

Greenwich Riding and Trails Association Honors Adalbert von Gontard, Jr.

By Peter Herman

Adalbert von Gontard Jr. has the distinction of being the first ever honoree of the Greenwich Riding and Trails Association. The historic moment occurred at the GRTA's bi-annual Hunt Ball, October 18 at the home of Thomas Peterffy at Conyers Farm in the back country of Greenwich, CT.

The 94 year-old non-profit organization seeks "To foster an interest in horseback riding, and to preserve, protect and maintain the riding trails in Greenwich." It further seeks "to instill in riders, landowners, and the community respect for our natural heritage of horses, trails, and riding in the town."

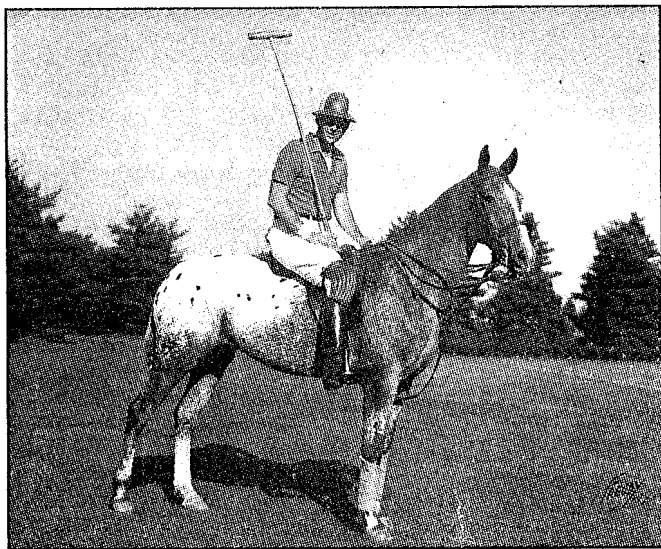
Von Gontard and his wife Mamie epitomize this statement. Hunt Ball Chairman Teresa Hackett, who is also their neighbor, said, "Their commitment to conservation and preservation of 56 years with the GRTA has been a great inspiration to all of us."

"Adie" von Gontard said, "I grew up on a farm. Horses have always been a part of my life." He added, "I got to see nature at its work. I enjoy the outdoor life, the geese, the turkeys, the ducks, the foxes, the gift of God that he has created."

"Naturally when I came to Greenwich in 1951 with Mamie, I sought the rural life and found the GRTA." He was to serve as its president and today von Gontard is a Chairman Emeritus.

He grew up in St. Louis, MO, and still recalls his first mounted experience. "My father put my bother and me on two donkeys." Mounted they were, riding they were not. "We were on a couple of jackasses that were tied to an apple tree. They were our nurse's aide. It's how we spent our time." His first actual riding experience was aboard a Shetland pony.

In St. Louis he was part of a family tradition playing polo at the St. Louis Country Club, the oldest active polo club in America. His polo playing has since ranged the globe: Africa, Argentina, Canada, India, Jamaica, Mexico, and coast to coast across the United States. In the late 1940's he was captain of his team while attending Georgetown University.



Adalbert von Gontard, Jr. aboard Reno, the only Appaloosa he ever owned. Photo was taken at the Blind Brook Polo Club.

(Freudy Photos)

When he arrived in Greenwich he joined the Blind Brook Polo Club in Purchase, NY. "I have great memories of playing there and of the adjacent hunt meets, point-to-points, and steeple chasing at Whitelaw Reid's stables that is now Manhattanville College."

After Blind Brook closed he played at the Fairfield County Hunt Club in Westport, CT. There he became a part of local history. "I was on Peter Brant's first polo team." Brant is the founder of the White Birch team, which has become a dynasty. He also founded the Greenwich Polo Club, of which the von Gontards are members.

Of course a polo player needs his ponies and von Gontard has a ready supply. "We have a ranch in west Texas, the Pitchfork Land and Cattle Company. Most of the polo ponies come from the ranch. We have cow ponies." According to the Pitchfork website they are a gray horse with a black mane and tail, and are very versatile. He related that the remuda has about 200 horses.

During his playing days at Blind Brook, "Mamie would ride the horses to the games down the trails astride one, leading two, and a child on each of the three horses. I would sometimes ride them home if I wasn't replaying the game at the bar."

His other equestrian activities included horse shows, gymkhanas, and hunter paces.

Animals abound at their home, Field View Farm. There is a miniature Dexter Black Angus calf, chickens, doves, dogs, peacocks, as well as riding horses, a donkey and a burro. "I still train horses for riding and driving. I have wagons on the place and I train the donkeys and burros to pull the carts."

Throughout his life Adalbert von Gontard Jr. has held many titles and earned many distinctions. These include:

- United States Polo Association Governor
- Chairman of the USPA's Northeast circuit
- President of the St. Louis National Horse Show
- Served with his cousin, Sally Wheeler, as Chairman of the Hunt Committee of the National Horse Show at Madison Square Garden
- Huntsman for the Bridlespur Hunt Club in St. Louis
- Started *Feed Bag* - feeding local stables
- Was the first purveyor of Eukabena and lams in Greenwich



At an Awards Ceremony at the Blind Brook Polo Club somewhere between 1961-1968, Adalbert von Gontard, Jr. (left) with Richard Nixon and Mrs. Pat Nixon.

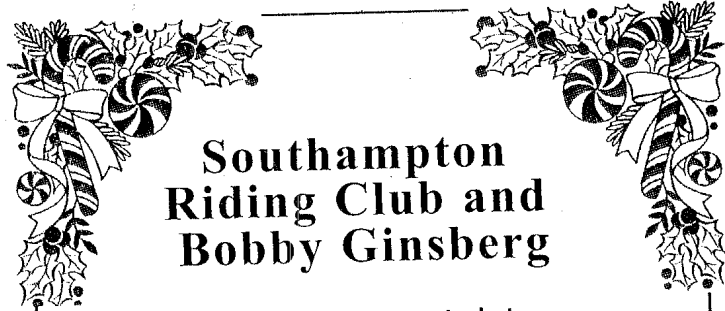
"I want other people to enjoy nature, too. Twice a year I open the place to the Boys and Girls Club of Greenwich to ride and enjoy the animals." Their appreciation is seen in the cards they have received over the years.

One of his daughters, Vicky Skouras, continues the family's dedication to nature. She is in her fourth year as Chairman of the Board of the GRTA. "More and more kids want to ride," she said, with enthusiasm obvious in her voice. Skouras firmly believes that riding offers a number of positive aspects to young people. "It's what the sport demands of an individual; it's a 365 day a year commitment. It's the dedication. It teaches humility, respect, kindness. Youth needs to have this experience."

Skouras noted that the GRTA maintains some 150 miles of trails. We're the ones clearing our land of fallen trees." She noted that staffwise the GRTA has one full time and one part time worker, and a secretary. She went on to say, "We appreciate our neighbors and major landowners like The Land Trust and the Audubon," for allowing riding on their property.

She spoke about the Hunt Ball. "I loved the record attendance. We had close to 400 people in attendance (a record)." She also praised Hunt Ball Chairman Teresa Hackett on a superlative performance. Attendees were greeted by two people on horseback in hunt suits. The theme of the ball was "Camelot," which was the brainchild of Brant and Peterffy.

In expressing his feelings about the GRTA Adie von Gontard said, "The GRTA keeps our land open and enables children and adults to cherish the world of nature. Bless the GRTA for maintaining these trails and to continue their stewardship and the important character they represent in Greenwich." Ω



Southampton Riding Club and Bobby Ginsberg

Wish to Congratulate
Isabel Ryan
on the purchase of
Asgard Mercury



Isabel Ryan and Asgard Mercury, Champions in Short Stirrup Equitation and Reserve in Short Stirrup Hunter at a recent Hunters Isle Horse Show.

The thief and liar is gone but we are still here.



**Servicing the Equine Industry
for over 50 years**

- 1st and 2nd Cut Hay
- Timothy and Alfalfa
- Straw • Mulch • Salt Hay
- Pine Bagged Shavings

*Service second to none.
We deliver full trailer loads and stock it neatly
and professionally for you.*

PALEY BROTHERS FARMS, LLC

Tom Stepnowski
Cell (860) 305-7091

PO Box 806 • Portland CT 06489
(800) 537-2539 • (860) 342-3055
Fax (860) 342-5071

*Happy Holidays to All
Our Clients
and Friends!
Best Wishes for a
Successful
2009 Show Season!*

BOBBY GINSBERG
Southampton Riding Club and
Island Hills Stable, Middle Island
Lessons, Training, Boarding, Sales
Always a nice selection of show horses for sale
cell 631-871-4059 • barn 631-287-4775