

THE ASPEN TIMES

Easement preserves 'a special place'

Couple saving part of historic Marble ranch

By **Scott Condon**

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MARBLE — Larry Darien received what he labeled a "generous offer" last summer for the Marble-area ranch that's been in his family for more than 75 years.

The unsolicited purchase attempt spurred his family to take steps to conserve the gorgeous property rather than sell out. You never know what someone else will do with the land, Darien said.

Larry and Dana Darien placed a conservation easement on 35 acres of open land under the shadow of White House Peak. (Courtesy Aspen Valley Land Trust)



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"It's a special place, and I just would not like to see it developed," he said.

Larry and his wife, Dana, worked with the Aspen Valley Land Trust last month to place a conservation easement on 35 of their 185 acres. They plan to conserve additional acreage this year.

A conservation easement allows the Dariens to continue using the land, but they surrender the development potential. In return, the family received federal tax deductions and state tax credits. Landowners have the option of selling tax credits if they cannot use them.

Darien said he considered conservation easements for the last seven or eight years on the piece of ground where he spent his summers as a kid. The land is part of the larger Prospect Mountain Ranch that his father and uncles acquired in the 1930s. His father, Gus, ran cattle with his brothers in the high ground around Marble. They moved their herd down to the ranch in the fall. Larry said his family also had a ranch near Carbondale. (The riding arena along County Road 100, site of a popular summer rodeo, is named after Gus Darien.)

The Dariens acquired the ranch from the estate of John Osgood, the entrepreneur who built a coal mine empire around Redstone at the turn of the 20th century. Osgood also built Cleveholm Manor, better known as the Redstone Castle, in 1897. Darien said Osgood owned a significant amount of virgin land in the area. He urged homesteading, presumably to spur the economic development of the Crystal Valley.

Prospect Mountain Ranch is 3 miles off Highway 133 on the county road that leads to Marble. At one point the railroad serving the mines at Marble ran through the ranch. It was the site of a water tank that used to replenish steam engines for their trips. The property also has an old coal mine.

Larry and Dana used the part of the ranch they ended up with for a variety of outdoor pursuits. They had headquartered an outfitting business at the stables there. They opened a cross-country ski center for a few winters, complete with a network of trails that meandered up into the hills, and a small sandwich shop. They continue to operate their bed and breakfast, Ute Meadows, during summers.

Conservation was a tool that allowed them to keep the land, Larry said. The Dariens still hunt on their property and keep cows and horses there. Conservation also ensures their 25-year-old daughter and 17-year-old son will be able to enjoy the land in the future.

Aspen Valley Land Trust Executive Director Martha Cochran said the Darien easement could be a fruitful pilot project in the Marble area. Some of the Dariens' neighbors have become interested in the prospect of conservation easements, she said.

The Darien property was an attractive project for the land trust because of its diverse characteristics. It has historic agriculture uses, it's along the Crystal River, it has high scenic value as open land along the entrance of Marble and it provides valuable wildlife habitat.

Darien said he has seen everything from deer and elk on the ranch to badgers and, last spring, lynx.

State, feds sweeten pot for conservation

Aspen Valley Land Trust Executive Director Martha Cochran might have a biased view, but she's looking forward to an active 2007 for conserving land.

There is good reason for her optimism. Both the federal and Colorado governments sweetened the pot of incentives for people placing conservation easements on their property.

The federal government increased the amount of tax deductions people can take for charitable contributions from 30 to 50 percent of gross income. It also allows people, such as farmers and ranchers placing conservation easements on land, to extend deductions for up to 15 years, Cochran said. Old rules allowed extensions for five years.

At the state level, the amount of tax credits for conservation easements increased from \$260,000 to \$375,000 per year, according to Cochran.

"They are trying to preserve the potential for farming and ranching," she said.

Additional incentives make it more appealing to conserve large parcels, unlike the old system, according to Cochran. She feels Colorado now has one of the best formulas in the country for rewarding land conservation.

Because of the fast pace at which ranchland and other open spaces are selling and getting developed in Colorado, Cochran feels the timing is perfect for additional incentives to conserve.

"As always, we think timing is running short on preserving lands," she said.

AVLT is the oldest land trust in Colorado at 38 years. It worked with landowners on the conservation of more than 5,200 acres in 2006, a record for the organization. That boosted its total acreage under easement to more than 20,000 acres. That land will forever have restrictions or outright prohibition on development.

AVLT continues to undertake the lion's share of its projects in the lower Roaring Fork Valley and the lower Colorado Valley. The valley floor in Pitkin County is mostly conserved or developed, Cochran said. Little potential exists there for additional conservation easements.

Eight landowners in the Canyon Creek area west of Glenwood Springs teamed to conserve land in 2006, as did 18 ranchers in the Dry Hollow area south of Silt.

Those two projects demonstrate a trend becoming common in conservation projects these days, Cochran said. A landowner will learn about the tax benefits of conservation, spread the news via word of mouth and often end up sparking interest among neighbors.

"That's really where awareness comes from, neighbors talking to neighbors," she said.

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[BACK](#) 