
Deal preserves Marble ranch

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- Courtesy Aspen Valley Land Trust

MARBLE, Colo. — Larry Darien knew a very different Carbondale as a kid in the late '50s and '60s.

Open agricultural land sprawled along much of the Roaring Fork Valley and Crystal River valley floors then, and Darien and his wife, Dana, wanted to keep at least a piece of the rural scene intact. That's why they agreed to a conservation easement through Aspen Valley Land Trust to ensure the preservation of their 185-acre ranch near Marble.

"We've been considering this for probably about 15 to 20 years," Larry said. "We wanted to see it conserved the way it is, we kind of like the way it is."

The Dariens initiated conservation efforts in 2006; they had placed 70 acres of the ranch under conservation easement by 2007. Now, some 90 percent of the ranch, visible from Highway 133, is protected and will never be developed. The Dariens did reserve some potential homesites along County Road 3.

Marble, in Gunnison County, is located south of Carbondale in the Crystal River Valley.

Conservation of the property involved a partnership between Aspen Valley Land Trust, Pitkin County and lottery-funded Great Outdoors Colorado, with additional funding assistance from Gunnison County. The property is a major piece of the Crystal Watershed Legacy project, which was initiated to conserve the last major ranches and historic properties in the Crystal River Valley. This project was headed by Pitkin County Open Space and Trails, in partnership with AVLT and the Town of Carbondale, with Gunnison County contributing funding.

According to Martha Cochran, executive director of AVLT, the ranch is a huge investment that will preserve the historical integrity of the valley.

"It's very exciting for us and the whole community in the valley," Cochran said. "It's a very unusual piece of property and it kind of sets the entrance for the upper Crystal Valley. It's a historic ranch."

According to AVLT, the ranch was originally owned by John Osgood, who also built the community of Redstone and the Redstone Castle in the Crystal River Valley. In 1938, Larry's father, Gus Darien, and two uncles, Hank and Jim Darien, purchased the ranch from Osgood. During the 1970s, the ranch was platted for more than 600 residential homes, though they were never built.

Larry and Dana built Ute Meadows Inn on the banks of the Crystal River and previously operated the Ute Meadows Nordic Ski Area on the property, but now mostly raise cattle and horses. The ranch is surrounded by the White River National Forest, is close to the Raggeds Wilderness Area and is considered vital winter range for elk and a summer concentration area for deer.

The Dariens retain ownership of the property with the conservation easement and can use the land for various purposes, though they have given up their right to develop it, Cochran explained. That was the main goal for all parties involved.

"It's our mission to conserve land and it's our responsibility as a land trust to ensure the rights of the land trust are enforced over the years of nothing being built on the property," she said.

For his part, Larry said working with AVLT was a positive experience, and he's glad to know the land will never be developed.

"I have a hard time being told what I can or can't do with my property," Larry said. "But in 2006, it became really evident that we needed to do something. We had someone that wanted to buy the ranch and said they wanted to keep it as a ranch, but you really never know."

That's when the Dariens decided the conservation easement was the best option.

"I think it feels really good," Larry said. "It's going to be really good."

In completing the conservation easement documentation, an appraisal determined the Darien Ranch extinguished more than \$1 million in potential development value.

The Dariens donated \$11,500 in value, with funding partners raising the balance of \$891,500 for the purchase of the conservation easement. GOCO lottery funds provided \$556,500, AVLT contributed \$50,000 toward the purchase and \$25,000 to other expenses related to the transaction. Pitkin County Open Space Fund contributed \$250,000 and Gunnison Valley Land Preservation Fund added \$35,000.

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