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The Genteel Sport of Basseting

Hunting With The Skycastle Thirty Years Ago As Seen Through The Discerning Eye Of Edwin A. Peeples

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by Edwin A. Peeples

Many years ago I took a neighbor, newly moved from the city, on a hunt with our local pack, Skycastle Bassets. We meet at 3:00 p.m. each Sunday afternoon from the first Sunday in November until the last Sunday in March. My neighbor endured the first hunt, but declined to go on another.

"Silliest damned thing I ever saw, " he said, when I suggested he try us again. "A lot of grown people and kids crashing through swamps and briars and cornfields behind a bunch of silly looking dogs that don't seem to do much of anything but bark and get lost."

"Well," I said, "You meet some nice people. You see some beautiful country and charming homes. It's good exercise."

"It's so pointless, though," he said. "I can do those things other ways and not feel like such a fool."

Events are how the viewer beholds them, of course. From this man's viewpoint, the novel *Crime and Punishment* would be a gloomy tale about a Russian dropout who butchered two old hags, and eventually gave himself up to the police. The novel is a good deal more than this, and basseting is a good deal more than my neighbor saw on his one hunt.

Still, his view is by no means a minority one. Over the years I've tried to explain basseting to a good many people. Many of them could understand and accept foxhunting and beagling. But the sense, often the actual words, of their response to my description of basseting was: "You're putting me on!"

It must be possible to explain basseting so it will be understood at least as well as foxhunting and beagling, so that you, reading this in a comfortable chair, can enjoy vicariously a sport of charm and quaint ceremony.

Let's try it.

I suppose the best way to bring you into the subject will be to say, briefly, how all such hunting with packs of hounds got started.

In ancient days, two animals plagued the British Isles and the

continent of Europe. One was the red fox and one was the Belgian hare. The first destroyed too many domestic and game animals—chiefly fowls. The other destroyed too many truck gardens, field crops and young saplings. There was no choice but to hunt the fox and the hare with the view of trying to keep their vigorous populations in check. Neither had enough natural enemies to do the job, albeit the fox did prey to some extent on the hare.

The packs for the early hunts were composed of everybody's dogs, regardless of breed. The fields—which means those who follow the hunts—were composed of people on horseback and people on foot. (Joyce Stranger has written a tender and beautiful description of this kind of a hunt in her book, *The Running Foxes*.)

Gradually, as the population of foxes and hares were brought under control, the hunts grew more formalized. Three kinds of hunts evolved: the foxhunt, the beagling pack and the basseting pack. Each hunt developed its own type of hound: the foxhound, the beagle or harrier, and the basset hound. Foxhunts came to be conducted exclusively on horseback; beagling and basseting, largely on foot, although either of the latter two could be followed on horseback and occasionally is. The field that follows beagles must be able to spend most of its time running. There is some running in basseting, but mostly basseting is a walking sport.

Foxhounds are large, rangy hounds with great speed and endurance. Beagles are small, rangy hounds with similar speed and endurance. Bassets are low, squat hounds that look like a cross between a springer spaniel and a dachshund. They are clumsy, waddling, endearingly silly animals. They are nothing like so fast as a foxhound or a beagle, but it would be a great mistake to suppose they can't move. On a fox or a deer, they could give a field of beaglers a good run.

The three types of hunts were transplanted from Europe to the United States, the foxhunt first, then beagling and finally basseting. But with a difference. We have no hares, except a few which were imported a few decades ago to Millbrook, N.Y., and the red fox has not been the problem here that other marauders have. Hence, foxhunts and beaglers have hunted fox more for the chase than the

Basset hounds, here on the scent of a quarry, are lowslung and a bit clumsy, and display their courage only in packs.

kill. Indeed, unless a local fox population gets out of hand, fox hunts and beagle packs avoid a kill so as to have a fox to hunt the next time out.

Basset packs occasionally hunt fox but mainly go for the cottontail rabbit, which is something of a rural nuisance. The cottontail rabbit is not much of a runner. He will go fifty to a hundred yards and dive into a hole. This is why, on a basset hunt, very little seems to happen. Unless one is following the pack very closely, hounds can make a find—that means starting a rabbit—and, with great cries and uproar, run it to ground before more distant members of the field realize what is going on. Once the brief chase is over, there is nothing for the MBH—Master of Basset Hounds—to do but gather the pack and cast it—that means urging it on—at another thicket or hedgerow in the hope of starting another rabbit.

Letting hounds make a kill is called blooding them. It rarely happens with Skycastle. In fact, I can recall only two occasions on which the Skycastle pack was blooded. Both were years ago, and both were accidental.

On the first, we were crossing a meadow at kennels—the farm of

Mrs. John W. Streeter, MBH of Skycastle. Suddenly a rabbit streaked through the field. Everyone shouted: *Tallyho!* This cry calls attention to a sighted quarry. For once, the pack got the scent instantly. Usually they don't. Briefly, on a hill like a Grandma Moses landscape, the whole operation of the hunt was visible: rabbit zigzagging up a hill of brilliant green, hounds in hot pursuit, MBH after them and the field strung out all across the meadow. The rabbit disappeared into a hedgerow. We thought he had gone to ground. But the hounds kept crying and plunging at the place where the rabbit disappeared. When we reached the hounds, we found the rabbit had become trapped in barbed wire and briars and the hounds had been able to get at him. The second time, the rabbit ran into a hound's mouth. The hound bit down and killed him, then sat on its haunches and howled with dismay.

Both accidents distressed the field. For most of us are as opposed to the blood part of supposedly blood sports as any who do not hunt. We go for the chase, not the kill.

So what makes this chase so attractive?

We, of Skycastle, hunt the part of Chester County known as the Pickering Valley. It is a land of steep and rolling hills, green pastures, overgrown lanes and bridle paths, large dense woods, deep ravines, clear and rushing streams and, until recently, mostly ancient stone farm houses and farms. Each Sunday, we meet at a different house, the houses selected because they are situated on a farm or a large acreage and, for choice, surrounded by other large farms or acreages. The fixture, a card listing the dates, times and places of the meets and mailed to us by the MBH, tell us where to go.

Unlike many other basseting packs, we suffer the little children to come unto us. So, since Skycastle was founded in 1948, we've had two or three generations who began with us as babes in arms, grow to hearty, vigorous boys and girls, marry and raise a new generation. Several of the boys and girls have served as Whippers-in, or Whips, for the hunt in the process of growing up with it.

The gathering for the meet is formal in manner, if not in dress. Adults, who may be on a first name basis on any other occasion, greet each other with bows and handshakes as Mr. And Mrs. So-and-so.

The children observe this, find the phenomenon of good manners pleasing and imitate it. As most members of the hunt speak that rare language, good English, the children pick this up as well. They run the risk, when they go back to school, of not being understood by any of their contemporaries, but they do discover a language in which intelligible communication is possible.

Presently, a red truck full of noisy hounds whirls into the gathering. The MBH, a tall, slender blonde of great presence and determination, descends from the truck. Gravely she shakes hands with Colin Hingley and Mark Burget, our two Whips, and with Henry Maconachy, our Field Master. The MBH and these other dignitaries are all in green coats with crimson collars. The colors of collars indicate the hunt of which one is a member. All members of basset pack staffs wear green coats.

The men wear white duck trousers, and it has become the practice of the women members of other basset pack staffs to wear white duck trousers, too. But Elizabeth Streeter, our MBH, still holds to the classic distaff dress of the white duck skirt, which descends to just above the knee, and long, green hose, which rise to just below the knee, leaving brief stretches of bare leg. As we basset in a country with some of the world's most murderous briars, Elizabeth generally comes back with her bare knees scratched and bleeding vigorously. So we brag that, while we seldom blood the hounds, we always blood our MBH. I asked Elizabeth once if all this scratching and bleeding didn't

bother her.

"Oh, no," she said lightly. "It all heals beautifully by the next Sunday."

Although the hunt staff is formally dressed, the rest of the field is not. We wear whatever we have that is durable, lightweight and warm. The effect is motley, but stylish.

Greetings done, the MBH opens the tailgate of the truck. The hounds, howling with glee, pour out and barrel off over the landscape, full of delight at being free. The MBH sounds her horn which more or less gathers the pack around her. She strides off in the midst of it. Mr. Maconachy follows, ten or fifteen paces behind her, with the field behind him. The two whips, one on each side, pursue a course about fifty feet to the right or left of the pack, and we're off.

The function of the Whips is to keep stray hounds from deviating from the direction of the hunt and, when the pack gets on deer or fox, to chase them and bring them back. The function of the Field Master is to lead the field, which is all the rest of us, and to prevent any of us from drawing too close to hounds. The ideal arrangement is for hounds to be in front of everybody, even the MBH. A person overrunning or crossing ahead of hounds will cut off or muddy the scent.

From 3:00 until 4:30 or 5:00, pursuing first one cottontail then another, occasionally raising a pheasant, from time to time being turned off fox or deer, our hunt wanders the countryside, covering a distance of from two to four miles. We avoid roads and, as much as possible, houses, barnyards, mowed lawns, newly planted fields and such penned animals as horses, cows, and sheep, because a basset pack will chase anything that moves and leaves a scent.No single basset is very courageous, but a pack of bassets is foolhardily aggressive and will take on anything.

We met once with a family who had peacocks and bantam chickens and a long, low, modern house with many ceiling to floor glass panels. The moment the hounds were released, before the MBH could sound her horn, the hounds went for the peacocks. The peacocks flew to the roof and sat there screaming. Bereft of the peacocks, the hounds went for the bandies. The chase went around

Mrs. John B. Streeter, MBH, follows the basset pack and is in turn followed by the "field" of basseters, led by Field Master Henry Maconachy.

Candida Streeter at Aldie, Virginia, in 1974 with Skycastle Galloper '71 and Amanda Schooley

A joint meet with the Timber Ridge Bassets in Maryland

and around the house, spinning off bandies who soared away in flight. Presently there was a crash. A basset, pursuing a bandy, had gone through a glass panel. The bandy disappeared. After the pack made two more circuits of the house, the MBH and the field got things under control, and we went off to hunt.

When we came back for tea in a sort of orangery, our conversation was suddenly interrupted by a loud crowing. There was a bandy in a large aspidistra. That night our host and hostess were awakened at five a.m. Perched on their bedpost, another bandy was welcoming the morning.

By four thirty or five o'clock, full of honorable fatigue and fresh air, the hunt returns to the host house for tea. With Skycastle, tea is not a euphemism for a cocktail party. We have high tea. For adults, tea, scones, cakes, sandwiches and specially made cookies. Most hosts disdain anything bought ready-made. The only alcohol, if there is any, is a decanter of rum to be splashed into the tea.

The children eat separately, in the kitchen or a cellar room or a sunporch. This is another bit of social training. Their repast is as special to them as the adults' is to adults. The children have cocoa, doughnuts, marshmallows and ready-made cookies, for they are more interested in quantity than quality. Only when they reach the age of eleven or twelve can they graduate to the adult tea where instead of racing around, squealing and teasing, they must be quiet, gracious and mannerly. This gives them a kind of debut, and they look forward to it. Tea lasts until six o'clock or until all refreshments give out, whichever comes first. Then, as ceremoniously as everybody convened, everybody departs.

At the beginning of our seasons, when the sun is warm and the earth dry, we have large fields: a hundred or more people. Much too big. As winter draws on, the fields diminish to fifty, then twenty-five. On Sundays with very bad weather, only the hard core turns out: the Henry Maconachys, the Blair Henrotins, the MBH and such of her three children as are home, one or two of my sons and I. We need the exercise and so do the hounds. Also, it is a challenge which appeals to the puritan ethic. We basset come hard rains, floods, blizzards, bitter cold and piercing winds. I assume we would basset through an

earthquake, so long as no fissures opened too wide for the field and the hounds to hurtle. Although bad weather is uncomfortable, the world has a kind of bleak and gothic majesty on such days. During a hard snow, the countryside is pure magic.

You can see, then, how Skycastle operates: with determination, but loosely and without much organization.

Other hunts differ considerably, as I learned when we had joint meets with other packs. The first such joint meet I attended was with Coldstream, which hunts the country once hunted by the Rose Tree Fox Hunting Club. Mr. and Mrs. Joseph J. McKenna were joint Masters. McKenna had a tightly disciplined pack and staff: many Whips, both active and honorary, Field Masters, Field Secretaries, etc. When we first met them, we had only three members in green. They had more than a dozen.

All of their green coats gathered with our three at a removed place, like officials before a football game. The two fields mingled in the tentative way that groups of strangers do. The green coats were settling who would lead what part of the hunt through what part of the country and what peculiar characteristics each pack of hounds had. This done, McKenna went off some distance, bade his hounds be released and played obligatos on his horn until the pack clustered around him tightly, like children expecting cookies. We found that, no matter where he was in the field, no matter what his hounds were doing, he could always gather them this way.

Our pack, in contrast, dismayed Coldstream, for each of our hounds is more or less an individual with a mind of his own, and no more than casually obedient. That we had brought children, although no more than four or five, also dismayed Coldstream. For they do not invite children to their meets.

With good reason. Their teas are full dinners, groaning buffets: their drinks, cocktails and highballs. And the party goes on until eight or nine o'clock.

Timber Ridge, a private pack in Hampstead, Maryland, has two joint meets with us each year: one here, one in Maryland. Timber Ridge is, if anything, even more highly organized than Coldstream, with similar platoons of staff and, at their Basset Ball each April, a

whole range of awards and citations. Those who wear green coats for Skycastle achieve the distinction by way of a private conversation with Mrs. Streeter. Those to whom Timber Ridge extends this privilege receive the honor at their Basset Ball. They receive it from Charles Rogers, a man with the presence, majesty and figure of Henry VIII, and from his wife, Meena, the MBH, an exquisite brunette who would look as glorious in a wimple as in a hard hat. The presentation of the Timber Ridge green coat is as ceremonious as a knighting.

Such ceremony is attractive and stirring, and Timber Ridge's right to conduct it is well earned. According to a very thorough book on the subject, *Beagling and Basseting* by James Fagan Scharnberg, Timber Ridge, established in 1946, is the second oldest pack in the country. The oldest is Stockford, near Wilmington, Delaware, founded in 1932. The third oldest, Skycastle, was founded in 1948.

During a recent trip to Illinois, the Maconachys found the Southern Illinois Bassets, at Herrin, Illinois, listed in the book, and arranged to hunt with them. When they got to the meet, they found many members who knew the Masters and fields of eastern packs. For basseting, like foxhunting, is a tight fraternity.

It may also be a diminiishing fraternity. Such hunting requires open space. Lots of it. The animals of the woods do not take well to alleys, streets, backyards, throughways, shopping centers and little ticky-tackys on hillsides. Increasingly, humanity is pressing into the countryside, cutting through pastures and fields, paving and populating the picturesque, lonely lanes, blocking the hunt movement with a variety of obstacles. One of the most insurmountable obstacles is a mental rather than a physical one. It is the urban or suburban conditioned reflex.

This attitude says that anyone entering upon an owner's property is there to do mischief: robbery, mugging, theft, vandalism; that any person seen on an adjoining property constitutes a real and present threat which must be driven off. The attitude is understandable. In the city or suburbs, it would be absolutely correct.

Thus, many people newly moved from the city or the suburbs believe we too are bent on depredation. The moment we come into view, they rush out in a frenzy of fear and threats. There is an ironic

aspect to this reaction. As one of our field remarked recently after such an incident: "It seems so silly when you realize there are lots of members of this hunt that, anywhere else, those people would be breaking their necks to meet. And here they are. Ordering them off the property."

Of course, objecting to hunts by no means began with new people moving into the country. There have always been farmers who banned hunts. But for entirely different reasons. They have objected to damage that some hunts—usually foxhunts—have done to crops or fences; or have had an argument with the Master or a member of the field on some subject—usually politics—or complain that foxes are killing their fowls and the hunt protects the fox instead of killing him.

Which brings me back not only to foxes. but to deer. There were once two resident herds of deer in Valley Forge Park. The hubbub of several International Scout Jamborees in the park drove these deer up country into our area. After the Jamborees, some of the deer went back to the park, but many stayed in our country and bred vigorously. Though we are rural, we are densely enough populated to make deer hunting too hazardous to permit. So nothing culls these herds, and deer are numerous.

To a hound, the scent of a deer is irresistable. Let a deer cross our path, and the entire pack is off after him. None of us can outrun a deer. Few of us can run fast enough to turn a pack of bassets who are hunting deer. Deer have no knowledge of our interest in the urban-suburban anxiety about random trespass.

This explains how, last year, we spent a good part of an afternoon throwing a new householder into a hysterical frenzy. We got on deer. The deer ran through his backyard. The pack followed in full and deafening cry, followed at a considerable distance, by the Whip who hoped to turn the pack. The householder rushed out, screaming about trespassers.

"Can't stop to talk!" the Whip yelled and disappeared.

Ten minutes later, back came the deer across the yard, pursued by baying hounds and the Whip. This time the man was out with a shot-gun. Nobody stopped. The next time though, most of the field had closed in to try to turn the pack. The man waved his gun and filled

the air with threats. His wife and children joined in.

But all of us were too busy to talk.

At that juncture, the deer decided to head for Wilmington. Everybody took off after him. I'm sure that, to this day, the householder doesn't know what hit him or where we all went when, after an hour of bedlam, silence fell as solidly as a block of granite.

A pack on deer must be turned, and everybody must concentrate on doing the turning. Deer will run for miles. Fail to get a pack off deer and, for four days afterward, somebody must be out rounding up Hounds. They follow the deer, separate, get lost and finally sit in some lonely spot and howl.

Basset hounds and basseters climb a low hill in search of some missing hounds as a day in the field draws to a close.

Fox present a similar problem, but one that is not so grave. A fox will take a pack for quite a distance, but generally he starts up near his lair and presently returns almost to the place where he started. So it is merely a matter of keeping in touch with hounds to see that they stay on the fox, don't go off on deer or don't run into a road where there is heavy traffic. Still, following a fox will take the hunt over a lot of country and inevitably, across the land of some newcomer with anxiety.

Last year, a fox took us onto such a property and went to ground in a pile of lumber between the house and the road. The owner came out quite wroth and, as I was the first person he saw, began expostulating, stating that he feared robbery, vandalism and all the rest. I tried to explain basseting to him. He listened at first with utter incredulity, then, with the uncertain grin of one who hears a tale told by an idiot, an expression that said: "You're having me on!"

Finally he said: "Well. Get your dogs off the fox, or whatever it is. If there is a fox. Get them off! And don't let me see you on my land again!"

I was tempted to tell him the truth: that I could never guarantee that. But there was no way to say it so he would understand I was describing fate and the uncertain ways of a little hunt, and not be impertinent.

EDWIN A. PEEPLES, *author of* A Hole in the Hill, A Professional Writer's Handbook, *and articles for many national publications, wrote and finished the year before his death* Planting an Inheritance, *a modern classic on the development and restoration of a farm house and property in Kimberton, Chester County, Pennsylvania. This article and most of the accompanying photographs appeared as a special feature in* Today, *the Sunday magazine of the Philadelphia Inquirer, on December 21, 1975.*