

THE INNKEEPER, THE STEEL MAN, AND THE TUMBLEDOWN RUIN
A Brief History Of The Block House Steeplechase

by
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Like so many long-lived traditions, The Block House Steeplechase was born by happy circumstance and was nurtured through a difficult childhood. The chance meeting of two men with little more in common than a dilapidated hovel in a rural southern town made this year's fiftieth running of the Block House Races possible, but few people in 1947 would have bet on it lasting this long.

There was, of course, fertile ground in which to plant the seed. Racing had been part of life in Tryon since at least the 1830's, when wealthy South Carolinians began forsaking the summer heat of the Low Country for the higher, cooler altitudes of western North Carolina, where informal point-to-point races were less punishing for both horse and rider. By the middle of the nineteenth century, these native sons were followed by increasing numbers of Midwesterners, who had begun climbing aboard the new Cincinnati-to-Charleston railroad, leaving their harsh northern winters behind but bringing with them their love of horse sport. Impromptu races were held anywhere space allowed. Especially irresistible were the broad, cleared strips of land being laid out for the Spartanburg-to-Asheville railroad, quickly adopted as race paths until crews arrived to lay track and the first locomotive wheezed up the Saluda Grade in 1877.

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It is tempting to think that one of the sites used for these early races was the farmland surrounding a decrepit relic of pre-Revolutionary War days, an old trading post and fort called The Block House. Originally built in the mid-eighteenth-century to mark the contentious border between Cherokee territory to the west and north, and the farmland of white settlers to the east and south, The Block House evolved, first, into a trading post for the commercial traffic coming through Howard's Gap with goods bound for Columbia and Charleston; then a military outpost held by an upstart new nation against British-inspired Cherokee raids; and finally, a tollhouse on the newly-established border between North and South Carolina. Later incarnations were more colorful. As a tavern, The Block House was conveniently divided in half by the state line, allowing those of a particularly disputatious nature to step across the room and carry on their disagreements in one state when authorities from the other arrived to restore order. More famously, it served as a brothel when, it is said, the gentleman who was then in residence absconded, leaving his wife and daughters to fend for themselves for a livelihood.

Still, not many people thought much about the old place. George Bridgeman, a young boy when his father owned the property at the turn of the century, remembered it as “just an old log house”, the place where chicken fights were a leading form of entertainment. It was merely the ramshackle hulk sitting on the main road that wound down from Asheville and on to Spartanburg, obscured by clouds of dust kicked up by the livestock being driven to market as late as the 1920's. Almost everybody ignored it,

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except for a man named Carter Pennell Brown.

Although certainly not the first Midwesterner to come to Tryon, it was Carter Brown who, more than any of his peers, would transform the rural landscape around a small southern town into an attractive alternate home for mobile Northerners. More importantly, he was, in the words of the late historian and former Block House Race chairman Charles Ross, “the man who put Tryon on the map as a horse center”.

But when Carter stepped off the train from Michigan in 1917, he wasn't particularly thinking of an equestrian mecca, even though he was an avid horseman and outdoor sports enthusiast. He was, rather, thinking of opening a business. By trade a hotelier, Carter had left the University of Illinois three months before earning a degree in agriculture to buy Castle Rock Cottages in Castle Park, Michigan, which he developed into the Castle Park Inn. An aunt who had visited Tryon mentioned a former tuberculosis sanatorium perched on a hill overlooking the town, vacant for several years, that she thought might be converted into a pleasant rural inn. Thus was born The Pine Crest Inn, which included three barns with stabling for more than thirty horses.

Carter devised and directed the renovations, even though he had no formal training in architecture. A deeply spiritual man and a devout Christian Scientist, Carter believed that a higher power, rather than formal training, was responsible for the success of any human endeavor, and his reputation for sure-footedness and success in whatever he undertook became legendary. The late Tony Wallace, who came to Tryon in the 1950's

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and served as an official in every Block House Race since 1957, spoke of Carter Brown with deep respect. "If I had to make a list of the five most remarkable people I've ever met," Wallace once said, "Carter Brown would certainly be near the top." Wallace remembered, for example, how Carter practically singlehandedly cleared and paneled what would become the hunting country around the present Fairview Farms, all with donated labor and machinery; and how, after breaking his pelvis in a fall off a horse, Carter refused to see a doctor and successfully healed himself.

His sense of sportsmanship was widely admired. He once forced his younger son, Austin, to return two hundred dollars the boy had been given by a grateful owner for winning a race on the man's horse. "You ride for fun, not money," Carter told the nineteen-year-old, and made him drive twenty-five miles there and then to return the cash. And when either Austin or his older brother, Carter Wilkie Brown, complained about losing a race, their words fell on deaf ears. "When it isn't fun anymore, you're through riding," their father would say.

Among his many notable accomplishments, Carter founded the Tryon Riding and Hunt Club in 1925; organized the Tryon Hounds the following year; established the Tryon Horse Show in 1929; and, as we shall see, was instrumental in founding the Block House Steeplechase - although, uncharacteristically, the idea wasn't strictly his. Carter became so intricately identified with Tryon that his slightest comment or activity was worthy of mention - even a stroll through town diligently reported by the Tryon Daily

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Bulletin in April of 1959:

“Carter P. Brown was seen the other day with a beer can in his hand while walking up Trade Street. He found it on the street and it looked so bad that he just had to pick it up and throw it in the nearest trash receptacle. He doesn't wait for cleanup week...because he loves Tryon and doesn't want it spoiled with unnecessary trash.”

He was a tireless promoter of the town, so much so that journalist Eugene Warner believed that “Carter practically invented the place”. Along with the equestrian events and organizations which have survived to the present day, Carter's architectural talents continue to grace many of Tryon's most prestigious properties; and it was this gift in particular that was the catalyst for the Block House Steeplechase.

Carter had had his eye on the decaying Block House since the 1920's, when an elderly woman, one Miss Bird, had asked him to draw up plans for renovating the structure for use as an antiques shop. Sadly, the unfortunate Miss Bird was taken seriously ill, and the plans had to be dropped. But the Block House, with its weather-warped timber frame and sagging floors, presented an intriguing challenge, and Carter would not forget it.

There were other pursuits to occupy his time, however. Carter had ridden several times in the fledgling Carolina Cup in Camden in the early 1930's, and was inspired to organize his own 'chase at Harmon Field beginning in March of 1934, which he called “The March Hare”. It was run over an improvised timber and brush course through what

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was then mostly cornfields, with Carter's horse Nuthatch leading a sparse field consisting that first year of his two sons and a few friends. The March Hare 'chase continued right up to the outbreak of World War Two, although it remained very much a family affair, with a trophy that was less than spectacular - a battered tin cup. By 1941, with wartime looming, "the race for the tin cup" was discontinued. A vestige of those days remains in the modest grave of John McKnight, who kept a racing barn at Harmon Field for many years. His resting place, along with those of two of his favorite horses, lies on former Harmon Field property, between the town's tennis courts and the former school building housing Tryon Arts and Crafts.

The last element in the birth of the Block House races arrived in Tryon during the war, in the person of Alfred D. Plamondon, Jr. Plamondon, a nationally-known wartime industrialist, was the founder and board chairman of Indiana Steel Products, a profitable manufacturer of, among other things, industrial magnets. Quite by chance, he came to town in 1942 for a short visit, stayed at Pine Crest, struck up a friendship with Carter and a liking for Tryon, and casually mentioned one day that it might be a good place for a modest hunting box. His host quickly offered to arrange it. The Plamondons had hardly boarded the train back north before Carter bought the Block House property for them, sight unseen. "It was rather a bold thing for me to do," Carter later said, "as the place was a shambles and they were people of social position with sophisticated tastes, not the kind to move into a tumbledown ruin."

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The first step in Carter's plan was to move the building to higher ground several hundred yards to the west, where it now stands, leaving a stone marker at the original site which can still be seen. A plumbing system, a new roof and flooring, and a refurbished exterior followed. As with all of his other projects, Carter used local materials as much as possible in his restoration and preserved as much of the original building as he could, the result being the comfortable elegance, both rustic and refined, that are the hallmark of Carter Brown's work.

Plamondon planned to graze cattle on his new property, and imported a herd of Black Angus from Lexington, Kentucky, for the purpose; but by 1946, after enjoying the equestrian activities so abundant in Tryon, and hearing tales from local riders of the late, lamented races once held at Harmon Field, Plamondon suggested to Carter that the races be revived over a course to be laid out on his property. With his usual aplomb, Carter designed a half-mile course around the Block House, graded and contoured the terrain to accommodate it, peppered it with brush and timber obstacles, and built a judges' platform on the roof of Plamondon's house - although it all had to be done as quietly as possible. Friends warned that racing would attract an undesirable crowd and ruin Tryon, but Carter was determined that local opposition wouldn't get the jump on him. Throughout the late fall and early winter, rumors spread around town that something was going on over toward the Hunt Country, strange clankings and rumblings having been heard at night. Carter was careful to do his bulldozing and grading under cover of darkness, and no one

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could figure out exactly what he was up to until Carter calmly but firmly announced some weeks later that there'd be a race meet in the spring over the new course he'd just finished building.

Even though the Maryland Hunt Cup had been running since 1894 and the American Grand National since 1899, and despite the release of *National Velvet* in 1947, steeplechasing was still an arcane sporting activity to the general population, no less so in the Southeast. The only nearby 'chase was the Carolina Cup, which had yet to draw crowds of any size, and the failure of the Harmon Field races was a sobering precedent for Carter's new venture. "We started from somewhere below zero," Carter Wilkie Brown said of that first year. "We didn't have any money and there were no local people who knew racing." His father enlisted his sons in organizing and promoting the race by teaching the rules to newborn stewards and judges, and especially by getting the local media interested. A press conference was set up at Pine Crest, to which newspaper and radio sports reporters were invited from as far away as Asheville and Charlotte. Presented with films and fact sheets about steeplechasing, not to mention a sumptuous lunch and, even more impressive, an open bar, the media began to think the sport might be worth something after all. For several years, in fact, Spartanburg's WSPA Radio would carry the entire race card.

Nonetheless, local announcements were modest during the days before the first running. On April 1st, 1947, readers of the Tryon Daily Bulletin learned, among other

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things, that a pound of coffee could be had at Cowans Market for forty-nine cents; that the Tryon Cinema was showing *Dead Reckoning*, with Humphrey Bogart and Lizabeth Scott; and, finally turning to page four, that “Tryon's first steeplechase to be held in several years” would take place in four days' time, with “a number of out-of-town horses, riders, and spectators” expected to attend. It was to be run under the auspices of Carter's Tryon Riding & Hunt Club, under whose guardianship it has remained ever since.

The card for the first Block House Steeplechase, on April 5, 1947, contained three races: the Pacolet Plate, for riders under seventeen on “mules, horses, or ponies”; a timber race of two-and-a-half miles, which revived the name “March Hare” from the Harmon Field days; and the inaugural running of The Block House, two miles over brush, with a five-hundred-dollar purse, half of which went to the winner, along with an ornate silver wine cup donated as a challenge trophy by the Plamondons. The name Brown, not surprisingly, figured prominently in the proceedings, with Carter's two sons, Austin and Carter Wilkie, winning two of the three races. The Browns' mare Bluish, with Austin up, won The Block House by eight lengths, the first of three Block House wins for Austin, who retired the Plamondon's trophy in 1950; while his older brother, on Dwight, finished first in the timber race with a time of 4:20. Both sons would continue to appear in the field each year until the late 1950's, when careers took them away from Tryon. The junior race was won by the son of noted Southern Pines horseman Mickey Walsh, who would soon organize his own 'chase, The Stoneybrook, and who would frequently van

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horses to The Block House to fill out the card and keep it alive through its infancy.

Although the Bulletin estimated the crowd at a thousand, the figure may have been generous. “The crowd was pretty small that first time out,” remembered Carter Wilkie Brown, “no more than a few hundred people, I'd say. And the entire staff, including jockeys, was probably around twenty or so.” Everyone knew one another, lending a congenial atmosphere to the day's proceedings, helped by a pre-race performance by the Tryon High School Band. Even most of the horses entered were local, except the two brought by Mickey Walsh and a Nashville horse ridden by Cal Houghland. Austin recalls that Houghland, running a close second behind him, shouted an encouraging “Go get 'em!” as Bluish approached the last hurdle on the way to victory.

Also present that day was the late Gerry Helder, who had come to Tryon in 1945 to manage Pine Crest for Carter and had helped in preparing the new race course. “It wasn't a bad crowd,” he once recalled, “considering how small a place Tryon was back then.” Carter assigned Helder a special task that first year - one that unexpectedly led to a 47-year-long career as “the voice of Tryon”. “Mr. Brown had asked me to take the sports reporter from WSPA to lunch, so I could bring him up to speed on the horses and jockeys who'd be running,” Helder remembered. “But when we got up there on the roof of the Block House and the horses started coming out of the paddock, the man froze up and forgot everything I'd told him. Next thing I knew, he handed me the microphone.” Helder's voice, however, was often missing from the timber race during the next several

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years, for the simple reason that he was one of the field, often in company with his brother, Jimmy - another pair of siblings in addition to Carter's sons.

Of some concern that first year was the short course - barely half a mile which, for the timber race, required the field to circle nearly six times to make up the required length, causing some confusion for riders who lost count, not to mention a certain amount of dizziness for the spectators. While little could be done for the latter, subsequent timber races featured someone with a flag to signal each rider how many times he'd been around, a practice kept in force until Piney Woods was cleared and the course was lengthened to include the fearsome Heartbreak Hill.

The convivial atmosphere, however pleasant, didn't do much to insure a future for the meet. Although a few local farmers rode mules or oxen over to see what all the fuss was about, Carter had hopefully set aside ten parking spaces for those with faster means of transport; four of them remained empty. Even more discouraging, the total receipts for the day were only seventy-five dollars, not even a quarter of the purse. To keep the races alive, Carter managed to find money in an emergency fund maintained for such purposes by the United Hunts Racing Association, and he told naysayers to give him just five years to turn things around. As usual, he was right.

But for the next two years, the races remained very much a local affair, with small entries and meager crowds, although the purse for the Block House race increased to one-thousand dollars in 1948, and a fourth race was added to that year's card. By 1949, there

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were six races - a number that has remained more or less constant ever since - and the purse was up to fifteen-hundred dollars.

Still, it was difficult filling up a card. The problem was a lack of accreditation. If a rider licensed by the National Steeplechase and Hunt Association “rode outlaw” - that is, rode in a non-sanctioned race - the NSHA claimed the right to ban that rider from future sanctioned meets. Few jockeys were willing to risk their licenses in a local race around a hunting box. “Back then,” Carter Wilkie said, “you had to earn the right to be sanctioned. We caught all the negatives that first year, but by the second or third year we had assembled a cadre of volunteers who knew what they were doing.” The hard work paid off. In 1949, two stewards from the Association, Frank “Whitey” Powers and Stephen Clark, came to Tryon at Carter's invitation to walk the course and meet with the race's staff; and in 1950, the fourth running became the first to be officially sanctioned by the NSHA (which shortened its name in 1994 and became the National Steeplechase Association).

The way was now cleared for more and better riders for the new meet, along with better publicity. Because of the course's peculiar geography, The Block House became known as the only race meet covering three counties (Polk, Spartanburg, and Greenville) and two states; and the famous jump straddling the state line was always a crowd pleaser, even if it may not have been on the border at all. George Bridgeman, who had become the estate manager for the house and its surrounding acreage by the early 1960's, claimed

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that his father, back in the days of the chicken fights, had moved the boundary marker one day because North Carolina took better care of the dirt road that ran by the place. The actual state line, Bridgeman said, was some yards distant from the “border fence”. There wasn't much enthusiasm for checking Bridgeman's story, since a tradition, once established, is notoriously hard to abandon.

In 1956, spectators were treated to an exhibition by the USET's three-day and jumping teams, which had been training in Tryon and was soon to travel to the games held in Stockholm that summer. The lucky audience was one of the few ever to see Hugh Wiley, Bill Steinkraus, Frank Chapot and Bert de Nemethy together in the same ring. The special guests at the 1959 races were more prosaic, although of more immediate interest to the locals, for the North Carolina Highway Commission was then debating the path of the new “superhighway”, Route 176, through town. Their Honors joined a crowd of some two-thousand spectators, cheering on favorites with names like Another Hyacinth and Chicken of Baghdad.

By now, there were seven races on the card, including a ladies' flat race with five riders. Among them was Jarrett W. Schmid who, nearly twenty years later, would begin a fourteen-year term as Chairman of the Races. There was also a “Pink Coat” race that year, open at first to members of the Tryon Hounds and, later, to riders from any recognized hunt, with a challenge trophy presented by Converse College; along with the Doncaster, the Tryon, and the timber race, now called the North Carolina Cup, all with a

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total of thirty-four entries. The purse for the Block House race itself remained at fifteen-hundred-dollars.

“The races in those days were more like hunt meets,” remembered Tony Wallace. “The riders may not have been very experienced, but everyone had a good time.” Jump crews would spend weeks before each race preparing the course and its obstacles, and were always treated to a catered lunch brought out to them every day by Carter Brown himself.

By 1960, the races attracted an entry of forty horses, the largest up to that time, along with a crowd which included a Swedish visitor who complained to a Bulletin reporter that his enjoyment of the day had been ruined by the sight of so many people throwing their paper cups and trash on the ground. It is not recorded if this dereliction was corrected for the next year's event, when The Spartanburg Herald-Journal reported that “Block House Day marks the opening of the spring season in this little resort town at the foot of the mountains, and folks come from all over this part of the country to enjoy the races and a day of good fun in the sunshine.” Horses from as far away as Ohio, Kentucky, Michigan, and Alabama were regularly entered, trained by the likes of Burley Cocks, Mickey Walsh, Joe Nash and Tommy Rankin, and running for a total purse of close to four-thousand-dollars. More remarkable still, the races actually made money for the first time in 1961 - a total of four-hundred-and-thirty dollars.

By now, Carter Brown had proven his case to the critics of fifteen years before.

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The Block House Steeplechase had become a staple of the Southeastern racing circuit and was even running in the black, if just barely. In 1964, Carter announced his retirement from active participation in the races. To mark the occasion, the Pacolet Plate was renamed The Carter P. Brown and was lengthened to two miles over brush. The entire day that year was dedicated to the man who had brought the Block House into being, and it must have been with a sense of deep satisfaction that Carter, along with a record crowd of two-thousand, watched the seventeenth running of the races he had created. Appropriately, receipts for that year reached a new record, too - nearly fourteen-thousand dollars.

1965 brought a new level of prestige, for in that year the races were moved from early April to late March, before the Carolina Cup, thus becoming the opening event of the racing season. The nineteenth running brought nearly a million dollars in horse flesh to Tryon, with forty-one entries and a crowd of three-thousand spectators. The leading date was retained for the '66 and '67 meets.

Of great interest to the crowd in 1967 was the return to the field of Austin Brown, who had left Tryon some ten years earlier and had enjoyed a great deal of success as a jockey at such prestigious meets as the venerable Maryland Hunt Cup. Austin boldly entered both the timber race and the Block House, on two different mounts, one of which he had never before ridden. "I thought I was pretty hot stuff and planned to show them how the big boys did it," Austin recalled. But disaster lay ahead. Just off the starting line

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for the Block House, the unknown horse managed only the first fence before stopping dead in its tracks, with Austin sailing over its head into ignominy. Then came the timber race. All seemed to be going well until the fence directly in front of the stewards, where the horse bolted off into the crowd with Austin struggling for control, which eluded him until after a good deal of thrashing around in the woods. “So much for the return of the conquering hero,” Austin ruefully noted.

But Austin was by no means the first to run amok. In the twenty years since the first race, the Block House course had gained a reputation as one of the toughest in the country, especially noted for Heartbreak Hill, with its angled, downhill jump and narrow approach flanked by heavy tree cover. “The Block House course is so demanding,” carefully explained *The Greenville News*, “because of going up hill and down dale, with a terrain often giving unsure footing, until it is the least popular with jockeys.” It was true that the Block House, like any race over a challenging course, had its share of spills and mishaps; but while Carter would agree that the course was difficult, he pointed out it had nothing to do with the footing or the terrain. “The turf is very good,” he insisted. “You've just got to be smart to run this course.” He had little sympathy for the two riders who lost their one/two position in the 1966 timber race when their horses both ran out at the same jump. It wouldn't have happened, he said, if they had checked the course and the obstacles before starting time. “The best way to avoid something like that,” he offered, “is to count the jumps and put the same number of peas in your mouth. Then,

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every time you go over one, spit out a pea, and when you've run out of peas you know you've finished.” Mickey Walsh, on the other hand, preferred his riders to remain empty-mouthed, and advised them to ride the course as if they were on bicycles. “You push hard uphill,” he said simply, “and you coast downhill.”

In keeping with a national trend, the next two decades saw slow but steady growth in spectators, purses, and entries. Even the card expanded, with the addition of three Quarterhorse races in 1969 and 1970, bringing the number of races to nine. (These extra three were dropped, however, in 1971.) By 1970, the races were costing an unprecedented ten-thousand dollars to run, and there were so many out-of-town horses that the card for the Block House race in 1968 included only one local horse, Tryiton, owned by the same Jarrett Schmid who had run in the ladies's flat race eleven years before. Happily for the locals, not to mention Mrs. Schmid, Tryiton emerged the winner.

The edges of Carter Brown's course were now crammed with spectators - over six-thousand of them by 1970. Parking spaces, hundreds more of them than 1947's scant ten, had to be assigned months ahead of time, and a full calendar of social events now framed the races themselves. The day's purse hit ten-thousand dollars for the first time in 1975.

While this unprecedented growth during the 1970's seemed to assure a rosy future for the Block House, there was one anxiety that cast a long shadow over the race's fourth

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decade, and that was the future of the Block House property itself. The Plamondons had sold it and moved away in the mid-1950's (a Plamondon Challenge cup was donated in 1969 by Alfred's daughter, Carol, for the winner of the Doncaster), although ownership had seemed secure for some years afterward in the hands of Converse College president Oliver Carmichael, who also served several terms as Chairman of the races. Later, to everyone's relief, Dr. Carmichael donated the land and building to Converse itself, which used them for its equestrian program and as a potential site for a planned outdoor Shakespearean theater. But throughout the 1970's, race officials had watched uneasily as the ownership of the Block House property changed hands several times. Nearly as bad, the usage fee for the property rose by several thousand dollars with each transfer.

“We were all afraid that something would happen to the Block House course,” remembered Gustav Hoffman, who was president of the Tryon Riding and Hunt Club during those uncertain years. “I felt we had to get out of there and get a permanent home of our own.” Despite attempts to put money away for the purpose each year the races made a profit, it became evident by the early 1980's that property values were rising too quickly to keep pace. An outright gift of land seemed the only solution, and it was Mrs. Ernst Mahler who came to the rescue.

The Mahlers, who had been supporters of the Block House since Carter Brown's day, owned considerable acreage in the southwestern portion of Tryon's old hunting country, just a few miles from the Block House. While the property's commercial value had been reduced somewhat by the intrusion of I-26, an eighty-acre portion of it formed a

natural bowl eminently suitable for a race course encircling show rings and stabling facilities. Additional land, which lay on the other side of Hunting Country Road, was set aside as a nature preserve and education center. Through Mrs. Mahler's generosity and the Tryon Riding and Hunt Club's determination to secure a future for the Block House races, the Foothills Equestrian and Nature Center was born, featuring a new, six-and-a-half furlong course designed and built by the late Colonel David Sandlin, a longtime supporter of horse sport and a member of both the Tryon Riding and Hunt Club and of FENCE.

After running for forty years over Carter Brown's original track, the Block House Races left its namesake behind and ran its first race at FENCE in 1988. "It was sad, having to leave the old property behind," Carter Wilkie Brown said, no doubt speaking for everyone associated with the race's long history on the site. "But the new place actually has better facilities, and the spectators can see much more of the action now." (The original Block House property on which the races were held is now owned by a California developer. The building itself, with some eleven surrounding acres, is a designated National Historic Site, and remains in private hands.)

The growing interest in 'chasing had become so noticeable by 1980 that the NSA was obliged to begin keeping closer track. In that year, it reported, attendance at 189 meets around the country totaled half a million fans, with purses reaching well over a million dollars. By 1994, attendance had doubled, the number of meets had grown to nearly 280, and purses had passed the four-million-dollar mark. Carter Brown would

have been astounded at his own steeplechase's twenty-thousand-dollar purse reached in 1979, a year after his death, to say nothing of the impressive sixty-two-thousand-five-hundred dollars reached this year - a more than thousand-fold increase over the five-hundred dollars won before a few hundred spectators in 1947.

But the spectators of nearly fifty years ago and those of today share one thing in common, something much more enduring than any statistic: an enthusiasm for a sport which combines the best elements of the competitive spirit with the family atmosphere of a day in the country. "Everybody had a good time," Tony Wallace said of the early days of the Block House; and that is the best thing anyone can hope for in the future.

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