



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – May 13, 2009

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History Goes High-Tech Along Allegan County Heritage Trail

(ALLEGAN, Mich) – The award-winning Allegan County Heritage Trail has taken on a new twist...as the 28 sites along the 122-mile route all feature “caches” for the increasingly popular activity geocaching.

According to *Geocaching.com*, “Geocaching (pronounced geo-cashing) is a high-tech treasure hunting game played throughout the world by adventure seekers equipped with Global Positioning System (GPS) devices. A geocacher can place a geocache anywhere in the world, pinpoint its location using GPS technology and then share the geocache’s existence and location online. Anyone with a GPS device can then try to locate the geocache. The basic idea is to locate hidden containers and then share your experiences online.”

The caches on the Heritage Trail route were placed throughout 2008 by avid geocacher, John Sexton from Holland, who is also a Sergeant with the Allegan County Sheriff’s Department and a member of the Michigan Geocaching Organization (MiGO). He said he came across the Allegan County Heritage Trail tour book at the Old Jail Museum, while obtaining permission to place a geocache there.

“After looking through the tour book, I discovered that Allegan County has many historical areas that are not well known,” Sexton says. “I quickly decided to combine my favorite hobby of geocaching with the history of Allegan County in hopes to bring people to these interesting locations.”

The 28 landmarks along the Allegan County Heritage Trail route truly reflect the historic character which makes Allegan County unique. Among those sites are a WWII Prisoner of War Camp (Site #6), a Civilian Conservation Corps Pine Plantation (Site #9) and the “ghost town” of Pine Creek just west of Otsego (Site #2).

Geocache container sizes range from film canisters, often called “microcaches”, which are too small to hold anything more than a tiny paper log, to five-gallon buckets or even larger containers. Typical cache treasures are not high in monetary value but may hold personal value to the finder. Aside from the logbook, common cache contents can include coins, small toys, ornamental buttons or other trinkets.

Considered a great family event, geocaching was introduced in 2000 and has attracted thousands of people to search for the nearly one-million caches worldwide. Caches are hidden in major metropolitan areas to remote rural locations, including difficult terrain areas. All caches registered on

Geocaching.com include the GPS coordinates as well as a ranking as to how difficult it is to find.

Sexton's fellow geocachers also enjoy seeking out the various sites, as they post their comments on geocaching.com:

- "WOW... I have lived in Allegan County had have a little history of the military, but I had no idea that we had a POW camp here." – The Burch Crew
- "Lived in Allegan County for 10 years now and never knew where the dam was, just new it was somewhere." – Jupiterkid
- "Learned that Fennville was named after a man named Fenn. I bought the Heritage Trail booklet at the library for \$3.00 ... hope to do some more of these Heritage geocaches since they are so interesting." – Sniffles
- "Decided to hit the Heritage Trail today. Love where these caches in the series take me." – Bjoan
- "Enjoying our day of caching on the Heritage Trail. Thanks for the cache and history lessons." – 2OtterRits
- "Fascinating history attached to this spot. A German POW camp!! I was surprised to learn that many of the POWs stayed on after the war." – Bjoan
- "We think this was the most interesting stop on the Heritage Tour that we've done so far. Mars is quite a history buff, especially when it comes to military history. Never knew this about Allegan. Thanks so much for teaching us something new." – Jupiterkid
- "Another pretty spot on the Heritage Trail. Good to get back to these objectives. Lived in Wayland for several years and never knew about this dam and hydroelectric plant. What a beautiful day to cache." – Bjoan

"The Allegan County Heritage Trail is a great way to experience the best that Allegan County has to offer," says Kevin Ricco, Director of Parks & Tourism for Allegan County. "The addition of geocaching to each of the sites on the trail adds yet another level of fun and interest to the tour."

A project of the Allegan County Tourist Council and its Heritage Preservation Advisory Board, the Allegan County Heritage Trail and the official 38-page guidebook were unveiled in May 2003, followed by a companion CD in the fall of 2004. Both the guidebook and CD feature interviews with county residents, written and oral histories and a collection of photographs. Brown directional signs can be found along the route and in 2007, informational panels were erected at the various locations to provide greater detail about the history of the area.

The tour is a loop route that runs from Saugatuck east across the farmlands of northern Allegan County and on through the towns of Hopkins, Wayland and Martin, down to Plainwell. From there, the trail heads back along the Kalamazoo River through Otsego and Allegan, then past Lake Allegan and through the Allegan State Game Area. The tour continues past orchards and vineyards to Lake Michigan, and then up the lakefront back to Saugatuck.

This self-guided tour is designed to be driven in a clockwise direction, which provides the best scenic vistas. Figure on taking a full day if you plan to tour the entire route, stopping to view the various sites and enjoy the experiences along the way. Driving non-stop, it would take you about 4-5 hours to travel the route. Of course, stopping to geocache along the way may add to one's overall time.

The Allegan County Heritage Trail Tour Book sells for \$3; the CD set is \$12. Both may be purchased at the Allegan County Parks and Tourism Office, area libraries, and other locations throughout the county. To learn more about the route, visit www.allegancounty.org/heritagetrail/.

The Allegan County Tourist Council was formed in 1982 and serves to market and promote the county's rich travel, tourism, hospitality, cultural and heritage resources. For more information on Allegan County, call 888-4-ALLEGAN or visit www.visitallegancounty.com

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