

Presentation for Flathead Audubon Celebration of the Permanent Protection of Owen Sowerwine

By Laura Katzman, Flathead Land Trust

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I am honored to be here on behalf of the organization that holds the conservation easement that permanently protects the Owen Sowerwine property. Who would have thought it would take 50 years and so many committed individuals, organizations, and effort to permanently protect the natural and community treasure? Flathead Land Trust's role has been just a small part of this effort – we are “standing on the shoulders of giants”. A special thanks go to the man who initiated the fight to preserve the area whose legacy lives on by name. As the Daily Inter Lake printed back in 1978 when folks at the time thought the Owen Sowerwine property was protected as a Natural Area under the Natural Areas Act: “A wild thicket enfolded in the coils of the Flathead and Stillwater Rivers is now protected under the name Owen Sowerwine, the longtime Flathead Valley resident and conservationist who initiated the fight to preserve the area.” Owen Sowerwine is a shining example of what one man can do!

He and others, including Sam Bibler who wrote the forward to the first master plan for the Owen Sowerwine property, were visionaries ahead of their time. Sam wrote and we should be reminded of the following: “Our planet earth has been around for 4.6 billion years and life on earth for 3 billion years. Of this 3 billion years, humans have been around only the last 3 million years and have lived reasonably close to nature until only about the last 100 years, in which we have altered the face of the earth with reckless abandon and almost nothing completely natural remains - hence the urgent need for the setting aside of representative “Natural Areas” before it is too late.”

He continued: “It seems absolutely mandatory that the role of a manager should be one of maintaining the integrity of a natural area until such time humans assume a proper and sustainable role as the only one of a million species of life on earth. In other words, the only way we can keep all options open with regard to the future of our “Natural Area” is to keep it as natural as we possibly can, for as long as we possibly can. If not, we very soon will have lost this unique opportunity forever.”

The conservation easement is designed to do what the visionaries that initiated efforts to protect the land and those that came after that worked to continue the efforts intended would define and preserve this natural area and special place. The conservation easement will protect the Owen Sowerwine property as an active and uninhibited ecological preserve for native species of vegetation and wildlife to evolve as they may, without human alteration of the land or water which supports them, and where human use is dispersed and unobtrusive and low-impact. It will protect its diverse riparian forest, wetlands, and seasonally wet areas along the Flathead River and Stillwater River that provide a variety of quality habitat with native plants, aquatic vegetation, shrubs, trees of varying ages, downed woody debris, and standing dead trees for native birds, fish, and wildlife including grizzly bear, black bear, fox, coyote, mountain lion, white-tailed deer, river otter, bull trout, westslope cutthroat trout, and many bird and small mammal, amphibian and reptile species. The conservation easement will safeguard the dynamic riverine ecosystem consisting of meandering channels with a braided pattern of waterways including abandoned channels, islands, and periodic gravel bars and sand bars characterizing the active nature of the forces shaping the area. It will protect the natural riparian and wetland vegetation

associated with the dynamic riverine ecosystem, including trees, shrubs and diversity of plants that are important to sustain the ecological integrity, healthy river function, and water quality in the Stillwater River and Flathead River and areas downstream. The incredible forested riparian habitat on the Owen Sowerwine property will continue to provide a travel corridor with foraging opportunities and security for native birds and wildlife that together with bird and wildlife habitat on adjacent public and private lands protected by government agencies and conservation easements to help provide an interconnected network of open space and quality habitat at a landscape scale. The conservation easement will also ensure public access to enjoy low-impact, dispersed use of a natural wildland area for conservation education, recreation, and research activities and protect scenic values of the area.

The conservation easement was put in place because of so many supporters including all of you. Together we did a great thing.

As Owen Sowerwine said, “we would be wise to assume that in some not distant but unpredictable future our valley will have 100,000-200,000 residents – and that additional millions will pass through every year,” – how right he was! He went on to say “On this assumption, we who live here today can help determine what this valley will be like when that day comes. You can help. Your vision may be as good as anyone else’s. Some values can be saved, if we can agree on what we want. What do you want this valley to be like when 200,000 people are living here?” (Daily Inter Lake, April 14, 1974, page 10.) This outlook and question are still relevant and true. Together we have protected a special place in the Flathead Valley for future generations. Our challenge is to continue to work together to help determine what this valley will be like in another 50 years . The question still remains - what do you want this valley to be like when 200,000 people are living here?