

Hallowed ground

When the Pawnee Indians looked out over Nebraska, they saw powerful spiritual powers residing in specific locations. To put it another way, land that many Nebraskans see prosaically as farm country or "empty" land was regarded by the Pawnee as being invested with magical force.

These observations provide useful background for understanding the need to preserve a sacred Pawnee heritage. A positive development on this score took place last month, when it was announced that a conservation easement will permanently protect a 257-acre wooded bluff near Cedar Bluffs, Neb., from future development.

This high bluff along the Platte River was known as "Pahaku." As reported in a recent World-Herald news story, the Pahaku is considered by some Pawnees to be the most sacred site in their homeland, a place where a council of animals in a hidden cave would teach the ways of healing to tribal members.

(Some early white settlers also recognized the prominence of the bluff: When anti-Omaha lawmakers bolted the Territorial Capitol to sit in Florence in 1858, they "passed" a bill designating the Pahaku as the site of *their* would-be state capitol — in a paper town dubbed "Neapolis.")

Given the rich history of the Pawnee and this hallowed land, this cooperative preservation certainly is welcome news.

Many deserve praise for this forward-thinking preservation, particularly the Nebraska Land Trust. It collaborated with the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Nebraska Environmental Trust to purchase the conservation easement from landowners Pat and Nancy Shanahan.

This effort underscores the trust's vital mission: to preserve

Conservation easement will protect sacred land of Pawnee.

private lands with agricultural, natural and historic significance. The Pahaku site certainly qualifies. The other half of the steep bluff is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It has been protected by a conservation easement for the past two decades.

Under the agreement, the trust will retain the rights to the land, thus protecting it from future development. The Shanahans, who donated a substantial portion of the land's value, still can farm the land and pass it down to their descendants. And the Pawnee's sacred site will remain intact for generations.

Even though the Pawnee relocated from Nebraska 132 years ago, the Pahaku remains vitally important today. Pawnees still travel to the bluff seeking visions or dreams. It is one of the tribe's five sacred sites in Nebraska but the only one still in its natural state. Appropriately, four Pawnee recently traveled to Nebraska from Oklahoma to witness the dedication of the land.

Paul Hosford of Albion, a fifth-generation resident of Boone County who long has been active in rural development issues, rightly called the preservation "a great gift to Nebraska's past, present and future generations."

"Many of us have come to love this land as the Pawnee and other tribes did, to form bonds with it and to come to know it nearly as intimately as the Native Americans did," Hosford told The World-Herald.

"Remembering and preserving the places that our predecessors came, through generations of experience, to value as especially sacred will only serve to connect us more with this land."

Kudos to the Shanahans and the Nebraska Land Trust for selflessly ensuring that this historical site will remain sacred for years to come.