

Farm now, farm forever

693 acres south of Gretna
protected by easements
from encroaching Sarpy
development

By DAVID HENDEE

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

A deal that started with a handshake seven years ago now is protecting a Sarpy County farm from future development with an iron grip.

The 693-acre Ron and Carol Patterson farm south of Gretna is the second-largest patch of protected property in Nebraska's smallest and fastest-growing county. Only Fontenelle Forest in Bellevue preserves a larger swath of Sarpy land.

The Pattersons permanently protected the property as a working farm by selling conservation easements designed to shield it from incompatible land uses and excessive development. The Nebraska Land Trust in Lincoln holds the easement.

The Pattersons said they wanted to preserve not only the farmland, but the property's mature oak and hickory woodlands, spring-fed creeks with rocky streambeds, scenic views, historic American Indian sites and pioneer wagon ruts.

Ron Patterson said he and his wife didn't want the farm to be ripped up for homes on acreages or in subdivisions.

"Imagine what you could do with this 700 acres," he said. "You're talking lots of money and a huge development. But we couldn't stand it."

Carol Patterson said the couple couldn't be happier about preserving the farm forever.

"It'll be here after we die, nice and green and welcoming to Omaha and Lincoln," she said.

The farm lies in the scenic Schramm Bluffs above the Platte River in western Sarpy County. It is west of Nebraska Highway 31, the road from Interstate 80 to Schramm Park State Recreation Area and the Platte River Valley.

The Platte cuts through a limestone ridge, creating steep bluffs and rolling farmland with deep ravines that shelter oak and hickory woodlands. These bluffs provide some of the best wildlife habitat in eastern Nebraska. The woodlands of bur oaks, red oaks, black oaks, bitternut hickory and other hardwood trees are especially important for migrating songbirds.

Archaeological sites in the area indicate that it has sustained people for millennia. Historic resources on the farm include



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Carol Patterson crosses a creek on her farm, which has been in her family since about 1920. The Pattersons have permanently protected the land from development with conservation easements.

an abandoned farmstead with a limestone barn foundation and ruts from a mid-1800s trail that took wagons to a narrow crossing of the Platte, where the Interstate 80 bridges stand today.

Views along the edge of the property look 3 miles west across the valley toward Mahoney State Park, Strategic Air Command & Aerospace Museum and Quarry Oaks Golf Club.

To the south is a nearly 1,000-acre religious retreat being built by Gov. Pete Ricketts' father, Joe.

The scenic region, however, is in the nation's 93rd fastest-growing county, based on census data, and the Pattersons have been fighting to save the bluffs from encroaching development since the housing boom of the last decade.

Then they heard about con-

servation easements from Dave Sands, executive director of the Nebraska Land Trust.

Conservation easements are voluntary legal agreements that prevent commercial and residential development of the site forever. In Nebraska, they have been used on sites ranging from the Omaha metropolitan area to rocky buttes in the Panhandle.

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Some opponents of the easements don't approve of restricting development of private agricultural land for future generations.

Ron Patterson disagrees.

"Land is the only thing that is forever," he said.

The lower Platte Valley has been a priority of the Nebraska Land Trust because the area harbors important environmental and historic resources in an Omaha-Lincoln region that is projected to have 2 million people within 50 years, Sands said.

The Pattersons and other landowners in the bluffs have advocated for preservation. County officials responded by designating 11,000 acres as the county's most important and vulnerable environmental district that should be preserved. Sands said many residents of the bluffs wanted more.

"They wanted permanent protection," he said.

Voluntary conservation easements were the preservation tool of choice, Sands said. It was no surprise, he said, that working farms contained several of the best prospects of 13 properties ultimately assessed for conserving under an easement. Farmland in Sarpy County is among the best in the state, producing high yields without irrigation.

The Patterson easements are the latest the land trust has negotiated in the bluffs. The farm consists of four parcels owned by the Pattersons and other family members. It remains private property.

The family's ownership of the land started about 1920, when Carol's great-grandfather, John Armbrust, bought 80-acre farms for three of his sons, including Carol's grandfather, Louie. Decades of expansion and evolving family ownership resulted in the current farm of nearly 700 acres. The Pattersons have been farming it since the 1960s.

Starting with the 2008 handshake between the Pattersons



A hand pump on the edge of a harvested field of soybeans is all that remains of the farmstead of George and Louie Armbrust on what is now the Ron and Carol Patterson farm. Carol is Louie's granddaughter.

and Sands, the couple and the land trust agreed to seek permanent protection of the entire farm. A separate easement was needed for each parcel.

Landowners who grant conservation easements reduce the value of their land through relinquishment of development rights. In Sarpy County, the value of those rights is substantial.

To purchase the easements, the land trust obtained two grants from the Nebraska Environmental Trust, funded by state lottery proceeds. The grants allowed the land trust to obtain nearly \$2 million in matching federal funds from the U.S. Agriculture Department's Farm and Ranch Protection Program.

Funding totaled \$2.9 million, most of which the Pattersons used to purchase parcels from other family members.

Most landowners can't afford to give up valuable development rights without some compensation, such as the sale of conservation easements. The Pattersons donated a significant portion of their easements by selling them for less than appraised value, Sands said.

Other partners in the Patterson deal included the Papio-Missouri River and Lower Platte South Natural Resources Districts, eight foundations and numerous individuals. The final of the four easements was completed

HOW SARPY COUNTY'S EASEMENTS WERE FUNDED

Ron and Carol Patterson's farm is part of 1,240 acres protected in the Schramm Bluffs by eight conservation easements over the last seven years. Funding to purchase those easements included:

Nearly \$2.49 million from the U.S. Agriculture Department's Farm and Ranch Protection Program.

Nearly \$2.15 million in grants from the Nebraska Environmental Trust.

More than \$966,000 in donations from landowners through bargain sales of easements.

Nearly \$355,000 in funds from Nebraska Public Power District and others.

More than \$50,000 from individuals and foundations to support transaction costs.

Source: Nebraska Land Trust

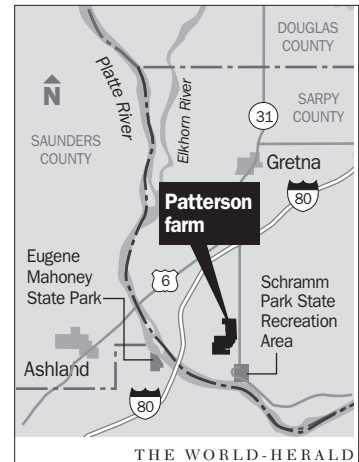
ed in September.

Ron Patterson said the land needed protection.

"It's really virgin country," he said. "Few people have set foot on some of this land. What's here is going to be here. We're going to be gone."

Sands said few landowners have the opportunity to permanently protect a special place, and only a fraction of those take action.

"But even among this small and dedicated group of landowners, Ron and Carol Patterson have demonstrated a rare degree



HOW CONSERVATION EASEMENTS ARE SELECTED

Initial landowner interest in the sale of conservation easements has exceeded available funds, so prospective sites have been prioritized to ensure that public funds were getting the biggest conservation bang for the buck, said Dave Sands, executive director of the Nebraska Land Trust. Landowners and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission developed this ranking protocol, based on values that factor into selecting projects:

- » Threatened or endangered wildlife.
- » Presence of oak and hickory woodlands, tallgrass prairie or other native habitats.
- » Historic and cultural sites.
- » Scenic views from public places.
- » Proximity to other protected lands (248 protected acres are adjacent to Schramm Park State Recreation Area).
- » Water quality protection.
- » Working farms.
- » Size of property.
- » Development threats.

Source: Nebraska Land Trust

of determination, patience and commitment in the preservation of their farm," Sands said. "As Sarpy County continues to grow, the value of the Pattersons' commitment to conservation will grow, as well."

Contact the writer:
402-444-1127, david.hendee@owh.com