

a tale of the TANGLEFOOT

*North Mississippi's longest rails-to-trails
throughway is a delightful trip.*



by beth ann fennelly | photography by taylor wilson



Normally I'm content with a slice of birthday cake, a gift from my hubby, and some crayoned cards from our kids, but not this year. A wilder birthday wish had entered my head, having recently learned of the Tanglefoot Trail, Mississippi's longest rail-to-trail conversion. The perfect way to celebrate my 44 years on earth? Biking the 44-mile trail that stretches from New Albany to Houston.

Opened in 2013, the Tanglefoot has brought tremendous energy (and quite a few tourist dollars) into the Chickasaw, Pontotoc, and Union counties. It bisects, quelling the fears of those who initially objected to plans for the rail corridor. Before being abandoned, the corridor was the conduit for the Gulf, Mobile, and Ohio Railroad, which was established in 1888 by Col. William C. Falkner, great-grandfather of Nobel-prize-winning author William Faulkner. Even before the Colonel planted his silver spike, however, the same passage had been used by explorer Meriwether Lewis, who himself was following the trail blazed by the native Chickasaws. For me, a fan of Mississippi history and literature, living in Faulkner's "postage stamp of earth," Oxford, the trail's pedigree adds further glamour—it's even named after one of Col. Falkner's stalwart locomotives.

Three main cities provide good trail access, and I chose to begin at the center, in Pontotoc, which boasts a bed-and-breakfast as well as a great bike shop. After getting fitted for my rented Cannondale Adventure bike, I glided downhill onto the trail and headed south to Houston. I got lucky with my early-May, 70-degree sunshine, scented with honeysuckle; but any hiker, biker, or birder gets lucky when entering the tree-canopied, 10-foot-wide asphalt path. The trail is blessedly flat, which makes it user-friendly for the less experienced, and a pleasant respite for avid cyclists who detour onto the trail from the Natchez Trace. Carol Koutroulis, proprietor of the Bridges-Hall Manor in Houston where I ate lunch, says that 80% of her clientele is composed of Natchez Trace cyclists, and that after a turn on the Tanglefoot they usually loathe to return to the Trace's hills and car traffic.

LEFT: Oxford author Beth Ann Fennelly traveled the 44-mile trail of the Tanglefoot to celebrate her 44th birthday.

After refueling in Houston, I cycled back to Pontotoc, marveling at the Mississippi that I love. The rural scenery—switching gently from woods to pastures and back again—showcases a bright soybean field, here a stand of cattle, a cluster of nonchalant goats, and a pond with turtles sliding off a log into the water as I pedaled past. I marveled, too, at the trail maintenance, overseen by the GM&O Rails to Trails Recreation District. “Whistle-stops” in Ingomar, Ecu, Algoma, and New Houlika allow a user to find a restroom, fill a water bottle, air a tire, or, if inclined, hit the warm up station for incline sit-ups. The trail is swept of limbs weekly and patrolled by an officer in a golf cart for cyclists with blowouts (trail users are advised to note the mile markers they pass in order to be located quickly).

Other than one malcontent unleashed dog, I was welcomed by everyone I encountered. “The trail brings out the hospitality in folks,” says Ellen Russell, director of the Pontotoc Chamber/Main Street Association. A good example is Greg Vaughn, who has run his Algoma two-pump gas station/country store for eight years. While his neighbors were initially skeptical of the trail, Vaughn saw potential customers for his hot lunch bar. But his interest seems to have expanded beyond business to a caretaker’s sense of civic pride. Behind his store, Vaughn has built a lounging area for trail users to kick up their feet. He’s planted roses, hung bird feeders, and erected a covered picnic pavilion, where, recently, a wedding took place. Campers can pitch their tents for free; “It’s for everybody,” Vaughn says, with a sweeping gesture. Near the “Welcome” sign, local Girl Scouts have provided a free “mini library” that also houses the trail register.

As I added my name and hometown to the register, I noted lots of



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Rent bikes from Hill & Trail Bicycle Company. Grab a book to read from the mini library provided by the local Girl Scouts, but don't forget to sign the register. Happy Trails Cottage provides a place to sleep with easy access to the trail. Algoma Store provides a comfortable place to rest, clean restrooms, and a hot lunch bar for hungry riders.

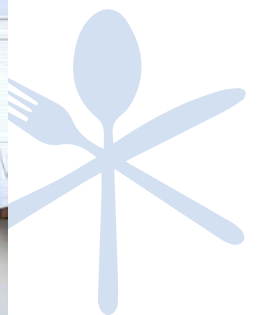
IF YOU GO... PONTOTOC

- HUB OF THE TRAIL, MILE MARKER 25 -

BEST FOR: Flexibility (options to bike north or south) and, if you don't own a bike, the chance to rent one. Karen and Brad Hill of Hill and Trail Bicycle Company will make sure you're ready to roll. A single-speed rents for \$5/hour, \$15/day; my Cannondale was \$45/day.



SLEEP: The Bodock B&B offers lovely gardens and a massive Southern breakfast served up by proprietors Jane and Toby Winston. Booked? Another good option is Happy Trails Cottage, with easy trail access.



DINE: Boondocks or Austin's on Main.

SHOP: Pontotoc has great consignment and antique stores, as well as some fashionable Main Street boutiques, such as Ella Ivy and True Blue.

CULTURAL ADD-ON: The Town Square Post Office and Museum, free of charge, is much more than the only working historical post office in the nation; its quirky tableaux and display cases contain artifacts and documents from native people and early settlers.

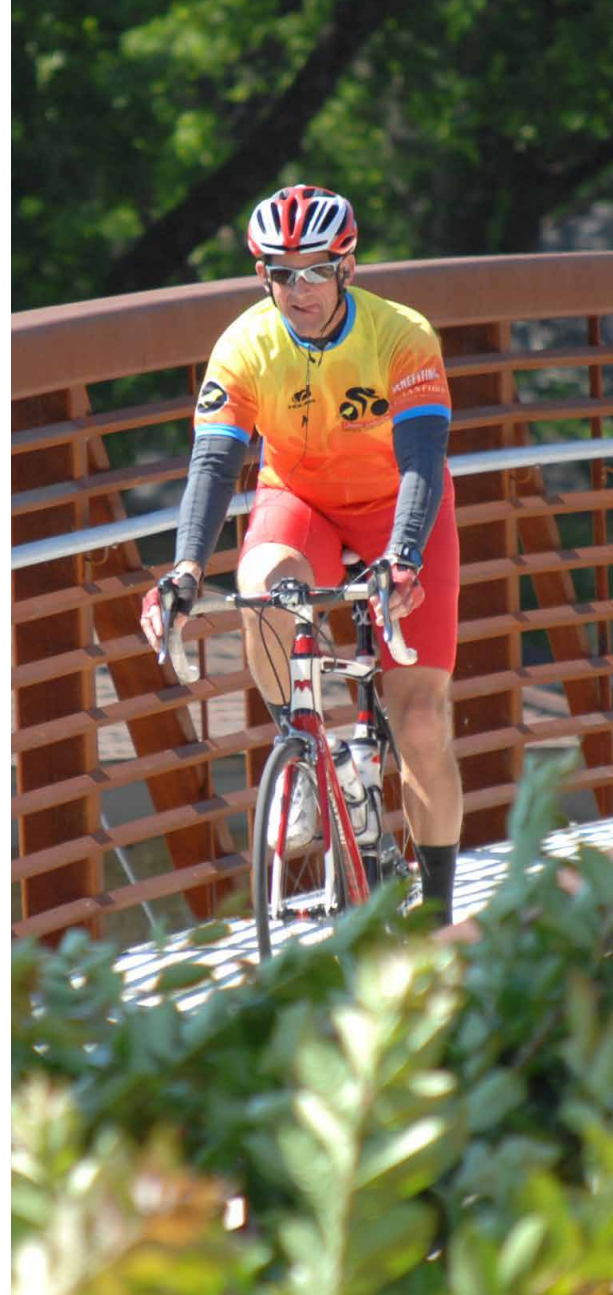
other local towns, proving that the trail has indeed inspired Mississippians to air up their tires. Jason Brooks, a CPA in Houston, has been so inspired. Although Brooks says he “hadn’t ridden a bike since I was a kid,” within a week of the trail opening, he’d purchased four bikes for his family. “Just knowing it’s there makes you want to ride it,” says Brooks. “We’re probably all healthier around here since the trail opened.”

But I noted, too, that lots of other places logged in the register weren’t local—Wisconsin and Pennsylvania were logged above Tupelo—and, increasingly, visitors come from out of the country, particularly from Europe. “I’ve had guests from 12 countries,” says Koutroulis of her Houston B&B, “and from 49 states. If you know any cyclists from North Dakota, send ‘em my way.” This cultural diversity is an unexpected boon to the towns along the trail. One can’t imagine that before the trail it was so common to see a country store filled with both regulars wearing John Deere T-shirts and three Spandexed gentlemen debating the beef jerky selection in Swiss German.

If you’re hoping I can suggest nightlife hotspots in Pontotoc, you’re out of luck. After my 50-mile round trip ride, all I wanted was a steak as big as my comfort-fit bike saddle and a long hot bath. What felt like the deepest sleep of my life came to its conclusion with a bright dawn that promised another lovely day, and even before rising I could smell sausage sizzling in the griddle. My B&B breakfast was both epic and guilt-free, as my next meal was 20 miles away.

So I felt I’d earned the chicken salad I ate at New Albany’s Tallahatchie Gourmet, and the bit of shopping I did after lunch. On my return journey to Pontotoc, where I’d exchange the two-wheeled bike for my four-wheeled car, I had time to

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A Tanglefoot cyclist heads in for a break. The California Chicken Salad and Godiva Chocolate Pie at Bridge’s Hall B&B are delicious ways to refuel. Stop by Boondocks Grill for a hearty meal. The trailway bridges are sturdy structures.



IF YOU GO... HOUSTON

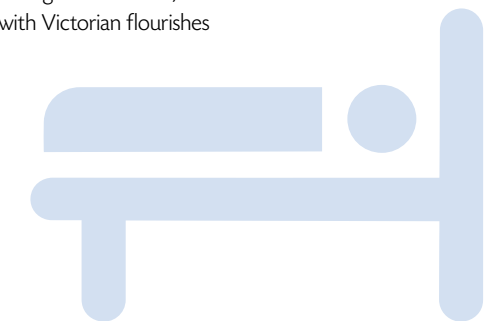
- SOUTH TERMINUS, MILE MARKER 0 -

BEST FOR: Access to the Trace

DINE: lunch is served at My Friend’s Place & Tea Room, right past the trail end on the way to downtown Houston; or enjoy a hotdog with slaw at the old-fashioned lunch counter inside Houston Rexall Drug (closed Sundays). Dinner is best found at No Way Jose.



SLEEP: The Bridges-Hall Manor, built in 1883 and bedecked with Victorian flourishes



CULTURAL ADD-ON: The Native American Indian Mounds (burial and ceremonial) located on the Trace

reflect on the glories of my 88-mile, there-and-back-again adventure. I also had time to reflect on the container of Sugaree's Ding Dong cupcakes in my white wicker basket. Six cupcakes for a family of five: the Ecrú whistle-stop allowed me to rectify the discrepancy.

Don Locke, manager of the Tanglefoot, tells me that, as ambitious as the trail's conception was, there are more plans afoot for the Tanglefoot. Houston is planning a restroom pavilion and a MDOT sidewalk to downtown. Pontotoc has broken ground on a cultural center that will offer parking and a small RV campground. Perhaps the best news for me comes from New Albany, which plans to add a spur, connecting the trail to a cluster of hotels. What that means for avid cyclists is that, with the extension bringing the length to 50 miles, round-trippers can complete a century ride. What that means for me: at least six more years of birthday rides. *M*

FOR MAPS AND OTHER INFO, VISIT TANGLEFOOTTRAIL.COM.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: For a light lunch, enjoy the Tallahatchie Chicken Salad at Tallahatchie Gourmet. AC's Coffee is located on the trail and makes a perfect pit stop. Fennelly celebrates the end of her ride with a commemorative T-shirt from Hill and Trail. Sugaree's provides multiple options for sweet treats. The 88-mile trek down the Tanglefoot and back offers many options to explore Mississippi and its small-towns.

IF YOU GO... NEW ALBANY

- NORTH TERMINUS, MILE MARKER 44 -

BEST FOR: Creature comforts, as this bigger city offers the most amenities



DINE: Tallahatchie Gourmet for sandwiches or salads; Bankhead Bicycle Club for craft beers and burgers; Latham's Hamburger Inn—famous for its graffiti and Depression-era dough burgers; AC's coffee is right at the trailhead plaza; Sugaree's for, well, sugar.

SHOP: You could spend a full day browsing the boutiques on Bankhead; if you have time for just one, check out the well-curated men's and women's lines at Sappington's.

SLEEP: One Night Stand, a three-bedroom house originally built by the GM&O, now restored and steps from the trail

CULTURAL ADD-ON: Union County Heritage Museum—from dinosaur bones found in the area to the Faulkner Literary Garden, there are lots of riches here. Kids will love the replicas of a blacksmith shop, early doctor's office, and 1950s automotive repair shop.

