

# Rock Garden goes up for sale

By JOE SIESS  
The Bulletin

REDMOND — Susan Caward spent most of her life living on her family's property near Redmond where her grandfather, a Danish immigrant named Rasmus Petersen, turned a love of rocks and his own labor into a roadside attraction known around the world.

The Petersen Rock Garden, a 12-acre property on Southwest 77th Street, is known for the numerous rock structures Petersen built with his own two hands in the 1930s and '40s. They have a weathered look to them and the landscaping today is rough around the edges, but the displays still inspire visitors. There are small rock structures, stone paths, a bridge decorated with rocks, a grotto, ponds and a small replica of the Statue of Liberty.

And peacocks that roam the property unrestricted.

But time has caught up with the 57-year-old Caward, who suffered a serious back injury in her 20s and now struggles to care for her grandfather's creations. Caward gets around with a walking stick and has trouble walking or standing for long periods of time. Sometimes, her legs go numb. It's all a sign, she said, that it is time for her to retire.

So Caward is working with her real estate agent to sell the property, which is listed for \$825,000. In addition to all the art and rocks, the price also includes the peacocks.

She doesn't want to sell the property to just anybody. Her hope is to find a suitable buyer who will maintain her grandfather's creations.

"I just want to kind of retire, come here every once in a while and see what the new people are doing with it," Caward said.

Caward said she wants to be clear that she is not retiring because she is no longer interested in the rock garden. The rock garden and the surrounding property is her home and very important to her, she said, but because of her declining health, she simply is unable to continue doing what it takes to maintain the rock garden.

"It's not that I don't want to do it. It's just that my body can't do it," Caward said. "My doctor has been cautioning me, 'You've got to retire.'"

Caward sat at a picnic table amid enchanting stone structures, as peacocks shrieked, cats pranced and her dog Hell-boy sniffed around, and told the story of how she broke her



Dean Guernsey/The Bulletin

The Petersen Rock Garden, a quirky tourist attraction near Redmond, is up for sale.



Dean Guernsey/The Bulletin  
A rock sculpture at the Petersen Rock Garden south of Redmond.

back. Caward broke her back in three places after a ram living on the family farm attacked her. If it were not for her dog Sheba — an English herder and Blue Heeler mix — Caward is convinced she would be dead.

It all started when she was feeding the animals on the farm and turned her back on one of the rams.

"Next thing I know, I went flying through the air, landed on the rock wall, rolled down off the rock wall, and started crawling away and had a feeling I should look behind me," Caward recalled. "And I look around behind me and the sheep is on top of the wall coming down on top of me head first, and I just thought, 'I am dead, dead, dead, dead.'"

At this point, Caward curled up in a ball on the ground with the expectation that she would be killed by the animal, but then Sheba vaulted off her back and took the ram down and hung onto its nose until Caward could escape. As a young woman working on a farm every day, she quickly forgot the back injury and went on with her life.

It wasn't until a decade later that her doctor discovered she had actually broken her back, and gave her a choice between back surgery and eventually

winding up in a wheelchair, she said. Caward chose surgery, which kept her back injury at bay for a good 19 years, she said.

She said she loves the people who come to visit the rock garden. She loves talking to people, but she envisions living on a piece of land with some friends where she could perhaps raise animals, sleep in, and enjoy her later years.

"Enjoy yourself, it's later than you think," Caward said, invoking the inscription on the Statue of Liberty rock structure her grandfather made.

Kaisha Brannon, the real estate agent helping Caward sell the property, has a personal connection with the rock garden and wants to see it go to the right buyers.

Brannon said her grandparents and parents visited the rock garden, and growing up, it was a special place she would go see as a kid. Now, her own children are exploring the garden while she shows the place to prospective buyers.

"I was super excited when I got the phone call, because I do know the Petersen Rock Garden really well, and I do know how important it is to the community and to Central Oregon, so ultimately this is very dear to my heart," she said. "It's not necessarily about the real estate transaction for me. It's very much about helping Susan and finding the right person that is going to be the new person that takes care of the property."

While there is no way to know what the future owners will do with the property once they buy it, Brannon said she is doing her best to vet buyers to ensure the rock garden winds up in the right hands.

Brannon added that the rock garden is open to the public during the selling process, and Caward hopes people will still come visit at this time.

Kelly Cannon-Miller,

the executive director of the Deschutes County Historical Society, said the historical society stands ready to provide research and background to whoever ends up buying the beloved rock garden.

"I hope the person who buys it is ready to take it on and loves it the way people have loved it over the years," Cannon-Miller said. "It definitely has a community memory attached to it. Folks who grew up going there want to go back and see it and remember family visits."

Cannon-Miller explained that back in its heyday, the Petersen Rock Garden accommodated thousands of tourists in a given year driving up and down U.S. Highway 97, which back then was mainly referred to as The Dalles-California Highway.

At the time, during the 1940s and '50s, visitors could visit the rock garden's museum, which still stands today, and could take a swan boat ride on the pond or grab a bite in the diner in addition to exploring the rock garden. Having lunch and contemplating life outside on the lawn surrounded by peacocks and Petersen's art was a popular pastime for visitors, Cannon-Miller said.

"Between 1935 and 1952, Rasmus (Petersen) was always still building and changing it, so it had that changing attraction element to it as well," Cannon-Miller said of the rock garden.

Petersen's art was influenced by both his childhood growing up in Denmark, combined with his experience homesteading and farming in Oregon, a combination complimented by his irreverent sense of humor and his contemplation of nature, Cannon-Miller added. Petersen died of a heart attack inside the museum on the property in 1952 at the age of 69 and is buried in Redmond Memorial Cemetery.



James Thomas/Contributed Photo

The Port of Morrow has been fined by the state for spreading nitrogen-laden wastewater from food processors housed in an industrial park managed by the port.

# Businesses help test for nitrates

By GEORGE PLAVEN  
Capital Press

BOARDMAN — A coalition of businesses in northeast Oregon — including several food processors and the state's largest dairy — is working with Morrow County officials to test drinking water for residents whose wells may be contaminated with high levels of toxic nitrates.

The affected wells lie within what is known as the Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area, or LUBGWMA, which was designated in 1990 to address groundwater nitrates from agricultural lands and other non-point sources.

Morrow County commissioners declared a state of emergency on June 13 after private well tests showed nitrate levels above the federal safe drinking water limit.

Debbie Radie, vice president of operations for Boardman Foods, a local onion processor, was at that meeting where she said the county health department indicated it did not have emergency funding to pay for additional well testing.

The Oregon Health Authority estimates there are 4,500 domestic wells in the LUBGWMA, between Umatilla and Morrow counties. About 1,300 of those are in Morrow County. With tests costing \$35 each, that adds up to \$45,500.

Radie said she began "fundraising" among businesses to assist the health department. The coalition offered to foot the bill in a press release issued June 17 by the Boardman Chamber of Commerce, ensuring residents can get their wells tested for free.

"I have a well. All my friends have a well," Radie told the Capital Press. "This is truly an emergency. We can't wait."

While the coalition offered to pay for well tests, Morrow County commissioners also approved a \$100,000 budget to address the groundwater nitrate situation on June 22.

Coalition members include Amazon Web Services, Boardman Foods, Calbee North America, Lamb Weston, Threemile Canyon Farms and the Tillamook County Creamery Association. They are

working in close coordination and under the guidance of Morrow County Public Health.

In addition to well testing, the coalition is helping to distribute safe drinking water to residents whose wells are showing elevated nitrate levels. Consuming nitrates can be harmful, increasing the risk of certain cancers, respiratory infections, thyroid dysfunction and miscarriages.

Radie said the coalition may also consider helping to pay for water filters in homes that need them. Reverse osmosis filters can cost several hundred dollars a piece.

"These are our friends, neighbors, employees and people we care about in the community," Radie said. "There is a need, and as Morrow County we should come together and try to help people who need education, information and support to have safe drinking water."

Boardman Foods, Lamb Weston, Calbee North America and Tillamook all run food processing plants at an industrial park along the Columbia River near Boardman, managed by the Port of Morrow. Amazon also operates several data centers inside the port complex.

Threemile Canyon Farms encompasses 93,000 acres west of Boardman, growing both conventional and organic crops and milking 33,000 dairy cows.

Earlier this year, the port was fined \$1.3 million by Oregon environmental regulators for spreading excess wastewater collected from food processors onto neighboring farms, where it is used as a source of nitrogen-rich fertilizer.

The original fine was increased to \$2.1 million on June 17 after additional violations were discovered. The port is contesting the penalty.

According to the committee responsible for overseeing the LUBGWMA, nearly 70% of groundwater nitrates in the area comes from irrigated agriculture. Roughly 12% is from applying wastewater produced at dairies and cattle ranches; 5% from food processors; and another 5% from residential septic systems.

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