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The Twin Jewels Of Western Pennsylvania

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DRIVING through the small town of Portersville, Pennsylvania, one is totally unaware of the nature beauty that can be found just two minutes away on either side of the main road. Veering off in one direction brings you to McConnell's Mill State Park, while a turn in the opposite direction brings you to Moraine State Park. These two relatively unknown natural areas in Western Pennsylvania offer a variety of scenic vistas that range from the calm stillness of Lake Arthur to the rugged terrain of Slippery Rock Gorge. It has been a personal project of mine to photograph the beauty of these two areas, which I call "The Twin Jewels".



Hell's Hollow Falls. Canon 1Ds, Contax 28mm lens, f-stop not recorded, exposure 0.8 second, patterned metering mode, ISO equivalent 200. An easy mile hike from the parking lot, Hell's Hollow Falls is the largest waterfall in McConnell's Mill State Park.

This land, which is now representative of how Western Pennsylvania must have looked hundreds of years ago, was not always so pristine. Beneath the natural beauty of Moraine State Park lies a history of longstanding environmental abuse that is difficult to comprehend. Nonetheless, unlike most environmental stories, this one has a happy ending. The areas transition from a polluted wasteland to one of Western Pennsylvania's most beautiful state parks is an example of what can be done to reclaim land that has been poisoned in order to return it to its natural state. One can only hope that what was accomplished at Moraine will serve as an example to be followed elsewhere.



White Trillium. Canon 1Ds MkII, 180mm f3.5 lens, f11 at 1/20 second, pattern metering mode, ISO equivalent 100. In the spring, portions of the forest floor in McConnell's Mill State Park become a carpet of trillium. Though plentiful in Western Pennsylvania, they are a protected species in many parts of the United States and Canada.

The landscape that is now Moraine was created during the Ice Age, when the local creeks became dammed by glaciers and several large lakes were created. The glacial movement also carved the surrounding area, leaving behind rolling hills and the 400 foot deep Slippery Rock Gorge, which lies within nearby McConnell's Mill State Park.

In the 1800's, the discovery of coal laid the foundation for what could have been the beginning of the end for this wondrous area. The land was first deep-mined for coal, and then subsequently scarred by strip mining. The mining severely polluted the local streams and waterways. By 1900, the area was also being drilled for gas and oil. Once the natural resources had been depleted, the wells were abandoned, leaving them unsealed and leaking.



Icy River. Canon 1Ds MkII, 70-200 f2.8L IS lens, focal length 100mm, f16 at 1/6 second, pattern metering mode, ISO equivalent 100. From the overlook at the old mill in McConnell's Mill State Park in winter, one can see a beautifully curved river meandering through the woods.

The tide began to turn in the early 1920's when Frank Preston performed a careful study of the area and developed a deep appreciation for the land formations. He ultimately formed the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy to purchase the land and attempt to restore it to its native state. He recognized that there was much work to be done, but made the commitment to see it through. By 1970, Mr. Preston's dream had become a reality. A dam was built to recreate the glacial lake (which was named Lake Arthur), the strip mines were filled in, and the deep mines and open wells were sealed off. Fifty years after Frank Preston began the project, the area was officially dedicated as Moraine State Park.

By comparison, McConnell's Mill State Park has had a relatively uneventful history. The gristmill for which the park was named was built in 1852 and bought by Thomas McConnell in 1875. The land was transferred to The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, the same organization that saved Moraine, in 1942, and the park was dedicated in 1957.

The views that these lands offer are very different from those a hiker would have seen in the late 1800s. The water is now clean and the land remains pristine and untouched. There are hiking trails, campgrounds, and boating on the lake. Various habitats beckon to be explored, from open meadows and marshes to rough, rocky hills and gorges.

One of my favorite locations in Moraine is a marsh that actually abuts a roadway - which makes accessing it easy. To my eye, the most interesting and beautiful portion of this unnamed area is clearly visible from the road but, oddly enough, I have never seen anyone else stop to take pictures or spend time here. Magical things can happen here at sunrise. Depending upon the time of year, there may be beautiful reflections in the water, abstract layers of ice and snow, or, my personal favorite, incredible soft lighting coming through mist and fog. When I photograph here, I find it important to try many different camera angles and to get down particularly low in order to see the various types of reflections and lighting effects in and on the water.

While in McConnell's Mill, I am particularly attracted to the rushing, turbulent water and waterfalls. They provide a wonderful contrast to the calm water found at Moraine. Using a long lens, I often isolate small areas of turbulence and, by using a long shutter speed and polarizing filter, make abstract images of the water's movement - each composition unique. Hell's Hollow Falls, the largest waterfall in the park, is located in a low-lying area

which is surrounded by tall trees, making it ideal to photograph since it doesn't receive direct light until late morning. I often bring wading boots with me so that I can climb onto the rocks in the middle of the stream to photograph the falls from different angles. Right next to the falls is a spectacular tree with twisted, gnarled roots that give it a mystical appearance. The half-mile walk from the parking lot to the falls is wonderful in any season, but particularly in spring and fall. In the spring, the forest is filled with a myriad of white and yellow trillium and, in the fall, the ground becomes a swirl of orange and red leaves.



Foggy Morning. Canon 1Ds MkII, 70-200 f2.8L IS lens, focal length 170mm, f11 at 1/15 second, ISO equivalent 100. The edge of a marsh in Moraine State Park becomes covered in fog on many autumn mornings. Before the fog lifts, it reflects the warm tones of sunrise, giving the shoreline an eerie and beautiful glow.

One of the best aspects of photographing locally is that you can revisit locations in all types of weather throughout the four seasons. Spring at Moraine and McConnell's Mill is filled with signs of earthly renewal. Wildflowers abound and there is a profusion of plants and trees with buds of different colors and shades. Summer is a symphony in green, while the colors of fall, as in most of Western Pennsylvania, are marvelous. Winter brings a sense of serenity, as there are few visitors and the lonely park seems willing to give up all of her secrets to the few that are willing to come and keep her company.



Color In Motion. Canon 1Ds MkII, 70-200 f2.8L IS lens, focal length 170 mm, f22 at 1/4 second, pattern metering mode, ISO equivalent 100. Rather than fight the wind, I always find it better to work with the hand that mother nature deals on any given day. One windy morning in Moraine, I made many images of the trees blowing in the wind in order to get just a few abstract images that seemed to work.

Moraine and McConnell's Mill State Parks have come a long way indeed. I feel certain that Frank Preston would be smiling if he could see the culmination of his dream today.

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Author's Note: The style of writing in this article is actually a bit 'flowery' for me, but was written to reflect the style of the magazine in which it was published.