

# Bellaire's Dorris Carves Home

(The following article was authored by Hal Lundgren of the *Houston Chronicle* for use in *Pro*, the official game publication of the National Football League. It is reprinted with permission of the author and of NFL Properties, copyright 1980.)

Andy Dorris was strolling across the 10½ acres where he lives when he felt something wiggle under one of his moccasins. He looked down. The bright bands of a coral snake caught his eye.

"The snake was two feet long," Dorris says. "It scared the hell out of me. It's one of the deadliest snakes there is. But fortunately, its teeth are small. They have to chew through your clothing, then your skin. I don't know if a coral has ever killed a person. The one under my foot didn't have a chance. I killed him with the machete I was carrying."

The occasional sighting of a poisonous snake can be more intimidating than having to play at least two games a year against the Pittsburgh Steelers. In the piney woods an hour north of Houston where Dorris lives with his wife and three children, almost anything could show up under his moccasins. Surprises are part of the enchantment of the Dorris property, which is a mile and one-half from the nearest paved road.

The fact that he was carrying a machete in the first place should tell you something. "I had shopped for land around the wooded areas near Houston," says Dorris, 29. "I couldn't find anything at first. Everybody we talked to said the land would cost \$5,000 an acre. When I found this place, I liked it right away. It was even easier to like when they told me the price—\$3,000 an acre."

The Dorrises still owned a house in New Orleans when Andy purchased the thickly forested property near Houston in the fall of 1979. Dorris and Terry Stieve, a guard who played for New Orleans then but now is with St. Louis, started driving to Houston on weekends.

"There was nothing but trees and underbrush on the place," Dorris says. "We had a lot of clearing to do."

Dorris and Stieve tried to work nonstop, except for food and sleep.

"Once we came over for a week and never slowed down," Dorris says. We went three days without water, except for what we brought to drink. We slept in a small camper we hauled over. We had no other facilities of any kind.

"Eventually, we got so dirty we couldn't stand each other. We left, drove over to Lake Conroe, and jumped right in. Just Terry and me and a bar of Ivory soap. It felt magnificent. We got strange looks from people who might have thought we were uncivilized. But that didn't bother me."

The country folk feel more comfortable giving out smiles than strange looks, an attraction that instantly caught Dorris's eye. Yet there have been days when people gawked. One of them was the day Andy established credit with a bank in nearby Conroe.

"I brought three \$1,000 cashier's checks to the bank, but I wasn't in

called the Oilers' office. Dania Fisher (secretary to Oilers coach Bum Phillips) was on the line. She didn't know my voice that well, so we played a game of questions. She must have had an information sheet on me, so she started asking questions from it. She wanted to know the names of my children. When I got them all correct, she was convinced."

Mary Dorris also raises some eyebrows in the community. When she grocery shops, Meredith, 8, Zack, 4, and Sam, 2, accompany her. Meredith and Zach push second and third shopping carts behind their mother.

"Some people look at you as though you're crazy when you put eight packages of toilet paper into your shopping cart," she says. "People have questions about the quantity of food. One lady asked me, 'Do you run a restaurant?' I told her, 'No. I'm just feeding Andy Dorris.'"

"We're trying to keep organized," Dorris says. "If we do it right, we only have to go to the grocery store once a month. With the store thirty minutes away, we can't be running down there all the time."

When the tree thinning and land clearing was completed, more than an acre of the property was a designated garden. The first crops of tomatoes, onions, squash, watermelons, pumpkins, and assorted beans were harvested this year.

"The first thing we got from the garden was turnips," Andy says. "We made the kids eat them. We told them we didn't want any sour looks. We asked them to eat each bite like it was a chocolate cupcake. We'll try to raise everything we consume. Our objective is to become self-sufficient."

"We've already had one surplus. We're getting about ten eggs a day. That's more than we can use. We wind up feeding them to the dogs."

To go with the eggs, the fruits, and the vegetables, there will be fowl and beef provided by turkey and cattle raised on the property. From time to time—depending on Dorris's aim—venison might show up on the menu.

"We built this as a third level to the barn," he says, pointing upward to a sturdy, room-sized observation deck. "We can read or get some sun up there. He feints a look around to make sure a game warden isn't within hearing range, then he confides, "I might be able to spot a deer from up there, too!"

Not all four-legged creatures on the premises will be for consumption. "We'll keep four or five horses," he says, "enough for the kids to play with."

There are two 75-pound boxers should an uninvited guest show up. Another four-legged pet was moved out at a vet's suggestion. The departed family member was a red-blooded, antelope-chasing, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer-type African lion.

"We really like him," says Dorris, who bought the lion shortly after his birth.

"We only had him a couple of months when we went up to Ohio and



ANDY DORRIS

discipline. Even if it's a lion."

"We have one consolation," Andy says. "He's still in the neighborhood. He's in a cage out on the road at Salty's Bar. It's the only bar in these parts where you can have a drink and see a lion at the same time."

The Dorris children may have had to cope with a lion. But they're far from the perils of urban life.

"We're away from most problems," he says. "We don't worry about them playing in the street because there are no streets. We don't worry about them falling in with the wrong crowd because there are no children's crowds. There are only two kids anywhere close to us and they're both good influences. Our biggest concern is that they might get lost."

Anyone could lose himself in the thick forest that surrounds them. A 3,330-acre paper company forest borders on one side of their property. A 7,500-acre estate touches another edge. A national forest of even larger proportion rests on another side of their land.

"I don't know how big the national forest is, but I'm told you can walk for a hundred miles and see nothing but trees. The edge of the forest is fifty yards from our front porch. I could take someone a quarter mile into the forest and spin him around three times and he might never find his way out."

"Mary and I have a strict rule about the forest. The kids don't go outside our fence."

Meredith doesn't need to be reminded of safety rules. She realized she wasn't in suburbia the first morning she made her long trek to meet the school bus last fall.

"I like it up here," Meredith says. "Even better than in the city. But sometimes it's scary."

Especially when day has broken and owls, snakes, javelinas, and other creatures are about. "Bugs, too," she says. "I don't like them."

Her father finally quieted her uneasiness when he dispatched Bo and Whiskey, the 75-pound boxers, to walk her to the bus.

"Really, almost everything that's happened with the kids has been positive," he says.

"We're a closer family. Meredith and Zach play together better than

dozed down enough to Robin Hood's men to they sawed up most of the Dorris fireplace. burned off or gave away.

Dorris also was getting another source. A friend unlimited supply of 12-foot telephone poles. Andy weight at 300 to 400 pounds know. He lifted them all

Two seasons ago, have had trouble hoisting poles. At 238 pounds it quick enough, but he was a threat to finish last if assembled all its def for an arm-wrestling ch

"I thought I was heavy 238, but not everyone says.

The Oilers' coaching pass rush, but felt he needed 15 or 20 pounds to defeat run. A man who knew receiving a pink slip, want it to happen again his weight to 255 in 1979 process, did more than 45-man roster. He to Young's job at left end.

"Andy came to us season and asked what do to contribute in 1979? Phillips, Houston's defensive coach.

"He already was a rusher. Somebody with could play right end. But we had Elvin Bethea. So we told Andy he had needed to play left strength.

"The left end has to tell our people it's play on that side because of the offenses have tackle on the right side. end on the right side means the defensive left end a lot of double teaming

"Andy said he'd be a came back. He was. We us in 1978, he could run. But the difference is now and then is that e Now he can get into upfield (to the outside) grab a shoulder and with the blocker inside spreading around him.

"A good offensive tackle back to wait for a quarterback make his move. The blocks him. Now that's enough to attack, offense don't know if Andy will with his quickness. At puts that much more powerful offensive tackle.

"I noticed the difference He got all excited after Rayfield Wright (then Cowboys) for the first wasn't the same player he had been in earlier was still the first time anything against him. reason to be excited.

"In effect, what Andy added the weight and started his career over. Fans wouldn't find that

caught Dorris's eye. Yet there have been days when people gawked. One of them was the day Andy established credit with a bank in nearby Conroe.

"I brought three \$1,000 cashier's checks to the bank, but I wasn't in my best clothes," Dorris says.

"I walked into the bank wearing a straw hat, faded jeans, and a western shirt. I told them I was a pro football player who was moving into a place north of town. Everyone I spoke to at the bank must have thought, 'Shu-u-ure, he is.'"

"One of the officers called me to his phone after a few minutes. He had

Goldwyn-Mayer-type African lion.

"We really like him," says Dorris, who bought the lion shortly after his birth.

"We only had him a couple of months when we went up to Ohio and left him with a vet. The vet specializes in exotic animals. When we came back ten days later, the vet suggested we get rid of him. He said that was the meanest lion he'd ever dealt with."

"The lion was fine unless we reprimanded him," Mary says. "He wouldn't be pushed around. I won't have a pet that won't conform to our

and money, the 10-pound creature walk her to the bus.

"Really, almost everything that's happened with the kids has been positive," he says.

"We're a closer family. Meredith and Zach play together better than they ever have. In New Orleans, I cut the grass alone. Now we try to make family projects out of everything we can. Zack is my tool handler, my assistant foreman."

"Zack seems to enjoy the country much more than the city," says Mary. "He's accepted responsibility. He does things without being asked."

"The kids still behave like kids. They fight. They get into things they're not supposed to get into. But I think they've done very well."

The children are drawn into their parents' projects, often because they're the only available labor supply.

"One of Mary's projects is the grass," Andy says. "We've put more than 500 pounds of seed in front of the house. And we need more."

After the house and barn were constructed, Andy's projects included clearing most of the trees and building a fence.

"Folks up here don't like the pine because it's so mealy," he says. "We've taken most of it out. But we've left oak and hickory and other good hardwoods."

Dorris and two hired helpers bull-

anything against him. Reason to be excited.

"In effect, what And added the weight and start his career over. ans wouldn't find that to do."

Dorris was the unknown 1979. Right end Elvir been chosen for seven. Bowls, nose tackle Cu six. Yet Dorris logged last season than either six years of paychec football, Andrew Micha sunk his roots.

After growing up in C to college at New I where he and Mary Cleveland's fourth year the 1973 draft. Later in Browns traded him to draft choice. "That y land, I had my first th somewhere in the c recalls. "I began k place...and then one day

Dorris was traded to then was sent to New fall. Four years late traded him to Seattle. released Andy in Octob lips invited him to HC accepted the invitation a free agent.

"I have nothing but football," he says. "I m a place like this even could never have happ if I'd been in any oth don't mean just the having five months in was the schedule I need our place."

His salary includes er ble income to propel diesel Mercedes 56 mil the Oilers' practice fi 112-mile daily round tr season, 672 miles for his week. Still, fuel costs h \$80 per month.

In the early days at seemed the family's f call would take a lot r from the Dorris treasur

Andy ordered phone the family took up res woods in the fall of 1 thought would be routi unraveled when the te pany informed him he outside its service a referred to another com

"The second com wasn't so bad," he s; installation cost was. T the price of running a national forest and into \$4,000."

Dorris convinced the charge was outrageous been forced to pay \$4, the standard installati have been one of his fe the new place.

"I grew up in a wood Appalachian foothills," a kid, I'd go out after play and not come back I've always wanted to kind of life.

"Up here, you brea and see the animals arc feel good. Maybe it's bo who don't like the out love it. I guess no one enjoys it more than I do hammock stretched o home after practice and It's hard to get up.

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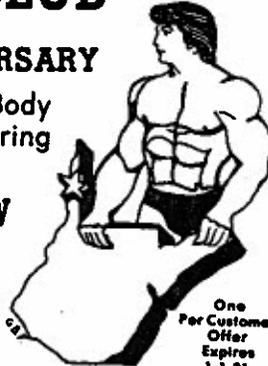
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"JEANS 'N  
THINGS"  
DEPT.**

land, I had my first thought of living  
somewhere in the country," he  
recalls. "I began looking for a  
place...and then one day I was gone."

Dorris was traded to St. Louis but  
then was sent to New Orleans that  
fall. Four years later, the Saints  
traded him to Seattle. When Seattle  
released Andy in October, 1977, Phil-  
lips invited him to Houston. Dorris  
accepted the invitation and signed as  
a free agent.

"I have nothing but gratitude for  
football," he says. "I might have had  
a place like this eventually. But it  
could never have happened this fast  
if I'd been in any other business. I  
don't mean just the money. But  
having five months in the offseason  
was the schedule I needed to work on  
our place."

His salary includes enough disposa-  
ble income to propel him and his  
diesel Mercedes 56 miles each day to  
the Oilers' practice field. That's a  
112-mile daily round trip during the  
season, 672 miles for his six-day work  
week. Still, fuel costs him only about  
\$80 per month.

In the early days at the house, it  
seemed the family's first telephone  
call would take a lot more than that  
from the Dorris treasury.

Andy ordered phone service when  
the family took up residence in the  
woods in the fall of 1979. What he  
thought would be routine installation  
unraveled when the telephone com-  
pany informed him he was 100 yards  
outside its service area. He was  
referred to another company.

"The second company's rate  
wasn't so bad," he says. "But its  
installation cost was. They estimated  
the price of running a line around a  
national forest and into our home at  
\$4,000."

Dorris convinced the company its  
charge was outrageous. If he had  
been forced to pay \$4,000 instead of  
the standard installation fee, it would  
have been one of his few setbacks at  
the new place.

"I grew up in a wooded area of the  
Appalachian foothills," he says. "As  
a kid, I'd go out after breakfast to  
play and not come back until dinner.  
I've always wanted to return to that  
kind of life."

"Up here, you breathe clean air  
and see the animals around you. You  
feel good. Maybe it's boring to people  
who don't like the outdoors, but we  
love it. I guess no one in our family  
enjoys it more than I do. I've got my  
hammock stretched out. I'll come  
home after practice and just lie in it.  
It's hard to get up."

"In the mornings, I'll pick up a  
rifle and go outside to hunt in my  
bathrobe and slippers while Mary's  
fixing breakfast. Imagine doing that  
in the city? Going out and not  
worrying about your appearance?"

"To me, it isn't natural to get all  
cleaned up to go to work. You should  
save that for when you'll be with your  
family, or before you're going out to  
have a good time. But if you live in  
the city, you go to work in the  
morning only after you spend a lot of  
time trying to look your best. It's a  
waste of time. Up here, we don't  
worry about what we wear inside or

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# Irves Home in Texas Wilderness



ANDY DORRIS

dozed down enough trees for all of Robin Hood's men to hide behind. They sawed up most of the timber for the Dorris fireplace, then either burned off or gave away the rest.

Dorris also was getting wood from another source. A friend provided an unlimited supply of 12-foot, creosoted telephone poles. Andy guesses their weight at 300 to 400 pounds. He should know. He lifted them all.

Two seasons ago, Dorris might have had trouble hoisting one of those poles. At 238 pounds in 1978, he was quick enough, but he would have been a threat to finish last if the NFL had assembled all its defensive linemen for an arm-wrestling championship.

"I thought I was heavy enough at 238, but not everyone else did," he says.

The Oilers' coaching staff liked his pass rush, but felt he needed an extra 15 or 20 pounds to defend against the run. A man who knew the anguish of receiving a pink slip, Dorris didn't want it to happen again. He increased his weight to 255 in 1979, and, in the process, did more than just make the 45-man roster. He took over Jim Young's job at left end.

"Andy came to us after the 1978 season and asked what he needed to do to contribute in 1979," says Wade Phillips, Houston's defensive line coach.

"He already was a good pass rusher. Somebody with his quickness could play right end at 238 pounds. But we had Elvin Bethea on that side. So we told Andy he had everything he needed to play left end except strength.

"The left end has to be stronger. We tell our people it takes more to play on that side because two-thirds of the offenses have their better tackle on the right side. With the tight end on the right side most of the time, the defensive left end also has to take a lot of double teaming.

"Andy said he'd be ready when he came back. He was. When he came to us in 1978, he could rush the passer. But the difference in him between now and then is that extra strength. Now he can get inside, not just upfield (to the outside). Now he can grab a shoulder and do something with the blocker instead of just speeding around him.

"A good offensive tackle will sit back to wait for a quick rusher to make his move. Then the tackle blocks him. Now that Andy is strong enough to attack, offensive tackles don't know if Andy will take them on with his quickness. Andy's strength puts that much more pressure on the offensive tackle.

"I noticed the difference last year. He got all excited after he had beaten Rayfield Wright (then of the Dallas Cowboys) for the first time. Rayfield wasn't the same player in 1979 that he had been in earlier years. But it was still the first time Andy had done anything against him. He had every reason to be excited.

"In effect, what Andy did when he added the weight and strength was to start his career over. A lot of veter-

outside the house. We have no curtains. We don't need any. There's no one around to look in."

The Dorrises have a dream that someday they will build a house no one can peep into; a solar home, constructed almost entirely underground.

"It's only on the drawing board now, Andy says. "We don't know when we'll start on it, but we've got an idea what it will look like. It will have 2,500 square feet. Our place, which will be right next to the solar home, has about 1,600. We have only two bedrooms. Our kids are young enough to share the second bedroom, which we call our dormitory. But they'll need their own rooms.

"In the underground place, the master bedroom's plastic dome will be above ground. That'll be the only room visible from outside. We'll use the old place as a guest home."

With a normal temperature of about 55 degrees, solar heat will keep the home comfortable. That will take a significant chop at the family's \$70-a-month electric bill. They use no natural gas or—after Andy had a 450-foot well drilled—public water.

"I'm no flatland farmer," he says. "but, when we were starting our garden, I listened to anything people were willing to tell me. It'll be the same with the solar home. If somebody wants to give me advice, I'd like to hear it.

"Even though we're going underground with it, the construction shouldn't be as big a disruption as all that was going on our first year here. The kids were dirty all the time then. Mary was mopping the kitchen floor eight times a day, but there was no way we could keep it up. The more we've settled in, the more of the primitive element we've taken out of our lives."

So far, Andy Dorris's finest personal achievement—the one of which he is most proud—is the fence he built.

"I like to look at a good fence," he says. "I think most people in these parts do.

"They judge a man's character by the character of his fence. If he puts up the fence for himself, which most do, the quality will show in his work. If you see a solid fence, you'll know a solid individual built it.

"My fence was a lot of work. But I

look at it this way: If I do it right the first time, I won't have to do it again for another twenty years. That makes it a twice-in-a-lifetime job.

"I look forward to the day when hard work like that is over. I want us to be self-sufficient. I want time for the hammock. I want to enjoy the peacefulness."

The Dorrises tried a visit to the city last year. They stayed with their former next-door neighbors in New Orleans...and almost went without sleep.

"Mary and I slept on a sofa bed in their living room," Andy says. "The city sounds...I thought we'd be awake all night!

"When everyone went to bed, we could still hear the dish washer and fan in the kitchen, the overhead fan in our room, and the traffic outside. I told Mary that compared with what we're used to, a rock band might as well have been playing."

"I honestly couldn't get tired of what we have," Mary says. "In ten years I might learn to hate it...but not now. There's just too much to enjoy here.

"I got tired of standing in lines in the grocery stores. Tired of lines at gas stations. Waiting for almost everything because there were so many people.

"We don't have to wait for anyone here. What we do have is the opportunity to sit outside and see the trees and the animals and everything else around us. I don't know if anyone could get tired of that."



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