

A Clean Slate

New owners of infamous property look beyond its history

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Last updated 12/4/2018



A levelled area suitable for a camper has cleared away most traces of the spot where Unabomber Ted Kaczynski's cabin once stood.

For 21 years, a secluded 1.4-acre parcel of land less than half a mile east of Stemple Pass Road remained relatively untouched since the day the FBI hauled away the 10-foot by 12-foot plywood shack that served as home to Ted Kaczynski for 25 years.

Split firewood left behind by Federal agents, who stockpiled it for warming fires while they searched the property, remained stacked against the old chain link fence that surrounded the site of the now-infamous cabin. Down the hill, a haphazard barbed wired fence and a lichen-covered, homemade ladder had marked the spot of Kaczynski's small garden. On the east side of the property, a plywood "root cellar" stood surrounded by more chain-link fence.

Reminders of Lincoln's most notorious former resident seemed to permeate the small area, making it feel like a slowly decaying shrine to the Unabomber's life here.

In early 2017, Don Emerson and his wife Andy received a text from their niece, a real estate agent, who had a lead on a couple pieces of property near Lincoln she thought might be of interest. They'd been looking for property they could use as a family get away to escape the hustle and bustle of Helena.

The first property proved to be more of a home site, which wasn't really what they were after, but the second seemed to fit the bill nicely despite the fences and odd structures scattered around the patch of ground.

"The thing that amazes me most is how soothing it is up there, how peaceful it is," Andy said.

At the time, they didn't know the history of the property and came to it without any preconceived notions. Even after learning of the land's notoriety, the Emersons saw it simply for what it could be to them: a quiet place where they could spend time with family and friends. They bought the property in May 2017.

"We bought this because it was what we'd been looking for, for three years. Nothing to do with Ted," Andy said.

Some people have claimed the land once owned by the Unabomber has a weird "vibe" to it, but that's not something the Emersons feel there.

"The guy planned a lot of evil acts there, and if you read his journals...he just was an evil guy," said Don, a brigadier general in the Montana Army National Guard, who serves as the Assistant Adjutant General. "But you know what? It's beautiful up there. There a stream running through there. There's a game trail running through there."

After buying the place, he said they met as many neighbors as possible and told them what they were going to do there.

"Our plan all along was clear it off, get all of Ted's stuff off there (and) maybe throw up a little dry cabin and place for a camper or two," he said.

The Emersons began pulling out the old chain link fences and hired Lincoln's Lonnie Cox to take out some trees and grind down some stumps, but the shadow of Ted Kaczynski proved a little difficult to shake.

A month or two after buying the land, a documentary crew contacted them about doing some filming up there. The Emersons agreed, but told them to make it quick, because they were going to pull everything out of there.

As they resumed their clean up, they began to uncover the detritus Kaczynski had left behind.

"Ted was a pig," Don said. "He would open up canned goods — pork and beans and what not — and he would just throw the cans into a pile. We found piles of garbage all over. One thing we found a lot of was Hershey's Cocoa (cans). The guy was a Hershey's Cocoa junky."

Andy said they also found one of his dress shoes and a Sterno cook stove, as well as a rusted old paint can with some old towels that contained a Western Family aspirin bottle with a handwritten label on it that said "mercury, slightly dirty."

They hadn't gotten much farther into the cleanup when another film crew came calling. They wanted to talk about possibly filming scenes for their movie, "Ted K," on the site.

"They said we wanted to make this movie. I said 'no, we were done,'" Don said.

However, the film's producer, Matt Flanders, is a Helena native and his sister Jenny had graduated from high school with Andy.

“That kind of greased the wheels between my wife Andy and Matt,” Emerson said. They agreed to let them use the site and even restore it to how it looked when Kaczynski lived there, in return for property improvements.

“I hope by telling this story then cleaning up that property and getting rid of every sign of Ted will be healing for the community,” Flanders told KFBB in an interview for their special ‘Beyond the Unabomber,’ which aired last month.

The artifacts from Kaczynski’s life lent authenticity to scenes filmed for “Ted K,” but the landscape now looks considerably different.

The movie production company removed nearly all traces of both the movie and of Kaczynski’s life there. They packed up their reproduced cabin (built by Tony Stone, the film’s director), took out both the original garden fence and the replica they’d created, and they removed the “root cellar” and two log re-enforced holes Kaczynski had dug into the mountainside.

“We had the movie people fill those in,” Andy said. “I don’t want wild animals living in them, or any of my grandkids falling in them, getting hurt.”

Once the movie production finished their work, the Emerson’s had Cox go back in and finish the landscape work he’d started the year before.

Today, the property sports a level upper landing for campers and vehicles, while the lower section remains more natural, and more open, now that several trees have been removed and it’s been cleaned up.

For her part, neighbor Wendy Gehring is glad that someone is finally doing something with the place. As someone who probably dealt with Kaczynski more often than anyone during his years here, she said until recently she could still feel the weight of his negative energy whenever she’d set foot on the property.

“That stigma’s gone away. It’s not ‘Ted’s Property’ anymore. It’s somebody positive,” she said. “I like the fact these guys... are erasing all that negativity.”

With the traces of Kaczynski erased from the landscape, and the landscape itself changed, the Emersons hopes it will dissuade people from trespassing to see where he once lived.

Last summer they put up a game camera near the spring on the property to see what animals visited the area, but Don said it was an eye-opener to see how many people had trespassed. While some of the people caught on the camera were taking care of the film set for the production company, others were just “Lookie Lous.”

“I realized lots of people were still interested in going up there to see the set or see it as it looked when Ted lived there.”

Now that there’s nothing left to see, he’s less concerned, but still plans to make it clear it is private property.

“I’m not truly a ‘private property Nazi,’ but I’ll probably slap up a few private property signs. There’s an easement road there and I’ll probably slap a gate over it where it comes into our property,” he said.



A re-creation of Kaczynski's cabin stands on the spot of the original during last summer's 'Ted K' filming.

Although Ted Kaczynski will always be an undeniable part of Lincoln's history, the Emerson's improvements to the property that once belonged to him hasn't really ruffled any feathers here.

"We're glad the community is not saying 'no... we don't want it touched,'" Andy said. "We're grateful they are working with us and are OK with us moving in and making it our own."



The site as it appeared in 2016, with artifacts remaining in place from Kaczynski and his arrest 20 years earlier



A dress shoe uncovered while cleaning up the property serves as a reminder of the man who once lived there



An aspirin bottle discovered on the property bears a handwritten label 'mercury, slightly dirty.'

The Ted K Archive

A critique of his ideas & actions



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