

Back in the Country...
Bell Acres Stories

by Debby Rabold

Outdoor Pursuits: Hounds, Horses & Hunting



The Sewickley creeks and surrounding hills have long been popular destinations for outdoor recreational activities. *Hounds, Horses & Hunting* is part of the *Outdoor Pursuits* series.

A special thank you to Allegheny Country Club historian Dave Moore.

Hunt and gun clubs were long popular in Sewickley Valley sporting life. One of the earliest was the exclusive twenty member McKean Shooting Club whose preserve covered 4,500 acres around the Sewickley creeks and whose Little Sewickley Creek headquarters is currently occupied by the Sewickley Hunt Club.



Shannon Family Photo

Organized in 1912, the Big Travis Hunting and Fishing Club had a limited membership of thirty-five Sewickley Valley sportsmen. The club purchased land on Big Travis Creek in Hanover Township, Beaver County that was used for hunting, fishing and recreation. An annual outing and dinner for members and their guests was the highlight of the club's social calendar. In time, the club acquired more than 400 acres of the Big Travis Valley along with a six-room lodge (left). Today, the club's former property is part of Raccoon Creek State Park.

Another early sportsmen's club was the Sewickley Coon Hunting Club. It was known for camping at the fashionable Frankfort Springs, not far from Big Travis Creek. Here members hunted for two weeks, living off the land (right).



One incident involving club members was long remembered. During a hunt beyond the Sewickley Water Works, the boys spotted a critter that had taken refuge in a hollow tree trunk. They were divided on whether it was a raccoon or a possum. Through the night, they carried the heavy trunk out of the woods and into town where the log was cut open and a possum emerged.

Local gun clubs and ranges included one in Edgeworth on the Hay Walker Estate, the Stonedale Gun Club & Range on Thomas McGinley's "Oak Knoll" estate in Sewickley Heights and the Sewickley Gun Club that shot on the Dickson-Miller property adjacent to the Sewickley Cemetery. William Schiller's Sewickley Heights "Follifoot Farm" welcomed shooters as did the Sewickley Valley Gun Club, also in Sewickley Heights. Almost all communities had a gun club, including nearby Leetsdale, Ambridge and Coraopolis. Newspapers routinely reported on competitions between Pittsburgh area clubs.

The best known local range was Stonedale, named for the grist mill that once operated on Kilbuck Run. The range was located on the 160-acre Blackburn Road estate of industrialist Thomas A. McGinley (bottom left) who also served as the Sewickley Heights burgess, police commissioner and Justice of the Peace.

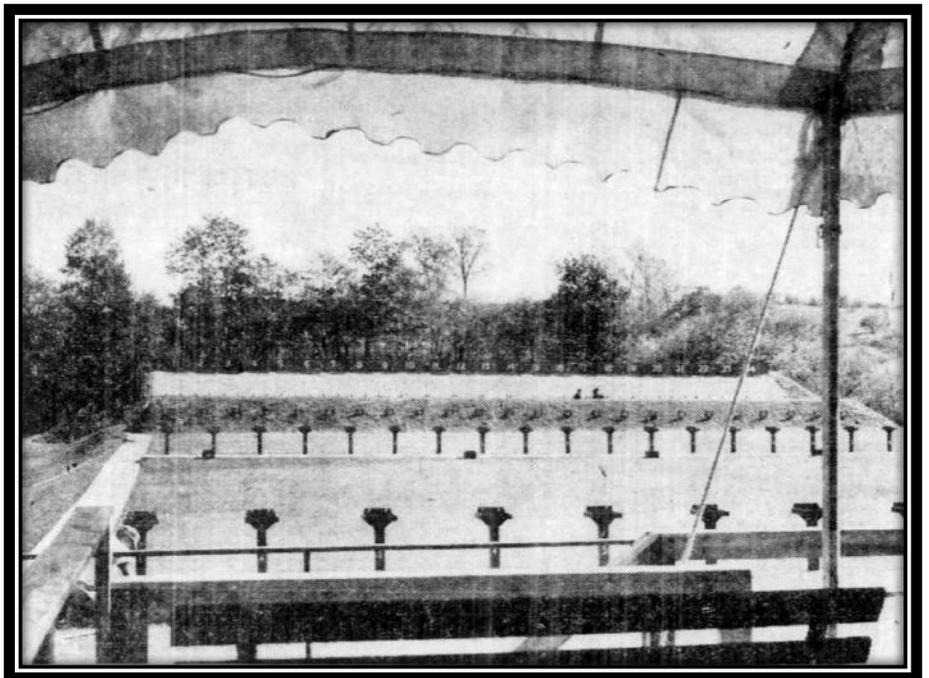
Big Shoot Planned
Acceptances are being received rapidly by Borough Manager Frank C. Sturm from police pistol teams intending to participate in the annual shoot at Stonedale Range, Sewickley Heights, on October 12th, Columbus Day. The New Jersey State Police will enter a team for the first time this year and The Baltimore City Police and Maryland State Police will also send teams. The Detroit City Police, winners last year, wrote that they would be here if they had to walk—which isn't likely. In addition, many teams representing cities, states, railroads, banks and express companies, will compete for the valuable prizes.

Sewickley Herald 17 September 1937

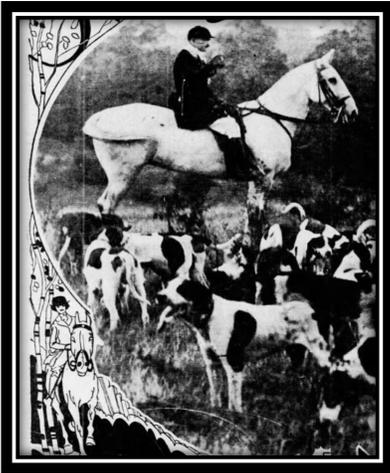


Bulletin Index 18 April 1939

Soon after his appointment as police commissioner, McGinley opened his estate for police pistol practice. The first competition in 1923 included several local police teams. In 1925, an invitation was extended to non-local departments. For the next fifteen years, prior to his death in 1940, McGinley hosted an annual Columbus Day national invitational pistol shoot for federal, state, county and municipal law enforcement teams. Also invited were teams of private security forces. McGinley's lasting contribution to the sport was developing automatic electrically timed targets, which set a new standard in pistol shooting. Pictured below is the Stonedale range as it appeared in the 11 October 1939 **Post-Gazette**.



Fox hunting arrived in Western Pennsylvania in the 1890s. It was Harvey Van Voorhiss who not only organized the first hunt, which was held in Greene County, but also introduced the sport to the Sewickley Valley. At the conclusion of Pittsburgh's first horse show, held in 1897, Van Voorhiss arranged for horses and hounds from Chevy Chase, Maryland, who had appeared at the show, to visit Sewickley for an eight mile drag hunt through Sewickley Township.



Pittsburgh Press 22 November 1931

"Beneath the canopy of a blue sky and with the October sun casting fantastic light and shade on the hills and valleys around and about Sewickley, a cross-country ride was taken by members of the Riding Club that had all the elements of a fox chase...A thousand people, more or less, turned out to witness the chase. Fifty persons joined in the actual chase, the valley contingent meeting the Pittsburghers at the Sewickley station....Once the town was left behind, the horses were given free reign and went at a rattling pace until Backbone hill was reached, members of the Riding Club pulling up on either side of the road at the bridge where the road took off in the direction of the McKean Shooting Club tract to permit the carriages and traps occupied by visitors to pass between the lines of horsemen, the latter saluting the ladies as they passed...Soon all had arrived at a point at the top of the hill and though the weather was warm for good hunting to hounds, the meet was a rousing one."

Post-Gazette 3 November 1930

Following the success of the 1897 hunt, the Pittsburgh Country Club, in 1899, acquired horses and hounds and held meets throughout the Sewickley Valley. The following year, the country club's newly formed Pittsburgh Hunt Club moved from Sewickley to the city's Beechwood Boulevard from where it hunted between Swissvale and Homestead.

Hemmed in by urban growth, the Hunt left the city in 1905 and relocated to McDonald, Pennsylvania, which straddles the Washington/Allegheny County border. The club changed its name to the Harkaway Hunt and continued until disbanding in 1914.

Sewickley Valley riders organized the Blackburn Hunt in 1908, with hounds and horses kenneled and stabled at the Allegheny Country Club located in newly created Sewickley Heights Township. Little is known of this short-lived Hunt other than it lasted for about two years. At the time, Harkaway and Blackburn were Allegheny County's only organized hunt clubs.

The Sewickley Valley's interest in fox hunting waned during the 1910s, but was revived in the early 1920s with encouragement from John and Adelaide Jones Burgwin.

HORSE SHOW

AND
GYMKANA GAMES

HARKAWAY HUNT
WITH
BLACKBURN HUNT
Of Sewickley, Pa.

MAY 30th,

DECORATION DAY,

2:30 P. M.

McDONALD PARK,

McDONALD, PA.

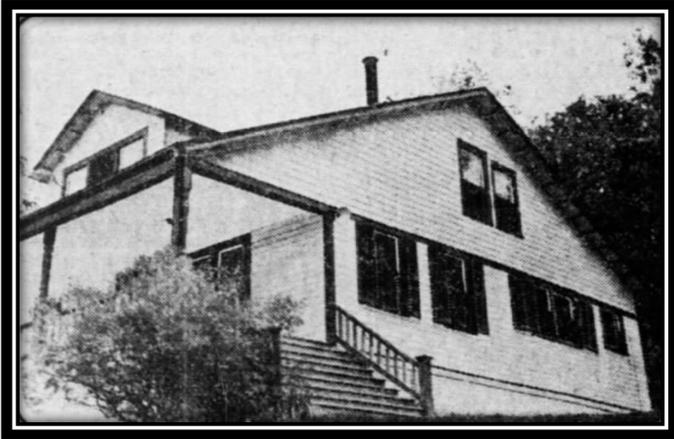
Grandstand Seats, \$1.00 Each.

Express Trains from Union Station
via Panhandle Road 9:20 and 9:25 a.
m. and 12:50 and 1:30 p. m.

Good Macadam road for automobiles
via Carnegie and Oakdale and from
Sewickley to McDonald via Clinton.

Pittsburgh Bulletin 21 May 1910

The Burgwins were residing in Allegheny City at the time they purchased their Barberry Road farm in Sewickley Heights. Experienced huntsmen, the couple laid groundwork for the new Sewickley Hunt Club in 1921, to which they donated their hounds.



Pittsburgh Press 4 September 1938

Renewed local interest in fox hunting led to the Sewickley Hunt receiving official recognition in 1925, the year after the club purchased what had been the McKean Hunting Club's lodge on Little Sewickley Creek Road (left).

At the time, meets were generally held on Wednesdays and Saturdays from Fall until New Year's Day. Participants rode through miles of fields and woodlands in neighboring communities, sometimes as far distant as Perry Highway. In addition to twice weekly meets, the Hunt also held special holiday events.



Allegheny Country Club photo

One annual event well remembered by older folks was the club's Armistice Day (November 11) breakfast for landowner families (bottom right) who generously granted permission for the Hunt to pass through their fields and woodlands. Without such permission, the Hunt could not have existed. Families were invited to the Burgwin home for a buffet, music and dancing that began at noon, following a morning meet. Hunt members are also remembered for delivering a box of chocolates to each landowner's home at Christmas.



Pittsburgh Press 12 November 1932



Pittsburgh Press 13 November 1934



The Sewickley Hunt was pictured in the 12 September 1934 **Bulletin Index**

Sometimes during a meet, the unexpected happens. A riderless horse with a boot caught in a stirrup trots by, hounds chase cows around a pasture or deer through a woodlot. Hounds once ignored a live fox that crossed their path as they pursued the artificial drag scent.

An unusual story was told to Ginny Komer by “Butch” Watenpool, owner of the Bar X Ranch dancehall that was located on his Camp Meeting Road farm.

The Sewickley Hunt is a drag hunt, meaning that instead of tracking a live fox, hounds follow a liquid scent that is dragged over a pre-determined route shortly before the meet begins.

The gentleman tasked with spreading the scent across the Watenpool farm that day happened to see Butch who offered him a glass of homemade wine. Ginny continues, *“One glass led to another and when the hounds and riders arrived, the hunt ended in the basement of the Bar X Ranch because the scent was dragged no further.”*



Post-Gazette 30 October 1949

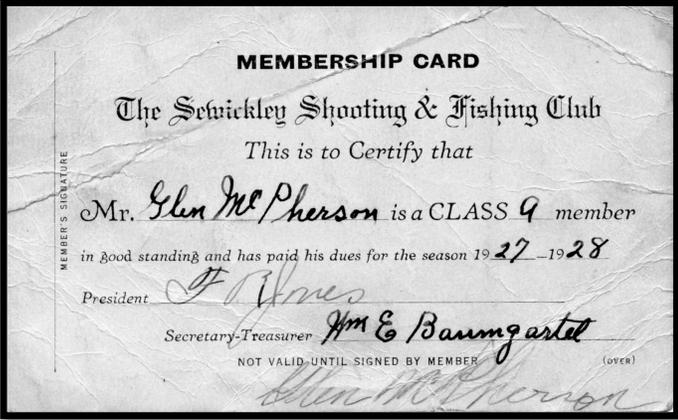
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**Skeet and trap shooting** both use clay pigeons as moving targets. Originally intended as a way for game bird hunters to hone their skills, skeet and trap shooting soon became competitive sports in their own right. By the late 1920s, skeet and trap were growing in popularity in the Sewickley Valley.

In skeet, two clay pigeons are launched into the air in opposite directions, crossing paths in front of the shooter. Trap shooting launches discs away from the shooter.



The Sewickley Hunt Club purchased ground opposite its clubhouse on Little Sewickley Creek Road for a skeet range with club members dividing their time between riding and shooting. The Hunt Club invited local farmers to join them in the new Sewickley Shooting and Fishing Club (1927), open to both women and men. As a result of having access to the skeet range, shooting became popular with many of the local 'society' women, including Adelaide Burgwin (right).



Bell Acres Borough

In 1937, the Sewickley Shooting and Fishing Club and Wallrose Hunting Club joined their preserves for a combined total of over 17,000 acres that were stocked with small game. The Sewickley club also stocked Little Sewickley Creek each year.



Pittsburgh Press 7 February 1932



Nearly a century after it opened, the Little Sewickley Creek Road skeet and trap field remains in active use, currently under the direction of the Sewickley Heights Gun Club. The Sewickley Shooting and Fishing Club became the non-profit Sewickley Valley Conservation Association in 2017 and continues stocking Little Sewickley Creek prior to trout season.

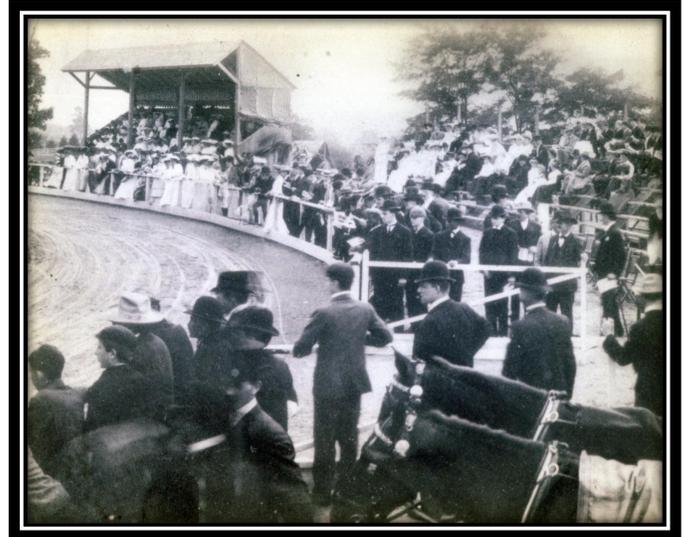
Camp Meeting Road resident Oliver Hopkins (left) served on the Sewickley Shooting and Fishing Club's Board of Governors. He also served as a Sewickley Township road supervisor and school director. (Undated photo)

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After first being introduced to Pittsburgh in 1897, horse shows grew in popularity. The Sewickley Valley's first show was held in 1904 on the William W. Willock farm before moving to Allegheny Country Club grounds the following year. For the next forty years, ACC horse shows were an integral part of Sewickley social life.



1.



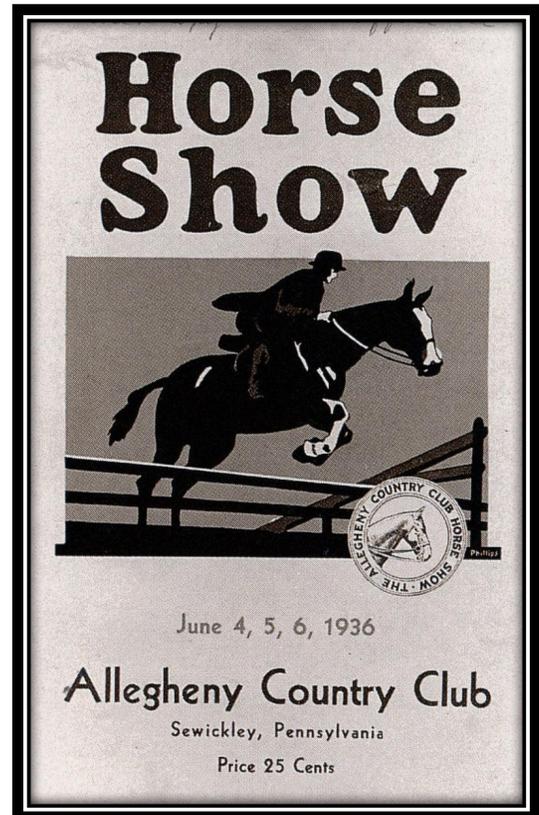
3.



2.

Allegheny Country Club photos:

1. The club's first show was held in 1900 at its original Brighton Heights location.
2. Undated photo of a team competing at the Sewickley show ring.
3. The ACC show ring in 1905.
4. Program from the 1936 show. Shows attracted hundreds of entrants in a variety of categories, including those for children.



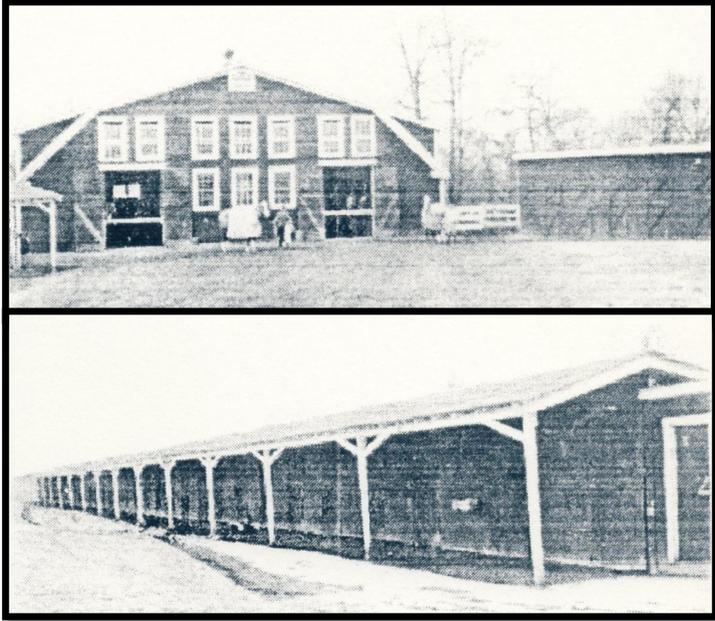
4.



1930 aerial view of the ACC show ring with the golf course on the right and Little Sewickley Creek Road and Sewickley Hunt buildings across the top (left). A trail once circled club grounds.

The club's barn and stables could board seventy horses (below left).

(Allegheny Country Club photos)



SEWICKLEY HUNT
HORSE SHOW

ALLEGHENY COUNTRY CLUB
SHOW GROUNDS

Thursday -- June 19, 1969 -- 10 a.m.
Friday --- June 20, 1969 -- 9 a.m.
Saturday -- June 21, 1969 -- 9 a.m.

Chairmen
Mrs. LeRoy Thompson, M.F.H.
Mr. F. E. Richardson, Jr., M.F.H.
Mr. C. Taylor Marshall, M.F.H.

Show Secretary
Mrs. Harry B. Black
Sewickley Hunt -- Sewickley, Pa.

Judges
Mr. and Mrs. Charles Dennehy, Jr.
Lake Forest, Ill.

Steward
Mr. Harry B. Black
Sewickley, Pa.

Entries Close May 28, 1969

Once a prestigious event that attracted entrants from across the nation, the Allegheny Country Club horse show ended during World War II. In 1951, however, the Sewickley Hunt began offering a scaled down event at the show ring (program above right) that continued for a number of years until equestrian events at the country club were discontinued and the ring and related facilities razed.

A real photo post card reads "From the Horse Show Sewickley Pa Sept 20, 1906 Thank you for the ale[?] Cora" (right).



**Cavalcade in Costume
Winds Way Across Hills
To Home on the Heights**

Annual Frolic For Friends, Guests and Show Exhibitors Given in Show Ring And At Franklin Farm.

Riding and Driving Parties

Following the conclusion of events on the first day of the ACC horse show, club members dressed in costume and paraded around the ring on floats, horseback and carriages of every description before proceeding to the Blackburn Road "Franklin Farms" estate of the William Robinsons for dinner and dancing.



Sun-Telegraph 4 June 1937



Sun-Telegraph June 1935



Farms once dotted the sparsely populated hills behind Sewickley. Many were given to part-time farming since men were usually able to find more profitable employment in nearby mills and factories. Work in the local oil and gas fields also drew men away from agricultural activities. Estate farms, however, enjoyed the benefit of full time farm managers and laborers.

Pennsylvania's 1927 agricultural census recorded twenty-five farms in then Sewickley Township (Bell Acres Borough) and ten in Sewickley Heights Township (Sewickley Heights and Sewickley Hills boroughs). At the same time, fifty-nine farms were recorded in Ohio township, twelve in Aleppo, two in Leet and one-hundred-twenty-one in Franklin Township. Dairy herds, both large and small, were a common sight in scattered pastures.

**Guernsey Cattle Show
Held at Country Club**

In an attempt to improve the overall quality of local dairy herds, the Sewickley Guernsey Cattle Club was formed in 1920 for herdsman and managers who met regularly to learn from experts and exchange information. The club held its first show

on the Rea estate in 1926. Initially intended for Sewickley Heights breeders, the event in which top milk producers could be purchased for thousands of dollars, was soon opened to others. Annual shows at the ACC lasted until 1930.

**CLASSY CANINE PETS TO BE
EXHIBITED AT SEWICKLEY**



Sun-Telegraph 26 June 1940

Sun-Telegraph 23 June 1935

Press 28 June 1929

Dog shows and field trials were also popular outdoor social events in the Sewickley Valley. Pittsburgh newspapers covered these activities in both the sports and society pages, reporting not only on the canine winners, but also the fashion choices of the socialites in attendance!

Record Entries Indicate Good Exhibition

Four hundred and ninety-five dogs, the largest number ever entered, representing forty-six breeds, more different kinds than ever exhibited here before, indicate that the seventh annual dog show to be held by the Sewickley Kennel Club at the Allegheny Country Club Show Ring, tomorrow, will be one of the best shows ever held in the local ring. With entries received from all parts of Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York and other eastern states, as well as Canada, the competition for the many attractive prizes will be keen.

Sewickley Herald 22 June 1934

Begun in 1928, the prestigious Sewickley Kennel Club dog show was held annually in the country club show ring. The show was a fundraiser for Allegheny General Hospital and attracted not only local dog owners and breeders, but also many from outside of Western Pennsylvania.

In 1936, the decision was made to move the show to the Sewickley YMCA grounds, but in 1938, the event was discontinued in favor of the club focusing on semi-annual field trials. The newly formed Sewickley Valley Kennel Association resumed the popular dog shows in 1941, but in a different format.

Sewickley Kennel Club

There will be a meeting at the Lewis A. Park Estate, Kennel Office, Thursday evening, ~~JAN.~~ 13th at 8:15 o'clock.
All members are urged to attend.

Secretary.

Field Trials

Field trials are competitions among trained hunting dogs. The dogs are judged on how well they are able to track and locate game birds or small animals. The Sewickley Kennel Club and Sewickley Shooting and Fishing Club once sponsored Spring and Fall field trials, most often on the Park, Curry and Burgwin estates at Fern Hollow. Spectators were able to view the dogs as they performed. The Sewickley Field Trial Club, an offshoot of the Shooting and Fishing Club, hosted trials for a number of years with proceeds used to stock its hunting preserve.

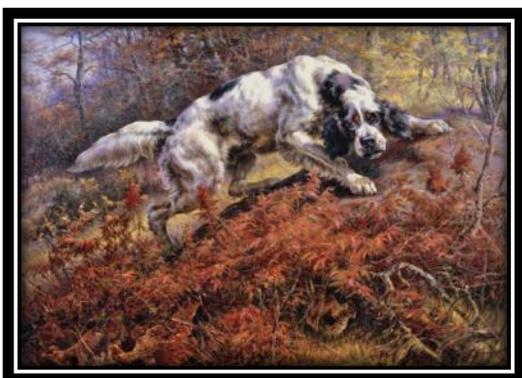


Kennel Club Spring field trials. Sewickley Herald 28 March 1940

Although the dogs were highly trained, trials did not always go according to plan. One amusing incident occurred during a Camp Meeting Road event that was reported in the 26 September 1930 edition of the **Sewickley Herald**.

“The fox chases were good sport to watch. Louis Steup laid the drag before each chase...In these chases, ten or more dogs are run until all have had a chance, these are called heats. In the second fox chase, before Oliver Hopkins, acting as starter, had given the signal to let the dogs go, one frisky hound with floppy ears and overly anxious to go got away from his owner and away he went. The rest let their dogs go too. There they went barking down the field and Steup not yet around the course with the drag. Shortly, two dogs were seen coming in along the ridge on the home stretch evidently following the old scent. Only one finished, the second dog losing the scent, turned off to the left. Soon the rest of the dogs were seen starting for the ridge and hardly had they passed in view when they were seen going across the same clearing in the opposite direction, retracing their steps trying to pick up the trail again. This was the first time anyone had ever seen so many dogs running the wrong way on a scent. Their howls could be heard from all directions in the woods below. Soon in the clearing, Louie Steup and his mount were seen leisurely riding along with five or six of the dogs trotting along behind him. Some of the owners had to go into the woods and call their dogs. This heat was run over again and though it displeased the owners, it surely had afforded some amusement for the spectators.”

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**Count Noble** (1879-1891) was the Sewickley Valley’s most famous hunting dog. Bred in England and arriving in the U.S. at six months old, the black and white English Setter was owned by the B. F. Wilson family of Osborne. While he was a talented hunter, he became so well known for siring exceptional progeny that the *New York Times* published his obituary.

Following his death, Count Noble’s body was stuffed and mounted in a diorama that was exhibited in Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Museum of Natural History (below) until 1999. The diorama was then moved to Tennessee’s National Bird Dog Museum, where it remains on display.

Through the efforts of Bell Acres resident Richard LeBeau, author of *Count Noble: The Greatest Dog That Ever Lived*, and the Sewickley Valley Historical Society, a roadside marker honoring Count Noble was dedicated in 2011. The marker stands at the former site of the Wilsons’ Beaver Road home, which is now occupied by Osborne Elementary School. A portrait of the famous canine once known as the “\$10,000 hunting dog”, hangs in Pittsburgh’s exclusive Duquesne Club (above).

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