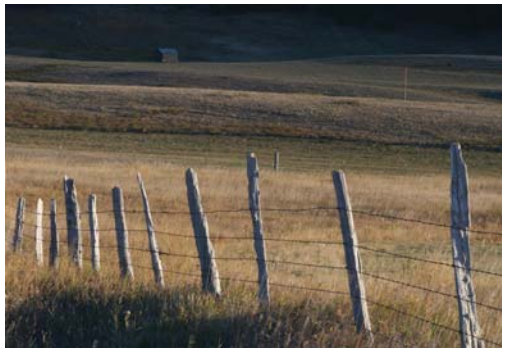


Saving the Bald Spot

Reynolds Prairie, a historic and sacred mountain meadow, is threatened by development.

By Bernie Hunhoff

SPENDING $460,000 when you barely have grocery money can cause insomnia, but the thought of condos and asphalt on Reynolds Prairie was equally unsettling for Linda Kramer and others who knew the background of the big meadow in the middle of the forested Black Hills.

The Rev. Kramer, an Episcopalian priest who was born and raised in southeast South Dakota, knew nothing about the historical prairie until 1993 when she bought a 133-acre ranch in the middle of the Black Hills, near Deerfield Lake. With the land came a few old barns and a remodeled house.

Her ranch lies on the east side of Reynolds Prairie, a 4,000-acre oasis of grass in the dense pine forest. Both visitors and longtime mountaineers enjoy the contrast between the claustrophobia of the forest and the wide-open grass and sky of the prairie. Only fences, a few ancient homesteaders' barns and some ranchers' homes lay between the land and the horizon. The dark Black Hills forest borders the grasslands in all four directions.

When Lt. Col. George Custer and his expedition toured the Black Hills in July of 1874, the regiment stopped there to let their animals rest and graze. Custer's soldiers discovered a pile of elk antlers, and dubbed the unusual meadow Elkhorn Prairie, but the name didn't last. Two years later, Joseph Reynolds settled there to try his hand at mining, and ever since the place has been called Reynolds Prairie. Joseph's great-grandson, Leonard Reynolds, is one of three ranchers who raise cattle in the quiet valley that lies about a half-hour's drive west of Hill City in Pennington County.

"Dad never knew why trees didn't grow on this land," Leonard says. "They'll grow now. The pines would have this thing covered if it were not for the cattle, so the buffalo must have grazed it hard." He regularly fights back the seedlings. "We like to cut

Photography by Stephen Gassman

The absence of trees in the Black Hills' high mountain meadows is partly attributable to grazing, but scientists also think the meadows have lighter soils than the adjacent lands that are thick with ponderosa pines.

them when they're frozen — hit them with a grubbing hoe when they're a foot high," he says.

Ranchers need about 10 acres to raise a cow and calf on Reynolds Prairie — about half the land needed across most of West River. "The winters are long, but this is excellent grass," Reynolds says.

Several years after buying the land, the Rev. Kramer established Borderlands Education and Spiritual Center, a non-profit program that brought urban teens and adults from around the country for spiritual pilgrimages. Among the instructors are community leaders, seven horses and two dogs — and the land itself.

Realizing that horses and young women have a spiritual bond, the Rev. Kramer and others developed GRADY's (Girls Responding Assertively to Defining Years) Program. "The horse is a very powerful teacher for all young people, but especially for girls," she says. "I don't know why. People have written books, trying to figure that out. One person has suggested that because the horse is not a predator — the horse is preyed upon — there is a spiritual link between the horse and young women, who usually are not predators but preyed upon.

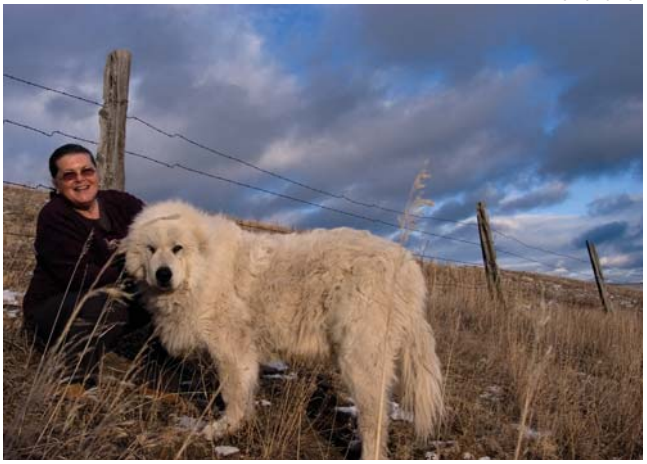
"I was following the spirit in my life and I didn't know what the end result was going to be. I still don't," she laughs. "It is a little like Noah being asked to build an ark in the desert." Unlike Noah, she has found believers who have helped Borderlands grow and prosper. When she wrote the $460,000 check, Borderlands became more than just a spiritual center; it became the frontline defender of an effort to preserve Reynolds Prairie.

The Rev. Kramer remembers the first hint that her life was to change. "I was horseback riding in the hills and I ran into Russell Eagle Bear," she says. "I knew Russell from time I'd spent on the Rosebud Reservation, so I asked what he was doing. He

explained that Reynolds Prairie is one of five especially sacred places in the Black Hills for the Lakota. Kramer began to do some research, and one of her sources was Patty Iron Cloud, who was a member of the Borderlands board. "Knowing the significance of the prairie was an unexpected benefit, but it was also a responsibility," she says. "I came here to retire, remember?"

Two years ago, she saw a "Lots For Sale" sign on a 120-acre piece of land next to Borderlands Ranch in the center of Reynolds Prairie. The property belonged to Jim Scull, a Rapid City general contractor who owns three small ranches in the Black Hills. "After I saw the sign, I was sitting on my hands, not knowing what to do. One day a county official was parked on the road. I asked what was going on and he said they were making preparations for upgrading the road since soon it would be a 'black ribbon of road' and the prairie would be a 'sea of houses.' He was delighted with the idea of the road and the houses, but I wasn't. You could have blown me over right there on the road."

Bernie Hunhoff



The Rev. Linda Kramer and her big dog, Grady, are the welcoming committee for Borderlands Spiritual Center.

The attractions of building houses on Reynolds Prairie are obvious. Flag Mountain and Hat Mountain tower over the grasslands. Just north of the big meadow is Deerfield Lake, the largest and deepest reservoir in the Black Hills and one of the West's top trout-fishing spots. The closest community is Hill City, a town of 900.

Several Borderlands board members met with Scull, and they were encouraged to learn that he is an ardent conservationist who had already protected his other three ranches from development by creating conservation easements through the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. Scull wanted to sell his Reynolds Prairie land so he could buy another property. He said he would happily sell to someone who would preserve it, and he even agreed to meet with other Reynolds Prairie landowners to discuss easements that could protect the entire meadow.

The landowners met twice in the fall and winter of 2006. "We had dinner and talked, and they were good gatherings," the Rev. Kramer recalls. "Neighbors hadn't gathered like that for a long time. But there was an overwhelming sense that development is coming and we can't do anything about it."

The Reynolds Prairie community talked about establishing easements on the land to prevent future development. But nothing was decided. One neighbor worried that easements could limit the options of their children or other future owners. Another wondered if it was selfish to discourage newcomers from enjoying the grassy oasis. The Rev. Kramer said later that she wanted to declare, "Come on, if we have subdivisions then nobody will have the way of life we have today." But she bit her tongue, realizing that if the 'sea of houses' was to be avoided, it was up to Borderlands.

Not long after that, she heard that an offer from a developer was imminent. Without waiting to consult with her board, she rushed to the realtor and bid a higher amount, $460,000. "I had no clue how we were going to pay for it," she says. "I never grew up with money, and I spent most of my life on a shoestring so this was a very big deal."

The entire budget for Borderlands was then $40,000 a year, hardly enough to pay interest and taxes on the new acquisition. She was worried that the board would be upset, but they supported the daring purchase. Farm Credit Services agreed to loan the money, based on equity from the 133 acres Borderlands already owned. The next step was to make the first year's payment.

A rancher leased the land to graze his cows, but the rent check was just several hundred dollars. After all, Borderlands had paid over $3,800 an acre for land that probably isn't worth $380 an acre to a cattleman. So the Rev. Kramer and the board appealed to a list of 700 friends and supporters of Borderlands, including Episcopalian and Presbyterian congregations that had sent youth groups. Checks began to arrive in the mailbox, and by the end of 2007 the donations exceeded $41,000 — just enough for the first payment. She hopes to raise enough each year to make the annual payment, until Borderlands finds one or more large donors willing to pay off the debt.

"I am sleeping at night now," the Rev. Kramer says, "but for awhile I wasn't. I told a lot of people that I didn't know what faith was until the last couple of years."

She says Borderlands didn't take the risk only to preserve the environment of a mountain meadow. "No, this isn't just about land," she says. "This is about maintaining sacred vows and protecting and respecting a place where people have prayed for hundreds and hundreds of years and protecting the sacred ceremonies of a people. It's just the right thing to do!"

"It's gutsy on Linda's part," says Ben Rhodd, an archeologist who serves on the Borderlands board. The Borderlands board never doubted her or the mission to preserve the prairie, but he says others in the community are skeptical. "To be honest, there are people here who want to see this area developed, and there are others who don't want development. I guess you could say this is the South Dakota persona exemplified."

Rhodd, who lives in nearby Hill City, is a member of the Pottawatomi tribe from Oklahoma. An authority on the Lakota culture, he is especially knowledgeable about the significance of Reynolds Prairie, which he says is called Pe Sla (bald place) by

Reynolds Prairie is one of three large meadows in the Black Hills. The others are Slate Prairie and Gillette Prairie. Gillette, like Reynolds, remains an open grassland, but some development has occurred at Slate, below Harney Peak.

the native people. "This is one of five sacred places on the Lakotas' annual journey, which entails the track of the path of the sun through the heavens," he says.

The other holy places include Harney Peak and Bear Butte in South Dakota, and Buffalo Gray Horn Butte (known today as Devil's Tower) and Inyan Kara Mountain in Wyoming. All four are public-owned. Only Reynolds Prairie is in private hands.

The effort to preserve Reynolds Prairie has been waged quietly, while private property near Bear Butte has become controversial due to efforts to build campgrounds, saloons and entertainment complexes for bikers attending the annual Sturgis motorcycle rally. One developer even considered naming his complex Sacred Ground. Indian leaders say the rally's rowdy parties are offensive in the shadow of the butte, and they want to establish a five-mile buffer zone around the mountain through zoning.

Scull, the house-builder, expects increasing development pressure in the Black Hills. "Land, without a doubt, in 10 years will be selling for $15,000 or more an acre, if you can sell it in five or 10 acre parcels for ranchettes. I'm building houses in the hills that are second or third homes for people who are paying $150,000 to $200,000 for their land and then putting up million dollar homes so they can bring their families here a month or two in the summer and enjoy the beauty of the Black Hills."

As a conservationist who grew up hunting the backwoods, he recognizes the irony better than most. "It's going to be a challenge for the Black Hills to figure this out," he says. "There is a lot of pressure on longtime landowners to sell." As land values increase, the owners face higher property taxes; "cashing in" becomes more attractive with every passing year.

Even if Borderlands manages to maintain its property in native prairie, Scull notes that other landowners may decide to sell. "It'll be a bloody miracle if they can preserve the place," he says.

Meanwhile, the Lakota people are re-establishing annual religious observances at the five places according to their culture's age-old calendar, which was created by lining up the constellations and the landforms on buffalo hides to show the seasons. "The result would show you where you're supposed to be at that time of year to work with the birds and animals and all of nature," Rhodd explains.

Sacred ceremonies were re-started at Harney Peak in 1987, and at Reynolds Prairie in 1998. This year, the observance at Reynolds Prairie will have extra significance. Those who attend will be wondering what it might be like to be praying in a subdivision of new homes and condominiums.

A few years ago, some North Carolina teenagers took a plane to Rapid City and then drove by car to Reynolds Prairie to attend a retreat at Borderlands. Upon arrival, one of the boys exclaimed, "We've been traveling all day and we are nowhere." His observation was music to the ears of the Rev. Kramer. She just hopes that Borderlands can manage to keep it that way.