Back into the clear

Nonprofit prep new land for public use

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In an era when Ventura was more cow country than scenic beach community, members of the Willoughby family were ranchers, running a dairy farm on the west end of town.

But the Willoughbys had dreams that extended far beyond city limits, and in the late 1800s, James Russell Willoughby headed to West Point. His father's death meant an abrupt change of plans, and he returned two years later.

His son William, though, enlisted in the Army, and in 1940 left Ventura, never to return.

The Willoughby's property was sold off except for a small patch — 6.74 acres, to be exact — between the Main Street and Highway 101.

Bruce Livingston, a volunteer from Patagonia, helps cut arundo near the Main Street bridge in Ventura. The Ventura Hillsides Conservancy has accepted a donation of land from descendants of a local ranching family. The property is considered an important piece in reclaiming the river and finding permanent housing for the homeless population.

The property soon will fall to new ownership, the Ventura Hillsides Conservancy. The nonprofit plans to one day turn the donated land into a place for picnics, walks and a connector for the length of the river.

“Mam, I was hoping to first restore the habitat and then open it to the public,” said Lee Sherman, Ventura Hillsides Conservancy development and volunteer coordinator.

A coalition of social service agencies, environmental groups and government officials sees it as a significant piece in a much larger and difficult puzzle — permanently clearing the river bottom of homeless camps.

“There's a lot of illegal activity on that property,” said Peter Brown, Ventura's community service manager. “We now have an owner that is going to be attentive to that illegal activity.”

In the decades since the Willoughbys left Ventura, nonnative arundo plants have overtaken the property. The thick reed can grow up to 30 feet tall, and it did, providing the perfect cover for a community of homeless people who have set up more or less permanent residence.

“This area is a key to what goes out into the ocean. There's a huge human component and a huge environmental component, and they're very closely tied together,” Project Coordinator Executive Director Rob Orth said.

The property is surrounded by land owned by state, city, county and private entities, including the Wood-Claussens Foundation/Taylor Ranch.

As they have forced out homeless people and cleared 45 acres of arundo as part of the effort, some of the homeless have moved to the Willoughby property.

“Many have moved to the river bottom for a year or a half, he said, having lost his job and home. He knows he will have to move, and is debating joining his sister in Missouri. Orth knows there will be a lot of people like More, all with different experiences, all with different problems. "This is what's coming," Orth said. "This area's going to get cleaned out, and they're going to have to step up to the plate and think about a life change."

When William Willoughby died in the 1970s, his son William inherited the property. In 2009, the conservancy contacted him to see if he'd be interested in getting rid of it.

He was indeed, providing the land remain open space in perpetuity.

"It's been kind of a hoop dream. If there were a local responsible entity to take charge of it, I think it could be put to good public use," he said from his home just outside Cleveland. "I'll feel much better about it."

**HILLSIDES**

Roundies by land owned by state, city, county and private entities, including the Wood-Claussens Foundation/Taylor Ranch.

**VENTURA HILLSIDES**

This 8.74-acre property is being given to the Ventura Hillsides Conservancy.

Volunteer Matt LaBarge helps clear the arundo near the Main Street bridge in Ventura.

The area will be ideal for homes, parks and trails.