

Family land

Los Molinos ranch set to become a preserve

By **JENN KLEIN**
Staff Writer

LOS MOLINOS — For almost 50 years, the Hamilton family raised cattle on their ranch about 20 minutes from Chico.

The land is now vested with their family heritage. At the top of a small crest in the middle of the property lies a memorial to the original owners of the ranch, Fred and Barbara Hamilton, marked simply with the words "in loving memory of the cowboy and the lady."

From this vantage point in the middle of the property, it's only possible to see the outline of a fence and mountains in the distance — and absolutely no power lines. On a spring day,

■ See **LAND**, 8A



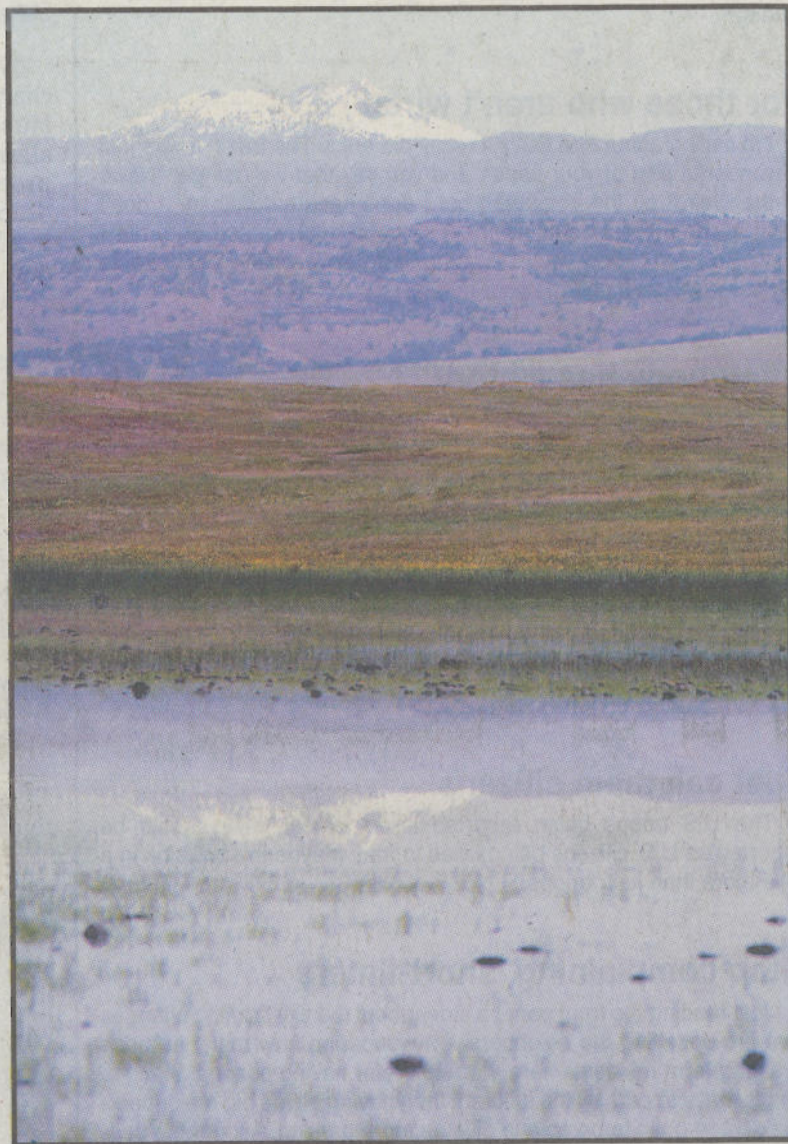
BACKGROUND: A cattle ranch in Los Molinos is home to very rare and large wetlands.

WHAT'S NEW: Chico's Epick Homes is in the process of establishing a conservation easement to preserve 400 acres. About 80 acres of the preservation are intended to offset the development of a proposed subdivision in Chico.

WEDNESDAY: A look at the proposed 178-acre development in north Chico called Mountain Vista/Sycamore Glen.

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Fred Hamilton
current owner of the ranch



Photos by Bill Husa/Enterprise-Record

Land at the Hamilton Ranch is full of vernal pools (above) and wildflowers (far left). The area has been in the Hamilton family for almost 50 years. The original owners, Fred and Barbara Hamilton, are buried in the middle of the property (top left) in a grave marked with the words, "in loving memory of the cowboy and the lady." Now, 400 acres of the land have been designated for a conservation easement, which will preserve the land from development. About 80 acres of this land will offset land in a proposed subdivision in north Chico.

LAND

From 1A

wildflowers surrounding the nearby vernal pools and swales — seasonal depressional wetlands — in concentric circles make up an artist's palette of light blues, aquas, algae greens, and yellows.

Father and son developer team Pete and Chris Giampaoli first saw the Hamilton ranch from an airplane when they were out looking for signs of large vernal pools. Chris Giampaoli, senior vice president of Epick Homes, said after the two had flown all over northern California looking for a site to set up for conservation, the ranch — which contains some of the largest vernal pools in the region — instantly stuck out.

"It was exactly what we were looking for," Giampaoli said. "It's one of the best sites in northern California we could find."

Part of the family ranch is now a 400-acre preserve and conservation easement that's being established by Epick Homes. About 80 acres of it will offset a large development proposed for northeast Chico if the project is approved.

"It is a way to preserve into perpetuity a piece of the ranch that our parents always loved," Fred Hamilton, the current owner of the ranch, wrote in a letter. "Our mother, Barbara, always loved that particular 400 acres because of the wild pansies and other flowers in the spring. Our father, Fred, loved it because he could sit on the hill and watch the cows."

In the 12 years Kevin Derby has spent as a biologist and environmental consultant, he said the Hamilton ranch is one of the nicest he's ever seen for vernal pool habitats.

Derby, a senior project manager for Foothill Associates, which provides environmental consulting, landscape architecture, and planning services, said biologists rarely see vernal

On the Internet

For a slideshow of pictures at Hamilton Ranch, visit chicoer.com

pools the size of the ones on the Hamilton ranch, which are so large they are known as the "Langier Lakes" on a U.S. Geological Survey topographic map. As well as the large vernal pools, the 400-acre site also has 95 acres of wetland habitat.

Derby said once a property is a conservation easement, it's protected by a conservation and land management plan forever. He said while the Hamilton ranch, a working cattle ranch, would have likely remained a cattle ranch, as generations turn over someone could sell the land.

"You just never know," Derby said.

The conservation and land management plan means the land can't be developed and the wetlands can't be filled, but it allows the Hamiltons to still keep ownership of their land. The management plan limits cattle grazing to where it's already taking place.

Derby said the Hamiltons were already following good ranching practices that preserved the land. He said the cattle grazing is actually good for the wetlands because the cattle eat the non-native grasses that could otherwise clog up the pools.

The agreement stipulates no structures or new roads can be built and no motor vehicles are allowed unless for a ranching purpose or normal use of ranch. It also sets up an endowment fund for annual monitoring of the site to make sure the rules are being followed and the land is intact.

"We felt that by putting a conservation easement in place it would allow us to maintain the lifestyle that we have chosen, that is ranching," Hamilton wrote.

Brian Mayerle, a senior biologist with Foothill Associates said the quality of wetlands and the amount and variety of



Bill Husa/Enterprise-Record

Cattle graze at the Hamilton Ranch in Los Molinos in April.

native species on the ranch is particularly high.

"This is as good as it gets," Mayerle said.

Vernal pools happen when the volcanic soil forms an impervious surface, creating "bath tubs," said Derby. Those bath tubs fill up with water seasonally and create a new habitat, a home for new species, some of which are very rare.

When the vernal pools are full of water in the spring it produces rings of wildflowers. But in the summer, the pools dry and "without a well-trained eye, you'd barely know," said Derby.

The Hamilton ranch is home to four rare invertebrate species and three rare plants, Mayerle said. He said one of the species is the very rare Conservancy fairy shrimp, a small crustacean classified on the Federal Endangered Species register. Other species include vernal pool tadpole shrimp and vernal pool fairy shrimp, both listed as threatened.

The Giampaolis found the conservation when looking for a way of substituting the impacts to wetlands in a proposed a 178-acre development in north Chico called Mountain Vista/Sycamore Glen.

Derby said the wetlands and vernal pools on the Chico site — which is close to Pleasant Valley High School — are very disturbed because of the

amount of off-road, illegal dumping on the site and because it is surrounded on three sites by development. Derby said even though proposed plans for the development preserve half of the wetlands on the property and aim to create and rehabilitate additional wetlands, more was mitigation was needed. He said while 400 acres are in the entire preservation, consultants picked 80 acres of the habitat most like the habitats being impacted in Chico. The rest of the conservation easement will be available to help with the mitigation of other developments.

Giampaoli said if even if plans for the Chico development were to completely fall through, Epick Homes will still establish the preserve.

Epick Homes is also working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to set up the preserve, Giampaoli said. He said the group is now waiting for final response from the fish and wildlife service — which told Giampaoli the preserve was the best site it's seen in northern California — and hopes to have the paperwork finished in the next three to four weeks.

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