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Outdoors | Society to honor John O'Dell, brainchild behind River-to-River Trail

LES WINKELER For The Southern
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John O'Dell

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The River-to-River Trail Society is waiting for the last piece of federal red tape to be severed so it can honor John O'Dell, who is largely responsible for the trail as it exists today.

O'Dell, a former educator and tireless advocate for tourism in Southern Illinois, believed a trail stretching across Southern Illinois would be an economic boost for the region. His dream became a reality in the early 1990s.

"This was kind of his baby," said William Gilmour, current president of the River-to-River Trail Society. "He worked with several members of the forest service, private individuals, some in the horse community, and yes, they plotted it out. They got permission to put it where it's at. They laid it out. John and all these people laid it out, coordinated it."

A page in the current River-to-River Trail Guide succinctly states O'Dell's role in the creation of the trail, "It was John who, with the help of his wife Marilee, pored over topographic maps, pulled on his hiking boots, and went out on foot to mark a route for hikers and horsemen to follow from the Ohio River to the Mississippi. John sought out and enlisted the support of the Forest Service, and many like-minded individuals, in order to overcome the many obstacles that lay in the way of completing the Trail.

"On February 15, 1992, the River-to-River Trail Society held its first meeting at Marion, with John serving as Founder and first President. Since then, the Society has continued John's work in promoting, publicizing, and advocating for the Trail."

In addition to serving as the society's president until well into the 21st century, O'Dell wrote the first four editions of the trail guide. Now retired and living in Indianapolis, the society figured it was time to memorialize O'Dell's efforts.

"The O'Dell monument came about upon the suggestion of Sue Perina of the Shawnee Trail Conservancy," said Gilmour. "She messaged me and suggested it. We talked about it back and forth. I threw out the idea to other board members and everybody seemed to be in favor of it. So, we started moving forward with it."

Fittingly, the five-foot tall monument will be shaped like a hiking boot. The monument will include a map of the trail and an inscription outlining O'Dell's efforts in establishing the trail and the society.

"It's going to be mounted as soon as we get permission," Gilmour said. "It will be mounted in the Garden of the Gods, near the backpackers' parking lot. We're not going to put it in the parking lot itself. It's going down in the woods. My thought is to put it in the woods, right along the trail. It will get a lot of exposure to people walking in the Garden of the Gods and all the thru-hikers."

The Shawnee National Forest has already granted permission to place the monument, but is awaiting for final approval from Washington, D.C.

The River-to-River Trail winds its way over 157 miles in Southern Illinois. The Ohio River terminus is Battery Rock while the Mississippi River counterpart is Devils Backbone Park in Grand Tower. The trail also travels near Garden of the Gods, One Horse Gap, Ferne Clyffe State Park, Lusk Creek Canyon and Inspiration Point.

The trail has changed somewhat since O'Dell and his companions established the trail.

"We reworked the maps," Gilmour said. "I hiked it in 2014-15 with some of our friends in the society. The maps were extremely outdated. After I got done, I called the Forest Service and we got everything updated. Now they're on Avenza, an app on your phone. Your phone knows your GPS location, so you can look on your phone and know exactly where you're at on the trail."

As O'Dell hoped, the trail is bringing people to Southern Illinois. Gilmour said he is aware of 30-35 people who thru-hiked the trail already this year. Hikers usually spend 10-12 days on the trail.

Finally, the O'Dell family is thrilled with the recognition.

"I think he was really surprised," Gilmour said. "I know John's family was extremely pleased. They were very supportive and appreciative."

