

Engelmann Farm purchase will preserve St. Clair County history as park

Acreage was under contract to home developer in 2007

By Larry Ingram - Jun 10, 2009

The historic Engelmann Farm in Shiloh might have been bulldozed and cleared to make way for a subdivision with a nice view.

But thanks to St. Clair County residents and officials aware of the history behind the farm, it will be preserved as a park.

The county will receive \$1.5 million in funding from the 2009 Open Space Lands Acquisition and Development program to pay for purchasing 124 acres of the 145-acre site.

"We have received two grants from (Illinois Department of Natural Resources) to purchase the property for a total of \$1.5 million," said Pam Hogan, executive assistant to the St. Clair County Board chairman.

The county submitted OSLAD grant applications for the property in 2007 and again in 2008, she said.

"The result is the two grants approved for \$750,000," Hogan said.

Phase I of the funding was for 61 acres; Phase II was for 63 acres, she said.

The county is in the process of applying for funding to purchase the remaining acreage, she said.

The acquisition was announced in May by Illinois Senate Majority Leader James F. Clayborne Jr. (D-Belleville).

Bob Brunkow, a member of the St. Clair County Historical Society and editor of the Journal of St. Clair County History, said he found out in February 2007 that the farm was to be purchased by a developer.

The property was under contract to Fulford Homes, a Metro East home developer.

Brunkow said he met with St. Clair County Board Chairman Mark Kern about preserving the property.

Kern said he worked with the County Board and other officials to apply for the grant to purchase the Engelmann Farm area.

The property is a "truly magical" piece of real estate, Kern said in a recent interview.

"It will be preserved by county residents for years to come," he said.

Kern also said the property has a "spectacular view."

"It would have been a shame had it been bulldozed (to make) home sites," he said.

Brunkow said he appreciated Kern's effort to preserve the land.

He said the farm is significant because of the German history it represents.

"It's ground zero to the original German immigration in the state," he said. "The Engelmann family was among the first German immigrants in the state."

Gordon Stone, who rents a house located on the farm site, learned about the possible development of the land through the heirs of the Engelmann Farm.

Stone said he also called Kern's office to notify him of the potential development of the property.

"I just alerted everybody and attempted to preserve it," Stone said.

Although Stone has lived on the farm for 31 years, he said he did not realize the historical significance of the farm until recently.

He said he was influenced by a book he read by Douglas Hale, Ph.D., "Wanderers Between Two Worlds: German Rebels in the American West, 1830-1860."

The book follows the lives of seven young German revolutionaries who attempted to rebel against the German Confederation to create unity and freedom for their country.

Their abortive attempt made them outlaws in Germany, and they fled to the U.S., according to Stone.

Four of the individuals chronicled in the book, Gustav Bunsen, Georg Engelmann, his brother Theodor Engelmann and Gustave Koerner, came to live at the Engelmann Farm in Shiloh in the 19th century.

Brunkow and other members of the society also devoted the latest issue of the Journal of St. Clair County History to the Engelmann Farm.

The acreage represents the last "old growth" forest in Shiloh Valley, Brunkow said.

The last Engelmann to live on the farm, Brunkow said, was Anna Engelmann, who died in 1960 at 90 years of age.

An Engelmann family cemetery on property was dedicated at a historic site by the St. Clair County Historical Society in 2000.

Initial development of the park will include converting existing agricultural fields into native grasslands.

German immigrants, residents of the Engelmann Farm, 19th century

Georg Engelmann: premier botanist of the American West, helped to develop the Missouri Botanical Garden

Theodor Engelmann: (Friedrich's son) published the first German newspaper in Illinois

Friedrich Engelmann: purchased the farm property 1833, establishing the Engelmann Farm

Gustave Koerner: married Sophie Engelmann (Friedrich's daughter); became Illinois Supreme Court judge and lieutenant governor of state; presided over the 1860 Illinois Republican Convention that nominated Abraham Lincoln; garnered German support for Lincoln as Republican nominee for president

St. Clair County Historical Society