



A CLASSIC VIRGINIA LADY

Ellie Wood Page Keith Baxter

by
Jane Fogleman

If one goes back through the history of the Commonwealth of Virginia, one factor that is ever present in its development and daily life is the horse. Various types of horses have contributed to the prosperity of the Commonwealth over the years. In today's horse scene, one can find racehorses, steeplechase horses, foxhunters, show horses, pleasure horses, and Western discipline horses. Indeed the horse industry is an integral contributor to the State's economy. Many people are responsible for the success of the horse industry, and this is the first of a series of articles about Virginians whose lifelong contributions to the State has been a legacy of horses.

Ellie Wood Page Keith (and don't even think of shortening that name to Ellie) was born in Charlottesville, Virginia in 1921 into a family of horse showing and fox hunting. She grew up in a small in-town stable yard, Keithwood on Bollingwood Road, very near the University of Virginia. Her



mother, "Big Ellie Wood," had a stable full of ponies as they were her preferred interest, and her father "Hoodie" fox hunted. Young boys and girls from all over town would come to ride and fox hunt at Keithwood. I certainly remember many fond days on Bollingwood Road as a young girl. "Little" Ellie Wood, or "Chee"



as she was fondly called by family and friends in town, was “the rider” from the age of 5 when she won a blue ribbon over fences at the Keswick Show. She rode in horse shows throughout Virginia, first on her mother’s ponies in the pony classes, and later in her teenage years in the ladies classes, as these were really the only venues for young ladies in the horse show world.

Ellie Wood rode for Manly Carter, Jack Payne, Garfield Harding, and some other noted Piedmont Virginia horsemen. She rode in a lot of good shows in Virginia as well as very prestigious shows



in the Washington area. Ellie Wood was a great success and her reputation grew by leaps and bounds. In 1935 she won the McClay Trophy for the ASPCA Horsemanship finals in the old Garden in New York City. She feels this was a great accomplishment as she was a southern girl competing against all of the big northern hunter riders, both male and female.

Ellie Wood's career as one of the country's leading show hunter rider was now firmly entrenched, and the horses she was asked to ride on were the *crème de la crème*. She has always said that she was lucky because "I had great horses to ride." Sometimes she would not have sat on a horse until she walked into the ring with it. Now that is where talent and instinct take over! She was well known nationally for the next three decades for her forward riding, precise eye, great hands, and elegant seat. She does truly present a wonderful picture on a horse. I contend that you can look at photos of Ellie Wood jumping a horse in her 20s and her body position will be the same as a photo of her in her 80s.

She rode up and down the East Coast from Virginia to New York at shows such as Keswick, Upperville, Warrenton, The National, The International, Devon, Harrisburg—the list goes on and on. She was champion in most of these shows in the amateur classes such as the Corinthian and the ladies classes. The people for whom she rode were the likes of Mrs. Jock Whitney, Mrs. Parker Poe, Mrs. John Maloney and so on. Some of her most famous mounts were Substitution, Spanish Mist, (two of her favorites) Escapade, Adventure, and many more. She was literally the most famous woman amateur from 1935 to the mid 60's.

Fox Hunting was a way of life and she grew up hunting with Farmington and Keswick Hunts in the Charlottesville area. She would also compete in Hunter Trials, Team Chase events, Hunt Club Horse Shows, and any hunt-related activity. In her late 20s and early 30s, she taught



"sports" at the local boarding school, St. Anne's, until her horse show responsibilities made that impossible. During her 30s, she became a whip for the Farmington Hunt Club.

Riding was not her only sports involvement as Ellie Wood was also an avid tennis player though horses kept her from her tennis game on many occasions. Another activity that Ellie Woods loves was dancing. She could be found dancing the night away with her lithe athletic body (the same at 84) swirling over the dance floor to the rhythm of the Big Bands. She was and is truly the most graceful of dancers.

While riding in horse shows all up and down the East Coast she met her husband Charles "Wing" McGee Baxter. After they married, they lived in New York City where Ellie Wood continued with her riding. They would spend the weekends at their farm in Virginia and eventually retired to Charlottesville with their son Charlie. After Wing's death in 1976 Ellie Wood remained in Charlottesville and

focused on fox hunting.

Ellie Wood's career and contribution to the horse show world was formally recognized when she was inducted into the Upperville Horse Show Hall of Fame and the American and Virginia Horse Show Association Hunter Hall of Fame. In 2003 she was awarded the prestigious "Pegasus Award" for her lifelong contribution to the horse show industry. This is a great tribute to her.

Today, Ellie Wood's horse show career still goes on as she is a regular in the "Classic Invitational" at Upperville. She also rides in Hunter Trials, Hunter Paces, Team Events, and Foxhunts at Farmington Hunt Club in Charlottesville. She travels up and down the East Coast with friends to hunt with other packs. In 2004, at the age of 83, she had both of her hips replaced as the pain had become too constant and disabling to ride comfortably. For the first jump in the hunt field after this double surgery, she picked the nastiest looking coop that exists in our hunting country and rode right over it. She was so thrilled to be able to do so without pain that she said, "With



my heart in my stomach, I decided the time was now.” Today she can be seen galloping across fields on her ex-racehorse Talc, with the Derby trademark on her head, or driving her tractor through the hunting country bush-hogging paths. Until a few years ago she could be seen riding her motorcycle over to the tennis courts in Farmington Country Club for a game—gratefully she gave that to her son.

Ilie Wood once told me that, being successful in her field, she felt an obligation to set a good example for young people. She certainly has done so by continuing her excellent seat on the horse, her impeccable eye, her remarkable posture, and her attention to the correct manners one must have in life. I personally wish that more sports figures would heed those words. She is truly a remarkable athlete and a valued friend.

Jane Porter Fogleman was born and raised in Albemarle County and is an avid lifelong foxhunter. She hunts with Farmington Hunt Club, Keswick Hunt Club and travels to other Virginia hunts whenever possible.