

Evening light illuminates blowing grasses on Fern Mountain, a small hill in Hart Prairie. In the background are the San Francisco Peaks' Humphreys Peak (left) and Agassiz Peak. Joel Hazelton

HART IS WHERE THE HOME IS

For more than a thousand years, people have been flocking to the western flank of the San Francisco Peaks. First it was the Cohonina people, who hunted the area around A.D. 600. Later came Frank Hart, for whom the prairie is named. He was followed by the Dillmans, the Wilsons and, eventually, The Nature Conservancy, whose Hart Prairie Preserve is home to the world's largest grove of Bebb willows. **BY KATHY MONTGOMERY**

SCRUBBED BY AN OVERNIGHT RAIN, THE AIR AT

The Nature Conservancy's Hart Prairie Preserve feels clean and crisp. Wet aspen leaves, like spent confetti, dot the porch at Mariposa Lodge. Before me, an island of aspens floats in a sea of tawny grasses. Upslope, an early-morning cloud wreathes Humphreys Peak. On Agassiz Peak, sunshine glints off Arizona Snowbowl's chairlifts like a heliograph.

Mariposa Lodge stands at the heart of what is remarkable about this place: To the left are a cabin and outbuildings built by 19th century German homesteaders, and to the right is the Bebb willow community the sanctuary protects. Even the lodge is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Hearing a red-tailed hawk, I scan the sky but see nothing. Then, a Steller's jay glides to the ground from a nearby aspen. I realize it must be the impersonator I heard about. Things here often are more than they appear. Yet Hart Prairie's rich, layered history is on display everywhere — if you know how to look for it.

Located on the western flank of the San Francisco Peaks, Hart Prairie Preserve shelters a high-altitude meadow dotted with aspen groves and flanked by ponderosa pine forest. Its boundaries include what is thought to be the world's largest and southernmost grove of Bebb willows and an unusual variety of scarlet gillias — showy strumpets of flowers that change color as the season progresses to seduce a shifting parade of pollinators.

Generally closed to the public except for guided summer nature walks, the preserve is a living laboratory protected by The Nature Conservancy and is used to develop practices for managing the area's natural resources.

But Hart Prairie also records a span of human history that extends thousands of years. It served as, among other things, a hunting ground, a potato farm, a sheep pasture, a cattle ranch, a stagecoach stop and the state's first Arabian horse breeding facility. Ancient hunters and Basque shepherds left their marks here, and at least one developer tried but failed.

Frank Hart broke ground on Hart Prairie's first permanent structure near the base of Fern Mountain in 1877, but he never finished the one-room log cabin. Its four walls stood open to the heavens until 1882, when sheep rancher Augustus Dillman Freudenberger finished it and moved in.

In the years he lived there, Dillman and his family — who dropped the Freudenberger name during World War I — built onto the home and added a barn and a root cellar. A blacksmith by trade, Dillman owned a Flagstaff brewery for a time but sold it to run cattle and farm potatoes and hay at Hart Prairie.

From 1892 to 1901, the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway ran a tourist stagecoach from Flagstaff to the Grand Canyon. Beginning its 12-hour ride from the Bank Hotel, the coach made the first of three stops at Dillman's Fern Mountain Ranch to change horses. Dillman's wife, Lena, a former housekeeper for the Babbitt family, served sandwiches and cold buttermilk to the passengers.

But while these early settlers became Hart Prairie's first permanent inhabitants, the area's human history began much earlier.



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BOBBY JENSEN HAS LIVED AT HART PRAIRIE for decades and served as the preserve's first manager. With a flowing silver beard, apple-round cheeks and startlingly blue eyes, Jensen looks a bit like Kris Kringle. And with its harsh, snowy winters, Hart Prairie feels, at times, like the North Pole.

Still, Jensen's affection for the place is obvious as he gives me a tour of some notable spots, including a cluster of basalt boulders that marks the remains of a camp likely used by Native American hunters.

"There are smoke stains down here where they built a fire for warmth," Jensen points out, explaining that he's also found potsherds, obsidian flakes and bones.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Adirondack chairs in front of Hart Prairie Preserve's Mariposa Lodge offer a stunning view of the San Francisco Peaks. *Mark Skalny*

Bebb willows (*Salix bebbiana*) are among the preserve's ecological wonders. The grove of the plants found here is thought to be the largest and southernmost such community in the world. *Tom Bean*

The preserve's old cabins are a testament to Hart Prairie's extensive human history. *Mark Skalny*



U.S. Forest Service archaeologist Peter Pilles says this area is rich with archaeological sites. The presence of potsherds suggests this one was likely used by the Cohonina people, who hunted at Hart Prairie beginning around A.D. 600. Hunting parties may have stayed for a month or two — gathering obsidian at Government Mountain, then refining the stone into sharp points and tools at the campsite. These boulders would have supported branches to create a shelter.

Hart Prairie's other gems include dendroglyphs, or tree carvings, left by Basque shepherds who drove sheep through the area into the 1970s, and children's forts in the central aspen grove — likely built up and modified over generations, much



Aspens with golden leaves frame an autumn view of Hart Prairie.
Derek von Briesen

as their parents added to Hart’s cabin.

Jensen came to Hart Prairie through his connections with the Museum of Northern Arizona. Its founder, Harold S. Colton, bought the property from Dillman’s son in 1928 and transferred it to Colton’s sister Suzanne. She and her husband, Robert T. Wilson, summered at Hart Prairie. They bought a celebrated Army Remount Service stallion named Ribal and raised Arabian horses, making Fern Mountain Ranch the first in Arizona to do so.

The Wilsons built Mariposa Lodge in the 1930s and invited friends to spend summers. Their guests helped with building projects, including the cabins that dot the property. A photo album kept from 1934 to 1950 documents these visits with photos, sketches and verse.

The Wilsons gave their Eastern friends a Western experience — teaching them to rope and ride, and taking trips to the

Grand Canyon, Sunset Crater and Oak Creek. At the end of the summer, each guest contributed a rhyme. One begins:

*I don’t mind answering dinner bells,
I don’t mind laying fence
And mucking in Fern Mountain wells
Makes just a grain of sense*

*But somehow, it is just a crime
When one’s brain needs a rest
To struggle to produce a rhyme
At cruel Suzanne’s request*

Jensen came to Hart Prairie after the Wilsons’ son, Dick, and his wife, Jean, inherited the property. But he heard plenty of stories about “Aunt Susie,” who brought her guests from

Flagstaff via a 40-mile route.

“She realized if they knew it was only 16 miles to town, they wouldn’t stay, ’cause they had an outhouse they had to use, and to heat water for a shower took all day,” he says.

Dick Wilson, a University of Arizona professor, returned to Hart Prairie one summer in the early 1970s to learn that a developer had quietly gotten initial approval to build a ski village on 327 acres nearby. Summit Properties’ plans included town houses, a shopping area, a golf course and a new ski lift.

Wilson hired a lawyer and assembled a coalition — members of the Navajo and Hopi tribes, which consider the San Francisco Peaks sacred — to oppose the development. The highly public dispute raged for years. Ultimately, “Snowbowl Village” was never built, and Summit Properties sold the land to the Forest Service.

Wilson hired Jensen in the late 1970s to act as caretaker, and

for a few years, Jensen ran the homestead as a retreat. Meanwhile, The Nature Conservancy learned about the Bebb willows and approached Wilson about protecting them. Named for 19th century biologist Michael Schuck Bebb, the small, bushy trees are not usually found so far south or in such great numbers.

Wilson, who in the early 1980s had sold Muleshoe Ranch in Southern Arizona to The Nature Conservancy, agreed to safeguard the rare trees. Then, in 1994, he took it a step further and donated the entire property — not just the acres containing the willows — to The Nature Conservancy. Jensen stayed on as preserve manager until his retirement in 2002.

YOUNG AND FIT, BLAIR FOUST looks like the river guide and ski patroller he once was. Foust volunteered at Hart Prairie for five years before signing on as preserve manager in 2013. Today, his work includes maintaining and restoring the land, as well as caring for the historic structures.

Elk grazing has made it difficult for the willows to reproduce, so The Nature Conservancy recently collaborated with the Forest Service to plant 300 seedlings propagated at Northern Arizona University. It’s also restoring the meadow where, after more than a century of fire suppression, ponderosa pines have encroached.

“Each one is like a straw sucking up water from the ground,” Foust explains.

Upslope pines could draw as much as 80,000 gallons in the course of a growing season, according to one estimate. A recent project removed more than 1,000 young trees from a corner of the preserve, with the goal of restoring pre-European-settlement conditions and increasing available groundwater for other plants, including Bebb willows.

It’s too early to tell how the project affected groundwater, but the understory has responded well. “It used to just be litter and pine needles,” Foust says. “Now, we have grasses and all sorts of native flowers.”

The Nature Conservancy is now working with the Forest Service to extend that work beyond the preserve.

The organization also opens Hart Prairie to scientists and graduate students, including those from NAU’s Merriam-Powell Center for Environmental Research (named for biologist Clinton Hart Merriam and explorer John Wesley Powell), to study how plants might respond to a changing climate.

A pioneering eco-scientist, Merriam studied the area’s plant and animal life from a nearby base camp to develop his theory of life zones. So, in a way, The Nature Conservancy has brought Hart Prairie full circle, continuing the scientific inquiry Merriam began here in 1889. [AH](#)

For more information about Hart Prairie Preserve, call 928-779-6129 or visit www.nature.org/hartprairie.