

LIVING LEGEND: Ellie Wood Keith Baxter Has Lived Her Life At A Rollicking Good Gallop

More than 80 years in the hunting field have supplied her with plenty of good tales.

Molly Sorge

ONE CRISP FALL DAY, Ellie Wood Keith Baxter and her good friend Tom Bishop were hacking back to The Barracks after a day of hunting with the Farmington Hunt Club. Baxter's horse, Take Command, was kicking up his heels and playing, and Bishop offered to trade horses with her.

Baxter smiled politely, and said, "Why, yes, that would be lovely."

Her smile grew even wider when Take Command promptly bucked Bishop off. As nice as his gentlemanly gesture was, she suggested that he might have done well to let her ride it out.

"She was always the most impressive rider in the field, period."

—Tom Bishop

"That horse just loved to buck," Bishop said. "But she rode him fine. She didn't care. She'd boot him on, and away she went."

The incident sums up Baxter: a Southern lady with impeccable manners, a wicked sense of humor and a remarkably adept seat on a horse.

Many stories told about Baxter begin with the caveat "This is so Ellie Wood." She was a fearless rider in the hunting field who reveled in an eye-tearing gallop over a towering fence on a fast Thoroughbred and a well-bred lady with cutting insight delivered gracefully. She was also a polished rider in the show ring and grew up in a time when ladies wore bowlers and derbies in the show ring and gloves and hats to social affairs.

She jokes that George Morris is too young to have influenced her riding.

Baxter, who was born and bred in Charlottesville, Va., celebrated her 90th birthday this fall but still rides to hounds devotedly. While some physical limitations have slowed her down, she hasn't lost a bit of the bold verve and style that made her a star decades ago.

"She was always the most impressive rider in the

Ellie Wood Baxter has continued to hunt into her eighth decade and is a legend in the Farmington Hunt Club lore.



(Catherine Summers Photo)



(Thomas Neil Darling Photo)

Ellie Wood Baxter (left) learned all about riding and horses from her mother, Big Ellie Wood Keith.

field, period," said Bishop, ex-MFH and whipper-in of Farmington. "To see her sit on a horse, she's just part of the animal. She is such a beautiful rider. She rides her horses the same way in the field and the show ring: bold and forward."

Just Kicking On

Baxter—who is known always as "Ellie Wood," never just "Ellie"—has hunted with Farmington since the club's inception in 1929 and is a familiar face capping at many of the other East Coast hunts. She's been known to lead the field, and she liked to gallop right behind the Master.

"I liked being field master because you didn't have to worry about anybody running into you. I whipped-in one year, long ago, but I never enjoyed whipping. It's too anti-social. And I'm not an antisocial person! It never was my cup of tea," she said.

Pat Butterfield, jt.-MFH of Farmington, has known Baxter since the '60s and remembers a day 10 years ago when the two of them capped at Green Spring Valley

(Md.). "Ellie Wood, being Ellie Wood, was hunting right behind the master, Sheila Jackson Brown, and I hunted right behind Ellie Wood.

"We came into this field, and the hounds were running, and we were galloping along. All of a sudden, I noticed that Sheila was jumping over this enormous four-board fence. And it was an aisle-way, so it was an in-and-out of these huge four-board fences. Right behind Sheila was Ellie Wood. She was probably almost 80 years old at this point. Sure enough, she just galloped right on and cleared it."

Baxter also recalls that day. "I was on Free Booter, and I said, 'Booter, pay attention!' But we had a lovely fence. You don't see that kind of fence too often around here, and it makes you sit up and take notice!" she said.

"She's pretty fearless, period," said Butterfield. "If she'd had an opportunity to drive sportscar races, she probably would have done that. There was never any fear, and she has a tremendous rapport with a horse. She's amazing—even today, her form on the horse is pretty remarkable."



Above: Ellie Wood Baxter was in high demand as a show rider on horses like Mrs. Page Jennings' Icecapade at the 1946 Keswick Horse Show (Va.). *Below:* Ellie Wood Baxter, here showing Baby Seal in 1938, is known for her bold, forward style both in the show ring and the hunt field.



Baxter hunted full tilt in first field even after 2004, when she had both hips replaced. However, cataract surgery in both eyes a few years later put her into the hill-topper or second field. "My real problem isn't my ability to ride, it's the fact that I don't feel like I see well enough to read the land as well as I did," Baxter said.

"I've always liked to gallop, and I've always loved jumping fences cross-country. When you're galloping on a horse, you have to read the undulation of the land. The horse knows, but I don't know," she added. "That makes me feel a little bit dissatisfied. I would still love to be up there galloping, but I'm trying to be sensible."

And while Baxter's heart lies with an intrepid Thoroughbred, she's recently resigned herself to a reliable warmblood, Zoe. But Baxter wouldn't abide a boring horse. "Zoe has a mind of her own. I still have to use a little discipline when she says she doesn't want to go somewhere, and I say, 'Yes you do,' " said Baxter said.

Baxter has also seen development take a toll on the Charlottesville area. "We don't have the open land that we used to have. And a lot of it, where there is open land, there isn't any jumping. That makes me sound like I like to jump!" Baxter said with a wink and chuckle. In fact, Baxter never met a big fence she didn't like.

"She doesn't like small fences. She says they're the sort of thing that horses trip over," Bishop said.

The Days Of A Bold Show Hunter

Baxter rode show hunters the same way she rode in the hunting field. "She really enjoyed the show ring—she jumped the fences at a good rate, not like they do today. She definitely galloped on," Butterfield said.

When she was 5, Baxter showed at Keswick (Va.) and won. Before the age of 10, she was a familiar sight at Virginia shows with her wonderful paint pony Colonel Harbison. By the time she won the ASPCA Maclay Finals in 1936, she was a show-ring veteran.

Baxter, like many lady riders in the '40s and '50s, was in much demand to ride the top horses of the day in the classes in which the professional trainers couldn't—the amateur, Corinthian and ladies classes. She rode the likes of Cold Climate, Spanish Mint, Spring Hope, Substitution and Prompt Payment for owners like Shawnee Farm, Mrs. Liz Whitney, Mrs. Deane Rucker and John and Betty Maloney.

From the late '30s to the late '60s, Baxter was one of the top hunter riders of the day, though she wasn't considered a professional. She spent the summer on the East Coast show circuit and the fall and winter not only hunting, but also teaching physical education—basketball, field hockey and tennis—at St. Anne's School in Charlottesville.

In those days, many show hunters spent the off season in the hunting field, and Baxter recalls that Betty Maloney's Substitution showed with her at the National

One of Ellie Wood's first show ring stars was her pony Colonel Harbison, which she showed in open jumper classes.



By the age of 8, Ellie Wood Keith Baxter was making news, appearing in *The Morning Herald*, a Newport News, Va., newspaper, in 1929.



Ellie Wood Baxter rode Free Booter in the hunt teams class at the 1997 Washington International Horse Show (D.C.).

Horse Show in Madison Square Garden, then shipped home and went hunting with Maloney the next day.

In 2000, Baxter was inducted into the National Show Hunter Hall of Fame, and in 2003 she was awarded the U.S. Equestrian Federation's Pegasus Medal of Honor, which recognizes individuals who have exhibited outstanding service to horses and sport.

While she transitioned from showing to mostly hunting in the '70s, Baxter still makes an appearance each year at one of her favorite venues: the Upperville Horse Show (Va.). She's a regular winner of the Piedmont Invitational class, although this year, her horse behaved badly and kept her from another blue ribbon.

"I was winning at New York and all over. There wasn't any reason to be looking for a husband!"

—Ellie Wood Baxter

"I had planned on this one being my last year, but I may have to come back next year and redeem myself," she said. "Also, this year, I was going to show in my shadbelly. I figured I'd try something different. I've ridden in my bowler derby and hunt coat, so I thought, 'Well, I'll go out this year with my shadbelly on.'"

"But I think the Lord must have known what was going on, because I forgot my top hat," she continued. "I'd brought the other coat, so I showed in that, but now I have to wait until next year to come out in the shadbelly and win again."

A Childhood Of Ponies And Friends

Baxter grew up on her family's Keithwood, a small farm located inside the Charlottesville town limits on 250 West and now lost to development. Baxter's mother, Big Ellie Wood, delighted in having a yard and barn overflowing with children, ponies and other inhabitants of a menagerie.

Neighborhood children and University of Virginia students flocked to Keithwood to ride and play, gallivanting bareback on their ponies. Baxter remembers riding her pony to the UVA football field to meet up with her friends and take in a game, her pony tied and patiently waiting until she was ready to ride home.

Big Ellie Wood introduced legions of children to the hunting field and show ring, and Baxter took to it like a duck to water, immersing herself in both worlds. Baxter's father was one of the original whippers-in of Farmington, and hunting was as much a family affair as showing.

Throughout the '40s and '50s, Baxter lived a whirlwind life of showing and hunting. In a departure from convention of the day, she waited until she was 38 to get married. "I was having a good time horse showing. I was



(Al Cook Photo)

pretty successful. I was winning at New York and all over. There wasn't any reason to be looking for a husband!" Baxter said. "Until my father said that finally I found somebody I liked better than myself!"

In 1959, Baxter married Charles "Wing" Baxter, an investment banker who split his time between his farm, The Barracks, in Charlottesville, and New York City.

"Wing had a box at the National in New York," Baxter recalled. "We were always looking around for places to sit. Wing always had a nine-person box and never more than six people in it. So he told me to come up and sit in the box. So, I sat there and he said, 'Why don't you join us, we're going to a club?' Here I am, this little country girl."

"I said, 'What about your date?' He said, 'She won't mind.' Well, I imagine she did mind. But we went off to this club, which was a glamorous place. I went out a couple of nights with him to these fancy nightclubs, and when he came back to Charlottesville for Christmas time, he invited me to go to the Van Clief party with him. That was it."

There's Only One

Baxter's only child, her son Charlie, was born in November 1960, and throughout the '60s, the family divided their time between New York and The Barracks, with Baxter showing and hunting whenever she could.

"I did a lot of showing after that. I rode in New York until 1970. I would push Charlie Baxter around the shows in the stroller," she said.

In 1972, Baxter's husband, Wing, retired, and they sold The Barracks but moved into a cottage on the property. Baxter still lives there, in a small, neat house, the walls lined with mementos of her life. In 1976, Wing passed away.

Baxter didn't slow down—she kept horses in the barn behind the house and hunted up and down the East Coast. She'd load up her horse and head off to hunt in Pennsylvania, Maryland or Northern Virginia. "She had this huge old Imperatore six-horse van; I used to think of it as the Queen Mary," Butterfield said.

"There's only one Ellie Wood."

—Pat Butterfield

"She's great to travel with and loads of fun," said Bishop. "She has friends everywhere. She vanishes every now and then; she travels around to visit people."

Baxter still drives, though only in the day, and she remains a vital part of the Farmington community. She joins hunt members for girls' night out and keeps busy with social engagements.

A portrait of Baxter on a childhood pony overlooks her desk, where she keeps up with friends via email. She even has a Facebook page. She's seen many changes in the world and kept up with them all.

Baxter's memory of each horse is even more clear than the images that decorate her house. And she hasn't lost any of the forthright honesty that's been her trademark.

"She usually has an opinion, and she doesn't hold back," Bishop said. "She'll tell you what she thinks, whether your hair's too long or you're not riding a horse just right. She's never mean, just direct. She'll say, 'What did you do that for?' and it'll be half-joking."

"There's only one Ellie Wood," said Butterfield. "She is definitely not conventional at all. She's conventional in her ways, but not in the way she's lived her life. She is a lady, through and through, but I think she's always had a lot of fun." 🐾

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