



Jennifer Owen, on horseback with children Katie and Tyler, decided one summer that if Spring Creek were to be made better, it would be up to her.

PHOTO: KARL WOLFSTOHL

A Community Saves Its Creek

When the alarm sounded on their stream, these Oklahomans took action.

BY KARL WOLFSTOHL

As Jennifer Owen spent lazy summer days at Spring Creek with her three children, she gradually realized it was going to be up to her to save it.

"In the summertime the kids would beg me to take them to the creek, so we would go there regularly," says Jennifer, who ranches with her husband, Steve, in Peggs, Okla.

"You get down on the creek, and all of a sudden your business that's so critical just dissipates, and you're enveloped in the beauty. Being there would relieve me of everything I was involved in. I would lose track of my problems as I gazed at the creek and the trees and the kingfishers, and

there's nothing like getting in that cold water all at once.

"I just can't express the transformation that takes place," she continues. "I just felt God, to be honest."

Troubling thoughts crept into Owen's summertime reverie, however. Thoughts of wider highways bringing more Tulsa tourists and their trash to this eastern Oklahoma paradise. Thoughts of some of those tourists staying and building more homes. Thoughts of more poultry houses being built in the hills and valleys, with every rain washing nitrogen and other pollutants into Spring Creek.

"I would always end up thinking

how it was inevitable that this would someday be gone," Owen says, "going one little piece at a time."

But then this rancher had a more optimistic thought. The creek didn't have to go down. Her efforts, combined with those of her neighbors, local teachers, the community, several government agencies, and now even visitors from Tulsa, are slowing the decline.

Owen began by organizing people who lived along Spring Creek. One of them was Mitch Fram, an area Extension water quality specialist. Owen, Fram, and other concerned neighbors formed the Spring Creek Coalition. Their goal was to keep the watershed clean and the little stream from losing its purity, along with the fish and other diverse life this purity supports.

Watching Progress

Donna and Rudy Cisner, who live a mile from Owen, have ranched in the watershed since 1964. They've noticed the changes progress brings.

"Highway 82 was a gravel road when we moved here," Rudy says. "There was no bridge at the creek. You had to drive through the water to get to the other side, and you could walk the banks and see the bass with their red eyes. Now there's a lot more people, but you don't see as many fish.

"This coalition has made the community aware of what a precious commodity the creek is," Rudy continues. "People have more respect for the creek now. They're helping clean it up, and they're doing other things that need to be done."

Spring Creek Coalition's board of directors meets regularly. Dues-paying members now number about 60, with a mailing list of twice that. Here's some of what they have accomplished since 1994:

- They hold stream cleanup days, in which much of the community and even some visitors have participated.
- They enlisted the help of several agencies, including the Natural Resources Conservation (Continued)

A Community Saves Its Creek (Continued)

Service, Oklahoma Water Resources Board, Extension, the Cherokee Nation, Oklahoma Conservation Commission, and the Grand River Dam Authority. GRDA has jurisdiction over Spring Creek.

- They provide educational programs for landowners on forestry, fertilization, wildlife habitat, and other subjects affecting the creek.

- They have set up eight test sites where they collect and catalog fish, small invertebrates, and other animal

and plant life with equipment provided by Oklahoma Water Resources Department and GRDA.

Teaching the Children

"We're trying to document as much data as we can because we're losing these things so quickly," Owen says. Students from local schools are doing much of this work and a lot of the play.

"We all agree that the key to saving the creek is to teach children to love it like we do," says Alicia Osborne, who

lives on the creek and teaches school. "It's a lot of playing as well as educating, and understanding that you can't take without giving back. It means a lot to these kids that they can do something real."

Manuel Holland, another teacher, adds, "One of the projects for our gifted and talented students is to have them work with the coalition gathering data. We're looking for baseline information like dissolved oxygen and pH.

"Later on we're going to sample for ammonia, nitrates, and phosphates," he continues. "With a little more backing, we may test for fecal coliforms. I've told my kids at school that it's a Ph.D. degree for anybody who wants to take it that far."

The coalition board has big plans for its creek. With help from the Cherokee Nation, members are developing a Geographic Information System-guided land-use map showing the lay of the land, tributaries, homesites, poultry houses, city waste treatment facilities, and other things that could affect the creek. They plan to put the map on the Internet so school kids can keep up with what's happening. They want local schools to adopt sections of the creek and keep them clean.

"Our goal is to have 80% of landowners in this watershed participate or support this project," Owen says. "We stand firm on keeping out industrial development and willy-nilly permitting."

She says many of the creek's environmental problems come from permitting and other decisions made by well-meaning people in Oklahoma City who've never been to the area. The coalition now supplies agencies with information, and Owen wants to bring more agency members to see the creek firsthand.

"My involvement has taught me that the majority of people know what's right and wrong, and they want to do what's right," she says. "It's just a matter of providing guidance so they can. People on this board are a good example. We come from completely different backgrounds, but we sit down and talk about issues, concerns, and goals. When the dust settles, we have a good plan."

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