



# CONSERVING NATURE

## Stories of Protected Lands

Stories gathered in 2016

## "YOU'VE GOT TO FIND A WAY..."

When Elizabeth Levi's family bought their land near what is now Wixom Lake, their property was surrounded by fields and forest. Purchased as a northern retreat, her land is now surrounded by houses.

"This is the last little piece of land that is left," Elizabeth said.

Elizabeth and her mother, Pearl, knew their eight and a half acre oasis of mature forest along Wixom Lake and Lincoln Bayou was special, and in need of protection.

Elizabeth recalled, "Before my mother passed [in 2006], she said, 'Elizabeth, you've got to find a way to protect this.'"

She contemplated many options to conserve her land.

"I considered giving the land to the DNR," she said. "I had never heard of The Little Forks

Conservancy until I started reading articles in the newspaper. I thought this is it."

In December of 2007, Elizabeth signed a conservation easement with the Conservancy. The conservation easement ensures that the property's white pines will continue to grow untouched for generations to come.

She chose to place a conservation easement on her property because it guarantees the land will be protected forever.

"As long as I'm alive," she said, "I know I have the strength to protect it. But, when I'm dead, I'm not going to be able to do that."

She continued, "Now it'll never be destroyed and I can feel safe with that."

Elizabeth's family has used the property, which features 787 feet of frontage on a channel

of Wixom Lake, for recreation since the 1940's. Elizabeth recalled spending many hours fishing with her father in the family's rowboat.

Elizabeth has continued to use and enjoy the property, often taking her rowboat out into the water. She also enjoys walking to her favorite spot in the woods, a place where she says she feels a deep, spiritual connection to the land.

"That land and I are like one," Elizabeth said. "For that land to be destroyed it would be like me getting destroyed."

Below (c. 1940): Levi in the arms of her father, Robert, on the property with her mother and uncle.



# “HOW THEY WOULD WANT IT”

Driving on M-61 just outside the City of Gladwin, you can't help noticing the beautiful red Michigan barn owned by Darlene Wolohan and Bonnie Shaw.

This iconic 72-acre farm with a gently rolling field leading to a mature forest has been in the sisters' family for nearly 100 years.

The property was purchased in 1919, Bonnie explained, “because Grandpa felt the family needed to be closer to school.” Otherwise, their father, the oldest child, would have had to board in town and wouldn't have been able to help with the farm work.

To preserve the rich agricultural tradition of the land, the sisters signed a conservation easement to protect their family property. Now, the Bailey Farm will forever be an oasis of farmland along the Cedar River.

Bonnie said, “I thought about dad, grandpa and the aunts - the ones who cared deeply for the land. That, to me, was how they would want it.”

Darlene and Bonnie first started thinking about conserving their



Top, from left: AmeriCorps member Erin Quetell, Director of Land Conservation Elan Lipschitz, James Shaw, Bonnie Shaw, Charles Wolohan, Darlene Wolohan, and Executive Director Doug Koop. Bottom: View of the barns from M-61 in Gladwin.

land after reading an article in the Detroit Free Press in 1998.

Bonnie said, “It was always in the back of my mind, even before we knew of the Conservancy.”

Placing a conservation easement on their land, Darlene said, “felt right and we had the support of our families.”

In fact, when the sisters told their children, Darlene added, “They said finally and great. They have a lot of happy memories here. We do, too.”

With its proximity to the City of Gladwin, the Bailey Farm will continue to provide a positive impact on the Gladwin community.

# "THIS PRESERVE MEANS A GREAT DEAL TO US"

Nestled along 1,200 feet of the Salt River, this new nature preserve is located within the Pine Haven Recreation Area at the end of Maynard Road.

The 8-acre property was donated to The Little Forks Conservancy by the children of Albert and Virginia Szok in memory of their parents.

"The property has been a privately owned in-holding within Pine Haven," said Doug Koop, executive director of the Conservancy. "Because of this gift, it will now be open to the public to discover."

Albert and Virginia's son Peter Szok recalled, "My siblings and I often took hikes on the property. It was wonderful to walk through the woods with my father. He took great joy in identifying trees, mushrooms and animals."

Albert Szok was a long-time Midland Public Schools teacher, who not only helped develop the environmental education programs for the Chippewa Nature Center during its formation but also helped develop the environmental education standards for the State of Michigan.



Peter, Cameron, and Virginia Szok at the preserve dedicated in memory of Peter's parents.

Peter remembered, "He was constantly taking his students outdoors. He felt that in the natural world, one could find one's goodness and also see the goodness in others."

Virginia Szok met her husband while teaching in Indonesia. After her marriage, she was primarily a homemaker, but remained very active in the community. She later took a job at Northwood Gallery. Together they ran a small fine arts business, specializing in the sale of Audubon prints.

Peter said, "Both of them were crazy about birds and had, at least, ten feeders in their backyard." Szok recalled that his father "had an amazing talent for bantering with birds. He

whistled back and forth with them as we made our way through the forest."

Because none of the family lives in the area, they chose to donate the land as a nature preserve.

Szok said, "We wanted to see the property remain in a natural state. The preserve means a great deal to us, and we deeply appreciate the willingness of Little Forks and Chippewa Watershed Conservancies to protect the land."

Chippewa Watershed Conservancy will help permanently protect the preserve through a conservation easement donated to them by the Szok family prior to gifting the land to Little Forks Conservancy.

## "I LIKE THE LAND THE WAY IT IS"

In 1999, Don Blades asked The Little Forks Conservancy's executive director, Doug Koop, if the Conservancy would be interested in protecting his land.

"I told him we would be glad to," Doug recalled.

Two hundred seventy four acres of woods and farmland, the property is bordered by the Tobacco River.

Don's family has lived on the Tobacco River in Gladwin County for several generations. Both sets of his grandparents and one great-grandfather owned land along the river.

"I like the property they way it was years ago," Don said. "The people who live above me [on the river] have been excavating. They build their houses so they almost hang into the river. Everybody downstream gets the mud."

"Years ago," he said, "we used to catch trout out here -- not anymore. I haven't seen any trout there for 40 years."

Don has taken many steps to preserve the quality of his land. He has spent years stabilizing his one-and-a-half miles of riverbank. He also partnered with the Gladwin Soil

Conservation Service to construct a retention pond to control runoff from his farmland.

Don noted that some of the wildlife is returning. "I've seen a pair of eagles in the past two or three years. They're building a nest. I used to see ospreys, but no more."

When asked why he decided to place a conservation easement on his property, Don replied, "I like the land the way it is."

He knows that when he is gone, the land will be kept the way it is, forever.



Little Forks Conservancy's first conservation easement donor, Don Blades, protected 274 acres along one and a half miles of the Tobacco River.

# "I WANT THAT TO BE MY LEGACY"

Sitting in the two-story farmhouse where he was raised, you quickly discover Howard Asch's deep love of the land that surrounds it.

"It's been 15 years since I actually farmed it," he said, "but, you know, you still get the itch to get the plow out and smell that damp earth turned over."

And, there's a lot to love. With a mix of farmland, forest, fields and wetlands, Mr. Asch's property covers 313 acres in Gladwin County.

"It's really nice to have a mile-long backyard," Mr. Asch said. "That's something that is really valuable and I would hate to see that carved up and destroyed."

To make sure that didn't happen, Mr. Asch and his wife, Jill, donated a conservation easement to Little Forks Conservancy.

Mr. Asch added, "Unless we start preserving land now, eventually it's going to get to the point where it's all carved up into such small parcels that many of the features that make Michigan what it is are going to be gone – we'll lose the wildlife, we'll lose the open spaces and feel."



Howard Asch (right) shakes hands with Doup Koop following the signing of his conservation easement

In just his lifetime, Mr. Asch has seen – and made – many changes to the land.

When his parents purchased the first parcel during the Great Depression, he recalled, "it was the typical farm that you'd see back in the 20's and 30's when I grew up here. We had some cattle and some pigs and some crops, mainly to feed the cattle and the pigs."

Once he started working outside the farm to earn a living, it became more of a second job and Mr. Asch converted most of the pasture to row crops. Several years ago, Mr. Asch restored about 30 acres of farmland to native grasses and

wildflowers.

It was through the years of working and restoring the land that Mr. Asch's love of nature and passion for conservation grew.

"Many people can't understand attachment to the land," Mr. Asch said. "When you spend a significant number of years working in the ground and working with the ground to produce a living, it does something to you. You get an attachment that people who haven't done that can't understand."

Seeing his land conserved forever "is what I've been hoping for, for a long time," Mr. Asch said. "I want that to be my legacy."

# "COULD NOT IMAGINE THE PROPERTY BEING SPLIT"

In 2000, Hugh and Eileen Starks, founding board members of The Little Forks Conservancy, donated 40 acres of land in northeastern Mecosta County.

"We could not imagine the property being split up into a bunch of home sites," said Eileen.

With approximately 3,000 feet on the Chippewa River, the property was used by the Starks family for picnics and canoe trips for more than 20 years.

The river creates a mix of high bank and forested floodplain as it meanders from north to south across the land. The landscape is further enhanced by two small ponds, an open field and a small farm plot.



Because the property needed good management to maintain the important natural features found there, the Board of Directors determined that a conservation easement was the best tool to protect the property.

In 2002, with the support of the Starks, the property was protected with a

conservation easement and returned to private ownership.

"Protecting their land with a conservation easement met the Starks' goals," said Doug Koop, executive director, "as well as made it possible for another local family to enjoy the land as they once did."



"AS INDIVIDUALS, WE CAN'T EXPECT TO CHANGE THE WORLD AND ITS VIEW OF CONSERVATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT. HAVING A CONSERVATION EASEMENT ON OUR PROPERTY IS OUR SMALL PART OF TRYING."

Glenn and Carol Sanford

Conservation Easement Donors

# CONSERVATION OPTIONS

Permanently protecting your land is one of the greatest gifts you can give to our community. If you own “wild” land that you want to conserve, there are many ways Little Forks Conservancy can help you make it happen.

## **Conservation Easements**

The most common method Little Forks uses to protect land is a conservation easement. A conservation easement is a permanent agreement between a landowner and Little Forks Conservancy which determines the uses of the property to best preserve its natural resources forever.

## **Donations of Land**

Donating land to Little Forks Conservancy can be one of the finest legacies you can leave to future generations. Little Forks accepts lands with significant natural or cultural value to the community. Little Forks will maintain certain properties as nature preserves open to the public for uses that do not compromise the natural resources of the land. For other properties, after consultation with you, Little Forks will evaluate the best way to conserve the land and make appropriate decisions to further our mission and protect the land.

## **Bargain Sale of Land or Conservation Easements**

If you are not in a position to donate your property or a conservation easement outright, it may be possible to complete a bargain sale. Little Forks Conservancy can purchase the property or conservation easement at below market value. The difference between the sale price and the full market value of the property may be used as a tax deduction to offset capital gains taxes triggered by the sale.

## **Remainder Interests and Reserved Life Estates**

It is possible to donate land to Little Forks while you continue to live on the property for the balance of your life and/or the lifetime of certain named individuals. This is known as a reserved life estate. When the landowner or others named by the landowner passes away, the life interest is released and Little Forks Conservancy is given full title and control over the property.

## **Bequests**

If you wish to maintain full control over the land during your lifetime, but assure that it is protected after your death, a property or conservation easement can be bequeathed to Little Forks Conservancy by will.

**To find out how Little Forks Conservancy can help you protect your land forever, contact our office at 989.835.4886 or [info@littleforks.org](mailto:info@littleforks.org).**