

Sierra Foothill Conservancy makes major purchase in works for years

Pristine property on East Westfall Road is rich in history

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By GREG LITTLE Editor



Above, Bridget Fithian of the Sierra Foothill Conservancy is shown with Violet and Sweet Pea, two donkeys which are now owned by the conservancy. Below is the landmark red barn on East Westfall Road. Photos by Greg Little

Editor's note: This is the seventh in an eight-part series about the Sierra Foothill Conservancy. The final story in the series will run next month.



You know it's going to be a good day when you are greeted by Violet and Sweet Pea.

The pair of older donkeys welcome you like they've known you all their lives.

Oh, and they are also looking for some food.

Violet and Sweet Pea are just a small part of the story of the Stookey Ranch Preserve, a 246-acre tract of land that will now be preserved forever thanks to the efforts of the Sierra Foothill Conservancy as well as many other players.

"It gives you the biggest grin," said Bridget Fithian, executive director of the Sierra Foothill Conservancy (SFC).

She's speaking of the effort to preserve the ranch which has literally been decades in the making. And, of course, she smiles when Violet and Sweet Pea follow her closely, still looking for those carrots she forgot to bring one day last week.



A huge oak tree on the property is one of many examples of why the Sierra Foothill Conservancy believes the land is an invaluable part of the county.

The ranch is located just off of Triangle Road on East Westfall Road. The property is a true landmark in the county where the famed "red barn" is located. That's the corner of this property.

The property has a lot of features that make it perfect for conservation. But it also has a historic house, the famed red barn, a blacksmith shop and a whole lot of Mariposa County history.

So much so, it was originally owned by the Westfall family. You know it is historic when the road on which it sits is of the same name.

But now, the property is owned by SFC, which really isn't typical of how they normally manage land. In the majority of the cases, the property remains in private ownership and an agreement is generally signed with the conservancy to make sure it is preserved in perpetuity.

In this case, though, the conservancy is now the proud owner of this historic piece of property.



large pond is one of four on the property. Wildlife of all kinds utilize the pond.

That's a good thing, said Fithian, but it also brings a lot of responsibility – and work.

This is the 10th preserve owned by SFC with a total acreage of more than 7,600 acres.

The deal on the property closed at the end of October and now SFC officials are working on how they will proceed when it comes to not just the land, but the house which has historic value, as well.

The entire project came together, said Fithian, thanks to a major grant from the Wildlife Conservation Board, which aims to preserve land throughout California.

This piece of land, she said, is ideal for what they are trying to preserve.

The details

The land now owned by the conservancy has many conservation values. Those include natural, scenic and open space character, future grazing potential, diversity of native plants, high quality wildlife habitat, riparian areas, meadows, ponds and cultural and historical resources.

The habitat types include montane meadow, wetlands, riparian corridor of the Chowchilla River watershed and mixed hardwood conifer forest.



This is a photo of Mary Tong-U Westfall, who married JJ Westfall and lived on the property for years, being a midwife and medical provider to many in the area. Submitted photo

The special/critical habitats or species include the opportunities for the great gray owl olive-sided flycatcher, Western pond turtle, yellow warbler, pallid bat, ring tail porcupine and foothill yellow-legged frog.

The property includes four ponds, 1.5 miles of streams and two wells.

“This is a property we will be able to share for generations to come,” said Fithian.

She said one of the “key” elements of being able to obtain the grant funding to purchase the land was “protecting the wildlife corridors.”

Of particular note, said Fithian, are the meadows on the property. The land is ripe with meadow areas, including large swaths of open space.

She called meadows the “kidneys of the ecosystem,” saying the meadows act as a place to “hold and filter” water instead of having it runoff and go down the mountains to the coast. Instead, the meadows allow the water to both soak in and “slowly release,” she said, which is ideal habitat.

Fithian also called the land a “bird sanctuary,” noting a wide variety of birds utilize the area, both those who stay all year and migratory species. She said there are four owl species alone which occupy areas of the property. Songbirds are plentiful as are many other species.

As part of the agreement to purchase the land, certain requirements were hammered out between the parties, she said. That includes continuing it as a habitat and allowing no further development. That’s a big one, she said, as the land is zoned for mountain residential and could have been broken into five acre plots for development.

The main point, she said, is “making sure it is an intact project in perpetuity.”

When the conservancy takes on projects like this, Fithian said there is a lot that has to be done, not the least of which is doing cleanup and, in this case, doing work on the home, which is dated on the inside though quite functional.

One way they are going to treat the land, she said, is using fire as a “good tool.”

The land does have a fair amount of dead trees, some on the ground and others still standing. Some of them died during the Mono wind event last January, others from bark beetles. Plans are in the works to fell those tree as well as use techniques to do controlled burns.

Fithian said that is crucial because the SFC wants to make the entire area a “more fire safe community,” which benefits other landowners. That is another key element for all of the properties managed by the conservancy.

“We want to bring healthy fire back into the landscape,” said Fithian.

They will do that by again partnering with the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation, said Fithian. The history of healthy fires dates back generations and was a key tool for Native Americans, who inhabited the land well before others came to the region.

In fact, there is a lot of evidence of Native Americans who lived on that land many years ago and Fithian said that will also be a key element in the future of the property.

Another aspect they hope to incorporate is education, said Fithian. They are hoping to work with the local school district in having tours of the property by school children and incorporate “programming to get people out here.”

As part of that entire process, Fithian said the fact the property is historic can also be crucial. She said the Mariposa Museum and History Center has a lot of information about the property history and has worked with SFC in the process of uncovering that during the effort to purchase the property.

“We want to eventually share a historic preservation display that shares history,” said Fithian. “We want to preserve the history. It is part of the richness of who we are as a community.”

Another aspect of this particular property is the fact a functioning home is part of the ownership. With a crunch in housing in the county, Fithian said she is hopeful the house can be used by interns who are hired by the conservancy. In addition, she is hopeful board retreats and other events can be held at the property.

In addition, Fithian said updating the house and cleaning the property will employ people in the region. From tree cutters to fuels management personnel, all will be a part of restoring the property, she said.

“There will be a lot of investment in the community,” said Fithian.

She said SFC already has a docent program in place and the eventual goal is to have those docents lead tours on this property, including hikes and classes.

And who could forget the red barn, a landmark in Mariposa County?

She called the barn “something special to the community” and believes the landmark can be part of the overall experience when people are able to enjoy the property.

The history

The property is rich in Mariposa County history and Fithian said that is a critical element in why preservation is important.

Joel J. “JJ” Westfall is a well-known name in the history of Mariposa County. Westfall and his wife, Betty, owned the property in the 1800s. Westfall was a Mariposa County supervisor in the late 1800s. His wife died, but then his history really gets interesting.

According to historical records, Mary Tong-U was born in Canton Province in China in August 1829. She was brought to California by a labor contractor.

At some point, it was Westfall who, according to a paper written in 2008 by Leland E. Bibb of El Cajon, “bought” her for \$800 at an auction. She was to be the housekeeper on the Westfall property.

But that turned into something else, according to the documents. At some point, Westfall married the woman. At the time of the marriage, Westfall was 44 years old and was known as “an old mountaineer and one of the pioneers of Mariposa County.”

The history of when he came to Mariposa County is unknown, but U.S. Census records note he was in Ritchie County, Virginia, in the 1850 with his wife, Julia, and a two-year-old son, James R. Westfall. The earliest record of him in Mariposa County, according to the record written by Bibb, was on the 1857 roster of Freemasons in Mariposa.

How Westfall met Mary remains a mystery, but one thing is for certain – it was a lasting union when they were married. They did not have any children. Records do indicate Westfall received patents for land in 1880 and 1890 and served as a county supervisor for 16 years, according to the Nov. 26, 1910, edition of the *Mariposa Gazette*.

“A number of homesteaders were in his vicinity and created a vibrant community which relied on cattle raising, subsistence farming and logging,” according to the paper written by Bibb.

Another huge aspect of Mary’s marriage to Westfall was how she helped so many people in the surrounding area. She was a midwife and would travel many miles on horseback to deliver babies. It was also reported she would help people in the area around their property, including when they were sick or injured.

In 1901, the *Mariposa Gazette* reported on the death of Mary Westfall. It said she died at her home in the Snow Creek district on April 26 after a week’s illness with pneumonia. She was 71 years old and “respected by all of her acquaintances,” according to the newspaper article.

Here’s another passage from the story: “Her prompt and attentive ministrations to her sick neighbors was one of her characteristics that endeared her to all. The interment was had in the Masonic cemetery at Mariposa, Sunday last, and the remains followed to the grave by a large procession of mourning relatives and friends.”

A couple of years after Mary’s death, the paper by Bibb states, Joel Westfall sold his property in Mariposa County and returned to West Virginia to live with his son. He died in 1910 at the age of 91.

That sale was apparently to the Stookey family who bought the property. They ranched and farmed on the property, said Fithian.

Bill Stookey, said Fithian, became a member of the SFC and wanted to see the land preserved. It was about 20 years ago, she said, when Bill began talking with the conservancy about the land. Bill and his wife, Betty, set up fisheries on the property, evidence of which still exists today. They raised trout, according to Fithian.

But in the early 2000s, he died, leaving the possibility of conserving the land on hold.

His son, Chris Stookey and his wife, Sandra, became the owners of the property.

In 2012, Fithian said, they “started talking” about the property, exploring various options.

But that faded, she said, until 2019 when the idea “was rekindled.”

Those talks led to what happened just a month ago when the final documents were signed and registered with the county, making the conservancy the new owners of the prime property.

For Fithian, just being on the property, including with Violet and Sweet Pea, brings a sense of calm surrounded by nature.

She compared to the Hundred Acre Wood of Winnie the Pooh fame.

The Hundred Acre Wood is a part of the fictional land inhabited by Winnie-the-Pooh and his friends in the Winnie-the-Pooh series of children’s stories by author A. A. Milne. The wood is visited regularly by the young boy Christopher Robin, who accompanies Pooh and company on their many adventures.

Fithian said that fictional land mirrors what she sees at the Stookey Ranch Preserve – a place to unwind, put down the cell phone and wrap yourself in the natural beauty of the Sierra Foothills.

Even when Fithian is crazy busy with a lot of responsibilities, and now even more thanks to the land purchase, she said visiting the property makes it better – at least for a while.