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It's a far, far cry from what most folks probably think of when the subject of hunting in Arkansas is broached. But in Huntsville, the Misty River Hounds are calling on a different tradition

By Nancy Hartney | Photos by Wesley Hitt



The morning mist still in the air,

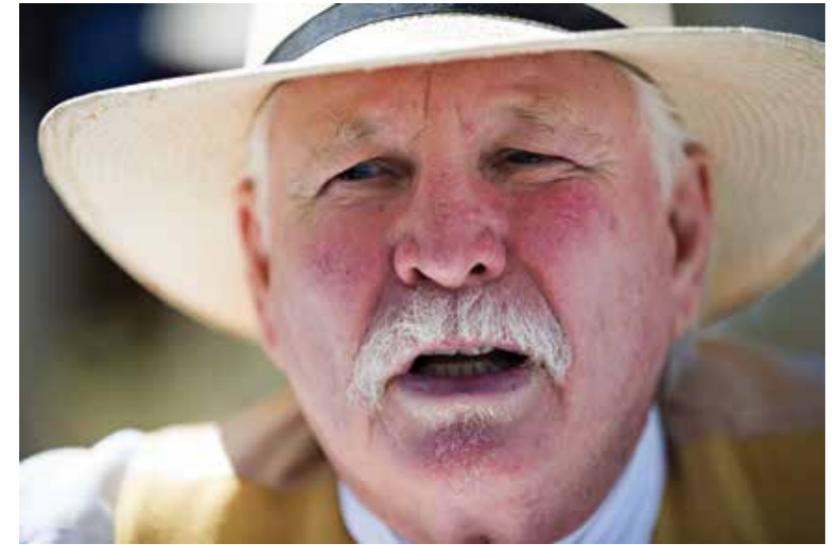


Dina Del Guercio pulls on a red coat, saddles her hunt horse, Moses, and strides to the kennels to select the hounds for the day. A cacophony ensues. It's the morning of the Misty River Hounds 25th annual closing meet, and the day has dawned clear and slightly crisp—a gift, perhaps, from Hubert of Liege, the patron saint of hunting. For days, rains have drenched Madison County, leaving soggy ground, too-slick footing and a swollen War Eagle River.

Twelve hounds—crossbred, a mixture of English and American foxhound—trot behind Dina, the Master of Foxhounds/huntsman, toward the assembled 45 riders and 30 nonriding guests. “We need a stout, tenacious and biddable hound for these Ozarks,” Dina says. “The crossbred hound is my choice for these steep hills and trappy hollows.”

The foxhunters who hunt these hills with Misty River Hounds come from all walks of life: corporate employees, farmers, middle school students, college professors, consulting engineers, homemakers, a librarian. Riders trailer-in from parts of Washington, Benton and Sebastian counties, while a few others arrive from sister hunts in Oklahoma, Texas and Missouri.

Although Misty River members ride in the finest English-hunt traditions, Dina has traded the customary British copper horn used in most of the 152 sanctioned hunts in the U.S. and Canada for one made from the horn of a cow, giving a nod of recognition to the



early Ozark settlers and regional hunters. After making her opening remarks, Dina then hands the horn off to Sally Lobb of Fayetteville's Deer Creek Farm—and originally, Cornwall, England—to hunt the hounds for the day.

Hounds trot in a pack to the Strawberry Patch, the first covert or hunt area for the day. After a short pull through the area, hound Max gives voice, his bay signaling “game about.” The pack howls behind Max and leads riders on a pounding charge. In the high pasture, coyote scent dissipates in the warm sun. Hounds lose direction. Although they search diligently, they are unable to find a new scent line.

With hounds drawing a blank, Sally calls a rest, or check. Riders dismount, discuss the run and adjust the horses' tack. Bottled courage moves from hand to hand, each taking a swig. Or two.

Refreshed by the check, Sally directs hounds along the Broken Nose Trail toward a bare knoll. Here Max again gives voice. Two hounds, Peach and Pi, with their distinctive high notes, bay and follow Max. The entire pack follows with their primal music rising and falling in full cry on the heels of wild quarry.

First field riders view a coyote running hard toward another parcel of private property, a territory 2 miles distant as the crow flies. Between the riders and hounds, however, stretches an unauthorized strip—land on which they do not have permission to ride. Sally holds the field on a hill at Mary's Pond and watches the hounds disappear. Although out of sight, she knows the pack's general direction by their voices and blows a long, mournful recall before she asks the road whip, or



MISTY RIVER MEMBERS RIDE IN THE FINEST ENGLISH-HUNT TRADITIONS. STAFF MEMBERS USE FLAT OR ENGLISH-STYLE SADDLES AND WEAR FORMAL RED COATS AND WHITE BREECHES AND CARRY A HUNT WHIP. FIELD RIDERS DON BLACK COATS AND FAWN BREECHES AND BRING SPIRIT-FILLED POCKET FLASKS. DINA'S RIDERS GATHER MOST WEEKENDS FROM OCTOBER THROUGH MARCH TO HUNT A TERRITORY THAT LIES ALONG THE WAR EAGLE RIVER NEAR HUNTSVILLE AND ENCOMPASSES 10 MILES OF PRIVATE FARMLAND BORDERING WITHROW SPRINGS STATE PARK.



ACCOMPLISHED EQUESTRIANS, FIELD RIDERS JUMP OBSTACLES AND RIDE AT A HARD GALLOP IN ORDER TO STAY CLOSE TO THE HOUNDS AND THEIR WILD QUARRY, WHICH INCLUDES MOSTLY COYOTE WITH AN OCCASIONAL FOX OR BOBCAT. SECOND FIELD HORSEMEN FOLLOW THE CHASE BY MOVING THROUGH GATES RATHER THAN JUMPING, OFTEN AT A FAST CANTER, WITHIN EARSHOT OF THE PACK, AND SOMETIMES EARN A VIEW OF WILD COYOTE. HILLTOPPERS RIDE SLOWLY, HACKING FROM HILLTOP TO HILLTOP, ENJOYING THE OPEN FIELDS AND DEEP BASS TONES OF BAYING HOUNDS.



vehicle support, to drive the public county roads listening for the bass notes of baying hounds. With no success and the sun past the meridian, Sally has no choice. She stops for the day and blows “going home.”

Upon arrival at the kennels, Sally discovers the hounds heeded the horn and returned. She grins, proud of her stint as huntsman. A coyote viewing and all hounds returned make a fitting end to this October-through-March hunt season.

With hounds re-kennelled and horses stabled, everyone retires to enjoy a “breakfast,” a late afternoon feast of pulled pork and grilled chicken, side dishes and dessert. The term breakfast is lost to history, but the topic of conversation remains the same—tales of horses, hounds and coyotes, all seasoned with braggadocio.

Joint Master Harry Kuniansky, an Atlanta attorney, settles down with a beer and a plate of food. “There are three kinds of riders,” he says, “those that live for the hounds, those that favor horses and riding, and those that put up with hound and horse so they can get to the breakfast.”

Deer Creek Farm owner and riding coach Diane Gooderl puts chasing in a nutshell: “The fast riding, especially when hounds strike scent and the chase is on, compounded with young riders racing behind and grinning from ear to ear, is simply thrilling.”

At the end of the day, as guests finish the breakfast, load their horses and prepare to leave, Dina remarks to her staff, “Although I enjoy the pageantry and tradition, it’s the chasing that I truly love. I am enthralled

with watching the hounds puzzle out the scent line and unravel coyote tricks. I respect landowner permission with their private property. I’m proud of my contributions to land and game conservation.”

She smiles and bends to pet an enormous black dog, her Bouvier, and continues. “Foxhunting is a way of life. It’s really about chasing. There is nothing like the hound music, the animals and the companionship of like-minded folks.”

With the departure of the last trailer, she ambles back to the kennels and her beloved hounds. Forgotten are her aches and sore muscles, the stress of caring for a kennel of 20-plus hounds, accumulated guests and the unpredictability of the weather.

In a voice rich with pride, she praises each hound with a “good boy, good job.” She checks for cuts or sore feet, fills water buckets and gives treats before she closes the gate and flips off the lights. ♡

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