

# How One Man Helped Capture The Beauty of Benzie County Forever and For All

By Tom Rademacher

Over the course of several decades, the late Dr. Bill Olsen earned the reputation as a skilled surgeon, capable of creating fresh starts for people suffering from a minor laceration to the need for an emergency appendectomy.

But in northwest Lower Michigan especially, he might instead be remembered for the way he stitched together a wide array of people and sentiments in order to create the Betsie Valley Trail, a monument in perpetuity to the beauty of nature and the power of perseverance.

“Bill worked tirelessly to advocate for the establishment of the Betsie Valley Trail, and then built on this achievement by putting thousands of hours in the trail’s continued maintenance and upkeep,” says Bob Wilson, executive director of the Michigan Trails and Greenways Alliance.

“In his retirement, it was his greatest passion outside his family.”

Doc Olsen’s passion culminated in a 22-mile odyssey that snakes its way along the former Ann Arbor Railroad bed and invites thousands annually to walk, run, skate, ski, bicycle and snowmobile through what some argue is the prettiest part of Michigan. It debuted in 2003.

Contained entirely within bucolic Benzie County, the Betsie Valley Trail extends from Frankfort through Elberta and Beulah to Thompsonville, offering majestic views of Crystal and Betsie lakes, the Betsie River, wetlands, hardwoods and more. It boasts miles of natural, undisturbed habitat – including a 6.5-mile stretch through the Pere Marquette State Forest – and modern conveniences ranging from accommodations to bike rentals to restaurants.

But it didn’t evolve easily.

Like other rails-to-trails efforts elsewhere in Michigan, the Betsie Valley Trail wasn’t welcomed by all, most notably some owners of lakeshore property on Crystal Lake, who viewed the transformative measure as detrimental to their property values.

Enter Wilson and Olsen, who teamed in the early 90s to help convince contrarians that the opposite was actually true: With little exception, land along an improved trail actually increased in value.

Still, lawsuits pockmarked the process, and it was Doc Olsen who stepped in time and time again to smooth ruffled feathers and argue on behalf of a measure that would create something greater than one’s self.

“The trail wouldn’t be there if it weren’t for Bill Olsen,” insists Rick Schmitt, owner of Stormcloud Brewing Co. in Frankfort,



Dr. Bill Olsen was the driving force behind the Betsy Valley Trail. Shown here biking in Norway.

just a block off the trail. “Bill took it upon himself to spend hundreds and hundreds of hours researching the ownership of every foot of the trail.

“He singlehandedly put the plan together, and created the group that would spearhead the effort. It ended up in court, with some homeowners fighting it tooth and nail, and in some instances he didn’t make friends.”

“But he stuck to it, and he got it done.”

Born in Frankfort during the summer of 1931, Doc Olsen graduated in 1949 from Frankfort High. He learned how to sail at an early age, and worked his way through high school and college at his grandfather’s now long-gone service station on Crystal Lake. He helped pioneer the practice of running a gas line to a dock on the lake to service boat owners in need of direct access to fuel.

At 19, he married his high school sweetheart – Joan Jacobsen, two years his junior – and they had three children – William C., Kristine Drake and David. After earning a degree in zoology at Michigan State University, Olsen graduated from the University

Joan and Bill enjoy a fall bike ride on the Betsie Valley Trail.



of Michigan Medical School, and after completing his internship and residency in Ann Arbor, worked both as a general surgeon and professor of surgery, mostly in southeast Michigan.

According to his son, Bill, Doc Olsen specialized in treating trauma cases. His career was cut somewhat short after he developed an allergic reaction to the latex in gloves that surgeons must wear. But he'd also become somewhat disenchanted with the profession as it morphed from a service vocation into "more about the bottom line," said his son. "His cup of tea was taking care of people."

The Olsens retired to the Frankfort area and its sweeping dunes and beaches in 1991 (Doc was 60 at the time), where they had a 40-foot sailboat named "Northern Light," and found joy in hosting family outings at what they called "Camp Olsen" at their place on Upper Herring Lake.

They also found fulfillment in the local culture, cheering on Frankfort High's sports teams and patronizing area businesses, nonprofits and organizations.

Doc's life changed dramatically the day Joan shared a clipping she'd cut from the local paper, inviting people to meet and explore the feasibility of a trail on the old railway bed, which had been abandoned by the Ann Arbor Railroad. The venerable railway had carried freight and passengers from Toledo clear to Elberta from 1892 until 1982, but passenger service was discontinued in 1951 and freight service ceased in 1985.

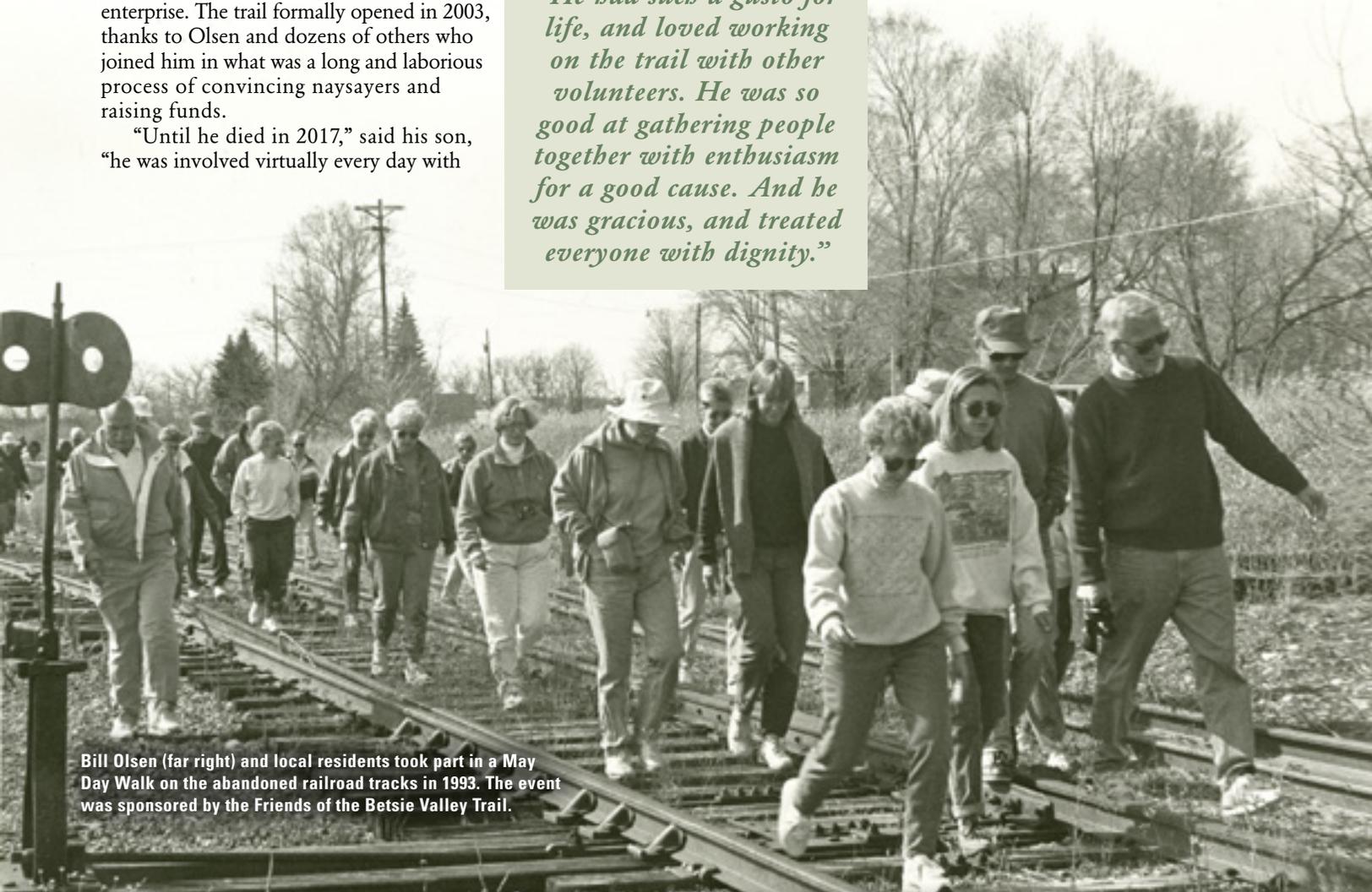
Efforts to improve its status as a dedicated trail first surfaced around 1990, and Doc Olsen wanted to be part of the fledgling enterprise. The trail formally opened in 2003, thanks to Olsen and dozens of others who joined him in what was a long and laborious process of convincing naysayers and raising funds.

"Until he died in 2017," said his son, "he was involved virtually every day with

that trail. And I never talked to him on the phone or in person without him bringing up the trail. It was just a constant topic." In fact, son Bill refers to his father's passion as "an unreasonable commitment to excellence that resulted in the trail being built."

After Doc Olsen worked night and day with the Friends of the Betsie Valley Trail to raise funds and write grants to get the trail built, he transferred his energies into maintaining it. He chaired the Betsie Valley Trailways Management Council to help secure and manage contracts to keep

*Daughter Kristine says "kind" is the word she thinks best described him. "He had such a gusto for life, and loved working on the trail with other volunteers. He was so good at gathering people together with enthusiasm for a good cause. And he was gracious, and treated everyone with dignity."*



Bill Olsen (far right) and local residents took part in a May Day Walk on the abandoned railroad tracks in 1993. The event was sponsored by the Friends of the Betsie Valley Trail.

the trail in tip-top shape. And in conjunction with his wife, established the William R. and Joan Olsen Endowment to benefit the Friends group.

To demonstrate that he was much more than simply interested in raising funds to maintain the trail, Doc Olsen bought a John Deere tractor and climbed aboard to do his part.

In all seasons and in all kinds of weather, he'd make his way along the 22-mile route, clearing branches and improving everything from bridges to mile markers to retaining walls, all the while snapping pictures of flora and fauna, many of which still live on websites showcasing the Betsie Valley Trail.

"It was more than just a personal passion for trails," explained Wilson. "Bill thought of them as a way to build community and neighborhoods. And that's a theme we see continuing today. You can live next door to a person and never know them. But get them onto a trail, in a safe environment, and that corridor exposes them to each other, not to mention history, nature and community."

Though Doc Olsen was well-known as a perfectionist – and opinionated to the point of being stubborn – daughter Kristine says "kind" is the word she thinks best described him. "He had such a gusto for life, and loved working on the trail with other volunteers. He was so good at gathering people together with enthusiasm for a good cause. And he was gracious, and treated everyone with dignity."

Joan Olsen's health faltered in later years, as she contracted dementia and eventually moved into an assisted living facility in Frankfort. She died in November of 2018.

Bill preceded her in death by about a year and a half, during the summer of 2017, after suffering a heart attack on – where else? – his beloved trail. He was aboard his bicycle at the time, on a remote stretch, and somehow managed to walk out under his own power and eventually seek treatment. He was hospitalized, and died 10 days later, at the age of 85.

Though gone, his legacy will live on, as the depot at the trailhead in Beulah is named in his honor. A dedication ceremony attended by his many devotees recalled Bill as "a pioneer" and "central figure in the early growth years of Michigan trails."

So there's that. And the endowment. And then there's Doc's old haunts, the Stormcloud included, where owner Rick Schmitt still imagines his friend propped up on a barstool, ordering a Birdwalker Blonde ale.

Doc is striking up a conversation with whoever will have him, and then he's roaming tables some, greeting old friends and making new ones.

And for anyone sharing that they're first-timers to the area, the comeback is always the same: "Well then, let me tell you about our Betsie Valley Trail..." 

The author of this profile, Tom Rademacher, was a long-time reporter and columnist for The Grand Rapids Press. He now freelances. Contact him at: rademachertom@gmail.com



Doc Olsen bought a John Deere tractor and put thousands of hours into trail maintenance.



Family of Bill Olsen speaks at his trailhead dedication ceremony.



The depot at the trailhead in Beulah is named in Bill's honor.

To learn more about the Betsie Valley Trail, see page 59 or visit [www.BetsieValleyTrail.org](http://www.BetsieValleyTrail.org)



Doc Olsen cuts the ribbon and the Betsie Valley Trail is formally opened in 2003.