

Mud Lake Land & Lumber: A Stroll through the Past and a Vision for the Future

From a June 2009 interview with Karl & Elaine Roosa

Walking the land with Karl and Elaine Roosa is like taking “field” courses



Karl & Elaine Roosa

in history, ecology, forestry, and economics. Though retired from long careers as teachers, they remain wonderfully instructive. And these two educators of youth have proven to be great students themselves. This is a story of how the Roosas became scholars in Mother Nature's classroom, and how they learned to cope with an ever-changing blackboard of tough assignments.

The history of the land

The Roosas' land sits just west of the Swan Mountain Range—on a valley floor

carved by glaciers. A fierce wind long ago filled the valley floor in this area with sand—creating a sandy loamy base for future agricultural production. However, farmers trying to use this land have been challenged with maintaining good water supplies where much of it was foul above 250 feet, where soil is interlaced with quicksand at shallow depths, and where water systems were constantly clogged with crystallized materials.

All around were thick forests in a variety of species that lured the logging industry at the turn of the 20th century. Numerous logging companies sprung up throughout the Swan Range region from Hungry Horse to Somers. These enterprises were interconnected with roads, railroads, and even boat ferries feeding the commercial interests of the area as well as providing essential conduits for the distribution of the valley's resources. The harvest of Pine and fir trees took a toll on the land as few nutrients from the trees went into the soil. With no ground cover there was no nutrient build up and the soil was left highly acidic.

In 1910 the Roosa parcel was owned and logged by Somers Lumber Company which eventually sold it to the Ross Wilson Family. In the early 1920s the land was utilized for a variety of farming ventures including growing grains, and raising cows and pigs. In 1940 it was sold to Ernest Wilkins who raised strawberries on 9 cleared acres, logged some, and cleared the

east 40 acres and built a house. His strawberries grew well in the acidic soil.

How the Roosas got involved

After having traveled cross country from New York in a van to find their new home out west, Karl and Elaine spent time in the Flathead Valley. The Flathead felt like home. In 1966, the Roosas bought the 80 acres of land. In 1968, they leased some of it to the Hoffert Company, a commercial Christmas tree farm company, and continued intermittent logging. They took the land back to plant 3,000 of their own Christmas trees in 1981. Growing and harvesting Christmas trees is hard work. First you prepare the ground, then plant the seedlings, then wait seven to ten years while diligently cultivating & nurturing the young trees. Then you take them to the



Karl showing an aerial history of the land



Trees, young and old

shakers to shake out all the spent needles, then to the bailer, load the trucks, and finally sell the trees—hopefully at a profit—so you can start all over again. Competition from west coast tree farmers—who could grow trees much faster—made the local tree farm business unprofitable. The Roosas eventually wholesaled their last 800 trees to the Snowline Tree Company. By November 10th of 1992, all the trees were gone. This seemed like a good time to retire.

Source: W. Curtis, 2009

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Trials and lessons on the land

Retiring for Karl and Elaine was something of a misnomer. They had a history on their land—filled with successes and hard lessons—that taught them to survive through adaptation. There was an ever-changing landscape of environmental concerns like hungry deer, bugs, and the ever-present, hardy knapweed and hawkweed that required constant maintenance. Living on the land part-time during the 1970s and 1980s, the tree farm (among other endeavors) financially augmented the Roosas' teaching careers. They did whatever it took to provide a living for their family. In the early days Karl recalls teaching for 9 months and logging in the summer while Elaine was raising the kids.

The Roosas have five kids—all educated, good kids, Karl noted. It was hard balancing work, family and tending the land which was subject to the whims of Mother Nature. In the 1990s they logged the back 40 in response to disease, wind storms, and for money. They had beautiful white pines that were attacked by something, maybe a beetle. In 1995-1996 they started to see Grand Fir with rotten cores and conches, but took as much as possible before they rotted. They harvested birch for a cabinet maker, and Karl himself planed the wood to make his own cabinets. They sold larch to a pole yard for pilings and telephone poles. They've sold wood for pulp and they've sold firewood. "Everything has been interesting," suggests Karl with a wry smile Elaine shared with him.

Stewards in the making

The Roosas saw their land as an important asset that would continue growing in value over time as it had from the beginning (early on they sold 10 acres that helped pay off

the remaining 70 acres). Their goal is to leave the land to their kids as something they can enjoy, reap financial benefits from timber harvests, and not be burdened with too much physical work. They decided to return the land to supporting trees and they worked to create a sustainable forest that would add to the land's intrinsic value.

They have planted nearly 16,000 trees on the back 40 and began planting the front 30 in 2000. They are creating and maintaining thickets that provide cover for local wildlife. They believe that by creating uneven forest stands, they will improve the health of the forests and aid in increasing and protecting a diversity of

wildlife. This past spring, a grizzly bear sow and three yearlings spent time on the property. Karl attended the Montana State University Forestry Stewardship Program to learn as much as he could about the options for and limitations of his forested land and to develop reasonable and achievable goals.

At the same time, they have brought back good habitat for many bird species. Avid birders and members of the Flathead and Pintlar Audubon Societies, the Roosas are thrilled with all the birds on their land. Western bluebirds, kinglets, thrushes, chickadees, juncos, pileated woodpeckers, great horned owls, northern flickers, and barn owls that help keep the insects in check. Elaine notes the magpie roost "it has about 100-150 of them." They have even installed raptor towers from which the hawks purge the land of rodents while receiving nutrition.

Motivation and genetics

The Roosas kids are their *raison d'être*, their motivation. Becoming purposeful stewards of their land and protecting it for future

generations of their family has cultivated their vision. And their vision has created a sustainable sanctuary for wildlife. We walk through the barn while Elaine describes the wedding their daughter insisted on having



The barn

there. It was easy to imagine.

The Roosas have seen much change in the past 45 years. "Where are all the huckleberries, the kokanee salmon, and the native trout?" asks Karl. "There used to be asparagus and mushrooms...everyone lived off and enjoyed the fruits of the land. You didn't raise a garden because it was the latest thing to do, you just raised a garden." As Karl looks across his property still envisioning a harsher life of not that long ago he explains how it could take 5 days to clear the snow after a storm.

We discussed the land around us as Karl questioned the unrealistic expectations so many people have for their land. "You have to have a realistic notion of what you have and what you are doing with it." Considering the land, Elaine added, "We're just borrowing it for a while." As we walked back toward the house from our two-hour trek around the property, Karl said quietly, "I like genetics. Mother Nature puts out a lot of seeds, and genetics favors the strong."

As educators, Karl and Elaine Roosa have themselves become lifelong learners and appreciate the journey in keeping their piece of the Flathead Valley special.



Young trees

Source: W. Curtis, 2009

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