

# Martha Wadsworth

## Pure Pixie Dust on Horseback

By Laurie Mercer

***"If we wanted to talk to mum, we'd have to get on a horse."***

— Heidi Heen, Martha's eldest daughter.

The place, the Granger Farm on Houston Road in upstate New York's Genesee Valley. This horse paradise lies roughly between Rochester and Buffalo along the Genesee River, where hundreds of miles of roads are still dirt and the wire fences are jump-able thanks to chicken coops.

Midway through our interview Martha Wadsworth, Co-Master of Foxhounds for the Genesee Valley Hunt, suddenly brightens while looking through a window as she views a handsome red fox, right in her own backyard.

The fox and Martha have met before; she calls him the "neighborhood fox." Sitting in a sun-filled kitchen, her place in this horse-centric valley reminds me of American primitive artist Edward Hick's painting, "The Peaceable Kingdom," in which all living things exist in harmony.

She is 5 feet 6 and 3/4 inches tall ("I used to be 5 feet 8, but I'm shrinking"). Audrey



Above: Martha on Marty in the hunt field, the latest in a long line of talented equine partners, beginning with Tony the Pony. This herd of personal horse partners has made Martha's life complete, competitive (in a good way), sometimes fascinating, and frequently full of fun. Below: W. Austin Wadsworth, demonstrating the then-fashionable cavalry seat, founded the Genesee Valley Hunt in 1876. On the pony is William P. Wadsworth, Martha's father, who was MFH for 37 years, missing only five seasons while in military service. William's joy came from watching hounds work, and he once told this reporter that he would hunt hounds on a pogo stick if the pogo stick provided the only way to get around.



Hepburnesque in physique, Martha still weighs 110 pounds. She welcomes the routine of mucking her own stalls. She not only fits into a wool suit that was custom-made for her honeymoon trousseau more than 50 years ago, she still enjoys wearing it, not that she gets dressed up much.

"Oh, I think it's great," she says when asked her age. She has never left the saddle and has rarely left the Genesee Valley in her 75 years. In addition to her co-master of the foxhounds duties with her brother Austin, she remains a frequent and seriously competitive rider at novice and preliminary levels in three-phase events, ranging in complexity from fun (the valley's 10 Cent Event) to famous, as in the nearby Cosequin Stuart Horse Trials. She did retire from high-risk steeplechasing ("faster, with more riders") about 15 years ago after she broke her neck while out hacking a client's horse. She calls it a "good break," because she didn't have to wear a halo. Freakishly, only a few weeks later, Martha's daughter Sara came off the same horse with the same physical results. For a while both women had to watch events sitting side-by-side in lawn chairs until they healed sufficiently to compete again.

The Genesee Valley Pony Club is blessed with a superior natural riding amphitheater called Wheeler Green, which adjoins Wheeler Gully. This property and thousands of other acres like it are now part of the Genesee Valley Conservancy, created to ensure happy trails 100 years or more from now. Martha has been instructing pony clubbers there, in the shade of the Genesee Valley's red and white oak trees, for many years. She calls herself a "lesson freak" and attends clinics hosted by visiting notables and horse whisperers alike. The teacher can also become the taught, as event rider and valley native Carol Kozlowski, once a pony club student of Martha's, sometimes finds herself in the center of the ring instructing Martha instead. (See sidebar for Carol's impressions of Martha as a horsewoman.)



**Martha on Tony the Pony—her first mount.**

While riding at 75 may not be that unusual, winning ribbons probably is. Martha doesn't have to win everything she's in, but she intends to place if she can. Somehow she manages to make almost any horse look good because she is fearless in a good way—providing a proven path to competitive success as a rider. As Balzac noted, "Boldness has genius, magic, and power in it." Martha has got buckets of all three.

Take the annual GVH point-to-point, for example, with a new course every year, where knowledge of the country and a fast horse are required. Martha has raced in the point-to-point a total of 32 times and taken home the winning trophy on 13 occasions. In any other sport she'd be in a Hall of Fame.

Understated and shy about her accomplishments, she has no trophy cases in her comfortable but winter-chilly farmhouse situated at the epicenter of hunt country. The casual visitor can spot a few heavily inscribed trophies she retired amid the decor. The only ribbons I saw were two badly fading, tri-color rosettes. Martha says she earned them while attending Chatham Hall in Virginia as a young girl adding, "It was horsey so I went there."

Martha's first mount, Tony the Pony, also carried her on a lead line to her first fox hunt where, in her grandfather's day, enthusiasts including Teddy Roosevelt were participants and guests. Without horse trailers, people hacked long distances and back following a full day of hunting through the valley's deep ravines and gullies, cow pastures, swales and woods that are recognizable by names in the hunt's fixture card, including the Big Woods, the Bottoms, McQueen's Switch, and Nation's Farm.

The Genesee Valley Hunt, founded

in 1876 by William Austin Wadsworth, Martha's grandfather, remains mostly a local hunt attended by farmers, working people, and families, including young children, on horses of every description and suitability to follow the hounds. References to places and coverts mentioned in W. Austin Wadsworth's diaries of daily activities devoted to horse and hound, *The Hunting Diaries of W. Austin Wadsworth, MFH of the Genesee Valley Hunt, 1876-1909*, accurately describes the activities today. Under Marion and Travis Thorne's influence, the hunt country once again extends south of Genesee to some promising country in the town of Groveland.

Martha has competed in valley events from the early days when they jumped in and out of the woods to today's courses, which please thousands of spectators and tail-gaters alike. Until fairly recently, she was also the one person the hunt field followed, clamoring to keep up with hounds, wherever they went. What began for Martha on Tony the Pony continues today with Marty, a horse with a story. But we'll get to Marty's tale later.

Martha was too young to ride Mrs. W.A. Wadsworth's Homestead-bred "Big Horse," called Hotspur II, who went south and won the Maryland Hunt Cup under Stuart S. Janney Jr. in 1935. Martha's father and Master of the Hunt William P. Wadsworth rode Hotspur in the valley's annual point-to-point. Born in 1931, Martha was aware of this important equine's place in family history before she was large enough to tack up.

"Tony the Pony was a chestnut and white paint. Father [a former cavalry officer and author of *Foxhunting in America*, still the bible on the subject] insisted we ride

bareback first. Later we were taken on lead lines to foxhunt in the back of the field at about age six." Martha remembers her very first fox hunt, accompanied by her sister Perky, as also being the last hunt for her grandmother, Elizabeth, a woman who loved being around horses and excelled at breeding them for performance.

Martha shares an anecdote about her grandmother's central belief that all horses know how to jump naturally. Elizabeth liked to have her horses jumped over a formidable chicken coop on the Homestead's east lawn. Martha says her grandmother viewed these demonstrations from a special seat, holding a basket of sugar lumps in her lap for rewards. She adds, "Years later I learned that the stable hands were schooling the horses to jump over the hill, safe from view."

## **Carol Kozlowski— Both Sides Now**

"What I find amazing is that Martha continues to set goals for herself," says noted event rider Carol Kozlowski, who grew up in the Genesee Valley and took lessons from Martha Wadsworth while attending Pony Club. Once her instructor, Martha now takes lessons in the finer points of event riding from Carol, who said, "Martha continues to work toward fairly specific competitions. In terms of learning and re-learning, she is a sponge with a huge degree of humility. She brings graciousness to the sport and to everything we've done in the valley."

"She is one of the most intuitive, naturally talented riders," Carol added. "She arrived in this sport [eventing] 20 years too early. The sport hadn't evolved yet. She would have been one of our best riders." As for dressage, Carol thinks that Martha is "fascinated by the mechanics and the physics of flat work. She has so much experience, so much natural feel. She really does have a gift."

"Martha may not always get the results she deserves because she's not as cutthroat as some other people—but she's probably enjoying the journey a heck of a lot more.

"She relies very heavily on the communication she has with her horse. Archie would have jumped through fire for her. She loves her horses so much and enjoys the journey so much; I wouldn't call it a competitive spirit. She is too busy keeping her horse happy. Horses are integral to her life."



**Growing up horsey meant riding at home and while attending Chatham Hall, a "horsey" private boarding school in Virginia.**

"Elizabeth Perkins Wadsworth, my grandmother on my father's side, loved to hunt, she loved to ride. She always rode sidesaddle. She loved horses and bred a lot of them," Martha recalls. "Perky and I had spotted a draft horse foal out in the field one day, and we ran to grandmother asking for it to be ours. She was dying to have us ride, so she gave us both more suitable horses instead. That's how I got Janet. Janet was a small horse of Homestead blood lines. I did everything with Janet, foxhunting and long rides alone. Janet was the first one I ever raced."



**It's a family affair. Left to right: William P. Wadsworth, Master of the Genesee Valley Hunt, on Joan; Martha Wadsworth on Janet, the first horse she ever raced; her sister Perky on an unnamed mount; and her brother Austin, co-MFH today, astride Peter Pan. Sally, the fourth sibling, was too young to appear in this picture, but she lives, rides, and hunts in the valley today.**

The Homestead, the white palatial mansion at the head of Main Street in Geneseo, was home to a long line of Thoroughbred and nearly Thoroughbred bloodlines based almost exclusively on a Homestead-bred stallion called Witchmate. Martha says, "Witchmate bred wonderful jumping horses. He was smart, had fabulous bone, and a very nice temperament. They all jumped. He was still in the barn long after my grandmother died."

One of Martha's treasured homebreds was Peace Flight, a gelding she called Colter, who had been sired by Sid Old Boy, a Canadian steeplechase stallion standing for a few seasons at noted Genesee Valley horseman Lee Gardner's farm. "Colter was a pretty fabulous horse who did everything," she says. "He raced, did point-to-points, but he wasn't the greatest at eventing because he never forgot an early experience of jumping into a stream that was over his head. He won the big race twice [the Genesee Valley Hunt Cup], once with me and once with Sara [her daughter] riding him."

A Witchmate Connemara cross named Sweet William ("Willy") was foaled at Ashantee (a family joke on the words "a shanty"), Martha's marital residence before her divorce. Willy provided the keys to the city for Martha's kids—Leif, Heidi and Sara—and numerous other Pony Club kids wanting to get their "B." "Willy won the ladies race, Austin hunted hounds with him. Willy was always the one you entered whenever we needed another horse. There are lots of Willy stories; he was an exceptional horse."



**This photograph of Martha and Dalemate appeared in the *Buffalo Courier Express*. A Homestead-bred gelding from the stallion Witchmate's bloodlines, Dalemate was one of the big horses in Martha's early life as a competitor. She admired his talent for jumping freely in and out of the Homestead pastures when it suited him.**

Life is all about facing obstacles—Colter, Willy, and some other horses later died in a catastrophic barn fire at the Granger Farm.

In addition to having the oldest active foxhunt in the country, the Genesee Valley hosts one of the oldest, if not the oldest, event, which has grown in sophistication and stature, not to mention entries.

General Reynolds, an enthusiastic foxhunter, started the eventing tradition in the valley. "He was the inspiration for the current horse trials," Martha notes. "We had the first one at Mulligan Farm. It had three parts, but you could win each different part. Nobody put it all together. We didn't understand what dressage meant."

Martha says courses were designed by cutting down trees and using other natural obstacles, but show jumps might have been measured by their ability to please the crowd. "We were totally in the boondocks," she concludes.

In 1976 Ed Young and Sharon Persuitti took over the Genesee Valley Hunt Horse Trials and invited Roger Haller to act as technical delegate. Today the sanctioned event is run on inviting and challenging natural terrain, near the hunt kennels on Roots Tavern Road. Becoming more professional about eventing does not mean



Laurie Mercer Photo

**And the winner of the 1971 Genesee Valley Point-to-Point is Martha Wadsworth, riding Marion Thorne's Westport Papa. Today, Marion is huntsman and one of three co-masters of the Genesee Valley Hunt, while Travis, her husband, is whip and manages the kennels.**

there's no longer any fun in the valley. Far from it. During "Kitsch Gardens," a mock dressage show, Martha did her own test wearing a Hawaiian shirt and sunglasses at a full canter on Frodo, a Shetland pony who displayed good extensions and star qualities.

She also helped inspire the annually held "10 Cent Event," a realistic warm-up in all three phases to big time eventing, where wearing a costume is encouraged. The entrance fee is still 10 cents, but "we only accept exact change," she says. Having fun seems to help her "take a deep seat" when riding and in life.

"For me," she says, "I didn't want to have a foxhunter that didn't event. They are so much better. They've done dressage so they know how to move sideways to open gates. They jump any old thing. Likewise, foxhunters who event also know how to take care of themselves. Foxhunters never know what they are going to be stepping in, on, or over." For her, riding is all about yin and yang. "Eventing inspires you to get your horse ready for foxhunting in the fall. Otherwise you'd just go out and trot around. Eventing is fun. I enjoy it."

She also relishes any good horse story. Her current mounts are storybook material, each in a different way.

"I was sitting here at the kitchen table a few years ago having a cup of tea with

Marion, when Charlotte Castle [a neighbor] called and said she just got a call from a trainer at the track [Finger Lakes] who has this horse who is going to the killer's tomorrow. We can have him if we come right away. That's where my preliminary horse, R.J. Jose, came from. We pulled off his racing plates and turned him out because my barn was full. If it hadn't been for Marion, I would have missed this wonderful horse. I paid \$400. That was his meat price."

Archie, his barn name, is now 22 years old and remains a favorite, useful for trail rides with Heidi's daughter Julia who at 15 has been bitten by the "horse bug." Martha says Archie, who almost became somebody's dinner in France, is sweet and kind, with lop ears, good eyes, and a laid back personality. Like that other great horse, Seabiscuit, Archie seems to sleep until it's almost time to get tacked up. "I have stopped foxhunting him, but there is nothing he would not jump," she says. Her horses are her teachers, and she credits Archie with heroic proportions, such as taking the correct jump in an outside course when Martha was about to go astray.

"When I got Archie we started going all over the place," she says. Accompanied by Carol, Marion, and Meg Lloyd, Perky's daughter-in-law, Martha spent the next dozen years or so eventing beyond the Genesee Valley.

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Martha, pictured here in her seventies riding at preliminary level, is on R.J. Jose—Archie—a race track reject slated for the knacker's. She bought him for his "meat price" of \$400.

"Now there is Marty," she continues the story from Tony the Pony to the present. "Marty has a little story too. Marty is another chestnut Thoroughbred with papers and all that. She was six years old, already had a foal, was turned out at White Devon, and could not be caught. The owner said to Marion, 'You catch her and you can have her.' Marion caught her, broke her, did a lot with her, and then gave her to me saying, 'You need this horse.' She's not Archie; she's a feisty mare. She's afraid of certain things. I'll never get to preliminary level with her, but she'll be fun to event novice this year."

In a rare moment of talking about herself instead of her horses, Martha mentions that she never wanted to be any place else but the Genesee Valley, and that every wish she ever had for her horses and herself has come true.

"Everything I wanted to do happened. To hunt the hounds was really a gift. I never planned to go anywhere but here. I decided when I was 70 to hand the responsibility of being huntsman over to Marion [Austin's stepdaughter]." Martha, Austin, and Marion now share the responsibilities of co-MFH.

If horses are indeed a form of wish fulfillment, Martha Wadsworth's life, cen-

tered around her many horse partners, is a testament that wishes really do come true.

*Laurie Mercer is a freelance writer/  
photographer living on the Mulligan Farm  
in upstate New York's Genesee Valley.*

## Cyber Hunt

Go to [www.geneseevalleyhunt.org](http://www.geneseevalleyhunt.org) for a complete look at hunt-sponsored activities including eventing and this year's 78<sup>th</sup> running of the Genesee Valley Hunt Cup Races, which has steadily grown to become what even non-horse people enjoy—a beautiful day at the races. The "Big Race," is 3.5 miles over 18 timber fences about four feet in height. A larger purse, with \$30,000 in prize money, now attracts professional jockeys in colored racing silks, riding steeplechase horses from outside the valley. Race Meet has become "more game," as they say in other sports. Attendance and sponsors help defray costs, while proceeds go to charities.