



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

Parent volunteers running a PC rally

- The United States Pony Clubs -

The first US Pony Club was founded in 1954, taking its inspiration from the Pony Clubs of Great Britain, founded in 1928. Their web site describes US Pony Club as follows:

"Pony Club is one of the leading junior equestrian organizations in the world, represented throughout 30 countries. The United States has over 600 individual clubs throughout 48 states and the Virgin Islands, with more than 12,000 members.

"Pony Club provides opportunities for instruction and competition in English riding, horse sports and horse management for children and young adults up to 21 years of age. The term 'pony' refers to the age of the members, not the size of the mount... Parents play an important role in Pony Club... such as Club leader, chaperone, jump judge, or assist in activity events and fundraisers."

- The Middleburg-Orange County Pony Club -

"The land will always be open to a polite child."

—Eve Fout, Founder of the Middleburg-Orange County Pony Club and the MOC Beagles.

Northern Virginia is a hotbed for the perpetuation of addiction to horses. The Middleburg Orange County (MOC) Pony Club, founded in 1959, is one of the oldest in the US. Like MOC, the early ones usually were associated with hunts, but now many are not. Pat Leins, its District Commissioner (DC), describes the Pony Club philosophy this way:

"Pony Club encourages independence. It forges a relationship with a horse and with one's peers. Kids learn responsibility for each other. After a stint in a Pony Club a child will know how to organize the world. The Pony Club sets up guidelines by age and level of experience, and teaches riding. On the horse management side it also has guidelines: clean water, clean stall, and so forth. Kids have to be a team to get this done. No one does it for them. This process forms bonds with their horses and with each other.



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

Elliott Heapes, MOC Pony Club

"There is a Pony Club camp each summer, and after it some parents complain that the kids come home wanting to do everything for themselves, they have grown up so much. The patterns of responsibility and behavior and thoughtful emotion that they learn in Pony Club stick with them for life."

There are now about 50 members in the MOC Pony Club, most of whom have ponies and horses that they keep at home.

Pat suggests I go to a rally, involving teams from several Virginia Clubs, to be held shortly at Frying Pan Park. We will cover this experience later in the chapter.



- Old Rag Mountain Pony Club -

The Old Dominion Hunt's Point-to-Point at Ben Venue is a favorite. It has all the elements that make amateur steeplechasing so appealing – pony races, novice rider events, owner-rider races, and lady riders over timber. And, because all the "big" jockeys are in Southern Pines for the sanctioned races, even the two "open" races are filled with amateur riders.

The setting is superb, a rolling course visible almost in its entirety from a hillside covered with parked cars and tailgate parties. Above, on a rocky ledge, is a huge hospitality tent, from which the view of the mountains to the southwest provides a spectacular backdrop. Behind the tent is a patch of woods where children play at being Indians, as our grandson Sam did years ago. And when a rider is dislodged his horse can find solace by escaping into the woods on the far side of the course, as one did this past Saturday.

Passing through the gap in the fence that leads from tailgates to paddock there is a table on which are a number of items of pottery to be raffled off. In front of the table is a hand lettered sign – a crude poster – announcing that this is the booth of the O.R.M.P.C. – the Old Rag Mountain Pony Club, "Old Rag" being a dominating local terrain feature. Tending the table is a smiling blonde girl of 11 named Abigail Smith, whom I engage in conversation.

"You belong to the Pony Club? I ask.

"Yes, sir."

"How many members are there?"

"About 20. We meet every week, we hope. We like this club because it's small."

"What level are you?"

"C-1, sir."

"That's pretty good for 11." She comes back, with some pride...

"You have to be 13 before you can go to C-2."

"Do you have a horse?"

"Yes sir, a Quarter Horse / Welsh. She's 14.2½."

"Just the right size – and she's a horse, not a pony." Then I add, "You ought to be in public relations." Abigail smiles at me, and I suddenly realize that she already is.



Timber race at Old Dominion

"Why did you join the Pony Club?"

"Me and my sister wanted to learn more about horses. She's 14.

"What level is she?"

"She's C-1 too, sir. C-1 is the highest in our club."

I haven't been "sirred" like this since I was in the army. "Does your sister get jealous that you are both at the same level, and you're younger?"

"No, she helps me and I help her. It works out pretty good."

After telling her that this "interview" is for a book, I learn that Abigail has done some jumping and dressage, and a bit of foxhunting. She plans to take up eventing this summer, and she is excited at the prospect. About then her parents Glen and Dawn Smith appear. I learn that the Pony Club and its supporters do a lot of work for the Point-to-Point, selling tickets, parking cars, selling programs. According to Glen:

"We make maybe three grand, it pays for the summer camp for 20 kids each year. And Old Dominion lets the kids hunt without paying any cap fees."

"Our older daughter, Emma, grooms for Nina Fout. She's going to go with



her to Rolex* in Kentucky later in April. I like eventing better than hunter-jumper. In eventing you know when your round is going to be. In hunter-jumper shows you have to be there at eight, and you may not go 'til late in the afternoon."

I can see how that would bust a parent's weekend.

I ask Abigail, "Why do you like horses?"

"I don't know, I've always liked them since my sister got into them."

Glen adds, "She's been riding since she was two." Abigail continues:

"Our Pony Club meets at Mr. Kummlie's farm, Windsor Lodge. Our District Commissioner is Abigail Gillie."

"Another Abigail?" I ask.

"Yes, sir."

I tell her I'll give her a chance to edit what I write, so she gives me her address, being careful to tell me how to spell her street...

"B-U-E-N-A V-I-S-T-A... and don't forget to say that I'm starting eventing next summer!"

- A Pony Club Horse Show -

The local newspaper steers me one sunny day in August to Glenwood Park, near Middleburg, where an MOC Pony Club schooling show has been re-scheduled for 9:00am., following two previous rain-outs.

Entering the grounds I find a small collection of trailers, trucks, parents and Pony Clubbers grooming and tacking up their horses under the shade of a grove of trees near the gate that leads from the race course paddock to the course itself. In the shade, beside an SUV-drawn trailer, are a mother, a boy and girl, and two ponies. Introductions disclose that they are, respectively, Susan Farah, her children Jeffrey and Jessica, and Eclipse and Popeye.com. Susan comments, referring to her children:

"They're triplets. The third – Jeremy – doesn't ride, he plays baseball and football. And I have a younger one who rides, too."

I ask Jeffrey about Pony Club. He is quite concise:

"In winter we learn about the pieces of tack, and how to take care of horses."

* The Rolex**** (four star) three day event is the premier one of its kind in America.

In summer we have riding lessons, and Pony Club camp for a week. The horses live at home and we take care of them."

"And your mother helps some?" As expected, it turns out that she does. At that moment a loudspeaker from over the ridge by the racecourse finish line announces the results of the class just ended. Now Jeffrey and Jessica start urging their mother:

"It's time to go. Can we ride over?"

Susan, who also has to go as she is scheduled to be in charge of the gate to the ring, is firm.

"No, lead the horses. You don't want them to get tired."

And I wish them luck.

Over at the ring I find grandmother Nancy Dillon and father Graham Alcock



Jessica and Jeffrey Farah with Eclipse and Popeye.com

