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### **Early Settler's Descendants Preserve Family Land**

By Laurie Ward

The great-great grandchildren of a Saline County settler have donated a conservation easement to the Kansas Land Trust on 20 acres of native prairie and wooded areas.

Four siblings--Richard L. Stauffer, Emporia; Donna M. Lantry, Lawrence; James F. Stauffer, McPherson; and Jerry Michael Stauffer, Manhattan--granted the easement on the land, part of a larger parcel in Saline County which has been in their family since 1884, when their great-great grandfather Daniel Donmeyer bought it. The land passed from generation to generation, and the Stauffer siblings were raised on it by their farming parents, Kenneth L. Stauffer and Mary Bell Stauffer.

Kenneth (K.L.) and Mary were married in 1931, at the height of America's Great Depression. With economic hardship and in the midst of the Dust Bowl, they started their family.

The siblings describe their father K.L. as a humble farmer who loved the countryside so much it was like he was one with nature. And, they believe this attunement contributed to his consistently high agricultural yields. According to his children, K.L. welcomed the adversities of nature as a challenge and often left a patch of unharvested crop for wildlife needing food. Mary's determination and fortitude allowed her to find creative ways to surmount financial difficulties. For example, many nights she stayed up late after a long day of work to sew the family's clothes. During the farming recession of the 1970s, K.L. worked various jobs where he helped ranchers, worked in nurseries, and built grain elevators. Growing up, K.L. and Mary's children received honors in 4-H, athletics, scholastics, community and civic service, art, and music. As adults, they became successful in art, education, farming, insurance, and technology and have avocations in the fields of music, design, horticulture, and archeology. They say they, like their parents, feel inherently rich in love for nature and the land.

Many requests to purchase the 20 acres were made over the years to K.L. and Mary, with what would have been financial reward for them, but they adamantly declined to sell. When K.L. and Mary died, ownership of all of their land passed to their children, who felt that the 20 acres should never be developed. Motivated by their parents' wishes that the prairie be saved, the Stauffer offspring decided that a conservation easement held by KLT was the only feasible way they could accomplish their goal of permanent preservation.

The protected land, with hills and lowlands, is a native pasture containing more than 90 identified species of plants. From the property's high elevations are scenic vistas of the Solomon, Smoky Hill, and Saline river valleys, as well as of surrounding farms--lush bottom land and uplands many miles in the distance. Wild animals and birds live among trees, in a ravine, and on the prairie.

The property's community and family history has been commemorated by monuments to various activities on the land--human and otherwise. Artworks and walking paths maintained by the family are intended to increase visitors' appreciation of this rare and special place.

The Stauffer siblings explain that they named the property, "Heritage Hill," honoring their parents and ancestors by hanging on to this contiguous acreage, continuing collectively to touch their past and each other, and perpetuating their heritage. They offer this quote from the 1884

Saline County Atlas: "In truth and soberness, every man, woman, and child within her borders may say, 'Our lot is cast in pleasant places; yea we have a goodly heritage.'"

On the occasion of granting the conservation easement to the Kansas Land Trust, the Stauffer siblings stated: "Through living the joys and trials of a farming family, we harvested a deep association and love of the land. We grew to know ourselves better because of our connection with nature, its rhythms, gifts, and complications. We could contemplate the richness of nature's gifts and see its simple beauty, Our hidden connections, the invisible tangibles, are our moral standards, sensuality, spirituality, memories, and aspirations. These helped formulate who we are today. This land is a living legacy and is a metaphor of life, as there is both joy and discontent . . . The land was a refuge from work and trouble, a contemplative respite. This land owned by our ancestors will forever be a legacy from them to all those who like us will forever be a part of the land from whence we came."