

# Virginia's 'Hunt Country' elite: oligarchs who ruined the economy

by L. Wolfe

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According to a recent wire service report, the famous British character actor Robert Morley, who died a few weeks ago, requested that he be buried with his credit cards. "Never know when I might need something," he is said to have quipped.

The remarks prompted a flurry of letters in the *London Times* from people indicating what things they might need to bring along in the afterlife. One of the most original came from a lady who requested a "fire extinguisher"; she reasoned that it might come in handy, since it might take a while for her to get a reprieve from *that* place. Another said that he wanted to bring along a set of ear plugs, just in case the heavenly choirs sang out of tune.

All of this came to mind when I heard the latest complaints from those wealthy folk on their big estates in western Loudoun. It seems that they are quite upset about the problems of being a wealthy landowner. They are especially concerned about their ability to maintain these large estates in the family into the next generation and beyond.

One of these pious souls was featured on a recent local television news feature show telling us all how important it was to maintain the "tradition of the Hunt Country" and the "beauty of the open spaces" in western Loudoun. Then came the pitch: We, the wealthy Loudoun elite, will keep our large estates intact and out of development if you, the citizens of the county—nay, the country—grant us a break on inheritance taxes. That way, we will promise to pass on our wealth to our posterity and they will pass it on to theirs, and so forth and so on.

When I first heard this, I thought to myself, even the people in these parts, who tend to kiss the feet of those landed oligarchs of the west, would see through this transparent sham. But I have since found out that there are many, including some people on the county staff, who think that this new inheritance tax break for "open space" is a fine idea.

And in this political year, with the 10th Congressional District gerrymandered to have a larger part of those western

lands, the Hunt Country landowners might find a sympathetic political ear or two whose hearing could be further improved by political contributions.

Whether such nonsense would actually go anywhere legislatively in Congress is not really the point; Loudouners, or at least some of them, apparently still believe that they owe something to their wealthy Hunt Country neighbors for preserving our "way of life."

## Preserving 'our way of life'?

The reality is that the existence of the large estates has actually contributed to a crumbling of "our way of life." Historically, a good part of Loudoun was once productive, small- and medium-sized family farms. That is the way it should be, since the land, especially west of Leesburg, is extremely fertile land and very suitable for agriculture.

There were some large estates in the county, going back to before the Civil War, with Oatlands perhaps being the most notable, along with Oak Hill and Rokeby. But the story that the so-called Hunt Country centered around the Middleburg area is somehow part of Loudoun's old heritage is pure myth.

The Hunt Country was something artificially created toward the end of the last century by the wealthy, mostly *Northern* oligarchy—the Harrimans, Mellons, Belmonts, and du Ponts being among the notable creators of this life-style. It is further a *pseudo-American* phenomenon, replicating the semi-feudal lifestyle of the British oligarchy, including the importation of barbaric fox hunting and a variant of the similarly British *oligarchical* horse racing, steeplechase tradition as practiced by these same American oligarchs in the Saratoga, New York area and similar environs.

The correlative point is that the creation of this Hunt Country has nothing to do with productive use of land for agriculture. Its imposition on an area with a productive agricultural economy has steadily led to the destruction of that productive economy, and its replacement with parasitic land use, typified by the large estates. For the most part, the large estates take land out of useful production of crops, dairy, sheep and beef production, and into use primarily oriented to serving the Hunt Country, such as horse breeding, or out of production altogether, and into "open space."

The more land taken out of production, the more the



*The Hunt Country set gathers at the Oatlands estate in Virginia's Loudoun County for point-to-point races. Do they really deserve a break on their inheritance taxes?*

infrastructure required to support agriculture collapsed and deteriorated. This, in turn, added prohibitive costs to the operations of the remaining productive farms. Ultimately, those productive farms became no longer profitable, causing the farmers to either borrow heavily to stay in business, or to attempt to sell their land.

### **Land value**

As things now stand, the current relationship between the small- and medium-sized productive farmer and the Hunt Country estate owners effectively resembles the way an English manor dominates the surrounding countryside and local economy; English agriculture in these areas has been notoriously unproductive, despite the best efforts of the farmers.

The creation of the Hunt Country has over a period of years lowered the *real* value of land in this area. Land, in and of itself, has no assignable intrinsic value. Its value is determined by its productive use, in this case with agriculture. That value can be approximated by examining the market basket of production of all goods, including agricultural goods, and assigning a value to land determined by what is required to keep it in productive use.

It is absolutely the case that land used for small and medium-sized family farms for productive agriculture has more *real* value than land associated with the Hunt Country and its estates. Thus, the more land deployed for Hunt Country purposes, rather than for productive agricultural purposes or held in reserve for those productive purposes, the lower the *real* value of that land.

The land value we are talking about may or may not correlate to the price of the land; in general, because of speculation, the market value assigned to land is way above this *real* value, as determined by market basket approximation. To the extent that family farmers have been forced to pay taxes and carry land at these higher than *real* values, this has further diminished their productivity.

Some farmers, under pressure to make ends meet, fell into a cycle of borrowing against the inflated speculative value of their land. Their declining productivity, caused by national agricultural policies that have denied parity pricing, as well as by the factors we have described, cannot support this borrowing, especially at higher than acceptable interest rates. As these loans come due, the family farmers are unable to pay them, forcing more of them off the land.

As this land goes out of agricultural production, it is redeployed for Hunt Country related uses or for speculative development.

While our officials moan about how we have to protect Loudoun's lifestyle by protecting the interests of the wealthy Hunt Country estate owners, we have destroyed Loudoun's productive agricultural tradition.

### **Put things right**

It's time that we put things in reverse and thereby act according to our proper interest. Rather than see all agricultural uses as equal, we must distinguish between productive and counterproductive uses; we must grant tax breaks to land used by our family farmers and raise taxes on land used for Hunt Country related purposes. And we must abandon all tax breaks for so-called "open space," in absence of productive agricultural use.

Our Hunt Country estate owners and their fellow travelers will no doubt scream loudly. But they can afford the tax on their parasitic lifestyle; and their moans to the contrary, they are not about to sell their estates or break them up: in the current real estate collapse there are no buyers for such properties. (Just ask Sen. John Warner.) Their threats are idle ones.

But if they did break up the estates, it would probably be for the better, anyway. We could provide tax breaks to put the land back into useful agricultural production. So let these poor rich souls scream. There are always ear plugs.