



GREAT MEADOW

By

William Semple

Photographs courtesy of Great `Meadows Foundation

In June of 1962, a curious 3.3 mile stretch of four-lane highway was completed between the Virginia towns of Marshall and Delaplane, about fifty miles west of Washington, D.C. The four lanes connected two two-lane roads with no apparent purpose. But N. Frank Neer, a farmer living only two miles from Delaplane and the author's grandfather, knew what was up.

Months earlier, Neer had taped a blueprint of the VDOT road plan for Interstate 66 next to his basement television, literally seeing the writing on the wall from his office desk. His was not just an

idle fear: he also witnessed the construction from his church pew each Sunday morning. After each service he would go home to rant and rave about the danger Interstate 66 posed to the countryside.

I recall his thundering, "They are going to build the rest of that damn road over my dead body!" Unfortunately for the crusty old farmer, VDOT almost did just that - by 1983, the highway stretched from The Theodore Roosevelt Bridge on the Potomac to beyond the Shenandoah River, running just a hundred yards from where he was eventually buried at historic Piedmont Parish just up the road from Delaplane.

Despite Neer's fears, the destruction of his cherished rural environment has not materialized, though no one says it's quite as pristine as it once was. Thanks to the Piedmont Environmental Council, the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, legions of landowners willing to protect their property against the encroachments of Walt Disney theme parks, and county officials and state legislators who appreciate the beauty of the Commonwealth, a historic portion of the Virginia countryside was saved — farm after contiguous farm will remain so forever.

Over the past two decades, per-

haps one man and one decision best illustrate the struggle and commitment to what Rudy Abramson describes in his classic, *Hallowed Ground: Preserving America Forever* – a man standing ankle-deep in a bog just nine months before the final section of Interstate 66 was completed, a man surveying an abandoned 640-acre farm at the corner of Route 17 and Old Tavern Road just two miles from the newly completed Interstate. A man named Arthur W. “Nick” Arundel.

Arundel was on a practical mission: to find a new venue for The Virginia Gold Cup. Since 1924, the Gold Cup had leased its course at Broadview near an increasingly busy intersection in Warrenton, but the property owners’ reluctance to renew and the rapid escalation in property values forced the organizers of the historic steeplechase to find another long-term lease or to buy a permanent venue somewhere else.

An even more urgent matter concerned Arundel himself, who lived nearby. He had learned that the abandoned Fleming Farm had become slated for development. An ardent conservationist, founding member of the Piedmont Environmental Council, and publisher of the local community newspaper, Arundel was horrified by the thought of 500 houses jammed betwixt the historic little village of the Plains and Warrenton. He knew what a massive development could mean to the entire Northern Piedmont, well before Disney challenged the hearts and souls of residents, indeed the nation, more than a decade later.

Even the casual acquaintance knows that Nick Arundel, an ex-Marine, is always prepared to go into battle alone. At Age 77, he still reports to his editorial offices every day. But they also know him to be a visionary who would have realized that the future of the Gold Cup required a community solution with a mission that



Nick Arundel in the old crayfish field.



extended beyond the race itself. Yet nothing quite prepared anyone (except perhaps his wife Peggy) for the passion and commitment he displayed in responding to this challenge. Nor were they prepared for the result.

Arundel immediately purchased the Fleming property for \$2 million, rallied his friends, and established the Meadow Outdoors Foundation, a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit charitable organization dedicated to preserving open space and making it avail

able to the public. Then he personally set about to turn what was locally known as “the old crayfish field” into the most modern race course in the world. He studied courses in Europe and America, incorporating the latest advances in course design, soil technology, water drainage, and sound systems.

Asked why he was giving so much of his time and effort to the undertaking, Arundel - a former amateur steeplechase rider - said, “I just want to give something



Early Spring at Great Meadow

back to this sport, and further open space, visual order, and the spirit of volunteerism here. In the first third of your life you learn, in the second you earn, and then finally you give it all back.” In 1983 Arundel deeded the core land of 100 acres to the Foundation, and seven years later he completed transfer of an additional 70 acres to complete the facility.

The outcome of all this is nothing short of magnificent. The Great Meadow racecourse is the only combination timber and hurdle course in Virginia where all of the jumps can be seen from the rail. The beautifully maintained course ensures sure footing, true athleticism, and outstanding racing. The infrastructure allows for a crowd of almost 50,000. The buildings are

handsome and functional. At a typical race, over 170 tents dot the countryside.

George Strawbridge, president of The National Steeplechase Association, calls the Great Meadow racecourse, “the crown jewel of American steeplechasing.” Contested on the first Saturday of each May, The Gold Cup today is also without question the crown jewel of the National Steeplechase Circuit.

The non-profit Foundation has struggled to overcome the misconception of Great Meadow as nothing more than a fancy jockey club - not too surprising because the two premier events, the Gold Cup and its sister race in the fall, The International Gold Cup, at first appear to be

expensive. The Gold Cup costs \$75 for general admission, and access to the Members Hill is sold out well in advance. But the \$75 pays for six passengers and parking, so the price of admission for the general public can be as low as \$12.50 per person, about the cost of parking in downtown Washington for a day.

Further, Arundel’s vision from the very beginning extended well beyond one race: since 1988 the Foundation has hosted the Family 4th of July Celebration, a huge fireworks display. In 1990, the Fauquier Youth Soccer league began to hold practices and games, the first of many large community activities to call Great Meadow home. In 1993, a stadium was completed to provide a new home for events such as



Barbershoppers at Fourth of July.

National Rocketry Championships

polo, horse shows, and pony club games. In 1994, Great Meadow inaugurated Friday Twilight Polo, held under the lights at the Great Meadow Stadium. Founded by Nick Arundel's son Peter, the Great Meadow Polo Club draws huge crowds weekly and gives lessons at the area's only polo school. In 1995, the Steeplethon Course, designed to test horses over obstacles found while foxhunting, was added to the Spring Gold Cup race card. The Middleburg Classic Horse Show has called Great Meadow home since 1995, and each spring and fall, three-day event riders compete in horse trials. New this year, Great Meadow will host a Hunter and Sport Horse Breeding Show

featuring event, dressage, and hunter horses together for the first time.

In addition to "horses for courses," Great Meadow hosts (see 2004 Schedule Below) bike tours, dog agility trials, cross country meets, and a rodeo. Thousands high-school cross country athletes compete each November at Great Meadow for the State Championship meet. In May, the world's largest model rocket and scholarship contest, Team America Rocket Contest, will take place for the second time, when teams of students from across the country compete for prizes and scholarships. These budding scientists

aren't just launching ordinary toy rockets: rockets must be able to reach heights of over 1,250 feet and safely return to earth a *raw* egg.

Perhaps the least known fact is that the grounds are open daily to the public when not in use for other scheduled events, a haven for paint easels or just a stroll.

This past winter, Great Meadow launched a new volunteer program, the FROGS—Friends of Great Meadow to assist in such events as Children's Field Day, the Riders Up! Reading Days at the Fauquier County Public Library and the Great Meadow Gallop 5K Fun Run. The Foundation is supported by public contributions, which in addition to income earned from race day activities and other paid events, are used to support the staff, grounds, and programs.

So a jockey club Great Meadow is most definitely not. From its humble ori-



gins, this *great* meadow has become synonymous with the other names that are such a cherished part of the historic countryside. In Nick Arundel's own words:

I cannot imagine a reason for being in these Virginia foothills without pastures, woodlands, and streams. Something will have gone out of us as a people if in our times we let the remaining open countryside near our Nation's Capital be destroyed

We need available to us forever these fields, marshlands, and streams now bearing names like Bull Run, Paris Mountain, Goose Creek and Great Meadow, even if the families of the future can never do more than drive past the edge, look in, and return home better and stronger of spirit.

William T. Semple is a freelancer writer, foxhunter, musician and realtor living in Delaplane, VA who rides either his bike or his horse through some of the Piedmont's most beautiful countryside

2004 Great Meadow Calendar of Events

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| <p>May 1 - Virginia Gold Cup Spring Races</p> <p>May 22 - Team America Rocketry Challenge</p> <p>May 22-23 - MS 150 Bile Tour</p> <p>May 29-30 - CDCTA 3-D Horse Trials</p> <p>May 31 - CDCTA Breeding Day</p> <p>June-September - Friday Twilight Polo</p> <p>June 13 - Pony Club Games</p> <p>July 4 - Great Meadow July 4th Celebration</p> <p>July 31-August 6 - National Rocketry Championships</p> <p>August-November - High School Cross Country Track Meets</p> <p>August 7 - Twisted K Rodeo</p> <p>August 21- PJW-50 Bike Tour</p> | <p>September 9 - Golden Retriever Agility Trial</p> <p>September 11 - Belgian Sheepdog Agility Trial</p> <p>September 11 - Great Meadow Invitational Cross Country Meet</p> <p>September 12 - Great Meadow Fun Run</p> <p>September 12 - Warrenton Kennel Club Agility Trial</p> <p>September 17 - Polo Championship</p> <p>September 21-26 - Middleburg Classic Horse Show</p> <p>October 2 - Octoberfest Cross Country Meet</p> <p>October 16 - International Gold Cup Fall Races</p> <p>October 30-31 - CDCTA 3-Day Horse Trial</p> <p>November 13 - Virginia High School League Cross Country Championships</p> <p>December 4-5 - Sighthound Lure Coursing</p> |
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