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Marker makeovers
 Carn enjoys bringing history back to life
 by Chris Brady
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Jim Carn, of Williamsport, applies a final coating of paint to a historical marker sign at the entrance to Turbotville. Carn has refurbished more than 30 signs in the area. Photo by Chris Brady/Standard Journal.

TURBOTVILLE — You likely pass one or more each and every day, but it's only in recent months that you've noticed a little something different, a newer, fresher look perhaps. Well, that change is thanks the work of Jim Carn, a Williamsport man that has brought historical markers throughout the area back to life.

Carn and fellow members of the Keystone Marker Trust have been sprucing up the historical Keystone Markers — the signs that greet visitors entering boroughs and small villages throughout the commonwealth, bringing the once rusted, bland signs back to life with a new coat of the original blue and yellow color scheme of the signs.

Carn, a district judge and retired Williamsport police officer, has been refurbishing the signs for more than three years. He's completed more than 32 signs, from Milton, Watsontown, Vicksburg and Dewart to Roaring Branch, South Williamsport and Wellsboro and many points between.

Carn said he appreciates the historical markers, noting they often contain a little bit of history, compared to the modern signs of today, which simply note the municipality you are about to enter.

"These signs are nicer than the newer signs," said Carn. "They have a little history on them."

The signs also include the distance to the next town as well as the year in which the town was founded.

The signs are well-constructed consisting of cast iron and have stood the test of time, aside from the weathering, of course. He estimates the signs are about 50 or more pounds each and bolted onto steel poles.

He just wrapped work on a second Turbotville sign and plans to refurbish another in the borough soon. He would also like to spruce up a Potts Grove sign in the near future.

"I'm usually there and gone before anyone from the town knows what's going on," said Carn, who typically spends around four hours on each sign. "I'm going to keep doing it as long as it's not too far."

Carn has traveled up to 50 miles from his Williamsport home to treat a sign.

The signs were originally erected by the precursor to the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT), the Pennsylvania Department of Highways. The program began in the 1920s and continued, it is thought, through the 1940s.

Carn first questioned Rick Mason, media relations director for the local PennDOT district, about the possibility of refurbishing the signs.

"We ran it through the bureaucracy and got the OK as long as it kept the same color scheme," said Carn.

It is the hope of Carn and others associated with the Keystone Marker Trust that the group soon gets custodial rights to the signs. That will enable the group to refurbish any of the historical markers throughout the state. PennDOT will retain ownership of the signs.

Carn donates his time and services and even provides his own paint, though he's received donations from various people and businesses toward the purchase of paint.

No matter the condition of the sign, Carn will sand, scrape and refurbish the sign with a new coat of paint. Some are missing pieces, others, such as the ones in Turbotville, appear to have been constructed by someone other than the state.

"The Os are smaller and the letters are rounded," said Carn with his now-discerning eye.
 Still, he gives the sign a careful hand and a new coat of life. After an initial coat of paint, he returns to provide a second and final coat of both the blue and yellow coats.

The biggest thanks he gets is from passers-by.
 "I have people stop," he said. "Others drive by and give me a thumb's up."
 "It's fun."

For more information on the markers, visit www.keystonemarkerttrust.org, where you can also see more of Carn's work.
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