

Grass Lake Sesquicentennial Farm Protected Forever

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Courtesy photo. Irwin Farm in Grass Lake in the evening.

(Chelsea Update would like to thank Diana Kern for the information and photos in this story.)

A sesquicentennial farm—in the same family for over 150 years—is now permanently protected by Legacy Land Conservancy.

The farm, owned by brothers **Tom and Jim Irwin**, consists of 158 acres of rolling farmland, forest and wetlands off Grass Lake Road in Grass Lake. In 2017, Tom and Jim inherited the farm from their late father, Richard (Dick) Irwin, who had already conserved another portion of the farm with Legacy between 2004 and 2008.

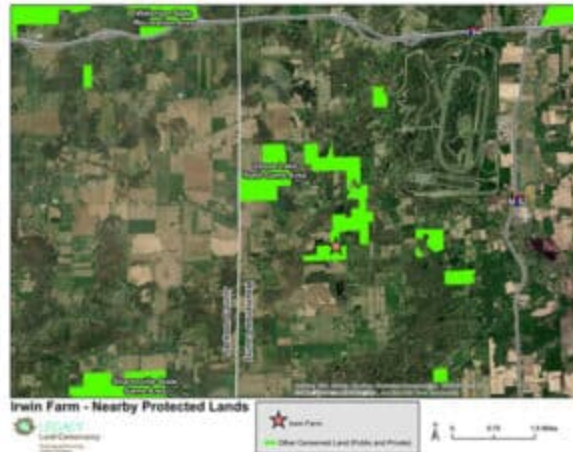
By working with Legacy Land Conservancy to protect their farm via a conservation easement the Irwin brothers are honoring their father's wishes. A conservation easement permanently protects private land by limiting the type and amount of development on a property, and restricting other uses that would damage natural features such as rich soils and high functioning wetlands.



Courtesy photo. The Irwin Brothers and family.

“At a young age our father instilled the value to leave the Earth better than you found it for the next generation, by putting the conservation easement on the farm, our family feels we are putting his values to practice,” the Irwin brothers said in a press release.

Preservation of the Irwin Farm is significant because it is adjacent to other protected lands, features high-quality soil and wetlands, and was at risk for development. In addition to ensuring a farmland base contributing to local food security, the property also adds to an existing 300 acre natural “greenway” in the Sharon Short Hills area, benefiting water quality and wildlife habitat.



The Irwin Farm conservation easement exemplifies innovative land protection through local, federal, and private partnerships.

Legacy worked with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Washtenaw County Parks & Recreation Commission (WCPARC), the Carls Foundation, and other private entities to secure a creative mosaic of funding sources to purchase the conservation easement from the Irwin brothers.

Tom and Jim will use some of that money to invest back into their family farm. While Tom and Jim currently lease the farmland out, they plan to restore the historic barn and farmhouse on the property and restart their farming business together.

“This conservation easement will allow us to continue farming and keep the farm as one huge parcel far beyond our lifetimes,” said the Irwins. “We can imagine our ancestors smiling down on us today as we finalized our conservation easement on Earth Day.”

“We’re thrilled to be protecting this piece of local farming history with such dedicated partners,” Diana Kern, Legacy’s executive director, said. “Family farms are increasingly disappearing as farmers age out of their work and sell their land to developers, making preserving farmland a critical part of creating a healthier local food system. To be helping the Irwin family return to their farming roots is an incredible win for land conservation in southern Michigan.”

History of the Irwin Farm: The first 80 acres of the Irwin Estate was purchased in 1836 by James Irwin, the great great great grandfather of Tom and Jim Irwin. The original deeds to the land were signed by the eighth US president Martin Van Buren on sheepskin.

At its zenith, the Irwin Farm totaled approximately 354 acres. The deeds, along with other Irwin family memorabilia, are housed at the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library.

About Legacy Land Conservancy: Founded in 1971 as Michigan's first local land trust, Legacy is a nonprofit conservation organization that protects land in southern Michigan. Legacy's mission is to secure for current and future generations a land base for nature, agriculture, fresh water, and recreation in Jackson and Washtenaw counties and beyond.

Legacy has helped to protect more than 9,000 acres of land (including seven nature preserves open for all to enjoy) that enhance our community's quality of place by safeguarding water quality, conserving working farms, and protecting places to play.

In a testament to 50 years of successful voluntary conservation, Legacy is accredited by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission for adhering to a set of standards designed to ensure the organization's work will endure forever. Legacy is based in Ann Arbor, Michigan. For more information, visit www.legacylandconservancy.org.

About U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS): For more than 80 years, NRCS and its predecessor agencies have worked in close partnerships with farmers and ranchers, local and state governments, and other federal agencies to maintain healthy and productive working landscapes by delivering conservation solutions.

Through financial and technical assistance programs, NRCS helps America's farmers, ranchers and forest landowners conserve the nation's soil, water, air and other natural resources benefiting both the landowner and the environment. For more information, visit <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/about/?cid=nrcseprd1547221>

About Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission (WCPARC): WCPARC's mission is to enhance the quality of life in the County by promoting a healthy lifestyle, efficiently providing high quality facilities and programs reflective of current and anticipated recreational needs of County residents and visitors—with particular emphasis on preserving fragile lands, water quality, wildlife habitat, creating pedestrian and greenway connections, and providing high quality services to those of all backgrounds.

WCPARC manages Washtenaw County's Natural Area Preservation Program (NAPP) which was established in 2000 by the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners through an ordinance that provides procedures and standards for purchase and protection of natural areas and agricultural land by the County.

In 2010, and again in 2020, voters chose to renew the county-wide millage that funds the program. For more information, visit <https://www.washtenaw.org/939/Natural-Areas-Preservation-Program>.



Courtesy photo. A scene from the Irwin Farm.