

IX

FOXHUNTING



PHOTO BY ANITA BAARNS

D'ye ken John Peel, with his coat so gray?
D'ye ken John Peel at the break of the day?
D'ye ken John Peel when he's far, far away,
With his hounds and his horn in the morning?*

*'Twas the sound of his horn called me from my bed,
And the cry of his hounds, which he oft times led;
For Peel's view-halloo would 'waken the dead
Or a fox from his lair in the morning.*

First two verses of "D'ye ken John Peel," words by John Woodcock Graves c.1829. Peel (1777 - 1854) lived in the County of Cumberland in northwest England.

*No doubt the "Pink" coat had not become fashionable as yet in Peel's hunt. When it did the word "gray" might better be "gay."

FOXHUNTING

"Creatures can open up a world to you, can connect you to other people. Foxhunters – can you imagine such a diverse group getting together under any other circumstances? Hunting is the oldest thing we do together as a species."

—Rita Mae Brown, MFH, huntsman, author and amateur philosopher

Gallop after hounds as they search for and pursue foxes has been a favorite pastime of Virginians for centuries. Though the sport has fewer devotees than horse shows it is probably the most visibly representative of the many equine sports in the Virginia Piedmont, often referred to as Virginia's "Hunt Country."

Centered on Middleburg, Warrenton, and Charlottesville, this area consists of gently rolling land, a mixture of farms and large estates, and it is sprinkled with small streams, ravines, patches of woodland and the occasional small town. It teems with foxes. No one disputes its ranking as the premier fox-



PHOTO BY DOUGLAS LEES

Warrenton Hunt led by Huntsman Jim Atkins





Loudoun Hunt Huntsman Joe Cassidy, Whipper-in Perri Green, and MFH Anita White

hunting area in America. Only a few die-hard Brits would argue that it is not now the best in the world.

As a result it is home to 15 of Virginia's 25 "recognized" hunts (there are a total of about 175 in North America), and several informal "farmer's packs" as well. And there is the "farm team" of embryo foxhunters, the M.O.C. Beagles, the pack organized to teach young people the principles, traditions and enjoyment of hunting behind hounds.

This hunting country has attracted many people for whom foxhunting is life's greatest enjoyment, in some cases verging on religious fanaticism. So, too, is it with horses. Foxhunter Gar Royer observes:

"Horses love to gallop in open country. It is very rare to find a healthy horse that does not like foxhunting. To gallop with the herd is what they like best."

After all, horses were once wild, herd-oriented animals. Hunting takes them back to their ancestral roots.

Fox hunting needs stretches of undeveloped countryside for fox habitat and long runs following hounds. Without open country and sympathetic landowners the sport is impossible. It also requires foxes – the objective in



Jim Simon is owner of Little Brook Farm, a frequent site of Loudoun Hunt meets. The Simons moved recently from Connecticut, and Jim's wife Carol has joined the Loudoun Hunt. Foxhunting depends on supportive landowners like the Simons for its existence.

America today being to chase them, not kill them. A hunt may run two or three foxes in a day's outing, but not have a kill in several years. Foxes that have "gone to ground" are left undisturbed. To ensure good hunting, foxhunters are ardent protectors of the natural habitat on which the fox depends, and frown on any shooting, trapping or poisoning of foxes.

Hunts vary greatly in their style – some being autocratic, others democratically cosmopolitan, others social, still others extremely challenging in the size of their fences and the pace at which they pursue their sport – but they all conform to the traditions and etiquette of foxhunting as it developed over the centuries in England.

The leader of the hunt is the Master of Foxhounds – "MFH" or "Master" for short – who leads the "field" of riders and generally directs the action. He or she is usually supported by one or more "Joint Masters" – also called "Master" and entitled to the designation "MFH" – who share in the tasks of hunt management, landowner relations, admissions to membership, oversight of the professional staff, and ancillary activities such as trail rides, hunt balls, and Point-to-Point races. The title of MFH may seem to be a desirable honorific, but to do the Master's job well calls for long hours of unseen hard work and oceans of tact. A few moments



Old Dominion Masters Gus Forbush and Douglas Hytla



in the spotlight are visible, the hours of careful preparation that underpin the hunt's success usually are not.

To control the hunt the Master must ride at the head of the field. Protocol dictates that the more senior members ride up front near him, and the more junior stay to the rear. A distinguished visitor, perhaps the Master of another hunt, may be invited by the Master to ride with him.

Care must be paid by riders not to interfere with hounds. Letting your horse step on a hound or kick it is considered extremely bad form. So is crossing the line of the fox, thus interfering with the scent and the ability of the pursuing hounds to follow it. Owners of horses with a propensity to kick when crowded are expected to braid a red ribbon or a piece of red wool into the horse's tail as a warning of this danger.

Equal in importance to the Master(s) is the other critical player, the Huntsman,



PHOTO BY ANITA BAARNS

Piedmont entering a wood

usually a professional employee who trains the hounds and directs and controls them during the action, using both voice and horn to do so. He (or she) is aided in the field by two or more "Whippers-In", riders who patrol the flanks of the hunt's progress in order to deflect hounds who may stray out of the hunting territory, or get too near hazards such as roads or forbidden areas. "Whips" may be either paid professional "Hunt Servants" or experienced hunt members, an honor for the latter so chosen.

The Virginia Piedmont has been the nursery for generations of legendary huntsmen, many of whom have emigrated to build other hunts and packs of hounds with the skills learned here in childhood. Of the current local crop, the Poe brothers, Melvin (82 years old in 2002) and Albert stand at the pinnacle.

Huntsman and MFH Randy Waterman of Piedmont and hounds taking a fence, with permission despite the "POSTED" sign



PHOTO BY ANITA BAARNS



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

Melvin Poe

One Sunday afternoon in February Peter Winants drew on a biography he has written to give some insights into the life of Melvin Poe. The site of Peter's talk was the Trinity Church parish house, and the SRO crowd assembled would be the Sunday envy of any clergyman. As the tale unfolded it was easy to see what it takes to be a good huntsman. Here are some notes taken from Peter's remarks:

"What prompts people to become huntsmen? Melvin says it all revolves around the land, and an understanding of animals and nature... When Melvin was a boy the Poes were real farmers, living near Hume, not

'recreational farmers' like some of us in this room.

"There were ten Poe children. For them the horse was all important for transport. It was before the days of yellow buses, and they'd ride to school, sometimes three on a single horse.

"Hounds were important – the Poes kept six or eight. Turn-out hunts – bring your own hounds – were big social events in those days.

"In this country environment Melvin was close to the land, animals, nature. In fact, in his Boy Scout troop he was called 'nature boy'... Later on, grown up and back from the army, Melvin started at \$90 per month with Old Dominion. They had 13 hounds then, and Melvin could outrun 10 of them."



He built up that pack, and served as huntsman at Old Dominion for 16 years. Eventually he went on to be huntsman at Orange County for 27 years. After retiring at 70, George Ohrstrom invited him to start up a new hunt in Bath County, where he is still active. Meanwhile Albert, 11 years younger, was serving as Huntsman over 39 years for a succession of local hunts – Fairfax, Middleburg and Piedmont

John Coles, Joint Master of Orange County, particularly remembers Melvin's impact as a woodsman, "A man of the land, of forest and fishing."



PHOTO BY DOUGLAS LEES

Albert Poe

This background, added to a love of people and a colorful and charismatic personality, has led Melvin to a great career in the sport he loves. Working with his wife Peggy there have been side projects as well, including a bed and breakfast for weekend fox-hunters, a stud farm breeding miniature horses, and some home-brew wine making. Of the latter Edie well remembers being introduced to "Chateau Poe" after one of her first hunts with Orange County. (Thoughtfully, we have decided not to ask for her analysis of the vintage.)

At the end of the parish hall gathering, Melvin and Albert were asked, "Which of you is the better

rider?" The Poe brothers demurred, so Peter answered:

"Albert is a great rider, one of the best. He sits on a galloping horse and his body hardly moves at all. Now, on the other hand, Melvin has his own style!"

A week later Melvin confided to me:

"They asked the wrong question. They should have asked: Who was the better huntsman?!"

You don't have to be a great rider to be a great huntsman, but you better know and love the ways of the fox, the hounds, and the people around you. And the stimulus of a bit of sibling rivalry doesn't hurt.

- The MOC Beagles -

Though they are not the same, there is a close relationship between the MOC Pony Club and the MOC Beagles, another Eve Fout innovation which she still runs as Master of Beagles, aided by huntsman Hubert Davy who has replaced Hank Woolman, now retired. The purpose of the Beagles is to introduce children to the thrills and customs of foxhunting using the smaller, slower breed of hounds. Eve describes the MOC Beagles this way:

"We started the Beagles with kids. We never had any problem with 'lock the door and do your homework.' Instead it was 'get out, ride your pony, do something outside.' You absorb the country by riding through it.

"Kids need a responsibility, not just riding in the back [of the hunt]. With the Beagles we assign children to the duties of whippers-in and field master, so they may learn by doing what is involved in conducting a hunt. We hunt Sundays, going to various hunts' territories. Dot [Smithwick] allows us to use her land with the beagles. On a typical big day we may get 50 kids... Nancy Dillon may bring 15-18 with their ponies."

The Beagles meet on Sundays at 1:00 PM, and on school holidays. Elders are usually allowed to "ride to the beagles" only if they have brought a child along.



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

Prospective MOC Beagles Hunt Servent

The management of the Beagles is separate from the Pony Club, but the Pony Club sponsors trail rides in support of the Beagles, and kids put in time early in the season walking and helping train the pack. Though originally bred to chase rabbits, the MOC Beagle pack works on pursuing the faster foxes, assuring both longer runs for the field and safety for the quarry.

On this particular day, the Sunday before Thanksgiving, a large crowd of participants and spectators

