

GENESEE VALLEY HUNT



The 131st formal season of the Genesee Valley Hunt will begin September 29, 2007 at the Homestead in Geneseo, New York.

The hunt was started in 1876 at the Homestead by Maj. W. Austin Wadsworth (photo at right, with young W.P.), who continued as the MFH until his death in 1917. For the first few years it was called the Livingston County Hunt and hunted a trencher pack. Not satisfied with the quality of the hunting, Maj. Wadsworth developed his own pack of crossbred hounds. Describing his pack in 1880, Major Wadsworth wrote “This year I started a pack of my own consisting of Jim, Joe and three puppies, Stubby, Speckle and Colonel, of which the last turned out useless and the former was executed for sheep-murder.”



In 1886, however, Henry Cabot Lodge wrote “Under Mr. Wadsworth’s management, the pack has grown to thirteen couple of good hounds, some of which are imported and some home bred. Mr. Wadsworth hunts his pack himself...” By 1899, Major Wadsworth had developed his pack to the point where they won the

designation of best pack of hunting hounds at the Westminster Dog show in New York City.

In 1907 Major W. Austin Wadsworth was one of the original founders of the MFHA and was chosen by the other organizers to be the first President of that organization.



Although William P. Wadsworth (photo at left, with hounds) had started hunting with his father when he was six and had been given his own pack of beagles with which to hone his huntsman skills, at the death of the Major, he was only eleven, too young to take over the responsibilities of a MFH. The hunt struggled for a few years until, in 1922, Major Winthrop Chanler agreed to take over as MFH. On December 31st, 1925 the hunt was formally incorporated to ensure it continued existence with

subscribing members, so that no one man bore all the expenses. Winthrop Chanler died in the summer of 1926. The newly organized corporation elected Ernest L. Woodward and James S. Wadsworth (“Jim Sam”) as Joint Masters, Mr. Woodward having been brought to hunting through his friendship with Mr. Chanler. In 1930, Jim Sam died, leaving Mr. Woodward to carry on alone as MFH until 1933, when William P. Wadsworth, the founder’s son, was ready to step into his father’s boots.

William P. Wadsworth was master and huntsman until 1972, except for the hunting seasons of 1941-1945 when he was serving in the military during the war. During those years, Edward D. Mulligan served as MFH. Like his father, William P. Wadsworth also served as President of the MFHA, from 1970 to 1973. In 1972, William P. Wadsworth’s son, W. Austin Wadsworth (photo at right), became the huntsman and Joint Master with his father, until William P. Wadsworth retired in 1975. Austin continued as huntsman and MFH alone until 1980, when his sister, Martha D. Wadsworth (at left in photo), became joint huntsman. In 1987, Martha also became Joint Master. In 2001, Austin’s stepdaughter, Marion Thorne, was brought in as a joint huntsman, and she became a Joint Master with



Austin and Martha in 2006.

The Genesee Valley Hunt survives and prospers because of the traditions and priorities instilled in the descendants of Major Wadsworth and those who admired what he created. As earlier outlined, Major Wadsworth was a hound man. He created his own pack and hunted them himself for most of his 41 year stewardship of the hunt. His grandson, MFH W. Austin Wadsworth also improved the pack by adding hounds from the Midland and Brandywine hunts. Today, Joint MFH Marion Thorne hunts the hounds. With her husband, professional whip Travis Thorne, she makes many of the breeding and training decisions that have resulted in our award winning pack.



A good pack of hounds, however, is nothing unless they have land on which to hunt. Major Wadsworth owned significant land in 1876, and the Major had no problem getting his brother and Wadsworth cousins to allow him to hunt their lands. But much of the vast territory which was hunted consisted of smaller tracts owned by working farmers. Major Wadsworth made it well known that all farmers were welcome to join him in the hunt field. Teddy Roosevelt commented in 1886 “At Genesee, the bulk of almost every field is composed of the hard-riding farmers from the country round about who, be it said in passing, are beginning to find the breeding and selling of good hunters a very valuable part of their stock raising”.

The farmers also knew that if their livelihood was in any way damaged by thoughtless riders crossing their wheat or leaving gates open, Major Wadsworth would make it right financially to them and thunder down retribution on the offenders. Today we are still blessed with a large territory of hunting lands because of the good will established in the past and the continued efforts of the MFH's and staff to cultivate that good will with current land owners. Also very helpful has been the establishment, in 1990, of the Genesee Valley Land Conservancy which currently holds about 6,000 acres of our core hunt country.

The last tradition which has secured the survival of the Genesee Valley Hunt is that it has always been a hunt of inclusion. The membership meeting in 1881 lists 13 male members and 15 female honorary members. Over the next 30 years, over 150 people of all ethnic, religious and economic backgrounds would be invited to be members of the hunt by Major Wadsworth. The same mentality that guided the hunt to select the American colors of blue and buff for our hunt coats, instead of the British red, opened the opportunity to hunt to the farmer, the shop keeper and those who had been shunned by other hunts and social groups because of their religion or ethnic background. Major Wadsworth was "politically correct" 100 years before the term was invented. Our hunt today remains open to anyone who shares the passion; we currently have 105 members, ranging in age between 8 and 80, and representing all levels of horsemanship. There is no field master, and those with the ability and horse can stay right up with MFH Thorne and the hounds. Others can keep up as best they can or hill top. On the opening day of formal hunting, the community shows its



support by lining Main Street in Geneseo early in the morning to watch the hunt exit the driveway of the Homestead and walk down the street before hunting.

Historically, the Genesee Valley Hunt has sponsored and supported several ancillary activities, most of which continue today. In 1885, the first old fashioned Point to Point was run over an unmarked course designed by Major Wadsworth. This race is still run today, usually on the first Saturday in November. The riders are given the start location at Noon and the check points and finish location upon arrival at the start. Knowledge of the hunt country is essential, with most of the 15-odd entries happy to just finish the race.

Also in 1885, a local tradition of holding a Hunter Trial was started, and they were adopted in 1895 as a hunt sponsored event. Classes on the flat and over fences were offered for Light weight hunters (able to carry 160lbs), Middle weight hunters (175lbs) and Heavy weight hunters (200lbs), with vertical jumps ranging from 3'6" to 5'6", along with banks, ditches and hedges. This event continued to be very popular with the members of the hunt until 1954.

Another event started in 1885 was first called the July Meet or Annual Re-Union and is now call the 4th of July Cavalry Games. The games are open to any rider over 21 and currently consist of such events as Riding at the Ring, Javelin Throw, Lemon Slicing with a sword and the Manikin Race, which was won by Teddy Roosevelt in the year he came to compete.

In 1892, records show there was a Master's Test won by local hunt member Harry Martindale. This event is still held, usually on the second Sunday in November, and is a test open to members who have accumulated qualifying points from hunting, the GVH Horse Trials, the Point to Point and other racing. The test measures the skills needed by the ideal field hunter.

Hunt-sponsored Race Meets over flagged courses started around 1895 and always included a flat and/or a steeplechase race for farmers only on the card. The 1897 race card offered a 3 mile novice steeplechase race open to horses owned and ridden by farmers of Livingston County or their families. The race offered a purse of \$50.00 gold, the equivalent of over \$1,200.00 today. Nine entries went to the post and the winning margin was "by a nose". The Genesee Valley Hunt Race Meet is still the crown jewel of the fall season, being held on the second Saturday in October. Sanctioned races with large purses are just part of the festivities, along with venders, dog races, hay rides, pony rides, stick horse races and tailgate contests attracting many spectators.

Also in the 1890's, the tradition of having an official Hunt Ball became popular. The Hunt Ball is now held on the evening of Race Meet day and is still a popular event in the busy Race Meet weekend.

In 1955, the Genesee Valley Hunt sponsored its first One Day Horse Trials, the equivalent of what is now called a combined training event or three phase event. This was before the creation of the USCTA. This event became very popular with the members of the hunt and replaced the Hunter trials. Today, the Genesee Valley Hunt sponsors a USEA sanctioned Horse Trials event which is held in mid July and which offers Beginner Novice through Preliminary classes.

In the early 1960's, what is now called the Whiskey Race, and was then called the Bacchus Relay, was a hotly contested annual event. Usually held in mid November, teams of three race in a relay format against other teams over a jumping course carrying a flask which must be emptied through consumption before the last team member crosses the finish line. Held before the start of a regular hunt, tradition has it that the winning team does not receive their trophy unless they are all able to stay out until the hunt is completed.

In the early 1980's another tradition was started, called the St. Hubert's Breakfast. This "bring a dish to pass" affair is usually held on the first Saturday in December to pay homage to all those who have fallen during the hunt season. Those who "qualify" are not required to bring any contribution so that those who have been lucky, at least for that season, can pay them back for satisfying the ground fairies.

Being a northern hunt, the Genesee Valley Hunt has established a tradition of ignoring the weather. Hunting is usually only cancelled for lightning or when the Genesee River freezes over. Torrential downpours and near zero temperatures do not stop the hunt from starting or staying out, often over five hours. On December 13, 1893 the meet was at Chadwick's Tavern at 11:30. Alida K. Fitzhugh wrote in her diary that she did not realize until she had hacked to the Homestead that it was only 8 degrees. She, the MFH and about four others continued on, however, to the meet, a hack of about 11 miles. She then describes the hunt by saying "The hounds seemed unable to follow (the scent). The field had enough of hunting before they reached the meet, but it took five cold and dreary hours to satisfy the MFH."

However, on a hunt held 111 years later on December 13, 2004, Marion Thorne reported that the four who hunted enjoyed the "hunt of a lifetime" during which the hounds spoke without pause for two hours and ten minutes and the field traveled 20 miles.

Cub hunting starts in mid-July, with hounds going out Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday, usually at 6AM. Formal season starts at the end of September, with hounds going out Monday, Wednesday and Saturday. All are welcome to join, and more information regarding capping and accommodations can be obtained from the web site, <http://www.geneseevalleyhunt.org>, or from the Hunt Secretary, Janice Barrett, at 585-243-3949.