

OUTDOORS

ember 7, 2003

SUNDAY

Baltimore, Maryland

THE SUN



PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID BRIDGES
Back in its heyday, hunting groups like this (from left to right), with club secretary Henry Bridges, Gov. Herbert R. O'Connor and Babe Ruth on Nov. 15, 1939, were common at Woodmont.

Rich and very famous once hunted here

Once upon a time, politicians courted sportsmen.

Maybe they weren't true lovers of the outdoors, but pols loved the he-man image and the vote potential that came from talking the talk. So they'd drag themselves out of bed before dawn and wrap themselves in camo or hop in a fishing boat for the photo opportunity.

One of my favorite pictures shows an obviously uptight Thomas E. Dewey, New York governor and 1948 presidential candidate, and a trout. Cold fish meets dead fish — talk about separated at birth.

That's not to say every lick of it is political posturing. Teddy Roosevelt inhaled the outdoors, from camping in Yosemite with



SUN FILE PHOTO
The interior of the once-private Woodmont Rod and Gun Club hasn't changed much from the 1950s, when this photo was taken.



CANDUS THOMSON
Outdoors

John Muir to shooting big game in Montana.
The National Rifle Associa-

thor's grandfather.

The *Washington Evening Star* reported that the 60 members were "prominent private citizens, members of both houses of Congress and distinguished officers in the military and the naval services."

While the elder Bridges wasn't a charter member, he became the most important one.

The first clubhouse on a bluff overlooking the Potomac River was a dive. After the second one burned down in 1903, the club seemed on the verge of collapse.



The National Rifle Association museum in Northern Virginia displays a letter dated March 20, 1961 from President Kennedy to then-NRA president John Schoolley, talking about the pride that comes with being a lifetime member of the group.

And not only was Kennedy a lifetime NRA member, but as a senator he applied for and received an M-1 rifle from the Army's Civilian Marksmanship Program to use in competition.

Closer to home, the late state comptroller Louis Goldstein loved to shoot turkeys and pheasants on the Western Shore and waterfowl on the Eastern Shore. Paul Sarbanes, Maryland's senior senator, knows his way around national parks and the summit of Backbone Mountain, the state's highest peak. William Donald Schaefer and Barbara Mikulski love to fish.

Unfortunately these days in Maryland we have too many public officials who would rather spend their time hacking away at tiny dimpled balls on over-priced, over-fertilized fields.

I mention all this because I just finished reading *The Bridges of Washington County*, a new book that traces the history of the Woodmont Rod and Gun Club just outside Hancock.

Author David Bridges, a Presbyterian minister in Virginia, uses the club history as the foundation of the story of his family from 1816, when Robert Ferguson Bridges came to Baltimore from Scotland, to the present.

While you may not want to read a 350-page family history, the story of the rod and gun club serves as a reminder that the sporting community used to matter a great deal to big-name political leaders and those who wanted to be seen with them.

Six presidents visited Woodmont: Garfield, Arthur, Harrison, Cleveland, Hoover and Teddy's cousin, Franklin.

Babe Ruth shot turkeys and pheasants there, as did heavy-weight boxing champ Gene Tunney, golfer Bobby Jones and the radio stars of *Amos 'n' Andy*.

That's not a bad guest list for a spot that seems out of the way today, even with 1-68 just five miles from the front door.

Back then, it cost \$3,500 to join the club and \$165 in annual dues to stay in. But for the rich and famous, that was a small price to pay to, paraphrase the Wizard of Oz, "confer, converse and otherwise hobnob" with their brother money bags.

Woodmont was founded in 1870 and had as members a "combination of people and places far too improbable for the taste of a fiction writer," according to Henry Bridges, the au-

seemed on the verge of collapse.

In 1908, Bridges stepped in and reorganized Woodmont with him as secretary. He next set about designing a new lodge to stand where No. 2 did and raising the construction money.

Work began in 1927 and was completed three years later. It's the building you'll see today: an imposing stone and timber structure with a broad front porch. The cavernous entrance hall is flanked by a dining room that can seat 150 and a lounge of equal size filled with original Audubon prints and hundreds of animal mounts. Upstairs, the club has overnight accommodations for 35 guests.

By the time it reopened, the club had a national reputation as a playground for the rich. A wildlife magazine reported, "The members, who are mostly millionaires, are ready and willing to furnish funds at all times to maintain the area. ... It is estimated that the aggregate wealth of the 60 members of the club is at least \$800 million."

However, Bridges was not satisfied with providing a hunting and fishing preserve, his grandson writes.

The businessman started a game farm, breeding wild turkeys and a meatier variety of white-tailed deer. By 1931, the two pairs of birds on the property had grown to 1,400 and the mega-deer weighed up to 315 pounds.

Ever the promoter, Bridges sent his super beasts to the White House for Christmas dinners, and presidents responded with gushing thanks.

David Bridges includes a 1943 letter from Stephen Early, FDR's secretary, to his grandfather that has a certain zany quality to it:

"Because of certain very rigid restrictions imposed regarding receipt of food stuff at the White House, I suggest that the turkeys be addressed to me and sent to me at my home address — 7704 Morningside Dr., Washington, DC, and please do not put my title on the address label. In this way I can give them to the President and he is sure to get them. This is strictly confidential."

Oh, yeah, and the armed guards at the door aren't going to notice that 20-pound bulge under your suit jacket.

Roosevelt was the last president to visit Woodmont. By the late 1950s, the club had lost Bridges to cancer and the spirit of the hunt to modern diversions. In 1985, the membership was just 20.

In 1995, the club and its 3,420 acres were bought by the Department of Natural Resources for \$3.1 million. It was a natural addition to the 2,600-acre Side-

ling Hill Wildlife Management Area next door.

These days, the state operates Woodmont under a cooperative agreement with a chapter of the Isaac Walton League. The site is used to teach hunting to youngsters and women, and at certain times of the year the public can hunt at a place once dubbed "the millionaires club."

Maybe I'm wrong, but I'll bet Henry Bridges would still feel right at home.

David Bridges' book is available at www.dma-zon.com.

SUN STAFF

JOURNAL

Biking

Thursday: Learn basic bike maintenance at a free seminar at REI/Timonium, 63 West Aylesbury Road, 7 p.m.-8:30 p.m. Information: 410-252-5920.

Fishing

Tuesday: Capt. Carmel Libercci III of Fallston will discuss techniques and tactics on the upper bay at a meeting of the Northwest chapter of the Maryland Saltwater Sportfisherman's Association, 7:30 p.m., Pebbles Pub, 700 Security Blvd.

Hiking

Today: Hike 5-7 miles in the Avalon area of Patapsco Valley State Park with the Mountain Club of Maryland. Meet at Catonsville Park and Ride #3, 195 and South Rolling Road at 12:30 p.m. Bring lunch. Information: 410-536-1656 before 10 p.m.

Wednesday: Ridge walking and a little bushwhacking in Patapsco Valley State Park's Daniels area, led by the Mountain Club of Maryland. View Backfall road "Mold Main" ruins. Call 410-788-6626 for details.

Saturday: Seven easy-paced miles on the Appalachian Trail, from Fox Gap to the Washington Monument and back, with the Greater Baltimore chapter of the Sierra Club. A 600-foot elevation change. Bring lunch. Meet at the Giant/Wal-Mart parking lot, U.S. 1 and Rolling Road, at 9:45 a.m. Information: 410-752-0104 before 9 p.m.

Saturday: Take a history hike on the Mill Race Trail in Patapsco Valley State Park, 10 a.m. Details: 410-737-0451.

Shows, seminars and banquets

Saturday, next Sunday: View the works of 40 carvers and artists at the Hove de Grace Decoy Museum's 14th annual Duck Fair. On museum grounds, 215 Giles St. Free. Saturday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m.; Sunday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Information: 410-939-3739.

Items for the *Outdoors Journal* may be mailed to *Outdoors Editor*, The Baltimore Sun, 501 N. Calvert St., Baltimore, MD 21278-0001. Please include time, date and location of events, as well as a short description of planned activities and a telephone number for more information. Please mail listings four weeks before the date of the event.

To read an expanded *Outdoors Journal*, go to www.sunspot.net/sports/outdoors.