



A sign of the times: Estate breakups change the face of Maryland's past.

THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD.

As suburbia spreads out, Maryland's Blue Bloods move on.

ON THE FIRST SATURDAY OF EACH month, privileged equestrians from Montgomery and neighboring counties gather at the Eaton Hills Hunt Club dressed in scarlet coats, white cravats and black velvet bowlers. At precisely 8:00 a.m., a copper horn sounds a muted but distinct tune signaling the hunters to mount their horses. On cue, 40 eager hounds sing out their own baleful music. Pulling eagerly at their chains, they, too, are ready for another Eaton Hills fox hunt to begin.

"Very soon all this will be gone," says former Maryland Senator Daniel Horn, standing in a dewy field on a crisp Octo-

ber morning presiding over this Saturday's hunt. "Only 20 years ago, the Allison Club (a former thoroughbred farm, now defunct) bordered us to the east, and Sharp's Hill lay to the south." Horn points off to the south, and one can see the roofs of homes interspersed through groves of oak and pine; there are not a lot of homes, not inexpensive homes, but homes nonetheless.

"There was plenty of acreage and plenty of solitude then," he says. "But now look at it. There are too many people, too many houses. In a few years, we'll be staging hunts in people's backyards. Or not at all!"

The Allison Club, Sharp's Hill and a handful of other private sanctuaries for the rich—once sprawling farms of hundreds, even thousands of acres—have been replaced by "planned communities," as club members derisively call them. Estates formerly belonging to some of the nation's wealthiest families have been transformed into two- and three-acre plots for the upper middle class who have graduated from the fashionable suburbs of Bethesda and McLean to the more pastoral climes of Montgomery County.

New projects in this part of Montgomery County by no means cater to the impecunious. Prices for new homes start at around \$250,000 and go to over a million dollars. Still, the old and sometimes intractable super-rich find it hard to coexist with their new neighbors. Begrudgingly, many of them move on; and as they go, they leave more and more of the old estates open to new development.

The new money.

Real estate developers such as Montgomery County's William Cochrane, a firebrand entrepreneur who buys land from the wealthiest and sells to the wealthy, have adjusted comfortably to the new order that the past 10 years have wrought. Sitting behind the wheel of his vintage 1938 Dodge "Woodie" overseeing the survey and division of his latest acquisition, the Old Sewell House, he seems oblivious to the slow-boiling controversy that surrounds him.

"It's very simple," says Cochrane. "My clients are looking for a few acres and solitude. They don't need half a county; one or two acres will do. So they come to me. I have half a dozen properties now under development. The people who sold me this property sold it because they grew weary of fighting the inevitable. They realize how close DC has become. They know their property is worth a fortune. They know more and more people are coming, like it or not. And they know that if they can't get used to having neighbors, they're going to have to move. When they make that decision, they come to me. I pay top dollar, and I charge top dollar."

Cochrane has no romantic illusions about the Maryland Hunt Country. He plays a numbers game. And he often

BY SUE ANNE FRANK

RAMBLER

wins. But lately, Cochrane is beginning to feel the heat of a handful of old residents who refuse to be bullied and bought out.

A group of old-money landowners has formed a coalition to save what's left of the Hunt Country life; they are making no concessions to Cochrane and others like him. Their weapons? Money and influence.

The old money.

1980 Census records indicate that Montgomery County's median household in-

come is just over \$70,000. Compared to the national average of \$20,000, this makes Montgomery County one of the five wealthiest areas in the nation. Interestingly, the greatest concentration of this vast wealth lies in the hands of perhaps 20 or 30 families like the Ashcroft-Wellmans.

The power and influence of this elite group of landowners extends far beyond the county line. Records on file at the Montgomery County Courthouse list at least nine influential national legislators

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Veronica's Bash

"What is Halloween without the pumpkins?" asked Veronica Ashcroft-Wellman as she surveyed the unloading of a thousand of the 30-pound orbs onto the front lawn of her verdant

Montgomery County estate. The jack-o-lanterns will be part of an elaborate prop for one of the country's most fabulous Halloween balls to be held next week at Ashcroft Farm, Veronica's ancestral home.



Veronica: Party Queen

The annual ball, a 110-year-old Ashcroft tradition, draws hundreds of dignitaries from the worlds of art, business and politics. Last year's guests included Senator Lance Duncan, actor Robert McCarron, Katarina Ostrovsky of Metropolitan Ballet fame and British ambassador Sir Edward Black. And if Veronica has her way, this year's party will be even more spectacular. It promises to be second to none for sheer opulence.

Guests will dine on the rare delicacies of French Nouvelle Cuisine prepared by Master Chef Louis LeClerc of Washington's Ma Maison Restaurant. They'll be entertained by the famous Foggy Bottom Band under the direction of Vince Goodman, who, by the way, was a long-time friend of Veronica's late father Cyrus Ashcroft III. And they'll come bedecked in costumes that make Hollywood's most garish productions seem pale by comparison. To all this, add the setting of Ashcroft.

The farm, a sprawling sanctuary of pine and oak forest and pastureland,

commands over 120 acres of Montgomery County's most idyllic vistas. Dominating all this is Ashcroft Manor house, built by Veronica's great-great grandfather in 1872. The farm is one of the county's last remaining colonial estates of this grandeur, and Veronica has maintained it in the finest tradition.

"I have a vested interest in this countryside," says Veronica. "Once a year I like to share the magic of this place with my friends. And what better time for magic than Halloween?"

Magic may be just what Veronica needs, because once the idle chatter has waned, talk is sure to turn to the sweeping changes that are afoot in Montgomery County.

The director of Ashcroft Trust and a close personal associate of the Ashcroft family, Colonel Robert Marston, talked to our Keyhole reporter about those changes. "Of course land is an issue in Montgomery County these days. Veronica makes no secret of her desire to stop the influx of new residents to the county. She sees it as being the only way of preserving her way of life.



Marston: Here To Stay

"The many friends and relatives who will be attending this year's party are fully supportive of her position. They, too, want Ashcroft to endure as the tradition it has grown to be in the past century. That will certainly be a topic of conversation at the party."

The Halloween Ball at Ashcroft—regardless of the 'political weather'—promises to be a grand old time. For how many more years that will remain true, one can only guess.

IN THE MARYLAND TRADITION



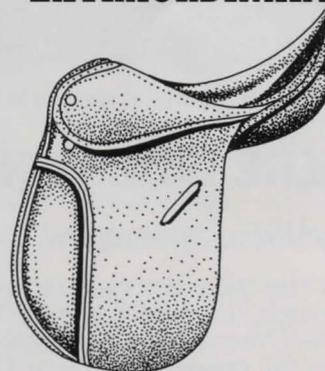
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