

Ojai Trust Seeks to Preserve Ranch

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Conservancy plans to raise \$4 million to buy more than 1,400 acres along the Ventura River. Sale would likely kill proposed golf course.

By STEVE CHAWINS
Times Staff Writer

An Ojai land-preservation group announced plans Monday to acquire a 2½-square-mile swath of oak-studded meadows and chaparral-covered hills—a century-old ranch that is the largest private landholding in the Ojai Valley.

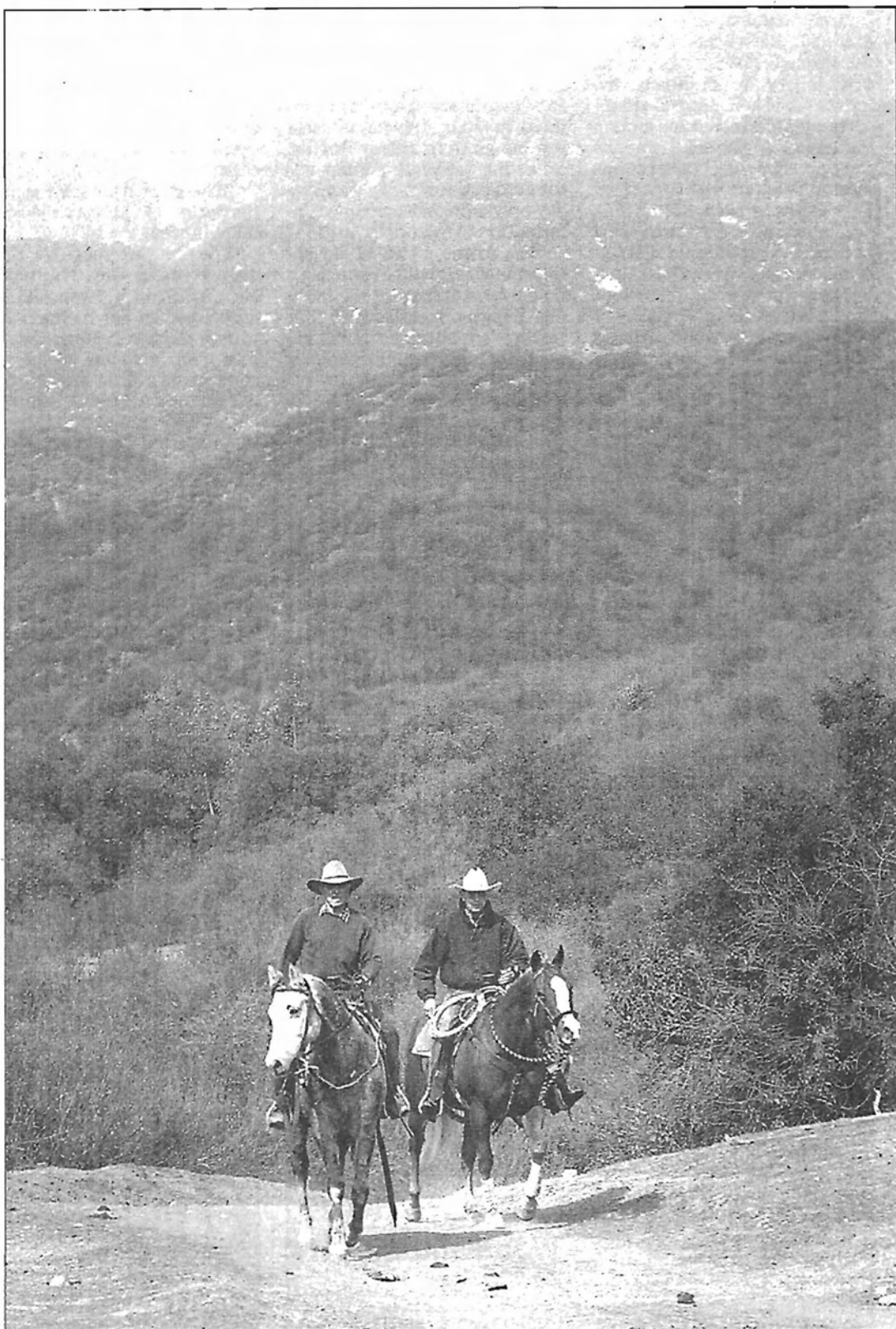
The Ojai Valley Land Conservancy plans to raise \$4 million to purchase the land from the Intel Management and Investment Co., a New York firm that has owned it for two years.

"As far as we know, it would be the largest purchase of open space in Ventura County by a land trust," said Jim Engel, the conservancy's executive director.

Ventura County Supervisor Steve Bennett, whose district includes Ojai, said the pending purchase "really launches us on the road to protecting the entire Ventura River watershed."

Straddling three miles of the Ventura River just north of California 150, the land is home to roadrunners, bobcats and black bears. Eventually, its new owners hope, some 12 miles of hiking and equestrian trails will meander through the sprawling old ranch that original owner W.I. Rice called El Nido (the nest).

Engel said the purchase would effectively end the pros-
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STEPHEN OSMAN Los Angeles Times

ROUGH-AND-READY: Bob Yanez of Oakview, left, and Buzz Hunt of Summerland ride through grazing land included in a parcel the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy announced plans to buy Monday.

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pect of a golf course on the property. That possibility has been bitterly fought by environmental activists since 1987, when Japanese media tycoon Kagehisa Toyama unveiled plans for the elite private Farmont golf course on 200 of the ranch's 2,000 acres.

Plans for a golf course were revived earlier this year by Intel, which invests in properties as diverse as an entertainment complex in New York City's Times Square and Enron's former headquarters in Houston.

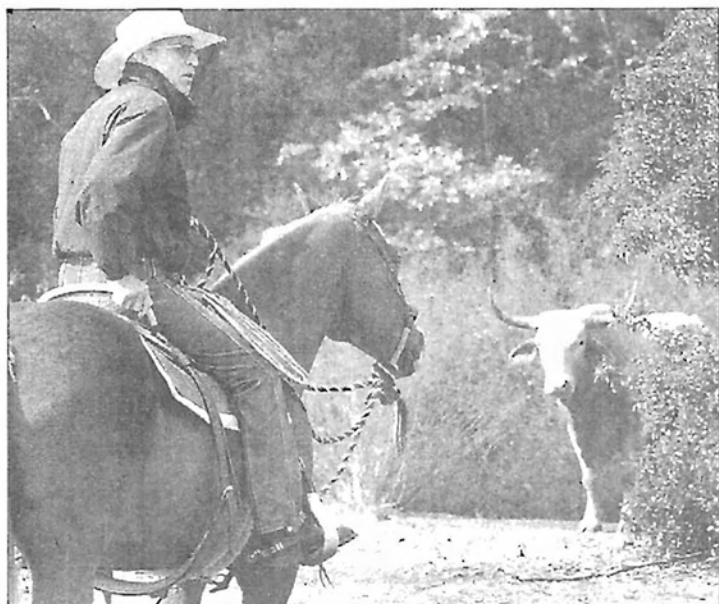
However, those plans were suspended after county officials demanded additional environmental studies, said Lindsay Nielson, a Ventura attorney who represents Intel.

"Having spent close to \$600,000 on a prior environmental impact report, there was little appetite for spending an additional \$100,000 on water studies," Nielson said, adding that the golf course idea is "not completely dead, but on life support."

Under an agreement with Intel, the conservancy would own 1,416 acres and hold a conservation easement barring development on an additional 150 acres.

Intel would retain two home sites on the property and is in negotiations to sell the remaining 400 acres, which includes the original golf course site, Nielson said. The prospective buyer's identity and plans for the land have not been disclosed.

The area to be preserved spans rolling terrain between the Ventura River and Los Padres National Forest. It includes a 48-acre orange grove and grazing land for about 100 head of cattle. Whether those uses will continue has yet to be decided, Engel said.



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WILD COUNTRY: Cattleman Buzz Hunt checks on a bull on the century-old ranch slated for purchase by an Ojai trust.

A one-lane asphalt road runs a mile and a half through the property for crews servicing a canal between the river and Lake Casitas. Aside from that and an incongruous line of telephone poles, the land looks rough-and-ready, with game trails lacing through the sage and yucca.

"From an ecological standpoint, it's really what the rest of the valley was 100 years ago," Engel said.

Five springs run year-round on the property. Around one, the ferns are lush and green, even in this time of drought. Animals including deer and mountain lions make their way between the river and the forest through a number of wildlife corridors.

"When you put it all together, with its adjacency to Los Padres,

we'll have river bottom to ridge-line potentially protected," Engel said.

Funding for the purchase will likely come from the state's Coastal Conservancy and private donations.

The agency already has put \$1.5 million into two projects just upstream from the property: the Matilija Dam dismantling project and a fish ladder at the Robles Diversion into Lake Casitas.

Peter Brand, a Coastal Conservancy spokesman, said the Ventura River winding through the property is "a key migration corridor" for the southern steelhead trout.

"We hope to provide a major portion of the amount needed to complete this project," Brand said, adding that the local con-



servancy must show that it can raise the money needed for the property's long-term maintenance.

"We understand they'll be seeking donations to make that possible," he said.

The purchase agreement calls for the Ojai conservancy to acquire funding by next June.

That's a sad necessity, said attorney Nielson, who represented Toyama before Intel became his client.

In return for building his golf course, the Japanese radio magnate had offered to donate to the conservancy a conservation easement for the 1,500 acres it now wants to purchase, Nielson said.

"Had the golf course gone through, there would have been a lot of benefits to the community," he said. "Now they'll have to pay dearly for it."