

History of Mountain District Horse & Pony Club (Mrs P Towzer 1974)

Mountain District Horse & Pony Club formed in 1944 was the first Pony Club to be formed in Victoria, but its inspiration came from a Pony Club at Ingleburn in NSW which had already established itself.

This is how it all began:

One day in about June 1944 Miss Margaret Douglas was out driving in a Horse & Jinker from Croydon to Ferntree Gully, accompanying Miss Elsa Grice who had employed her as a land army girl on her farming property during the war years. They had picked up the latest issue of the English magazine "Riding" and while looking through it saw a letter from Mrs Edward Hirst of The Ingleburn Pony Club in NSW. Miss Douglas thought what a wonderful idea it would be to try and establish a similar Pony Club in Victoria to try and give some helpful tuition and organised activity to all the riders who had a sprung up during the Petrol rationed/War years, and so she wrote to Mrs Hirst asking for more details on running a club.

Mrs Hirst's letter dated 1.8.1944 told how the club was based on the English Pony Clubs, but how in Australia as many adults as children were interested and so they used "Horse & Pony Club" in the title. Their aim was "Education & Entertainment with Horsemastership as important as Horsemanship" and that no matter how broken down the horse – how bad the saddlery or rider, we welcome them all. It was upon this 6 page letter, which Miss Douglas still has in her possession, that Mountain District Horse & Pony Club was formed, and the same structure, aims and ideals were adopted.

A preliminary took place on August 12th 1944 at Miss Grice's home "Wyeera", Hull Road, Croydon at which the decision to form a Pony Club was made. Present were Miss Grice, elected President, Miss Douglas, Secretary, Miss Good Treasurer, Miss Atkins, Miss Margery Drury, Mrs Adams, Miss Stretton, Mrs Peters, Miss Cotton, Miss Griffiths, & Mr Roy Hawking.

Mr Hawking with the help of Mr Maddern, Mr Rowlea, Mr Sutton, & Mr Dinsdale had been running Gymkhanas at Boronia & Ferntree Gully during the war years to raise money for the Red Cross, shortly afterwards these men came on to the committee of the Mountain District Horse & Pony Club.

In the first year Mr Murray Jones came onto the committee, and has taken an active part in the club since its inception, and still helps with the instruction at rallies whenever he is able.

To publicise the first rally a notice was put in the local paper "The Mail" 24/08/1944. Mrs Adams rode around the district nailing pamphlets onto fence and lamp posts, which read as follows- Horse lovers please note – A Horse & Pony Club has been formed in this district & the first rally will be held at the Boronia Sports Ground on September 2nd at 11am. Riders and others interested are invited to attend and bring their own picnic lunch. The aims of the club are Entertainment and the encouragement of better horsemanship. Annual subscription 5/- further enquiries from Miss M Douglas, Hon Secretary, Hull Road, Croydon, Phone 54.

Mrs Peters has presented her original notice framed to be hung in the Club House with the remark on it "Large Oaks from little Acorns grow".

At the initial rally there were about 30 riders present and a number of interested spectators, and over 40 members were enrolled. Mr L Monod, and Councillor Lyall representing the Royal Agricultural Society were present and addressed the meeting, Mr & Mrs Coffey kindly volunteered

to instruct the young people and gave them some drilling exercises & some small competitions. So as to give wider coverage, and so that no one would have to ride long distances all the time to attend rallies, they were held each month at all different districts. In such places as "Devon Park" Ferntree Gully (by courtesy Mr Hamilton), Kilsyth (by courtesy Mr & Mrs Grieve), "Sylvan Dell" Bayswater (by courtesy Mr Connelly), "Pytchley Hill" Heathmont (by courtesy Mr & Mrs Hume) and at Boronia, Montrose & Mitcham during the winter months. The activities were hunting rides with the club grouped into Hares & Hounds also Paper Chasing. It makes interesting reading in the records of riding over hill and dale through glorious bushland & open paddocks in such areas as Mitcham, Ringwood, Heathmont, Vermont and Croydon.

A newspaper cutting of 1947 tells of 40 club riders taking part in a Hunting Ride starting from Heatherdale Road railway gates, the field jumped through Madden's & Jones where some particularly stiff fences were met. Crossing into the estate the trail swung south past Jacobson's. Near Vermont, a creek proved too deep for all, but a dozen of the Horses, so the field turned west and jumped through timbered country in the direction of Mitcham, entering the estate again the trail back across Jones's & Madden's.

At the end of the first year's activities there were over 160 members and numbers were steadily increasing, members coming from far and wide to join the Mountain District Club. This probably accounts for the fact that when looking through the records it is noticed that practically every well known name in the Equestrian world has at some time been associated with the club, top show jumping riders, Garryowen winners, Champion Gentlemen riders, Lady riders, Good hands winners, Boy & Girl riders, Mooney Valley Steeplechase Riders, all came from the club.

At the commencement of Mountain District Miss Douglas had asked Mrs Bruce, wife of Major Bruce, or better known as Mary Grant Bruce, to become the Patroness which she gladly consented to do, she took a great interest in the young riders, she was well known for her writing of the Billabong Books and others, which all children interested in riding used to delight in reading. At one time Sir George Knox was Patron, later Miss Jeanette Brooks daughter of the Governor Sir Dallas & Lady Brooks was patroness for some years, and used to attend rallies accompanied by her companion Miss Patricia Edge.

Helpful advice was given by Judge Streeton father of one of the members in drawing up the constitution of the club which was registered as a Company with a limited liability of 5/- per member, Permission being obtained from the Attorney General's department to delete the word "Limited" from its name. Since then many other Pony Clubs as they were formed applied to Mountain District for assistance in drawing up their constitution and information on conducting rallies, and many a "first rally" was attended by someone from the Club to give them advice. The club became a registered Member of the Light Horse Association of Australia, and later of the Polocrosse Association and in February 1947, became affiliated with the Institute of The Horse and Pony Club Association of London which later became affiliated with the British Horse Society. In 1950 the committee sponsored the formation of the Australian Horse Society which was bound by the constitution of the British Horse Society.

It is interesting to note that when the preliminary discussions were taking place regarding the 1956 Olympic Games to be held in Melbourne, Mountain District was the only Club registered here with the International Equestrian Association, and for some time it seemed possible that the Club would be invited to conduct the Equestrian events at the games. Eventually the horse events were transferred to Helsinki due to quarantine regulations. Mr Murray Jones a President of the Club, had some interesting discussions in England with members of the British Horse Society on this subject.

As stated earlier, rallies were held in various districts, but the Club had its head quarters at the Douglas property, Mountain Highway, Bayswater, also the use of land on lease next door belonging to Mr Karl Schmolling, one of the earliest settlers in the district. In early 1952 a lease was granted from the Croydon Council for the use of 14 acres at Cheong Park, Bayswater Road, Croydon, and a Club House was allowed to be erected. Unfortunately we now only have about 4 acres for our exclusive use, due to other sporting bodies requiring use of the park for their activities. Rallies are held regularly on the first Sunday of each month and there are plenty of other organised days, such as Gymkhanas, Trail rides, Combined training days, & One Day Events.

Late in 1949 the Boot & Saddle Shop of the Myer Emporium donated a beautiful hand carved Shield to be competed for Annually for General Horsemanship. Later on another Shield was donated by Mr Page, one of the committee members and named "The Wheatland Shield" in honour of the then President, this is competed for by Junior Members of the Club, both these competitions now take the form of One Day Events. Right from the beginning the Club has conducted many Gymkhanas, one of its main objects in the early days was to raise money for various charities such as the Baby Health Centres, Kindergartens, St Johns Ambulance, the local Hospital and also the Olympic fund.

Many camps have been among the Clubs activities, both for instruction and Entertainment, the first being in 1947 at the late Mr Pope's property at Yarra Glen for 6 days, to which most of the Members rode, also at Mr Syd Chapple's property "Lockswood" at Rye, at Arkoona Park Berwick, and for the last couple of years at Dromana as the guest of Mr Tobias at "Ups and Downs".

The Mountain District Club is rather unique in that it has never employed paid Instructors, yet through the years it has had the services of many great Horsemen and Horsewomen, who have given their time to help young Equestrians without receiving any payment. First of these was Mrs Coffey who helped with instruction, Judging and Training of young Members within the club to become Instructors of the future. She became well known for her "Bag of Bones" being a horse skeleton which she used to show how Splints, Curbs, etc had formed on a Horses bone. Then followed Colonel Patterson, Colonel Pope, (who I think was later on the first President of the P.C.A.V) also Mr Feuchtenleben, to mention a few. Then the records mention so many well known names in the local horse world, all of them members of the club at some time, and the club is indeed grateful to all of them. I hesitate to mention any of them for fear of leaving any out. However, there has never been anybody to compare with our present Honorary Chief Instructor, Olympic Horseman Mr Ern Barker, who came to the Club in 1958. He has given of his services in an Honorary capacity over all these years, his great knowledge of Horses and his enthusiasm has inspired many young riders to go further ahead. However, he has always kept in mind the original object of the club when formed "Primarily to instruct and help riders, especially the children without anyone to help them" the child on the shaggy Shetland receives as much attention if not more, guidance than the Member on the better mount who is able to afford outside tuition. Though the emphasis in the Club is not on competition it was due to Mr Barker's outstanding instruction that Mountain District were successful in the Inter Branch (now called the Pony Club Championships) in the years 1955 – 1958 – 1959 – 1960 – 1961 and equal first in 1962.

The Club Membership fee is one of the lowest, starting at 5/- in 1944 and was still only \$5.50 in 1974 for the first member of a family reducing for other members of the same family.

So after 30 years the Mountain District Horse and Pony Club still holds to its original motto of "Education and Entertainment" no matter whether the riders are absolute beginners or advanced

Equestrians they will find that while they are enjoying themselves at a club rally there is always something new to learn about themselves.

People who have helped the club in the past and have been rewarded for their services with life memberships, are Miss Elsa Grice, the original President, Miss Drury who very early in the piece was Secretary for 9 years, the first Patroness Miss Mary Grant Bruce, Miss Margaret Douglas, to whom honour must go for the formation of the Club and who still attends rallies when able, Mrs Hume, Mrs Adams, Miss Good, and the late Mr Cliff Giles, there is a Memorial Fountain outside the Club House, Mr Malcolm Harvie, well known for his excellent work as a Commentator of Show jumping and eventing, Mrs Harvie, and Mr Murray Jones, one of the very early committee members, and who for 30 years has helped in every possible way, also the late Mr Bill Robinson. These are all very early members of the Club.

Other Life members, Miss Joyce Hussey (now Mrs Marshall), Mr & Mrs Donald Tozer, Mr Ronald Sullivan who was Treasurer from 1955 till recent ill health forced him to resign, Mr Brian Bebbington, and of course Mr Ern Barker.

Presidents of the Club have been Miss Grice, Miss Drury, Mrs Peters, Mr Murray Jones, on two occasions, Mr Roy Hawking, Mr MG Jefferson, Mr Wheatland, Mr LSK Cunningham, Mr Syd Chapple, the late Mr Hugh Wood, Mr Donald Tozer, Mr Brian Bebbington, Mr Mick Dexter, Mr Norman Leggat, and our present President Mr Ken Seymour.

There were also many other people prominent in both the business and Equestrian world who have given of their administrative knowledge and financial assistance to the Club.