

SUMMER 2017



... to protect the land forever

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AN UPDATE ON THE FUTURE OF
THE SONOMA DEVELOPMENTAL
CENTER'S LAND

PRESERVING A WAY OF LIFE ON OUR WORKING LANDS

BY NICOLE NA

Otto and Anne Teller sought to create a harmonious relationship between farm and nature at their Oak Hill Farm in Glen Ellen. Photo by Scott Hess Photography.

In Sonoma County, it's all about the land. Like the county itself, Sonoma Land Trust is rooted in agriculture. Since our founding 41 years ago, Sonoma Land Trust has fostered the connection between well-managed agricultural lands and healthy natural lands. This intersection is both our heritage and our future. From Ellen Stuart to Luther

Burbank to our young farmers, food, fiber and vines have put Sonoma County on the map.

It was Otto Teller, devoted land preservationist and farmer, who first gathered together Sonoma Land Trust's founders in the mid-'70s. Soon after, he donated his 300-acre Secret Pasture property, seeding our conservation efforts

and blazing a trail for our work. Otto believed in respecting the heritage of Sonoma County — as well as looking toward the future. Similarly, we are using our properties' natural systems to inform a sustainable approach to agriculture, preserving our lands' unique histories, keeping them productive and managing them responsibly for future generations.

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Farms and Sonoma Land Trust

In the toolbox for land trusts, there is a term — Landscape Conservation — that describes Sonoma Land Trust’s approach to land protection. It requires working collaboratively across political and ecosystem boundaries to connect nature, community and culture in the 21st century. Our portfolio of protected places includes natural and working landscapes, and most projects that we undertake protect elements of both.

Farming and ranching tie us to the land in time-tested relationships that are intrinsic to the culture and character of Sonoma County. In this newsletter, we highlight our work in this field and pass along the stories of farmers who have helped to shape our vision for tomorrow.

Farmers’ markets in our local towns reflect a common bond of community — and the value we place on locally grown food is front and center in our favorite menus of meals shared with friends at home and in restaurants. Yet farming presents a complex set of issues: There are pressures on the land that stem from rapid-paced growth in the greater San Francisco Bay Area and impacts from climate change that serve as an all-too-urgent reminder that now is the time for land protection.

In his classic writings on nature and conservation, Aldo Leopold wrote, “There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery and the other that

heat comes from the furnace.” Most of us won’t own a farm, but everyone can mitigate the dangers Leopold warned about by taking steps today to protect these special landscapes in Sonoma County.

Thank you for supporting Sonoma Land Trust and I’ll see you out there,

Dave Koehler

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Farming hand in hand with nature at Oak Hill Farm

In 1977, Otto Teller met Anne, his future wife, and the two of them began cultivating a life dedicated to farming — and land preservation. They donated a conservation easement over their 677-acre Oak Hill Farm, nestled in Sonoma Valley, in 1985. Otto had purchased this property 20 years earlier, converting it from a dairy and pasture to a farm growing “back greens,” the foliage found in flower arrangements. Anne has kept their vision going strong since his passing 19 years ago.

“In a nutshell,” Anne says, “my husband was a devoted environmentalist. Like a terrier, he wouldn’t let go of the concept. He planted cover crops to restore the soil and we conserved water.”

Remarkably, thanks to Otto’s values, herbicides and pesticides have never been used on the property, and it was a natural step for the Tellers to donate an easement over the farm. “We were already practicing what you call sustainable agriculture,” says Anne. “We didn’t want to subdivide our property anyway, or build new buildings or roads, so the easement worked just fine — we didn’t have to change our farming style.”

As years passed, the Tellers began to grow flowers and, eventually, vegetables. Today, Anne grows 200 types of fruits, vegetables and flowers, some of which are sold on Saturdays at the Red Barn on Highway 12. The rest goes to San Francisco businesses and restaurants, and their new flower operation in Sebastopol.

The conservation easement covers the entirety of the property, but roughly only 10 percent of it is cultivated — the remaining portion is forested, attracting all kinds of wildlife. “An important part of this farm is its forests,” Anne says. “They bring clouds, which bring rain, and keep our streams viable and our aquifer healthier.” Oak Hill Farm, Secret Pasture, Audubon Canyon Ranch’s Bouverie Preserve and Glen Oaks Ranch are all connected to one another, creating a wildlife-friendly neighborhood that sustains deer, mountain lions and myriad other native species.

Anne seeks to maintain an equilibrium with nature at Oak Hill Farm. “I think it’s a question of how we strike a balance with nature.” Anne cites the pair of rattlesnakes

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***“I think it’s a question of how we strike
a balance with nature.”***

— Anne Teller, Oak Hill Farm

that inhabit the barn. “Do I kill them? Other people would. They can be a danger to me and my dogs. But the rattlesnakes do so much good and provide so much service. In exchange, we give them shade and protection. They’re part of the system.”

It’s this system — a harmonious relationship between farm and nature — that the Tellers sought to protect. “The conservation easement connects me to a wonderful organization. And it connects me to wonderful friends,” says Anne. “The easement volunteers scan the grounds for me and help me preserve the property. It’s the best way I know to support what I believe in — a healthy Earth — and it’s close to home. What could be better than that?”

A legacy continues at Old Hill Ranch

In 1981, the Tellers purchased Old Hill Ranch, a 37-acre vineyard just across Highway 12, upon which they placed a

conservation easement a decade later. Will Bucklin, Anne’s son, manages the vines there. “Almost everything we practice here is born from an Otto-ism,” says Will. Otto’s holistic practices have shaped the farm, both literally and figuratively. The ancient vines lack trellises or the ubiquitous black irrigation tubing found in most other vineyards. Rye grass and clover sprout between every other row (Will is experimenting with tilling only alternate vine rows), and the vines are free for wildlife to browse. As Otto put it many years ago, “Deer gotta eat too.”

The vineyard operates on an “allow access to everything and take away nothing” philosophy — a code that extends to the vines themselves, which were planted in 1885 and have been producing ever since. Pointing out a particularly gnarled vine, Will explains that it has a genetic defect that prevents it from bearing fruit. “In any other

vineyard, it would’ve been torn out. But it’s part of this place now.”

Old Hill’s grapes are special for a few reasons. First, they’re dry-farmed — not irrigated. This is made possible by a few factors: The vines are given more space than most other grapes and the root stock grows longer, allowing the plants to draw water from deep within the soil. Will uses compost and cover crops like fava beans to sequester carbon and increase the water-holding capacity of the soil, ensuring that the water nature provides is sufficient to sustain the vines. “If you’re taking water out of the ground,” says Will, “it by definition isn’t sustainable. To do more with the water we have, every farmer should be focused on sequestering carbon for the planet.”

In addition to promoting soil health, this gives the grapes a deeper flavor — with less water, they have more skin-to-juice ratio and don’t “balloon up.” With roots that reach deeper into the soil,



“On a personal level, loving the land is the key to caring for it. It drives you to do better.”

— Will Bucklin, Old Hill Ranch



the wine also gains more of the characteristic taste and flavor of the land that the French call *terroir*. Additionally, Old Hill's wines are a "field blend," unlike most others. "In just this 12-acre block, we grow 30 different grape varieties," says Will. "They're harvested together and blended all at once. Since this blend is so unique, nobody makes the same wine anywhere in the world."

This method of farming goes hand-in-hand with Old Hill Farm's conservation easement. "Otto used to say that we've got a special spot carved out here," says Will. "He wanted to do whatever he could to keep it that way." The conservation easement over Old Hill, as easements go, is fairly strict, but Will doesn't mind. "I love rules," he says. "The Land Trust is responsive. They help me understand the easement — I know what I can and can't do. That simplifies life and slows the pace of change."

Otto Teller's legacy was a love of the

land and a mechanism — the Land Trust — for people to save it. "On a personal level, loving the land is the key to caring for it," says Will. "It drives you to do better."

Preserving a dream at Laufenburg Ranch

When Charlie Laufenburg passed away in 1987, he left behind a vision for his Laufenburg Ranch. Born on the property, he lived off the farm and its diversified operations — grazing cattle, raising chickens, growing crops and caring for the prune orchard. The ranch was a part of Charlie and Charlie was a part of the ranch — so it was vital to him that his farm and its way of life be preserved.

For the last several years, Ken Orchard of Orchard Farms has been keeping Charlie's agrarian spirit alive at Laufenburg Ranch. This summer, Ken is growing sweet corn, watermelon, tomatoes, okra and other seasonal crops. The produce, grown organically, is sold at farmers' markets in Santa Rosa, Sebastopol and

Sonoma. Ken strives to preserve agricultural continuity in Knights Valley, an area that has been going through persistent change. "As an environmentalist and organic farmer, working at Laufenburg meshes well with me," Ken says. "When I was out there the first time, I saw that the ranch was unique — it has truly been in a time capsule. There's a composition of plants and wild stuff here I haven't seen in a long time."

Responsible agriculture isn't the only thing Sonoma Land Trust is preserving at Laufenburg. The barn and house, both built in 1883 by Lewis McLane, are registered as a historic landmark by the County of Sonoma. Originally built for racehorses, the barn now holds owls, bats and over a century of history, while the old house still serves as a residence. "It's our mission to keep these buildings standing and in good order so that people can continue to visit and experience the richness of history here," says Trevor

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***For the last several years, Ken Orchard
of Orchard Farms has been keeping
Charlie's agrarian spirit alive at
Laufenburg Ranch.***



George, stewardship project manager. Thanks to diligent restoration and conservation efforts, stepping into Laufenburg Ranch is like entering a past that is informing the future.

Grazing at Pole Mountain and Tolay Creek Ranch

Glen Mohring had been grazing his cattle in the green hills of Tolay Creek Ranch for 35 years when the property was purchased by Sonoma Land Trust in 2007. When Glen came to the Land Trust to renew his lease, we were happy to oblige. Managed grazing does the land and our native plant species a great service, and has ever since elk and other hooved mammals roamed the grasslands.

“There have been wildflowers across the top of the ridge as long as I can remember,” says Glen, gesturing toward the west ridge of the ranch — and that’s no coincidence. Glen’s 160 cows keep both the native and non-native species trimmed in the rare serpentine soils, reducing competition and allowing the spectacular native wildflowers to flourish.

Despite the fact that we donated Tolay Creek Ranch to Regional Parks earlier this year, Glen will be able to continue grazing his cows there because he’s also been the longtime operator at Tolay Lake park! “I have a great working relationship with the Land Trust and I love how their work supports the local agricultural economy,” says Glen. It’s an arrangement that benefits all parties, keeping our landscape healthy and the cows happy.

At the opposite end of the county, Sonoma Land Trust is working with specialists to create a new grazing plan for Pole Mountain Ranch — a prescription of sorts for managing the rolling grassland hills atop the highest point along the Sonoma Coast. Decades of heavy grazing without a grazing plan and with an improper stocking rate and duration have actually harmed the root systems of native grasses, reducing their ability to photosynthesize and replenish themselves.

Our new grazing plan will replace year-round grazing with spring grazing, keeping down non-natives when they’re youngest and tastiest to cows and

promoting the growth of native species. “Relative to other options for controlling invasive plants, grazing is definitely the most viable management tool in a landscape like this,” says stewardship project manager Shanti Edwards. “It also supports our local food system and our local economy, and maintains the historical uses of the land.”

In every corner of the county, we’re working with ranchers to reconnect our working landscapes with our natural systems — and doing it in a way that creates a harmonious balance that sustains and preserves the wild, agricultural and historical elements that are key to our Sonoma County identity. We’re thankful for those who champion our values in their work and strive to contribute to local agriculture, local food and our local economy.

Nicole Na is SLT’s communications coordinator.



Glen Mohring’s 160 cows keep both the native and non-native species trimmed in the rare serpentine soils, reducing competition and allowing the spectacular native wildflowers to flourish at Tolay Creek Ranch.



“Saving land and our open spaces for future generations is so important. To have that kind of beauty is like art or music — you can’t live without it.”

THOUGHTFUL CHOICES MAKE REDWOOD HILL FARM A MODEL OF SUSTAINABILITY

BY NICOLE NA



Redwood Hill Farm has long been a champion of humane animal husbandry, an example of traditional farming practices and a purveyor of excellent goat dairy. The woman behind it all is Jennifer Bice.

Jennifer oversees her 300-goat farm and is founder and managing director of the creamery, which makes award-winning cheese, yogurt and kefir. What makes Redwood Hill Farm so special, though, is Jennifer’s unique set of values, which enables her to run her business with integrity and responsibility. “Personal actions are based on personal values,” Jennifer says. “Running your own business is a natural extension of that — it allows you to apply your values to

every aspect of the business.” For Jennifer, these values are the foundation for the commitments she’s made to her animals, the environment and the people she cares about.

Redwood Hill’s goats are happy and personable, and its products are Certified Humane, but the farm doesn’t just steward its goats — it stewards its natural resources, too. Huge catchment tanks hold up to 100,000 gallons of rainwater, used to wash barn floors and irrigate the farm’s olive trees, apple orchards and gardens. “With climate change and drought, water conservation is particularly important,” says Jennifer.

Saving water helps the nearby Green Valley Creek, home to coho salmon and steelhead, retain its water levels in the summer. Recycling features prominently in the farm’s operations — straw and manure are composted, while yogurt and kefir leftovers are saved and fed back to

the goats. The farm even has five solar arrays that sustain the entire operation, while the creamery operates entirely on electricity from its 2,500 solar panels and Sonoma Clean Power. “It’s important to look around at what you’re already doing and to take every opportunity to be more sustainable,” Jennifer says.

To Jennifer, taking responsibility for her animals and the environment is crucial in the face of challenges like climate change — and, as land becomes more expensive, it’s increasingly important for sustainable agriculture to be financially viable. “The good thing is that, in Sonoma County, there are plenty of educated consumers who vote with their dollars,” she says. “We’re lucky to live where we do, where we can make sustainable business choices that support local food and promote food security.”

Jennifer values our local food and our local farmers, and to that end is a generous and dedicated supporter of Sonoma Land Trust. “With conservation easements, the Land Trust has enabled families to stay on their land and keep farming for generations,” she says. “Saving that land and our open spaces for future generations is so important. To have that kind of beauty is like art or music — you can’t live without it.”





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AN URGENT UPDATE

THE FUTURE OF THE SONOMA DEVELOPMENTAL CENTER LAND

BY JOHN MCCAULL

In Sonoma Land Trust's 2016–2020 Strategic Plan, we made a commitment to broaden our constituency base with an "array of fresh voices for conservation." For land trusts all over the country, there is a growing recognition that inclusion of a diversity of new members and new voices is essential to staying relevant and effective. We call this "community conservation." Your land trust is backing up our commitment by working with a broad array of Sonoma Valley organizations and residents to plan a common future for the Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC).

As we have reported prior, the State of California intends to close SDC as a residential hospital for people with developmental disabilities by the end of 2018. In May, the State launched a site assessment, which will take an in-depth look at the buildings, infrastructure and natural resources of this nearly 900-acre property. Concurrent with gaining an understanding of the condition of the 125-year-old institution, the State is engaging with the Sonoma Valley community to

create a vision and guiding principles for what will happen next.

The top priority for Sonoma Land Trust is clear: Secure broad public support for a compelling vision to add SDC's open space lands to a regionally connected park and nature preserve system. But our job won't be finished when we protect the land. Our engagement with the community is leading us in new directions: to high school students trying to figure out if they have a future here, to community groups looking for a home for new facilities, and to our allies concerned about the future of health care for our most vulnerable citizens.

At a time when we are concerned that our voices are not carrying beyond California, we have a remarkable example of how "acting locally" can make a lasting difference. To stay informed, register to receive updates at our blog at transformsdc.com.

John McCaull is the land acquisition program manager for the Sonoma Valley.

OUR MISSION

Sonoma Land Trust protects the scenic, natural, agricultural and open landscapes of Sonoma County for the benefit of the community and future generations by:

- DEVELOPING LONG-TERM LAND PROTECTION STRATEGIES;
- PROMOTING PRIVATE AND PUBLIC FUNDING FOR LAND AND CONSERVATION;
- ACQUIRING LAND AND CONSERVATION EASEMENTS;
- PRACTICING STEWARDSHIP, INCLUDING THE RESTORATION OF CONSERVATION PROPERTIES; AND
- PROMOTING A SENSE OF PLACE AND A LAND ETHIC THROUGH ACTIVITIES, EDUCATION AND OUTREACH.