



Shelly Thompson (L) and Anne Riley begin the 30-mile ride on the trail at The Homestead. (Photo courtesy of Cristie & Co.)

VIRGINIA TRAIL RIDERS

Looking back and moving forward

By Elizabeth H. Sutton

Equestrian sports have been a part of Virginia's history and lifestyle since the 1600s when Englishmen first landed in Jamestown. George Washington brought the sport of mounted foxhunting to northern Virginia. In earlier times, people traveled miles on horseback to fight wars and to move households across the country. Today, long-distance riding lives on as a sport despite changing times and the fast pace of life. There is a group of hardy equestrians who hold annual competitions to promote the enjoyment of the sport of trail riding — the Virginia Trail Riders (VTR).

“Horses provided the first transportation that brought people to the resort when it was founded in 1766,” notes Lynn Swann of The Omni Homestead Resort Hotel in Hot Springs, Virginia. “We are pleased to have the Virginia Trail Riders as part of our past and our present.”

The Virginia Trail Riders, Inc. is a private organization of equestrians that hosts two long-distance trail rides each fall and spring at The Homestead. The popular 30-mile competitive and pleasure ride is in early October on Columbus Day weekend and the more rigorous 100- and 50-mile competition is in April. Riders from as far away as Vermont, Florida and California have come to ride the extensive trails that traverse the Allegheny highlands surrounding the hotel.

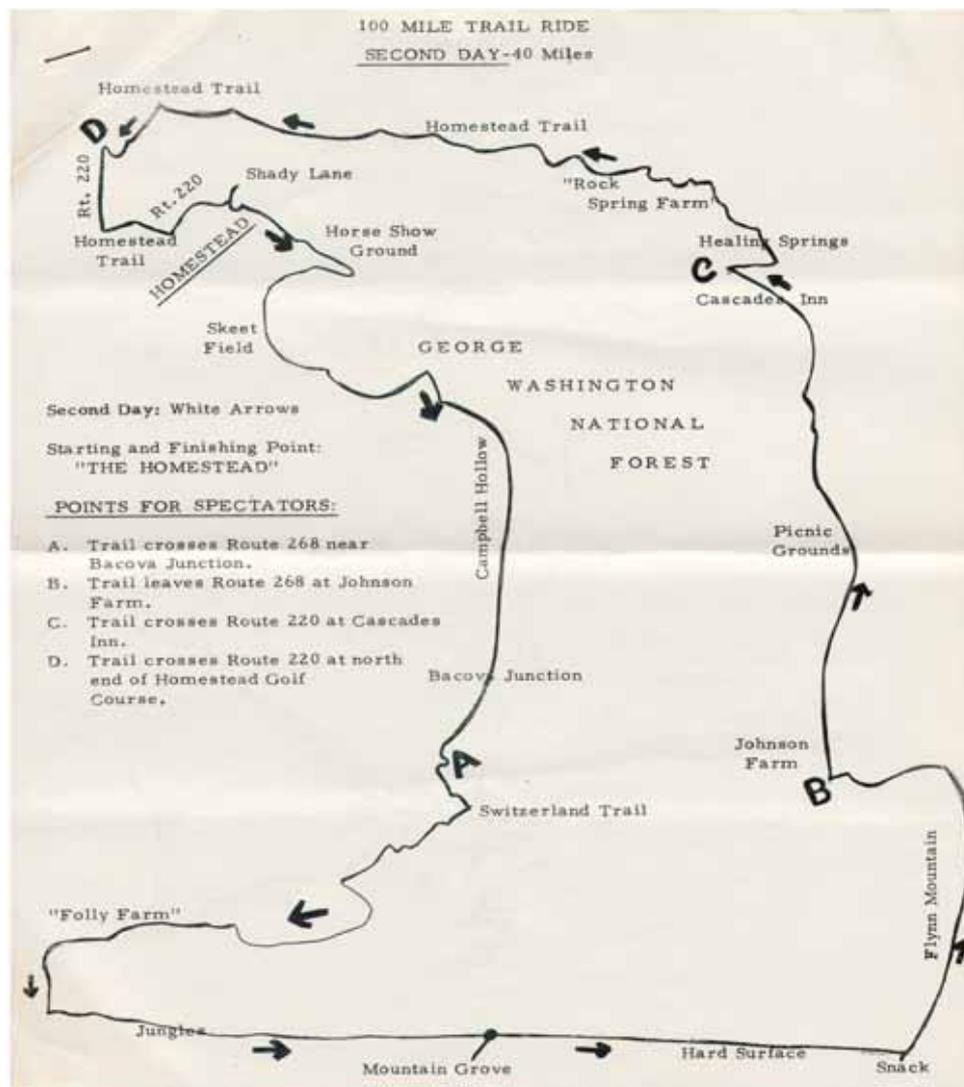
The organization was founded originally in 1957 at a meeting at the Skyland Inn in Shenandoah National Park, organized by George Cole Scott of Richmond with a group of 43 fellow horse enthusiasts to “inaugurate, promote and execute an Endurance (i.e. long distance) Trail Ride in Virginia and to inaugurate, promote and execute other trail rides and recreational enjoyment of horse sports in Virginia.” Its executive committee included two scions of Virginia equestrian history: Mrs. Archibald Randolph, MFH of the Piedmont Hunt of Upperville, who learned her “keep up or go home” riding style from her uncle, General George S. Patton; and Alexander Mackay-Smith, a distinguished author, historian and sportsman from White Post.

The first 100-mile competitive trail ride took place April 15-17, 1958, at The Homestead. Fay Ingalls, then managing director of the Homestead, invited the Virginia Trail Riders to set up



A 50-mile rider trots along Hobby Horse Farm near the Cascades Inn. (Photo courtesy of VTR)

A map showing the second day of the 100-mile route for the inaugural April 15-17, 1958, ride (Courtesy of VTR)



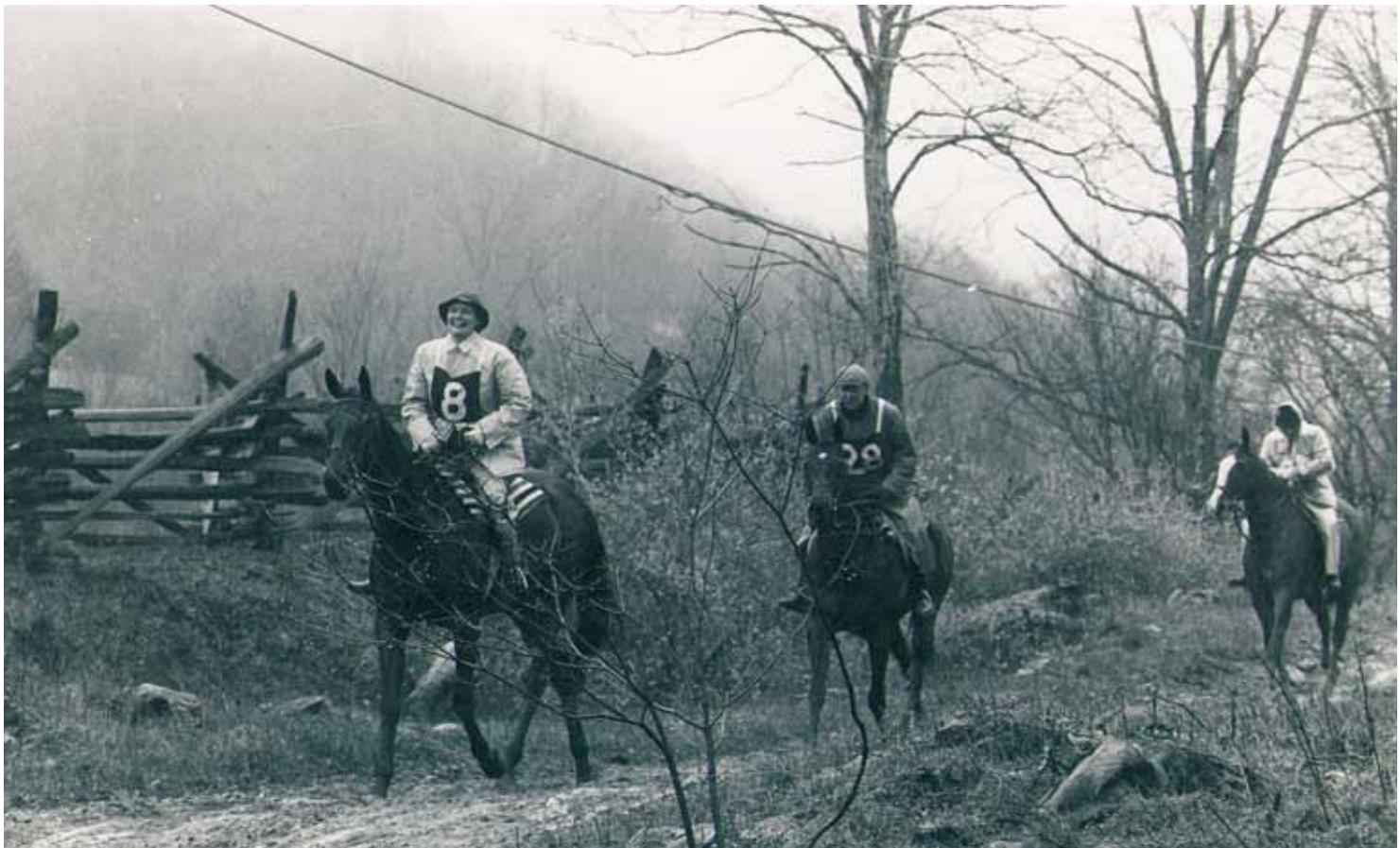
headquarters and hold its events there to take full advantage of the extensive trail system and stables at the Bath County show grounds. The Cascades Inn provided the ideal lodging, with a banquet hall and facility to handle up to 90 guests. The conditions and schedule followed the rules laid down by the Green Mountain Horse Association in South Woodstock, Vermont, (established in 1926) for the 100-mile competitive ride. There were 44 entrants who rode 40 miles the first and second days. Only 30 of them completed the final 20 miles on the third and final day. Entrants set off at a prescribed time between 8:30 and 9 a.m. and seven hours in the saddle was optimal. Contestants know how to pace their horses after spending many hours in the saddle preparing for the event.

“April in the Hot Springs valley can bring cold and unpredictable weather,” said Jean von Schilling, local landowner and current secretary of the organization,



Robin Richards and Terri Catlett from Millwood, Virginia, stop so their horses can drink along the trail in Hobby Horse Farm on the 50-mile ride in 2008. (Photo by Doris Stimpson)

Mrs. Stephen C. Clark, Jr. of Middleburg, Virginia (L), William N. Wilbur of Warrenton, Virginia, and Mrs. Richard N. Jackson of Upperco, Maryland, on the last leg of a 40-mile ride through rain, sleet, mud and snow at the third annual 100-mile ride in 1961. (Photo by Aubrey Graves)





Horses are examined by a vet along the trail at designated stops to assess their heart rate.



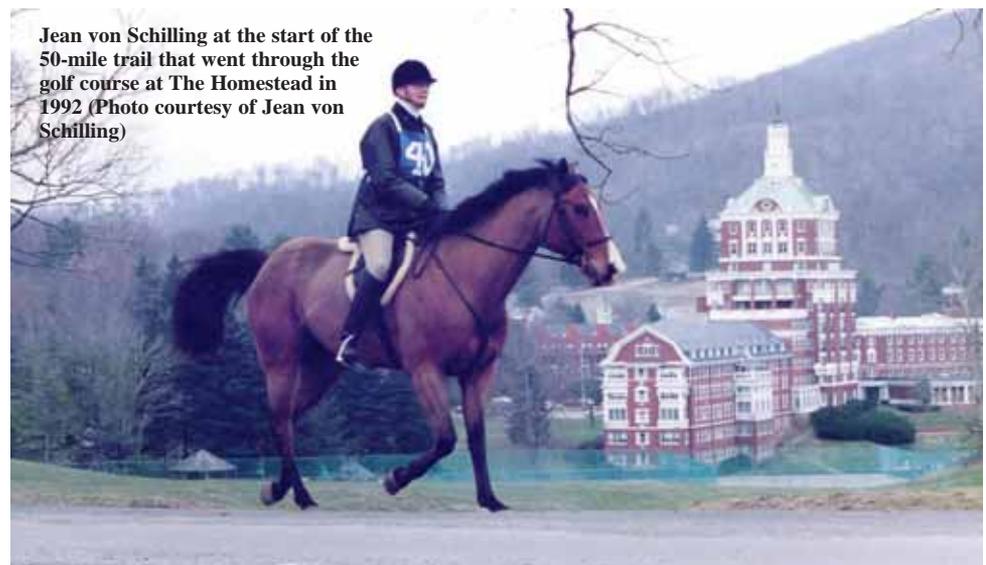
The Cascades Inn provided lunch during a 30-minute break midway through the 40-mile portions of the ride.

The above photos were taken in the 1960s, before regulations for wearing approved protective helmets went into effect. (Courtesy of VTR)

recalling her introduction to the event. “I had never heard about the ride until some riders wearing numbers came through on a miserably cold and wet day. They looked as though they were somewhat worse for wear, and were just part way through the course.”

The winner finishes the third day of riding worn to a frazzle and exhausted—but the condition of the rider at the finish line is not judged. What counts is that the horse he or she is riding arrives in tiptop condition and within the time limit. It is not a race in the normal sense, but an endurance test for the horses. Winning the long distance ride gives an incomparable sense of pride and accomplishment. Paul Mellon was Grand Champion of the 100-mile in 1977, 1978, and 1979, riding his retired steeplechaser Christmas Goose, a bronze statue of which is prominently displayed at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

In the early days of the 100-mile event, the 70 stalls at the show grounds were filled. Today, there are only 40 stalls and fewer riders. Former 100-mile champions Jennifer Spalding of Middleburg and Edith Lyon of Syria explained that the interest in long-distance trail riding peaked in the 1980s and early nineties. Today, however,

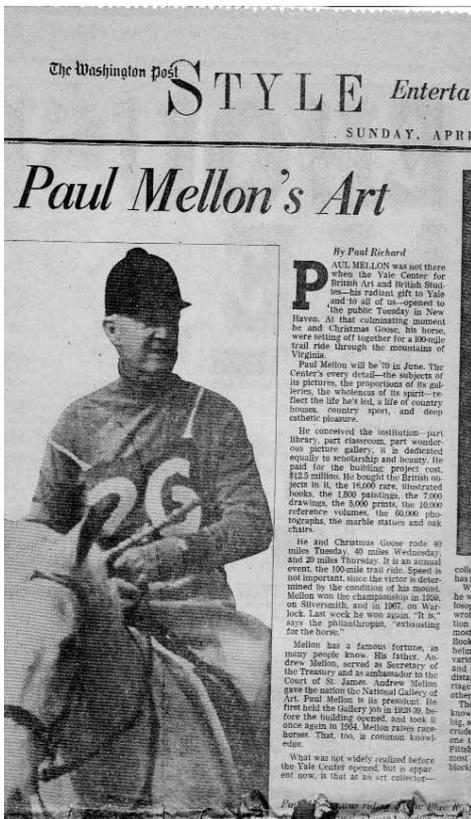


Jean von Schilling at the start of the 50-mile trail that went through the golf course at The Homestead in 1992 (Photo courtesy of Jean von Schilling)

the motivation is the same: the challenge, the competition and the camaraderie.”It’s similar to the spirit of the cavalry! To take care of your horse to go the distance and be in ‘fighting good shape’ when you arrive—it’s a test of what you and your horse can do together.” von Schilling explains. The spring ride at The Homestead served to kick off a series of competitive trail rides that took place from New York, New Jersey, North Carolina and all the way to Florida.

Big changes came to VTR when the Ingalls family sold The Homestead to ClubCorp in 1993 and portions of the extensive original trails were taken over by private development. The Cascades Inn, once the center of hospitality for the gathering, closed its doors. The resort no longer maintained the trails as it had done when the Ingalls, who were active horse people, were owners.

However, VTR lives on, thanks to the mentorship and dedication of its members and the cooperation of the current ownership, the Omni Hotel group. After the 100-mile ride this year on April 11-13, VTR will assess its future. The group lost its president, Carol Easter, in the fall of 2015. Trail committee chair Doris Stimpson of Boyce,



The Sunday April 24, 1977 edition of the Washington Post featured Paul Mellon who with his favorite horse Christmas Goose won the 100-mile ride in 1977, 1978, and 1979. (Photo courtesy of VTR)

Virginia, and treasurer Martha McLean Rodgers of Crozet, Virginia, will dedicate the fall ride (October 9-11, 2016) in honor of Carol Easter.

VTR is adapting to today's challenges. Participants in the pleasure division can ride the trails at their own pace. They are granted access to trails courtesy of Natural Retreats and the Nature Conservancy, as well as private landowners. The Omni Homestead Resort offers a mini-vacation for riders and their horses for the 100- and 50-mile rides in April and the 30-mile fall ride in October. A course will be laid out for 30-, 50- and 100-mile rides with divisions for competition and pleasure. For some riders the competition remains a central part of the experience. Professional riding instructor Lynne Beegle-Gebhard of Brook Hill

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Farm in Charlottesville comes back every year with her husband Mark and a large group of students. Gebhard says, "It's really one of the only activities we can do that truly measures how much you and your horse can do together; it's a good test." Another regular competitor and champion endurance rider Steve Rojek said, "The Hot Springs ride and the Homestead are just part of my life every year, "The trails are technical and challenging. The riders return faithfully so solid friendships are made. I compete a lot and consider the Virginia three-day 100 to be a good steppingstone to other rides that follow in the spring and summer."

The Virginia Trail Riders and The Omni Homestead Hotel and resort will welcome old friends and new guests for the rides planned for 2016. An equestrian sporting tradition that has lasted for many years will continue. Much has changed, but some things remain the same: the love of a horse and the close bond that comes through shared hours on the trail.

For more information about the Virginia Trail Riders, Inc., visit www.virginiatrailridersinc.com, and www.facebook.com/virginiatrailridersinc.

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