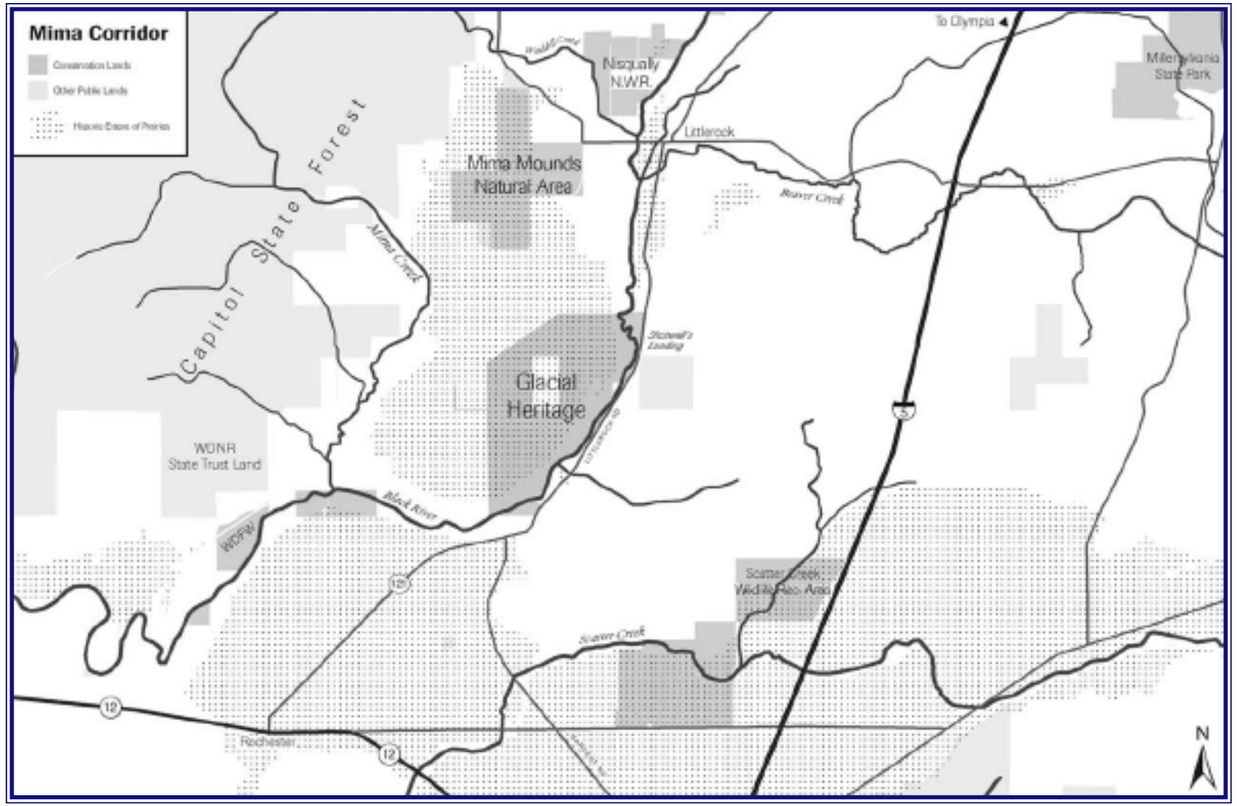
The Nature Conservancy

voices of the prairie



cover: detail of watercolor painting by J. Kerstetter

Voices of the Prairie

Landowners speak of their lives on the Mima Prairie of South Puget Sound

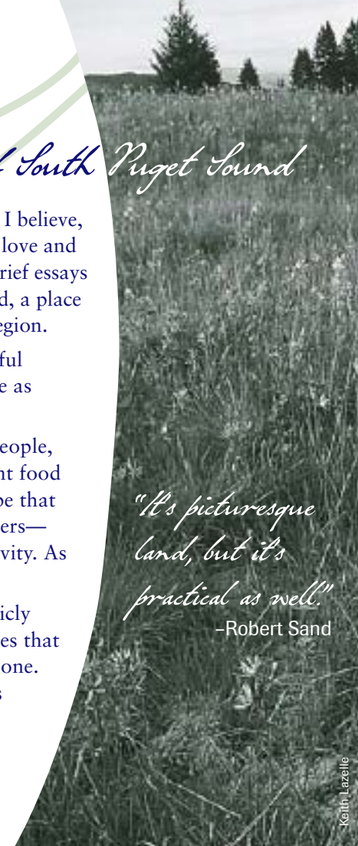
Place matters. I've heard this phrase a number of times over the years. It speaks to something I believe, too—that land is real, not abstract; that people develop a deep connection to what they know and love and steward; that we carry something of where we're from with us, always. What follows are several brief essays by people who know, love, and steward the Mima Prairie of South Puget Sound. And this is, indeed, a place that matters. It matters to people. It matters to wildlife. It matters to the ecological health of our region.

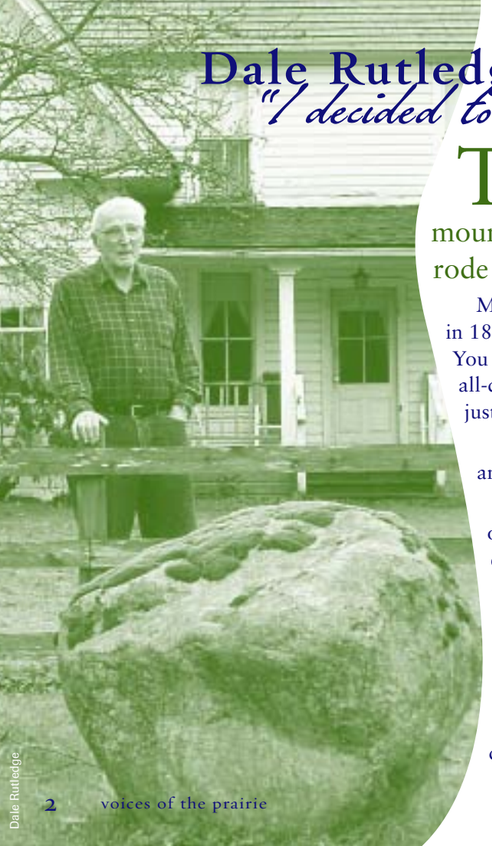
Found here are butterflies known in few other places in the world. Wildflowers with delightful names—death camas, Oregon sunshine, chocolate lily. Majestic oak woodlands. And a landscape as intriguing and mysterious as any I can imagine.

Found here also is a rich tradition of land stewardship. It started with our region's earliest people, Native Americans, who used fire to maintain the prairies so that sun-loving camas—an important food source—would thrive. It continued with the first European settlers, who found an open landscape that reminded them of the agrarian lands they had left behind. And it continues today, with landowners—some descendents of those earliest settlers—who relish the prairie's history, beauty, and productivity. As Robert Sand says, "It's picturesque land, but it's practical as well."

The Nature Conservancy is working to create a corridor of healthy habitat, connecting publicly owned lands like the Mima Mounds Natural Area Preserve with private lands—so that the species that have come to depend on this prairie landscape will not only survive, but thrive. We can't do it alone. By working collaboratively with landowners, we're finding that we all share a connection to this remarkable place, and we're finding that it truly is a place that matters.

Eric Delvin
Thurston County project manager
The Nature Conservancy, April 2006





Dale Rutledge

Dale Rutledge:
"I decided to stay"

The town of Littlerock was named after the rock that sits in my front yard. It was used as a horse-mounting stone in the mid-1800s, back when ladies rode side-saddle.

My grandfather, Thomas Elliott Rutledge, put the rock in front of his house in 1879, after asking the government if he could establish a post office here. You used to have to go from here to Olympia to get your mail and it was an all-day trip, there and back. My grandfather wanted to call this post office just "the rock," but the postal service used the name "Little Rock" instead.

My granddad was the town's first postmaster. Mail came once a week and as the postmaster, he got the privilege of mailing letters for free.

He arrived in Washington by covered wagon and was the first owner of this property. He homesteaded 160 acres, then bought some more and ended up with about 320 acres. He raised cattle and sold hay to delivery stables and horse stables.

The house I now live in was built by my grandfather in 1861. I've just always lived here. I got out of high school in 1938 and times were hard, and many of the farms were lost because of the difficult economy. Dad asked me what I wanted to do, if I would like to stay here. He said, "If you will stay and help me, I'll give it (the property) to you." So I decided to stay.

"I always liked the way the wildflowers looked carpeting the mounds in the spring."

Buttercup — Doug Harshfield

I had a sentiment for this land because it's been in my family for generations. Today I own about 250 acres.

I had three older brothers and a younger sister and we found lots to do. We used to walk through the woods and spend a lot of time down by the river, which was quite an attraction. We used to swim in it during the summers. And in the later months, the river saw a lot of activity with many, many salmon coming up.

I always liked the way the wildflowers looked carpeting the mounds in the spring. Mima especially was the most picturesque place. All those flowers were pretty in their way; even the buttercups looked nice.

I worked the farm as a child—milked the 25 or 30 jerseys that were raised on our hay and grain. We also had harvesting to do, wood to cut. That was a tough job; back then we had to cut the wood with a cross-cut saw.

One time we cut down an old fir tree that was in the woods across the street and noticed that it was all charcoal about eight inches into its trunk. We figured that the tree must have existed at the edge of the prairie back when the Native Americans used to burn the fields to keep the forest from intruding on the pastures. It probably got burned but survived, growing bark up around its charred skin. It's pretty remarkable, knowing that something you touched had such a history.

Now one of my sons lives in the house with me, and my youngest daughter built a house to live in behind my home. She had lived in the city but did not like being so close to her neighbors. She said, "I can't get used to stepping out of my door and being on someone else's yard." That's what's so nice about this property. You have quite a bit of privacy here.

Dale Rutledge, 85, owns 250 acres in the town of Littlerock and has lived there all his life.

Taylor's checkerspot | Dan Grosbail/TNC

Tess Ray:
"Wildlife becomes your closest neighbor"

My husband Robert calls me one of the "Mima pioneers" because I've lived here so long and built my own house here.

I bought my five acres in 1974. I just always wanted land, and with a pilot in the family then, I wanted property that was flat enough to land a plane on.

It didn't occur to me then that I was getting the most beautiful place on earth. There's no other place like it. After more than three decades on this property and all the sweat and blood I put into it, I feel like it's a part of me and I'm a part of it.

The property started out as just a big hay field. But I planted some trees, built my house, and put in a garden, and now there's no other place I'd rather live.

I'd say that I became a part of the land when I first began to dig my own well. I dug it with a fence post and managed to mine about an inch a day, removing dirt by the bucket-load. I made it down to 18 feet when my dad took pity on me and got a crew out to help finish it in exchange for my help with one of his projects.

Over the years I have learned that when you live on the prairie, wildlife becomes your closest neighbor and Mother Nature is your primary entertainer. We see bald eagles, red-tailed hawks, peregrine falcons, beavers, and raccoons on a regular basis.

"The mounds are ever-changing and provide images like nothing you'll see anywhere else in the world."

We get wonderful wildflowers out here. And the butterflies are spectacular.

Sometimes your wild neighbors don't have the best manners. I remember one year we had the best, beautiful crop of corn growing. Then one night we could hear a lot of noise in our corn field. In the morning, we discovered our corn had been decimated. It looked like the 'coons had had a beer party in our field. But it was so funny that we weren't even mad. They'd carefully peeled each corn husk, eaten it, and chucked the cob. It looked like they had been sitting in a big circle doing this all night.

The mounds are ever-changing and provide images like nothing you'll see anywhere else in the world. Robert likes to tell of a time when a light fog rolled in; it colored the dew on the camas in such a way that it created a purplish hue that floated right above the mounds. "I'll never forget that," he told me.

I've raised four kids on this property and I think it's made a big difference in their lives. They know where broccoli comes from. When they were bored, they could ride their horses on the prairie for hours on end. When they were growing up here, they thought they wanted the big-city life. It's hard because you are isolated. But now that they're grown, they don't like city life so much and want to come home to the country.

Robert and I will stay here forever. I can see us both growing old and dying on this land.

Tess, 55, and Robert Ray, 48, own five acres on Gate Road Southwest. Tess has lived there since 1974 and Robert joined her nine years later.

Western bluebird | Roderick Gilbert

Morris Dodge:
"The property was my childhood playground"

My grandfather, Robert Bruce Dodge, arrived on Mima Prairie in 1853 and was one of the town's original settlers. He had about 1,800 acres stretching across this vast territory down to where I am now on Gate Road.

I own 69 acres, just a fraction of what my grandfather owned. It's the last piece in the Dodge name of what used to be an enormous estate.

I was born and raised here but left when I was 20. I headed to California to become a pharmacist, but got into an accident and lost my right leg. That steered my life in a different direction, to the prosthetic limb industry. I ran my own artificial limb company in Seattle for almost 40 years.

Even when I didn't live here, I'd come back to visit as much as I could. And I think I always knew in the back of my mind that I'd be back, because this is my family's legacy.

My dad lived here all his life. He raised cattle on the land and had taken over a milk route that went out to the neighboring town of Bordeaux, to deliver milk to the loggers. I'd go with him and we'd drive over in a model-T Ford pickup.

Even though I was a kid, I had work to do here. That's just how farm life is. I would mainly help milk the cows. We'd get to the barn early, around 5 or 6 a.m., and since there was no electricity then, we milked by lantern light.

We'd put the milk through a strainer and store it in 10-gallon cans. We used the creek to cool the milk, because, of course, we didn't have refrigerators back then. We'd put the cans in the creek to cool them overnight. It was my job to stir the milk to keep it from separating. I used a mixing tool that I was supposed to take out and hang up afterwards so that we could close the lids to the milk cans. But once I left the mixer in overnight, and the next morning when I checked the milk, holy smoke, there was a trout about six-inches long in the can! I fished it out and told my dad, and he said, "That's OK, those old loggers won't know the difference."

The property, with its wide, open fields and adjoining woods, was my childhood playground. I'd run around the farm with my cousins who'd come from the city to spend a couple of weeks out here. We'd play Robin Hood or the French Foreign Legion. We'd get out our bow and arrows and hide in the tree house. I even shot a bear out here when I was a kid.

My family's history runs throughout this land. The barn was built in 1870 and the family's farmhouse was moved from the nearby town of Gate and has since been restored. Even the old water wheel in my front yard has family history—my uncle bought it in 1950. But the wheels were broken by the time I got it, so I had to totally rebuild it.

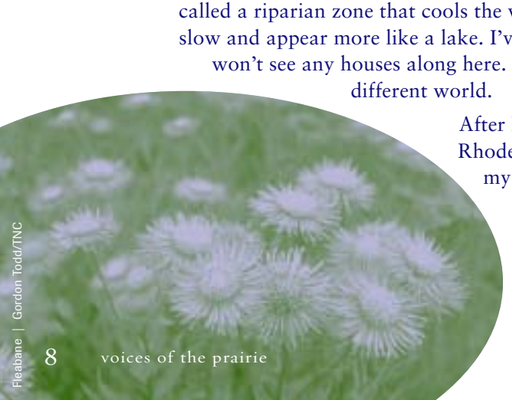
My two sisters and I inherited the property from my father, and I bought out my sisters' portions in 1988. Now my son Gary owns the adjoining 10 acres. He loves the place as much as I do.

Morris Dodge, 80, owns 69 acres on Gate Road Southwest. Morris' grandfather was an original Littlerock pioneer. Morris grew up on the property he now owns.

Margaret Rader: *"I knew I had to come home"*

When I was 12, my family and I moved from Vancouver to Rochester, a rural community just south of Olympia. We came to take over the 100-acre farm from my grandfather, who had owned the property since 1920.

The farm is a combination of pastures and wild lands. The Black River coils around our property, carving it into an oxbow. Towering Douglas-firs and cedars, majestic Oregon ash, and shrubs such as willows, flowering red osier-dogwood, and western ninebark line parts of the river to create a lush ribbon of habitat called a riparian zone that cools the water. This is my favorite part of the river, where the waters run deep and slow and appear more like a lake. I've gone canoeing and swimming in the river, and even fished in it. You won't see any houses along here. Some areas are so quiet and peaceful, it's like you've gone to an altogether different world.



Fleabane | Gordon Todd/TNC

After I grew up, I moved away from Rochester to live in several places, including Rhode Island, Portland, Oregon, and Berkeley, California. Then, in 1992, when my husband Keith and I retired, we decided to return.

I knew I had to come home. It hit me one day as I was looking out across the pasture: I realized that most people don't have an opportunity to live in a place like this. When I step out into the yard and look out over the fields and up at the trees, particularly the dramatic oaks with their gnarled limbs, I realize how very fortunate I am to be able to live here.

"The wildlife is so abundant, it will touch almost all of your senses."

The wildlife is so abundant, it will touch almost all of your senses. You hear the high-pitched cries of the red-tail hawks and see harriers swooping gracefully over the pasture. A quartet of deer comes through the yard all the time. It's very common to see ospreys and raccoons, opossum and river otters playing nearby. And the coyotes make quite a bit of noise.

The meadows in the spring fill with wildflowers, such as chocolate lilies with their delicate purple blooms and bleeding hearts with their deep pink dangling blossoms.

My brother Pete, Keith and I own the property and have a conservation easement, so that we can pass the farm onto our heirs but still preserve its vital function of protecting the river, land, and wildlife. The easement allows us to determine what sorts of activities can take place on our farm in the future. We have allowed for farming, grazing, and light recreational use such as horseback riding.

We also participate in an enhancement program that allows us to fence a large buffer along the river and plant it with trees to cultivate a healthy riparian zone.

Pete, Keith, and I are concerned about preservation and wanted to conserve the values of this property even if our heirs want to sell it. We have ensured that this critical ecosystem is protected long after we're gone.

Margaret Rader, 70, owns 100 acres on Holm Road Southwest with her husband Keith and brother Pete. After living on the farm as a child, Margaret returned in 1992.

Red-tailed hawk | Roderick Gilbert

The South Sound Prairies:
A landscape shaped by nature and people

By Drew Crooks and Caroline Marschner

The prairies and oak woodlands of South Puget Sound are like no other place in Western Washington. Here, in a part of the world known for its carpets of coniferous forests, is an open, sun-drenched landscape—an undulating grassland awash each spring in a rainbow display of wildflowers. Butterflies found in few other parts of the world—the Mardon skipper, Taylor's checkerspot, and silvery blue, to name a few—dance across these lands. Meadowlarks and western bluebirds add to the display. Elk forage here. And while these prairies may seem out of place in rainy Western Washington, they tell a story about our geologic and human history.

The prairies were formed by the retreat of the Vashon glacier 14,000 years ago, which created a large, gravelly outwash plain—droughty, porous soil not particularly hospitable to conifers. Ultimately, however, Douglas-fir would have filled in these lands were it not for the practices of Native Americans, who burned the prairies to keep the firs at bay and maintain the camas and other wildflowers they harvested.

Native Americans also took advantage of the prairies' location near the Black and Chehalis rivers and adjacent forests. Villagers who lived along these rivers could easily fish and use the resources of the plains, forests, and oak woodlands without having to travel long distances. And with its substantial river system, the area provided an important trading corridor for the region's earliest people.

Not surprisingly, this open landscape and river system attracted the region's first white settlers as well. By the early 19th century, the Hudson's Bay Company established a series of trading posts throughout the Northwest, up to what is now Canada, and used some of the prairies for outstations. In the 1840s and 1850s, pioneers, eager to re-create their farm life and intimidated by the old-growth forests in other parts of the region, began making their homes on the South Sound prairies.

Spring camas | Jeff Crampton/TNC

This process was encouraged by the passage of the Donation Land Act in 1850, which gave these pioneers the right to own up to 320 acres (or 640 to married couples) after cultivating the land for four years. In the South Puget Sound, the act was a precursor to the Medicine Creek Treaty, signed in 1854; the region's Indians sold most of their land to the U.S. government in exchange for reservation lands, payments in non-cash items, and recognized rights to traditional hunting and fishing grounds.

By the 1890s, logging had dramatically transformed the region, and pioneers were less interested in burning the prairies to maintain them. In fact, residents in the late 19th century and early 20th century looked down on this practice after prairie burns touched off massive forest fires. But by then, these natural and human forces had helped to create a flora and fauna unique to Western Washington.

Over the next several decades, these ecologically rich prairies were increasingly lost to development and invasive species. And today, with only 3 percent of this historic landscape remaining, heroic efforts are underway to protect and restore them, efforts that are beginning to bear fruit. Ecologists, volunteers, and landowners have worked tirelessly over the past 10 years to remove invasive species and restore native grasses, oaks, and other habitat. And as a result, western bluebirds are finding new homes in bluebird boxes, safe from starlings and exposure. Hundreds of acres of Scotch broom have been removed. And camas are proliferating once more.

Drew Crooks is the Lacey Museum's historian.
Caroline Marschner is The Nature Conservancy's Mima Mounds steward.

Robert Sand:
"It's picturesque land, but it's practical as well"

My wife Dolores and I wanted to raise our five kids on a farm so that they would learn how to work, learn responsibility. We thought this was a good location because it was close to the Deschutes Animal Clinic, where I worked as a veterinarian for 40 years.

Silvery blue | Keith Lazelle

When we first arrived in 1963, we bought almost 55 acres for $33,800. I just saw it and thought it was a good buy.

My wife had me buy an additional 10 acres in the early 1970s because the neighbor was going to bulldoze the trees that buffered our property. So now we own 65 acres. We chose to settle in Littlerock because Dolores was from Tucson and I was raised in Nebraska, so this was a good compromise.

There's just nothing quite like farm life to teach responsibility. You're invested in the land in a way that is unparalleled to other types of work. Having my kids work on the farm taught them a high level of responsibility and also about the capitalist system. They'd do chores, of course. They helped set irrigation, haul manure, feed the cows. And when they were between eight and 10 years old, I'd give them each two cows—one to raise and one to show and then sell at the fair, to make a little money. They also made money selling corn, pumpkins, and some beef cattle.

"There's just nothing like it."

I'd say our plans have paid off—all the kids are now responsible adults, with good, respectable jobs. One daughter is a veterinarian at the Deschutes Animal Clinic. A son is a manufacturing engineer and another is a physician's assistant. And my youngest daughter, who lives in Long Beach, Calif., is in charge of the space program for Boeing.

Now that we're getting older, our son Mark has taken over the responsibilities of the farm. We're cultivating about four acres, harvesting garlic, pumpkins, sweet corn, and a few beef cows. It's not a big operation, but it's steady and brings in several thousand dollars a year, and it's nice to see our legacy live on.

Our property's best feature is the creek that winds through it. We have 3,800 feet of creek frontage, and it includes a small, picturesque waterfall.

The stream provides habitat for all sorts of wildlife. Look out at any given time and you're sure to see great blue herons soaring in and out of the tall grasses. You'll often see river otters from the Black River, and beavers damming up the creek. We also get quite a few deer.

Black River | Keith Lazelle

If you just go out on my front porch and look at the waterfall, you don't have to wonder why I like living here. We have two twisting, towering black walnut trees that are over 100 years old right next to the house. My upstairs bedroom window frames the Black Hills, and when I look out that window in the fall and the frost hits all those orange pumpkins, it's quite a sight. Or when the garlic starts maturing in June and July, you can see a patchwork of different colors and heights, all the different vegetation. It's picturesque land, but it's practical as well. There's just nothing like it.

Robert Sand, 74, owns 65 acres on Littlerock Road Southwest. He's owned the property since 1963.

Stories of place: *Native oral history and the origin of the Mima Prairie*

By Linda Storm

Artist Paul Kane painted the prairie in 1847 and recorded the name "Mima," which was given to him by an Indian man. According to linguist M. Dale Kinkade, no word or term "Mima" exists in the language of the Upper Chehalis, the people who lived on these prairies prior to European settlement. Chinook Jargon words "miami," which means "down river," or "memaloose," which means burial or grave, are closest.

The Upper Chehalis name for this prairie is *nsq'wanxtn* or *nix·q'wa'nxtən,* meaning "place to dry hides on a frame" or "stretching the hide." Native oral history about battles with a giant animal relate to this name. Oral traditions also suggest that Mima mounds formed after a time of great floods, as Thelma Adamson noted in her 1934 book, *Folk-Tales of the Coast Salish*:

> *After the water fell and the earth dried off, the ground was found to be covered with dried [fossil] whales. The earth was just like new and the people could begin all over again.*

George Saunders, of Nisqually and Cowlitz descent, whose stories were recorded in 1925, tells of a battle with a giant animal at Grays Harbor who was killing all the people.

> *Eagle carried two men on his back and flew to Westport to kill the big animal. The animal came out in the moonlight ... When it lay down to rest it spread itself out over the whole bay. It lay there for five days and then it seemed to become aware that the men were there to kill it. Its tail was very large and shaped like that of the beaver. When it lifted the tail and hit the water, the bay became dry. That was the way it had drowned the other people so now it tried to drown the two men ... They skinned it. The animal was so large it took them five days to skin it. They wanted to find a place to stretch the skin so that it would dry. They carried it around and finally came to the prairie now called Mima. There they stretched the skin. The prairie is called "the stretching hide."*

Mima Mounds by Paul Kane. The Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto

This story suggests a tsunami occurred at Grays Harbor with the image of the giant animal's tail drying up the bay and then drowning all the people. That Mima prairie was the place where the symbolic giant animal's hide was stretched to dry suggests a link between the tsunami at Grays Harbor and the Mima prairie almost 33 miles inland. Images of mounds as whale bodies left after floodwaters receded further connect salt water to Mima mounds. And spreading a dark hide over Mima prairie could symbolize the thick, black layer of prairie soils.

Other "Battle with a Giant Animal" stories originate inland and upriver. Peter Heck, an Upper Chehalis, tells of the son of an old man who battles a giant mountain lion, *waq'e'sxenasxena*. After he kills and skins the lion, the young man packs the skin and carries it "to all the different prairies," looking for "one large enough to allow him to stretch the skin out," Adamson wrote.

> *Finally he found one that was large enough. And there he spread the skin out over practically the whole of the prairie. That's why we call this prairie nix·q'wa'nxətən (where a hide is spread out to dry). The prairie is now known as Mima Prairie.*

Linda Storm is an ethnobotanist who studies the cultural history, traditional environmental knowledge and ecosystem management practices of the First Peoples of Western Washington prairies.

Tom Westbrook:
"We see all kinds of wildlife here"


Western grey squirrel | Roderick Gilbert

As a boy, I would play among the earthen mounds that pepper my ranch. These formations ranged from a few to several feet high, and they made for great hiding places and forts when it snowed.

Although I'm not sure what created the mounds, I do not believe prehistoric gophers were responsible. I imagine it was the result of some sort of glacial activity. When I dug into them, I found that they contained the darkest, richest soil I'd ever seen, with rocks the size of a quarter.

My folks bought this property, called Black Hills Ranch, in 1952. We moved out here in 1961, when I was 14, although we used to come out every weekend from the time I was five. They owned 2,380 acres and operated a farm for race horses. My family also ran a lumber mill and grazed 250 head of cattle.

The property borders Capitol State Forest and is mostly woodlands, with some of the most crazy, contorted oak trees. As a child I would often ride through the forest on "Chap," my father's chestnut quarter horse. My friends and I would pack a lunch and take off in the morning and return home late at night.

I eventually left Black Hills Ranch to attend the University of Oregon and later Willamette University, where I obtained a law degree. My career has spanned law, a non-profit trade association, and the wood products industry, which I continue to work in to this day as co-founder and CEO of the World Wide Wood Network.

My wife Claudia and I moved back to the ranch in 1986 and today we own 150 acres. Things look similar to how they were when I was a teenager, although it's not quite as private as it used to be with so many new houses going up nearby. And the invasion of Scotch broom is something else.

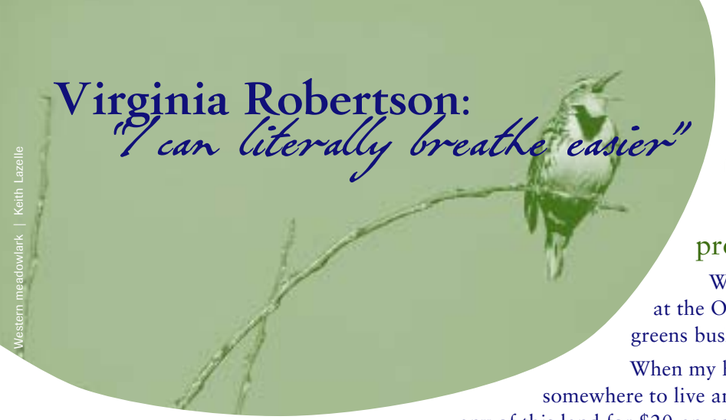
Claudia and I enjoy working from home as often as we can, which we're able to do because we can telecommute. We have the most beautiful, unobstructed view of Mount Rainier, and in the evening, the view of the Black Hills in silhouette is spectacular. We see all kinds of wildlife here, including coyotes, pheasants, grouse, and partridge. We've had bald eagles, elk on occasion, and we've even seen cougars. And the wildflowers that grow here, such as camas and buttercups, draw four or five varieties of butterflies.

My children and now grandchildren have played all over this property, retracing the steps of my childhood. The screensaver on my laptop shows my granddaughter when she was two years old catching a trout in the creek here. It's the same creek I used to fish from when I was a boy.


Keith Lazelle

Tom Westbrook, 59, owns 150 acres on Bordeaux Road Southwest.

Virginia Robertson:
"I can literally breathe easier"



Western meadowlark | Keith Lazelle

"The continual gentle breezes of the prairie provide the cleanest, freshest air."

The prairie has not only been our home for 48 years, it has also provided our livelihood.

We've harvested honey here for 28 years and sold it at the Olympia Farmer's Market. We also ran a wholesale greens business for 30 years.

When my husband Jack and I got married, we just needed somewhere to live and this area was affordable. You could have bought any of this land for $20-an-acre back then. Our five acres cost $5,000 and included an old house that we tore down. We salvaged the timber from the house and used it to build our existing home five years later. We thought the property held tremendous value. I also liked that people didn't live too close together.

We've been able to run our own businesses from what grows on the prairie. Some years we produced over 30,000 pounds of honey. At one point we managed close to 200 hives and four employees. The bees make the honey from the mish-mash of flowers that grow here every spring, such as Indian plum, the snowberry that blooms in late May, and the camas. We'd keep the hives on nearby land that we leased from the timber company.

When we ran the greens business, every day Jack would pick brush—mostly salal, but also beargrass, fern, huckleberry, and Oregon grape—then bunch, weigh, and pack it for the wholesale market. The brush was used as fillers for fresh flower bouquets. Eventually we paid immigrant workers to pick and bundle the brush.

Our children and grandchildren used to run around all over the prairie. When it snowed, our kids and the neighbors' kids would take their sleds down to this one slope and they'd spend hours out there. Jack also took the children deer hunting when they were teenagers.

The prairies provide good soil for gardening, and over the years I have cultivated all varieties of vegetables and fruit. Right now I'm growing potatoes, carrots, peas, beans, corn, raspberries, and garlic. Some years I grew strawberries. Things grow pretty well out here, but you can't plant anything that's frost-susceptible too early because there's always a late frost. You have to wait until the first part of June.

You'll see an abundance of wildlife on this property. We see quite a few birds, including several varieties of hawks, doves, Steller's jays, and meadowlarks. We see our share of raccoons and opossums as well.

Living on the prairie means I can literally breathe easier. I have lung troubles, and I imagine that I'd be sputtering and coughing all the time if I lived in the city. The continual gentle breezes of the prairie provide the cleanest, freshest air.

My favorite time of year is the springtime when the flowers bloom. It's something else, to see the blue camas blanketing the fields. Even the plain, old buttercups are beautiful.

Virginia Robertson, 69, and Jack Robinson, 77, own five acres on Southwest Mima Road. They have lived on their property since 1957.

Eric Delvin

Prairie camas | Dennis Plank

Michelle Blanchard:
"I am surrounded by a subtle and understated beauty"

I chose my property in this rural community south of Olympia because I wanted a place for horses, and this open grassland offered an ideal setting.

Since then, I have discovered that I am surrounded by a subtle and understated beauty. This landscape's charm whispers to you; you have to have your heart and mind open to be able to experience it.

The magical moments often sneak up while I am tending to the land, which is covered with mysterious, symmetrical mounds. One day I was out back pulling Scotch broom and thought, what's that noise? It was bees. Hundreds of thousands of bees. The whole prairie was humming.

Almost every species of raptor soar above my property. One red-tailed female hawk I named Broom Hilda calls this home. She's huge, brave, smart, and highly opinionated. She's chased off two eagles that easily outweighed her.

I've trained a family of chestnut-backed chickadees to eat peanuts out of my hand. And with a degree in biology, I've been studying the meadowlarks that flutter through here.

Indian paintbrush | Doug Harshfield

Rufous hummingbird | Roderick Gilbert

Since I moved to this property in 1992, the diversity of species I've encountered has increased tremendously. Every year I get something new or unusual. Recently I noticed California quail on my property.

The prairie comes alive with color in the spring. When the camas is in bloom, it is a sea of blue. The season also brings a colorful carpet of death camas, ladies'-tresses orchids, chocolate lilies, and violets—all wildflowers that are hard to find any other place on earth. These wildflowers attract uncommon varieties of butterflies, such as the delicate silvery blues.

I've never felt so attached to the land like I do here. When I'm sitting in the middle of my property on one of the mounds with the camas in bloom and the bees buzzing, I just have a feeling of being home. Not just home, but I sense my connection with the earth through the ages. I just feel like a part of it.

Michelle Blanchard, 52, owns five acres on Prairie Parkway in Littlerock.

"Since I moved to this property in 1992, the diversity of species I've encountered has increased tremendously."

The mission of The Nature Conservancy is to preserve the plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and water they need to survive.

The Nature Conservancy

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