

Hunt Club Rides in Old Tradition—Without Fox

Valley Hounds Follow Scented Bait and Ignore Trail of Live Native Animals

"Pack in! Pack in!" the whippers-in snapped at the excited, baying fox hounds.

"Pack to him!" they commanded with repeated cracks of their lashes as they veered their horses to maneuver the hounds into a grouping about the feet of the master's horse.

The huntsmen pressed forward with the scarlet-coated master astride his white mount flanked by two whippers-in as a third rode to the rear to keep the hounds in line. Behind them cantered the field of a score of well-turned-out hunters, making a picturesque tableau.

The setting was not England, but the San Fernando Valley.

Only Fox Missing

Traditions, mellowed by centuries of fox hunting in England, have been transferred almost intact to the Valley, and are revived every Sunday morning when the riders of the West Hills Hunt Club gather for their weekly chase.

Only the fox is missing.

But the scarlet-garbed hunters with top hats are mounted on prize horses which are just as eager to follow the keen-nosed hounds as are their skilled riders.

This is not a social club, George A. Burns, its president, emphasized. The members ride to hunt, he asserted, adding that this is the only riding hunt club in Southern California.

Hold Hunt Breakfasts

But it is not without its social aspects, too, all in keeping with hunt traditions. Once a month the members hold a hunt breakfast and twice during their season, which stretches from October to May, they hold daylong hunter field trials, including point-to-point races.

The rest of the Sundays they ride—rain, smog or shine—under the leadership of Percy Dunn, Master of the Foxhounds, surrounded by the club's proudest possession, their six couple (12) American foxhounds. (Hounds, never called dogs, are always referred to in units of couples or half couples).

This activity isn't new to the 50-year-old Master of the Foxhounds who operates a dog kennel the other six days of the week. He started chasing red fox under the guidance of his father in England when he was 10 years old.

Use Scented Bait

It was Dunn who figured out the nature of the scented bait the club uses which makes it possible to lay a drag line to give the hounds the feel of a red fox in flight.

Dunn recalled that during one of their hunts a gray fox crossed their home made line but the hounds held fast to the red fox scent without wavering for the live gray one.

The course they cover is tough, the cross country chase hard.

What nature has omitted in the way of obstacles club members have built themselves in sections of the 11,000 acres of rolling hills over which they have permission to ride.

Close to Boulevard

Although their grounds are but a short distance south of busy Ventura Blvd. stretching from Encino to Woodland Hills when the field is mounted and the master leads the hounds to the hunt, the scene looks like it might have been lifted from an old painting.

One exception would be the fact that a few contemporary film personalities might be included in that picture. Regular riders included Academy Award Winning Director John Huston and Actor Dan Dailey and his wife, Liz. Ronald Reagan used to be a regular until a broken foot (a baseball accident) dismounted him last summer. Otherwise the membership ranges from bookkeepers and secretaries, who can just afford to keep a horse, to the more wealthy ones who have a lot of help in caring for their mounts.

The love of riding, hunting and the hounds is the common denominator that binds them all together, according to Burns. On Sundays they are all ladies and gentlemen turned out for the hunt with meticulous attention paid to details of their dress, language and horse deportment.

Substitute Costumes

Scarlet coats and top hats are desirable but not mandatory, Burns said. Soft hat or derby, tie, breeches and boots are approved substitutes for members of the field.

On the other hand, a top hat for a staff member is just as taboo as jeans, kerchief or western saddle. The staffer is required to wear a regulation hunting cap, with the ribbons in the back pointing up to indicate that his is an honorary, not a paid, position, Burns noted.

Etiquette of the field is always maintained within the framework of the centuries-old tradition. Every Sunday members of the field individually greet the master with a "Good morning, master."

Beyond that, if the member wants to talk to him he asks permission, Dunn asserted. With a dozen or more hounds to care for and the responsibility of giving sport to the hunter, the mas-

ter is a busy man before the hunt and can ignore the request and still be in good taste, Dunn pointed out.

Expert Horsemanship

The cardinal sin of the hunt is for a member of the field to overrun the master and the hounds. For that reason the West Hills Hunt Club has expert horsemanship as one of its major prerequisites for membership, according to Dunn. No one has committed that sin while the hunt was on, he added.

Officers of the club, in addition to Burns and Dunn, are Don Cameron, vice-president and a whipper-in; Bill Ashley, treasurer; Isabel Young, secretary. Members of the board include Liz Dailey and Jim Donaldson, who are both whippers-in, as well as Nino Pepitone, Roger Marchetti, Augusta King and Audrey Scott.

Mission Play Opens Sunday in San Gabriel

John Steven McGroarty's "Mission Play" will open Sunday with a premiere at 3:30 p.m. in the Mission Playhouse at San Gabriel.

Chief George Standingbear will play the part of "Capitajeno" in the drama. He is the son of Chief Luther Standingbear, who wrote several books on the life of the Sioux Indians. The actor in his younger days traveled with the Buffalo Bill Wild West show.

Authentic Dances

He danced for the King and Queen of England. He speaks and sings in the native tongue of the Sioux Indians and knows all of the authentic Sioux dances. He was educated at the Haskell Indian University at Lawrence, Kan.

Mrs. Louise Ward Watkins will return to the stage to play the role of Senora Josepha Yorba and James Kirkwood will play the part of Fray Yorba.

Twenty-eight matinees will be held following Sunday's premiere with an extra performance every Sunday at 5:45 p.m.