



Living History Farmington Hunt Club's 80th Anniversary

Photo by Cathy Summers

By Elizabeth H. Sutton

Galloping headlong over hills, across ditches and over solid paneled fences on the back of a horse in pursuit of a pack of hounds in full cry, hot on the scent of their quarry, makes the blood rush faster, heart beat harder, and every sensation of sight, sound, fear and exhilaration rush to the surface. This is the addictive thrill of foxhunting, a sport brought to colonial Virginia from England, a sport steeped in history and tradition that is still being carried out each week in and around Albemarle County, within surprisingly close proximity to Charlottesville.

Farmington Hunt Club, which celebrates its 80th anniversary this year, hunts its hounds over 14 square miles

extending from the foothills of Buck Mountain to the banks of the James River. The heart of its original territory starts just a few miles west of the city at Foxfield, home of the well-known steeplechase races, and extends as far as Greene County to the north. In the 1950s, hunt meets were held at a stately brick home just walking distance from Jefferson's Rotunda on the grounds of the University of Virginia.

There was a time when country gentlemen and women had much open land on which to pursue their quarry, but many large farms have dissolved into housing developments, or intensive commercial farming has eliminated woodlands and fallow ground. The sport of foxhunting in

general is threatened by the lack of available open space. To preserve hunting privileges in Farmington's territory, the hunt club is responsible for ensuring that each landowner's rights are carefully protected and that trails are well maintained in order to have easy access to the wooded coverts and open fields, the habitat for foxes and other wild game.

Foxhunters are active land conservation advocates, as their sport depends entirely on the availability of large tracts of land. In the Farmington Hunt alone, 62,000 acres are protected from development by conservation-minded hunt members with easements promoted by local conservation advocates such as John and Mary Scott



Author William Faulkner blows a hunting horn, c.1959.
(Photo by George Barkley, courtesy William Barkley)

(Left) Jill Summers riding Fizz, whipping in on a wintry morning (Photoby Cathy Summers)

Birdsall and Sherry Buttrick, head of the local office of the Virginia Outdoors Foundation.

Jill Faulkner Summers served as Farmington's master of foxhounds for four decades from 1968 until her death in 2008. Her knowledge of the hounds and her commitment to the breeding was legendary—a passion that began in the mid-1950s after she moved to Charlottesville and started riding at Grover's Stable, owned by Grover Vandevender, huntsman for Farmington during the '50s and '60s. It was there she was introduced to the sport and pursued it with a passion for the rest of her life. Her father, author William Faulkner, also hunted because he enjoyed being with his daughter. They both loved the countryside and were keenly interested in hound work and riding.

It was Summers who hired Farmington's present huntsman, Daron Beeney and his wife Alison. The Beeney's moved from England in 2001 to assume duties as professional hunt staff for Farmington. They recall how Summers was completely hands-on, in contrast to many of their former employers in England. "She came to the kennels every single day,"

Daron said. "She knew each hound and was interested in everything we did."

On a Saturday morning in mid-February with deep snow on the ground, the Beeney's were at work with the hounds. Released from the kennel, the pack tumbled forward *en masse* onto the gravel walkway. They were quick to respond to the snap of the whip and the sharp rebuke commanding them to follow the group. They kept in a tight bunch around Daron, the huntsman, who walked in the lead. Surrounded by the pack of 45 eager and rambunctious hounds—some coupled (a young hound attached at the collar by a double brass link to an older hound), Daron was assisted by Carolyn and Ken Chapman, honorary whippers-in and kennel man Tommy McCauley, who has worked for the Farmington Hunt for 30 years.

Walking the hounds on foot in between hunts allows them closer contact with the people who will be working with them during the hunts. It also helps the hounds to develop social skills that are essential in their training as a well disciplined hunting pack. Daron's affection for each hound is obvious, and their respect for his

authority is absolute.

Farmington continues its tradition as home hunt club for amateur and professional horse people of diverse backgrounds and interests. Student memberships are comparatively inexpensive and excellent equestrian centers are nearby. Playwright Sam Shepard and his wife Jessica Lange joined Farmington when they lived in Albemarle County in the 1990s. Shepard, an experienced rider, caught the foxhunting bug much as his predecessors did. Lange learned to ride and hunt at the Barracks, headquarters for the University of Virginia Equestrian Team.

Farmington claims numerous champions and leaders in many horse sports: MFH Carol Easter heads the Virginia Trail Riders Association and can count several Farmington veteran champs in the history of that organization's endurance ride at the Homestead. Farmington has also claimed eight champions of the Virginia State Field Hunter Trials since 1962, and three North American Field Hunter Champions in the 1990s, including Caroline Chapman and her home-bred mare Chelsea, who won the Champion of



(L to R) Ellie Wood Baxter, Laney Kaminer and Jane Fogleman, Thanksgiving meet at Foxfield, November 2009 (Photo by Cathy Summers)

(L) Daron Beeney, Huntsman and MFH Jill Summers with hounds at the opening meet at Millington Stable, October 2004 (Photo by Cathy Summers)



Championship title in 2000. That is a record number of awards for any Virginia hunt.

Among its present membership are award-winning equestriennes such as the legendary show rider Ellie Wood Baxter, who was inducted into the Virginia Horse Shows Association Hall of Fame in 1994; and nationally recognized trainer and coach Claiborne Bishop. Bishop was twice winner of the Virginia Horse Shows Association Horse Person of the Year Award in 1986 and 2008, and was inducted into the VHSA Hall of Fame this year, 2010.

Bishop's husband Tom Bishop serves the Farmington Hunt as honorary whipper-in, and for many years led the field on Bunker Hill. He was the winner of the 1984 Green Confirmation Hunter Champion of Virginia. His hunters, trained at his home stable the Barracks, are frequently seasoned veterans of the hunter show ring as well. The Bishops' daughters, Marianna and Mariah, are active in the family business of coaching students for the inter-collegiate competitions and schooling hunters and riders for top level competition in the National Hunter Horse Show.

The Bishops' good friend and neighbor, Baxter, now in her 80s, continues to ride with the Farmington field and keeps her horses at home. Foxhunting clearly is a sport that knows no age limit. As long as there are people who love the land, country living, horses and hounds, Farmington will encourage sportsmen of all ages to carry on a Virginia tradition.

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