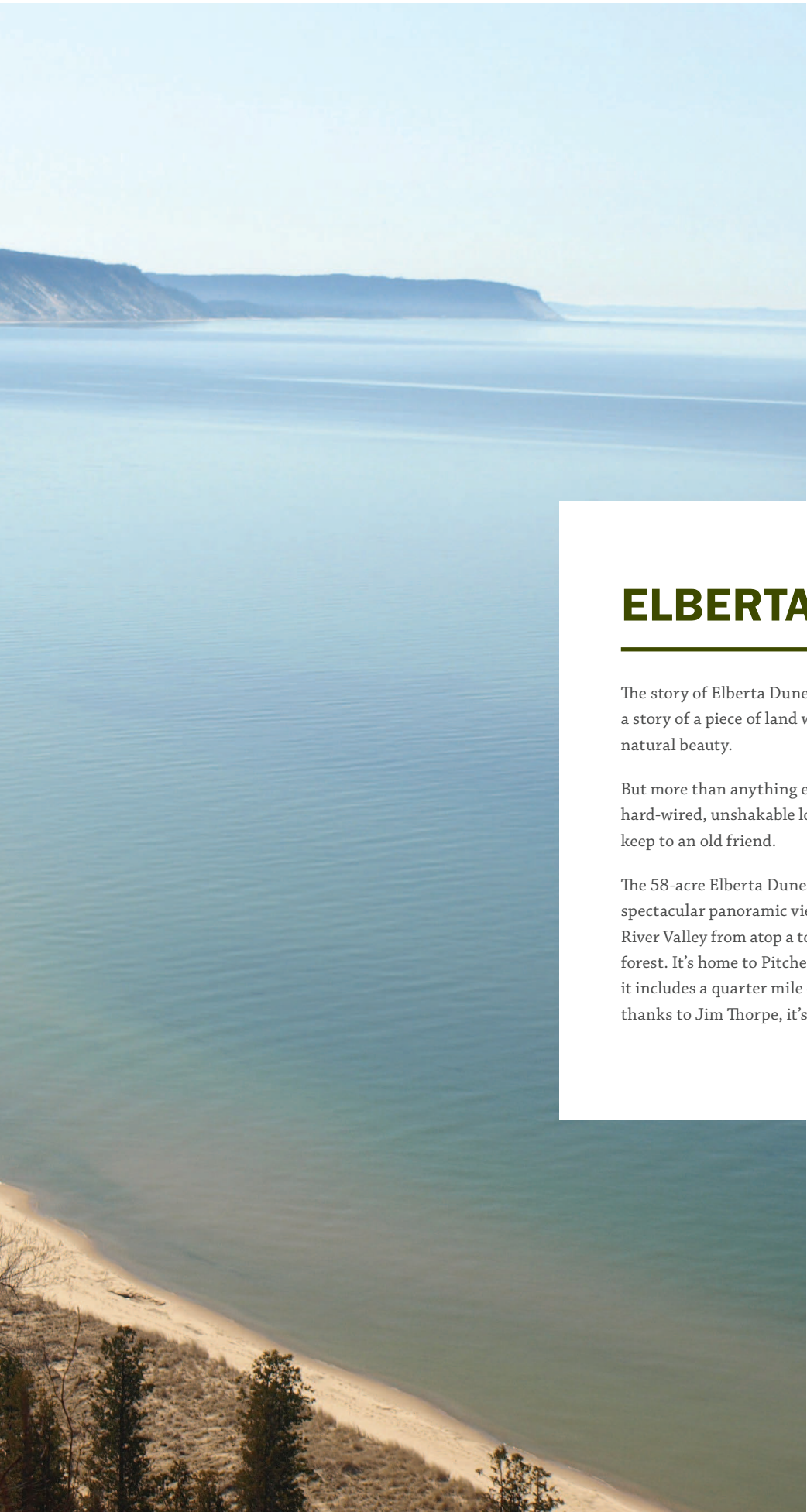




Looking south from the top of Elberta Dunes.

PHOTO BY JAY BURT



ELBERTA DUNES

The story of Elberta Dunes is a story of family and legacy, a story of a piece of land with a rich history and remarkable natural beauty.

But more than anything else, it's the story of a man with a hard-wired, unshakable love of the land – and a promise to keep to an old friend.

The 58-acre Elberta Dunes South Natural Area offers a spectacular panoramic view of Lake Michigan and the Betsie River Valley from atop a towering dune surrounded by pristine forest. It's home to Pitcher's thistle and rare shorebirds, and it includes a quarter mile of sandy Lake Michigan beach. And thanks to Jim Thorpe, it's now protected forever.

“THERE WASN’T ANYTHING IN WRITING OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT, BUT FOR MEN OF THAT ERA, THEIR WORD WAS AS GOOD AS GOLD,” CHOWN SAID.



Jim Thorpe in his Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) days.

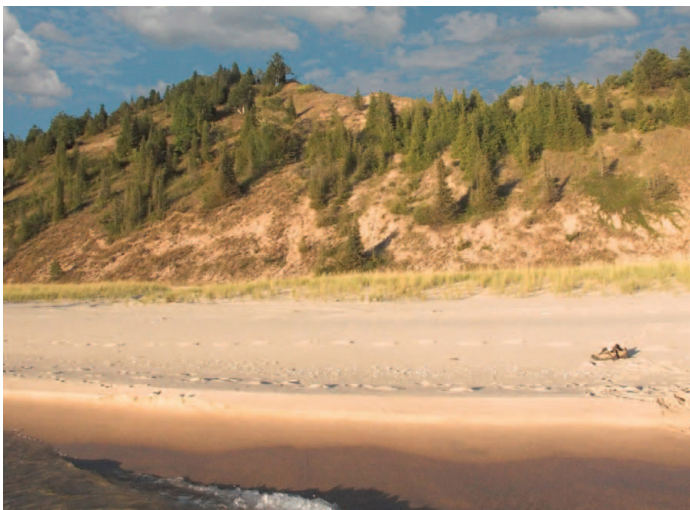


PHOTO BY MICHAEL COLLINS

Thorpe, born in 1918, grew up in the Grand Rapids area during the hard years of the Great Depression. His father died when he was 12, and not long after he started hopping on freight trains to come north and look for work. He found it in the fruit fields along the northern Michigan coast, sending nearly every penny back to his family. He eventually signed on with Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Civilian Conservation Corps, replanting a forest ravaged by decades of logging.

These experiences instilled in him a deep love for the Northern Michigan landscape.

“It was a very important time in his life,” said his daughter, Linda Jaris. “He always really loved the area after that and wanted to retire up here.”

Thorpe went on to a very successful career as a general manager of an automobile parts manufacturing business in the Grand Rapids area, taking his family up to the Frankfort area for regular vacations. Then, in 1991, he bought the dunes property from an elderly woman named Marie Sivertson Kreger. Thorpe had regularly visited Marie for years prior, and the two bonded over their shared Norwegian heritage.

Marie’s parents, Norwegian immigrants Ole and Susie Sivertson, bought the land in 1903 and farmed a variety of fruits and vegetables there. Through the 1930s, cabbages and other produce were grown on the fields just east of the dune. Many of the cabbages grown on the property were stacked floor to ceiling in a warehouse that now houses the historic Cabbage Shed restaurant along Betsie Bay.

Marie was growing ill and was in financial trouble, and Thorpe bought the land to help her out. She asked him to promise that the land wouldn’t be later sold for development. He agreed.

“She just absolutely loved Jim – he was Norwegian, after all,” said Bonnie Rodgers, Marie’s daughter. “She trusted him and believed he wouldn’t do anything to break up the land.”

Not long after GTRLC was founded, Thorpe reached out to and had a conversation with Chown about his options for the property, if he ever chose to sell. Chown recalls Thorpe mentioning his promise to Marie.

“There wasn’t anything in writing or anything like that, but for men of that era, their word was as good as gold,” Chown said.

That conversation planted the seed, Chown and Jaris said, though nothing happened for nearly two decades. Then, as Thorpe got older, Jaris urged him to re-contact the Conservancy.

“He had always kept it in the back of his mind, and as he was really aging, getting into his late eighties, I said, ‘Dad, you’ve really got to decide what you want to do with that land.’” Jaris said.

Thorpe had already rebuffed a few development proposals, including one from a man who wanted to put a golf course and homes at the site – “My dad told him flat out that he was talking to the wrong person,” Jaris recalls – and he really wanted to know that the land would remain protected long after he was gone.

“I know he himself would never have divided the property or sold it to a developer...but you never know what’s going to happen to it down the line. One generation removed, you can be pretty confident, but after that, who knows?” Jaris said. “It was really important to him to have that property preserved.”

So began conversations with Chown and GTRLC Land Protection Specialist Chris Sullivan in early 2007. The conclusion was reached that this would be an ideal Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund Project, with the Village of Elberta to own and manage the land. GTRLC secured a purchase option in June of that year, and Thorpe died in late August. Jaris is glad he went with the knowledge that the land would be permanently undeveloped.

“He had such a love of that land. He felt very assured by the conservancy that it would be protected forever, and that meant a lot,” she said.

GTRLC viewed the project as a sort of “encore” to the Coastal Campaign, Chown said. There was some concern about trying to tap the donor base in that area again so soon after that campaign, but Thorpe’s property was too important to not make an effort.

“A lot of our donors were still tied up with pledges and were fatigued, but we still went ahead and did it,” he said.

It took a bit of convincing to win over officials at the cash-strapped Village of Elberta. Everyone was on board with protecting the dune portion of the property, but some officials believed the old farmland on the east side of should be left available for development that would provide the village with much-needed tax revenue. But Thorpe and Jaris wouldn’t have any part of that idea.

“Linda told us that field was just as important to their family as the dunes were,” Sullivan said. “It was an all-or-nothing situation.”

There also was considerable concern about the village’s ability to manage it on a long-term basis. GTRLC

decided to raise money not only for the local match to the trust fund grant, but also for a permanent stewardship endowment for the village.

“I think they were nervous about having the resources to manage it, but because we built in that stewardship endowment, that didn’t need to be a concern,” Chown said.

Village officials, led by then-village President Doug Holmes, eventually agreed to go along with the trust fund plan to protect and acquire the entire property. But the 2008 trust fund cycle



Jim Thorpe at Elberta Dunes.

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was shaping up to be very competitive, Chown said, and it was no guarantee that the trust fund board would award a grant.

Then-trust fund board chairman Bob Garner advised Chown to secure some form of testimonial as to how the project might help business in the area. So Chown reached out to John Madigan, who runs boat cruises of the Pictured Rocks in the Upper Peninsula. As it turns out, Madigan was testing out a plan to run dune-viewing cruises out of Elberta. Chown asked Madigan to pen a letter. Madigan complied, writing a brief letter of support that was read at the trust fund meeting in which the vote to award projects was held.

“It got read right before they made motions,” he said. “Trust me – it made a difference.”

The board signed off on a \$1.15 million grant.

Many heroes stepped up and helped GTRLC raise funds for the required local match and a stewardship endowment. Coastal Campaign veteran John Woollam’s J.A. Woollam Foundation provided a generous \$100,000 challenge grant that offered a 1:1 match on local donations. Betty Mitchell’s Seabury Foundation also kicked in \$30,000. Nearly 300 local donors contributed to the project by the time it was complete.

Jaris, who for years owned and ran the Trick

“We were just so happy to hear about it and to see the sign,” she said. “We never wanted to see it broken up – we wanted it saved.”

Dog art gallery in Elberta, said her dad let the public use the property, something Marie allowed as well. It was particularly popular for skiing, snowshoeing, hiking and as a spot to relax. Saving it, therefore, was important to the entire community.

“A lot of the locals use that property...and it’s been very important that it’s been kept open and usable without being destroyed,” she said. “How many people in Elberta can afford their own Lake Michigan frontage? It would have been awful to lose that.”

Chown looks back on Elberta Dunes with fond memories. He’s especially thankful that Jaris made sure to guide Thorpe back to GTRLC when the time was right.

“It was hugely important to him, and what a wonderful thing it was for his daughter to recognize that and help him build that legacy,” Chown said.

Rodgers, Marie’s daughter, said she and her family take a great deal of comfort in knowing the land their immigrant ancestors settled more than a century ago will forever remain unspoiled.

“We were just so happy to hear about it and to see the sign,” she said. “We never wanted to see it broken up – we wanted it saved.”



From left to right, standing: Greg Jaris, Chris Sullivan, Linda Jaris. Seated are Jim and Frances Thorpe.