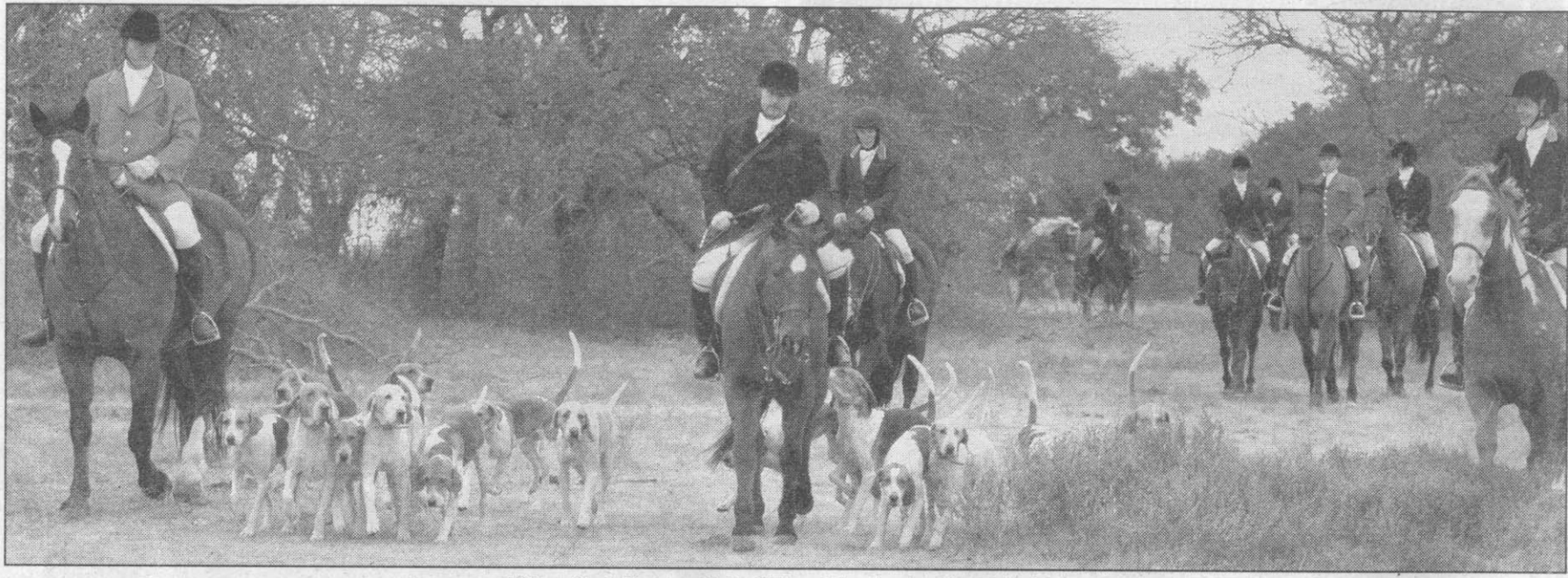
Hickory Creek Hunt

By RUPERT ISAACSON

PHOTOS BY PENNY DRAKE



Hickory Creek Huntsman Bobby Wilson with whips, hounds and the field

"Where does it come from do you think?" mused Mary Anne Radley, joint-master of Texas' Hickory Creek Hunt, as we drove home down the darkened lanes from the Mexican restaurant the night before the hunt's Rush Creek fixture; "This thing that makes the kind of person who just isn't happy unless he's on horseback, in nature, with dogs, in bad weather."

In other words, *foxhunter-sapiens*. I have pondered this myself in odd moments. What are the origins of our strange, obsessive breed? Are we some kind of collective throwback to the Ice Age man who, after half a lifetime of lumbering through thigh-deep snow-drifts in pursuit of game that moved much faster than he could, suddenly realized that maybe it would be a good idea to ride, rather than eat, the shaggy-coated horses who were always disappearing over the next snowy ridge: a Eureka moment that somehow imprinted itself on the genetics of a certain proportion of humanity and which resulted, after a series of mutations and genetic dead-ends, in *us*. Physical discomfort, cold, the feel of arms being pulled out of sockets, red, dripping noses, and downright terror: just add horses and dogs and suddenly this unpleasant cocktail becomes paradise on earth.

And today we were getting our fill of that kind of paradise. You don't often see snow in Texas. However—as many of us have learned to our cost—a good way to tempt the Gods into playing havoc with the weather is to drive several hundred miles specifically in order to hunt. So it was that, having expected to hunt in unseasonal heat, I found myself peering through swirling snowflakes as the Hickory Creek's huntsman Bobby Wilson put his small pack of leggy, long-eared Americans and crossbreds—just eight couple of mostly doghounds that day—into covert.

A solid, bigger-than-average coop guarded the entrance to the wood. I looked up to see Bobby still in mid-air, the red coat of Aver Hammerlindl, field master to the twenty or so die-hards who had braved the weather, cantering in behind. Should I try it? "Feel free. He'll take you," said Jennifer Stewart, owner of Adamir, my borrowed mount for the day; a Halflinger pony (well, at 15.2h, hardly a pony) complete with flowing palomino mane and tail and a short little stride like a Shetland's.

I gave Adamir a skeptical touch of the spur. Five short strides and—PING—we were clearing it by a foot. Halflingers were bred to haul logs out of Alpine forests in Austria and Germany, not to jump. I was impressed. In an instant, I forgave Adamir his naughty-little-pony bucks, and his repeated attempts to kick the chestnut quarter horse being ridden by Mark Friedburger, husband of the Hickory Creek's senior master Mary Sue Allinson (always a great way to ingratiate yourself at a new hunt, that). As he scampered, handy as can be, down the narrow, twisting trail saving my kneecaps from the crowding oaks, I even thought about buying him.

"They're onto something," said Bobby over his shoulder as we hustled down the ride. "But I can't say what!"

And indeed hounds were hunting, pressing purposefully through the trees—but mute, not speaking at all, which is rare indeed for American hounds. Down a steep-sided ravine they took us, we the field skipping over the rocks at the bottom, then grabbing mane for the pull up the farther side. But once on the ridge whatever scent they had been following simply petered out. No, reported whips Michael and Diane Brumson, over the crackling radio from the farther side of the woods, no game had broken. Shaking his head—for by all hunting logic this should be a perfect day; cold, moist, little wind, the air colder than the ground—Bobby picked up his hounds and took us on to draw again.

Let's take a break, between coverts, to talk a little bit about the Hickory Creek and hunting in Texas. Although it is not the state's oldest hunt (apparently an army pack hunted the high desert near El Paso up until World War II), the Hickory Creek is Texas' oldest *extant* pack. Founded in 1970 in the counties north of Denton and Fort Worth, it has proved a kind of brood-mare for the sport in Texas, giving birth—over the years—to two offshoot packs: Col Denny's Cloudline Hounds (founded 1974) to the east and the Brazos Valley (founded 1994) to the west. Combine these three hunts with the three other hunts in Oklahoma, just to the north, and you have a tight-knit, if little-known, hunting community similar to those that have sprung up recently in the Carolinas and parts of the Mid-West.

A huge variety of country exists within this community. Huge ranches blessed with sandy footing, wide grassy uplands dotted with live oak savannah, cut through with steep, hidden ravines. Wide expanses of "blackland prairie" cattle lands and intensive cotton farms snaked through with wooded creeks that house no end of game. Add to this some of America's only national grasslands and you have varied, highly sporting country. The only problem, as you can imagine, is heat.

But that was not our problem today. As we rode from covert to covert, hunting up and down the ravines and quartering the sleet-blown ridges, the temperature seemed to merely drop further and further. No, the problem seemed to be that Texas foxes and coyotes prefer more balmy, clement conditions if they are going to be persuaded to set their masks at the open country. Hounds, too, seem more used to working in dryer, hotter conditions. Not that Bobby's doghounds weren't working. Despite the strange absence of scent and game not once did I see them get bored or give up, nor start sulking. Moreover when, three hours into this raw morning, a cottontail got up right under their noses, they did not use it as an excuse to riot.

No, clearly the Hickory Creek have a good pack of hounds. They also have a charming, and tightly-knit bunch of supporters. There was much joking and teasing as we trotted and cantered across the great expanse of the ranch, and I had a chance to coffee-house (or "visit," as Texans—inexplicably—call chatting) with the field a little more than I might have been able to on a busier day. Jennifer Stewart, who had lent me my horse, and with whom I spent most of the morning, was one of those up-front, completely candid individuals who probably ought to be President. A quiet adventuress, she had recently taken a year out of her computer job to follow her family roots to Poland—teaching English in a small city there.


Field Master Aver Hammerlindl

"I'm surprised you didn't bring back with a Polish husband," I quipped, as we swished, shivering, between two tall stands of prickly pear (how strange to see cactus in the snow).

"Well," came the reply, "that would have been hard, seeing as I already had one back home,"

"Ah, I suppose that *would* prevent it."

"But I divorced him as soon as I got back."

"Oh!"

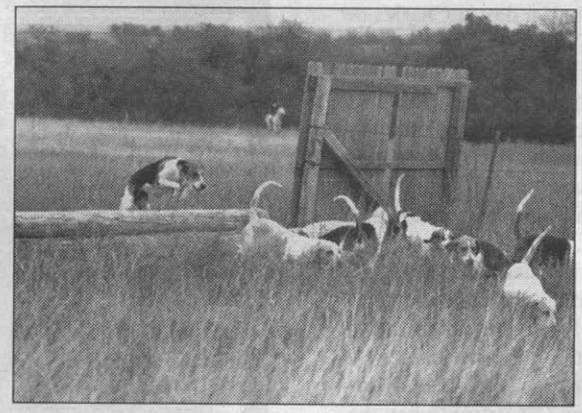
"And then I found a new one of the internet: Match.com."

Jennifer had also found Adamir, the timber-jumping Halflinger, on the net. I made a mental note to put in some more surfing time. Strange the things you learn out hunting.

Then there was Sandra Wilson, mounted on a bay show-hunter, who next day would be jetting off to Korea to sell medical equipment: oil-industry execs, ranchers, software geeks, an agricultural historian …the Hickory Creek Hunt is nothing if not eclectic. In fact it always amazes me how wide the net of human expertise is in any given hunt field. And they say we're a bunch of blood-thirsty barbarians. Ah well…

For such a quiet—not to say blank—day out, we still seemed to find ample adventure. There was a creek crossing that turned out deeper—way deeper—than I expected it to be. There was learning that a Halflinger pony can clear timber as well as any Thoroughbred, hopping hunt jumps here, there and everywhere. Even on the quietest of days, hunting brings the landscape alive—catching one's breath as a doe leaps elegantly from covert and goes bounding away across the field, watching a large hawk flap away from the trees where hounds are questing, seemingly deaf to the keening cries of the great predatory bird they have just disturbed.

Truly, as Mary Sue Allinson, the Hickory Creek's quiet, humorous, and ultra-competent senior master had observed over dinner the night before; "*we fox-hunters are lucky people.*" Lucky because we are never far from the magic of life. As we rode back, shivering, towards the trailers, where hot coffee, soup, sandwiches and cake awaited us, that foxhunting magic was all around us. It was in the warm, good-smelling scent of the horses; in the undaunted energy of the hounds, a moving, mottled splash of living colour clustered behind Bobby's black-coated back. Over head the sky was the soft, downy gray of a wood-pigeon's wing. The pasture-lands were a sea of red and yellow grasses, from which the live oak thickets rose like dark islands.


Hounds over a hunt jump


Mary Anne Radley, MFH and Mary Sue Allinson, MFH

Above all, there was the feeling of being coldly, keenly alive—happy, as Mary Anne Radley had put it the night before—on the back of a horse in the raw, wet weather, with hounds feathering happily out front. If this isn't magic, dear reader, then show me, please, what is.

FACT FILE

The Hickory Creek Hunt welcomes visitors. To organize a day, call Mary Sue Allinson on 940-464-3100. Hounds go out Wednesday and Sunday, mid-September through mid-March, roughly one and a half hours north of the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex.