

PineStraw

The Art & Soul of the Sandhills

January 2014

The Huntsman and the Billionaire The Enduring Mystery of Overhills



Our 2014 Memoir Winner • A Classic Cottage Reborn • An Artist's View of The Pines

PART ONE

The Huntsman and the Billionaire

By GAYVIN POWERS



The baying of a Walker foxhound echoed in the wooded distance. "Is it Stinger or Satin?" the whipper-in asked Rudolph Singleton Sr., the master huntsman, riding alongside him.

"No, it's Model Rudy Jr.," Singleton Sr. said, recognizing his favorite hound. "He's found the fox."

The huntsman enjoyed a unique connection with the animals in his care. He had the remarkable ability to identify each one of the sixty-four Maryland and Walker foxhounds by bark alone. This, of course, was at Overhills, an exclusive hunt club in Harnett County founded in 1913 for industrialists and millionaires that later evolved into a private family retreat for the Rockefellers. Guests were bound by a love of horses, hounds, the hunt, and freedom from the psychological burdens of the Great Depression—the very economic holocaust that inspired Singleton Sr. to move his family to Overhills. Rudolph Singleton Jr. lived at Overhills between the ages of 3 and 5, and remembers his father during those bleak

years. "Daddy was a happy, cheerful man."

Prior to working for Percy Rockefeller, the elder Singleton was an award-winning huntsman at Iroquois Hunt Club in Lexington, Kentucky, until he lost his job. The Depression's toll on foxhunting members of the club cast a powerful shadow over the nation's prosperity and leisure classes, affecting hunt clubs across the county and leaving Singleton Sr. grateful for the opportunity to work at Overhills—a darn sight better than standing in the bread line. Furthermore, the job was effectively a promotion. At Iroquois Hunt Club, he merely assisted on the hunts; at Overhills he would be in charge of all the details associated with foxhunting, including carrying the golden horn and leading the hunts.

With the family's 1930 Hudson stuffed with their belongings, the Singletons drove from Kentucky to North Carolina, without a clue what the future held at the exclusive Overhills. On the plus side, for Delores Singleton, Rudolph Sr.'s devoted wife, who was raised in Sumter, South Carolina, the move brought her closer to her own family. On the down

OVERHILLS HUNT



OVERHILLS
HARNETT COUNTY
N. C.

Nineteen Hundred and Thirty-four



OVERHILLS HUNT 1920-1921

Forty couples of Fox Hounds will be maintained at The New Kennels near Overhills P. O., North Carolina, to hunt in Harnett and Cumberland Counties during December, January and February. Regular meets will be held four days weekly with such bye days as circumstances permit.

A pack of Foot Beadles will likewise be hunted through the season.

Further particulars may be obtained from

Overhills, N. C.
November 15th, 1920.

ELIODE R. CAMPBELL, Hunt Secretary.



Capitalist and financier Percy Rockefeller was a passionate fox hunter; the Overhills Hunt was his preferred form of recreation.

1921

OVERHILLS



HUNT

OVERHILLS P. O.
NORTH CAROLINA

HORSES

DATE _____

MONTGOMERY	OCKEYALL
HARNEY	DROPS O' BRANDY
BALRAM	WIND BLOWN FLAME
HAYLAND	CYCLOPS
FOLLY	CLARA HUNYLAND
FRANK	PHONY ROYAL
FOUR EASTER	SCHOO, BOY
EAGLE	PORT MESSING
TELL ME	STEAK O' LIGHTNING
HUNTERMAN	EAT O' BARK
WAGGON	FIFTY MESSING
NIGHT LETTER	HAGAN
OVER THE TOP	ROUND
TEXAS	
KENTUCKY	
BONNET	
KING RICHARD	
FRANCE RICHARD	
HENNING BELLA	
LAFAYETTE	
FIREMAN	



*The Circus at Overhills:
An aerial photograph of
the custom-designed and
architecturally grandiose circular
kennel and stables, center left,
designed to accommodate the
training and boarding of hundreds
of dogs and horses, including an
oval track outrigger with hedges
and jumps. The Circus was the
ceremonial starting point of the
Overhills Hunt*

side, the relative isolation of the plantation in a vast longleaf forest meant there was little if any indication of the luxurious lifestyle that awaited the family in their mysterious new home – not even a sign that announced the entrance to Overhills. There was only a simple dirt path connecting visitors to the elite lifestyle hidden in the pines.

From 1933 until 1935, Singleton Sr. spent idyllic days raising his family and serving as the rustic estate's master huntsman, overseeing the foxhunting organization at Overhills. It was a quiet, isolated life where the workers could enjoy resort amenities when work or play was complete. From the beginning, the elder Singleton was keenly aware of these fortunate circumstances that allowed him to spend his days caring for the animals and riding Hildred Seth, his favorite horse.

A sea of pines sprawling almost beyond comprehension, Overhills was ideal for hunting with its fields and pine forests that spanned across old hunt clubs and the remains of farms and plantations, cumulatively making up more than 40,000 total acres. Only birdsong and baying hounds could intrude upon the sweet isolation, allowing visitors to disconnect from a troubled outside world.

Splendid isolation in nature was Overhills' principal attraction; everything that took place (bird hunting, fishing, swimming, foxhunting, shooting, golf, polo, tennis) revolved around the naturalist views of the Rockefeller clan. During Percy Rockefeller's tenure at Overhills, while Singleton Sr. was master huntsman, the patriarch's favorite pastime in nature was "the hunt." Specifically, foxhunting.

Known as a "King's Sport," owing historically to the royal purse required to run and maintain a foxhunting organization, the sport gained popularity throughout the early 1900s in America, supported mainly by successful bankers and stockbrokers who traveled south to get away from urban cold and play among other wealthy types. North Carolina's largely uninhabited Sandhills region was a perfect warm retreat for them, and much more appealing than the tediously long journey to Florida. By the time Singleton Sr. worked at Overhills, many of the wealthy investors who supported Overhills during the early 1900s through the Roaring Twenties, had taken their money elsewhere, increasing Percy Rockefeller's shares, thus maintaining his position as the estate's primary investor.

"People couldn't afford to foxhunt anymore," recalls Singleton Jr. "Only the very wealthy could." The result of this financial shift meant that Overhills soon became a secluded family retreat.

The younger Singleton recalls the time he spent living at Overhills as a magical time. "Most of the time, it felt like our own place," he says. "They [the Rockefellers] were there 10-percent of the time." During the other 90-percent of the time, the employees had a Donald Ross-designed golf course, tennis courts and surrounding pristine pine wilderness to themselves.

September 16, 1933.

Mr. P.A. Rockefeller,
Room 5101,
25 Broadway,
New York City.

Dear Mr. Rockefeller:

Thanks for your letter of the 8th, and 13th.

Cartload of hay, cartload of oats and feed, and cartload of buckwheat meal arrived and unloaded. Stables are all ready for the arrival of horses on the 19th as per Mr. Conger's telegram.

Nine hounds arrived Fayetteville Tuesday evening 10th and we picked them up there, they were in fine shape, did not show any sign fatigue in as much as they were only enroute part of one day. The additional hound referred to in Mr. Jackson's letter, arrived safely, yesterday. We dipped these hounds the following morning and then put them in the kennels with other hounds and they are getting along nicely together, and as soon as they get used to the other hounds, and kennels we will take them out.

Yours very truly,

W.B. Bruce.





Not surprisingly, a lot of folks in neighboring towns didn't even know that Overhills existed. The staff and their children kept quiet about it, too. At a time when newspapers were full of stories about desperate kidnappings that recalled the Lindberg tragedy of a decade before, Overhills' employees used extreme discretion to ensure that their employers and their guests were kept safe.

On a regular workday — when their employers were gone — Singleton Sr. and the other staff kept time by the sun, rising early to start work. His days largely consisted of training the horses and dogs, as well as overseeing their care and diet, ensuring they were strong and fit for when the Rockefellers and their friends visited.

"A person doesn't pay top dollar for the best dogs only to feed them scraps," Singleton Jr. notes. The dogs' diet was strictly managed, and, depending on the day, meals, which were made in large copper kettles, consisted of oatmeal, grain, vitamins and meat. "They ate better than a lot of people," he says.

The Singleton family lived in a house connected to the horse stables in front of the home on either end.



The original Craftsman-style Clubhouse for Overhills, above left, center of the winter colony's busy social swirl, opened in 1913 to accommodate horse lovers and golfers alike. Members and their guests stayed here, the gathering place for weddings, Christmas parties and events of all occasions. Note the same structure in the 1930s, painted white and showing its age at the depth of the Great Depression.



Boasting five bedrooms and five sleeping porches, spacious Croatian Lodge, was built as a family retreat and included dormitory style accommodations for traveling nannies.



Alabaster House was the Craftsman-style bungalow of Percy Rockefeller's personal valet, complete with a well-stocked wine cellar. By the 1950s the house sat abandoned and was believed to be haunted.



High times among the aristos of a dying Jazz Age affluence: All friends and family members of the Rockefellers pose during a party on the golf course.



Future New York governor Averell Harriman, a longtime member of Overhills, and his two daughters, Kathleen and Mary, seen on the front porch of the family's cottage, Covert Cottage, in 1920.



Frequent visitors to Overhills, Almira Geraldine Rockefeller (Percy's niece) and Faith Rockefeller (his fourth child) pose by the Clubhouse during a visit in 1920.

Horses were transported south each winter, and at any given time, there were eight to twelve Thoroughbreds in the estate's stables. Next to the home was "The Circus," a circular training field; and directly across from that were the dog kennels.

"Mr. Rockefeller had The Circus located away from the main homes and clubhouse. That way, people wouldn't hear the animals. But it was still close enough to walk to," says Singleton Jr.

When the family planned a visit, Mrs. Isabelle Rockefeller typically sent a telegram from up north a week in advance to notify the staff, ensuring preparations were made and everything was ready for their arrival. Cooks guaranteed there was a stockpile of food, specifically homemade chocolate chip cookies, and Singleton Sr. was equally meticulous, ensuring details of the upcoming hunts were planned out thoroughly. Upon the family's arrival, Singleton Sr. traded his aged work clothes for an English pink (red) coat and light riding breeches from Brooks Brothers — supplied to him by Percy Rockefeller. The jacket not only served as proper attire, it was essential during a hunt when barbed wire was encountered.

"Daddy would take off his coat, lay it over the wire so the horses could jump over it safely," says Singleton Jr.

Nipped fingers were the result a couple times when Singleton Sr. tried pulling a fox from its covert. "He learned real quick to stop doing that," says Singleton Jr., chuckling at the memories.

Foxes come by their keen reputation honestly. They are known for doubling back, crossing water and finding shelter in obscure areas, including the swamp. This explains why a lot of hunts ended with the fox outsmarting the hunters.

During the loyal Huntsman's final year of service at Overhills, however, as his son proudly recounts, "Twenty-three out of the 25 hunts ended with a fox being caught." A banner hunt, a banner year.

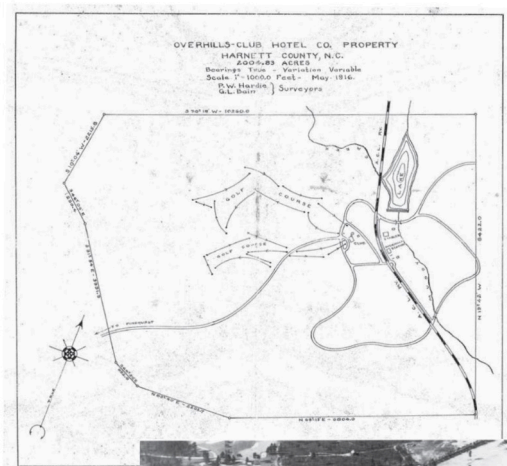
The younger Singleton grew up hearing remarkable stories of Percy Rockefeller's hunting achievements, which left a powerful impression. According to *Overhills Oral History*, a book by Jeffrey D. Irwin and Kaitlin O'Shea, Singleton Jr. recalled seeing "Mr. Rockefeller on his horse on one occasion. And, of course, [me] being a little chap, he looked as big as life itself."

Overhills saw many influential and famous visitors in the early 1900s. One of the many notable and regular visitors to the site was Percival Rosseau, a nationally recognized artist known for his dog and nature oil paintings, who was also artist-in-residence at Overhills, living and working in a small cottage during the winter months. The huntsman himself became an inevitable subject for Rosseau, corralling horses and managing the hounds, evidenced by the painting *Hunter and Hounds Pause for a Refreshing Drink*.

Another one of Rosseau's paintings, *One of the Many Bold Streams on the Overhills Estate*, features a majestic huntsman atop a Thoroughbred surrounded by hounds. The huntsman is Rudolph Singleton astride Hildred Seth.

When the Rockefellers departed, life at Overhills became quiet again ... unless a child was around.

Singleton Jr.'s favorite story about Overhills could have come from the pages of a Mark Twain novel. With no one around for miles, bored





A frosty morn on the Overhills Hunt: Master Huntsman, front left, had the responsibility of keeping the hounds and leading the action, planning and executing the hunt. In the early 1930s, Rudolph Singleton was brought to Overhills and served as the Huntsman until the Depression took its toll even on splendidly isolated Overhills, presaging its decline and sale to Fort Bragg.

and in need of entertainment, Singleton minor – then a precocious age 3 – released twenty-four rabbits from their cages. There was no grandiose hunt, the sound of his father's horn or men chasing down escaped rabbits atop their mounts – only the sight of his mother trying to retrieve the rabbits from a nearby swamp before they scampered to freedom in a Southern eden.

If the Singletons had stayed at Overhills, their son would have continued to enjoy a Huck Finn-*idyll* childhood. Outside of Overhills and its pampered sporting environment, people struggled for food, shelter and life's other basic necessities; schoolchildren without lunches or proper clothing were a reminder of the harsh reality lurking on the other side of the pines.

The sanctuary Overhills provided ended for the Singletons with the sudden death of Percy Rockefeller in 1934. Foxhunting, the patriarch's greatest passion, abruptly came to an end at Overhills. Singleton Sr. faced the decision to uproot his family and move to a Rockefeller estate in Chatham, New York, or stay put in nearby Fayetteville and sell cars. Mrs. Singleton enjoyed being close to her family. Family won out.

The younger Singleton sometimes wondered what his life would have

been like being raised in the cold New York winters, learning about horses firsthand from his father instead of living in a Fayetteville apartment where they couldn't keep a horse.

In the end, he made his peace with his father's fateful decision. "I have a lot of respect for my father. He loved riding horses, but he gave it up. He raised his family here instead."

The huntsman's life at Overhills represented the final days of a lavish era. Overhills would eventually fall into ruin, remembered by few, lost in another time.

Rudolph Singleton Sr. walked away from an elite lifestyle insulated from a struggling America, opting to raise his family in Fayetteville. After selling cars, he eventually became a successful insurance agent. His son, who also raised his family in Fayetteville, is now a retired attorney. Over time, Rosseau's painting of the huntsman was changed, the elder Singleton's face was painted over in favor of the visage of a Rockefeller. Despite the alteration, Singleton Jr. looks back on his father the way that Rosseau captured him proudly that day by the water, astride Hildred Seth.

For a time, he lived in a place that existed as if in another world, doing what he loved. **PS**