

Pedal Power

Young entrepreneur introduces railbiking action as an energizing Up North travel option

By Dianna Stampfer

There are thousands of miles of inactive rail lines meandering throughout Michigan's countryside, and removing those tracks can be expensive.

Macie Hefron found a creative way to repurpose three miles of abandoned railroad lines off U.S. 31 in Grawn, just south of Traverse City. She launched Wheels on Rails, a railbike tour company that's the culmination a series of online searches about two things she's passionate about: biking and railroads.

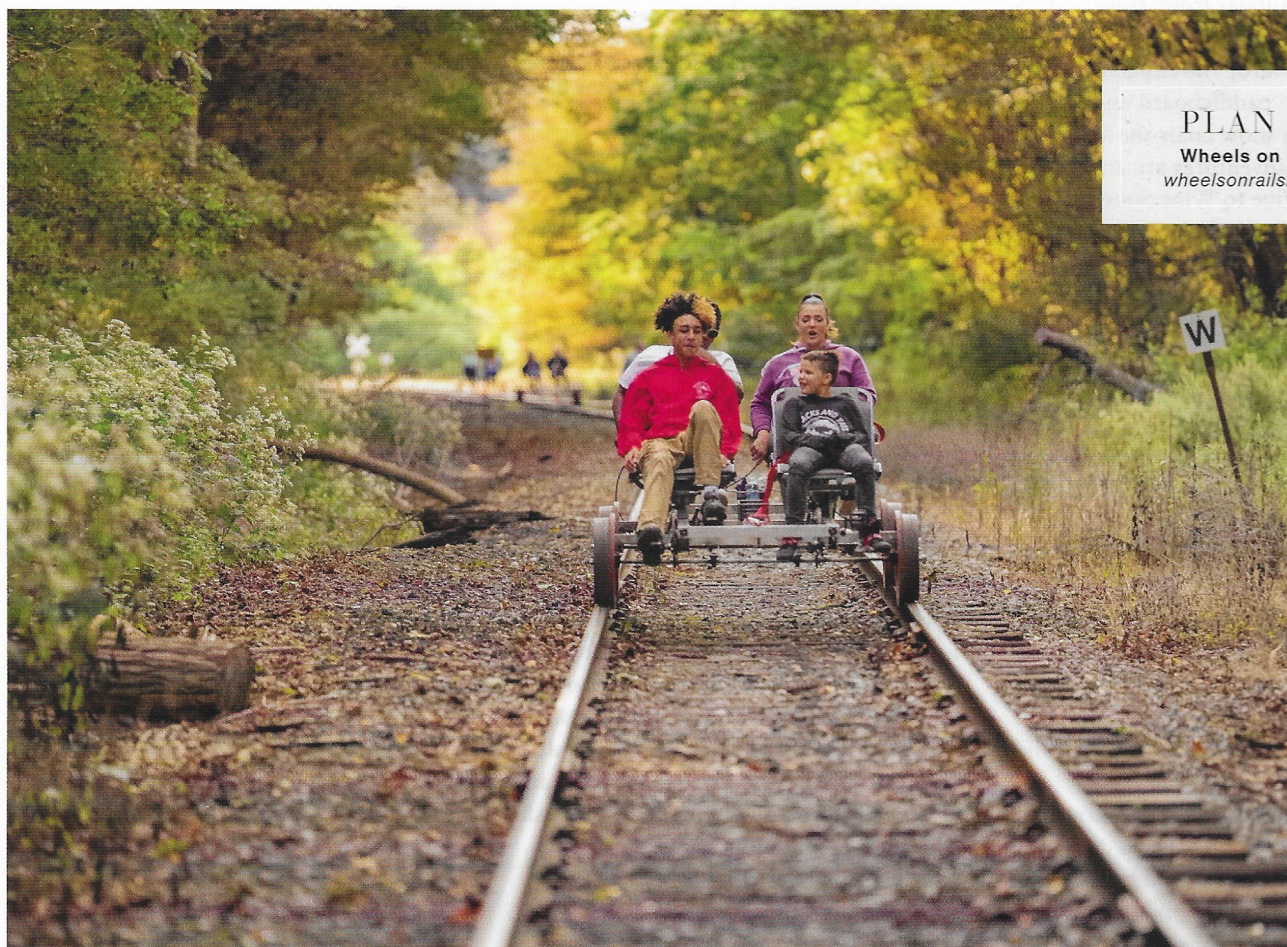
"I was scrolling through Facebook when a photo came up that combined my recent searches, biking and railroads," says the recent Spring Arbor University graduate. "It was a railbike. It caught my eye so quickly and I knew, right in that moment, that I had to do some more dig-

ging to get to the bottom of what railbiking was all about."

Railbiking is a rapidly growing activity around the world in which riders pedal custom-designed, four-wheel open-air carts — much like recumbent or surrey bikes, or a paddle boat, only on wheels — along the unused tracks of inactive rail lines.

The wheels were turning, and Hefron — who at the time was working as a student assistant for the Michigan Department of Transportation Office of Rail — began researching where and how to introduce this fun and inclusive activity to people in her own state.

She enlisted help from her boss and then began the arduous task of trying to make a connection with someone who was willing to embrace her idea. After a couple of immediate rejections and a deal that



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Wheels on Rails
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Wheels on Rails outings follow three miles of abandoned railroad tracks south of Traverse City.

fell through at the end, she finally found a home for Wheels on Rails. The tracks were completely out of service, meaning there's no chance of encountering trains while the railbikes are on the line.

"I came to them with full paperwork in hand and went for it," she says proudly. "The process of approval took one full year. I then had to go through the state, since this is a Michigan-owned line. I knew it wasn't going to be an easy task, but it was something I had to do." When there were delays and things were slowed to a standstill, she contacted legislators to help push things along. "During this whole process, I'll say I've felt very out of place (because of) my age, but I want to advocate for young entrepreneurs because we're capable of making things happen."

With her "I think I can, I think I can" attitude, Hefron has been chugging along to bring this exciting experience to Michigan. The woodland tracks travel over two road crossings, under a bridge, and near spring-fed creeks on a six-mile, 60-minute "Up North" round-trip jaunt. This is the first (and currently only) railbiking operation in the state.

"Exploring the rolling, tree-lined hills on custom-made railbikes creates a unique opportunity for health and wellness," says Trevor Tkach, president of Traverse City Tourism. "At the same time, it showcases the beauty of the region from a different perspective. Wheels on Rails promises to be an outstanding addition to the local travel experience."

Railbikes are great for those who can't ride a normal bike, as well as families with kids of all ages. They have special harnesses for toddlers, and require a chest harness for parents riding with babies.

Hefron operates six quad and three tandem railbikes, which are able to carry four or two guests, with a maximum of 30 people per tour. The cost is \$89 an hour for the tandem and \$160 an hour for the quad. Reservations are requested.

Tours run five days a week, Memorial Weekend through Sept. 10. Fall dates may be added, depending on how the summer season goes. ≈



Above: The six-mile round-trip railbike rides are great for those who can't ride a normal bike, as well as families with children of all ages. **Left:** The 60-minute jaunt travels along tree-lined hills. The custom-built railbikes can handle two or four guests.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF WHEELS ON RAILS