



*An Early History of the
Brandywine Valley Driving Club*

By Marjorie Miller



Gabrielle Taylor's pony, Magic Leprechaun

There's a familiar saying that harkens as far back as Chaucer. The essential meaning of the several versions are similar and highly applicable to the beginnings of the Brandywine Valley Driving Club. From Chaucer's: *Troilus and Criseyde* (1374)... "mighty oaks from little acorns grow".

The Brandywine Valley Driving Club began with just such a kernel: an idea that grew with conversations between friends and drivers Mary Lane Wark and Mickie Bowen.

To understand the history of the Brandywine Valley Driving Club, we need to look back to the beginning of Combined Driving in this country.

Time-travel back to Phillip Hoffman's meeting with Prince Phillip in the UK, following Hoffman's purchase of a four-in-hand. He was in England to learn how to drive his team. Prince Phillip, who had recently retired from Polo, was taking up a new sport based on rules of the *riding* sport, *Combined Training*, or "eventing," an offshoot of long-time military horse training, where horses were taught to cope with a multitude of possible hazards – all sudden or strange – encountered under difficult conditions, in open country or crowded spaces.

Taken with the budding sport, Hoffman organized the first U.S. Combined Driving Event in Bedminster, N.J. He became the first president of a new organization, composed of a small group devoted to pleasure driving. This organization, the American Driving Society, was established in 1974.

The ADS submitted driving rules to the American Horse Show Association (currently the United States Equestrian Federation). The United States Combined Driving Events grew from the efforts of the American Driving Society, which established those first driving rules.

Victor Shone trained horses in Millbrook, N.Y. He organized the first Millbrook CDE.

Deirdre Pirie and Holly Pulsifer, who both drove singles, pairs and fours, went to England to observe the new 'driving sport'. In 1975, they established first Myopia Driving Event in Wenham, Massachusetts, which held the title of the longest continual CDE that was later tied by The Laurels.

Locally, as far back as 1976, John Greenall held a small, informal clinic on *driving harness* in a home near Unionville, PA.

As to the Brandywine Valley Driving Club's formation, Mary Wark, a foxhunter, remembers always feeling a strong desire to drive horses. When she moved to Marshallton, Pennsylvania, she asked Kelly Valdez, who was driving for Frolic Weymouth, to break her horse to drive.

Meanwhile, she and her friend Mickie Bowen, who had a long history as a driver, talked about getting together with other people in the area to form a driving organization. The kernel was planted and the soil was ideal for germination.

Mickie and Mary sought out others already interested, or already driving in the area. This small group met in Mary's living room on a chill, fall evening in 1983. A fire burned in the fireplace, as well as in their hearts, as they discussed forming an organization that would nourish their mutual interest in the sport of driving.

During a second meeting, Jean Braceland was named the organization's Secretary; Mary Wark and Mickie Bowen were designated the co-founders. The original interested parties, aside from Mary, Mickie and Jean, included Gabrielle and John Taylor, Martha and Steve Barbone, Hope Hand, Mary Warner Brown and Marjorie and Bill Miller. The preliminary work, including the organization's name,

The Brandywine Valley Driving Club, was completed in 1983.

With sparse information about the fledgling new sport, organizers struggled to find expert advice. Word of the driving organization spread throughout Chester County. Interested parties contacted the club in hopes of finding an information source.

The first real meeting with a full contingent of interested people was held at the Allam House, New Bolton Center. John Taylor asked Elaine Hammel, a New Bolton veterinarian, if she could arrange for the group to meet in one of New Bolton Center's classrooms. The BVDC, the club's new sobriquet, continues to meet there.

The BVDC's first President, was Mary Wark. She appointed Jean Braceland and Bill Miller to draw up the Club's by-laws, accepted in early 1984.



Saratoga pair - Mary Wark in the Whip seat, Mickie Bowen, passenger

Bill Miller held the BVDC's second President's position for 2 years. Gabrielle Taylor succeeded Miller as the third President with a two-year term. Bernie Homer followed Taylor.

The first three meetings at New Bolton Center were brief business meetings that morphed into classroom experiences during which information was shared by more experienced drivers with those who were eager to garner more knowledge about the sport.

The first educational session was “Conditioning Your Horse” given by Elaine Hammel, who was the Chief Veterinarian for the BVDC and the Laurels CDEs for many years. Other topics that were covered included proper fitting of harness, safety, greasing wheels and similar “beginner topics”.

The following spring, a mini-clinic was held covering driving basics at the Miller’s *Frog Spring Farm* in Mendenhall, Pennsylvania. Audrey Bostwick, the clinician and a long-time trainer of driving horses, provided a wide variety of essential instruction. Lisa Singer offered very practical information, as did several more experienced whips, including hands-on advice on the proper fit of harness to horse.

The BVDC’s initial thrust was to put on a small practice CDE. To that end, three separate clinics were held on three consecutive Saturdays.

Lore Homer gave a clinic on driving dressage, Lisa Singer on cross-country and hazard driving and Mary Wark on the tactics of cones driving.

The one-day practice event was held at Maresfield, the Miller’s new farm, located not far from the entrance to The Laurels. The event was confined to the hilltop, because the competitors were inexperienced and the hills were daunting for even more experienced drivers. Marjorie Miller worked with Lisa Singer on possible hazard sites. Paige Singer and Kim Miller were outriders. Marjorie and Gabrielle Taylor shared the Presentation that was geared to overall appearance, safety and adjustments for properly fitting harness.

Those who taught the pre-event clinics judged the areas they had covered. One green pony balked on a hillside, but otherwise the mini-event ran smoothly. Participants and judges were asked to bring their own lunches. Many didn’t, but Eunice Marvel and Jean Miller saved the day by providing hot chocolate and homemade cookies, which was perfect for the cool, fall weather and the hungry competitors.

The second CDE was expanded after receiving permission to use the Laurels conservation land and receiving a go-ahead to build temporary hazards in the Laurels’ valley. Most hazards actually took advantage of the natural landscape.

Frolic Weymouth brought his coach and four to observe. The water crossing through the Buck and Doe Run Creek was uneventful.

A catered competitors’ party was held in the Miller’s carriage house following the event.

After the second CDE, club members unanimously decided that the BVDC should be independent from the combined driving event. Those involved in the CDE decided to adopt a name other than the previous “Brandywine Valley Driving Club CDE.”

Looking at where the event was held, the CDE group decided on “The Laurels”. Fredda Pennock, the Miller’s artist friend, designed The Laurel’s logo.

Concurrent with the event’s expansion, as education continued, pleasure driving continued to rise within the organization. It is notable that despite the two somewhat divergent interests, no factions developed within the club. The BVDC functioned as a whole, supporting both disciplines. Those

interested in Pleasure Drives organized several. Most notable among the early drives were: a drive originating at Primitive Hall, one crossing Route #1, and proceeding up the long Chadds Ford hill on Route #100, and one even more daring drive that took horses and drivers along parts of Route #82.

All BVDC whips were invited to join the friends of Frolic Weymouth on his annual drive to the Winterthur Races held in May. Whips who dared to do the weekend's Saturday cross-country drive usually did it only once since it was notable for being "quite challenging".

The American Driving Society, at the behest of Bill Miller, held their Annual Meeting (which included lengthy drives) at Fair Hill, Maryland. The BVDC was designated as the host driving organization for the meeting. Bill recalls many long hours on a tractor-mower getting trails cleared, shrub and broken branches cut down and making the trails drivable.

During the ADS pre-breakfast drive, a rest stop was provided in a clearing in a grove of trees. Mary Warner-Brown and Gabrielle Taylor decided to treat the whips to a "woody surprise". Attired in flannel PJs; fluffy robes and floppy slippers, wearing huge hair curlers, they greeted the whips with a full breakfast of bacon, eggs and pancakes, all cooked on a gas griddle, with hot coffee. Their astounding surprise breakfast was well received!

Kelly Valdez, who had moved back to the area to teach driving and to train Peter Wetherill's horses, organized the next Laurels CDE with assistance from Betsy Copperswaithe.

Rain poured down for 24 hours straight prior to and during the event. The marathon course, which incorporated a very steep downhill section, left several drivers unnerved. Anyone involved in any phase of the event was thoroughly soaked, despite their foul weather gear.

An awning was put up outside of the carriage house. Bill Miller remembers that he and his son, David, had to keep pushing the awning with brooms from below to keep the water from collapsing the awning as they served barbecue. Wine was provided by a generous donation from Phyllis Wyatt at John Taylor's request.

News of the new, well organized and challenging CDE spread by word of mouth and, although the fourth Laurels was delayed a year while Kelly Valdez competed in Europe, it returned full force the following year.

Eventually an overloaded Kelly Valdez relinquished leadership of The Laurels to Jamie O'Rourke, who had recently moved to Southern Chester County and had once directed Long Island's Paumanack CDE. O'Rourke took up the reins of the Laurels and skillfully handled them for 25 years. Under his leadership the once fledgling Laurels became known as "one of the most prestigious Combined Driving Events...in the U.S." Jamie O'Rourke and the Laurels at Landhope retired in 2011.

In addition to being a driving club, members developed friendships that outlasted their involvement in the organization. The BVDC was not only well organized, it had friendship and heart.

In the early 90's, on a cold January night, the Millers noticed a huge fire in the distance. Their friends, Martha and Steve Barbone's barn in Marshallton was burning to the ground. Tragically, Martha lost two horses along with everything else.

Within a heartbeat the BVDC and the Barbone's many friends rallied around. At the suggestion of Mickie Bowen, John Taylor, Jiggs Baldwin, David Longmaid, Ed Jeffries, Joe Colella and Mary Wark, among a host of other friends, gathered materials together and built a run-in shed for the Barbone's remaining horses in a single day.

Friends brought food. Mary Warner Brown arranged a “barn shower” at the Millers. At least twelve or more friends, like Connie Goracci, Gabrielle Taylor, Lisa Singer, Mary Wark, Mary Warner Brown and Marjorie Miller, brought a wide variety of everything imaginable to replace the bare necessities lost in the fire.

When the driving club was formed there was a paucity of information on driving. The club grew within an environment that accumulated and disseminated any and all of whatever information could be gathered from every possible source. Looking back it is akin to the BVDC, and the driving world itself, transitioning from a model T-Ford to a Ferrari.

Today the BVDC has grown to include members living in New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania and beyond. While the board meetings continue to be held at New Bolton Center, membership meetings and programs are held in a variety of venues to accommodate the diversity of the group and to encourage a more inclusive attendance.

The Brandywine Valley Driving Club is strong and vibrant thirty years after that small kernel of an idea took root in the soil of Chester County.

I interviewed and credit Mary Wark, Lisa Singer, John Taylor and Martha Barbone for sharing details. In a few instances memories varied, in which case, Bill’s and my memories acted as the default, fortifying one opinion/memory over a less supported one. As far as I know – as far as I am able to ascertain, this history is as correct as possible.

Happy 30th Anniversary BVDC!

Marjorie Miller

The BVDC Anniversary Committee thanks Marjorie Miller for authoring this history of BVDC.



Marshall Jones & Iria Hicks and their Mules photo courtesy of Gabrielle Taylor (apparently, they showed up for drives regularly and everyone enjoyed them a lot)