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FOXHUNTING AND THE FARMINGTON HUNT CLUB

BY ELIZABETH SUTTON

IT'S MID-OCTOBER AND ALL IS SILENT IN THE PREDAWN HOUR. The jarring “ping” of my cell phone alarm interrupts the quiet and my sleep. Today is a hunting day, and it’s time for chill and darkness—and the stable to get ready for the hunt.

After some time, the sun begins to beam and creates shadows as it rises over the dewy grass near my home in western Albemarle County. My horse and I join dozens of riders and an eager pack of foxhounds. Soon, we gather at the “meet,” which happens to be at the Farmington Hunt Club Kennels near Free Union.

The masters greet us and make announcements. We then set off promptly at 9 am for a morning ride and follow hounds over streams, through woodlands and

open fields. This same routine happens three days a week throughout the hunting season, and on different properties in our hunt country.

Each season begins with cub hunting, or “cubbing” in September, when the young hounds are still in training. Similarly, the young cub foxes quickly learn how to successfully evade our hounds. A fox might find safety in a ground hog hole or run through water to mask its sent and throw off the hounds. It might dive under a pile of sticks or brush, and escape safely “to ground,” leaving our young hounds bewildered, panting, scratching and

sniffing at the ground in vain. The thrill of the chase delights riders; it’s even better when you catch a glimpse of the fast-moving fox as it darts out of sight.

Early season weather is usually dry, which makes the scenting conditions and the ground very hard on the hounds and the horses. The hunt begins early when it’s still cool, and the length of the hunt is limited to allow for conditions and protect the health and safety of the animals.

As the weather changes and rain begins to fall, conditions for hunting improve. The hounds follow the fox with their nose to the ground, and the best hounds have a keen “nose” (sense of smell) that enables them to track the fox’s sent easily over moist terrain. Visibility for



the riders improves as the leaves fall. Our hunt country is heavily wooded, with ravines and rivers, so hearing hound “voices” (intensity and tone of their barking) is oftentimes the only way to know where they are. Road whips—volunteers who follow the hunt by car and keep hounds from crossing roads—track the hounds with radio collars that transmit signals via GPS.

Formal hunting begins in late fall, when more riders attend the “opening meet.” This is a celebratory occasion and marks the first day of the official hunt season.

Foxhunting mandatory attire changes from tweed to formal black coats for ladies and sometimes scarlet for men. Special members who have been awarded their “colors” (honorary designation for experienced riders in the field) wear collars with Farmington Hunt’s Belgian Blue. (Different hunt clubs have their own colors.) In this centuries-old sport, traditions of dress and protocol have remained unchanged for centuries. The Farmington Hunt keeps this tradition active and alive all year.

The formal season is in full swing by Thanksgiving and will continue until severe weather. In January and February, frozen ground and icy footing sometimes forces riders to continue on foot. When the hunting season ends in March, club-sponsored horse activities, trail rides, horse shows, and social events keep members busy until next season.

Hunting style and variety depends on terrain and climate. Farmington hunts on land in southern and northwestern Albemarle and Greene counties. These borders are recorded by the Masters of Foxhounds Association. This is an international association that governs all hunts in North America and Canada. The Association was established in 1907; initially its purpose was to prevent territorial conflicts between hunt clubs and to maintain a stud book of foxhound pedigrees.

Joy Crompton, Joint-Master of the Farmington Hunt Club, said, “Permission to allow fox hunting by private landowners is not so much a service for the farmer, but a field sport for the enjoyment of landowners who ride and the people who support the conservation of the land required for foxhunts,” said Joy Crompton, joint-master of the Farmington Hunt Club. “Killing the fox or the coyote is not the goal so much as the challenge and fun of the chase. It’s a privilege and pleasure getting out in the beautiful countryside that we have and appreciating the natural environment with the desire to preserve and protect the wildlife that live there.”

Farmington Huntsman Matthew Cook echoed Crompton’s sentiment: “Enjoyment. I just want to see people out here enjoying the sport.”

Foxhunting requires large expanses of open territory; preserving the land and streams there that support wildlife is a critical component of the pursuit. The Farmington Hunt Club is dedicated to land conservation efforts, and Albemarle County is the second most heavily protected county in Virginia in terms of conservation easements; these total more than 100,000 of protected acres. Leaders and members of the Farmington Hunt Club played a big role in this successful land preservation.

“The total protected acreage in the Farmington hunt territory is actually close to 84,600,” said Rex Linville, field representative for the Piedmont Environmental Council for Charlottesville, Albemarle and Greene Counties.

In 2011, the Farmington Hunt and J.B. Birdsall—a longtime foxhunter, landowner and hunt member—received the Masters of Fox Hounds Association (MFHA) Hunting Habitat Conservation Award.

“As Farmington Hunt Club enters its tenth decade, there are many positives for which the club should be thankful, said Foxfield Racing Director W. Patrick Butterfield, joint MFH. “We are located in a beautiful part of Virginia and are privileged to hunt over countryside that we have hunted for 90 years. Generous landowners have protected some of our original hunt country despite encroaching development, and we have been able to add many new fixtures.”

Today the hunt ended before noon. I can’t wait for the next one. I can’t wait to ride again over more open spaces.

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Farmington Hunt Club—A Brief History

THE ORIGINS OF THE FARMINGTON HUNT CLUB

PREDATE THE FIRST WORLD WAR. It was originally referred to as the old Albemarle Hunt Club but was disbanded because of the trying times of World War I. Afterwards, several private packs continued hunting the same territory.

In 1929, a group of landowners and equestrians revived and reorganized the old Albemarle Hunt and its Belgian Blue colors under a new name: Farmington Hunt Club. The new organization was governed by more formal conditions set by the National Foxhound Club of America.

Soon afterwards, the Farmington Hunt acquired permission to hunt farmlands in western Albemarle County. Hounds were purchased or gifted from private packs and local farmers. Grover Vandevender was elected huntsman, a position that he held for 32 years.

He kenneled the hounds at his home near Ivy.

Today, the Farmington Hunt kennels and clubhouse are located in northwestern Albemarle, near Free Union. Diverse terrain encompasses rolling hills and fields at the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains and stretches into historic southern Albemarle along the Hardware and James rivers.

THE PEOPLE

Farmington Hunt Club’s membership totals approximately 275 people of all ages from the Charlottesville area and beyond. Staff includes one professional huntsman who is responsible for the care and management of the hounds; he has the help of a kennel man or paid assistant. In addition, five honorary or volunteer riders serve as whippers-in, or outriders who assist the huntsman in keeping the hounds safe and hunting together.

There are three “fields” or groups of riders, each led by an honorary staff person (“field master”) who is responsible for guiding and protecting the welfare of riders, and for making certain that the landowners’ property is respected.

THE HOUNDS

Farmington Hunt Club currently has mostly American hounds totaling more than 60, including un entered puppies. The huntsman usually takes out 16 to 25 hounds at a time depending on “the fixture,” which is the hunt location on a given day. Each hound has a name and a distinctive set of identifying markings; hounds are also recognized by their “voice” or sound of the bark.

Hounds are trained to hunt together as a well-organized pack and respond to commands from the huntsman who controls them with his voice and his horn. Whippers-in ride on the outskirts of the area hunted and use their hunting crops with lashes to make loud cracking noises; these noises signal the errant stragglers to keep together.

THE LAND

Farmington Hunt territory includes 84,600 acres that are protected by conservation easements. In addition, 24.9% of the territory has been preserved for open space. ()

For more information about foxhunting and the Farmington Hunt Club, visit farmingtonhunt.org. For more about land preservation, visit pecva.org.

