

Buyout Brings New Life to Barnes County House and Property

In the mid-1990s, repetitive river flooding in Barnes County, North Dakota, prompted county officials to buy out seven flood-damaged properties that were at risk for future flooding. Four of the houses were moved away from the river into other areas of the county that are outside of the floodplain. Two of the houses were sold for parts and the remaining debris was destroyed. The last house was moved to another county. Barnes County officials wanted some good to come of the land left behind. So they found new caretakers to restore the property to a safer, more natural use.

Here is the story of one of those buyouts. It is told from three perspectives: the man who sold his flood-damaged house and property to the county; the family that bought, moved and restored the damaged house; and the group that has given the old property new life.

It is, in fact, the full circle of it all.



On the move...

John Scott's house once sat in a nice wooded area along the Sheyenne River. But repetitive flooding prompted Scott to seek a government buyout of his property. The house was later auctioned and its new owner was given the task of moving the house out of the floodplain. Photo courtesy of Neal Emery.

A Man and His House

John Scott loved his red house with the small A-frame in Barnes County, North Dakota.

It sat near the banks of the Sheyenne River in a beautiful natural setting with abundant wildlife. Strangers occasionally stopped to visit—telling him stories about the good times they'd had there back in the days when his property was a park.

He could have lived in that house for life. But the river flexed its proverbial muscles one too many times, severely flooding Scott's property.

So he decided to get out. He couldn't take another flood. Meanwhile, Barnes County Emergency Manager Norma Duppler was looking for flood-damaged properties she could buy and remove from harm's way to avoid future flooding. The two situations were a match for one another.

“We feel lucky that there was a buyout and that we are where we are,” Scott said from his home in Lakebay, Washington, about 60 miles west of Seattle. “The buyout enabled us to get out of there and get back to Washington” where Scott, 62, and his companion Karen Sanders, 59, both have children living.

Scott’s family owned the Barnes County house for about 20 years. He and Sanders had lived there the last 12. The house had flooded only once before when his mother Ethel lived there. Scott didn’t think it would happen again.

But in 1996, spring snowmelt swelled the Sheyenne out of its banks and into Scott’s house.

“It flooded right up inside the house, in the floorboards, in the rugs,” Scott recalled. “We had a three-foot sandbag dike around the house and we couldn’t keep the water out. We had pumps going but we just couldn’t control it. There was two feet of water flowing around the house.”

The water stayed in the house for a week. Scott and Sanders cleaned up and began considering whether to seek a local government buyout. The couple thought they had survived the worst. They would soon discover the worst was yet to come.

A winter of record snowfall—more than 100 inches in the area—produced a spring of incredible flooding. It was the worst the state had ever seen.

“We didn’t think it would happen again but it did,” Scott said. “I came home from work and said ‘this is going to kill me this year.’ It was a good thing we had good friends or the house would have washed down the river.”

As the river was rising, Scott and his friends began building a sandbag dike. But in April, a sudden, ferocious ice storm hit—paralyzing floodfighting efforts in much of central and eastern North Dakota. The storm marked the end of Scott’s floodfight too.

“There was no way to sandbag or work in it [ice storm],” Scott said, “and we had nothing but a wood stove there. Water was damn near up to the house. We just had to get out of there and go to town. It was coming into the garage when we left. It stayed that way for about 45 days.”



*Making the climb...
The Scott house is about
to ascend to its final
resting place overlooking
a scenic Barnes County
valley. Photo courtesy of
Neal Emery.*

When Scott and Sanders returned, they found that there had been 2 feet of water in the garage and laundry room. The basement had filled with water again. The main floor was damaged, too.

“Our first thought was to clean up the mess and see if we were going to be able to live there,” Scott said. “But we were getting sick because of the mold after we got back into the house.”



A firm foundation . . .

The Emerys built a full basement (left) that provides both a foundation and extra living space for the transported house. The house was bolted to the foundation to keep the structure from shifting from the brisk winds often found in North Dakota. Photo courtesy of Neal Emery.

Scott applied for and received disaster assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). But he needed a different long-term solution.

“We figured a buyout was the best way to go,” Scott said. “I thought it was one of the nicest places in the valley around there. We fed 120 deer there with the state game and fish department. But it would have been hard to sell to someone else after they know it’s in a floodplain.”

Within a year, Scott had sold the four-bedroom house and two-acre property to Barnes County for about \$75,000. The county had been awarded a grant to purchase flood-prone properties through a Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP), administered by the State of North Dakota and funded in large part by FEMA.

Under the program, federal funds can be used to pay for up to 75 percent of a project—chosen by the state and approved by FEMA—that will reduce or prevent future disaster damages. The remaining 25 percent must come from non-federal sources. The state paid 10 percent of the buyout cost. Scott paid the remaining 15 percent from his sale proceeds, a requirement set by Barnes County.

With the sale done, Scott and Sanders moved to be closer to their children. It is a decision they don’t regret.

“We miss everybody in Valley City and we like to go back and visit,” Scott said, “but we’re glad we’re here. I don’t know what we would do if we were back there now and it happened again. We’ve gotten older. We just can’t take that kind of life anymore. In a flood situation, it’s devastating.”



At home on a hill . . .

Emery now has the best of many worlds . . . a house that can’t be flooded again by the Sheyenne River, a special piece of land and a room with a view. Photo courtesy of Neal Emery.

“Now, we’re way up on a hill,” Scott added. “We wouldn’t have moved anyplace where we would get flooded again. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime experience we wouldn’t have done again.”

New Life Begins for an Old House

Neal B. Emery can remember trick-or-treating at Ethel Scott’s house when he was a boy. Having grown up on a farm across the Sheyenne River from the Scott place, Emery, 26, never thought he would one day own the little red house with the A-frame in the middle.

But in March 1998, he found himself bidding on that house at a Barnes County auction of flood-damaged properties. Emery, together with his dad Blair won the bid for \$2,600. And the real work was about to begin.

The four-bedroom ranch house, built in the mid-1970s in a wooded area that locals considered a park, had to be moved as a condition of a government buyout. That’s because the purpose of the buyout is to permanently remove properties from high flood-risk areas—thereby stopping the personal and financial costs of being damaged, making repairs and being damaged again and again.

Although Emery says he would have loved to live by the river where he swam, fished and canoed as a kid, he knew that wasn’t an option. But he did have another choice for land—a 15-acre section of native prairie with a spectacular view of the valley about three miles away. His grandfather Neal H. Emery owned that land. And to help his grandson realize the dream of buying his first house, Emery sold the property to Neal and Blair.

What followed was a flurry of decisions—how to site the house, what kind of foundation to build, who would move it, how and when it would be moved and what other work would need to be done.

A hill overlooking the valley was chosen for the site—in part because it was near the rural water line Neal’s grandfather had installed years earlier. Locating close to that line saved the Emerys “thousands and thousands of dollars” right off the top by not having to put in water service, Blair said. Also, the hill was high enough to keep the house from being affected by a small, nearby creek that has overflowed its banks during heavy rains.

Once the site was selected, work began on digging a basement. The house movers would need at least a 4-foot-deep space to reset the house so there would be room to withdraw the underneath support beams needed to move the structure, Blair said.

So father and son decided to add another 4 feet, making it a full 8-foot-high basement and thereby doubling the living space. The full 80-foot basement, wood with concrete footings, was dug into the backside of a hill to better insulate the lower space and to create at least one well-protected corner that can be used as a storm shelter.

To prevent water problems during heavy rains, the Emerys put in drain tile and pea rock that will let the water flow away from the house, and then backfilled around the foundation.

With the basement work done, the next challenge was actually getting the house up the hill and then another 8 to 9 feet into the air so it could be slid onto the new foundation. The Emerys hired a three-generation, family-owned house moving company from Lehr, North Dakota, to do the work and the move came off without a hitch.

In all, it took about four days and about \$7,000 to separate the house from the old foundation, transport it and reset it on the new basement. The Emerys went a step further and actually bolted the house to the foundation, Neal said, to prevent the possibility of strong winds blowing the structure off the basement.

“If you live in North Dakota, you know about the wind,” Blair added. “You get too high and you get too much wind, it’s just a pain. We didn’t want to take a chance that the house could shift from high winds.”

The Emerys then concentrated on finishing the basement area first so Neal could live there while he continued to work on the rest of the house. The result is a self-contained apartment that can be used in the future by other family members or rented out.

Throughout the rest of the house, there has been extensive redesign and remodeling—opening up small bedrooms, adding other walls, paneling, repainting, replacing flooring and converting the old garage to a large living area. The remaining interior work should be finished by the summer of 2001.

Both father and son say that the project has involved both more work and expense than they originally expected—largely from adding and finishing off a full, 80-foot basement. But they say their investment is still far less than it would have been to build a new, comparable house.

“In reality, I’m probably in that house for half of what it would cost to build a new 24-by-80 home of the same size, same space, same layout,” Blair said, declining to reveal how much the project has cost so far. “From that standpoint, it’s a good deal but not necessarily a cheap deal.”

For Neal, it is the best of both worlds. He now has the house he liked to visit as a kid. And he has his grandfather’s land—a place where he had hoped he could someday live.

“It was definitely a great move,” Neal said. “Being able to go home and sit on the front deck or the back deck and look out over the river valley and see the wildlife around there, I’m very happy to have a place in the Sheyenne River Valley to call home.”

Old Park Lives Again

Black and white signs mark two openings in an otherwise overgrown area along the Sheyenne River where river enthusiasts can launch a canoe.

Nearby, in a grassy area, there is a picnic table and a three-sided steel barbecue grill. A small restroom stands off to the side. Mature trees, offering enough shade to enjoy a summer picnic, abound.

It is reputed to be a good fishing spot and has become somewhat of a refuge for wildlife and nature-lovers alike.

Once it was John Scott’s home. His house stood among the trees for more than 25 years until back-to-back floods in the mid-1990s prompted him to move out. As far back as the 1930s and long before the house was built, Scott says, the area was a park... where folks stopped by to have a picnic and where young men proposed marriage to their sweethearts.

Now it is a park again—thanks to the care and diligence of the Barnes County Wildlife Club, a non-profit organization that promotes natural resource conservation and wildlife enhancement.

The club, made up of about 700 members ages 25 and older, got involved at the invitation of Barnes County, which purchased the two-acre site and a four-bedroom house from Scott in a post-flood buyout.

The county was looking for a way that the land could be reused, but still meet the conditions imposed by state and federal funding for the buyout. Those conditions require the county to maintain the land and prevent future building there.



Thanks to the efforts of the Barnes County Wildlife Club, the Scott property is a park once again. Two canoe-launching points now provide public access to the Sheyenne, a river that has, until recently, been completely bordered by private land.

So club president Perry Kaupan presented the county's offer to the group's membership, which readily took to the idea of developing and maintaining the site.

The members put together a plan for redoing the area and submitted it to Barnes County commissioners for approval. The county, which retains ownership of the land, gave the club a green light and the project was off and running.

"Our biggest obstacle was to clean the area up," Kaupan said. "There were a lot of dead trees from the flood. We had to get a CAT in there to bury what was left after we burned the dead trees. Then we had to level the land and get it draining in the right direction. With mostly volunteer labor, that all took most of the first summer."

Next, club members put in the canoe-access areas and added the picnic table, the barbeque grill and a bathroom. A wooden-post fence they built keeps vehicular traffic on the graveled areas.

To put in the bathroom, the club first had to meet special permitting and construction specifications because of the deed restriction against new structures on buyout land. The one exception to that restriction is putting in a bathroom, when the open space is used as a park or recreation area. Kaupan said the club worked with the county emergency management office to ensure that the facility met all the necessary requirements.

In all, the project took about two years and \$18,000 to complete, Kaupan said. The club covered 25 percent of the cost with cash and with sweat equity. About 52 members worked more than 250 hours on the project. The remaining 75 percent was funded by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, which cost-shares projects throughout the state that promote fisheries.



Canoeers embrace the Sheyenne River rapids, near where the Scott house once stood. Photo courtesy of Neal Emery.

Bob Frohlich, fisheries development coordinator for the state game and fish department, said that funding for the North Dakota program comes from federal excise taxes collected on fishing and water-related items such as boats, motors, and fishing gear and equipment. Those taxes are reapportioned to the states for fish and wildlife projects.

To be considered for the state program, Frohlich said, local entities have to submit a plan and site map for the proposed project. The project must be open to the public and be free of charge and the local entity must cover its share of the project with non-federal funding sources. The state does a follow-up inspection and takes photos of the sites to document the work.

"The local entities play a big role in whether a project is successful or not," Frohlich said. "The Barnes County Wildlife Club's track record with us is really exceptional. They've proven that if they say they are going to do something, they do it, and that's a big factor" in choosing the projects.

"Another factor is if the project opens up new areas that are traditionally not developed, especially the smaller rivers and streams," Frohlich added. "The Sheyenne River and some of these other branches have been restricted for public access because it's mostly private land along the river."

The Barnes County site now provides that public access, Frohlich said, which enhances fishing and canoeing on the Sheyenne, a river that begins and ends in North Dakota.

Kaupan said the club will maintain the property—including grass cutting and other needed maintenance—as part of its agreement with the county to use the land. So far, the area hasn't flooded since the work was done. But even if it does, Kaupan estimates there won't be much damage.

By all accounts, the canoe-access project has been a success.

"It's turned out real nice," said Roger Berntson, chairman of the Barnes County Commission. "As a community, we're happy with it. You see too many of these places that are just pushed up into a pile and left. But this is attractive and useful."

Kaupan said the project has been so well received that plans are underway to do another canoe access point in the north end of the county at Baldhill Dam in 2001. Some of the club's other projects include an annual deer-feeding program, promoting area fisheries, holding conservation and fishing youth camps, and hunter education programs.

"We've had a real good response from our members," Kaupan said. "And people around here, they love it. For people just going on a picnic, they really like it because it's not crowded. It's just a nice spot to get away."

John Scott and Neal Emery agree.

"The way it's turned out is just exactly what I would have wanted to happen," said Scott.

Said Emery, "I think it's really neat. Canoeing the Sheyenne has been overlooked by people living in that area, but a lot of people like fishing there. I'm glad it's a park now where people can do that."