

# Farmer's Day at the Steeplechase Course

By Gil Rodgers

The crowds would grow to over 4000 local farmers, businessmen, spouses, neighbors, and many children gathering from Medfield, Dover, Westwood, Sherborn, Walpole, Framingham, and Boston. This huge assembly was congregating at the large and spacious field on North Street recently acquired by the Wardner Farm Trust for benefit of the Norfolk Hunt Club, and re-configured and landscaped from its former use as a golf course (Castle Hill Golf Links.) Families were dressed in their finest: women wore long dresses, fur coats, mink stoles, and decorative hats for warmth and to protect from the late fall sun, while men wore dark suits, white shirts, neck ties, and top hats or bowlers. Even Medfield's public schools were closed on this special occasion so that pupils could participate in the activities and enjoy the once-a-year, annual community event. This was October in the year 1929. The purpose of the festivities was recognition and appreciation to the farmers whose land was used for drag fox hunting and to throw a giant "thank you" party for the community.

The Norfolk Hunt Club continues a long history of sponsoring equestrian activities with the 9<sup>th</sup> annual Polo in the Country on Sunday, September 18, 2011 on the very same steeplechase course located on North Street; but a polo game will be featured instead of steeplechases. Other activities include the thrilling precision drill team riders -- the Barnstable Barnburners, parade of the Norfolk Hounds, and pony rides for children.



Photo 1 Original Farmers Day was Held Across from the Current Hunt Stable on Center Street, Dover. This photo is from Norfolk Hunt Club House Looking South towards Medfield, 1915

It was the roaring 20's. The country had prospered after the WW I victory (just before the stock market crash and Great Depression,) and the Norfolk Hunt Club was thriving. People were in a good mood for a day of fun and excitement including: (1) a race dinner at the club house the night before attended by 125 guests and club members, (2) drag hunt starting at 7:00 AM, (3) breakfast at the club house, (4) Farmer's Day horse show starting at 9:00 AM, (5) a luncheon at 12:30 PM, and (6) steeplechase races starting at 2:00 PM. Although prohibition prevented legal sales of alcohol (from 1920 to 1933), the hosts creatively managed to have an adequate supply of whiskey, beer, and spirits for the race dinner. Prominent people from the community included Noah Allen, Walter Channing, Chester Heinlein, Robert Homans, and General Francis Peabody. Towering above all dressed impeccably in tail coat, spats, and his distinctive grey tall hat was Henry Vaughan, Master of Fox Hounds, greeting practically everyone by their first name. Vaughan was a lawyer of Sherborn with a passion for horses and the country. He served as Master of Fox Hounds and Huntsman for the North Hunt Club for 30 years – the longest ever for the Club and one of the longest periods for the entire USA, and was the first secretary/treasurer of the Masters of Fox Hounds Association.



Photo 2 Gymkana Contest, Norfolk Hunt Club House at Top of Hill, Farmers Day, 1906.

Farmer's Day started in 1901, continued until 1917, stopped for a few years during WW I, and began again in 1922. (Photos #1 and #2) By the late 1920's Farmers Day included a horse show, but unlike today's horse show that takes place annually at the steeplechase field. The program varied somewhat from year to year, but always included horse jumping contests with separate classes for men and women and organized by horse weight classifications -- heavy, middle, and light. In some years farmers brought their work horses that were regularly used on the property over which the Hunt rode, and competed in different types of obedience, conformation, driving, and pulling contests. In other years competitions were held for the high jumper that reached an astounding six feet over a rail fence (see Photo 3.) The broad jump was another contest held with horse and rider leaping 28 feet from the take-off to the point of landing – about four lengths of a full-sized horse. Another amusing contest was "lemon slicing" where the rider galloped full speed holding a saber and tried to cut in half a lemon that was perched on a pole (Photo 4.)



Photo 3 High Jump Winner, C.H. Macomber, Farmers Day 1903



Photo 4 Lemon Slicing, J.R. Cochrane, Farmers Day 1907

Gymkana was another entertaining contest held in the early years that had many different varieties involving both men and women contestants. In one event, for example, men dismounted at one end of the field, ladies dismounted at the other end of the field. Men mounted their horses and rode to the ladies and then dismounted; ladies 'dressed' the men wearing costumes. All mounted and returned to the men's starting point. The winner was determined by the fastest time. (Sort of like the do-si-doing in square dancing.) (See Photo #2)

Steeplechasing was born in Ireland in 1752 as an analogue to cross-country thoroughbred horse racing. It gets its name from racing from a church steeple in one town to another church steeple in the next town typically 4- 5 miles away; hence the name steeplechasing or sometimes called "point-to-point" horse racing. The first steeplechase on record is said to have been when two foxhunters – Denis O'Callaghan and Reginald Blake settled the argument of

whose horse was best by racing from Buttevant Church to St. Leger's Church in Doneraile, County Cork, Ireland, a distance of 4 ½ miles, following a long day of fox hunting. (Blake was the winner according to historians.) Steeplechasing came to the US in 1834, and amazingly enough started in Rock Creek Park, Washington, DC. It became a very popular sport in New England in the 20's and 30's with prominent events at Myopia, The Country Club in Brookline, and Medfield.

The Medfield course was laid out by Nathaniel Thayer with assistance from Henry Vaughan consisting of 9-10 wide hurdles covering a distance of 1 ½, 2 ½, and 3 ½ miles (depending on the level of the race) starting at the upper field near North Street, circling around to the lower field, doing a giant figure 8 around the gravel pit, and ending up near the starting line. At that time the entire course was visible to spectators standing at the brim of the hill. A wooden tower had been constructed elevating judges near the center of the property. In order to get the required distances, several cycles around the course were required. As many as 8 - 10 horses would race at the same time at incredible speeds; up and down the hilly and rough terrain; jumping solid log fences and stone walls, ditches, water obstacles, and banks; and maneuvering for the lead position. (Photo 5) You still can see the locations for some of these jumps that are being used today, although the walls and fences have been narrowed and side skirts removed. Steeplechasing had its own schedule but was combined with Farmer's Day in 1929. Many competitors were young horse riders such as Edward and John Grew, Charles Heffenger, Edwin Webster, and Richard Saltonstall. It was very exciting to watch but also quite dangerous – riders would fall off their horses over jumps, sometimes a horse would land poorly and do a somersault with its rider, and several deaths occurred.

Due in part to these high risks and more directly the effects of the Great Depression that lasted until about 1941, steeplechasing lost interest and the Farmer's Day program changed considerably ending in the early 30's to become a dinner for local land owners in appreciation of the use of their property. By the late 50's the Steeplechase field was no longer used for steeplechasing but for other horse events.



Photo 5 Upperfield Steeplechasing Jump, Medfield, October 1927 (from motion picture of actual steeple chase)

Similar to the Farmer's Day celebrations of the past, on September 18, 2011 the Norfolk Hunt Club is sponsoring the 9<sup>th</sup> annual Polo in the Country for a day of fun, entertainment, and celebration open to the community. The activity takes place on the Steeplechase Course at 240 North Street, Medfield. Proceeds are for the purpose of preservation and protection of recreational space in Medfield, Dover, Sherborn and surrounding communities.

A six chukka polo match between the Norfolk Hunt and Dedham Polo teams will be played by three players and horses from each team; normally four players are used but because of the small field size fewer players are used in this match. Similar to steeplechasing, polo is an extremely exciting and fast action equestrian sport for both riders and spectators. To acquaint new spectators to the game a short demonstration of the basic shots and background on rules will be given. At half-time, the Barnstable Barnburners will display precision drill team riding skills in formation flying across the field at top speed. This will be followed by the Parade of the Norfolk Hounds led by professional huntsman John Elliot and whippers-in from the Norfolk Hunt Club demonstrating drag hunting with the pack of 20 – 25 primarily American hounds from the oldest kennels in America still in use. Additional activities include: pony rides, tailgate contest, candy toss for the kids, and a few surprises.

The Norfolk Hunt Club invites you to attend. For more information see [www.norfolkhunt.com](http://www.norfolkhunt.com), or to make reservations call (508) 359-6704 or e-mail: [norfolkpolo@comcast.net](mailto:norfolkpolo@comcast.net).

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