



ELROY-SPARTA STATE TRAIL

In 1964, a Chicago and North Western railroad route known as the Elroy-Sparta line ceased operation. A year later, all tracks were removed. What remained was the start of something new: The steel and wooden bridges, tunnels, fencing and wide, flat railway bed were perfect for a recreational trail.

In 1965, the Wisconsin Conservation Department designated the abandoned railroad as a hiking trail, with bicycling added to the concept the following year, when the state's purchase of the trail right-of-way was completed for \$12,000. With that, the Elroy-Sparta State Trail was ready for use.



By 1970, the trail had been resurfaced with crushed limestone, and it

was officially made a National Recreation Trail by the U.S. Department of the Interior in 1971. As the 1980s approached, 40,000 people were enjoying the trail annually.

These days, nearly 60,000 users each year find their way onto the Elroy-Sparta State Trail, considered the nation's first rail-to-trail project. Five small towns are located on the 32.5-mile route, which passes through prairies, farm fields, wetlands and unglaciated areas. Former train depots now serve as visitor centers.

The rock tunnels, more than 140 years old, are popular features; there are three along the way, including one that's three-quarters of a mile long. Bicyclists are encouraged to walk bikes through these dark and cool spaces—and bring a flashlight!

With 2018 marking the 50th year since the emergence of the Department of Natural Resources, it seems like a great time to celebrate the five-plus decades of the Elroy-Sparta State Trail, shown here in August 1967.

To learn more about this iconic state trail, including a map, trail pass requirements and a slideshow with more historic photos, go to dnr.wi.gov and search keywords "Elroy-Sparta." For information from the trail's Friends group, see elroyspartatrail.com.

—WNR staff

