



Haverford Township Historical Society



HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTION FEATURES BRYN MAWR POLO FIELD EVENTS

By Kathy Case and Richard Kerr

Thundering hooves, the strike of polo mallet on ball, cheers as a splendid horse clears a high hurdle, and the baying of hunting hounds are sounds not heard in Haverford Township these days. Yet from 1900 to 1947, such sounds were common in the northern corner of the township known as the Polo Field. Here the Bryn Mawr Polo Club, Bryn Mawr Horse Show, Bryn Mawr Hound Show and, briefly, the Bryn Mawr Guernsey Cattle Show drew members of high society from all over the country.

This little-known history of the Polo Field is the center of a new collection at the Historical Society. Award ribbons and medals, photos, show programs, trophies and other memorabilia from the polo club and the shows tell a story of an era when horses shifted from a transportation necessity to a luxury.

It all started in 1892 when A. J. Drexel's son, George W. Childs Drexel, who lived at "Wootton" (now the St. Aloysius Academy), acquired about 26 acres in Bryn Mawr from the estate of railroad executive Samuel A. Black. In addition to being publisher of the Philadelphia *Public Ledger*, George Drexel was a horse owner and breeder. In 1898 Drexel and others chartered **The Bryn Mawr Polo Club**. By 1899 Samuel Garrigues had surveyed the land for Drexel, and a field of about 18 acres was set aside for polo, with the other land to be developed. The first matches were played on the field in 1900, the last in 1935. In spite of this short span, the field has been known as the Polo Field for the last 120 years.

Horace Laffaye's *Polo in the United States: A History* notes, "... the green shirts of Bryn Mawr remained the most powerful force in Pennsylvania polo," gaining six junior championships between 1905 and 1920 and winning the 1912 U.S. open, and a senior championship in 1914.

According to the 1917 *Horse Show Chronicle*, Bryn Mawr was known as "one of the hotbeds of horse breeding and fox hunting of the East." A group of equestrians, including members of the Polo Club, formed **The Bryn Mawr Horse Show** Association in 1895. The show was first held on the grounds of the Bryn Mawr Hotel on September 19-20, 1895, making it a year older than the Devon horse show. In 1914, when the hotel came under the control of The Baldwin School, the show moved to the Polo Field in Haverford Township, its most enduring home.

Much press attention was given to the presence and attire of the gentrified attendees, often more than was given to the horses. Proceeds from the annual fall event went to a mix of different medical and charitable groups over the years. (By contrast, the Devon shows have been for the exclusive benefit of Bryn Mawr Hospital.)

Bryn Mawr Horse Shows were not held in 1917-18 and 1941-45 because of the wars, with the last show at the Polo Field held September 25-27, 1947. From 1948 to 1953, the Bryn Mawr show teamed up with the Chester County Horse Show and then disappeared.

To accommodate polo games and the horse and hound shows in one field, a ring, sometimes called the "tanbark oval," with grandstands and a judging pavilion, was constructed at the edge of the Polo Field

near Railroad Avenue. There was also a wood platform by the driveway used for hound judging, and rows of horse stables were built near Dayton Road and Penn Street. An old farm house that dated back to at least 1848 was altered to serve as the club house. All of these structures have been torn down.



View from the grandstands of the show oval and judges stand at the Bryn Mawr Horse Show, at the Polo Field in Haverford Township, September 29, 1932.

Local sportsmen John R. Valentine and J. Stanley Reeve of Haverford Township, among others, started **The Bryn Mawr Hound Show** in 1914. It was held in conjunction with the annual horse shows, under the auspices of the Masters of Foxhounds Association of America and the American Foxhound Club. This event proved more enduring than either the Polo Club or the Horse Show. The 1915 Horse Show introduced whippet races; however, the hound shows thereafter featured beagles plus a variety of other hunting breeds. All were classified as hunting dogs (foxhounds).

Hound shows were held at the Polo Field in 1915-16, 1918-40, and 1946-47. The hound show moved to Rose Tree Hunt Club from 1948 through 1955, and in 1956 to Radnor Hunt Club, where it is still held and still called The Bryn Mawr Hound Show.

By 1931 a **Bryn Mawr Guernsey Cattle Show** was being held in conjunction with the Bryn Mawr Horse Show. The cattle show was discontinued after 1935.

By the time the U.S. entered World War II in 1941, the Polo Club no longer existed, the Horse Show and the Hound Show were suspended, and the mortgages and taxes on the land had become seriously in arrears. Investment banker H. Gates Lloyd, Jr., who lived at “Linden” on Darby Road (now the Quadrangle office), had been voluntarily working to clear up the property situation for the Haverford Township commissioners since about 1939, paying off the debts himself.

The Bryn Mawr Playfield Association was incorporated in 1944, following Lloyd’s plan, and technically still governs the use of the field. Lower Merion and Haverford township staff meet periodically about the Polo Field, both use the field, and they share the maintenance and scheduling duties.

Explore the HTHS collection for the Polo Field and its events. Go to haverfordhistoricalsociety.org, place your pointer over **Resources** in the top menu, click on **Searchable Gallery**, then on **Keyword Search** and search for **“horse show”**. A display in Nitre Hall features many of the items from this collection.

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