

SEVEN BRIDGES

In the hallway outside the GTRLC's boardroom, a large photo of three women on a bridge hangs in a modest frame. Among the dozens of stories that float around about the Conservancy's successes, theirs is the stuff of legend – the story of a picnic lunch and an uphill battle to preserve an irreplaceable community treasure.

Seven Bridges is a 314-acre nature preserve a few miles from Rapid City in Kalkaska County. It is, without question, one of the most idyllic and enchanting preserves protected in the history of GTRLC. The Rapid River separates into multiple arms as it spills through a mixed forest of tamaracks, cedars and hemlock, creating a peaceful and ecologically diverse place.

Long ago, the land was owned by four eccentric brothers – Jacob, Julius, William and Carl Ricker – who built a sawmill there in 1882. The brothers came from Germany and headed to northern Michigan after receiving a land deed from President Ulysses S. Grant. Their mill produced thousands of feet of lumber a day, and the brothers, all bachelors, lived together on the property for decades.



PHOTO BY DREW SMITH



The land eventually passed to Gordon Peschke, a great-nephew of the brothers. Gordon and his siblings owned the property together, but it was Gordon and his wife Cecelia who were the primary caretakers from the 1940s through the 1980s. The Peschkes believed deeply that everyone should get to enjoy the property, so they encouraged the public to use it and even maintained a guestbook for visitors to sign. Generations of locals and people from across the state and beyond developed a deep connection to the area that came to be known as Seven Bridges.

By the mid-1980s, Gordon Peschke faced mounting pressure from his siblings to sell the land as property tax bills continued to rise. He worked hard to find a buyer who would preserve the property, but his efforts were in vain. The state wasn't interested at that time, and a Kalkaska-based conservation group could only raise about half of the land's appraised value. Finally, with few options left, a heartbroken Peschke agreed in 1989 to sell the land for \$180,000 to a development partnership.

No development occurred immediately, and many locals weren't aware that the property had even changed hands. Then, in the summer of 1994, three women – LouAnn Taylor, Virginia Sorenson and Helen Milliken – went there for a picnic. Sorenson, a longtime Kalkaska County resident, served on GTRLC's board with Taylor, a community activist with a strong belief in conservation. Milliken, a friend of both women, was the wife of former Michigan Governor William H. Milliken.



The four Rickers brothers in an undated photo.

On that fateful day, these three women – lunch and a bottle of fine wine in hand – were horrified to discover small stakes with little orange flags in the ground. It was clear the property had been surveyed and staked for development. They scribbled

down a phone number they found on a small sign, and Sorenson and Taylor drove directly to see Chown on Third Street.

"I'll never forget it – they marched into my office and they were very upset," Chown said. "They said we had to do something about this and we had to do it now."

Current GTRLC board member Terrie Taylor, LouAnn's daughter,

recalls that these women hardened their resolve and refused to see such a special place destroyed by development.

"They were determined to not let it happen," she said. "They saw those stakes and their reaction was fairly matter of fact, as all three were experienced activists at that point: What do we need to do to forestall this development?"

Chown got ahold of Bernard Schueren, who along with development partner Ron Reblin had purchased the land from the Peschkes and planned a series of luxurious homes on 10-acre riverfront parcels. The project would be called Rapid River Estates, and initial conversations about derailing those plans in favor of permanent protection weren't promising.

"He basically said you're too late, it was the first thing out of his mouth," Chown said of his discussion with Reblin. "But we really didn't take no for an answer. We knew we needed to be tenacious and relentless."

The partners eventually named a selling price of \$450,000 and agreed to give GTRLC time to seek a MNRTF grant for the property. The plan was to sponsor the state for acquisition, meaning the trust fund board would grant money to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources for the purchase. Sorenson and a project committee of Michael Beratta, John Freeman, Monica Lack and Dave Mahan were instrumental in helping GTRLC raise money for a purchase option and the beginning of a stewardship endowment fund.

The project seemed like a perfect fit for a trust fund grant. Surveys showed the land was ecologically diverse and offered

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plenty of public recreation potential – a must for potential trust fund properties – in the form of hiking, fishing, bird watching and much more. But DNR staff who advised the trust fund board recommended rejecting the Seven Bridges project, in part because acquiring it would expand the boundaries of the adjacent Pere Marquette State Forest.

At that point in time, Chown said, there had been much statewide discussion about the merits of removing more land from the tax rolls and locking it up in state forest. Many people were staunchly opposed to the idea, and it appeared that line of thinking had crept its way into the heads of key decision makers who advised the trust fund board.

“There was a lot of political concern about the state owning too much land,” he said. “It was not exactly a favorable climate for this project at this time.”

Chown, Sorenson and company were left with one option – to drive down and appeal to the trust fund board directly. If they didn’t, the board would certainly accept the DNR staff’s recommendations and not award a grant to Seven Bridges, leaving the project dead in the water.

“It was all hinging on the trust fund decision,” Chown said. “There was no other recourse. This was the only way to go.”

Chown recalls being particularly passionate with his support for the project, especially after learning what it meant to locals.

“I wasn’t ready to take no for an answer,” he said. “And this wasn’t about me or my ego, it was about that piece of land. I fell in love with it like everyone else does. This had to be done.”

If the trust fund board was to be swayed, a convincing case needed

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to be made. A small group prepared to travel to Lansing and speak to the trust fund board on December 13, 1995 as it met to finalize that year’s grants. The envoy included Sorenson, Chown and Ty Ratliff, who grew up fishing at Seven

Bridges and later would hire on as a land protection specialist with GTRLC. Along as well were Richard Waterman, a postman and then-chairman of the zoning board of appeals in Clearwater

Township, and Terri Crandall, then executive director of the Kalkaska Area Chamber of Commerce.

Everyone except Chown, who drove down the night before, piled into Sorenson’s recently purchased four-wheel-drive Jeep and traveled to Lansing in a brutal snowstorm the day of the meeting. Each gave a presentation that focused on a different reason to save Seven Bridges. Chown also promised the board that GTRLC would be responsible for management of the property.

“We were showing that there’s a ton of community support, we were showing that this is one of the most unique properties in Michigan...we were working every angle we could work,” Chown said.

As luck would have it, one trust fund board member, Wendy Potts, had recently read a book that put her in the mood to support just such a project.

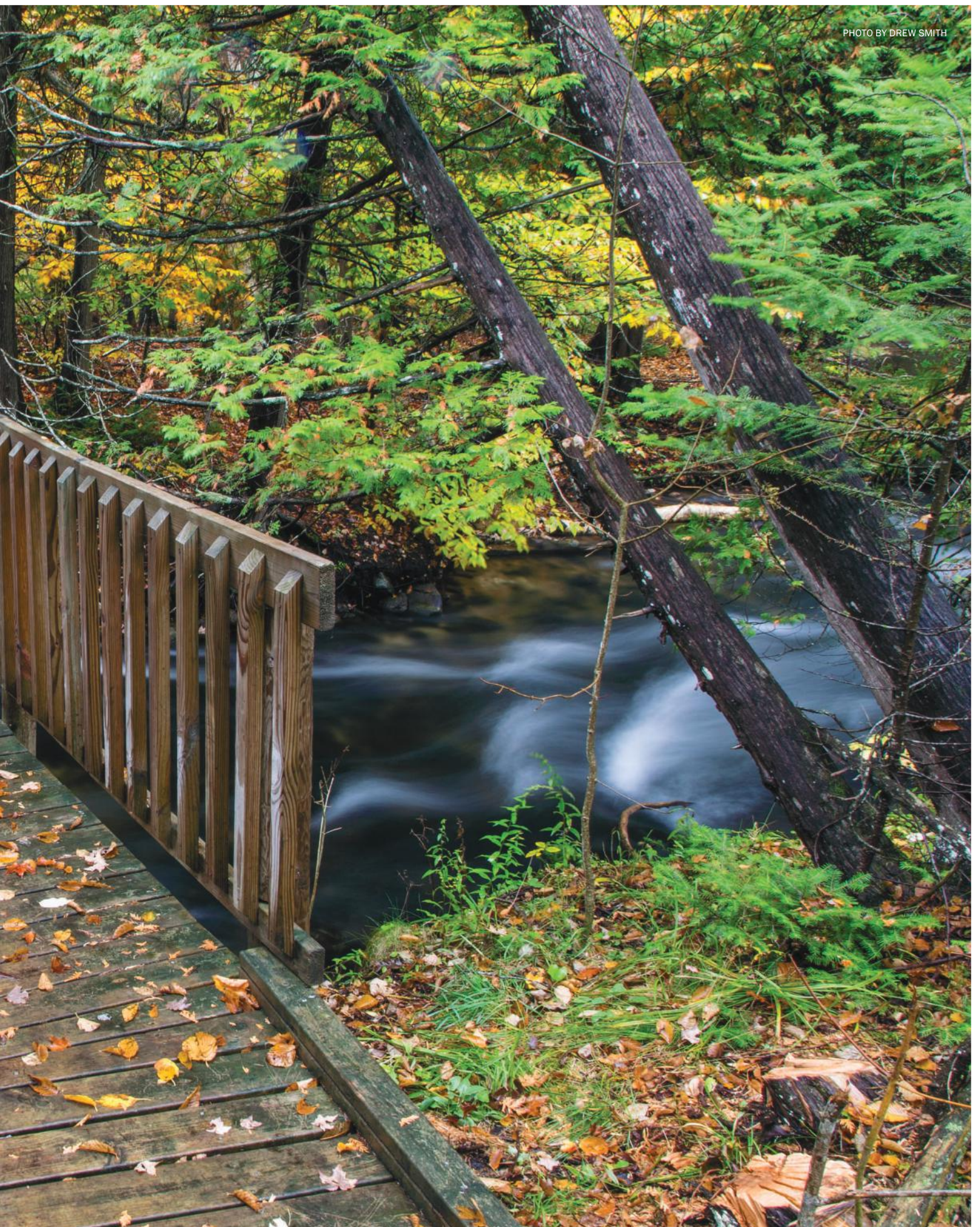
“We were all captivated,” Potts later told *Traverse Magazine*. “I had just finished reading *The Bridges of Madison County* and was really taken with the photographs of how beautiful this place was.”

Potts made the motion, and the board approved the \$450,000 needed for the state to purchase the land. As a state purchase, no local match was required. The group from up north could hardly contain its excitement.

Gordon Peschke with his grandson.







“The euphoria was indescribable – we were calling people left and right,” Chown said. “It definitely was another highlight of my entire career in land conservation.”

Because of the Peschkes’ unselfishness, generations of Kalkaska County residents and visitors had used Seven Bridges for wedding photos, family picnics, swimming, fishing, relaxing and much more. As such, the trust fund victory meant much more than protecting a place with wildlife habitat or pretty views – it meant saving a place that meant the world to so many.

“This was an example of community conservation long before that became the buzzword it is now,” Chown said. “The thought of losing public access to that site was just terrible.”

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Taylor, who had grown ill, was boosted by the news that the trust fund approved the grant. She went on to briefly serve as GTRLC’s board chairwoman before she died in August of 1998.

“She felt a real sense of victory, and the timing was excellent, given her illness,” Terrie Taylor said. “It was triumph mixed with relief, pleasure and excitement.”

Gordon Peschke, who for decades let locals enjoy his land, died in August of 1996 with the knowledge that his beloved Seven Bridges would be forever protected for the public to enjoy.

A dispute between the developers dragged out the closing process, and the Seven Bridges natural area was finalized and official by June of 1998. GTRLC continues to care for the land today.



From left to right, Lou Ann Taylor, Helen Milliken and Virginia Sorenson.