

The History of Woodbrook Hunt

Part I

In 1911, the now defunct Seattle Hunt came south for a joint meet with what would later become the Woodbrook Hunt. Although the span of our history may seem brief when compared to the long established hunts of the East Coast, in the 98 years we have hunted, we've more than made up for it with out characters, charisma and ... great character and abundant flavor

Little is known of the origination of the hunt, other than the information given in a newspaper article from the Tacoma Tribune in August of 1911 when the Seattle hunt (now disbanded) came south to hunt with the newly formed Woodbrook Hunt Club. Woodbrook's benefactor was a local banker and his wife, Chester and Anna Thorne. Thorne was one of the founders of the Port of Tacoma, whose manse later became a favorite for movie sets and is situated on a road that today still bears his name and is used to access the hunt.

In May of 1926, T.H. Bryan and Major J.E. Mathews, from Vancouver, B.C., headed up the hunt. Bryan had hunted in England and Ireland, and donated the 2 ½ couple that he himself had purchased. They realized that Tacoma wanted to ride, and there was wonderful country for riding in the Northwest in the area that is now the Fort Lewis Reservation.

Bryan put on two or three drag hunts, and everyone was enthusiastic. However, feeding and exercising hounds, building kennels and jumps, and laying drags cost money, and with no enthusiastic millionaire in sight, the only way was to form a club and share the expense. This was done with Hill Hudson as President, Katharine Rice as Vice President, T.H. Bryan as MFH, his daughter, Iris Bryan, as huntsman, and Major Mathews as Secretary-Treasurer.

The club hunted regularly during the summer and fall of 1926. Snake fence rails from the old farms were plentiful on the reservation. So, with the loan of a truck and volunteer labor, a series of courses were constructed, each named after a member. The surest way to get a course named after you was to take a spectacular spill over a jump. Several members gained prestige by using this method. At the end of the year the Club held its first annual dinner at the Tacoma Hotel, where a financial report was read and the President and the Executive Committee for the ensuing year were elected. The Woodbrook Hunt Club was flourishing. (In 2006, the Club held its 80th annual dinner and meeting in a downtown Tacoma hotel. The Tacoma Hotel itself no longer exists.)

In 1929, Major Mathews bought two acres on the hillside above what is now McChord Air Force Base and moved the entire covered riding stable and its riding ring in 20 foot sections from its original location outside South Tacoma to the new location. It was here that the riding academy and the Hunt Club experienced their happiest and most successful years despite the Depression.

On the McChord property was a two-room shack which Major Mathews donated to the Hunt Club. Members pitched in and raised enough money to turn it into a comfortable little club house with a main reception room, kitchenette, and two changing rooms. The Mathews turned the attic into a small apartment, with an outside stairway, where they lived for several years. At the back of the academy, kennels were built which housed from three to eight couples of hounds. Pink coats also began to appear in the hunting field at this time. And so it went as year by year the Club grew and its reputation spread. Hounds were hunted every two weeks during the season October to May, and special events were held, such as an annual dinner and dance (usually at the Tacoma Golf and Country Club[2]), New Year's Day hunts followed by a Tom and Jerry party in the Club House, gymkhanas, horse shows and early morning hunts before the close of the season in May or June. During the summer months the Club organized Sunday rides and picnics on the reservation. The highlight of the social season was the annual hunt ball. Sometimes neighboring riding clubs from Seattle and Portland would be invited to take part in the hunts. Some of our members came from as far away as Everett and Aberdeen.

There were setbacks, too. Twice members were barred from riding on the reservation by a new General at Fort Lewis. Then the Club would have to rouse all the local politicians to create pressure at Washington and have the ban lifted. In the meantime the Club would almost go broke. Then it was nearly wiped out by rabies when it lost most of its hounds plus the neighbor's calf. Luckily no humans were bitten as there was no reliable antidote at that time. However, the Club did survive those troubles and usually came back stronger than ever.

During all of this the Club was experimenting with types of scent for the drag and the training and raising of hounds. The first scents applied to a gunnysack were a concoction of herring, fish oil, and a few drops of asafetida. The hounds followed it quite well but ran mute as they did with all artificial scents. As half the excitement of the hunt is the music of the hounds, and the members were always trying to get more of it. They used to lay the drag on foot, but decided this took too long. So they used the old hound truck (Model T Ford). That gave them the notion that the smell of a tire would suffice, and they ran several drags made of cold scents and purchased, "Rebecca," the coon, to provide live scent. She gave them some wild fights to start with, but soon became very bored with her job of walking on the end of a lead. She walked very slowly, and when tired, just gave up and refused to go another step even if dragged until her paws were raw. They ended up keeping her as a pet to amuse the kids. She finally dug her way out of the pen and escaped. After other experiments, they hit on the idea of using a wild cat skin, which proved by far the best of all drags. It was soaked in water overnight and dragged from horseback – one skin being good for several hunts. The hounds ran well on it and gave plenty of tongue.

The other difficult part was training an even pack of hounds. Usually two or three would be so much faster and keener than the others that it spoiled the pack. Although less than half the pups raised turned out to be disappointing in the field, developing a good pack proved to be not only expensive but uncertain. It usually took two years to find out if a young hound would be suitable in the field. Buying grown hounds was not the answer, either: generally they were coon hounds picked up from the local farmers and trained to hunt singly, not adapting themselves to drag hunting with a pack.

By 1939 war was started in Europe and the peaceful days of the Fort Lewis Reservation were over. In 1938 the government bought Major Mathews out in order to build McChord Field, and he had to find a new location in a hurry. A good price was paid for the Club House and with the proceeds he was able to buy a fair sized piece of land, build new kennels for the hounds and build a modern Club House on the present location.