



The  
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Journal



# Healing of the Bear

Petoskey's Dr. John Tanton instrumental in advocating  
for the natural restoration of the Bear River

by **Richard A. Wiles**

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## 2 - Healing of the Bear

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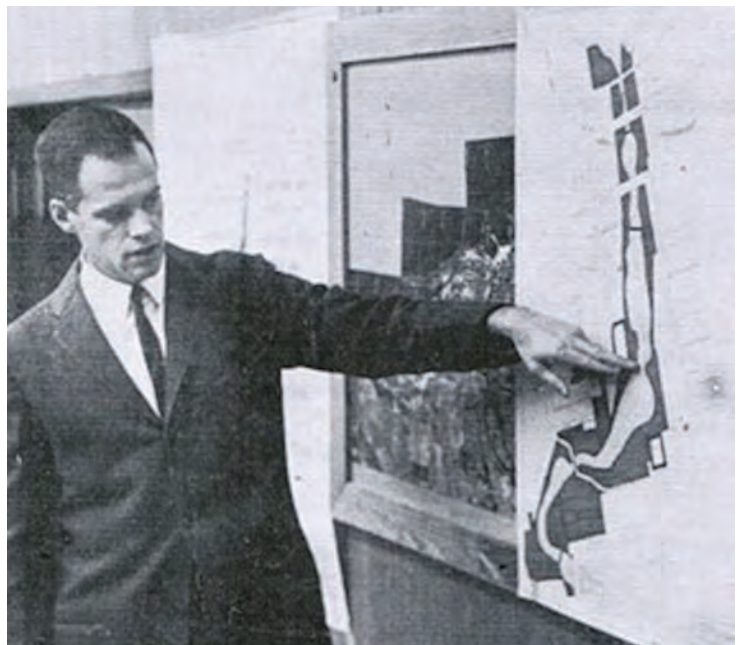


# The Healing of the Bear

Petoskey's Dr. John Tanton instrumental  
in advocating for the Bear River

By Richard A. Wiles

**D**r. John Tanton resided in Petoskey, Michigan, since moving here in 1964. While the rest of the United States knew him as an avowed conservationist and a strong advocate for a reduction in this country's population growth, many in the Tip of the Mitt area knew him only as their local ophthalmologist (until he retired in 1998). Tanton's involvement in the Zero Population Growth movement led him to be the organization's national president from 1975-1977. His overpowering belief in the idea that because the United States population used an enormous number of natural resources, as compared to the rest of the world, it should be the leading country in keeping its population as small as possible. Even if that meant severely limiting its entry of immigrants. His strong



Dr. John Tanton in 1966 presentation of his vision of development of the Bear River Valley Recreation Center



1884 Mitchell Street wooden bridge



Andrew Porter dam and mill on the Bear River

beliefs were often misinterpreted. He was most likely Petoskey's first real "environmentalist." One of his greatest environmental achievements concerning northern Michigan was his initiative to begin the healing of the Bear River.

Petoskey's Bear River, which originates from a flow out of Walloon (Bear) Lake, some 15 miles south of its mouth, at Little Traverse Bay, Lake Michigan, resulted from glaciation.

Native Americans used the river to get to and from Little Traverse Bay into the inland lake. Its name came from the local Native American words, Mak-wa (bear) and Ziibi (river) due to the number of black bear known to reside in the swamplands between Walloon Lake and Lake Michigan. The name Bear Creek (river) was adopted for the small settlement along Little Traverse Bay on Dec. 2, 1857. On that date a United States Post Office was estab-

lished. What made the river so unique was its last mile which has the steepest drop (116 feet) of any river found in the lower peninsula of Michigan.

An August 1840 survey of United States General Land Office surveyor Charles Cathcart made note of the steep fall of the yet unnamed Bear River and how it would be an excellent source for mill site's water power. That steep drop within the city limits of Petoskey (100 feet) was the cause for seven dams to be built over the years after European settlement in the area. Early real estate agents promoted Petoskey's Bear River as the best water power available for industry using dams and mills. The damage to the Bear River from its waterpower development was not addressed until the middle of the 1960s, 100 years after its first man-made dam.

As of 2019 there were 2,600 dams on the rivers of Michigan. The first dam on any river in Emmet County was placed on the Bear River in 1855. It was built for the Andrew Porter family who were involved in the Presbyterian effort to educate local Native Americans. The dam was built to provide

## 4 - Healing of the Bear



Original McManus Dam



McManus Dam 1898

a grist mill for the area. In the early 1860s, this first dam was purchased by Hazen Ingalls and the grist mill converted into a saw mill operation. Prior to the 1836 Treaty of Washington ceding the area of Emmet County to the federal government from the Ottawa and Chippewa people, no dams existed on any river in Emmet County. Author Christopher Bzdok, in his 2008 book, "Public Rights to Fish and Hunt

On Lakes and Stream" stated, "The public trust doctrine says that certain natural resources are owned by the state and held in trust for the people of Michigan. Therefore, the public's right to use these natural resources for certain traditional activities are protected from interference by private parties ... In state law, the public trust doctrine was passed down from the European legal system to the American legal

system and then to Michigan when it became a state.

The public trust doctrine includes the Great Lakes, the shorelines of the Great Lakes, and Michigan's navigable streams and inland lakes. Such entities are considered natural resources which have an inherent recognized right of public use under state law. A test referred to as the "log-float test" was used in Michigan beginning in the 1850s due to the wide use of the state's rivers for floating harvested timber to sawmills. Law cases were brought in Michigan which established that a stream would only be public during the times of year when there was enough water to pass the "log-float test." That law is still in effect.

The adoption of English Common Law in the United States, and the state of Michigan, granted ownership of a stream or river to one owning the bordering land parcels of the two banks of the water. While a landowner does not own the stream, he does own the rights of water usage. Thus, courts in Michigan, by the 1850s, tended to rule in favor of mill owners, lumber and timber interests, and also communities to place dams on the state's rivers. It was deemed "reasonable use" and centered around furthering economic development.

The first Bear River dam (1855) was followed by six more according to Blue Print Petoskey-2006, with only two remaining as of 2019. The original Porter dam and mill was owned by John Kilborn in 1874, and then by George McManus in 1876. McManus used the dam to develop the McManus Lumber Company. That dam and



The Petoskey Fibre Paper Company



City of Petoskey AC current hydro-electric plant, 1891

the lumber mill developed by the year 1900 produced over 9 million feet of finished lumber boards. This first dam was constructed of logs (a common practice of the time), which were then “supplemented by earth and hewn lumber” according to the *Grand Rapids Herald* issue of Oct. 8, 1922. The pondage behind this dam was over four miles upstream. In 1922, this dam was boxed in and the old water wheel removed. In its place two hydro-electric units were installed. The McManus dam was sold to the city of Petoskey in October of 1931 and rebuilt by 1933. It then became one of the city’s sources

for electrical power until 1959.

The William Porter dam was the second dam placed on the Bear River. It was located at the end of Petoskey’s Charlevoix Avenue. Porter, the brother of Andrew, constructed it in 1862, and in 1866, sold it to Hazen Ingalls and his son, Jackson, who then continued to use it as a sawmill until converting it into a grist mill for their City Mills company.

In 1885, Thomas Birkett of Dexter, Michigan, partnered with his brother, William, and experienced miller William Spokes of Jackson, Michigan, to

purchase the dam and use the water power for their own flour mill. A pulp wood mill was added later and in 1901 the property was sold to the Petoskey Paper Fiber Company. By the 1920s the dam and mill was named the Petoskey Paper Mills. In 1930 the dam property was purchased by the city of Petoskey and then rebuilt to incorporate a hydro-electric plant. The dam was named after the long serving city manager and engineer Peter T. (P.T.) Mitchell, who was also responsible for the city’s first sewage disposal facility built in 1923.

According to the American River Organization, the United States led the world in the number of dams placed on rivers. Also, the organization stated that dams, such as those placed on the Bear River for hydro-electric power and commercial use, had in several ways negative environmental effects on the river. First, the Bear River dams blocked fish from their natural migration, limiting their spawning ability. Secondly, the dams obviously slowed the river, creating reservoir pools, thus affecting the aquatic organisms and natural plant growth along the banks. Next, the various dam structures helped to trap sediment and buried fish spawning beds. Logs, gravel and other types of debris also became trapped. Finally, the slower moving water and the pondage reservoirs behind the dams heated up the Bear River to abnormal temperatures, causing algae blooms, depleting oxygen levels, and affecting the river’s water quality.

The *Independent Democrat’s* May 14, 1895, special edition titled “Petoskey, Past and Present,” noted that Loveless Blaney built the third dam on the Bear

## 6 - Healing of the Bear

River at its mouth in Little Traverse Bay. At that time the river ran east along the bay with a small peninsula separating it from Lake Michigan until it finally ran under Hiram Rose's dock (he leased the property from Rose) out into the bay. That configuration would later change with the coming of the Chicago & West Michigan Railroad in the early 1890s. The 1884 "Traverse Region Portraits and Biographical Sketches" (H. R. Page & Company) stated, "... during the summer of 1875, Shaw & McMillan purchased a tract of land alongside Bear Creek and began to build a dam (September). Mr. Blaney also built a dam across the creek and had a planning mill and factory. That building is now owned by the Blood brothers on the bay shore." Thus, by August there were three dams across the river.

Prior to 1891 and the coming of the Chicago & West Michigan Railroad, the Bear River traveled east along the Little Traverse Bay before its mouth emptied into Lake Michigan close to the village's wooden dock. At its furthest point had been placed a water wheel for the Blood Brother's (Clarence and Maurice) Machine Company in 1878. They manufactured maple rolling pins and broom handles. A gate was installed to the west of the plant to regulate the flow. By 1885, the plant was shut down and moved to Clarion, Michigan. One of the requirements for the West Michigan & Chicago Railroad when laying its tracks into Petoskey and its new depot was the need for a bridge across the Bear River. The *Northwestern Reporter* in 1896 stated that "... in 1891 the city council of the village of Petoskey had given the



1877 Shaw & McMillan Dam looking south from Lake Street Bridge



Gardner-Hankey dam built in 1879 just upstream (south) of Shaw & McMillan Dam

Chicago & West Michigan Railroad permission to change the course of the Bear River ... and building a stone wall for a new course ..." straight into Little Traverse Bay.

The Shaw and McMillan dam was the fourth dam on the Bear River by September 1875. Archibald McMillan and John Shaw had been involved in the building of the Grand Rapids & Indiana Railroad into Petoskey (November of 1873). They decided to become land speculators and built their Bear River dam with the idea of offering it as a source of waterpower for potential new industries. It would be three years before a company took them up on

their offer of cheap waterpower and cheap land. The Forbes & Baker broom handle company came to Petoskey in 1878 to use the dam as its source of waterpower. In 1938, Petoskey historian Fly Irene Graham wrote in her "Petoskey & Bay View in the Ye Olden Days" pamphlet that, "... the Forbes & Baker Woodenware dam was just south of the Mitchell Street bridge."

The Forbes & Baker broom handle plant burned in 1883.

The *Petoskey City Record's* Sept. 30, 1880, issue published an article titled "Along the River." In it, the paper stated that "In looking back a few years, we cannot help but notice the great change

## Healing of the Bear - 7



Lake Street Dam



Bear River Dam at Walloon Lake



Mitchell Street Dam built in 1930

that has taken place in this busy part of the town. Then the stream was blockaded with trees and rubbish from the bridge on Bay street to the railroad, and not a sound of industry was heard save that of the rippling water as it wended its way down over rocks and logs till it reached Little Traverse Bay. Now there is a handle factory, two grist mills, one sawmill and one planning mill, all doing a good business, four dams have been built and the stream has been cleared out more or less, from one dam to another, while the timber has mostly been removed from its banks, and we find good, substantial buildings in most places. The Cable Flouring Mills, C.F. Hankey, proprietor, has the finest building of any on the stream ... the next up the river is the Star Flouring Mills, run by J. Ingalls & Bro., and was the first mill in Emmet County, with the exception of one on the Convent farm at Cross Village. This mill site was originally used for a sawmill, but for two years past has been used for the grist mill now running. ... Farther up the river is W.L. McManus & Co.'s sawmill and planning mill, and it is unnecessary to say that they are full of business, as they always are."

The Shaw & McMillan dam would be leased by Hiram Rose in August of 1886. In 1887, the Edison Electric Light & Power Company of Petoskey was incorporated by Hiram Rose and others. In 1898, Petoskey purchased the Shaw & McMillan dam and the Rose-Edison power plant. The dam was in place until it was partially washed out in 1959 by the spring flow of the river. It was removed from the river in 1968.

According to the 1884 "Traverse Region Portraits & Biographical

## 8 - Healing of the Bear

Sketches” publication, Joseph A. Gardner moved to Petoskey from Albany, New York, in February of 1879. He purchased acreage on the Bear River and constructed a dam and what would be called the Cable Flour Mill. His occupation was building mills and selling machinery. In 1880, he sold his operation to Christopher Hankey. The Hankey Dam then supplied waterpower not only to the Hankey flour mill, but also the Winsor Woodenware Company by way of a large cable—this is why they were referred to as the “cable mills.” In 1913, the Hankey Dam washed out and had to be rebuilt, only to wash out again in 1951.

The sixth man-made dam on the Bear River was the Lake Street Water Works dam. It was a low-head dam put in place in the fall of 1881 by Petoskey. Its purpose was to help generate a greater flow of water for the new city water works, just north of the structure. At first, the dam consisted of logs. It washed out in July of 1885 and had to be rebuilt. The dam (later constructed of cement) is still in place today with an 8.5-foot head. It is one of only two dams left on the Bear River as of 2019.

The seventh dam on the Bear River was constructed in 1884 at the mouth of Bear Lake (Walloon Lake) in Charlevoix County. William McManus used the temporary dam to help flow cut logs down the river to his Petoskey-based sawmill. Lakeside residents sued McManus because he was constantly changing the level of the lake with his various log flows. The court ruled in favor of the Bear Lake cottagers and in 1889, a new dam, referred to as the Olds dam, was



Gardner-Hankey dam debris before its removal in the 1960s

constructed. It was replaced in 1900 with an adjustable wooden dam that lowered the lake level by over two feet. Cottagers took things into their own hands and raised the dam level back up. They won a court fight for their effort. By 1911, McManus decided to sell his dam to the cottagers.

By the year 2000, only the 1887 Walloon Lake dam and the Lake Street dam, just south of the Lake Street bridge, was still intact.

The Jan. 12, 1910, *Petoskey Record*

article “Improving the Bear” indicated the mind set of people in that time period. Their idea of improvement was to add another dam on the river to help increase the city’s hydro-electrical power generation. It was thought that this increased energy source would help attract new industry. The new dam, however, did not get constructed until 1932 (during the Great Depression). The new dam, located at the end of Petoskey’s Charlevoix Avenue and Ingalls Avenue, was named after the long-time city manager George Mitchell (Mitchell Dam).



Boy Scouts clean up the Bear in the spring of 1966

The first public mention of a Bear Creek/River “clean-up/clean-out” appeared in the Sept. 11, 1908, *Daily Resorter*. The article mentioned praise for the city’s light and power committee (made up of city council members) “... for its latest work of beautifying the city. The committee has taken it upon itself to clean up the riverbed between the electric light plant dam and the waterworks dam (Lake Street), hauling out old water-soaked logs and timber ...” Then, 15 years later, the *Petoskey Evening News* edition of June 2, 1923, reported the Bear River was to receive a planting of rainbow trout just above the McManus Dam. The Michigan Department of Conservation would conduct the planting and the article also stated, “Many younger fishermen have expressed the opinion that the river also needed a stocking of brook trout for more enjoyable fishing ...”

That improvement was followed in April of 1931 when the city of Petoskey decided to dredge the Bear River. The *Petoskey Evening News* reported on April 6, 1931, under the headline, “Petoskey Has Its Own Smelt Run,” that,

“City manager Mitchell recommended the Bear River be dredged out into the bay, the bottom be sanded and graveled. The whole project being part of a lakefront beautification plan by the city. It would include a fish ladder at the Lake Street dam. It would also include beautifying and fixing the stream as far as the light plant dam. That would give four or five blocks of (smelt) dipping territory on both parts of the stream.”

This improvement came after the city purchased waterfront land at the end of Petoskey Street in July, 1930. It had been the goal of the city for many years to own all the Little Traverse Bay shoreline from the breakwater east to the Bay View Association. A waterfront park was proposed to go onto the newly purchased property along with a city wharf — large enough to contain a dance pavilion.

In 1937, using money allocated by the federal government to help fight the Great Depression, a plan called for WPA (Works Progress Administration) workers to clean up the banks of

the Bear River and the Petoskey waterfront from the mouth of the bay east to the city dock. The waterfront area would be graded, and shrubs would be planted according to the *Petoskey Evening News* on March 17, 1937. The project also included the demolition of the old water works building and construction of a new one along the west side of the Bear River close to its mouth.

The next major improvement to the river and waterfront came in 1947 when work was completed by the city of Petoskey on the 1881 Lake Street dam’s spillway into Lake Michigan. The Aug. 22, 1946, edition of the *Northern Michigan Review* discussed the fact that the spring trout fishing in the Bear River was one of the best in years. Brown and rainbow trout were abundant, however, they had a hard time maneuvering the Lake Street dam’s spillway (in order to make it up river to spawn). The article stated, “... It will cost money to fix the fish ladders ... But it won’t cost much to clean up the debris of the old spillway ... In fact, it wouldn’t cost too much more to tear out the good-for-nothing spillway and give the trout a chance ...” By April of 1947, the old dam spillway was gone.

Later, in early 1952, the upcoming Petoskey Centennial Celebration sparked an interest in the further enhancement of the Petoskey waterfront. The *Northern Michigan Review*’s Feb. 21, 1952, edition discussed the completion of 40 separate projects to help enhance the waterfront. However, the high water levels of the Great Lakes that year hampered the work. Then in 1957, the

## 10 - Healing of the Bear

city established a Little League ball-park to accompany slides and swings for children.

The ultimate Bear River program to develop a recreational and nature area began in 1966 under the leadership of Dr. John Tanton, chairman of the Bear River Development Commission. Tanton had helped organize the commission during 1966. In a Dec. 19, 1966, meeting before the city council, Tanton outlined plans for the future development of the river valley within the city limits. It included, "... removal of no-longer-used dams which would help establish coho salmon and rainbow trout runs up the river ... picnic sites, a foot bridge, and nature areas ..."

The report stated, "The area presents Petoskey with an unusual opportunity and challenge. It is rare, even in this part of Michigan, for a community to have undeveloped potential park lands within its city limits, already in public ownership. It is even more rare to have a natural water course travel these lands ... In addition, dams have never before been removed from a Michigan river to restore a fishery, so the city has an opportunity for leadership in this area ..."

In March of 1968, the state of Michigan offered the city \$150,000 for the swimming beach northeast of Kegomic and the old tannery property. The beach property had been sold to the city by the Michigan Tanning & Extract Company of Kegomic in 1934. Petoskey paid \$25,000 for the property which included the Lake Street office of the company. The property contained 2,700 feet of shoreline,



Lake Street spillway



however, by the late 1950s, the bathing house and other facilities fell into disrepair.

From 1962, when Michigan purchased 175 acres of land southwest of the bathing beach, until 1968, the city and state discussed a possible sale in order that a state park could be developed on Little Traverse Bay. On March 30, 1968, the city's residents voted in favor of the sale. That sale took place in May of 1969 and Petoskey State Park opened July 1, 1969. The money from the sale (\$150,000) was then placed into a "special fund" account until a decision could be made on what the money should be used for. Tanton lobbied the city council to use the windfall to help create the Bear River Valley

recreational area. Others wanted to see the money used to help build a city swimming pool. The money sat in that account until 1973. By then, it had grown to almost \$186,000 (5.75% CDs). On Nov. 5, 1974, the people of Petoskey voted down a proposal to use the money to build a pool. Eventually, the money from the sale of the Petoskey bathing beach was used to help create the Bear River Valley Recreational Area.

Back in September of 1967, the two cities of Harbor Springs and Petoskey were shocked to find that the front page of the *Chicago Tribune's* Sept. 8, 1967, edition carried a story titled "Two Michigan Resort Cities Pollute Lake." The gist of the exposé was

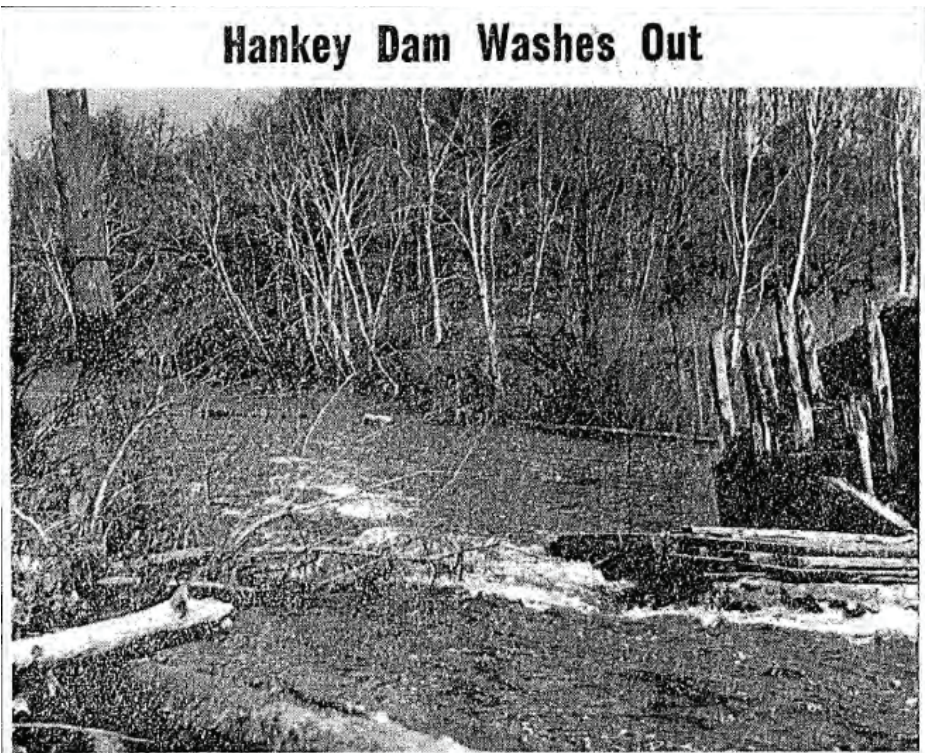
that Petoskey's combined sewage and storm water system resulted in numerous dumps of raw sewage into Little Traverse Bay whenever heavy rainfall occurred. This resulted in the area at the mouth of the Bear River, and along the bay at Magnus Park, to be unsafe for swimming (due to high bacteria counts) after such storms. Also mentioned was the fact that some storm sewers ran directly into the Bear River, contributing to the problem. However, 20 years earlier the state of Michigan had charged the city with pollution.

Tanton, according to author John F. Rohe, in his 2002 book, "Mary Lou & John Tanton: A Journey into American Conservation," arrived in Petoskey in the year 1964. He was to be employed by Burns Clinic as a doctor of ophthalmology, the clinic's 25th physician to join the growing medical clinic.

Rohe wrote about Tanton "... patients who disagreed with his views respectfully conceded he was striving, in good faith, to avert a problem before it arose. This was true for his vocation as their treating physician and for his avocation as a conservation activist."

At the center of John's life was a deep concern for the protection of the planet. He was a true environmentalist before the word was coined. He had an incredible ethic toward the protection of the land, and of the earth's waters. That ethic is what brought him to become interested in helping the healing of the Bear River.

In March of 1966, Tanton wrote a letter to city council offering them his



Old age and high waters took their toll on Petoskey's Hankey Dam Tuesday as over half of the dam was washed down stream. When the block square millpond held by the dam began to recede, two power poles, set near the site, were washed out, necessitating replacement.

The dam, once used to furnish mechanical power for the Hankey Milling Company, was taken over by the city about 10 years ago to furnish badly needed electrical power but was never used. (Evening News Photo)

April 12, 1951, Petoskey Evening News

services concerning a study involving the development of a long-range plan for the Bear River Valley. At the March 21, 1966, council meeting then-city manager Richard Gorman announced that the local Boy Scouts, and Kiwanis Club, were also expressing an interest in the Bear River Valley. Gorman asked council their thoughts on using Pellston prison camp labor to help in the clearing of stumps and trees from the Bear River. This was agreed. Thus, the first modern day clean-up of the "Bear" took place in April of 1966.

That first clean-up effort involved the Boy Scouts and Petoskey Kiwanis members along with other volunteers. Their goal was to not only clean the Bear River, but also to install fireplaces

and picnic tables at various spots along the river valley within the city. So, the "healing of the Bear (River)" had begun. However, it was only a start. One hundred years of benign neglect and industrial use of the stream had left it in less than desirable shape. In 1966, the river still had six dams in place, some in very poor condition. One of them was the Hankey Dam located near Grove Street in Petoskey which had been washed out in April of 1951. In 1955, a reconstruction of the dam was considered by the city in order to convert it into another hydroelectric dam. By then, the power supply in the tourist-visiting summer months was under capacity. However, that project did not materialize.

## 12 - Healing of the Bear

Tanton's first letter to the editor in the *Petoskey News-Review* appeared in its Feb. 2, 1965, edition. Tanton's real passion, besides seeing the healing of the Bear River, was carefully expressed in this writing. He was convinced that the world's population was growing at an alarming rate. He stated, "The evidence that we are today laying the groundwork for a fantastic problem of human numbers within our lifetime is abundant and clear."

This statement would be Tanton's mantra for the next 50-plus years of his life. It was closely tied to his ecological and environmental concerns for his adopted northern Michigan

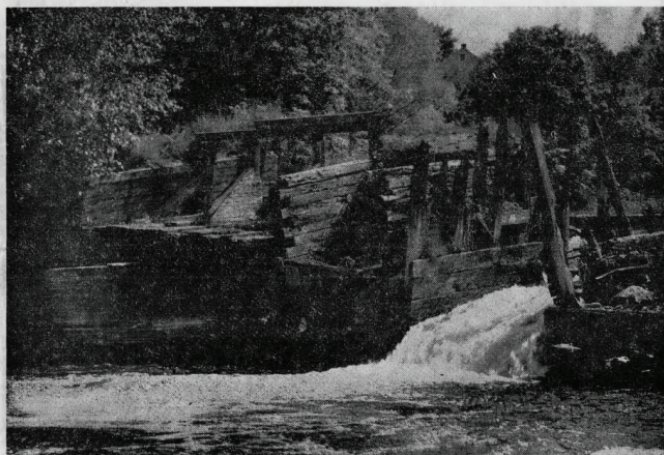
home.

On Monday, May 23, 1966, the Petoskey City Council officially established the Bear River Development Commission with its four members to be appointed by the city mayor, with approval of the council. The members would serve terms of two years and were to take office on July 1, 1966. Mayor James Gibson then appointed Tanton (as chairman) to a one-year term, along with Joe Kilborn, and for two terms, James Dilworth and Tom Walenta. The commission members were charged with developing a long-term plan for the Bear River Valley's improvement

as a public park and recreational area. All four of the mayor's considerations were approved. On Dec. 19, 1966, the Bear River Development Commission shared a preliminary study of possibilities for developing the Bear River Valley within the city limits. The *Petoskey News-Review* reported, "They visualize picnic and playground areas, nature study areas, hiking trails, beautification, removal of old dam sites and development of salmon and trout sports fishing ..."

On April 11, 1967, chairman Tanton spoke to the Petoskey Kiwanis Club about the new commission's efforts since their first meeting back in July of 1966. Tanton presented slides of various spots along the Bear River Valley deemed for immediate and long-term action. He said, "There is an 80-foot drop between the Sheridan Street bridge and this distance is just about one mile. The Colorado River's steepest drop is 30 feet per mile. There seems to be the possibility of developing a series of rapids if the old dams can be removed ... The Mitchell and McManus power dams had created a barrier to fish. If all dams could be removed, a trout and salmon spawning area could be established between Petoskey and Walloon Lake ..."

Tanton further explained that the commission had divided the Bear River Valley into six sections beginning at the mouth of the Little Traverse Bay on upstream through the swamp area surrounding North Central Michigan College. Each section had been given recommendations for improvement that would soon be presented in a public meeting.



ALMOST HIDDEN by weeds, and forgotten as a picnic spot, is this stone fireplace close by the banks of Bear River near the old Hankey Dam. The site was bought some years ago to be developed as a recreation area, but with the acquisition of the waterfront area, and development in that direction, Bear River was forgotten by the people.

The beautiful birches, however, have been mangled by "peelers," knives, hatchets and pencils.

Lower photo shows the dam, almost rotted away. The bridge which was used for years is gone, and soon most of the dam will break off and drift downstream. See "Looking 'Em Over," page one, section II for further details.

—Review Photo-Engraving

Aug. 3, 1950 Northern Michigan Review photos

In 1967, sportsmen complained to the city council about pollution in Little Traverse Bay and Bear River, along with numerous instances of oil slicks being found in the Bear River. Most of the oil was said to be from the city's diesel-powered electrical generating plant on the Bear River close to the bay. Another source of oil was thought to be coming from the city storm sewers running into the river at various spots. City manager Richard Gorman promised to fix the problem of oil leakage from the generating plant, however, the storm sewer problem lingered. In November of 1968, the *Petoskey News-Review* ran an editorial stating that the paper had been calling for action concerning pollution in the local waters for over 25 years and it was now time to stop the numerous Bear River fish kills.

During the spring of 1967, the first dam to be removed from the Bear River was what was left of the Hankey Dam, leaving four dams within the city limits. For the first time in the history of Petoskey, 1967 became the year that the waterfront and the Bear River were proclaimed as valuable assets. In 1968, a *Petoskey News-Review* editorial in October ran under the headline, "We can have a million-dollar asset — if we want."

They stated, "If Petoskey pulls together on waterfront and river development, we'll have something we can all enjoy and be proud of ... we can have a million-dollar waterfront ..."

That fall, the Bear River Development Commission was able to have a large crane and crane operator (free of charge) take out the second dam



John and Mary Lou Tanton

on the Bear River, the large concrete structure known as the Mitchell Dam. And then there were three.

On Nov. 17, 1969, Tanton addressed Petoskey's city council concerning the need to stop the flow of Petoskey's sanitary and storm sewers discharge into the Bear River and Little Traverse Bay. Tanton stressed that the only acceptable level of discharge into the bay was "zero." He cautioned the group that the summer's evidence of "large, free-floating colonies of filamentous algae" was a forerunner of what was to come if action was not taken soon. The Nov. 18, 1969, *News-Review* reported Tanton as stating, "Lake Michigan has an extremely long half-time of dilution, about 200 years (as compared to Lake Erie's 26 years). This is the time required to dilute some pollutant to one-half of its original concentration ... Little Traverse Bay may have an even longer dilution half-time since there is very little inflow to the bay, and it is isolated from the main body of Lake Michigan. Thus, its waters are more fragile than the big lake."

The two main culprits were nitrates

and phosphates from various sources.

The Bear River Development Commission applied to the State of Michigan in 1970 to designate all of the Bear River except the last mile within the city limits as a "wild river." The application was made under Michigan's 1970 Scenic and Wild Rivers Act. The act prohibited any development within 400 feet of such a designated river's banks. However, the Bear never achieved this designation. In 2010, however, the last mile from Walloon Lake to Lake Michigan did become a white-water park.

Tanton and his wife, Mary Lou, were avid outdoor enthusiasts who joined the national Wilderness Society in 1958 after backpacking the entire 45-mile length of Isle Royale National Park. Protecting land and nature became their life. In 1962, while Tanton was working on his Master of Science in Ophthalmology degree at the University of Michigan, he became secretary of the Michigan Natural Areas Council, which was affiliated with the national Nature Conservancy. After his 1964 graduation and move to Petoskey

## 14 - Healing of the Bear



in 1965, Tanton organized and chaired the Bear River Development Commission for seven years, ending his term in 1972. That year he was instrumental in the organizing of the Little Traverse Conservancy, becoming an original board member and then president in 1979 -1981. In the year 1970, Tanton organized the Petoskey chapter of the Sierra Club. Then, for the 1971-1972 term, he served on Michigan Gov. William Milliken's Advisory Council on Natural Areas. He was appointed by Milliken in 1972 -1975 to serve on the Wilderness and Natural Areas Advisory Board of the state's Department of Natural Resources.

One of Tanton's most notable accomplishments besides being the "healer of the Bear River," was his fight to save Charlevoix County's Monroe Creek from a dam construction. It was Tanton's legal battle against a developer that helped give teeth to Michigan's young Environmental Protection Act in 1972. Tanton organized the Michigan Environmental Protection Fund to help with the



costs of the court battle. He was also heavily involved in 1973 with a court case involving the Birchwood Farms development near Harbor Springs.

Tanton's "healing of the Bear" which started in 1966 has continued through the decades with clean-ups, clean-outs, dam removals, and a beautification project that is ongoing. In 2008 a master plan for the valley area was adopted by Petoskey City Council, and by the year 2010, the city began a \$2 million project that extended 1.5 miles within the city limits from the Lake Street Mineral Well Park south to the Riverbend Park on Standish Avenue. Whitewater kayaking, foot paths, lookouts, pedestrian bridges, and excellent fishing spots have been created. The Bear is almost healed. 🌿

Richard A. Wiles is a retired history and reading instructor at Petoskey High School and a former Spring Arbor University class instructor in research. He has written five White Paper research projects for the Petoskey Public Library involving historical events in the area, including the crash of the B-52 Air Force bombing trainer into Little Traverse Bay in 1971.

Wiles holds a Bachelor's degree in history from the University of Toledo, a Master's degree in reading development-psychology from Michigan State University and an Educational Specialist degree in community leadership from Central Michigan University.

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