

# PYATT LAKE NATURAL AREA



WOOD DUCK



GLENN WOLFF



# PYATT LAKE

Halfway up Old Mission Peninsula, less than a half mile inland from the quiet shores of Bowers Harbor, sits a place legendary for both its natural splendor and its role in GTRLC's early history.



PHOTO BY DREW SMITH

From an ecological perspective, Pyatt Lake is nothing short of a rare jewel. More than 250 plant species have been identified there, making it one of the most botanically diverse properties in Grand Traverse County. As one of the last intact “wooded dune and swale” complexes in the region, the habitat it provides is both exceedingly rare and tremendously important for scores of birds, insects, mammals and more.

In what would become a familiar pattern over the years, this place would have been gone forever if not for GTRLC's intervention and assistance. In 1991, right around the time the Conservancy was formed, local developer Rick Meyer purchased 80 acres surrounding the lake and planned to sell off a series of 10-acre lots for home sites.

Meyer had already surveyed the property and sold one lot off, in fact, by the time Chown got a call from then-Peninsula Township Supervisor Rob Manigold. Chown was already familiar with the property, as an earlier natural resources inventory completed at the request of Grand Traverse County officials had singled out Pyatt for its ecological importance.

“We were horrified, because this was one of the highest priority properties in the entire county,” Chown said.

Chown soon got a hold of Meyer, who at first didn't have much faith that a brand new nonprofit could raise enough money to make a serious offer. After all, this was expensive land on a peninsula that was becoming more and more attractive to developers with each passing year.

“He was certainly very skeptical at first,” Chown said. “But I worked him and worked him and worked him.”

By the spring of 1992, Chown talked Meyer into giving GTRLC about six months to raise money to buy the most critical 61 acres around the lake. A purchase price of \$75,000 was named, with \$5,000 in option money due up front. That was substantially less than fair market value, and Chown to this day is thankful that Meyer recognized the importance of saving such a special place.

“I convinced him that this community really values preservation, and that this was such an incredible area – very unique,” Chown said. “To his credit, he really, really cares about this region.”

Founding GTRLC board member Frances Eaton, who had deep roots in the fabled Old Mission Peninsula summer community of Neahtawanta, covered the option expense. Eaton, a staunch believer in conservation, had been summering on Old Mission her entire life and clearly understood the importance of saving Pyatt.

“I went and visited her and she wrote a check for \$5,000 on the spot,” Chown said. “That was like getting a \$5 million gift today, that's how big it was – it gave us breathing room and credibility.”

But nearly \$100,000 was still needed – initial infrastructure costs were added to the campaign – all within a roughly six-month time frame. A project steering committee was formed, with members of the Old Mission Conservancy – a group that would later merge with GTRLC – playing a vital role.

Former Michigan Governor Bill Milliken and former First Lady Helen Milliken served as honorary co-chairs. Local artist Glenn Wolff designed a promotional print and logo used on T-shirts sold to raise money, and various other community members stepped up to host benefit concerts and help in other ways.

Board member Wayne Kladder remembers a gathering at Ray and Marsha Minervini's home on Old Mission. Minervini, a developer who reinvented Traverse City's old state hospital as the wildly successful Village at Grand Traverse Commons, was one of many supporters of the Pyatt Lake project.

“I remember standing over sort of near the stairway and looking at all these folks gathered, and I thought, my goodness, look at all these



A photograph of a wooden boardwalk or path winding through a dense forest. The path is made of wooden planks and is bordered by wooden edging. Sunlight filters through the dense canopy of green trees, creating a bright, starburst effect in the upper center of the image. The ground is covered with fallen leaves and twigs. The overall atmosphere is serene and natural.

**"WE WERE HORRIFIED, BECAUSE  
THIS WAS ONE OF THE HIGHEST  
PRIORITY PROPERTIES IN THE  
ENTIRE COUNTY."**

PHOTO BY DREW SMITH



people. They're all here to preserve Pyatt Lake – it was just so exciting to see that energy,” Kladder said.

Lew Coulter, then head of the Grand Traverse Conservation District, sent a pair of letters to every home on the peninsula during the course of the campaign. Chown believes the second letter, sent in the campaign's home stretch, struck the perfect chord.

“The first letter was very technical, wooded dune and swale, lots of science. But our second letter was much more effective,” Chown said. “Lew was inspired and wrote it from the heart with lots of emotion.”

Old Mission Elementary students, who wrote letters to the *Record-Eagle* in earnest in support of the project, also sold T-shirts and pop cans, an effort that netted \$1,300 dollars toward the campaign. But the children's involvement was exponentially more important than that figure, Chown said, as it attracted the attention of a man named Bill Carls.

At the time Chown got a call from Carls, the campaign was approaching its fall deadline. With only two-thirds of the money raised, Chown wasn't resting easy. This was GTRLC's first major project, and the stakes were high.

“We had about \$30,000 to go with only 45 days left until the deadline, and I was not sleeping – literally. I was waking up at 3 a.m. pretty much every night in a cold sweat, and I'm not exaggerating,” he said. “Because if you fail on your first project, you're toast – good luck getting anything else going.”

The German-born Carls, who was at the time nearly 90 years old, had amassed a fortune after he pioneered a specific type of pneumatic valve used in automobile manufacturing. He sold his downstate company and retired to Old Mission Peninsula not long before GTRLC's founding. After reading about the children's fundraising in the *Record-Eagle*, Carls called up Chown and invited him to his home.

Chown fondly recalls that first meeting. Carls, with his lingering German accent and fatherly demeanor, warmly welcomed Chown in and got straight to the point.

“He basically said – how much money do you need?” Chown said.

Carls agreed to provide a challenge grant of \$15,000. The grant, provided through his charitable group, The Carls Foundation, would be used to provide a one-to-one match for each dollar donated to the campaign.

“That just lit the campaign on fire,” Chown said. “Once we got the word out, I think it only took about 10 more days to get us to the finish line.”



**“THIS IS WHEN THE  
COMMUNITY REALLY BEGAN  
TO LIFT THE CONSERVANCY  
ON ITS SHOULDERS.”**

GTRLC closed on the initial 61 acres of what is now known as Pyatt Lake: The Bill Carls Nature Preserve, in December of 1992. The preserve has been expanded a whopping eight times, with The Carls Foundation providing another major gift in 2011. The preserve now measures nearly 160 acres with 1.5 miles of trail. After its initial involvement with this project, The Carls Foundation – which had previously focused almost exclusively on health care – officially added land conservation across the state as a grant-making priority.

Although the deal closed so long ago, it still continues to have a positive impact on GTRLC. More than 650 separate individuals and businesses made contributions to the campaign, and many of them are still donors to this day.

“You ask some of these donors who have never missed a year what lit the fire, and it was this project,” Chown said.





The Pyatt Lake fundraising template was used over and over again for future land acquisition projects. It remains a special project for Chown, who himself lives not far from the preserve.

“It’s definitely one of my favorite memories of my entire career in land conservation. I just felt like, as organization, we had arrived and we could engage the community and do big things,” he said. “This is when the community really began to lift the conservancy on its shoulders.”



*From left to right, Helen & Bill Milliken and Ray & Marsha Minervini at a gathering to raise money and awareness for Pyatt Lake.*