

FOXHUNTING

Phoenix Rises From the Ashes

By Stephen K. Heard, Ex-MFH

The attrition of foxhunting organizations has been apparent for quite some time. In 1996, the Masters of Foxhounds Association (MFHA) listed 171 member hunts. By 2020, that number had dwindled to 145 member hunts. In the MFHA 2022-2023 directory, 136 hunts are listed. There are, of course, farmer's packs and other hunts that do not belong to the MFHA, but the foregoing numbers are telling.

Foxhunting clubs cease to exist for several reasons. A foxhunting organization requires sufficient land on which to hunt and adequate funds to support its operation. Development of hunting lands fueled by increasing land values and sales of land into smaller and smaller parcels has had a negative impact on some clubs. Additionally, the inability of a hunt to raise sufficient operating capital through subscriptions, fundraising and/or masters and benefactors' contributions has had dire ramifications for other such organizations. And, of course, a cascade of human failings, including a lack of competent leadership, has put a number of hunts on the ropes.

But there are situations in which hunts have met rising challenges with foresight, imagination, and energy. Such brings to mind the legend of the Phoenix. This myth is found in several ancient cultures, notably those of the Greeks and the Egyptians. The story holds that the Phoenix is a bird that lives for 500 years, then bursts into flames to be thoroughly consumed by same, and thereafter is miraculously reborn from its ashes. In the parlance of 2024, the allusion of the Phoenix rising from the ashes symbolizes an organization or event that has been able to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles to achieve rebirth when, to all rational observers, the situation was hopeless. This is a story of a foxhunting club that was, for all intents and purposes, dead but for the burying, yet found a way to improvise, adapt, overcome, achieve, and ultimately prosper.

I was relaxing one Sunday morning in March of 2014 at my farm in Cornersville, Tennessee, when there came a knock on my door. I was at that time a member of a then splendid hunt in Kentucky comprised of some of my closest friends, and I whipped-in to a huntsman who was a pure pleasure to work with. Previously, I had been staff with several hunts and had also spent some years as Master of Foxhounds. I was happy with my current arrangement and had no plans to change. I answered the door and found William D. "Bill" Haggard requesting a word with me.

Bill and I sat down in front of my fireplace, and he told me that he had accepted an offer of mastership with the Mells Foxhounds of Lynnville, Tennessee. Bill indicated that he had a vision for Mells but he was going to need help. Bill asked me if I would consider joining Mells to work with its hounds. Skeptically, I sat quietly and listened.

I first came to know Bill at a time when neither of us were old enough to hold driver's licenses and, regrettably, at my instigation, he was part of a group of some 15-20 friends who decided to visit a girls' slumber party. The entire endeavor devolved into chaos when the chaperones of the young ladies took exception to the plan and called the police. Order was restored and I later surrendered to my parents, was grounded, and was required to apologize to all of the parents whose sons I had led astray. Accordingly, I did not see Bill again for decades. But, as fate would have it, we found ourselves foxhunting together thirty-five years later. I was a first flight field master and Bill was one of the "hard boots" who always finished the day behind me regardless of how tough the going was or how long the hunt lasted.

However, I had not seen much of Bill following my joining another hunt. What he was asking seemed to be a non-starter. Bill, however, is nothing if not persistent.

Why Mells, I thought? I had not heard much about this hunt in years. I had been a member of Mells Foxhounds for one season, 1994-1995, and had hunted behind the late Troy Taylor who showed great sport. I was thereafter called elsewhere.



William D. "Bill" Haggard, MFH, welcomed riders and guests in preparation for the Blessing of the Hounds and the start of the 2023-2024 formal hunt season. Dr. William D. Kenner photo

I researched the Mells Foxhounds and was surprised by what I found. The founder of Mells was Colonel John L. Horner, Jr. Colonel Horner was a highly decorated officer in the US Army who personally assisted President Franklin D. Roosevelt during WWII with the invasion plans of Nazi-occupied Europe and, at President Roosevelt's instruction, met repeatedly with Winston Churchill and General Dwight D. Eisenhower to coordinate D-Day. When that fateful day occurred, Colonel Horner landed at Normandy (Utah Beach) and thereafter served under General George C. Patton. Colonel

Horner's wife, Ann, had foxhunted with General Patton as a little girl with the Rappahannock Hunt.

Prior to WWII, Colonel Horner enjoyed foxhunting in Northern Virginia with a number of hunts, particularly the Old Dominion Hounds. Following the war, Colonel Horner accepted a position with the Chrysler Corporation's Jet Engine Division located near Huntsville, Alabama. He moved his family to Huntsville and developed a friendship with a fellow foxhunting enthusiast, Harry Rhett. Rhett formed the celebrated Mooreland Foxhounds and he and Colonel Horner enjoyed hunting together with Mr. Rhett's pack. However, Colonel Horner wanted to establish his own hunt and have his entire family enjoy foxhunting from the ground up. Accordingly, Colonel Horner moved to Giles County, Tennessee, purchased a suitable farm, and formed the Mells Foxhounds. By 1966, Mells was registered with the Masters of Foxhounds Association and recognized by same in 1970. Mells has remained an active member of the MFHA for 57 years. While in England during WWII, Colonel Horner visited his ancestral home, Mells Manor in Somerset, England, built in the 16th century for Edwin Horner. Colonel Horner took the name of his forebearers' residence for his foxhunting organization.

Bill laid out Mells situation to me. He told me Mells was nearly terminal. A former master and huntsman who had given the Mells her all for 15 years was at the end of her tether. This master sadly announced to her sole joint master, Stasia Bachrach, that she could no longer shoulder the crushing expense and necessary resources to maintain the hunt. During her 15 years of leadership (12 years as huntsman), she had performed admirably.

My father once headed a university and received many accolades for his leadership. He always responded to suggestions that he and he alone was responsible for the success of the institution by saying, "We are here because we have built on the foundation laid by those that have come before us." Thanks to the efforts of its prior leadership, there remained a sound foundation on which Mells' future could be built.

Ms. Bachrach was faced with a choice: Whether or not to simply let Mells go the way of the dodo into extinction or initiate efforts to build on that surviving foundation. Stasia decided that she had had too much fun with Mells to shut the door on its legacy. But, Bill explained, Stasia needed help and went to another ex-MFH, Karen Kressenberg, to see if she would be willing to assist. Karen agreed to sign on, but only on the condition that Bill Haggard be solicited to join the Mells "revival" effort as an MFH. Bill was ultimately so persuaded, although he had a condition as well. All three of the masters would have to commit financially to building a state-of-the-art kennel. This term was unanimously accepted.

Bill told me that Mells had hounds but they were getting a little long in the tooth. However, he insisted that Mells was ready to move forward immediately. I agreed to sign on and was given the task of getting to know the hounds, exercising them, and working with Karen Kressenberg in resurrecting their training. On my first day out walking hounds, one of the canine senior citizens simply gave up and I had to carry the 60-pound animal half a mile back to the kennel. As we began our first season hunting these good fellows, I found that some had acquired a taste for venison.

Upon completion of the new kennel, a program for hound acquisition and breeding was instituted. Penn-Marydel hounds were drafted and bred with considerable initial success. While the first years of the rejuvenation of Mells were fraught with a bit of occasional frustration—some scattering of hounds, less than optimal fields, and no small degree of project reflection—there also was hilarity, spirited chases, and great camaraderie. Karen Kressenberg did hunt the hounds and showed commendable sport. Bill Haggard shared the duties of huntsman with Karen for a year and fulfilled a life's dream of hunting hounds with spirit and joie de vivre. The next year, I shared those huntsman responsibilities and it was an exceptional experience.

However, as all agreed, Mells needed a full-time huntsman. After appreciable effort and consideration of numerous candidates, the clouds broke, the sun shined and, in 2018, Charles Montgomery, along with his wife and first whip Boo, accepted the invitation to come to Mells. Charles Montgomery is a three-time Virginia Hound Show Hornblowing champion, has shown hounds at the Virginia Hound Show winning “best in show” on four separate occasions, and, in 2023, he was presented with the MFHA Ian Milne Lifetime Achievement award. Upon installation as Mells huntsman, Charles set about the task of putting together a pack of hounds that were best suited for the Mells country. While the metamorphosis included some Penn-Marydels, the emphasis was on crossbred hounds with an English influence.

No hunt can exist without territory on which to hunt and permission to hunt the land in that territory. Mells had and has a significant amount of registered territory. But, over the years, the land on which the club had permission to hunt dwindled to a 2,500-acre farm called Sugar Valley that the parents of the late Ms. Vanna Husband (former MFH of Mells) had acquired for her use. However, as Mells was reinventing itself, the entire Sugar Valley Farm was put on the market and Mells was faced with looking for new hunting grounds. At this point, however, Gerald Robeson became a joint MFH and Karen Kressenberg left Mells as her business interests took her out of state. Bill Haggard collaborated with Gerald Robeson, both successful businessmen, to study the feasibility of purchasing the Sugar Valley Farm.

Gerald and I had hunted together for years as subscribers with several hunts and even rode together in Epp Wilson's back pocket with the Belle Meade Hunt where we got a lesson in jumping coops in the dark of night. Gerald is a genial and generous fellow who is well liked by all. He also has extraordinary business acumen and a remarkable eye for real estate “diamonds in the rough.” Gerald invested in substantial acreage in the Mells hunt country and turned his new farm into a show place. Bill Haggard made a similar investment and extensive work was conducted such that the property rivaled any farm in Middle Tennessee.

Gerald Robeson and Bill Haggard then convinced others to make similar investments. A number of Mells members now own large tracts of the Mells hunt country and the improvements made include miles of four-board fencing, the installation of over fifty new or rebuilt coops, 50 new gates, many miles of new trails, and the building of clubhouses at two separate fixtures. The new coops, gates, and trails provide access to the entire hunt country for all flights of foxhunters, jumping and non-jumping.

Charles and Boo Montgomery also acquired a large tract of critical territory tying in many hundreds of additional acres and Charles has more than doubled the expanded hunt country through his favorable contacts with surrounding landowners. Additionally, the already state-of-the-art kennels that were completed in 2015 have been expanded to accommodate larger whelping facilities and to make room for the expanded pack.

In order to strengthen the Mells' team, Stasia Bachrach, Bill Haggard, and Gerald Robeson successfully invited Charles Montgomery and Theresa Menefee to become joint masters. I had served as staff with Theresa and her late husband Albert Menefee, III's Cedar Knob Hounds. Theresa expressed to Bill Haggard that with the necessary folding of her hunt, Mells was the place she wanted to be. Theresa brought the love and passion for the sport that she had shared with her husband to Mells along with a number of former Cedar Knob members.

However, a foxhunt with too few members shall not long survive. Bill Haggard realized this at the inception of his Mells mastership as did his joint masters. Under their leadership, Mells was fashioned as a welcoming hunt to adults and juniors alike. An “outreach” to two of the Pony Clubs that have historically hunted with Mells was rejuvenated with regular and consistent invitations to hunt with Mells.

Mells also successfully sponsored the 2023 Junior North American Field Hunter Championships (JNAFHC) and raised \$47,000.00, a record amount of sponsorship funding for the JNAFHC organization. Eighty-seven juniors who had qualified around the country for the opportunity to compete attended. This group represented the greatest number of foxhunts and Pony Clubs from the most states (and Canada) in the history of the competition. This event covered four days that featured a day of championships that included riding and hunting skills competition, along with contests of whip cracking, horn blowing, and hound judging (led by MFH Jack R. van Nagle). A day of full-blown foxhunting for the competitors and their parents was also part of the weekend. An awards banquet topped the weekend to the enjoyment of all.

To further encourage enthusiasts to come out, hunt with Mells, and join the organization, novices and experienced enthusiasts alike were and are advised that “this is a no drama hunt.” Stated with greater specificity, “leave your strong feelings about politics, religion, and any other negative sentiments you may have at home and come out to hunt with Mells for the sheer joy of it.” Respect for fellow foxhunters and the traditions of the sport are required. If you need to belittle others to feel better about yourself, Mells is not for you. Bill and his joint masters strive day in and day out to make the Mells a thoroughly enjoyable experience.



Stephen K. Heard, ex-MFH, on a day of autumn hunting with Mells Fox Hounds, 2023. Dr. William D. Kenner photo



A festive display greeted hunters and supporters at the entrance of MFH Gerald Robeson's Sugar Valley Farm on Mells Fox Hounds Opening Day, 2023. Dr. William D. Kenner photo



Carter Webb on Tink, the incredible Fjord. Dr. William D. Kenner photo



The Reverend Bill Forrester performed the Blessing of the Hounds, as he's done for the past several years, as Huntsman Charles Montgomery looked on. Dr. William D. Kenner photo



Gerald Robeson, MFH, and Beth Holtz. Dr. William D. Kenner photo



Huntsman Charles Montgomery issued some final counsel to his hounds before moving off on Opening Day, 2020. Michael Gomez photo



Riley Jones, Junior Apprentice Whipper-In. Dr. William D. Kenner photo

Mells was able to put an “A” team of masters at the helm, but foxhunting organizations require hands-on business management. To that end, Mells has had excellent hunt secretaries to assist Mells’ escape from the crypt. Judy Kirk did yeoman’s duty moving the hunt forward in the early years and, thereafter, Dr. Cheri Thomas exhibited extraordinarily hard work, initiative, and energy. As Dr. Thomas’ academic and teaching responsibilities required her full attention, Melisa Webb took the daunting reins and has discharged the responsibilities of her office with diplomacy, skill, and indefatigable spirit.

It’s expensive to run a hunt and Mells keeps the subscription charges low to encourage membership and present the opportunity for many to participate who might find themselves priced out of some other hunts. Accordingly, Mells depends on its membership to volunteer for its many activities. Mells’ members, masters, and staff all participate in multiple work parties to keep the hunt country in excellent shape. This takes hard work and yet there are never any complaints. Mells also conducts a number of fundraising initiatives. Mells puts on an annual hunter pace that draws well over a hundred competitors. This is conducted with a luncheon serving over 200 participants in conjunction with an awards ceremony. Mells additionally underwrites a well-attended annual horse show which provides further revenue. Mells also sponsors an annual hunt ball which is held at the Milky Way Farm, a mansion once the home of Frank Mars, founder of Mars Candy (and an avid foxhunter himself). The attendees have repeatedly reported that this is the “most fun” hunt ball they have ever attended.

Mells has retained a number of subscribers who have been with the hunt for decades. However, the majority of members have come from numerous other hunts from around the country. In fact, the membership currently contains nine ex-MFHs from non-Mells hunts.

Mells has also assembled an excellent staff to assist Charles Montgomery. With three professional whips, two of whom successfully completed the MFHA Professional Development Program, three honorary whips (and a junior apprentice), and two vehicle road whips, the hounds are expertly hunted three days a week.

And, where is the Mells today? The success has been overwhelming. The membership has increased exponentially. Beautiful facilities are enjoyed by the membership and their families. The hunts throughout the week are well attended. Each hunt is followed by a sumptuous “tea” at which time Charles Montgomery explains, blow by blow, how the day’s hunt played out from the huntsman’s perspective. This engaging review permits the membership to understand how the hounds are hunted, why huntsman and his staff are doing what they do, and the results of their efforts.

And, as further evidence of Mells’ successful regeneration, on Saturday, November 11, 2023, Mells Foxhounds celebrated its 59th consecutive Opening Hunt at the Sugar Valley Farm in Giles County, Tennessee. More than 220 members and guests gathered, 84 on horseback. Bagpipes played by Jim Drury echoed across the valley, all in the presence of 15½ couple of animated, well-trained foxhounds of Crossbred, English, and Penn-Marydel breeding under the stewardship of Charles Montgomery. This event, sponsored by the Mells masters, featured the Blessing of the Hounds by the Reverend Bill Forrester with attendant distribution of St. Hubert medals, Patron Saint of hunters.

A full day of activities played out for the 2023 Opening Meet and following Reverend Forrester’s words of prayer, safety, solace, and encouragement, the pack set off across verdant fields and into woods ablaze with the colors of fall. Four flights of mounted foxhunters followed them as did two “Tally Ho” wagons with 60+ non-riding enthusiasts. The hounds were skillfully hunted by Charles Montgomery and views of the coyotes abounded, flushed and pursued by the keen pack, thrilling the fields and Tally Ho wagon participants alike.

At the end of the hunting day, foxhunters and guests were treated to a sumptuous banquet of salmon, beef tenderloin, candied carrots, green beans almondine, potatoes au gratin, a variety of cheesecakes, and an array of beverages sufficient to slake the neediest of thirsts.

Mells prides itself on its contributions to land conservation in Giles County, the development of youth riding programs, the support of Pony Club organizations, and its participation in the charitable activities of the Volunteer State Horsemen’s Foundation. Mells provides scores of volunteers to the Iroquois Steeplechase held each May, which benefits the Monroe Carell Children’s Hospital at Vanderbilt University and multiple other charities. Mells is also a featured event during the Iroquois Steeplechase Race Meet parading its hounds before 25,000 race goers.

Mells currently has over 116 MFHA-listed subscriptions and this does not include its five masters and four ex-MFHs who pay dues independently to the MFHA. Of the 116 subscriptions, 25 are family memberships. Accordingly, there are actually over 170 individual members that make up the Mells’ family.

A once almost dead yet storied hunt has survived, reinvented itself, and now flourishes, proving that vision, conviction, fortitude, dogged persistence, hard work, and an indomitably positive attitude can pay off. The Mells’ Phoenix has indeed risen from the ashes.

