

A man wearing a light-colored cowboy hat, a white long-sleeved shirt, and dark leather chaps stands in a lush green field. He is smiling and looking down at a German Shepherd dog that is lying down in the grass. The background features a dense line of trees and a distant mountain range under a clear sky.

LEGACY |

BITTER ROOT



LAND TRUST

"This creek and the cottonwoods are important to wildlife. And now they are always going to be there."

– Frank Mogan,
Bitterroot Landowner

Steve Powell's Legacy Lives On



Pictured L to R: Brian Simpson, Diana Simpson, Colleen Powell, Charlotte Powell, Maureen Powell, and "Coquina." Photo by Russ Lawrence

The Bitterroot Valley continues to welcome an influx of people. They come seeking access to the out-of-doors, and a healthy place for themselves and their children to play and grow with the mountains, rivers, and open spaces at their fingertips. It is time to revisit a vision for a thoughtful future in this valley.

Steve Powell and his father LM were trusted Land Surveyors in the valley. In this capacity, they were familiar with the length and breadth of the valley, as well as the hopes and aspirations that the residents held for their surroundings. Bitterrooters are independent, outdoor-loving people who readily lend a hand to a neighbor when needed. Steve and LM successfully pursued their vision of keeping working lands open, a free-flowing river, views of the mountains, and access to public land. While working for the Forest Service, LM negotiated public

access for many of the Westside trailheads. Steve, through the Land Trust, worked with landowners who wanted to ensure that their farms and ranches are preserved for future generations.

Today, the Bitter Root Land Trust continues conversations that Steve started with landowners and their neighbors to create wildlife corridors, parks, and working land that retain the character and farming roots of the valley. As our population grows, the opportunity for creating public access where appropriate has become an important aspect of this work. The river bottom has long been used for fishing, swimming, walking, and enjoying wildlife, and Steve worked to build a vision of river access available to all of us. As a part of that vision, Steve worked with the Taber family to put their riverfront property into a conservation easement, which is now a public park that bears his name.

Vision is an important component in making things happen, but worthwhile things only happen with hard work and follow-through. It takes the generosity of all of us, through the Open Lands Bond and personal donations, to keep this work going. Thank you for supporting the Steve Powell Opportunity Fund, which honors not only the memory of Steve Powell but also the foresight and generosity of the individuals and families who have acted on their vision to conserve the open lands of the Bitterroot Valley for future generations to enjoy.

– Maureen Powell



BRLT Board Member Gail Goheen with husband Stephen

Reflections on the Bitterroot

It was over 48 years ago when I had my first glimpse of the breathtakingly beautiful Bitterroot Mountains. It was Springtime, and I will never forget my first hike around Lake Como with my husband (Stephen). The view of the lake and surrounding peaks was full of magic, and on our walk we encountered a lot of wildlife—including a coyote pup lying in the middle of the trail awaiting its mother's return. Unlike many who were born or raised in Montana or who had other connections to this place, Stephen and I didn't have that history. Instead, we had taken off on a year-long adventure in a VW camper to see the country, with the goal of choosing where we wanted to live and raise our family.

On that VW trip, we discovered and explored many, many lovely places, but Montana rose to the top of our list and the Bitterroot Valley held extra special

memories. We embarked on plans to make our return. Both of us had spent our "growing up" years in other parts of the country—me on the Prairie and Stephen on the East Coast. After our trip and finishing employment/school commitments in New Orleans, we were able to angle our way back to Montana, and by 1976, found work in the Bitterroot Valley where we have been fortunate enough to live ever since...fulfilling our life's dreams, raising our children, and even managing to retire in this bit of heaven.

SHARED VALUES REMAIN

The Bitterroot has changed a lot over the years—the population has almost tripled since we first saw this place and there has been obvious and significant development pressure, especially as of late. But almost everyone who has been born or made their way here chooses to stay in this place, not only because of its enchanting beauty and the

opportunity it allows to connect with nature, but because these shared values have helped create a special community of people. We all want to protect and preserve this place—its sparkling waters, its working farms and ranches, its wildlife, its opportunities for peacefulness, and its meaning for what's important in the big picture of life.

Over the last 25 years, the Bitter Root Land Trust has worked hard not only to conserve these assets we so value, but it has also made the effort to acquire interests in properties that the public can access and share with their friends and family to even better appreciate this special place. I have so valued the opportunity I have had to be involved with BRLT. I hope all of you out there can join in continuing to promote and support what it does for our community, our values, and our love of this place.

– Gail Goheen, BRLT Board Member

A Protected Highway for a Different Kind of Traveler

For those who enjoy a classic outdoor Bitterroot experience, the short and scenic hike along the Blodgett Canyon Overlook Trail is a favorite among visitors and locals alike. However, what many don't know is that the breathtaking view to the east toward the Sapphire Mountains could have easily been cluttered with the rooftops of homes had former whitewater rafting guide BC Rimbeaux not stepped in to protect 110 acres of land at the end of last year.

Located on a timbered ridge between Blodgett Creek and Canyon Creek, BC purchased what was initially a 20-acre plot of land during a trip to Hamilton in the 1980's. Over time, he acquired the 20-acre parcel to the west and then another 10-acres on the east. The family of a late neighbor and good friend eventually sold BC the additional 60-acres adjacent to his, bringing the total property size to 110 acres.



Through countless hours spent exploring the wooded ridge and walking along the accompanying irrigation ditch, BC quickly learned that not only did the land provide

incredible views of Blodgett Canyon, but it also served as a main wildlife corridor. Evidence of deer, elk, turkey, bear, wolf, and other native species made it clear that this land was not only used as feeding, resting and breeding grounds, but also as a major route to travel from the wilderness and public lands above to the valley below.

While he dreamed of building a home and living there full-time one day, in the back of his mind BC also knew that any sort of development would require putting in a road that would have to be cut deeply into the steep ridge, further interfering with space the animals depended on. That's when he made the decision to ensure this special section of land would be protected as a wildlife corridor, as well as an unobstructed viewpoint, forever.

On December 31, 2020, BC finalized a conservation easement through the Bitter Root Land Trust solidifying the protection of the land and wildlife habitat for years to come.

"It was the best way for me to ensure that whatever happens, this will remain wildlife habitat forever," says BC. "I see this as an extension of protected land from the crest of the Selway-Bitterroot down to where it gets populated. It makes me feel good to know that I've been able to add that element."





LUCK & HARD WORK

Conservation momentum
builds in Threemile

The winter sky is icy-blue, and the morning sun is golden. Surrounded by open hay fields and Threemile Creek meandering just below, Frank Mogan softly pats his new German shepherd pup, Trapper, on the scruff with his rough hands, worn from a lifetime of hard work.

Trapper's eyes slowly blink and glint in the morning sun. It's quiet and peaceful. Frank breaks the silence and looks up. "My mom came over to take a look," he said. "After she took one walk up along the creek, she fell in love with it. From that day, I knew this wasn't going to be a money-making thing."

But Frank Mogan didn't always feel that way. Conservation didn't seem like an option for him and his land early on. For landowners contemplating conservation for their land, there is much to consider. Barriers like financing, debt, resources, and misconceptions can make it difficult for farmers and ranchers to pursue a conservation outcome on their land.

HARD WORK PAYS OFF

Frank worked for a number of years to pay down his debt and position himself to conserve the farm. He accomplished a lot through honest, hard work. "I was lucky," Mogan said. "I've always had all the work that I needed to make the payments, even during the recession. Sometimes it meant that I had to travel to places like Park City, but I always had the work."

The good news is that with programs like the NRCS, critical funding is

available to farmers and ranchers that make projects like Frank Mogan's pencil out. Thanks to the NRCS program and staff, \$238,000 went to protecting an important wildlife corridor, $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile of Threemile Creek riparian habitat, and productive hay ground, totaling 161-acres of beautiful Bitterroot Valley ground.

This critical funding helps to leverage local Open Lands Bond dollars, making it possible for farmers like Frank to protect their land do right by those that came before them. As Frank puts it, "It makes me feel great," Mogan said. "It wouldn't give me satisfaction if this had been developed with million-dollar homes and turned into a city. This creek and the cottonwoods are important to wildlife. And now they are always going to be there."

MOMENTUM IN THREEMILE

Frank Mogan's farm is adjacent to another conserved family farm. The 160-acre Gates family partnered with Bitter Root Land Trust the year prior to make sure their family land and legacy could be passed on to the next generation. Sam Gates' daughter and granddaughter play a big role in the farm's future now.

Now, because of NRCS Open Lands Bond funding, and because Montanans care about the future of farming and ranching, Frank's land stays in working hands. "I think I could have been worth millions in a heartbeat," he said. "But I don't think I would have been any happier than I am now."





A Key Piece of the Puzzle

This past March, landowners Larry and Sheila Melsness celebrated the completion of the South Burnt Fork Ranch Project which conserved 301 acres in the Bitterroot Valley. The Melsness' decision to conserve their property is a continuation of the momentum that exists in the historic and predominantly agricultural Burnt Fork Drainage, near Stevensville.

“The South Burnt Fork Ranch plays an important role in this landscape as it ties together 2,100 acres of contiguous private land conservation easements.”

With over 240 acres of agriculturally important soils, this ranch supports a cow-calf and horse operation, as well as a productive hay operation. A historic hundred-year-old red barn stands tall on the property next to a unique, six-sided wooden grain silo, a snapshot from history that will continue to be admired by community members as they head to and from town.

A diverse mosaic of agricultural grassland meadows, wetlands, and stream and riparian habitats, the South Burnt Fork Ranch also provides important habitat for a variety of wildlife. The Montana Natural Heritage Program has documented twenty-four wildlife Species of Concern on or around the property, including westslope cutthroat trout, golden eagle, and western toad. The ranch also provides habitat for locally important species including raptors, elk, mule deer, and Sandhill crane, its habitat value magnified by its adjacency to surrounding conserved private lands.

Conservation of the South Burnt Fork Ranch will build upon the existing conservation momentum in the Burnt Fork and will hopefully inspire further conservation easement projects in the area. This neighborhood conservation results in a significant impact for the public by conserving the Bitterroot agricultural heritage, economy, water resources and open spaces.

Thanks to the generosity, patience, and vision of the Melsness', their ranch will remain intact for both agricultural use, wildlife habitat, and scenic open space – in perpetuity.

A Year in Retrospect on Skalkaho Bend Park

July 2nd marked one year since the opening of Skalkaho Bend Park, the new public river park in Hamilton. For the Bitterroot community, the new outdoor space to exercise and enjoy nature is the reward for all the local support—contributions, helping hands, encouraging voices, and more—that brought the dream to reality. For all of us at the Land Trust, opening day was the happy conclusion of years of planning, fundraising, building, and working with countless partners to coordinate one of our most ambitious projects ever. We are so grateful to work in a community that shares our excitement to invest in this place and in the wellbeing of future generations.



A Big Lift

Skalkaho Bend started in 2010 as a conversation between BRLT founder, Steve Powell, and John Christmann about how Christmann’s 70 acres of meadow and forest along the river could become a permanent natural space for the public to access and enjoy. After years of thoughtful discussion, the City of Hamilton offered to own, manage, and maintain the land as an addition to their system of riverside parks, if BRLT was able to acquire the land. With that goal in sight, BRLT purchased the land from the Christmann family on the community’s behalf in 2017.

Determined to make their vision of a public nature park feasible, the Christmann family donated a significant portion of the land’s value. BRLT took out a loan from The Conservation Fund to finance the remainder of the purchase.

However, we were set on gifting the land to the City of Hamilton “free and clear,” so the loan needed to be paid off before the park could officially open. We asked for help, and you answered! Over 200 Bitterroot Valley residents pitched in to cover the purchase price of the park. Further support came in from local groups like the Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Association, Bitterroot Trout Unlimited, Bitterroot Audubon Society, the Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust, the Rapp Family Foundation, the Steele-Reese Foundation, the LOR Foundation, and others. The biggest single supporter was the Ravalli County Open Lands Bond—just one of the many ways the Bond is working to protect open spaces in the Bitterroot Valley. All together, the community raised \$730,000 to secure the new park.



The building work was done, and done well, thanks to local businesses.

Creating the Park

It was important to set the park up for success as a public space. That meant a property that was clear of litter and weeds, had sturdy infrastructure to support responsible use, and that had all the necessities in place for Hamilton staff to manage the park efficiently. To get it done right, we again asked for our community’s help.

The Hamilton Volunteer Fire Department and firefighters from Bitterroot National Forest turned out to do a prescribed fire on the park, burning the invasive thistle, houndstongue, and tansy, and preparing the land for follow-up weed treatments. Hamilton High School students, local Boy Scout troops, and other groups have kept up the momentum against invasive species by volunteering their hard work during weed pull days.

We received funds from the Montana Recreational Trails Program to install the trails, bridges, parking, signs, bathroom facilities, boundary fencing, and other infrastructure that was needed to make the park safe and ready for community use. After carefully planning the park’s layout with Hamilton staff and neighboring landowners, the building work was done, and done well, thanks to generous assistance from local businesses including Donaldson Bros. Ready Mix, Massa Home Center, LD Custom Fencing, and Specialty Excavating. Local artist Karen Savory provided the great blue heron art that is featured on the park signs, including the entrance signs that are hung on timber frames constructed by Isaac Harmon and Boy Scout Troop 1987 for Isaac’s Eagle Scout Project. The park trailhead features a map that was designed by a local cartographer Gary Liss (who received BRLT’s 2020 Volunteer Award for his work on Skalkaho Bend and other projects). Several of the wooden signs on the park were created by Mark Lind, a local hobbyist who volunteered his engraving skills to help out with the new park.

To polish up the Skalkaho Bend’s bench area, we received a grant from Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks to plant an educational exhibit of wildlife-friendly native plants along the park’s all-abilities trail. Those native trees and bushes were planted and maintained by volunteers from

the Bitterroot Audubon Society, Hamilton High School, and a handful of dedicated community members.

A final on-the-ground effort to prepare our new nature park was done by Bitter Root Water Forum, who worked with Hamilton staff to design an environmentally-sensitive approach



to manage erosion along the river bank. In their project, “Roots Against Erosion”, the Water Forum planted a line of willows and other native vegetation to hold the land together naturally as the river shifts. The deep-rooting plants should moderate the river’s movement as it shifts throughout the floodplain, helping keep the park land intact as time goes by.

REFLECTING ON A FOREVER INVESTMENT

In the year since Skalkaho Bend opened, it has become a piece of this community and a real part of people’s daily lives. Open-space lands are a big part of what makes the Bitterroot Valley so great and it is such a joy to see people out enjoying the public space that we all pulled together to create. If you haven’t been down to the park lately, I’d invite you to find a few minutes to head down for a picnic, to cast a fly, or to enjoy a walk on the trails along the river. Skalkaho Bend is something we did together—for our community today and for the generations to follow—and it’s surely worth taking a moment to appreciate it.

— Kyle Anderson, BRLT Stewardship Coordinator



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