



PHOTO BY DANA VANNOY

## TIMBERS AND LONG LAKE ISLANDS

As Matt McDonough settled into his position as land protection specialist at GTRLC, his marching orders in Long Lake Township were crystal clear.

When McDonough interacted with residents who lived on or near the shores of the township's namesake lake, two requests came up time and again. The first was to protect as much property on the lake's unspoiled islands as possible. The second involved a place treasured by generations of young girls – the Timbers Girl Scout camp.

"If you do nothing else when you're in this job, protect those islands and protect that camp," McDonough recalls.

One of those islands – South Island – was donated to the conservancy back in 1996 by a citizen-led group that had raised money to purchase it in 1973. The island mission was completed from 2005 to 2010 with the protection of Fox, Long and Round (sometimes called Picnic) islands. The Oleson family covered four-fifths of the purchase cost on the former and donated conservation easements on the latter, which they already owned.

The second mission, that of securing the Timbers camp, involved persistence, good timing and another round of involvement from steadfast GTRLC supporters Don and Jerry Oleson.

This 250-acre property on the north side of the lake has a rich history. It was once a vast estate owned by the Chicago magnate J. Odgen Armour, who inherited the Armour meatpacking company founded by his father. The property changed hands a few times from 1946 through 1961, when it was sold to the Girl Scouts. A rolling topography with a mature beech-maple forest and a combined 9,000 feet of frontage on three lakes – including 2,000 on Long Lake itself – made for a wonderful setting for generations of girls and their counselors, who developed lifelong bonds with nature and their fellow campers.



Over the years, McDonough had sent a few letters to the Girl Scouts regarding Timbers in an effort to make sure they would contact GTRLC if it ever came time to sell the camp. In 2005, during a favorable economic climate, the scouts contacted McDonough to discuss the property.

At a meeting in Flint, Scout officials expressed interest in selling a conservation easement on the property. But after an appraisal determined that the easement value alone was around \$3 million, the idea fizzled. Raising that kind of money for a piece of land that would remain private didn't seem feasible, McDonough recalls.

"We basically had to go back to them and say, sorry, an easement just isn't going to work," he said.

Fast forward to 2009. Girl Scout councils had consolidated, and new leadership reached out to GTRLC to again discuss the camp, which by that time was reducing operations as Girl Scout leaders prepared to unload the property. The economy had taken a nose dive, and an appraisal showed the entire camp was worth around \$3 million – less than half of what it would have sold for a few short years prior.

The Olesons gave GTRLC money to secure a purchase option on the property, ensuring it would be kept from potential development for

at least one year as McDonough and GTRLC staff put together a long-term plan. Rotary Camps and Services of Traverse City, which owns land used for Boy and Girl Scout camps near Spider and Bass lakes, agreed to own the land and share in the purchase price if another group ran a camp there. But, after much searching, no willing partner could be found.

"I gave probably a dozen different entities tours of that property to see if they'd have an interest in running a camp, but we had zero takers," McDonough said.

After months of fruitless searching and without a willing partner, GTRLC abandoned that option. Eventually, GTRLC met with Long Lake Township officials. Township ownership initially wasn't considered because the township had only recently acquired several other parcels, including the beautiful Cedar Run Creek Natural Area with the assistance of GTRLC and two trust fund grants over two years.

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*Don and Jerry Oleson.*



PHOTO BY GARY L HOWE

Township officials agreed to let GTRLC help them purchase the land with assistance from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund, provided GTRLC handle fundraising for the local match. But there was a problem. Trust fund money would take 18 months or more to arrive, and the Girl Scouts needed to sell much sooner than that. Enter the Olesons – who else? – to save the day once again.

**“THIS DEAL SIMPLY WOULD NOT HAVE HAPPENED WITHOUT THEM,” MCDONOUGH SAID. “WE WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN IN A POSITION TO TAKE THE RISK AND PRE-ACQUIRE AT THAT STAGE IN THE GAME. WE’RE FORTUNATE THE OLESONS HAD A LOT OF FAITH IN US.”**

The Girl Scouts were unwilling to extend the option, and they had already made it clear that any and all option payments wouldn’t be applicable to the final purchase price. The project likely would have been dead in the water if not for a directive from Don Oleson, who had been regularly checking in with McDonough for project updates.

“He basically said ‘Matt, negotiate the best deal you can, and we’ll buy it and hold it for you,’” McDonough said.

The Olesons have their own special history with the property. It was their father, Gerald Oleson, who bought the property from the Armours in 1946. Don and Jerry have fond memories of spending time at the property as children.

“I had a horse there, but I wasn’t very good with it,” Don Oleson said with a laugh. “I remember one time it threw me three times.”











PHOTO BY NATE RICHARDSON

The Olesons used \$2.7 million of their own money – not the Oleson Foundation’s – to buy the property, giving GTRLC time to seek and secure a trust fund grant for the township and to raise local match dollars. The importance of their role as interim buyers cannot be overstated, McDonough said, as this interest-free “loan” made the entire project possible.

“This deal simply would not have happened without them,” McDonough said. “We would not have been in a position to take the risk and pre-acquire at that stage in the game. We’re fortunate the Olesons had a lot of faith in us.”

Long Lake has always been tremendously important to the Oleson family, Don said. After helping GTRLC protect the islands, he’s grateful he and Jerry were in a position to help save Timbers as well.



*A group of Girl Scouts at Timbers in 1999.*

“It was wonderful. It brought us back to our childhood and the great memories there that we had as kids,” Don Oleson said. “And it’s such a beautiful piece of property.”

The trust fund approved a nearly \$2.1 million grant in December of 2012. GTRLC raised the roughly \$900,000

required as a local match to the trust fund grant. Through hundreds of generous donors, the goal was met in the summer of 2014 and the township acquired the property.

Township Supervisor Karen Rosa said the project meant volumes to township residents and visitors. Aside from the obvious connections made by thousands of scouts over the years, older township residents also fondly remember the days when the property was owned by the Armors, Rosa said. Many township residents – including Rosa’s parents – hired on at the estate to help with gardening, cooking, housekeeping and more.





PHOTO BY NATE RICHARDSON



Former Girl Scouts and counselors gather at Timbers for a reunion in 2013.









"It's obvious that people are very passionate about that piece of property. It's such a unique place, and I think everyone in the township was just overwhelmed by the preservation of it," she said. "I really think it's one of the most important pieces we could ever have preserved."

GTRLC deserves a ton of credit for its role the protection of Timbers, Rosa said.

"I really believe we could never have done it without the conservancy," she said. "They were wonderful to work with, and they really took charge of the fundraising, which was a huge commitment. We worked together and partnered together very well."

McDonough, in return, is grateful for Rosa's support and involvement.

"She was a great leader at the township level, and many of our land conservation projects wouldn't have gone nearly as well without strong leadership," he said. "She is among my favorite public officials I've ever worked with. She just gets it."

The Long Lake Foundation and Long Lake Association were also absolutely critical to the success of the project, Chown said. These groups helped build support for protecting Timbers, then put GTRLC in contact with all the right people when it came time to fundraise.

"They were absolutely tremendous ambassadors for the conservancy and fantastic advocates for this project," he said. "We couldn't have done it without them."

Shelby Reynolds was a counselor at Timbers for five years during college. She and other alumni of the camp held a reunion and garage sale of old camp gear to raise money during the protection process. Timbers was a special place to so many girls who camped or worked there, she said, especially since the camp served girls in the especially formative teenage years.



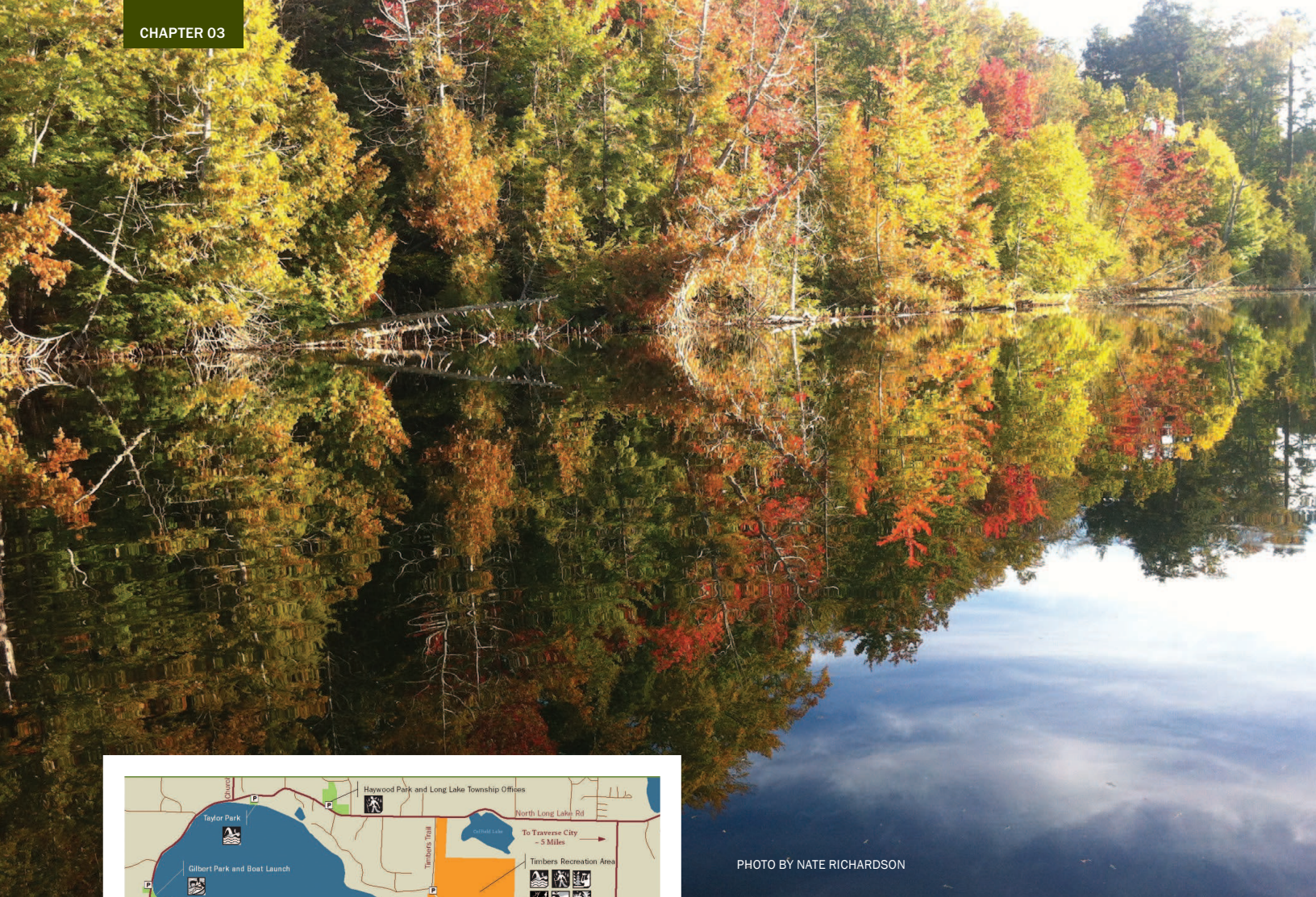
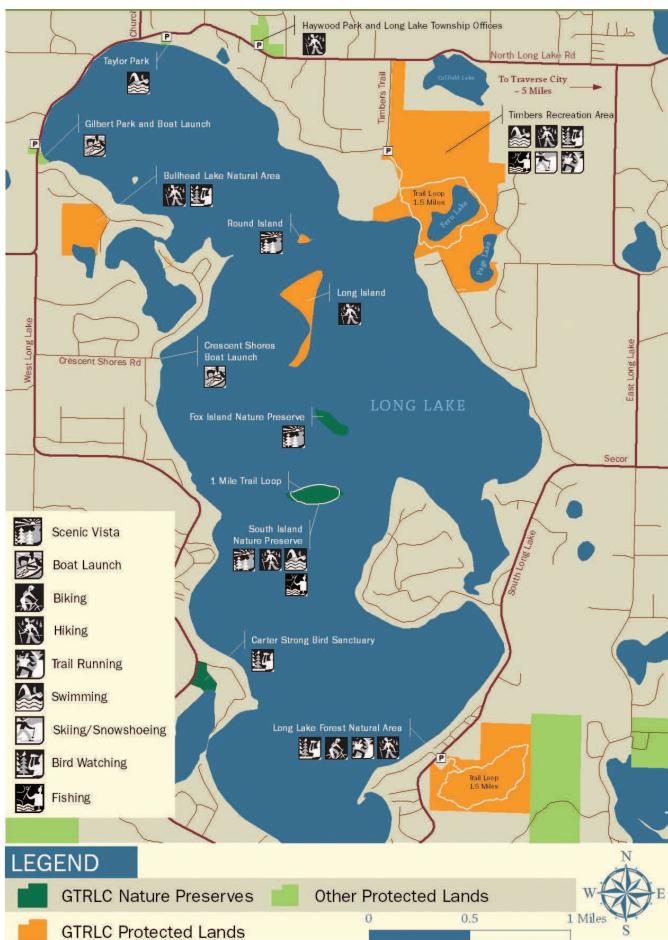


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“It was really an empowering experience, even to go and work there,” she said. “For so many girls and young women in their teens and early college years, it was such an important piece of their self-development.”

Alumni were very saddened when the camp closed, Reynolds said. But knowing that the property is forever saved and open to the public softened that blow.

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“The property is still accessible, and that’s priceless,” she said. “For girls to be able to still visit that property, which is a place where they were during a very meaningful time in their lives, means that time in their lives can still be alive for them.”