



BITTER ROOT
LAND TRUST

| LEGACY



Director's Letter

Montana and the Bitterroot Valley have a voice I didn't fully appreciate until now.

When I started in the Executive Director role six months ago, I never would have thought that I would have already traveled to Washington D.C. and shaken hands with our Montana Senators and Representatives, met our Governor in his Helena home, testified on behalf of bills to defend our conservation community, or learned so much about our Montana legislature in a "trial by fire."

Ravalli County Commissioner Chair, Dan Huls, and I joined other land trusts and landowners representing the Montana Association of Land Trusts in D.C. in March. After eight meetings in 48 hours making our case for conservation, the return flight home had a new meaning. As we were clearly relieved to be flying over the valley back from the "big city," it became even more crystal clear

what we were fighting for and why it seemed that people were listening.

OUR BITTERROOT WAY OF LIFE

Our community has shown over and over that conservation matters. It protects our agricultural heritage and open lands far into the future. It's a way of life that we cherish, that we hold near and dear to our hearts, and that we are willing to do everything we can to protect.

I underestimated how our community's actions translated into a strong Bitterroot voice in both state and national politics. Our state representatives know that Ravalli County carries weight in Montana heritage, agriculture and conservation. They want to hear what we have to say. In essence, they want to know what you think, how you're impacted, how you feel. Because of our community's longtime incredible commitment to conservation - your dedication to open lands, water and wildlife, and local agriculture- we have an important voice. And people listen.

Your belief in conservation gives the Bitterroot the voice it deserves. What an honor it is to carry the message.

— Lauren Rennaker



From L to R: Senator Steve Daines, Congressman Ryan Zinke, Montana landowners Denny Iverson, Monica and Fred Prince, Ravalli County Commissioner Dan Huls, Gallatin Valley Land Trust Executive Director Chet Worth, BRLT Executive Director Lauren Rennaker, Heart of the Rockies Initiative Managing Partner Gavin Ricklefs, Five Valleys Land Trust Associate Director Ben Horan, and Congressman Troy Downing gather at "Montana Coffee" event in Washington, D.C. on March 13, 2025.

Thank You 2024 Partners!

Last year, you helped to protect Bitterroot family farms and ranches, river and stream frontage, wildlife habitat, and public recreation access for future generations.



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To learn how your business can partner with BRLT, contact:

BRLT Philanthropy Director, Owen Yager: owen@bitterrootlandtrust.org | 406-375-0956



BUKER RANCH (AKA LAZY5Y RANCH) – VICTOR, MT

We All Come Back Home

The old ranch dog, Scooter, stands in the doorway of the barn at Buker Ranch on a spring afternoon. The names of the 5 Buker children are scribbled on the wooden barn door, a lasting testament to a family's presence in a beloved place.

Scooter was the righthand man to John “Ranger Jack” Buker, the father of Clarissa (Buker) Patzer and James Buker, who are sitting and visiting in the barn with Clarissa’s husband, Tony Sheerer, about family growing up on the ranch – agreeing it is one of their favorite pastimes. When Jack passed away on the ranch several years ago, Scooter was right by his side. When Scooter was given a new address, he managed to find his way back to his ranch where he still stands guard today. Clarissa says, “Everyone moved away, but we always make it back to the ranch. The kids... a horse... even the dog,” she laughs. “We all come back home to the ranch.”

Situated where Big Creek Canyon meets the valley floor in Victor, the ranch was

homesteaded in the 1880 by Clarissa and James’ great-great grandfather John M. Buker under the ‘Homestead Act’ signed by President Cleveland. The ranch has historically farmed hay and raised cattle and horses. And, thanks to a hard work ethic and love of the land that spans nine generations, the 160-acre ranch will be forever protected through a conservation easement.



The Buker family’s vision to keep the same land in their family has required grit, determination and sacrifice for over nearly 150 years. When earlier generations needed to stock up on supplies,

they would travel north to Missoula every three months – a three-day journey by horse and wagon.

When asked what it means to their family that the land was held together for so long thanks to the family members that came before them, Clarissa says, “It means everything. They had to do everything to keep the land together. If they had sold this land, it would likely be subdivided today. When times were tough they adjusted and found new ways to make a living – they farmed apples, milked dairy cows, logged the timbered acreage by hand with horses, outfitted up Big Creek Canyon.... They just made it work. You didn’t gripe, you just did it.”

That same work ethic has been passed down through the generations. Clarissa, James and their siblings and cousins learned to love a good, hard day’s work from early on.

“Coming out here to visit our Grandpa and Grandma Buker, there’d be 9 of us kids all doing chores – picking up rocks on

the property. It was almost the equivalent of a tractor,” laughs James. “We worked and helped buck hay by hand. Even as kids we would be out helping work the land every day when we came to the ranch. It was always ‘cattle, horses and hay.’ The Buker work ethic becomes a part of your soul. They instilled a ranching work ethic in all of us. It’s not a

“The growth the Bitterroot is experiencing had a huge impact on pursuing the conservation easement—and, the fact that we know that it will be intact forever.”

9 to 5 job. Ranching has no time – the cows don’t care when it’s Christmas Day, you better be up when the sun comes up.”

Active in the Victor agricultural community, the Buker family were founding members of the Big Creek Lakes Reservoir Association. They helped to build the original Big Creek Lakes dam between 1897-1906. The water was used to provide late season irrigation to approximately 2,500 acres of ranch/farmlands. Following Buker generations have maintained involvement as officers of the Big Creek Lakes Reservoir and have been pivotal in the maintenance and operation of the dam itself, including its total rebuild in the 1970s.

The Big Creek drainage serves as an important habitat corridor and thoroughfare for the many species of wildlife on the west side of the valley. The Buker Ranch’s

large, open and unfenced irrigated fields provide foraging habitat for herds of elk, raptors, migrating birds, and owls. Whitetail deer graze the property year-round, and a pond on the property serves as teaching grounds for various birds to teach their young to hunt.

As rural areas like the Bitterroot Valley continue to experience unprecedented growth and subdivision, the threat of losing agricultural lands, water resources, and open space are at an all-time high. The rapid growth of the valley was one of the driving factors for the Bukers to pursue the conservation easement with BRLT.

“The growth the Bitterroot is experiencing had a huge impact on pursuing the conservation easement – and, the fact that we know that it will be intact forever,” says Clarissa. “At one point our family thought we were going to have to sell the ranch, and we didn’t want to. We thought, there’s got to be some way to keep it. And that’s

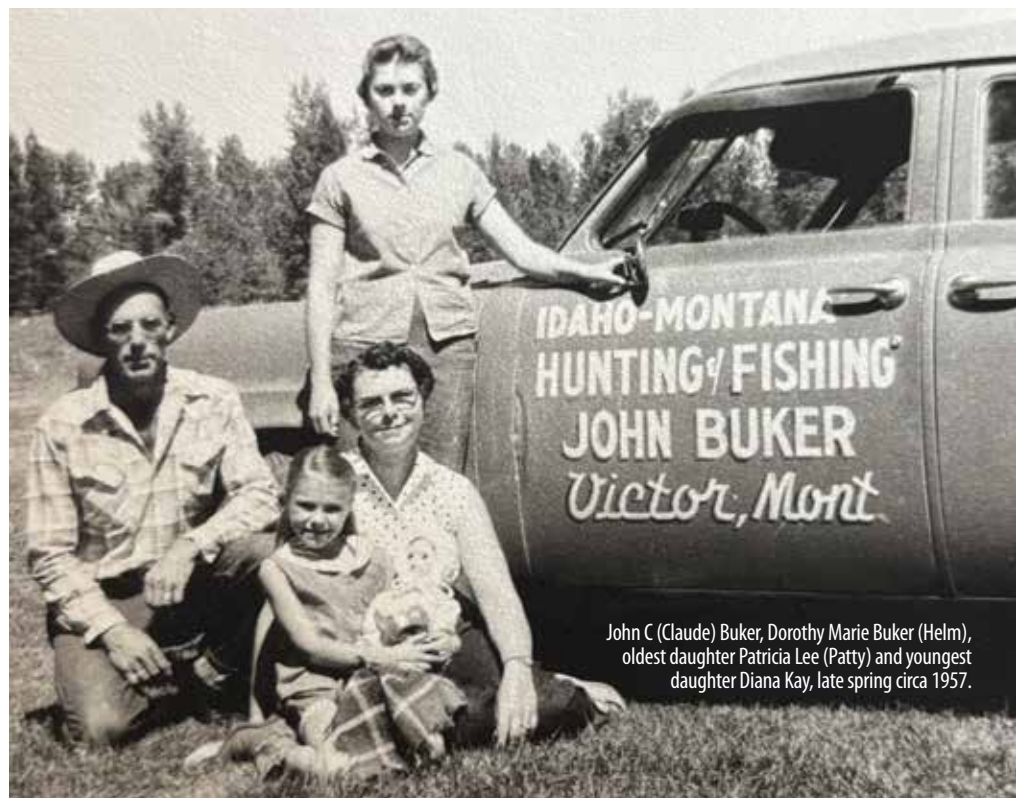
when we found out about the land trust and the conservation easement.”

The project was made possible thanks to federal funding received from the US Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service’s (NRCS) Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), and local bond dollars from the county-voted Ravalli County Open Lands Bond Program.

“I’ve lived out here my whole life, and you never realize that it might be gone someday. Mom and dad would be proud,” says Clarissa.

Thank you to the Buker family for your vision for conservation, and for helping to keep a spectacular agricultural property in-tact for future generations.

James says, “We have no regrets that we did this. It’s more fulfilling every day. Somebody way back there from the Buker family is going, wow... I can’t believe the ranch is still there today.”



John C (Claude) Buker, Dorothy Marie Buker (Helm), oldest daughter Patricia Lee (Patty) and youngest daughter Diana Kay, late spring circa 1957.

“Where I Lived, and What I Lived For”

—Henry David Thoreau

Bryan Dufresne is a local educator and member of the BRLT Next-Gen Committee. He has twice been voted Bitterroot’s Best Author.

1980something, early summer in the Bitterroot Valley. I hear only the whir of my bike tires as I pedal frantically to keep up with my brother, Jeff, who is two years my elder. Black pavement flows by. My left hand clutches my handlebar and a net. I look up at Jeff who also holds a net on the left handle bar, on the right hangs a five gallon bucket. We are headed down College Street to the north in the direction of the Lee Metcalf Wildlife Refuge. Our destination is a series of small cattail ponds just beyond the Vance’s place.

Tires eventually skid to a stop. We lay our bikes down, and wade into the pond. The hunt begins. We read the water for frogs, looking for eyes popping above the surface or some sign of movement.

My Bitterroot childhood was remarkable, full of unfettered freedom thanks to an abundance of natural space. As I grew into a teenager my playground shifted from bike trails and

to the railing at Bell Crossing for our annual polar plunges into the frigid waters below.

I can still feel the sense of summer awe when we came to realize we could lift a heavy rock, wade into the river until it was over our heads, and literally run across the riverbed holding our breath until we emerged on the other bank.

In adulthood, when faced with the daunting task of being a father for the first time, it was this valley that saved me once again. As soon as he could walk, my son Finn and I were trekking the Bitterroot River with our border collie, Whit. A few years later, my daughter Lila began joining the journeys and has been addicted to water ever since. As a family we have played, wandered, hiked, biked, fished, camped, walked, swam, skied and snowboarded up and down the Bitterroot Valley.

The two greatest friendships I have ever known were forged on the banks



you have been blessed, immeasurably. You then work to nourish and protect that which gives you so much joy- for when you love something, you do what’s best for it.

My stewardship began on a micro level: adhering to no trace ethics when backpacking and camping, recycling, fishing barbless hooks and keeping

“Life has an interesting arc, if done correctly. You find something you love, and you immerse yourself in it, sometimes recklessly.”

frog ponds to the Bitterroot River. The river was extraordinary on every level; the joy was infinite. We inner-tubed, snorkeled, swam, fished, floated, caught crawdads, jumped off bridges, launched off rope swings, hung out, and painted a masterpiece of teenage joy at the river.

I can still feel the biting cold of deep snow on my bare feet as we giggled, hooted, and hollered our way

of the Bitterroot River. Friendships that continue, nearly forty years later, to be fed and strengthened by time on the river and in nature.

Life has an interesting arc, if done correctly. You find something you love, and you immerse yourself in it, sometimes recklessly. As the relationship between you and the thing you love grows, you come to realize that

fish wet, taking a garbage bag on every fishing trip to pick up trash left at the river. Enter the Bitter Root Land Trust, and a chance at stewardship on a macro level. A chance to impact everything about the valley that has blessed me for 50 years: clean air, clean water, abundant wildlife, open space, and the remarkable playground only nature can build. Beyond the palpable, a chance to impact



the ethos of those of us who are lucky enough to live here.

The Bitter Root Land Trust has, in many ways, preserved a scrapbook of my life.

At the 2023 Bitter Root Land Trust Barn Dance a memory came flooding back to me as I stood next to the Severson pond on their conserved cattle ranch and gazed toward the house and the Sapphire Mountains beyond. In the 80s, I once traded baseball cards with Ethan Severson in the upstairs bedroom that looks out upon and endless sea of open space.

In elementary school, my brother and his childhood friend Steve Lewis used to make pilgrimages up Burnt Fork Creek in search of brook trout and happiness. Lifelong friend Keith Seppel moved to the Stevensville area in the 80s. In a new town, in a new state without a friend to call his own, Keith discovered Burnt Fork Creek and fished, swam, and flipped rocks to

his heart's content. Now, thanks to the Bitter Root Land Trust, darn near the entire upper stretch is preserved.

And there's the Bitterroot River itself. The Bitter Root Land Trust has not only helped safeguard clean, free flowing water, but has opened public access on stretches of the river that were once private. Skalkaho Bend in Hamilton is an in-town oasis of natural splendor, wildlife, and river song. Up the West Fork, the C. Ben White Memorial Fishing Access Site preserves the section of river that was Ben's childhood playground. I taught Ben in junior high school in Darby prior to his tragic passing. Every time I float or fish that section of river, my mind shifts to him. I connect to once fleeting memories and enjoy his smile and free spirit while I follow his childhood footprints.

The valley has changed immeasurably in my lifetime. The Bitterroot is magical after all, and

I blame no one for wanting to live here. Whether you are a fourth generation western Montanan like myself or an out of state transplant escaping the hustle and bustle of some booming metropolis, we share the same love for this place. The Bitterroot Valley's open space, fresh air, clean water, abundant wildlife, outdoor recreation, and natural splendor are inexorably tied to that love. And when you love something, you do what's best for it.

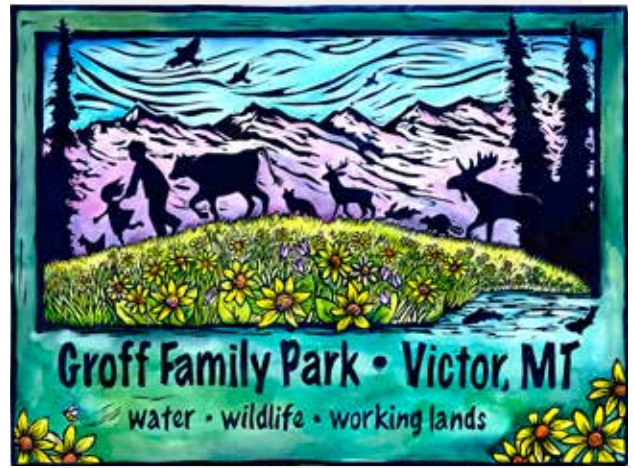
BRLT's latest endeavor is a combination agricultural land easement / public park on the Groff property near Victor. One of the goals is to preserve the town's historic sledding hill for future adventures. It's almost storybook, really, preserving a childhood sledding hill so laughter and squeals can echo through the trees for centuries to come.

You can follow Bryan's outdoor adventures at: humbledbynature406.com

You Can Help Create a Park!

BRLT is working with the Groff family in Victor to celebrate the family's 150-year agricultural legacy in the Bitterroot by creating a new 21-acre nature park for the entire Bitterroot Valley. With your help, BRLT can bring the park's purchase across the finish line this summer, ensuring that future generations of Bitterroot children will be able to grow up with access to protected open space.

For more information about Groff Family Park or on the impact of your donations to BRLT, please contact BRLT Philanthropy Director Owen Yager at owen@bitterrootlandtrust.org or 406-375-0956.



Original art by Karen Savory

You're Invited!

Community Event Series at the Future Groff Family Park, Victor

While the future park is not yet open to the public, you're invited to get a sneak peak of the location at a series of free BRLT-hosted events starting this May! To stay informed, we invite you to visit our website and follow us on Facebook @bitter.root.land.trust and Instagram @bitterrootlandtrust



Meet the New Faces at BRLT!

Please join us in giving our newest team members a warm welcome.



Welcome, Owen Yager!

Philanthropy Director

We are excited to welcome Owen to the BRLT team as Philanthropy Director. After growing up in the Colorado Rockies, Owen's first exposure to conservation work came when tackling invasive plants with hand tools and a spray pack while interning on a conserved lamb ranch in Southern Idaho. He went on to work with conservation organizations in Nevada and Colorado and was on the external relations team for the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust immediately prior to joining BRLT. Owen graduated from Carleton College with a Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in Religion and minoring in Russian and Creative Writing, and holds a Master of Theological Studies degree from Harvard University.

Outside of the office, you can usually find Owen and his dog Ernest adventuring with a fly rod, skis, backpack or mountain bike. They also enjoy tucking in with a cup of tea.

Please join us in giving Owen a warm welcome to the BRLT community!



BRLT Committee Member Spotlight

Kali Hinrichs, Outreach Committee Member

Kali is a volunteer member of BRLT's Outreach Committee where she contributes to the planning of community events, communication efforts and brainstorming unique ways to engage members of our community around a shared love of conservation. A local realtor, dental hygienist and mother of three, Kali attributes her love for the land trust mission of conservation for future generations.

"Moving here four years ago from an area that experienced massive growth in a short period of time, I knew I wanted to support BRLT's mission. I'm thankful for the opportunity to assist with the events that spread awareness around preserving the land we all love so much! Not just for us, but for future generations to come."

Thank you, Kali, for your volunteering your time and sharing your passion for the Bitterroot!

BRLT's mission is supported by four volunteer committees: the Outreach, Development, Next-Gen, and Lands committees. If you are interested in learning more about how to get involved by serving on a BRLT committee, please email Operations Director, Kori Anderson, at kori@bitterrootlandtrust.org or call 406-375-0956

Community Conservation

Connecting with our friends and neighbors over shared Bitterroot values

BRLT to host IN A LANDSCAPE: Classical Music in the Wild™

Date: Sunday, June 29, 2025 @ 6:00 PM

Location: Sweathouse Creek Conservation Easement, Victor

Limited Tickets on Sale at: inalandscape.org

IN A LANDSCAPE: Classical Music in the Wild™ is coming back to the Bitterroot for a special concert in support of local conservation and the Bitter Root Land Trust. You're invited to join your local land trust and roam the rolling foothills of the Sweathouse Creek Conservation Easement in Victor while listening to the classical sounds of pianist Hunter Noack. Guests are encouraged

to explore the beautiful property while streaming a personal soundtrack through wireless headphones (provided) with a radius that spans up to 1 mile away from the stage.

The Hackett family, whose legacy of ranching in Victor dates back to the 1800s, conserved their 540-acre ranch in partnership with the Bitter Root Land Trust, Montana FWP, Ravalli County Fish &

Wildlife Association, and other agencies in 2023. The easement offers permanent public access to the Sweathouse Falls trail while preserving winter range for elk and deer, and waterways vital for native trout. The Hackett family's generous vision to conserve their property and provide public access in perpetuity is a true gift to our community and will be enjoyed for generations to come.



BRLT's 6th Annual Barn Dance

Date: Saturday, July 26, 2025 @ 5:30 PM

Location: TBA

(stay tuned by signing up for our eNewsletter below)

Tickets will be available for sale June 1 at

bitterrootlandtrust.org

Grab your hat and dust off your dancin' boots – the Bitter Root Land Trust's signature Barn Dance is coming back in summer 2025!

Held on a different ranch each year that has been conserved in partnership with BRLT, you're invited to join friends and neighbors at a community celebration to honor what you make possible for conservation in the valley we love. Enjoy a BBQ dinner and drinks, games, and dancing to live music by Texas singer Zack Aaron. Try your hand at roping and learn more about current projects, the conservation easement process and the 14,000+ acres in our valley that have been conserved in perpetuity by generous landowners and our community.

**Sign up for
BRLT's eNews**



A Tribute to Stewards of the Land We Love

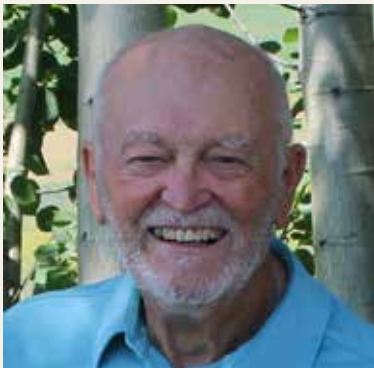
In memory of Danny Roy, Jean Ellison and Jim Swanz– lovers of the Bitterroot Valley and champions for conservation. BRLT deeply appreciates their foresight in helping to conserve the special aspects of the Bitterroot for present and future generations.



Danny Roy protected his family's Roy Ranch in Victor through a conservation easement in partnership with BRLT last year. The third generation of his family to work the land, Danny shared with BRLT that he was proud to have honored his father's dream to keep the entire property preserved for farming and wildlife. Thanks to Danny and his family, a legacy in ranching can live on through the conserved Roy Ranch for future generations.



Jean Ellison leaves a gift of conservation to the Burnt Fork neighborhood of Stevensville through a conservation easement on the family's 344-acre ranch. Together with her late husband A.C., Jean raised five children on the ranch she loved dearly. Jean was a key player in ranch management by keeping the books and helping with ranch operations such as warming newborn calves and lambs, sometimes in the house. With a conservation easement in place, Jean and the Ellison family's generous vision to keep their ranch in-tact will be appreciated for years to come.



Jim Swanz fell in love with the Bitterroot Valley when he and his young family moved to Hamilton in 1961. Having grown up on a working ranch in central Montana, Jim knew the value of land conservation and preservation of wildlife habitat. He was a long-time supporter and friend of BRLT and strongly believed in the organization's mission. Jim requested that donations be made to BRLT in lieu of flowers upon his passing. Thank you, Jim, for your passion for conservation.



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Front and back cover photos: Buker Ranch.

