



PHOTO BY KATHY PARTIN

RAILROAD POINT

Crystal Lake, the state's ninth largest inland body of water, has attracted vacationers in earnest since the closing years of the 19th century. As generation after generation continued to enjoy this iconic lake's sandy beaches and surrounding wooded hills, they built at first dozens, and then hundreds, of homes and cottages along its shores.

By the late 20th century, undeveloped chunks of land along the lakeshore were few and far between. When the call came to protect the last sizable piece of that undeveloped land, everyone involved felt a heightened sense of importance.

Protection of Railroad Point – a piece of land so named because of an abandoned railroad bed that winds along the shore there – began in 1996 when Chown received a call from Rusty Lewis, a conservation-minded woman who served on the board of the Crystal Lake & Watershed Association. Chown met Lewis at a party thrown by Nancy Brickman, whom he'd previously met at the High Tea hosted by Mollie Rogers.

Lewis was very upset at the potential sale of Railroad Point, then a 66-acre parcel owned by Ingrid Devine and her daughter, Bettina Appelhof. The property appraised at nearly \$3 million, and there was talk of a sale to a developer who would build more than 40 homes on the site's prominent bluff.

"When Rusty heard that the property was going to be developed, she called me right away and said 'Glen, you've got to do something about this. You need to call Ingrid. I've already called her, she knows you'll be calling,'" Chown said. "This was the last big undeveloped chunk, so it was a really big deal for people."

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Chown spoke to Ingrid at length about protecting the property. Luckily, it wasn't that hard of a sell because of Devine's feelings about her land and the surrounding area. Her 66-acre parcel had beautiful woods and more than 2,000 feet of waterfront.





A Ted Cline photograph of Railroad Point.

“My first conversation with her, she talked about how deeply her family loved Crystal Lake,” he said.

But, as with any other protection project, the deal needed to make sense from a financial standpoint as well as an emotional one. By the end of the year, Chown talked Devine and Appelhof into letting the GTRLC work to protect the land. Hot off Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund successes at Antrim Creek and Seven Bridges, Chown and GTRLC staff hoped to score another grant that would allow Benzie County to purchase the property and run it as a public park.

GTRLC board member Jim MacInnes – then as in now president and CEO of Crystal Mountain – and then-board chairman Wally Edwards worked with Benzie County Commission Chairman Dave Mead to gain county approval for the project.

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Devine and Appelhof agreed to sell the property for \$2.1 million, just 75 percent of its full market value of \$2.8 million. This was a huge boost for the project, as the discounted sale price – commonly known as a bargain sale – would count for the 25 percent local match the trust fund requires for every grant.

Securing the trust fund grant involved a now legendary tale of a fateful hike at the property not long before the trust fund was to vote on that year’s grants. Keith Charters, one of the trust fund’s board members, contacted Chown with bad news – the property scored zero points for wildlife habitat, one of the criteria the board uses for deciding if a project is worthy of a grant.

Chown insisted that Charters, who lived in the area, come have a look at the property so he could realize just how special it was. As they walked along a trail, Charters noticed a small tree with shredded bark along its side.

Though Chown wasn’t sure what it was, Charters knew right away. It was a buck rub, a distinct pattern made by bucks to signal their control over a territory. He told Chown to take a picture and send

it along as a supplement to the trust fund application. The board did in fact boost Railroad Point’s wildlife habitat score before approving the project. Whether the buck rub tipped the scales is unclear, but Chown likes to think so.

“I’ve always called that our \$2.1 million buck rub,” he said, laughing.

Everyone was thrilled about the trust fund grant, but a pair of \$150,000 option payments still loomed to keep the property secure for the year and a half it would take for the county to receive the grant and formally close on the property.

Three families, two of which Chown first had contact with during the fateful High Tea, were instrumental in seeing the project to the finish line. The Seabury and Borwell foundations – represented by High Tea attendees Betty Mitchell and Naomi Borwell, respectively – each contributed \$100,000. The John Burrows family kicked in another \$50,000. The remaining funds were raised from local residents.

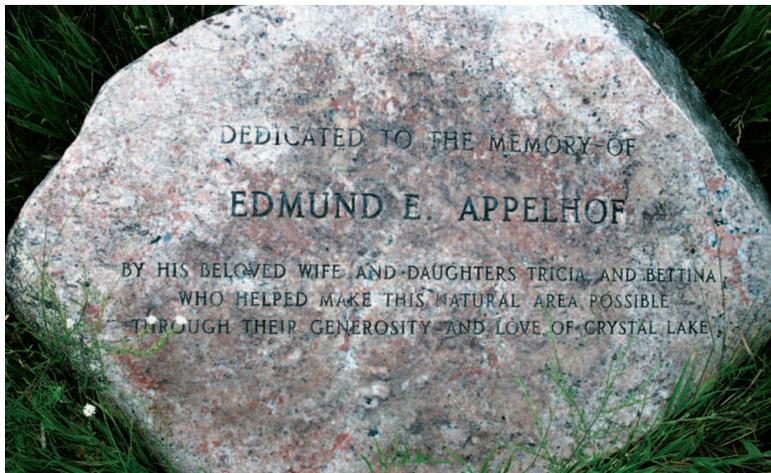
“Here was the High Tea paying dividends,” Chown said. “This project wouldn’t have been possible without the relationships cultivated there.”

Chown said Edwards, a World War II Navy veteran whose family had deep roots in Benzie County, was a critical part of the success of Railroad Point and other

important projects in Benzie County.

“In some communities, there’s an incredible tension between the haves and have nots, the summer people and the year-round people. Wally genuinely bridged those worlds,” Chown said. “He treated everyone with friendliness and respect, and he was a great listener – he simply inspired confidence in all the right places.”

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Benzie County officially dedicated the Railroad Point Natural Area in August of 1998. What began with a 66-acre parcel is now more than 200 acres, thanks to multiple additions from late 1999 through 2013. Talks with neighboring landowners began before the ink was even dry on the deal to protect the first piece, and other contiguous pieces were added over the years as they became available. The largest single addition came in 2003, when 102 acres were added through the use of another trust fund grant.

Former GTRLC board member Charlie Kehr, who died in April 2016, served on the county’s parks and recreation board during much of the Railroad Point project. His support was critical, Chown said, especially when it came

to expanding the natural area and determining a sound management plan for the beloved property.

“He was a great representative for us in the county and in county government,” Chown said. He was a very respected person, and he was truly a great advocate for our work.”

In 2011, GTRLC dedicated the Mary Margaret Johnson trail at Railroad Point. This trail was made possible by the gift of longtime area resident Walter Johnson, who asked that the trail

be named for his wife, who passed away in 2006. It provided stunning new views from the bluff overlooking the lake.



A scene from the Railroad Point dedication.