



Photo by Douglas Lee

THE HISTORY AND LEGACY OF FOXFIELD

by
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Photos courtesy of Foxfield Racing Association

As one drives west of Charlottesville on Garth Road, one of the most scenic roads in Virginia, one can see the effect of urban encroachment on the countryside. A notable exception is the lush green fields and beautifully manicured steeplechase racecourse known as Foxfield. Foxfield is an oasis which provides passers-by the opportunity to step back in time and enjoy the bucolic scene reminiscent of old-time racing in the Virginia countryside.

Foxfield has been a study in change over the years. Originally it was a farm owned by the namesake of the road, the Garth family. The Garths were horse people and were actively involved in racing and fox hunting. The tract known today as Foxfield passed through the family over the years until about 1929, when Hugh Garth sold it to a young man who envisioned the land as an airfield. He and his associate started the Dixie Flying Service in 1929, and the land became the

Albemarle Airfield. They constructed the landmark hanger, which is still in use today for storage. Dixie Flying Service was quite active for two years and then fell victim to the Depression.

The land was purchased by Grover Vandevender in 1935 and began its life as a riding academy and horse leasing facility. Grover called his farm Fox Fields, and it became a gathering place for fox-hunting folks from Albemarle. There was an eclectic assortment of structures.

The stretch-run at Foxfield





Grover in the center with his two great friends, William Faulkner (L) and George Barkley (R)

Grover took the office of the airfield, a building with a Spanish stucco motif, as his personal residence. The horses found home in a large, old, Belmont-style barn. Beside the barn parked an old yellow school bus, which served as the tack room with the back of the seats as saddle racks.

Grover's was a place where the foxhunters, show riders, trail riders and children came for lessons and boarded their horses. He drew people who wanted to ride and learn about horses. Consequently, there was a great variety of people around at all times. The barn was run by his helper Jesse and her two children, Jean and Mason, who kept the physical plant operating. Jesse would have the kids who came for lessons take the baling twine from the hay and fashion lead shanks from it. The kids would spend the summers at Grover's trail riding, helping with the mucking, grooming the horses, and generally learning to accept responsibility and discipline. There was a large ring for classes and a cross-country course for hunter trials and more. Grover was always in evidence with his cowboy hat

perched on his head. This was a fun place where many local children learned to ride. It was a place where there was a horse for everyone no matter what he or she needed.

Grover was the quintessential horse-and-hounds man and was well respected for his expertise in the foxhunting world. He was renowned as the Huntsman for the Farmington Hunt, whose kennels were next door. People would

come from far and wide to hunt with Grover Vandevender. His reputation spread to the business world, and a truck company made a commercial of their truck going over a coop at the same time that Grover was jumping the coop. It was the foxhunting and his almost mischievous personality that drew people to Grover.

Sadly Grover died in 1974, and his estate sold Fox Fields to his dear friend Mariann de Tejada. Tejada immediately set about fulfilling a dream that she and Grover had together. She created a world-class steeplechase racecourse for both timber and hurdle horses. The design and construction of the racecourse started in 1976 and took over a year to complete. The racecourse design and construction was overseen primarily by Raymond Wolfe, who grew up in the racing tradition (his father had trained for Marion duPont Scott at Montpelier). The eye-catching landmark of Foxfield was the hanger, which was painted at Mariann's insistence in her racing colors—lime green on the sides and pink on the roof. It was certainly easy to spot. The inaugural running of the Foxfield Races was held on May 13, 1978, a day not to be forgotten by racegoers. A storm dumped eight inches of water on the course, and the racecourse was virtually under water.

Raymie Wolfe and Mariann de Tejada at opening gala for Foxfield





Victorian Hill in one of his four Foxfield wins

Mariann de Tejada believed that Foxfield should contribute to the community that had so strongly embraced her project. She began a legacy of benefiting a local corporate charity with the funds raised from each race. Some of the beneficiaries over the years have been organizations that deal with children and their problems or handicaps such as The Children's Medical Center, Operation Smile, and the Boys and Girls Club.

The racecourse at Foxfield is a large, oval undulating course. The timber course is challenging because of its speed. The course is designed to be a challenge for any horse and rider and to make the

win a true test of the horse and jockey's ability. It has been said that if a horse can win at Foxfield it can win anywhere on the race circuit. Certainly the great Victorian Hill owned by the Lickle family proved that point by having four starts and four wins at Foxfield, winning more Van Clief Memorial races than any other horse. He was also Steeplechase Horse of the Year. Some other notable equine luminaries that have been Foxfield standouts are Flatterer and Le Sauteur both of which won the American Grand National at Foxfield on their way to being named Steeplechase Horse of the Year.

Foxfield has two race meets a

year. The spring race is the last Saturday in April and is well known as the "rite of spring" for many young people of the area. Through the years, this race meet has also become a tradition. People who have come first as 20-year-olds are now returning from all over the United States every spring to enjoy reliving past glories and watch the races. For them, Foxfield has become the physical glue that holds their relationships together. The fall race, which is the last Sunday in September, is a true time for families and kids. The staff at Foxfield has gone to great lengths to entice the family to come, with tents full of kid- and family-friendly activities. Many fond

memories for family and friends are created.

The benefits Foxfield offers to the Charlottesville community are intangible. The evening drive out Garth Road with the red blaze of sunset glowing on the white fences and the green rolling fields draws many a passer-by to pull off of the road and revel in the beauty. The immaculate condition of Foxfield enhances the community and sets an example for the area. These open green spaces that will endure as long as Foxfield is solvent are far preferable to a housing development. Other events Foxfield hosts, such as dog shows and the Women's 4 Miler that benefits breast cancer, are all varied and fun to attend.

The name Foxfield is not a misnomer as there is even today a family of red foxes that resides in the infield of the racecourse. I would love to be in their den on race day and hear what they have to say about the festivities. I feel certain they have a thank you for Mariann de Tejada for her generosity in preserving a wonderful piece of land and for the heritage of open spaces that she has contributed to the community.

For information about races or tickets call Foxfield Racing Association, W. Patrick Butterfield at 434-293-9501.

Jane Porter Fogleman is a lifelong fox-hunter. She was born and raised in Charlottesville and lives there today where she hunts with Farmington Hunt Club.

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