



CREMONA FARM

Jewel of the Patuxent River

By Jamie Haydel

If there is one thing Norton T. Dodge's life is not lacking, it's adventure. From learning to rope cattle on his ranch school in Arizona when he was young to acquiring dissident artwork from Russia during the Cold War, Dodge has seen it all in his 83 years.

While his interests have taken him to locations all over the country, it became clear after speaking with Dodge and his wife, that their true passion lies with the preservation of the natural landscape of their historic Cremona Farm near Mechanicsville. Located on the west bank of the Patuxent River, Cremona is the largest property in St. Mary's County under conservation easement with the Maryland Environmental Trust (MET).

The couple grew up in areas surrounded by vast stretches of open land. Norton lived in Oklahoma while Nancy resided in Illinois. These inviting landscapes inspired the Dodges to experience nature up close.

To Nancy, there was nothing better than sailing on Lake Michigan or walking through a corn field and listening to the rustling of the husks. Norton remembers going on canoe trips down the St. Lawrence, Colorado and Green Rivers with his father and not seeing another soul for days – just how he liked it.

This driving impulse to be in the natural world has carried over into their current residence surrounded by farm land, fields and a vast, untouched nature preserve.

In search of Cremona

After completion of graduate school at Harvard University, Norton landed in Maryland teaching economics at the University of Maryland and later St. Mary's College. He soon fell in love with the tidewater region and began looking for property. Dodge eventually found Cremona and bought the 750-acre historic farm in 1966.

Since then, the Dodges have expanded Cremona to a total of 1,275 acres. Today the farm contains 40 buildings and structures, several of which are entrenched in the deep history of the area and date back to 1819 or earlier.

Horse stables, miles of riding trails, historic rental houses, crops of corn, soybeans, and wheat, and a vineyard also dot the landscape. In addition, Cremona contains nearly every imaginable kind of ecosystem and wild animal of the area. The forests, marshes, fields, waterfront and creeks are home to everything from foxes and minks to terrapin, eagles, swans, geese and song birds.

The Farm is also the base for a long-term terrapin research project that has involved several universities.

History abounds

There are a number of historic buildings at Cremona. The spacious brick Main House, noted for its remarkable staircase, was built in 1819. Sam's Cabin, which dates from the early 19th century, was occupied by a man named Sam who was born a slave and lived in the cabin until the 1930s.

The property also contains several old barns, including the De La Brooke barn built in 1815 or earlier. Placed on the



Cremona Creek in Winter



The main house

National Register about two years ago, it is yet to be restored.

The farm harbors nine tobacco barns. "Saving tobacco barns is essential so that an important part of Maryland's history is not lost forever," says Dodge.

Also, the tradition of foxhunting, which originated in this country at De La Brooke, the adjoining property, has continued at Cremona to the present.

After having lived at Cremona for so long, the Dodges have seen their fair share of environmental degradation. White swans that used to winter at Cremona by the hundreds have dwindled. Water pollution in the river has steadily worsened over the years, while the property has also been plagued by invasive species, shoreline erosion, an oil spill and air pollution resulting primarily from a nearby power plant.

Saving the land

In addition to these setbacks, there is also the ever present threat of encroaching residential sprawl. The Dodges have placed their property under a perpetual easement with MET, so as to leave nothing to chance.

"Both of us care very much about maintaining large areas of woodland and open space for the enjoyment of future generations. We've seen so many farms and forests cut to pieces by development that we've become very protective of Cremona and appreciate the role that MET has played in preservation," says Nancy.

With two perpetual conservation easements protecting the land, the Dodges can now look confidently to the future of Cremona. After all, it is not just a farm, but an



About MET

A statewide land trust governed by a citizen board of trustees and affiliated with the Department of Natural Resources, the Maryland Environmental Trust was established in 1967 by the Maryland General Assembly.

MET is one of the oldest and most successful land trusts in the country. The trust promotes the protection of open land through its Land Conservation Program, Monitoring and Stewardship Program and Local Land Trust Assistance Program. MET also provides grants to environmental education projects through the Keep Maryland Beautiful Program.

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opportunity for archeological, historic and environmental exploration.

The couple hopes to pursue future projects like oyster restoration, organic farming, tracking air and water pollutants, hosting environmental field-trips, continuing research on the terrapin population, and conducting studies of the fauna and flora of the woods and marshes.

The Dodges will be conducting oral interviews with local people who know about the area's history, and will be organizing archaeological digs of past structures and shell refuse on the property.

Through environmental preservation, Cremona will enable the Dodges and others to continue experiencing a lifestyle of adventure. ■

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