

A Walk in Spirit with Alta Schrock

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The Springs Historical Society of the Casselman Valley in Pennsylvania recently celebrated the 100th birthday of the late Dr. Alta E. Schrock by formally dedicating a nature trail in her name during the 2011 Memorial Day weekend. Now open year-round to the public at no charge, the Alta Schrock Nature Trail forms a loop within a four-acre area adjacent to the Springs Museum and Springs Farmers Market.

Dr. Schrock, a former professor of biology, devout Christian and ardent nature lover, dedicated much of her life to the preservation of the Casselman Valley's historical, artistic and natural heritage. During World War II, she served as a matron and practical nurse in three Civilian Public Service Camps. Following the war, she worked with Mennonite Central Committee, International Refugee Organization and the Church World Service to assist war victims in Germany. The first Mennonite woman to earn a doctorate, she taught biology at several colleges and universities before coming home to serve her community in the mid-1950s and teaching at Frostburg State University. Her most notable projects include the Penn Alps Restaurant and Craft Shop, Spruce Forest Artisan Village, Springs Museum and Springs Folk Festival.

First conceived in 1983 as a setting for artisans' craft demonstrations during the annual Springs Folk Festival, the Nature Trail took on a new purpose when board members of the Springs Historical Society realized its potential to educate visitors, especially children, about area trees and plants.

Board member Harriet Berg views the nature trail project as a continuation of the ideals Dr. Schrock expressed during her life as a preservationist, activist and educator. "People aren't learning about plants like they once did," Berg notes. "Why not use the trail year round to educate?" The Board hopes to attract students from area schools as well as visitors to the Springs Museum, Farmers Market and Folk Festival.

Thanks to the efforts of Blaine Miller, a local self-taught naturalist, species native to the area are now identified and labeled. "I've studied plants since I could walk," Miller says. "It's a lifelong hobby. My knowledge is ever evolving." Following



in his father's footsteps as naturalist is his son Mitch, who assists Blaine as needed.

Visitors can now pick up trail guides placed inside a birdhouse located at the beginning of the trail. The guide highlights a variety of indigenous plants. "It's mostly natives, nothing planted," Miller says, "Many are spring ephemerals." A map (including a scale) with markings to identify trees and shrubs, herbaceous plants, ferns, semi-woody uprights, and vines informs visitors about what they'll find during their woodland walk. Each plant category is clearly defined. Within the guide, the reader will find the common and Latin names of each plant identified, along with descriptions and informative tidbits and occasional folklore. The Millers continue to update the guide as they find new plant species.

Since the trail's dedication, more than 100 guides have been distributed. "I think it's working," Berg says. Dr. Schrock would likely agree – and approve.



Alta Schrock (center) with Penn Alps Artisan Village visitors.

Left: One of the many educational signs along the new trail.

Bottom left: Split rail fence along the trail.

Below: Blaine Miller (left) and son Mitch, self-taught naturalists, have studied and labeled much of the plant life on the trail and are continuing to update as they find new plant species.

Bottom right: Huge fungus growing on a dead tree. The quarter in the photo shows the size relationship.

