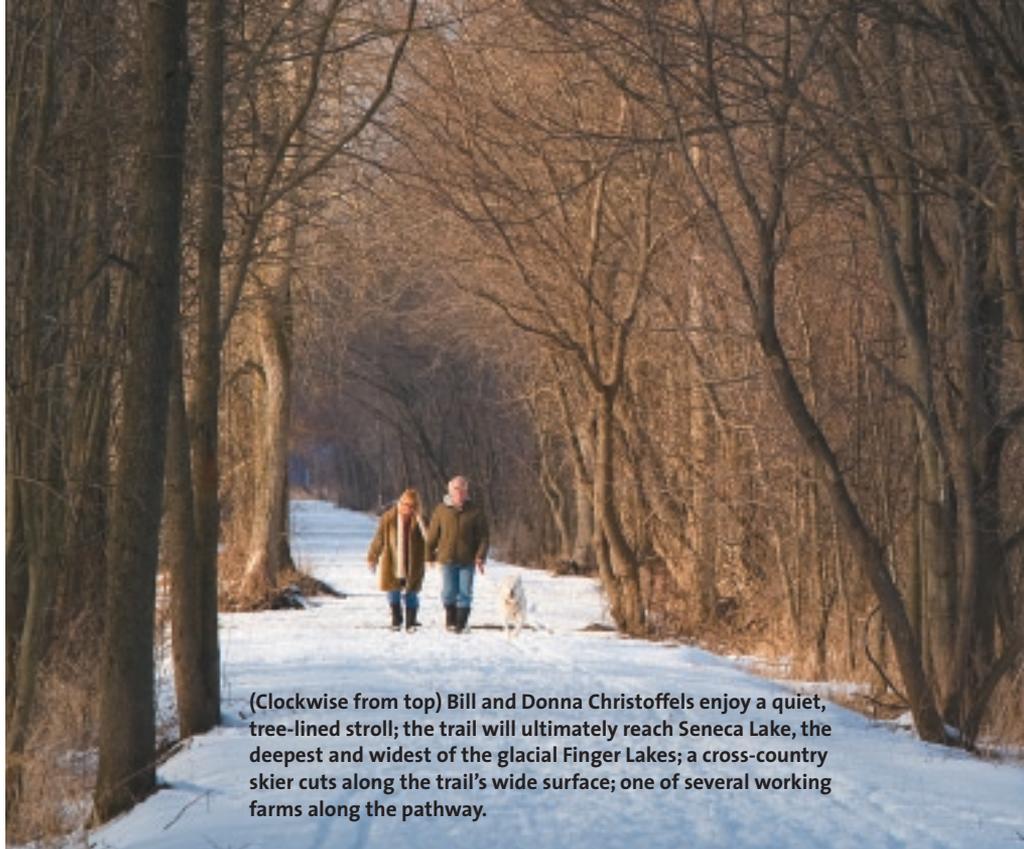
Start your engines, race fans and outdoor enthusiasts: The Catharine Valley Trail (CVT) is coming into its final turn.

Currently a bit past the half-way mark, work on the crushed-stone trail is due to be completed in 2009. Once finished, the CVT will flow 12 miles through western New York's scenic Finger Lakes region, from the shores of Seneca Lake south to the village of Horseheads. Along the way the trail will slip through the villages of Watkins Glen and Montour Falls, past wildlife-filled Queen Catharine Marsh, along the ridges that embrace Catharine Valley—and by one of the nation's hottest auto racing centers.

Cindy Chen of Clifton, N.J., snowshoes along the pathway. (At left) 156-foot Shequaga Falls, one of the centerpiece attractions of the Catharine Valley Trail.

Watkins Glen is a quiet village, except when it revs up to host the thousands of car racing fans who gather for events at Watkins Glen International speedway throughout the year. Michelle LaDue Benjamin, president of the Friends of the Catharine Valley Trail, hopes the trail will become a regular destination for racing fans and their families, providing a way for them to get out and enjoy all the area has to offer. “The trail has a plum location, making it a hub for the families of racers,” she says.

Of course Benjamin also expects the trail to appeal to the hundreds of outdoor enthusiasts who visit the area each year. With hiking, fishing, cross-country skiing and cycling opportunities, she says, “we’re definitely a big outdoor recreation area.”



(Clockwise from top) Bill and Donna Christoffels enjoy a quiet, tree-lined stroll; the trail will ultimately reach Seneca Lake, the deepest and widest of the glacial Finger Lakes; a cross-country skier cuts along the trail’s wide surface; one of several working farms along the pathway.

Checkered Past

The trail’s history dates back to the early 1800s, and its route might appeal to history buffs as it meanders through historic downtown centers. It even runs past a memorial to the famous local Native American chief, Queen Catharine Montour, for whom the trail is named, and the adjacent burial site of entrepreneur Charles Cook, who helped lay the groundwork for the trail by building the Chemung Canal.

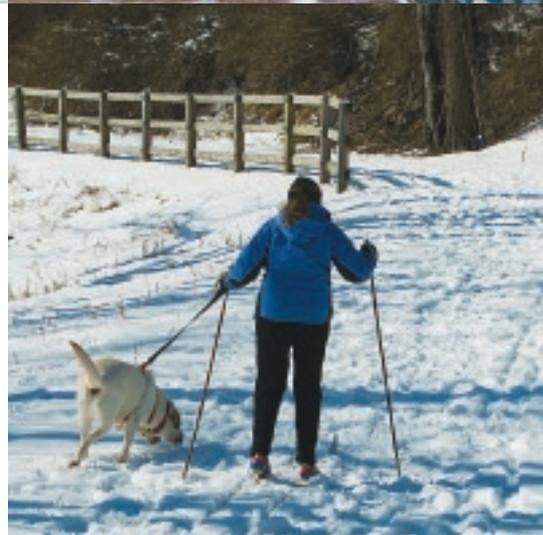


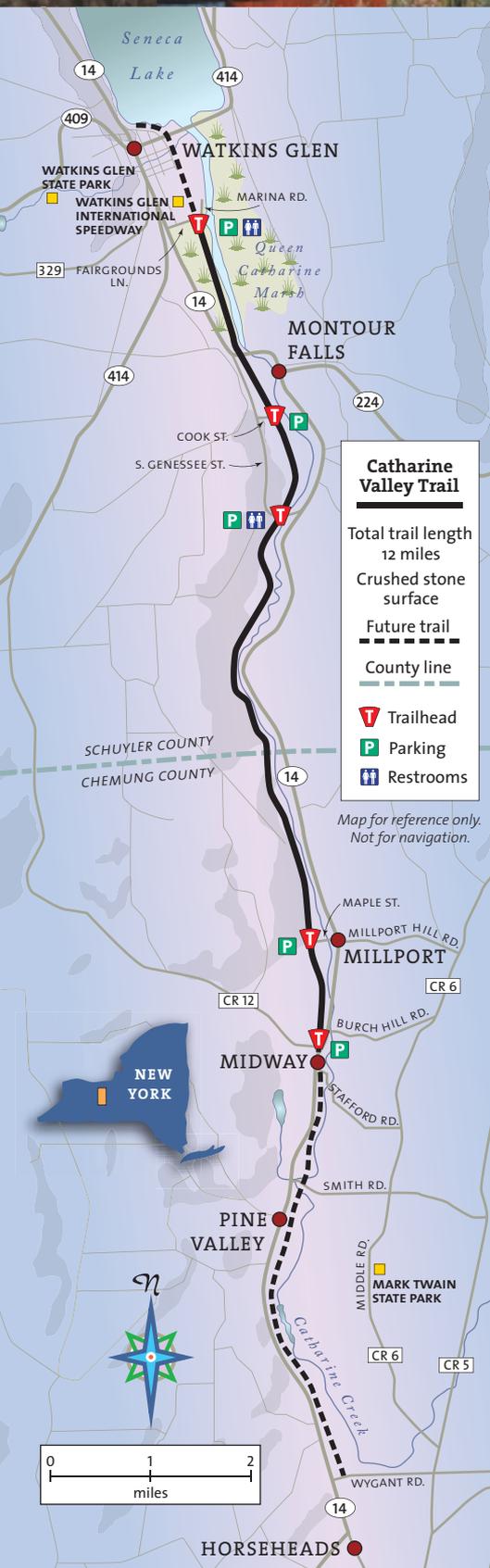
Completed in 1833, the canal formed a critical link in the freight transport route that connected Elmira, N.Y., to the bustling Erie Canal, north of Seneca Lake. But Cook’s legacy is complicated, according to Gary Emerson, a local high school history teacher who runs on the trail. The entrepreneur constructed a beautiful church, where he was to wed his fiancée, and an office in Montour Falls to serve as the county seat. Tragically, his soon-to-be bride died before they could wed, and the county seat relocated to Watkins Glen.

The Chemung Canal became another of Cook’s failed ventures. The canal’s cheap

construction, costly upkeep and the 450-foot elevation change—requiring 53 locks—contributed to its demise. “It was a money pit,” Emerson says.

While the canal venture ultimately failed, its route was ideal for a railway. The first train rolled along the Chemung Railroad line adjacent to the canal in 1849. Quickly the train began absorbing the canal’s business. During the 19th century, the line was incorporated into ever-larger railroad conglomerates. Eventually it, too, was eclipsed by the construction of highways and increased use of auto transportation. The rail line declined and was out of service by 1977.





(Clockwise from top) Even when the trail itself is quiet, you can expect plenty of animal company; Royal Treat Ice Cream on Route 14 in Millport; a barber shop on West Main Street in Montour Falls; Catharine Creek, a fishing hotspot for rainbow trout.



Even so, the late Edward Hoffman, an attorney in Elmira, envisioned a new use for the railbed. In the early 1990s he began to discuss with state park officials the idea of acquiring the rail corridors to bring communities together through outdoor recreation. Over the next few years he raised the money to buy them, ultimately conveying the right-of-way to the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. The first mile of rail-trail went in a year after Hoffman's death in 2000.

Since then, construction has been a slow, step-by-step process requiring long hours from volunteers and state and local officials. To date, seven miles of continu-



ous trail have been opened. Starting just south of Watkins Glen village, it runs to the recently opened pedestrian and bike bridge over Route 14, then parallels the highway and Catharine Creek for several miles a little above the Catharine Valley floor. Just past Millport, the trail reaches its current terminus at another pedestrian and bike bridge, which eventually will take trail users south to Horseheads.

Obtaining funding has been one of the greatest hurdles in getting the trail completed, Benjamin says. Another issue is that



The Watkins Glen International speedway; (above) one of several memorable waterfalls along the trail that freeze during the peak of winter.



Cross-country skiers near the Cook Street trailhead south of Montour Falls; (below) mailboxes in Montour Falls, and fishermen out on the piers in Seneca Lake.

state parks personnel, who are managing the construction, get pulled off the job for other parks projects. “Though we continue to face obstacles in getting the trail built, developed, promoted and interpreted, we are essentially a group of passionate volunteers working on a project that is a win-win for all,” she says.

Area residents are optimistic about the trail’s potential. Max Neal, interim president of the Watkins Glen & Schuyler County Chamber of Commerce, calls the trail an “integral part of our visitors’ experience.” A 1999 study suggests that the CVT could bring in as much as \$2.4 million annually to local economies.

Trail use has risen steadily as more sections have been built, says Emerson. “I’m seeing more people from outside the area who bring their bikes. I think as the trail continues to open up we’ll see even more of that.”

Wild and Wonderful

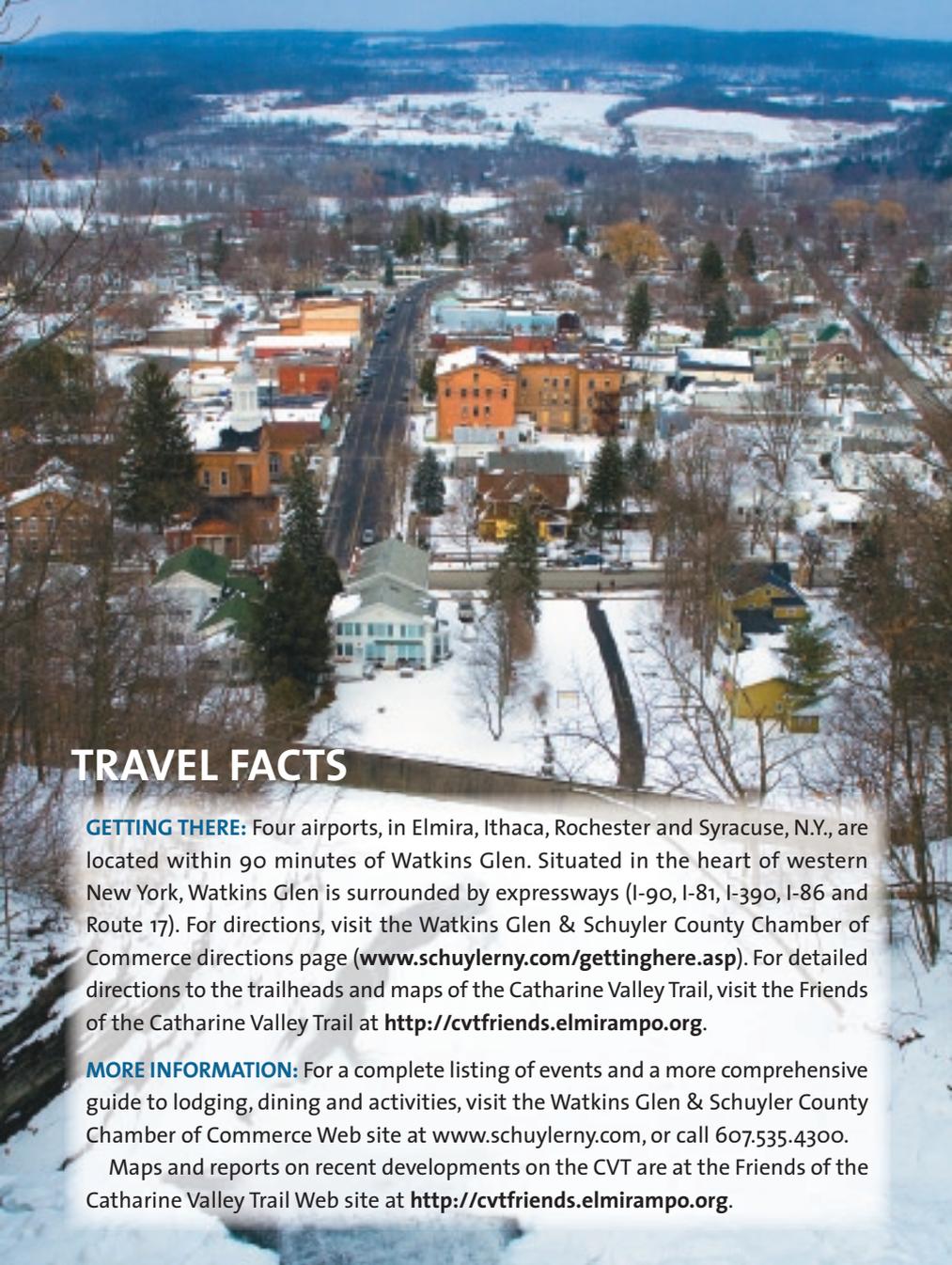
When my friend Leila and I rode the trail in the early spring, it was alive with area families out enjoying the sunny day walking, bicycling and fishing.

We parked just south of the town of Montour Falls at the Genesee Street trailhead. Venturing south, we started with a short detour along the river’s edge on the low road, following the old Chemung Canal towpath instead of using the high road along the CVT. Scores of anglers lined the sparkling water, eagerly casting their flies into the swift, cold current of Catharine Creek in hopes of catching one of the area’s prized rainbow trout. (The anglers said the fishing was slow; the water needed to warm up a few degrees before the fish would really start biting.)

The canal path ends with a short, steep climb back up to the CVT, which follows the railbed along the side of a wooded slope the rest of the way to New Road near Millport Village. Tall trees arch over the trail. Though leafless this spring day, in the summer they form a natural awning, keeping trail users cool in the shade.

Narrow, ribbed ridges jut down the slope, separating the numerous small streams flowing into the creek below. A lack of undergrowth makes it easy for trail users to see well





TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE: Four airports, in Elmira, Ithaca, Rochester and Syracuse, N.Y., are located within 90 minutes of Watkins Glen. Situated in the heart of western New York, Watkins Glen is surrounded by expressways (I-90, I-81, I-390, I-86 and Route 17). For directions, visit the Watkins Glen & Schuyler County Chamber of Commerce directions page (www.schuylerny.com/gettinghere.asp). For detailed directions to the trailheads and maps of the Catharine Valley Trail, visit the Friends of the Catharine Valley Trail at <http://cvtfriends.elmirampo.org>.

MORE INFORMATION: For a complete listing of events and a more comprehensive guide to lodging, dining and activities, visit the Watkins Glen & Schuyler County Chamber of Commerce Web site at www.schuylerny.com, or call 607.535.4300.

Maps and reports on recent developments on the CVT are at the Friends of the Catharine Valley Trail Web site at <http://cvtfriends.elmirampo.org>.

into the woods, perhaps catching a glimpse of a woodland denizen. Riding in the middle of the day, we spotted a small garter snake sunning itself along the trail's edge.

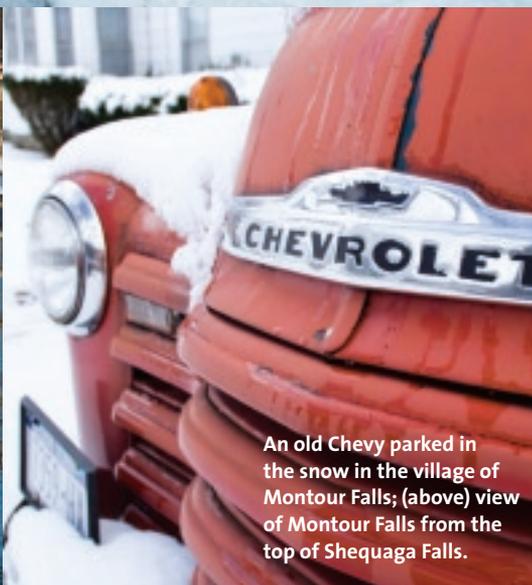
Queen Catharine Marsh, a cattail swamp on the trail's northern end, offers walkers and cyclists another chance to see wildlife. Leila and I visited this section later in the afternoon. The trail is flat, straight and open, allowing hikers and bikers a fine opportunity to observe migrating waterfowl. The marsh is a popular rest stop for these long-distance travelers and also plays host to muskrats, turtles and shorebirds.

Just north of the marsh are the Watkins Glen elementary and high schools. Once completed, the trail will include a connector path between the schools and the CVT, providing a safe alternative route to school and a space for play.

The trail's easy grades and mileage signposts every quarter-mile make it ideal for most pedestrians and riders. We passed one mother biking on the trail with her toddler in a tow-behind trailer. Huffing a bit up a moderate incline, she gave us a smile and a wave. A little farther down the way we came upon Randy and his small granddaughter. They were riding from her mother's house to his. Their pace was nice and easy. Randy rides the trail often on his knobby-tired mountain bike. A few weeks earlier, he was riding in the snow and ice, passing cross-country skiers and snowshoers. (The trail isn't plowed during the winter months.)

Most compelling, I thought, was watching a group of children playing in the woods alongside the trail. On a small network of side trails that lead to the Cook Family Cemetery, the kids were convinced they were navigating their way through an intricate maze. Not more than a mile north of the site was a playground, complete with slides, swings, obstacles and painted courts. All these kids needed, however, was a warm sunny day, a trail, some woods and, of course, their imagination.

Freelance writer Dante Petri lives in Alaska. A recent graduate of Skidmore College in upstate New York, he was an officer of the school's cycling club and led hiking trips for the outdoor club.



An old Chevy parked in the snow in the village of Montour Falls; (above) view of Montour Falls from the top of Shequaga Falls.