

PRESERVATION

One of the finest examples exists in Jerseydale

/ September 30, 2021

By GREG LITTLE Editor



Carliene Anderson, sitting, is shown with Nancy Fluharty of the Sierra Foothill Conservancy. Photos by Greg Little

Editor's note: This is the fifth in an eight-part series about the Sierra Foothills Conservancy. The stories will run monthly through the end of the year.



This photo shows bear tracks visible along one of the roads on the property.

Al and Carliene Anderson love the land.

And it shows.

Their 833 acres known as Clarks Valley is located in the Jerseydale area and is steeped in Mariposa County history.

So much so, some of the wood used to build the historic courthouse in Mariposa came from that land.

It was 1988 and the Andersons were living on a small ranch in Southern California, but he was looking for something a little bigger. They also had a sense of just how fast that area in Southern California was growing.

Al, who used to be in the racehorse business, had a friend in that business who had purchased a ranch somewhere around the Clovis area.

Al was looking for something similar and then he got the phone call.



Al Anderson and Nancy Fluharty meander through the landscape on the Clarks Valley property. Photo by Greg Little

“Al,” said the realtor. “One of the most beautiful ranches in the Sierra is up for sale. I need money now.”

The agent said the property would not last a week on the market.

Al sent the money.

Though they still have their home in Southern California, they also have a spectacular home surrounded by the best the Sierra Nevada can offer. An abundance of wildlife, a wide variety of trees, birds galore, a creek and so much more. It is almost paradise. Maybe it is, in fact.

The Andersons knew back then they wanted a place where development would be limited. Forty years ago where they living down south, the population was 1,600. Thirty years ago, it was 100,000. Today, it’s close to half a million.

“There is no open space,” said Al, with the exception of an 8,000-acre piece of land that was bought by the Nature Conservancy and is preserved to this day. He studied that piece of property and the lure of a conservation easement which preserves the land in perpetuity.



This apple tree is estimated to be 100 years old and is on the Clarks Valley property. The owners say they never get the apples in time – the bears are always first. Photo by Greg Little

“It impressed on me the importance of preserving land in its natural state,” said Al.

But even in the Jerseydale location, he feared development could take place and so he began researching land trusts. A local man who was an advocate for conservation came out “a few times” to discuss the possibilities, said Al.

“I liked the idea of conserving a large piece of property,” said Al.

And so the story began, at least that part.

The land is preserved through the Sierra Foothill Conservancy (SFC), a local organization intent on preserving as much land as possible in order to keep this region as pristine as possible. The marriage has been quite successful, thanks in large part to the Andersons and their willingness to invest time and money into making sure the land is treated properly.

The Carstens Fire

It was Father’s Day 2013 when the Andersons and some friends were preparing for lunch near a pond on the property.



This photo shows the damage the Carstens Fire did back in 2013. The land preservation on the preserve helped slow the fire. Submitted photo

“I could see the smoke plume,” said Al. “I could see a small fire.”

It had started near the Midpines Market, which is the start of Carstens Road.

“We didn’t think much of it,” said Al.

Later, they were walking in the Buckingham Mountain area and a sheriff’s deputy “came flying up,” said Al. “He said get out of here or you’re going to die.”

Fire officials thought they had the fire under control. It was started by some campers on their way to Yosemite who had lit a campfire, but they didn’t get it put out all the way.

“The wind came up and it took off,” said Al. “The whole ridge burned.”

Fortunately, firefighters did a back burn around their home and it was saved.

“It hit our property line really hot,” said Al.

But because the couple had taken seriously the concept of preserving the land, which means making sure it is cleaned where necessary, the fire was not as bad as it could have possibly been, though it did burn for 10 days.



This photo shows some of the restoration work which has been done on the property. Submitted photo

Carliene said they had spent a lot of time thinning trees and removing brush.

“That is how it became a ground fire,” said Carliene.

A ground fire is much easier to get under control than how the blaze began by burning through the treetops.

Carliene said 229 houses were evacuated during the Carstens Fire but none were lost.

“That’s why conserving land is so critical,” said Nancy Fluharty, development program manager for SFC.

She said that one example is literally the reason why they work so hard to do easements; especially with people as serious as the Andersons.

Just a few weeks ago, that effort almost certainly paid off again when there was a fire on Buckingham Mountain. The fire began on a corner of the Andersons’ property, but

because it had been managed, it became a “smoldering fire” that ended up around 20 acres.

That is a great example to AI why they wanted to do conservation and make the land as pristine as possible.



This is one of the dead trees which remain on the property. Thousands have been removed. Photo by Greg Little

“From a conservation perspective, if you want to preserve the landscape, the culture, you should do it,” said Al about getting involved with the conservancy.

“Living in Southern California and seeing what happened to open spaces makes you want to do this,” he added.

Another reason he thinks it is critical to not just preserve land, but to maintain it as vigorously as possible, is because “we are losing wildlife at an unprecedented rate.”

The reason, he said, is “principally because of habitat loss. If we are able, we need to save as much habitat as possible.”

The history

The history of this property is storied in Mariposa County.

There was selective timber harvesting frequently on the property since the 1940s.

Al said millions and millions of board feet of timber were taken from the property, including the wood now at the courthouse.

The property has an elevation range of 3,500 feet along Snow Creek to 4,250 feet on Buckingham Mountain. The land consists of open meadows, grazing land, timber, wildlife habitat and the perennial stream of Snow Creek.

Some of the tree species include ponderosa pine, white fir, incense cedar and more. The property is dotted with meadows and there are riparian areas which, along with the meadows and forests, provide significant natural habitat for native animal species. That includes the Great Gray Owl, a highly endangered species in California.

Another important point Fluharty made was the land continues to be used for cattle grazing. She thinks that is a major issue when it comes to land conservation – and sometimes people don’t understand both can happen.

But Fluharty said it is only natural and in some ways, the cattle are taking the place of long-gone animals like antelope and elk. The animals serve as a kind of regeneration, helping other species thrive.

She also said having the Andersons as part of the program is a benefit to everyone – including the people who live in the surrounding area in Jerseydale.

“They are one of the most motivated landowners we have worked with,” said Fluharty.

Jessica Thompson, operations manager for SFC, agrees wholeheartedly.

“These are really involved landowners,” said Thompson. “This is a large-scale forest restoration.”

She also called the area a “key spot” for wildlife because it is sort of a buffer between protected public lands and private lands. She called it a “really invaluable” bird area.

Some of the animals migrate through the property, she said, while others make it home all year long.

And though the area does get snow, she said it is “not like the high country,” meaning it is more manageable for some of the wildlife.

On a visit last week, sizable bear tracks were visible, as were mountain lion tracks, coyote tracks and much more.

Al and Carlene routinely watch the wildlife, including some pretty large bucks which call the place home as well as the bears, which can be spotted on occasion.

Fluharty said one of the “key” parts of the conservation effort is doing “strategic areas” which allows the entire land to almost come to life because the habitat is nearly back to its natural state.

Al, though, said the tasks are not easy. When tree mortality struck the area, he said they removed 700 loads of dead trees.

When asked how long it took for the bark beetles to kill the trees, he said it was less than six weeks.

But the Andersons forged ahead with the removal and have also planted thousands of new tree starts on the land.

That, said Fluharty, is one of the entire points of not only conserving the land, but making sure it has a function.

Thompson looks at how the water has been managed on the property.

“Water is life,” said Thompson.

Hard to argue that point since all living creatures need it to survive.

She said if land is preserved properly, it can retain the water.

For example, if forests are too dense, she said the water just runs off. The same is true if they are wide open.

Thompson gave an example of when snow falls in the forest. When that happens, the snow moves around, in many cases forming rings around a tree that are at varying levels. That, she said, is the perfect scenario and the various levels of snow are able to soak into the ground and preserve it in the watershed.

Property management

A conservation easement allows for plans to be developed on how the land can be preserved and why it is critical to the environment.

This property has been grazed in the past and that continues to be a management tool. SCF also used this land for its Sierra Land Beef program, which means it benefits the local economy.

The property also has two main trails in addition to seasonal roads and cattle trails. One trail leads down to Snow Creek and follows it for several miles. The other leads to Buckingham Mountain and is strenuous with elevation gain.

Al continues to work, with his “fine crew,” he said, in maintaining the property, including ongoing tree removal as needed as well as reforestation, something he takes pride in doing.

While walking in a meadow, he pointed out the many trees which had been planted after all of the dead trees had been removed because of tree mortality.

The land also contains cultural heritage with many places having Native American remnants. At one time, it appears it was a large Native American encampment, maybe two, on the land and it is still visible today. Arrowheads are common on the property.

Al believes preserving that culture is an integral part of the overall preservation concept. He has hosted local tribal members who say the spirits remain on the land and Al wants to make sure that remains, as well.

Fluharty said the SFC brings in groups of people to the land to teach them about preservation and the importance of keeping the land intact and usable.

Al and Carliene even harvested some pine cones one year and took them to a nursery where they were allowed to thrive. They then took them to the students at the charter school in Catheys Valley and the students were allowed to come out to the property and replant the cones; thus adding more life to the property.

All of that and more sum up the vision of the conservancy and, at the end of the tour last week, Fluharty may have made the understatement of the day when it comes to the Clarks Valley Conservation Easement.

"It seems it really came into the right hands with you guys," she said.

No argument can be made.