

Family History

Since 1929, Cockrell's Marine Railway has been servicing the Bay's workboats. Now the yard's third and fourth generations are looking to bring more recreational boaters into their fold.

By Wendy Mitman Clarke – Chesapeake Bay Magazine

Whether it's the sag of its once jaunty sheer, or all that it has to say about the Chesapeake's past and present, there's something about seeing a skipjack on the beach that just makes you feel bad all over. And the Mary Somers, with her back broken and her planks held together more by inertia than anything else, looks about as downtrodden as a skipjack can. Andy Cockrell shakes his head at the sight. "The challenge," he says, "will be finding some good wood on her." If anybody can find some good wood on the Mary Somers, it's going to be the Cockrells, who are among a handful of Bay families with the know-how, handed down through generations, of skipjack construction, refitting and restoration. "I remember when I was a kid playin' on 'em, but Dad's the expert," says Andy Cockrell. "He's worked on a lot of them."

Today, Cockrell's Marine Railway on Virginia's Little Wicomico River is an amalgam of the past and present—and a future with intriguing prospects. Right next to the massive railway (once powered with a Model A engine) built in 1929 by Dandridge Addison Cockrell Sr., is the 25-ton boat lift that his grandson Andy added about four years ago. The railway can still haul a 30-ton boat, but it's far more efficient to use the modern lift to pluck a boat straight out of the water than to go through the laborious, careful blocking involved in hauling one on the railway. Out back in a tin-roofed shed is a sawmill with a 56-inch blade and two 15-foot-long carriages, capable of cutting entire keels and spars from a single tree. Out front there will soon be a brand new bathhouse to cater to the recreational boatowners who will be using the dozens of new slips going in. There's also a paint booth in the works, for recoating fiberglass topsides and decks. Cockrell's may be best known for its history and, most recently, its hand in restoring the Reedville Fishermen's Museum skipjack Claud W. Somers (from the same builder as the Mary Somers), but no one's standing still around here.

The yard's history began when Dandridge Sr. built the railway to work on the dozens of skipjacks whose owners couldn't get dredging licenses in the 1920s but who still wanted the boats to work. "They'd run watermelons, lumber, anything they could," says Dandridge Jr., now 79. "My dad converted a lot of them to power. He'd plug the center well, caulk it, take the mast and bowsprit off and then turn them to power. A whole lot of 'em they pulled ashore." His father supplemented his railway work with spring and summertime pound-netting. "They were fishing for herring and shad. And everybody was trotlining then, because the crab pot hadn't been invented."

Dandridge Jr. began working on boats too, and the walls of the pleasant home behind the railway where he and his wife Mary Priscilla live are covered with photos documenting the times. He pulls down one that shows a gaff-rigged 16-footer under construction, his

father and a fellow worker clamping planks into place. “That was Mr. Bob Bryant,” Dandridge says. “He worked at the yard at the time.” Andy laughs, remembering, “He’d chew a half a bag of tobacco in the morning and half in the afternoon and put it all in at the same time!”

Though he worked with his father for awhile, Dandridge Jr.’s heart wasn’t in the railway, and he went on to other things. But for his son Andy, the choice was easy. He worked alongside his grandfather as he was growing up and during summers when he attended Virginia Tech. After graduating, he started renting the yard in 1972 from Dandridge Sr. By then, he says, arthritis had crippled his grandfather, and along with the wooden workboats coming to the railway, recreational yachts started showing up. Wood started to give way to fiberglass. “Then the big land grab came along, and everybody started moving in,” Andy says. The railway also had a pile driver, so he started building docks. The side business took off as more people moved to the Little Wicomico, building homes and bringing their boats along with them, and it hasn’t slowed down. Andy’s son Myles, 21, has taken over most of the boatyard business and boat repair, and Andy heads up the marine construction end of things.

Sitting at the kitchen table today in Dandridge and Mary Priscilla’s home, the three generations of Cockrell men are a study in sky-blue eyes, shy grins and long limbs. While Mary Priscilla serves up a lunch of fried croaker, cold roast beef, steamed asparagus, sweet potatoes and iced-tea (with hot bread pudding and milk for dessert), the three of them piece together the yard’s history, with Dandridge occasionally getting up to pull out a scrapbook, or bring a framed photo down off the wall for reference or to spark a story.

About two years ago, they helped the Reedville Fishermen’s Museum restore the Claud W. Somers, built in 1911 by William Thomas Young on Virginia’s Eastern Shore. Not unlike most skipjacks still around after decades of hard work on the water and, lately, the plague of neglect, the skipjack was in rough shape when it was donated to the museum and towed to Cockrell’s. With advice and direction from his father and devoted help from more than a dozen museum volunteers, Andy Cockrell oversaw most of the restoration. It started with finding the good wood and entailed essentially dismantling the boat, saving what could be saved and fabricating anew what couldn’t, which was about 75 percent of the boat—ribs, planking, keel, sideboards. Most of the new wood was local pine and oak, and even Andy was impressed with the 36-foot-long, 18-by-18-inch log for the keel: “It was an awful big stick of wood,” he says. All the new wood was cut on the Railway’s sawmill. For the Somers’s new spars, museum volunteers located four Norway spruce trees in Syracuse, N.Y., that were cut and delivered to Cockrell’s. The Cockrells rough-cut the trees to an octagonal shape that volunteers then hand-planed to finished quality. The mast was 11 inches square at the base, tapering to 6 inches at its 62-foot top. “It was nice to watch the Claud being restored,” says Mary Priscilla. “It was fun to watch it. The day we put the mast in . . . you could hardly get in the lane for all the people.” “It was a lot of fun,” Andy says, although all three of them laugh about tripping over eager volunteers throughout the project. “They were a good group,” Dandridge says. “They were interested in it.” That Dandridge was able to help with the restoration and pass his know-how directly to Andy and his grandson Myles was probably the most valuable part of the entire job. It’s one reason the Mary Somers is here now—the owner wants to tap into that knowledge as he restores the boat.

The massive sawmill is just one part of Cockrell's that seems, in some ways, like a working museum of an early Bay boatyard. In the main shed, masts hang overhead in the rafters while an old Chris Craft undergoes work sitting on a trailer. Along one whole wall is a long workbench covered with tools—old and new—while wooden blocks the size of Virginia hams swing from beams, and battalions of clamps hang along the walls. Vintage planers and band saws share space with more modern table saws and drill presses, as well as a couple of recliners. The gears and mechanisms of the old railway itself—protected from the elements under an ell off the main shed—are a historian's dream. This is not a fancy boatyard shop—it's a workplace, dusty and gritty, with maritime history in the very dirt underfoot. Some of this will certainly be changing soon, though. Andy and Myles want to remodel the shop and add the paint booth. Most of Myles's new boat work is on fiberglass boats, or glassing over wooden boats and Awl gripping them. And the business last year received a permit to add some 100 slips to its existing 20. As of midwinter, 25 new slips had been added and were being electrified. Andy planned to have the new bathhouse built in spring.

As more and more people move to the region and want to use the river for fun and fishing, it only seems natural that Cockrell's should change to accommodate them. When Dandridge Sr. started the boatyard, he catered to the boats of his time; now his grandson and great-grandson are doing the same. Looking around, you can't help but hope some things will not change—like Mary Priscilla's bread pudding, or the throwback sawmill and the hard-worked wooden boats it has served so well over the years. Given the Cockrell family's roots along this quiet stretch of river, there's little doubt the past will remain a tangible part of the business's future.