

Foxfield &

BY ELIZABETH H. "BETH" SUTTON
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GEORGE BARKLEY
AND CATHY SUMMERS

A Foxhunter's Legacy Farmington

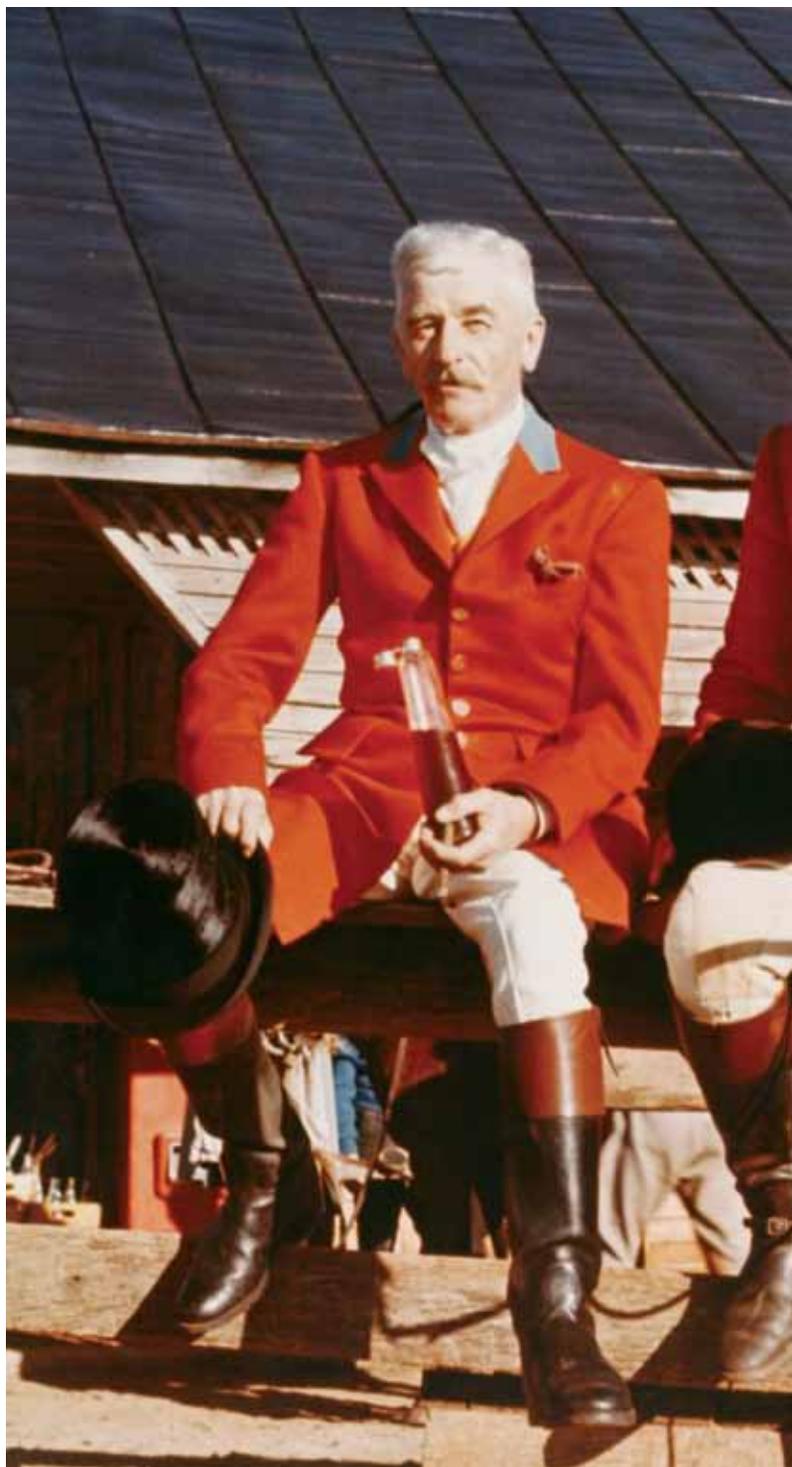
Thirty-two years ago, a former member of the Farmington Hunt Club, Marian de Tejada, paid homage to her devoted friend and legendary foxhunter, Grover Vandevender, who once owned a farm called Foxfield. With help from an advisory committee of prominent horsemen and racing professionals, Tejada established the Foxfield Racing Association, Inc., and every year since there have been two race meets held on the farm where Grover lived. Today the Foxfield Races bring large crowds to Charlottesville, Va., for fall and spring steeplechase races that are annual social celebrations of national renown. The April race meet is one of the most popular attractions for university students eager to celebrate the end of winter and enjoy a day in the country. By the time the horses are in the paddock for the first race, the party is well underway at tailgate picnics that blanket the fields surrounding the course. Thanks to the revenue these races bring in each year, the Foxfield Racing Association is able not only to preserve the property, but also to donate a portion of each meet's earnings to a designated charity for an average gift of over \$12,000.

The Foxfield Races bring entries from prestigious stables throughout Virginia and Mary-

land. The purses for the spring and fall runnings average \$60,000 per year. The home stretch is part of a manicured course of excellent turf that once served as a runway for planes at the Charlottesville-Albemarle airport. The green metal airplane hangar still stands beside Garth Road, next to the track that was once a landing strip-turned hay field and riding ring, and is now the finish line of the steeplechase course. The spring racing card features the Grover Vandevender Memorial Timber race over three miles, named for the legendary horseman who bought the old airport in 1935 and converted it to a farm where he raised cattle and horses, and harvested orchard grass hay, putting it up with horse drawn wagons in a large barn.

Gloria Fennell (Farmington MFH from 1962-1968) remembers learning to ride on her first pony at Grover's at the age of 6 in 1938. "My parents wisely decided it would be better to keep my pony at [Grover's] stable rather than ride at home by myself," explains Gloria. So the family decided to move the pony from their home, Gallison Hall, in the Farmington Country Club neighborhood, to the farm

William Faulkner and Grover on a fence in front of barn at Foxfield, circa 1958.





Foxfield stables: the center of horse activity and country life for generations of Charlottesville horse enthusiasts.



Foxfield is still on the Farmington Fixture card. Pictured here are members of the field at Opening Cub Hunting meet September 9, 2009. Sherry Buttrick on foot.



Grover raised a litter of orphaned fox cubs that he kept in a pen in the old hangar. After they were grown they were trained to come when he blew his horn. They lived in a den in the woods on the edge of the farm.



Grover's Working Students helped with "whatever needed doing" around the farm.

where Grover had established a successful riding school farther out Garth Road. "My friend and I would spend the whole day out there," Gloria recalls. "We did whatever he needed help with. He made you feel like you could do anything — he was a great teacher."

According to Gloria, during the 1930s and 1940s Grover played an important role not only serving as huntsman but also providing horses and instruction for a diverse social riding community. "When the young men went off to war, the hunt club paid Grover \$300 a month to keep two packs of hounds, and he also [maintained trails in] the territory. As a gifted 'hound man,' he took culls that were less than ideal for the live pack to make up a well-disciplined drag pack," she explains. "We hunted drag on Saturdays (around the Farmington Country Club). Tuesdays

and Thursdays we hunted live." During this time, Grover kept hounds at his kennels at Foxfield. In 1951, the Hunt Club purchased 30 acres from Mr. and Mrs. John Rogan and built a new clubhouse on the adjoining property on Garth Road.

During the 1950s a large and loyal clientele of riders, foxhunters and friends came to Grover's stable at Foxfield for instruction and to board their horses. Among them was local real estate broker, foxhunter and photographer George Barkley, who helped establish the popular Buck Mountain Riding Club. Barkley's son Bill, and Keswick resident Sara Lee Barnes, were also among the gang of children who learned to ride at Grover's. They remember it as the center of horse activity and country life for many local residents and visitors. "You could stop by and rent a horse for a few dollars," says Sara Lee, "or lease a horse

to hunt. There were shows and often two rings going at the same time." Students from Grover Vandevender's Riding Academy showed both regionally and nationally. Gloria Fennell's early experience began with a leadline class at the Warrenton Pony Show in 1937. A few years later, for her ninth birthday in the summer of 1941, her parents bought her a 16.2 hand chestnut thoroughbred mare that Grover received in payment for a board bill. That fall they won the Children's Hunter class at Madison Square Garden in Manhattan. Gloria adds, "Since they only had one children's class, we entered the Regular Hunter, too." The jumps were higher than she was tall.

By 1958 Paul and Jill Summers were settled in the area, having moved to Charlottesville when Paul entered UVA law school, and Jill's father, William Faulkner, came to the university

to work as writer-in-residence. They became Grover's good friends, sharing his enthusiasm for foxhunting in Virginia. Grover's love of wildlife, his expertise in horsemanship and foxhunting, and especially his skill in breeding and hunting hounds were passed on through his students. During her college years Gloria helped Grover with the hounds, riding as whipper-in and later becoming MFH. She and Dr. E.D. Vere-Nicoll initiated a more organized plan to register the Farmington Hounds and start a breeding program in the early 1960s.

The hunt club continued to grow and change as Grover's role became less active. He retired as huntsman in 1960, but remained a regular presence in the hunt and in the neighborhood. As proprietor of a small store on the corner of Garth and Free Union Road, he observed everything and stayed in touch with friends.

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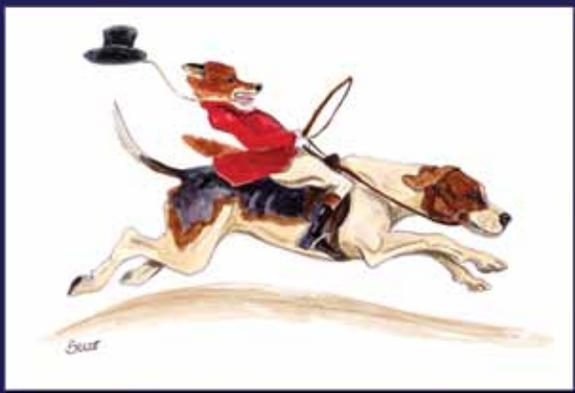
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In 1966, Grover hired Connie Dempsey to manage the stable. She was an important member of the hunt community, teaching during the unsettled times of the late '60s. In 1970 women were admitted to UVA for the first time, and the university underwent a major expansion in order to keep up with the changing student body. The town of Charlottesville grew rapidly; land values leapt, and pressures from development threatened farms near Foxfield. At a time when students were protesting, riots were in the daily news, and women rebelled against traditional roles, the student membership of the hunt club grew.

Tradition held fast both in the hunt and at Foxfield, with life continuing much as before. Grover would follow the hunt on foot or by car, and often the meets were near his home. Everett Sanner, his former assistant, became huntsman after

Grover retired, and Jill Summers succeeded Gloria and Dr. Vere-Nicoll 1968. Throughout her 40 years as Master, Summers dedicated her life to the Farmington Hounds, developing a strong breeding program that evolved from a predominantly American pack to one with more Crossbred hounds. Farmington adapted as the hunt country changed, later moving the kennels and the clubhouse farther out into the country beyond Free Union where it is today.

Foxfield's origins are closely interwoven with its present day leadership and preservation. The races began with a wish and a dream. Grover had always wanted a steeplechase since the first years of the hunt when there was an informal race on the old drag course at the Farmington Country Club. That vision would become reality when Marian de Tejada created the races on the Foxfield property after Grover's

death in 1974. Mrs. Tejada purchased the farm from Grover's estate and started construction of a steeplechase course dedicated to his memory.

The first running of the spring meet was May 13th, 1978, and over the years the races grew in popularity and the course improved under the regular management and maintenance of the association staff. Grover's Buck Mountain Riding Clubhouse was later transformed into the current Foxfield racing office. The 188 acres that complete the property surrounding the racecourse are now leased for cattle and hay farming. The foxes that Grover was so famous for nurturing on the farm are still very much in residence and provide good sport for the Farmington Hunt, celebrating its 80th anniversary this year.

The annual Thanksgiving meet and the opening meet of cub hunting season are still held

at Foxfield. Farmington Hunt joint MFH, W. Patrick Butterfield, works full time as racing director, FHC President Reynolds Cowles' Blue Ridge Equine Clinic teams with Georgetown to handle vet duties, and FHC former MFH Thomas Bishop serves as head of committee to select outriders from a well-mounted team of local foxhunters. This year, he and FHC joint MFH Bok Summers, Jill's son, were working the course with fellow FHC members. They look forward to many more races and hunting days in years to come thanks to the preservation of Grover's legacy.

Elizabeth H. "Beth" Sutton lives in Albemarle County, Va., and is a member of the Farmington Hunt. She is the author of "A Pony for Keeps" and other children's books. Her work has appeared in *Albemarle, Virginia Living*, the *Thoroughbred Times*, *Hurlingham Magazine* and *Virginia Sportsman*.

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