



ANTRIM CREEK

Throughout its history, GTRLC has helped local municipalities secure a total of more than \$60 million in Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund grants. The trust fund, in place since 1976, takes money earned from the sale and lease of state-owned mineral and gas rights and grants it to municipalities to acquire and develop lands for public recreation.

Although what became the Antrim Creek Natural Area in Antrim County wasn't the Conservancy's first MNRTF project, it was among the most significant of the 1990s because of its size, price tag and tremendous importance to the surrounding community.

The 153 acres that became Antrim Creek made up one of the largest remaining privately held parcels on East Grand Traverse Bay. In addition to a full mile of Lake Michigan shoreline, it features an incredible array of landscapes, including hardwood forests, forested wetlands, conifer swamps, shrub thickets, coastal dunes and a portion of its beautiful namesake creek where it empties into the lake. The property had been privately owned for decades, but the owners quietly allowed the public to enjoy the land.

By 1994, Steve and David Jones, whose parents purchased the property around 1940, were talking with a developer who wanted to buy their land and turn it into dozens of exclusive lakefront home sites. They very much loved the land, which had served as their family's vacation property for decades, but continued ownership was getting too costly.

"The taxes were becoming an increasing burden with not much return," Steve Jones, now 75, recalled in 2016. "It was just time to sell."



PHOTO BY TED CLINE

An early aerial photo, taken by Ted Cline, of what would become the natural area.

Chown and Mark Stone, then an Antrim County Commissioner, publisher of *The Lake Country Gazette* and GTRLC board member, cooked up the idea of applying for a trust fund grant that would allow Antrim County to purchase the property. They talked the Jones brothers into giving them time to pursue one, but they still needed several crucial things – a lot of money for an option, plus the support of both Antrim County and Banks Township, which stood to lose considerable tax dollars if the land was acquired by the county for a park.

The whole thing seemed like somewhat of a long shot.

Few were convinced that GTRLC and Antrim County would be able to secure the hefty \$4.7 million needed to cover 75 percent of the \$6.3 million acquisition cost. If awarded, it would be the largest amount the trust fund to that point had granted to a local municipality.

“We were quite nervous, because that was a lot of money,” Chown said. “It really was unprecedented.”

The state requires local municipalities to cover 25 percent of acquisition costs, which could have been another massive hurdle. Fortunately, the Jones family generously agreed to donate a portion of the property, which the state accepts as a form of local match.

Stone won the support of his fellow Antrim County Commissioners and of Banks Township officials. He convinced these public officials that a public recreation area with a mile of protected shoreline would boost property values in the surrounding area, and that commercial activity would increase because of visitors to the property. But above all else, he helped them realize preserving this property for future generations was “the right thing to do,” he later said.

But then there was the matter of a purchase option, which would provide some peace of mind for the Jones family. Although

it would be applicable to the final purchase price, a \$350,000 payment for the first portion of a \$500,000 option – the remainder was due after trust fund approval – was far and away the largest GTRLC had ever needed to secure for an option. The act of procuring that money began one of

the most important relationships in GTRLC’s history.

Rob Collier suggested Chown reach out to the C.S. Mott Foundation, a major charitable organization based in Flint. Mott eventually agreed to front the money, but only after another one of those fortunate twists that seemed to pop up often in GTRLC’s early days.

“This was a big deal for Antrim County, but it was also a big deal for the Conservancy because it was by far the biggest thing we had done, and it required a lot of creativity to get it done,” Chown said.

**“THIS WAS THE START OF A VERY,
VERY IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIP,”
CHOWN SAID.**

Mott – which to that point had never provided a grant for any sort of land acquisition – would not agree to provide a grant without, among other things, a program manager named Lois DeBacker setting foot on the property to examine it. But with time running out for Mott’s board to approve that year’s grants, Lois’ only window was to come up during what developed into a blinding lake effect snowstorm as winter raged in early 1995.

She called Collier near Mount Pleasant to tell him she planned to turn around, Chown said, but he implored her to take caution and drive on – if she turned around and the grant didn’t come, the whole project would fall through. The storm continued to bear down all the way to Antrim County, but then things changed.

“We had this truly horrible weather leading up to it, but when she arrived, a funny thing happened – all of a sudden the clouds parted, the sun came out, and here it was shining on this beautiful crystal snow,” Chown said. “We walked her down to the creek mouth and she just absolutely fell in love with it – and the rest is history.”

Mott provided a \$500,000 grant for the option, and the trust fund board approved the project in December of 1995. An extremely important piece of land was on track to be protected forever, and Mott would go on to become the single biggest Foundation donor in GTRLC’s history.

“This was the start of a very, very important relationship,” Chown said.

The Jones family still owns property just south of the natural area, and Steve Jones is glad to know the land will be protected forever.

“We just wanted to get something out of the property and relieve ourselves of those property taxes, and frankly, we were just delighted with the way this all this took shape and ultimately came to fruition,” he said in 2016 “It’s a wonderful thing.”

Chown, Stone and everyone else involved with protecting the property were beyond thrilled to know it would be saved and open to the public in perpetuity. \$100,000 of Mott’s grant was used to establish a permanent endowment, held by the Grand Traverse Regional Community Foundation, for care of the property.

“This was a big deal for Antrim County, but it was also a big deal for the Conservancy because it was by far the biggest thing we had done, and it required a lot of creativity to get it done,” Chown said.

The very same December the trust fund board approved Antrim Creek, it approved another project famous in the annals of GTRLC history – Seven Bridges.

PHOTO BY NATE RICHARDSON

