A summer day at Moraine State Park

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The Pennsylvania Land Trust Association promotes voluntary land conservation by acquiring and dedicating land or by purchasing or accepting donations of land and conservation easements. The basic tools are described below.

Land trust and landowner as well as government can access a variety of voluntary tools for conserving special places. The basic tools are described below.

A land trust can acquire land. The land trust then takes care of the property as a wildlife preserve, public recreation area or other conservation purpose.

A landowner and land trust may create an agreement known as a conservation easement. The agreement limits certain uses on all or a portion of a property for conservation purposes while keeping the property in the landowner’s ownership and control.

Landowners can donate land and easements. These charitable gifts may qualify the donor for federal tax deductions. In unusual cases this land trust may offer to purchase a property for an agreed-to price using donations from others.

A land trust can acquire a property, place a conservation easement on it, and then sell it to a conservation buyer—someone who wants to own a conserved property.

Sometimes a municipality or state agency wishes to conserve a property but can’t meet the financial or timing demands of the landowner. A land trust can help by acquiring and then donating or selling the land to the government when the government is ready.

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The Power of Vision

The Moraine State Park Story

A consequence of glaciers 14,000 years ago gave Muddy Creek its hills and valleys. Industry gave it its scars.

A meeting of minds in the 1950s transformed the land yet again.

Community leaders envisioned a beautiful park rising from Muddy Creek Valley’s mine-scarred surface. And they spent endless hours to make it happen.

Half a century later, Moraine State Park is one of Pennsylvania’s most visited parks.

Muddy Creek Valley, dumping Canadian rocks at the end of their reach—a terminal moraine. Water pooled behind the rocks and ice, creating prehistoric lakes. Frank wanted to map the extent of the terminal moraine, which would tell him the ancient lake boundaries.

Andrew M. Loza, editor and writer

Donna T. Morelli, writer and researcher

The Lake that wasn’t there

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“The critical thing was having the gas to get out there. He couldn’t do deskwork any more until we could get gas,” Jane explained. This was received during World War II. After the war, Frank and Jane would take day trips to Muddy Creek. “I went along to drive and he would tell me where to stop. I'd get out and pick apples. Frank would study rocks. There were fields with Canadian stones, and these were fields of local stones. It was fun.”

Preston’s visits to the valley became routine. And his fascination with the ancient lake grew into a vision of creating a grand state park and recreational lake for the people of western Pennsylvania. “He saw the big picture. He always could,” Jane recalled.

Devastation

Preston sought out a local attorney who had similar values as he. George Kiester was concerned with the past life of the landscape—albeit a much more recent past than Preston. Kiester, who later became Judge Kiester, is a native of Butler County. When he returned from law school to settle down, he saw a countryside he didn’t recognize.

Three years later, Preston found a place for his holdings with the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy. The group had recently evolved from the Greater Pittsburgh Parks Association. Kiester rallied residents and elected officials from Butler County to Harrisburg to make the industry more responsible. It was the work that attracted the attention of Preston.

“I guess I developed a reputation,” Judge Kiester said. “I was convinced and I still am. We wanted to preserve some of the land for the public good and not have it all be developed.”

The land trust

Preston first broached making his vision a reality at a 1948 meeting in Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Museum. There, while discussing scientific matters with friends, the topic turned to the nature of the glacier-carved landscape of Muddy Creek Valley. Preston expressed his feeling that the geological and ecological resource should be shared with others by creating a public park.

He wrote then of his interest in donating land to a park endeavor:

“I acquired only a few miles of railroad track and a few hundred acres in addition, and I offered to transfer these to an organization, whatever organization it might be, willing to accept responsibility for it.”

Three years later, Preston found a place for his holdings with the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy. The group had recently evolved from the Greater Pittsburgh Parks Association to serve all of western Pennsylvania. The Conservancy adopted Preston's vision, embarking on a campaign to raise funds and buy land in Muddy Creek.

The Conservancy hired Carl Leathers, a man who was familiar with the farmers and other landowners in Muddy Creek Valley. He spent years knocking on doors and making land deals. Much of the valley farmland was too wet to grow crops well. Many a farmer had retirement or a move to better ground on their mind.

Public support swelled as did the Conservancy’s dues-paying membership, which mushroomed from 1,000 to six thousand.

But for the bold vision to be realized, local support had to be translated into state support. Harrisburg had to be convinced to create a state park in the Muddy Creek Valley.

From private to public

Kiester and a group of influential men from Butler County made their way to Harrisburg. They planned their windmill, naming the world white, as the men strove to keep their appointment in the capital.

The determined group reached their destination, impressing Harrisburg with both their arrival and subsequent presentation. State support for the park was had.

Soon, government funding began flowing to complete what Preston and the Conservancy had begun. The Conservancy transferred he 3,000 acres it had acquired to the Commonwealth, and the state set out to fill in the gaps.

The former Pennsylvania Department of Forests and Waters and former Department of Mines and Mineral Industries sealed deep mines, back-filled and graded strip-mined areas, and plugged gas and oil wells. Soil was treated with fertilizers; grass, clover, and thousands of trees were planted throughout the property.

Moraine State Park, complete with a recreated ancient lake, opened in 1970.

Since then, millions have come and gazed at Lake Arthur from serene shores. Families and community groups picnic on the broad lawns. Children swim in the beaches and play in the water. Couples bicycle and walk the trails. Boaters unfurl their sails to race across the lake, while anglers hook what lives within.