



THOUGHTS OF A FOXHUNTER

JULY 2021

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- Ed Fry

By Ed Fry, Joint MFH Wicomico Hunt

Photo by Leslie Passano

Often, I can relate good reading to good fox hunting. The favorite book of my adulthood has been A Sand County Almanac, written by Aldo Leopold and published in 1949. This author is one of the naturalists who understood the interactions of nature and wrote elegantly. The Almanac is a series of short stories and in one short story, Leopold writes about "Wildlife in American Culture."

The culture of primitive people was often based on wildlife, such as Native Americans and the buffalo. As we developed technology, our cultural base has shifted elsewhere but some of us have clung to these wild roots of our ancestors. For some, this thirst for engagement with wildlife is deer hunting, waterfowl hunting or even fishing. For me, it is following a good pack of hounds, communing with nature astride a good horse, pursuing the noble red fox. As expressed by Leopold, these values are of three kinds.

First, there is value in any sporting experience that reminds us of our distinctive national origins. The author calls this the "split-rail" value, and his example is

a Boy Scout that tans a coonskin to make a Daniel Boone hat and then explore the untamed brush near a marsh for engagement with wildlife.

As fox hunters following hounds, we too get to feel that "split-rail" value as we maneuver our horses through woods lacking trails, guided not by a road sign or compass, only by the voice of hounds in chase of our quarry.

Second, there is value in any experience that reminds us of our dependency on the soil-plant-animal-man relationship, a fundamental organization of the biota. Today we are engulfed in mechanization, urbanization and technology. When we ride our horses and point the hounds toward the first covert and watch our huntsman make that first cast, we divorce ourselves from these trappings of the 21st century and step back into the soil-plant-animal-man relationship. It is the farm fields and marshes. It is the flora of the woodlands. It is the fox, hounds and horse. It is the camaraderie of fellow fox hunters yearning to experience the thrill of the chase.

Third, there is value in any experience that exercises those ethical restraints called "sportsmanship."

We have ample opportunities to express sportsmanship in the hunt field. Whether it is helping the rider with a fractious horse, providing a lead over a jump, crossing a water hazard, or yielding a trail to the hunt staff, our etiquette and actions are an expression of sportsmanship. The whipper-in who stays back to push up that last hound or races to the road to protect the entire pack is an example of the orchestra that makes it sporting for all of us. Likewise, the Huntsman blowing "gone to ground" and encouraging hounds to mark the earth yet pulling the pack away if they are digging too close to Reynard, exemplifies the sportsmanship that is a core value to fox hunters.

Fox hunting with hounds presents a dramatic escape from our surroundings of mechanization and cell phone invasion. This is the purest of sports; it has split-rail flavor; it has man-earth drama. May we continue to enjoy and appreciate the values of our chosen sport, realizing that it did not start with our first president, nor Robert Brooke, who brought the red fox and his hounds to Southern Maryland in 1650, but evolved from centuries earlier in Europe by people who loved the voice of the hound in pursuit of the fox. 