



Murrysville landmark is fading from view
Murrysville Tree Sign once featured in 'Believe It or Not'
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This grove of trees, visible from Route 22, once spelled out "Murrysville," see below.
Now, it has fallen into disrepair.

In 1933, Boy Scouts planted 850 Scotch and red pine trees spelling out the name of the community.
Now the trees are in need of care and the group that maintains them is looking for help.

Glenn Skena stood at the top of the hill and surveyed what lay below him: a vast slope, steeper than a set of stairs, obscured by hip-high brambles, studded with poison ivy -- and a historic landmark that is rapidly becoming a small forest.

Skena, a manager at Hamill Manufacturing and a lifelong Murrysville resident, gingerly picked his way down the overgrown hillside and pointed into the mouth of a giant but barely discernible letter U, planted in Norway and Blue Spruce trees. When viewed from the air, or from a few choice vantage points around town, the trees on the hillside spell out "MURRYSVILLE."

Planted in 1933 by local Boy Scouts, the Murrysville tree sign is 150 feet tall and nearly 800 feet wide. In 1947, the landmark was featured in Ripley's "Believe It or Not" as the world's largest arboreal sign.

Over the years, the tree sign has been decorated with lights for Christmas and beacons for airline pilots, who would use it as a reference point as they cruised into what is now Allegheny County Airport in West Mifflin. It has been chopped down and replanted, and its fragile baby trees have quickly been dispatched by grazing deer.

When the Bella Vista housing development was built above and around the sign, sewer line work took out most of the E, along with the bottoms of the L's.

And in September, Hurricane Ivan's rains caused a landslide, a huge sheet of clay and shale sloughing off the hill onto Pleasant Valley Road below.

Each time, a conservation group called the Sportsmen's and Landowner's Alliance of Murrysville rushed in to repair the damage. The group, which Skena described as "10 old, gray men," has been the designated caretaker of the Murrysville tree sign since 1979.

Over the years, as Murrysville has transformed itself into a bustling and affluent suburb, alliance members have been clearing, cutting, hauling and planting, hoping to maintain one of the town's connections to its rural past.

But these days, the tree sign no longer bears much resemblance to that old black-and-white picture postcard that Skena distributes to curious strangers: the neat, thin rows of red and Scotch pines standing in stark relief against the bare hillside, a former sheep pasture.

"The tree sign is going to be lost," said Skena, arms folded. "It's becoming a small forest."

The trees have grown together, huge and out of control, making the sign harder to read. The hillside has exploded with thorny underbrush, hemlocks and cherry trees, and is less traversable for aging alliance members, who aren't sure how long they will be able to keep it up.

"Most of us who worked on the project have aged with the project," said R. Carl Patty Jr., an alliance member and local historian.

"That hill keeps getting steeper," he joked. "I don't know why."

Down below the tree sign, traffic along Route 22 was a distant purr. The brilliant afternoon sunshine glinted off the tiny American flags Skena has pinned to his shoelaces. As a Boy Scout during the 1960s, Skena helped clear and replant this hillside. Today, he is not optimistic that the tree sign will get the care it needs to continue.

"People don't do this [stuff] anymore," said Skena. "Thirty years ago, the Boy Scouts would be chomping at the bit to get up there, and I was one of them. Now, kids don't give a [darn]."

Adding an element of pressure is a covenant worked out years ago between the alliance, the current landowners and the municipality of Murrysville, which has authority over the tree sign. The sign spans five Bella Vista lots, but alliance members have access to the property in order to work on it.

The tree sign will be set aside in perpetuity as long as it remains a tree sign, said Patty. If the organization fails to maintain it for five years, Skena said, it reverts back to Bella Vista.

"It's sad, because it's a unique part of Murrysville," said Michele Clarke, director of recreation for the municipality. "We know it's a dying project, but the fact is, [the alliance] can't do it anymore."

At its best 45 years ago The Murrysville tree sign was first conceived by F.M. Sloan, a local man connected with the natural gas industry. Sloan also was a scoutmaster, and directed his Boy Scouts to plant the bare hillside with 850 Scotch and red pine trees. The stem of the Y was positioned to point to the site of the Haymaker Gas Well, in 1878, the world's largest commercial natural gas well. It caught fire and burned for 18 months before being extinguished.

To compensate for the curvature of the hillside, the letters were surveyed from across the valley, Patty said, so that it could be read easily from town.

By the 1960s, the pines had grown tall and scraggly, and the sign's letters had begun to mix and blur. The idea was to cut down every other tree and replant the sign in stages. But the scoutmaster at the time wanted to get it all done at once, said Patty, so all of the original trees were chopped down and replaced with small spruce seedlings.

But poor maintenance caused fast-growing Cherry, Elm, Sumac and Crab Apple trees to sprout and overtake the seedlings, and most of the Spruce perished. By 1974, the sign was almost invisible, Patty said.

A few years later, the landowner at the time, Dr. Vincent B. Hall, asked the alliance to restore the landmark, and the group agreed. It took three years just to clear out all the deciduous growth.

After repeated attempts at replanting the sign with seedlings, which were promptly eaten by deer, the alliance finally bought 700 hardy, 3-foot Blue and Norway Spruce trees, hauling each one across the steep hillside. The sign thrived.

When Hall passed away unexpectedly, the property, including the tree sign, was sold to developer Pat DeCesare, who several years later began building the Bella Vista development.

To satisfy land-use regulations on lot size, Patty said, certain parcels were drawn down across the tree sign, and as a result, several homeowners now own pieces of the sign.

Bella Vista has created a drainage problems for the hillside, Patty said, and access to the top of the sign is now restricted by construction of a home on the second-to-last lot. The final lot has been sold and workers are scheduled to break ground for that home in the near future.

DeCesare denies the development has had an adverse impact on the tree sign.

Most of the 836 trees are now nearly double their ideal height and have begun to grow together, said Patty.

"It's quite obvious with the M, U and R," he said. "The S, V, I, L, L and E are in fairly good shape. The soil was not as good there, so the trees didn't grow as fast."

Once a year, the Murrysville tree sign is used for a holiday event called Light-Up Night, when alliance members climb up the steep hill and light up the M with candles.

Because the sign has grown out of control, said Clarke, the organization now has to illuminate part of the M and half of the U, "to make it look like an M."

As they get older, alliance members are not as capable of getting up that hill, said Carrie Martin, assistant to the recreation director.

"They're starting to get a little touchy about lighting up the ol' M," she said.

At its peak, the alliance had more than 100 members; today, there are fewer than 40, only five or six of them active, said Clarke. Usually, there are at least a few who are willing and able to make the annual climb up the hill to clear out all of the wild growth from around the tree sign. But one year, there was nobody to do it, and they had to hire a landscaper for the job.

All things considered, the tree sign was probably at its best 45 years ago, said Skena.

"It's truly a mess now," he said. "It's an extremely bad situation, and it's going to be an expensive situation. With 850 trees, you've got thousands of dollars in trees."

'History in our heads' Volunteers are not easy to find. The Boy Scouts were the ones who planted the sign's original trees, and replanted them 30 years later. But today's Scouts are a more nebulous entity, with so many different troops and constantly changing leadership.

"I've never found a troop to continuously do things year after year," said Clarke. "You just don't have a continuity of commitment, and that's what's so amazing about [the alliance] doing this project."

The alliance is not the kind of group to apply for grants, Clarke said, and unless someone comes through with money and time for such a massive project, the tree sign might soon become a memory.

Skena has very firm ideas about the importance of sweat equity in civic volunteerism. He proudly shows off all of the projects that the alliance has done over the years -- cleaning up streams, and building dams, bridges, wheelchair decks and picnic tables.

He grew up in Murrysville and has observed the many recent changes, in particular the infusion of wealthy residents. He worries about Murrysville becoming an "elite" community, and that today, "people are more willing to give you a \$500 check than five hours of their time."

Skena hopes that more parents and children will start being interested in preserving their environment, as well as local history. Keeping the Murrysville tree sign intact is a part of that conservation.

"There's a lot of history [in the tree sign]," he said. "And us 50-some-year-old people have a lot of the history in our heads."