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*Preservation of open space in River's Edge protected scenic views of the mountains above the Big Wood River, south of Ketchum.*

*This is the 8th in a series of 12 articles about the 50th anniversary of the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands.*

By Steve Stuebner

**T**he Ketchum/Sun Valley area in Central Idaho always has had a magical way of capturing people's imagination and dreams.

It might have something to do with the unique setting: Majestic mountain peaks surrounding the narrow Big

Wood River Valley tower into the cerulean sky. The tree-lined Big Wood River glides through the valley, writing a unique signature in every bend. Even today, a deep sense of quiet prevails away from the hustle and bustle of city life.

Imagine how the Wood River Valley might have looked and felt in 1938, when New Yorker actors Jay and Helen Fassett bought 55 acres of river-front land, just south of Ketchum, for a second home.

The couple "came to the new resort at Sun Valley and spent a full month in December 1938, riding horses in the snow and vacationing here," according to an article



Actor Jay Fasset, right, photographed during the play, "Our Town," with actress Evelyn Varden in 1938. (courtesy New York Public Library collection)

in the Wood River Journal. "They fell in love with the Wood River Valley and built one of the first houses in the valley for a part-time residency, naming it River's Edge Ranch."

The Fasset's were pioneer buyers, you might say, as they invested in land when Union Pacific Railroad and Sun Valley Company were just beginning to promote the brand new Sun Valley ski area. Union Pacific Chairman Averell Harriman was actively encouraging the New York and Hollywood elite to visit his newly discovered paradise.

The Fassetts would have known Harriman through their celebrity status as prominent actors in New York theater productions. Jay Fasset was a well-known character actor in Broadway plays and movies, and Helen was a leading Broadway actress. She even acted opposite Henry Fonda in one production, according

to an article in the Wood River Journal.

In 1950, the Fassetts moved to their River's Edge home full-time and remained there the rest of their lives. Helen Fasset had one son, Robert, from a previous marriage. Bob Sherwood was a very bright, ingenious kid who loved science. He learned to fish, shoot, hunt and ride horses when he visited River's Edge as a youth. Later, he had a storied career as a World War II veteran, scientist, and inventor. Following retirement, Sherwood moved full-time to River's Edge in 1976.



Bob Sherwood, a scientist and inventor, son of Helen Fasset.

The backdrop to the Fasset family home in River's Edge is a spectacular sight. Rocky spires punctuate the steep-rising mountains that rise above the Big Wood River to the east. Wildlife ranging from moose to elk, foxes to coyotes, are frequently seen in the area. That view meant a lot to the family; they wanted it preserved in perpetuity. The property lies directly across Idaho Highway 75 from St. Luke's Wood River Medical Center.

In 1982, Sherwood donated 55 acres of open space to the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands to protect the views of that scenic mountain backdrop forever. He made the land gift in honor of his mother, Helen M. Fasset, when she was in her mid-80s at the time.

"It is with great pleasure that I am able to forward to you the Deed of Gift and Appraisal as of July 12, 1982 on nature preserve land totaling 55 acres," Sherwood wrote in a type-written letter to former Foundation Executive Director Sharon Hubler. "The deed of gift will finally confirm to you oral agreements arrived at during March and April of this year and acknowledge your willingness to accept the gift .... My mother, Mrs. Fasset, wishes to express her appreciation for the time and effort put forth by the Foundation in acquiring the property and in furthering the interests and purposes of land and habitat preservation."

Sherwood noted that the gift of land was appraised at a value of \$570,000 in 1982 dollars, a figure that was considered to be "conservative."

By this time, the Idaho Foundation for Parks and

Lands – as the state’s first private non-profit land trust – was gaining momentum and respect. The gift of the River’s Edge scenic land followed the donation of the 110-acre Reinheimer Ranch open space property to the Foundation in 1977. Reinheimer Ranch is an iconic open space property that greets people as they arrive in Ketchum on Idaho Highway 75. (See May 50th anniversary issue for details about Reinheimer Ranch at <https://idaholands.org/50th/>)

Continuing on, the Foundation launched a “buy-an inch, buy-an-acre campaign in 1980 to preserve one acre of open space on top of Dollar Mountain in Sun Valley.

In 1988, the Foundation raised funds to purchase 5.68 acres of land to acquire Union Pacific Railroad right of way property at the urging of the Blaine County Recreation District for the Wood River Trail adjacent to the Reinheimer Ranch.

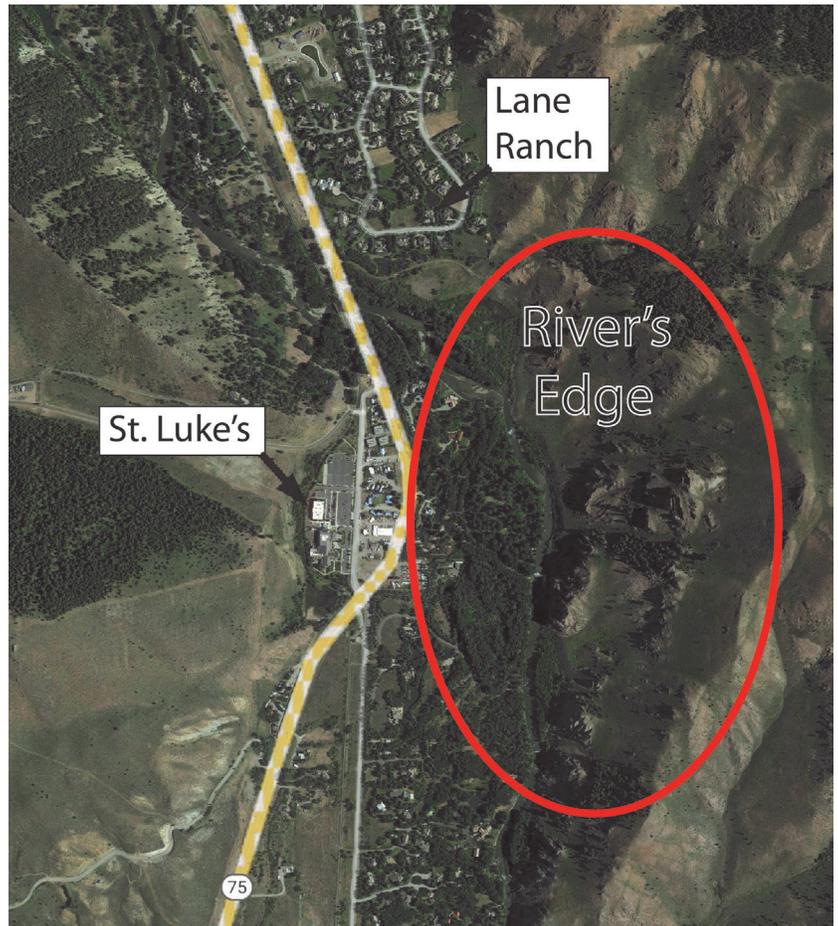
Ten years later, more land would be conserved in River’s Edge: Sherwood’s open space donation led to an 11.8-acre open space land gift to the Foundation by five property owners in the Lane Ranch area to preserve more of the mountain backdrop view on the northern end of the River’s Edge property.

In this August issue of our 50th anniversary series for the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands, we are revisiting the Wood River Valley region to highlight the Foundation’s ground-breaking conservation work here in the Ketchum/Sun Valley area.

“River’s Edge is a very, very critical part of the Wood River Valley with the river-frontage, the fishing and the spectacular mountain backdrop,” observes Larry Leasure, the Foundation’s longest-serving board member, in recalling the land acquisitions. “It all started with the land gift from Bob Sherwood, and it would grow from there. We were very pleased to work with Bob to make it all happen.”

#### **Thomas Hormel property acquired as open space**

Following the gift of land from the Fassett family, development in the Wood River Valley began to build momentum, once again, following a major recession in the 1980s. Population growth and new housing in the late 1980s and 1990s led to plans for St. Luke’s to build



*River’s Edge locator map showing open space conservation.*

the Wood River Medical Center in the late 1990s. The non-profit hospital opened in 2000.

A new subdivision called Lane Ranch – located immediately to the north of the River’s Edge property by the junction of Idaho 75 and Elkhorn Road – had been approved and annexed by the City of Sun Valley in the 1990s.

Leading up to the opening of the hospital, local residents were concerned about additional development pressure that could occur around the hospital property, changing the complexion of the natural open space next to the Big Wood River in River’s Edge.

And then Bob Sherwood decided to sell more parts of River’s Edge to help cover the growing cost of property taxes. First, he sold an 11.8-acre parcel to Thomas Hormel, an heir to the Hormel Foods family fortune, who planned to build a home on the property. And then Sherwood sold several large parcels of river-bottom land in River’s Edge to a businessman who was a major supplier to Walmart. This would become known as the Watson Creek property.

In the midst of these events, an annexation battle brewed south of Ketchum between the City of Sun Valley and the City of Ketchum. Both cities actively courted the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands to annex the Reinheimer Ranch and River's Edge open space properties into their jurisdictions. "We didn't really have a dog in that fight," Leasure recalls, "so we tried to keep a low profile."

When Thomas Hormel hired contractors to do some test-blasting on his land to ensure geological stability, that set off alarm bells with neighbors. Hormel began landscaping the property, and then started pouring the concrete foundation for a new home. A group of Lane Ranch property owners met quickly with Sun Valley real estate broker Marc Reinemann, who also lived in Lane Ranch. The Lane Ranch homeowners were worried that Hormel's new home would ruin the spectacular mountain views above the Big Wood River. "He had big plans and was going to build a big house there," said Christopher Hormel, son of Thomas Hormel who was working together with his father on the non-profit Global Environmental Project Institute at the time. Thomas Hormel also had a home in the Warm Springs area.

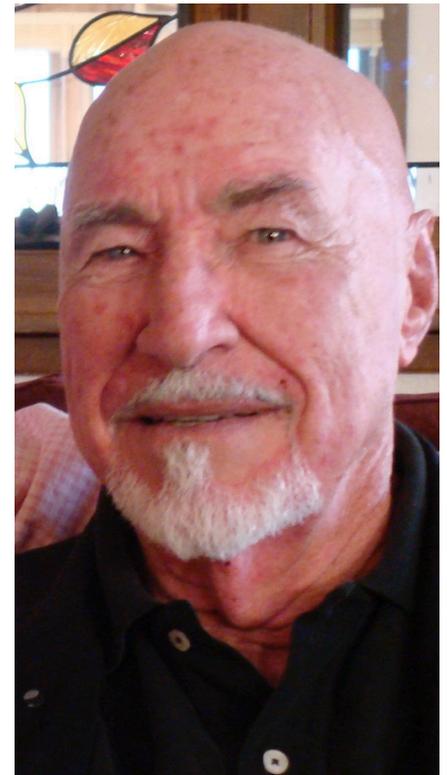
He had recently remarried. His new wife did not like living in the high-altitude location (elevation 5,700 feet), and they settled in Los Angeles instead, Christopher Hormel recalls. "Somehow, news got out that my dad was thinking about selling the property." An appraisal was done, and Reinemann quickly

pulled together five investors to purchase the land for more than \$2 million. Because of Hormel's environmental ethic, the property was sold at a discount. Reinemann also contributed to the sale by providing all of his brokerage services as an in-kind donation.

The five landowners were: George and Leslie Hume, Bill and Jeanne Landreth, Charles and Karen Bohlke, Richard and Nancy Robbins and Peter and Hope Garrett.

"I called the property owners and we put the whole deal together on a Saturday morning," Reinemann says. "Everyone kept their word."

In 1998, the property deed for the Hormel property was conveyed to the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands.



*Thomas Hormel  
(courtesy Christopher Hormel)*



*River's Edge open space property looking down at the Big Wood River flowing through the valley.*

Reinemann says it all worked out well to preserve the view and natural area. “It’s been wonderful,” he says. “It’s like we have a park behind us. It’s great to look out and see the cliffs and open space. And it’s been great working with the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands.”

Christopher Hormel ended up joining the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands Board of Directors at the time. Another Foundation board member, Dean Dickson Thornton, a retired Boeing CEO, helped the Foundation with the removal of the concrete foundation and property maintenance. Landscape architect Doug Clemens also worked on that project, Reinemann said.

“Dean became the go-to board member on the Hormel open space property,” says Sharon Hubler. “There were a lot of issues that came up with maintaining the property. He did an incredible amount of work for the Foundation. I found that to be extremely helpful.”

The land deal “worked out for the best,” Christopher Hormel says. “My father was very enthusiastic about the outcome.”

But the Watson Creek property was still at play. The landowners initially proposed a high-density subdivision, raising the hackles of neighbors. Foundation board members and Sherwood were concerned as well. Leasure recalls driving up to Ketchum to meet up with the Watson Creek landowner, urging him to reconsider.

As things turned out, Leasure ended up teaming up with Foundation Board Member Don Weilmunster to take out a loan and purchase the Watson Creek property, so a much lower-density housing development could be devised. In the end, they recouped their investment by selling three large lots for homes.

“Instead of 80 homes, we ended up with three homes in that location,” Leasure says. “That worked out much better for all concerned.”

Another nice part of the outcome is that Sherwood could see that his family’s beloved property on the Big Wood River would remain primarily open space and natural with a few homes blended into the cottonwood forest.

Throughout his career, Sherwood developed 120 new products and received 10 U.S. patents, according to



*Foundation Board Member and Boise businessman Larry Leasure stepped in to purchase land in River’s Edge to prevent a high-density development from occurring. (Courtesy Women Erased Foundation)*

his obituary in The Idaho Statesman. He served in 30 combat missions as a top turret gunner and armament specialist during World War II in the Army Air Force. His inventions were developed for companies including Doubleday, Bayuk Cigar, Ideal Toy & Novelty, Deluxe Reading Corp., and Horseman Doll Inc.

The original Fassett River’s Edge home is now owned by another family, but the property will remain intact forever.

### **Critical property for Wood River Trail**

Going back to the days when the Blaine County Recreation District was working on a paved walking and biking trail from Bellevue to Ketchum and Sun Valley, there were many crucial land acquisitions that had to occur to secure the whole railroad right of way for a non-motorized public trail. The whole effort began in 1984 and finished in 1992. Today, it’s one of the best long-distance rail-trails in the state of Idaho.



*Don Weilmunster, left, former Governor Cecil Andrus and Mary Austin Crofts at the ribbon-cutting for the Wood River Trail as it passes through Reinheimer Ranch. Rancher John Peavey (with cowboy hat) is visible behind them. (Courtesy Mary Austin Crofts)*

Mary Austin Crofts, former Director of the Blaine County Recreation District, distinctly remembers working with the Foundation and Weilmunster to find a way for the Wood River Trail to pass through the Reinheimer Ranch open space property.

Crofts remembers that Weilmunster made an immediate impression. “It was really fun working with Don. He was quite the character.”

A longtime Idaho rancher with vast private landholdings in Idaho, as well as a seasoned deal-maker on many conservation properties and easements for the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands, Weilmunster could drive a hard bargain. But if you got on his good side, he had a heart of gold.

Crofts informed the Foundation that she wanted to work with them to find a way through the Reinheimer Ranch in 1986. She recalls that Weilmunster and the Foundation put a deal together within a year’s time, raising \$100,000 to purchase .58 acres of railroad right of way property.

In a book Crofts is writing about the history of the Wood River Trail, she confesses that she actually had paving contractors out on the site one day before the property deed with the Foundation was signed. “This was how we got into trouble with Don,” she writes in the book. “He was a formidable figure, a cattleman, and I was anxious. It was my fault. I had expected the

agreement to be signed the day before construction was scheduled to begin. But, it wasn’t. We started anyway.”

Crofts goes on to explain in an interview that, “we were pushing really hard to push the pathway through everywhere. We paved when we had grant money, and we had grant money at the time.”

Who knows what Weilmunster might have said under his breath. Certainly it wouldn’t be printable. But in the end, all was forgiven!

There is a section of rails and ties left in place on the Reinheimer Ranch along the Wood River Trail. Crofts often is asked why.

“Don Weilmunster hoped to preserve some historic significance for the ranch and directed that a section of rails and ties be left so he could bring in a boxcar or caboose,” she writes in the book. “His

vision was a Wood River Trail rest stop with espresso, juice beverages and snacks. He found a caboose and came to me to get us through the conditional use permit process with the City of Ketchum for approval. We put together the application and, this time, we were the ones kicked out of town. The objections were fierce. Eventually, we set the idea aside.”

### **Buy an Inch, Save an Acre**

In 1980, the Foundation hatched an idea to raise funds and awareness about the need to preserve one acre of open space on the summit of Dollar Mountain, the prominent hill behind Sun Valley Lodge where Sun Valley Company operates ski lifts and a terrain park.

The theme was called “Buy an Inch, Save an Acre,” a joint promotion by Elkhorn at Sun Valley, business joint venture partner Johns-Mansville, and the Foundation. Hubler recalls that literally thousands of people contributed to the campaign. It started with corporations buying certificates at \$1 per square inch. She notes that there are 6 million-plus inches in one acre of land, so there was room for plenty of donations.

The grant of property from Elkhorn at Sun Valley to the Foundation, signed May 6, 1980, said, in part, that, the property “is hereby designated as an open space area, to be at all times maintained in a natural, semi-natural or landscaped state and shall at no time

be utilized for the location of any above or below-grounds structure, facility or other improvement. Such real property may be utilized by the owners thereof for hiking, horseback riding and other similar recreational uses ....”

“The intention was awareness of open space and conservation,” Hubler says. “The certificates mailed to families who contributed showed that they owned 1 inch of Dollar Mountain at Elkhorn in Sun Valley. These were popular for grandparents to buy for their children or for families to buy for birthdays and so forth, so it went really well. We had some help from Gov. John V. Evans, “Slim” Pickens and Ebersole “Eb” Gaines (Foundation Board Vice President at the time), who did a PSA on TV for us.”

In the end, no real property changed hands but the open space on top of Dollar Mountain remained in its natural state. Foundation Chair Hope Kading also played a prominent role in the campaign.

Larry Leasure looks back fondly at the work the Foundation has done in the Wood River Valley and continues to do as the long-term custodian of open space property such as River’s Edge and Reinheimer Ranch. He remembers being involved in discussions with Jack Hemingway and Bud Purdy about the renowned Silver Creek Preserve, but he feels The Nature Conservancy was the right fit for that property.

“I’m glad we’ve been able to work with a number of property owners in the Ketchum/Sun Valley area who wanted to donate their land as open space and natural areas forever,” Leasure says. “It makes me feel good looking back at those times to know we could help shape the conservation landscape. Sometimes you have to step in pretty quick to get things done, but each time, many donors stepped up to get those deals across the finish line. Ultimately, you know you’re doing



*Left to right, Don Weilmunster, Idaho rancher and Foundation board member, Hollywood actor “Slim” Pickens and Eb Gaines, a businessman and diplomat, on top of Dollar Mountain. (Courtesy IFPL)*



*A big air freestyle skier launches off a jump on Dollar Mountain. (Courtesy Sun Valley Company)*

things right when the dollars are flowing toward the preservation of nature and open space.”

*Steve Stuebner is a well-known outdoor and conservation writer.*

**Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands**

5657 Warm Springs Ave.  
Boise, Idaho 83716  
Phone: (208) 344-7141  
Email: [jan@idaholands.org](mailto:jan@idaholands.org)