

Acquiring the Nichols Preserve

I was quietly riding down the main road in the Nichols Preserve about 15 years ago, when I saw someone walking their dogs off leash. As they were unaware of me and my horse, in an effort to alert them and make sure it was fine to pass, I hollered a "hello" and "are your dogs friendly?"

OOPS! The two large Shepards immediately start racing towards us, the owner was unable to catch them and we got a nice flash of adrenaline. The frustrated dog walker started to yell at me that horses weren't allowed in this preserve and I needed to leave. Double OOPS!

I had moved to Greenwich a few years previously been shown the wonderful trail system by my neighbor and fellow equestrian, Bonnie Caie. The Nichols Preserve, part of the trails she introduced me to, is one of my favorites. Quiet tranquil level bridle paths, wide open fields filled with wild flowers, an old apple orchard and ponds teeming with waterfowl. Cody and I went there often to ride and never saw anyone until that "dog day".

We had always passed a decrepit sign near the entrance, but honestly I never looked passed the top line, which read "the Nichols Nature Preserve". There was plenty more text, but faded and far less interesting then what lay in front of us - another adventure on our favorite trails.

Upon returning home, I settled my horse in, jumped in my car and drove back to the Preserve entrance. I read the sign in its entirety, (unfortunately I don't have a photograph of it), but essentially it stated the preserve was open from dusk to dawn, managed by the Nature Conservancy and then listed numerous prohibited activities, basically saying "stay out and go home". Then came the clincher - the "No's":

NO VEHICLES, NO FIRES, NO HORSES, NO DOGS

"No Dogs??!!" I repeated out loud. That was it! The following day I began making numerous phone calls to GRTA directors, pulled all the related land documents in Armonk and Greenwich, spoke to neighbors and looked through The Nature Conservancy (TNC) rules and regulations of permissible activities.

It was the beginning of a long process that was extremely discouraging. A few of the land-use records specifically listed horseback riding and this is what encouraged me to persist. Members of our organization warned me it was a lost cause. They had pursued it several years earlier and TNC told them that a horse incident in another state forced them to ban horses from all their properties. I realized that TNC would have to honor its donors requests so the quest to get in contact with Mr. Nichols, who had long ago moved away from the area, became my immediate goal. It took

some time, but finally I was able to find him in Georgia, where he was residing in a small retirement home.

During our first conversation, he was moved to tears. During the 60's, he and his father had built the bridle paths, dug the ponds, planted the trees and wildflowers. This 94 acre natural parcel was a labor of their love, and he donated the land with the intention of many being able to use and enjoy this special place.

He lamented to me how the then current owners had let the preserve go, without any maintenance or stewardship. They had too many properties without the resources to manage his. Sadly, years past with disregarded requests and neglect of their initial agreement which left him feeling helpless. Fortunately, he was an excellent record keeper and had copies of all of his letters and correspondence throughout the years. We agreed that I would attempt to contact TNC on his behalf in an effort to restore the preserve for the uses he had designated, including horseback riding. The equestrian usage was particularly important to him as he himself used to drive a horse drawn carriage through the preserve. (there is even a credible rumor that he liked to do that in the buff - a true naturalist!)

Pushing 90 years of age, Mr. Nichols had amazing energy. He sent me everything he had on the preserve and continuously followed up with hand written notes and phone calls, remembering important details and often a tidbit of history on the preserve and his dealings with the TNC.

I quietly drafted the most legal sounding letter I could, not being a lawyer, backed with his documents and sent it overnight to TNC. The next morning the phone rang - they wanted to sit down and discuss possibilities for the future of the preserve.

Up until this point I had been working alone, but now I needed to involve others from our organization. Rusty Parker and Sheila Drenckhahn went with me to the first meeting. TNC admitted that they could not manage all of their properties and were looking to partner with local like-minded organizations, such as the GRTA. They were finding this model successful with many of their properties and believed we would be better at managing Nichols due to proximity and intended use. At the end of the discussion, they basically offered us the preserve along with a \$50,000 endowment - I was ecstatic! However, our GRTA Board had serious reservations; we had never owned land and there were doubts whether we could afford to take on this responsibility. How much would it cost to insure? What about vandalism? Who would mow it? What about encroaching neighbors? Was it more effort than it was worth? And for what benefit?

I saw it differently. I saw an opportunity for the GRTA to grow and have something all of us, equestrian or not, could enjoy and benefit from. I viewed it as an opportunity to become more entrenched in the community, attract supporters outside of the horse world and get more recognition as caregivers of the environment. Days leading up to our Boards' vote on whether or not to proceed

with the land transfer, I worked as a lobbyist, convincing those that I could to not pass up this unique opportunity.

The Board gave the green light, and, about a year later, we took ownership of the Nichols Preserve. Walter Stratton and Everett Fisher were key players in the complicated legal logistics of the transfer. It was a long endeavor but very much worth it. Today I cherish more than ever riding on those trails and am grateful that many others will continue to do so. What is most gratifying is that in my last conversation with Mr. Nichols I told him we had raised the money to replace the dam and save the largest pond on the preserve. This again brought him to tears as finally someone else cared as much as he did about this special place, and was committed to look after it ensuring its viability for the future.

~ Jenni Freedman