



The Alberta ECOLOGICAL *Gifts* PROGRAM

Margaret and Frederick

VAN DE PITTE

A Conservation Easement in Northern Alberta Protecting a Part of the Boreal Forest

"... I think we have to rethink the 'idea' of land. In the past, our culture has seen natural land as wasted or as a commodity to be used. I grew up on a farm in a natural setting and I watched it taken over and converted to strip malls. But we have a new legal paradigm for land now. One that recognizes the value of land in its natural state. We all need to see that natural land has an integrity of its own, as well as being the world we rely on. Then we will give proper place to conservation."

— Margaret Van De Pitte

"We actually had to follow bear tracks to get through the snow the first time we saw it."

A treasured family refuge and 593 acres of prime wildlife habitat have been protected in perpetuity thanks to the combined efforts of landowners Margaret and Frederick Van De Pitte, the Nature Conservancy of Canada, and the Ecological Gifts Program of Environment Canada.

Located on the southern edge of Alberta's boreal forest, the Van De Pittes' property consists of a rich mix of pristine forest stands ranging from aspen and balsam poplar to white spruce, tamarack and black spruce.

The Van De Pitte property is home to abundant wildlife and saturated with small marshy areas, bogs and fens. It is located in Northern Alberta, a region where land use is intensifying and the landscape is increasingly affected by the developments that accompany industrialization.

In 1966, Margaret and Frederick moved from Los Angeles to teach at the University of Alberta

in Edmonton. At that time, they both felt that they needed more contact with nature. "You really learned what a city is like in Los Angeles," Frederick recalls. "You couldn't breathe the air. You're on the seashore for heaven's sake and you couldn't see it!"

Looking for land and realizing that experiencing nature was a necessity for them, the Van De Pittes finally found what they wanted seven years later. "It was the wildest place we had seen outside of the National Parks," says Margaret. "We actually had to follow bear tracks to get through the snow the first time we saw it."

The property became a retreat virtually every weekend for the rest of their working lives. Walking, snowshoeing and birding, and sharing these experiences with their daughter, they fixed up a small homestead cabin made of hand-hewn



logs and plastered natural clay. The Van De Pittes also used this quiet and peaceful place to do some of their professional work.

Margaret and Frederick have let natural succession take place over most of the property. The small part of the land that was cleared in times past continues to produce hay, with the help of a neighbour. The wildlife corridors in and around these cultivated areas have been identified and are being improved. Hunting is not allowed, and Ducks Unlimited Canada has developed a wetland project on the property.

Today, almost forty years later, the Van De Pittes' connection to nature and to this property remains undiminished.

They still enjoy exploring and learning about their land, and simply sitting, listening and watching the parade of wildlife. Moose, elk, foxes, coyotes, bears, wolves and lynx call this land home as do northern hawks, great grey and great horned owls. Hearing boreal chorus frogs and Canada toads in spring, along with the songs of rose-breasted, pine and evening grosbeaks, kinglets and goldfinches, are like music to this family's ears.

In 2005, in order to preserve their cherished land for the future, the Van De Pittes also decided to place a conservation easement on their property

that would be held by the Nature Conservancy of Canada. "We love our land," reflects Margaret. "Our philosophy is 'Let it be.' If someone wants to replace the cabin with a modest alternative that blends into the landscape, and continue to hay the cultivated area, that's OK. But no more clearing of the land. No more development."

Despite their concerns about the potential long-term effects of surrounding development, the Van De Pittes feel they have done what they can to conserve the natural values and ecological diversity of their property by putting a conservation easement on their land. "We have a good written agreement, and we don't have any concerns about the property as long as the Nature Conservancy is there."

With this easement, the Van De Pittes have also made a significant contribution to preserving the ecology of the surrounding area.

"Sometimes you have to do something yourself," observes Frederick, speaking for both the Van De Pittes. "You watch decisions and policies and they annoy you, and you begin to think more constructively. The conservation easement has been a win-win situation for us. We haven't lost anything with respect to the use of the property. We got a tax

break through the 'Ecogifts' program. And the feeling that we've preserved the habitat for wildlife and for the future has been an important benefit for us personally."

Since 2005, following her own growing interest in land conservation, Margaret Van De Pitte has also gone on to work on the Boards of the Alberta Land Trust Alliance, Canadian Land Trust Alliance and Crooked Creek Conservation Society of Athabasca—where she now shares her experience and expertise with others.

"In looking back, I think that experiencing nature was a necessity for my husband and me," reflects Margaret. "I think a need for nature is a fundamental need for human beings. Being around nature gives you a perspective on how you are inserted into the universe, how important you are, and how you are related to other people and other kinds of animals. I think the most important thing I would say to anyone who loves their land, and thinks they might want to conserve it, would be 'Don't agonize over it.' The tools are there now. The help is there. Make sure you do it your way, but let people help. And just do it."



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