



Nature Innovation and Adventures in Portage County
Elaine Price, Co-founder of NatureVation Outdoor Adventures

Have you tried snowshoeing yet? It's fun exercise and a wonderful way to enjoy the winter. Ever wonder how the snowshoe came to be? While most of us use it for fun, for ancient people it was an innovation that transformed how they lived in winter. First invented 6,000 years ago in Central Asia, snowshoes made their way to North America. Then, European trappers and soldiers coming to this country four hundred years ago learned the technology from the Native Americans. Today's snowshoes are not much different.

My husband and I are the founders of NatureVation Outdoor Adventures, a tour company that takes groups of people on outdoor adventures in northeast Ohio, telling the stories of innovation which emanate from the land and water. We focus our efforts on getting people outside as individuals, families or business groups for nature experiences as an alternative to indoor recreation. Telling the stories of history, culture and folklore which come from the land help people relate nature to their own lives. And, when people relate to and experience fabulous nature right in their own backyard, they become the ambassadors and stewards of these places.

Portage County is full of history from its land and water. Take the Pippen Lake area on the southeast edge of Lake Rockwell, and part of Portage Park District's Towner's Woods park. After George B. Towner bought the property in 1932 to save it from development, he made a discovery. He saw a stone sticking out of a 60-foot high hill overlooking the lake and decided to excavate. What came to be known as the Towner's Woods Indian Mound revealed the remains of 11 Native Americans, as well as innovative uses of natural materials in the forms of copper beads, pieces of slate and mica, and flint knives. Copper, slate, mica and flint are not naturally found in Portage County, which shows that Native Americans enjoyed widespread trade.

The Portage Hike and Bike Trail also has water origins. Both Pippen and Brady Lakes existed long before Lake Rockwell, so their water was used to feed the canals built in the 1800s. Before railroads and trucks, the easiest way to move cargo was by water. But most northeast Ohio streams are too rapid, rocky, and shallow to support navigation on a regular basis. Innovative people engineered canals, or artificial rivers, that carried cargo long distances. In 1835, workers with picks and shovels, starting at the "Portage Summit," now called Kent, dug east to New Castle, Pennsylvania, and west to Akron, to create the 82-mile Pennsylvania and Ohio Canal. The canal spurred economic growth for Kent and other communities of Portage County, bringing people and goods in, and sending produce and raw materials out to Akron, Cleveland and the world. Through more recent innovation, part of the abandoned canal and towpath were incorporated into the Portage Hike and Bike trail, managed, in part, by the Portage Park District.

For millennia, vegetated land naturally managed rain and snowfall. Acting like a sponge, this land, particularly marshland, soaked up water during storms and slowly released it in dry times. Extensive human development with buildings, slabs of concrete and ribbons of asphalt everywhere interrupt this process resulting in flooding and erosion. Engineers are now mimicking nature with innovative "green infrastructure" techniques. The Portage Park District has installed a permeable asphalt pavement parking lot at the district's Morgan Park. They also restored a stream with naturalistic meanders to enhance wetland function, also at Morgan Park.

From Native Americans innovating showshoes, building mounds, and trading goods from hundreds of miles away, to using lake water to power canals, to mimicking natural surfaces, historic innovation surrounds us, and helps us enjoy our parks on many levels. So, get a glimpse of history by exploring Portage County nature this winter. Try your “foot” at snowshoeing at Portage Park’s Towner’s Woods, Shaw Woods, Morgan Park or Dix Park. Head out on your own or connect with a group.