

MAPLE BAY

Having good timing is always nice. When it came to protecting a now popular Grand Traverse County park, it was essential.

The Maple Bay farm straddling US-31 a few miles south of Elk Rapids provides one of the region's most recognized and appreciated views, with thousands of people passing it each day as they travel for work or play. It's now known for its massive field of bright yellow sunflowers across the road from a quaint white farmhouse, but for many years it was known for its bucolic herd of dairy cattle and the paint foals bred on the property that frolicked in the pasture near a historic red barn.

"This really is an iconic property, and it has been for many years," Chown said. "People's experience with that place starts with seeing it from the highway and appreciating it from a scenic standpoint. And the more you discover the property, the more you realize it's a quintessential example of everything we love about northern Michigan."

For decades, the property was owned by Helen Riordan and her husband Ed Rollert, a former executive at General Motors who died in 1969. A resident farmer named Ken Cook did an outstanding job of running the farm for the Rollert family, facilitating those peaceful farm views that endeared so many to the property. The 400-acre parcel included not only this farm but also extensive woods and a half mile of pristine, undeveloped frontage on East Grand Traverse Bay.





PHOTO BY MICHAEL JORDAN

By the late 1990s, Riordan, now an octogenarian, was looking to sell. At the time, real estate was booming and the farm had become very valuable. The potential for a large-scale development in that particular area was troubling for Chown and GTRLC staff.

“Just think what a large-scale development would have done to Acme, to Elk Rapids, to that whole corridor,” Chown said. “It would have been permanently altered. Maple Bay was the pivot point.”

Chown got in touch with an attorney representing Helen’s son, Dave Rollert, in an effort to pitch land protection over development.

“I called at a really good time,” Chown recalled. “The Rollerts had been pursuing other options, and they were in the late stages of talking with a substantial developer.”

Chown stressed that preserving the land was a much better choice than developing it. Not only did developers have plenty of municipal red tape to sort through in order to see a project to the finish, but he and the attorney agreed that a large-scale development would almost assuredly attract a lawsuit from a concerned citizens group in Acme Township.

“It would have been messy, and it would have taken lots of time,” Chown said.

With Helen and her family favorable to the idea of permanently protecting the land, the GTRLC had to pull together the money. Chown phoned longtime Grand Traverse County Administrator K. Ross Childs to discuss the idea of the county using a Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund grant to acquire the property. Childs would have to convince the county board, but the prospect seemed promising. In turn, GTRLC would help the county apply for the grant and raise matching funds.

After some discussion, Riordan and Rollert agreed to option the property to GTRLC in anticipation of a Trust Fund grant, while Childs urged support through the county board.

“As a long-time Rotarian who valued the economic benefits of balancing growth with land preservation, Ross really believed in the conservancy,” Chown said. “He was a great friend to this organization on more than one occasion, and this was one of those instances.”



PHOTO BY DANA VANNOY

In December of 2001, the Trust Fund board approved a nearly \$7 million grant for the property. GTRLC helped raised the 25 percent match required, cobbling it together from private fundraising and various grants. It was the largest trust fund grant the GTRLC had helped secure up to that point.

“This was our first campaign in the \$10 million range,” Chown said. “It really helped

give us courage to think even bigger when the Coastal Campaign opportunity came knocking on our door soon thereafter.”

As with all projects completed by GTRLC, Chown remains thankful to the original landowners for their role in the process.

“We’re grateful that Helen and her son Dave saw the vision and worked with us to protect that wonderful piece of property,” he said. “As she neared her 100th birthday, Helen and I drove out to the farm together so she could savor the beauty of her farm and the conservation legacy she helped create. She was so appreciative of the volunteers who lovingly maintain the buildings and grounds around the historic farmhouse.”

Today, Maple Bay is one of Grand Traverse County’s most popular parks, in no small part because of its beautiful stretch of beach. GTRLC still owns the old farmhouse, which could not be purchased with Trust Fund money, and the conservancy uses the farm as a setting for results-oriented partnerships that promote both GTRLC and farming in the region. The property has also become integral to the development of the conservancy’s growing volunteer stewardship program.

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Scenes from Maple Bay.



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