

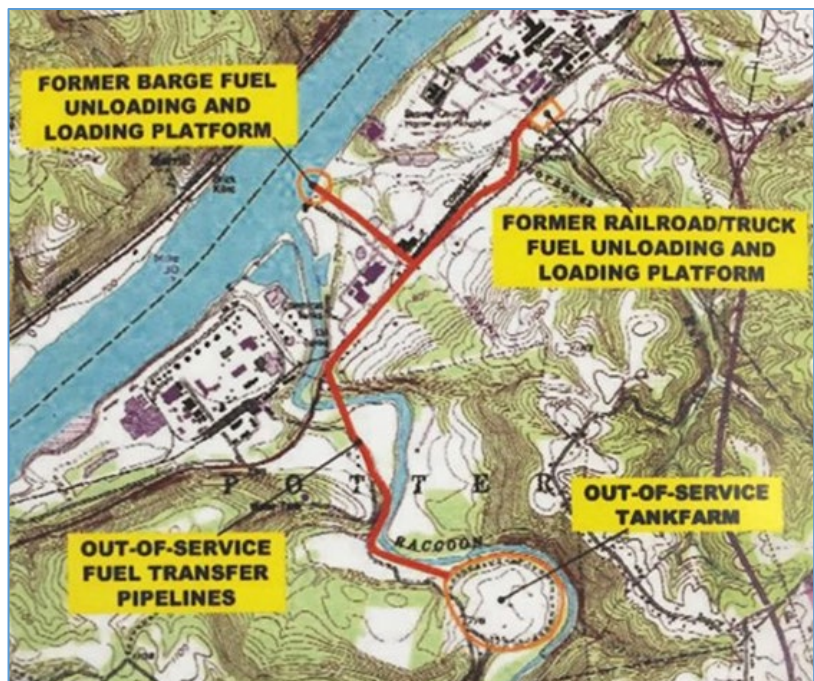


## **A Community Partnership Project of Potter Township and Independence Conservancy**

"Rocky Bend Nature Preserve" is taking shape on 89 acres of protected green space in the heart of Potter Township, Beaver County. Neighboring landowners Independence Conservancy and Potter Township have named their ambitious project for the sweeping, two-mile bend of Raccoon Creek that defines the Preserve's boundaries.



Nestled in a peaceful valley treasured by generations of local folk, Rocky Bend Nature Preserve is open to all for paddling, fishing, hunting, hiking, and quiet enjoyment of the Raccoon Creek valley. What sets Rocky Bend apart from other nature preserves is its little-known role in America's effort to win the Second World War. While the surrounding Ohio River valley has a compelling story to tell in the manufacture of glass, brick, and steel, Potter Township specialized in butadiene and styrene – chemicals essential to make synthetic rubber crucial to the war effort. That was the



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part people could see. But there was more, tucked away on Raccoon Creek, just upstream from the river.

Rocky Bend's secret role in WWII harks back to its days as a hidden fuel depot, or "tank farm." Built by the Department of Defense in 1942, shortly after the US entered the war, the tank farm was cleverly disguised to mimic the real farm it replaced. Its two steel barns and outbuildings lined up with those of the original farm. Buried deep in its fields were six massive underground gasoline storage tanks. The aim was to deceive spies looking for bombing targets when comparing before-and-after-Pearl-Harbor aerial photos of the countryside. All appeared quite normal, but instead of crops and livestock, the "barns" concealed pumps and pipes to draw fuel from the underground tanks and mix it to various octanes needed for airplanes, trucks and machinery. After blending, the fuel could be pumped through eight miles of underground pipes to loading stations near the Ohio River for further transport by truck, rail, or barge.

Situated between the two barns, the tank farm's primary outbuilding was the "change house," a sturdy structure of terra cotta, concrete, stone and steel. Half of the change house held a shower, lockers and restrooms for workers – thus the "change." The other half muffled the sound of a massive diesel generator that powered the entire operation through a network of buried cables.



No longer needed by the military after the war, the site passed through several owners. For decades, it retained an aura of mystery behind miles of barbed wire fence, no trespassing signs, and locked gates. In 2006, Potter Township acquired the tank farm from bankrupt Horsehead Industries and dedicated it to public recreation. In 2009, Independence Conservancy came to own parcels upstream and downstream of the tank farm, and likewise devoted them to free public access to Raccoon Creek. In 2012, the Department of Defense removed five of the underground tanks. The sixth remains in place because it was used for civilian purposes in the 1970s. With the tanks gone and the land reclaimed, the Township and the Conservancy began to grapple with how their adjoining parcels could find new life and purpose.

The vision for Rocky Bend Nature Preserve grew out of a planning process that gleaned ideas from gatherings of local residents, businesses, corporations, schools, sportsmen, and outdoor enthusiasts. With plan in hand, the Conservancy and the Township are now building out recreational infrastructure. At the former "tank farm," Potter Township has built a modern restroom with running water and electricity and a 25-space parking area. Interior paths and roadways are planned. Signs and storyboards will help visitors appreciate the tank farm's place in regional history, and hint at the natural wonders awaiting in the surrounding hills, valleys and meadows.

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With public grants, private donations, and plenty of volunteer muscle, Independence Conservancy has restored over a thousand feet of collapsing creek bank, built a canoe/kayak launch, cleaned up tons of debris, planted thousands of trees and wildflowers, built over 2000 feet of Creekside Trail, and created a new wetland brimming with wildlife and songbirds. The meadow at Rocky Bend is a birder's hotspot. Visitors can enjoy the sweet sounds of songbirds and marvel at bald eagles and osprey plucking fish from the creek.

Adjacent to Potter Township's former "tank farm," Independence Conservancy's Creekside Trail Natural Area features two parking lots open from dawn to dusk year-round. At 201 Raccoon Creek Road is a canoe launch/paddle access to the creek. The 221 lot features emergency vehicle access to the Creek.





Potter Township has recently restored the Change House, which is slated to anchor an outdoor artifact garden where people can see and touch remnants of our historic factories and items salvaged from the Beaver County Poor House at the mouth of Raccoon Creek. The Blending Barn is now a three-season gathering space available for weddings, reunions, graduations and special events.

### **Local Manufacturing with Global Impact:**

The tank farm was part of a vast complex of factories and facilities that sprang up in Beaver Valley in the early 1940s as part of the war effort. The Department of Defense engaged the Koppers Company to build a plant to produce butadiene and styrene, key ingredients in synthetic rubber. "Ko" (for Koppers) and "Buta" (for butadiene) became "Kobuta," the name of the factory and its adjacent worker village. Kobuta sat on the banks of the Ohio River and spanned Raccoon Creek where it meets the river in Potter Township.

Since steel was in short supply during the war, key structures were built of reinforced concrete. The walls of Kobuta's power house and integrated steam plant were made of concrete thick enough to withstand enemy bombing. Today, Kobuta's footprint is home to Styropek and BASF. Both plants continue to share water, sewer, and other infrastructure built quickly, quietly and durably to serve the original plant.

Built along the same riverbank during the 1930s was the St. Joe Zinc smelter, owned and operated in later years by Horsehead Industries. Many Potter Township families relied on jobs at St. Joe. Most recently, Royal Dutch Shell acquired the shuttered smelter, demolished it and remediated the site to



address legacy environmental concerns. It is now home to Shell Pennsylvania Chemicals, the largest industrial investment in Western Pennsylvania since WWII.

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Other local contributions to the war effort were the Curtis Wright propeller plant at the base of Tuscarawas Road in Beaver; electric motors made at National Electric and military watercraft built by American Bridge, both located in Ambridge. Millions of tons of steel were produced at Jones & Laughlin's seven-mile-long Aliquippa Works; at Spang-Chalfant, A.M. Byers and Wykoff Steel in Ambridge; at Babcock & Wilcox in Beaver Falls; and at many smaller mills along the Ohio River.

Today, Royal Dutch Shell joins BASF and Styropek in Potter Township's petrochemical tradition. Shell's bustling new Pennsylvania Chemicals plant is fully operational on the Ohio's historic banks, less than a mile from tranquil Rocky Bend.

As the war-era barbed wire fence comes down and the tank farm reveals its mysteries, Rocky Bend Nature Preserve will do what its name implies: protect our region's natural beauty, showcase our place in world history, and offer a quiet green haven for our residents, workers and visitors.

### **Put Yourself in Today's Picture:**

To find out how you, your group, or company can donate goods, services, time, or money to help bring Rocky Bend Nature Preserve to life, please contact the Potter Township office at 724-495-6220 or Independence Conservancy at 724-888-3303.

