

A Blackfoot Valley Rancher's Legacy

By Jessica Mayrer, 7-17-07



Bill Potter, 90, has managed the forests on his 4,000 acre E Bar L Ranch in Greenough, Montana, since the age of 13. Potter practices a unique form of forestry aimed at maintaining three to four different age classes of healthy trees on his land at all times. He'll soon apply his approach to another 3,520 acres in the Blackfoot Valley, with thanks to the Missoula open space bond. Click the photo for an audio slideshow.

“It’s a sad thing, see, you can’t outlive a tree,” says Bill Potter, 90, as he putters across his forest in the same Jeep he’s been driving for over 50 years. While that may be true, Potter’s legacy could outlive the ancient pines blocking out the sky on his 4,000-acre Greenough property.

In 1998, Potter donated a conservation easement on his E Bar L Ranch that will protect it for generations to come. And now, aided by \$200,000 of Missoula’s Open Space Bond money, the Potter family hopes to buy an additional 3,520 acres of Plum Creek land, with a conservation easement attached.

If all goes as planned, the 3,520 acres once logged by Plum Creek, now dubbed the

Sunset Hill Conservation Easement, will be tacked on to Potter's current 4,000 acres, restored and protected from development.

Click here for an audio slideshow of Bill Potter's Blackfoot Valley land, created by New West photographer Anne Medley. If you are using Internet Explorer and are unable to view the audio slideshow, try a Safari or Firefox web browser.

The new land Potter hopes to acquire constitutes a small percentage of a larger project put together by the Nature Conservancy, the Blackfoot Challenge, and Plum Creek Timber to restore 88,000 acres of timberland, and put them off limits to development.

The Blackfoot Community Project is now closing in on its goal, having purchased nearly 70,000 acres for resale to local, conservation-minded landowners and public agencies. And Potter is one.

The Nature Conservancy acts as a banker, reselling the land bought from Plum Creek with easements attached and at below market value, to compensate for lost development opportunities.

The difference between the price paid to Plum Creek and the actual sales price, a smaller sum, paid by the Potters, will be funded by a hodge-podge of contributors, including \$200,000 from the Missoula County Open Space Bond.

The public will have non-motorized access to the over 7,000 acres during hunting season.

In donating the easement in 1998, Potter handed over a goldmine, worth millions, says Hank Goetz, Lands Director from the Blackfoot Challenge, a landowner-based group that helps manage property around the Blackfoot River.

It isn't all that unusual for owners to put conservation easements on their land, but these two are unique because they allow logging. The easements, held by the Nature Conservancy, call for "sustainable timber production," a practice Potter has used for decades.

“The conservation easement was unique in that it was the first in Montana and one of the first in the country that required positive forest management,” Goetz says.

"Positive forest management" involves cutting every 20-30 years, ultimately leaving a family of Ponderosa Pines of various age and size.

This strategy has brought the Potter family a steady stream of revenue over the years, while leaving a healthy forest occupied by elk, deer, bear, moose, wolves and mountain lions.



In 1885, this land, just off the Blackfoot River in the Garnet Mountain Range, was some of the first logged in the state. Foresters used oxen to drag the timber to the river to be carried downstream.

Orrin Potter, Bill’s grandfather, came to Greenough in 1913, while working as a surveyor for the Milwaukee Grade Railroad. He decided to stay and raise a family.

The land was heavily logged in those early years.

“If you read this country you can see what happened,” Potter says. “For awhile the timber was all gone. And now it has come up.”

“If I’m going to stay here, I’m going to have country around me I enjoy and not just the stumps.”

Potter’s conservation ethic kicked into high gear after a bug infestation started to kill his trees.

“Twenty years ago I was advised by a forester to clear-cut it, because there were too many bugs in here. And that was the only way we were going to get rid of the bugs,” Potter says. “Well I told him to go jump in a creek.”

He got to work, using harvesting techniques contrary to conventional, large-scale logging. Because expensive pieces of machinery drive the need for clear-cutting to cover the bills, Potter says, he adapted farm equipment to do the work.

“My turn around time is in half and my speed is again in half. And when I come with the

Bill Potter’s granddaughter, Juanita Vero, has spent her entire life on the E Bar L Ranch. Today, with the help of the Sunset Hill Conservation easement, she and her grandfather hope to purchase an additional 3,520 acres of land adjacent to the ranch and begin restoring its forests to the way they were in 1885.

landing, I don't even stop," he says.

His goal, he says, is to return the land to its pre-1885 state, before the logging.

The University Of Montana College of Forestry is also in on the deal, already running experiments on Potter's existing land. They play a part in the new easement too, Goetz says.

"With this Plum Creek land, this will add a component, from the university standpoint, where we'll have to start looking at regeneration rehabilitation, of the land."

"It's been a great partnership, a really great partnership," he adds.

The Potters have a practical attitude toward conservation.

"That's my bank account," Potter quips, motioning to the forest. "If I want to go buy some chewing gum, I can cut one of those smaller trees down...."

The Potter land is now regenerating. But restoring the Plum Creek Land will take a long-term commitment, Potter says, perhaps a century.

"I've nursed it to a size, but now it's beyond me and Betty."

It will go to the next generation. Bill's granddaughter, Juanita Vero, is working with her grandfather to preserve the land.

"It's neat to do what your grandparents and parents have done, great grandparents," she says. "It's quite an honor."

Click here to view Anne Medley's audio slideshow. [End of article]

Comment By Colonel Bain, 7-17-07

Humm ..Nice story
Thumbs up here from the Colonel Jessica..

Comment By Cindy, 7-17-07

AWESOME! I spent my childhood in Greenough and I about cry when I drive by Clearwater Junction and see houses where elk used to be. Thanks Jessica for the neat article about a beautiful chunk of Montana and thanks Missoula for caring about open space. (and thanks, Bill and family for your vision and the courage to see it through!)

Comment By Jon, 7-17-07

Nice story for good folk trying to survive as well as look beyond the immediate profit. Good work and glad to call you friends and neighbors.

Comment By dcg, 7-19-07

I love this guy. He echoes of another time, another mindset. The video is hauntingly sweet-- and astringent, by cracky!

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