



- Aspen Valley Land Trust file photo

## Saving the sun-drenched hills of Missouri Heights

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MISSOURI HEIGHTS – Dee Blue was able last year to fulfill one of the last wishes of her late husband.

Blue placed a conservation easement on part of the Missouri Heights ranch where her husband Jean spent most of his life. Jean died in February 2004 at age 78. He made his intentions clear to his wife before he passed away.

“The more he looked across the hay field, the more he didn’t want to have it become subdivisions,” Blue said.

After his death, Dee eventually worked with Bethany Collins of Aspen Valley Land Trust on the conservation deal. She conserved 165 of the 407 acres that unfold primarily on a bench overlooking the Roaring Fork Valley floor. The land is tucked behind the Western Slope Aggregates gravel pit along Highway 82. The company rents the pit property from the Blues, but that land wasn’t part of the conservation effort.

The midvalley ranch, which the Blues also call Sunnyside Ranch because of its sun-drenched orientation, offers in-your-face views of majestic Mount Sopris. Massive cottonwood trees with cracked and gnarled trunks grow beside an irrigation ditch. Snow-covered hay fields preserve the ranch’s feel as an island among the development and pinyon and juniper covered hillsides of Missouri Heights. Little pockets of buildings dot the property. An old barn is the type purchased from the Sears Roebuck Co. Dee said she used to find all sorts of discarded metal scrap outside an old blacksmith shop.

When asked what she likes about the property, she reflected for a moment and said, “It’s the isolation, the quietness, the wildlife and view.”

The land that is now the Blue Ranch was homesteaded by W.L. Grubb in the late 1880s, according to research by Anita McCune Witt for her book, “They Came From Missouri, The History of Missouri Heights, Colorado.”

Grubb sold the property soon after the turn of the 20th century and it was acquired in 1921 by Jean’s mother, Mary. She married in 1923 and had two sons.

The family ran sheep and cattle, and raised potatoes, grain and hay. Jean shared with Witt his memory of the big community dances his parents used to throw at the ranch for their neighbors on Missouri Heights. Jean and Dee acquired 407 acres in 1998 and continued to work the land.

“He was always proud of the fact that he was a rancher,” Dee said. Jean saw a lot of changes on Missouri Heights during seven decades. Land that was always marginal for ranching became lucrative for development. Many of their peers sold out, but the Blues were among those who shuddered at the thought of living next to a subdivision.

Part of the property is still leased for cattle grazing and hayfields. By granting a conservation easement, Dee assured that agricultural uses can continue but the land cannot be developed. In return for conservation, she receives state and federal tax benefits. She said she will consider conserving more of the land in the future.

Collins said the Blue ranch is valuable for wildlife habitat as well as for agricultural uses and open space.

Blue encouraged other ranchers to look into conserving their land. “We do need to set aside some land for the future and for people to enjoy,” she said.

The Blue conservation easement was among several deals that kept AVLT busy last year. The organization, the oldest land trust in Colorado, conserved a little more than 2,600 acres last year and now holds easements on 30,819 acres, according to AVLT Executive Director Martha Cochran.

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