

Buying Here: Donegal

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 By Kevin Kirkland, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Bob Donaldson/Post-Gazette

276 Roaring Run Road in Donegal, Westmoreland County, is for sale.

As a boy growing up in a small house in Lawrenceville without a yard, Father Jeremiah T. O'Shea dreamed of having a cabin in the woods.

"And I got it," he said proudly.

For 20 years, the Catholic priest's home away from the rectory was the 52-acre Roaring Run Farm at **276 Roaring Run Road** in Donegal, Westmoreland County. Now in his 70s and serving as a senior priest at St. Valentine Church in Bethel Park, he was having a hard time keeping up with the land and buildings, including an early 1800s log house and springhouse and an 1890s bank barn. So he sold it to real estate broker John Oliver.

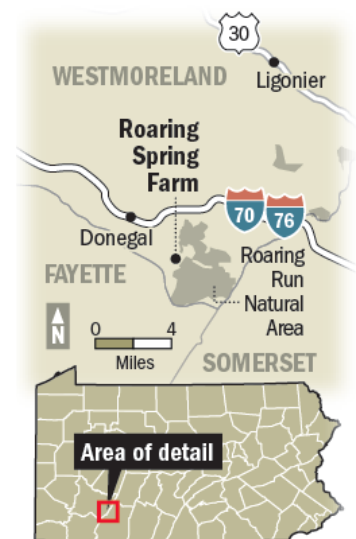
But not without first protecting it for posterity. In 2004, he sold a historic preservation easement on the property and 20 adjacent acres to the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation. The property cannot be subdivided and the land or buildings cannot be altered without the foundation's approval. It can only be used as a farm and the sale does not include rights to the natural gas beneath it. No wonder Mr. Oliver has it priced at a very reasonable \$298,000 (MLS No. 898739, www.oliverrealestate.com).

"I don't expect it to be on the market very long," he said. "We've had a lot of calls on it even before we put a sign up."

Jack Miller, director of gift planning/easements for Pittsburgh History and Landmarks, believes he knows the kind of person who will buy it.

"We're losing so much to sprawl. The next buyer is probably going to be someone looking for an area not affected by development," he said.

Mr. Miller lauded Father O'Shea for saving the property through an easement.



"He has a great appreciation for nature. It was a nice situation for everyone."

The \$74,000 for the easement came from an RK Mellon Foundation grant to preserve historically significant farms. This parcel, part of the larger Geary Farm, was eligible for the no longer extant program not only for the quality of its structures but also for its proximity to the 3,500-acre Roaring Run Natural Area and an early 1800s iron smelting furnace. The Hopewell Furnace about a quarter-mile away was operational from around 1812 to the 1850s, when it became obsolete.

Although he was a city kid, Father O'Shea said he has always loved gardening and being outdoors. His family bought a nearby piece of the Geary Farm in the 1960s. He and a priest friend bought the Roaring Run property in 1992 and used it as a second home year-round.

"Priests all have a work home. We looked at this as our 'home' home," he said.

Father O'Shea personally planted more than 1,500 pine trees on the property and removed shingles from the front of the farmhouse to expose the logs. Inside, the only sign of the farmhouse's age is some wide chestnut planks paneling the living room. None are straight but they all fit neatly together. The priests found them beneath six layers of wallpaper.

The house, which was added onto in the 1920s, has three bedrooms, one full bath, a small kitchen with white painted cabinets and a living room with a gas stove. In the 1950s, a previous owner put in a four-zone heating system with baseboard radiators and a propane-fueled boiler.

The living room ceiling is only about 7 feet high because people were shorter in the early 1800s. Father O'Shea, who is about 5 feet, 11 inches, said he often hit his head on the low doorways.

"I wore a hard hat for a while," he said, laughing.

While tearing off an old back porch, they found whiskey and medicine bottles, including one for worm medicine with the slogan "Children cry for more."

"I left all those things down there in the farmhouse for the next owner," he said.

He especially loved to take visitors to the basement of the 50-by-40-foot bank barn to see the single huge 50-foot-long oak beam that runs its length. Out in front of the house is a century-old lime spreader.

"I like history and I like to keep things natural," he said.

As he spoke to a reporter about the property, Father O'Shea said he sometimes is sorry he sold it.

"I have mixed feelings. It's a beautiful spot, but the reality is that I just can't take care of it."

So he passed it on to someone else who would care for it as much as he did.

*For more information on Roaring Run Farm, 276 Roaring Run Road in Donegal,
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