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Book chronicles landscapes and faces behind them

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When photographer Lois Abel Harlamert drove up to Charlotte Hood's ranch in South Canyon, west of Glenwood Springs, she was greeted by goats, cats and a potbellied pig. Looking down over the vast ranch spreading out below, Hood turned to her. "Just think," she said. "One hundred years from now, this will all be the same."

Hood is one of approximately four dozen landowners featured in a new book highlighting Aspen Valley Land Trust conservation easements, which legally preserve land as open space forever. "Our Place: People and Conservation in the Roaring Fork and Colorado River Valleys" highlights some of the unique landscapes that have been preserved between Aspen and DeBeque. It also features the faces behind those landscapes.

"This is about people," said Martha Cochran, executive director of the land trust, who wrote the text for the book. "The feel of our land is hard to convey in photographs, but if you know something about the people, you know something about the land and how they feel about it."

The book is a sort of sequel for Lois Harlamert. Her last book, "I Remember One Horse," written with Anita McCune Witt, illuminated the stories of some of the last of the area's ranchers and was well received as a chronicle of the valley's fading ranch heritage.

"Our Place" turns to the land itself. It includes many ranchers and others from different walks of life who have decided to protect their properties from development forever.

Harlamert, who lives on Castle Creek, said she decided to write about land conservationists after observing the ugly side of Roaring Fork Valley development.

"I was driving down (Highway) 82 and saw all those bulldozers digging up the land," she said. "Actually, it was painful, physically painful, for me to see that. I just thought, 'Boy, I'd love to take the pictures and honor the people who conserved the land.'"

She pitched the idea to Cochran over lunch at the Woody Creek Tavern. She would donate her time and effort taking photos to fill the book. Cochran would write the text, talking to landowners about the landscapes they preserved. The proceeds would benefit AVLT, which, had formed in 1967, is the oldest land trust in Colorado.

"Every place has a story," Cochran said. "That's what's fun about this. And everybody loves their land. Their place."

The properties represent a wide-ranging cross-section of the region's open lands, from Hunter Creek outside Aspen to the plateau of Spring Valley above Glenwood Springs to the sweeping ranchlands south of Silt and Rifle and north of DeBeque. It's a way to introduce valley residents to parts of the

region they might not know, Cochran said, and to show them vistas most would never see, some of them far from the beaten path.

It also introduces readers to a cross-section of people who preserved these lands, among them Woody Creek philanthropist George Stranahan, who wrote the book's foreword.

"It seems wrong to own land or destroy it ... not (to) leave it for others for many eons of time," Stranahan says in the book.

The sentiment is echoed, in one way or another, by others. "There's less and less open land each year," says Jim Slappey, who put a conservation easement on his East Canyon Creek Ranch west of Glenwood Springs. "I wonder if in 30 years we're going to have deer and elk herds."

For Cochran, preserving land is about preserving potential. Some lands might be preserved for wildlife habitat, some for trails. Some might be for growing trees, which help scrub the air. Some might be designated for growing food, even for growing crops for biofuels. Vegetation on AVLT's holdings removes about 60 million pounds of carbon from the atmosphere each year, she figures. But, she noted, once it is developed, that potential is lost, maybe forever.

"I think there's value in saving land that people use. I think there's value in saving land that people can't use. There's value in knowing they're there even if no one ever sees them," she said.

The book is dedicated to Lathrop Strang, a five-year AVLT board member who died in a skiing accident on Mount Sopris last spring. It is published by Boulder-based Westcliffe Publishers, owned by renowned nature photographer and environmentalist John Fielder.

"Our Place" will be formally unveiled at AVLT's annual Save the Last Dance fund-raiser set for Sept. 13, and will be available at area bookstores, at AVLT's office and Web site, www.avlt.org [1], and other locations.

In the meantime, books can be pre-ordered on AVLT's Web site.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.avlt.org>