



By Betty Weibel

Whether you are a resident, or visitor to the Chagrin Valley, you will notice the equestrian influence across the landscape. Miles of fencing and beautiful barns dot the countryside. The sight of horses grazing in fields adds to the charm of the area and appreciation for land conservancy is not reserved for equestrians. Horses have defined the Valley for decades. In some areas, horse farms are situated near houses and highways, growing through new construction or adaption of existing facilities. Streets and developments pay tribute to the Valley's equestrian heritage with names like: Hackney Lane, Carriage Hill and Derbyshire.

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A heritage of horses

Rooted in history

In the early 1900s Northeast Ohio had a well-deserved reputation in the horse world. Cleveland prospered and was home to successful inventors, business leaders and titans of industries that included oil, lake shipping, steelmaking and other manufacturing. Many residents focused their leisure interests on horses, having cultivated a passion from European traditions and visits to Maryland and Virginia, where they enjoyed horse sports like fox hunting.

As Cleveland's population expanded, the outlying suburbs grew slowly because transportation was limited. The Chagrin Falls and Cleveland Stage & Express was the regularly scheduled horse-drawn mode of transportation, leaving Chagrin Falls in the early morning and returning from Cleveland in the evening.

Later when the Interurban Railroad replaced the stagecoach, travel time between Cleveland and the Valley was reduced to an hour. Property in eastern Cuyahoga County began selling to city residents and wealthy Clevelanders who wanted second homes with land for their horses and open fields for riding, as well as open roads for carriage rides.

Before the housing boom, the open Chagrin Valley landscape attracted early morning horseback riders and hounds, as the Chagrin Valley Hunt trotted down dirt roads and open fields, sometimes in pursuit of a fox, more often communing with nature and enjoying the sunrise.

At one time the Chagrin Valley was a destination for competitive horse sport and hosted international horse racing and polo matches that attracted entourages of owners, riders, staff and fans. Thousands of horse show enthusiasts added the Chagrin



Photo courtesy of Gates Mills Historical Society

A rider competes in an early Hunt Club horse show.

Valley to their annual horse show calendars, and after the introduction of the first show jumping grand prix at the Cleveland Metroparks Polo Field in 1965, U.S. and Canadian Olympic teams were scouted and decided here.

The focus on horses in the Valley is not reserved for the wealthy. With an abundance of equine exposure, the interest in riding spread across the area, and residents and their children took advantage of the opportunity to learn and ride. Riding establishments like the Cleveland Cavalry's Troop A shared its instructors and horses with the general public to provide lessons and horse shows at its Armory. Numerous stables followed suit over the years, offering lessons, riding camps and horse shows for those with or without their own horse.

In the Valley today

Although international horse sport competition has shifted away from the Chagrin Valley, access to equestrian activity continues to be abundant throughout the area today. Riders enjoy numerous bridle trails throughout the rich green space and parks and numerous boarding stables offer riding lessons and camp experiences, as well as a place to keep horses if you don't own a farm. Fieldstone Farm Therapeutic Riding Center in Bainbridge also has an impressive facility that has grown and added services providing equine-assisted therapy to children and adults.

Although the cost of owning and maintaining horses has skyrocketed and impacted horse owners, the equestrian industry is solid in Northeast Ohio. The industry includes tack shops, feed stores, equine specialty hospitals and veterinarians who travel to their clients, as do blacksmiths. New businesses and services support the changing industry including manure removal; equine massage and dentistry providers; and hay, bedding and fencing suppliers. The American Horse Council estimates that Ohio's horse industry overall generates \$2.2 billion in economic impact.

The relationship with horses is extremely beneficial to equestrians. The Chagrin Valley's open land boosts real estate values and the physical activity benefits the health of those directly involved.

The intangible benefits of a relationship with horses may be best summed up in a quote from Winston Churchill: "There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man."



Did You Know?

Novelty was the site of encampments for Troop A of the First Cleveland Cavalry, an independent military company initially formed in 1877 to preserve law and order. The Troop, based at the Armory in Shaker Heights, held military practice sessions incorporating exercises from horse sports — jumping hurdles, playing polo, steeplechase racing and precision riding of dressage — to improve members' riding skills.

■ Gates Mills was an early stagecoach stop on the way to Cleveland and a popular destination for horseback riders and foxhunting enthusiasts. In 1909, a group of dedicated riders purchased the Maple Leaf Inn, which became the home base for the Chagrin Valley Hunt Club which continues today.

■ Hunting Valley had more than one polo field after the sport of polo was introduced to the area in 1911. Windsor White's Halfred Farms (which operates as White North Farm today) hosted U.S. Polo League matches and national championships. Crowds of 8,000 spectators turned out to cheer the local favorites.

■ Chagrin Falls once had a Jockey Club that hosted world class Thoroughbred horse racing at the site where Chagrin Falls High School is located today. The land was leased to the Cuyahoga County Fair before it moved to Berea



Photo courtesy of the Chagrin Falls Historical Society

Spectators glimpse horse racing in Chagrin Falls during the 1920s.

in 1925 and the facility included a race track, grandstand and stabling. Horses from Cuba, Mexico and the United States ran here until racing was halted by a "no betting" judicial order because gambling was illegal in Ohio.

■ The Cleveland Metroparks took over the Hunting Valley Polo Field in the 1940s to expand its Emerald Necklace — a network of preserved park land that encircles the Greater Cleveland area. In 1949 the Chagrin Valley Trails and Riding Club launched an annual two-day all-breed English and Western horse

show as their fundraiser. Over the years that show evolved and the Cleveland Metroparks Polo Field earned a name as the site of world class hunter and jumper competitions run by the Chagrin Valley PHA Horse Show, which hosted North America's first show jumping grand prix in 1965.

Chagrin Falls resident and equestrian Betty Weibel is the author of "The Cleveland Grand Prix: An American Show Jumping First" published earlier this year by The History Press.