

# Recalling Quail Hunting in Chatham County

*By Margaret Hamlet Bingham, Oct 2023*

Growing up in the 1950s and early 1960s in Chatham County, I always associated Thanksgiving Day with two events: a family meal and the opening day of quail season. The start of the Thanksgiving meal was timed to when my dad, Curtis T. Hamlet, would be back from a day of quail hunting. This sport was a team event for him and his hunting buddies—his brother Dorsey Hamlet and his first cousin Harvey Brinkley (both of Durham) and his good friend Layton “Partner” Herndon of Bynum. Curtis had grown up in the sport, hunting mostly in Baldwin Township of Chatham County. His father, William T. Hamlet, hunted quail and trained bird dogs in the early 1900s. Quail hunting was a Hamlet tradition.

In 2021, after my brother, Fred T. Hamlet, passed away and the family was sorting his papers and vast collection of newspaper clippings, I discovered that the family interest in quail hunting had continued when we found an article that he had written on the Hickory Mountain Hunting (Gun) Club. Fred had always had a wide interest in the history of Chatham County, especially the Hickory Mountain area. Even though he was not a quail hunter, his interest in county history and his exposure to quail hunting growing up must have led him to visit Mrs. Rosser (Alex) Cockman to talk with her about the Hickory Mountain Hunting (Gun) Club. Below is his article that was based on his visit with Mrs. Cockman and touring the Hickory Mountain Hunting Club’s clubhouse next door to her home on Alex Cockman Road. The article was published in *The Chatham Record*, August 5, 1976, as part of the Pittsboro Bicentennial celebration. The two *Chatham Record* clippings about the hunt club are my additions.

The description of the Hickory Mountain Hunting Club activities that Mrs. Cockman shared with Fred brings to life a different Chatham County than the one we know now. Today few quail are in the fields for bird dogs to flush and it is difficult to find open fields needed for quail hunting. If you have never experienced bird dogs “working” a field searching for a covey of quail, then maybe this article will bring to life that bit of yesteryear in Chatham County.

## Hickory Mountain Hunting Club

By Fred T. Hamlet

As with most things on Hickory Mountain, the Hickory Mountain Hunting Club can be traced to the Alstons. In the early 1900s, quail, always plentiful on Hickory Mountain, attracted numerous hunters from New York City down to Aspen Hall. "Uncle George" Eubanks, who worked for Mr. Lacy Alston, handled the dogs for these Northern industrialists and guided them about Hickory Mountain.

One hunting season, probably the 1907 season, a group of "Yankee" bird hunters from Aspen Hall rode up on young Alex Cockman on Hickory Mountain. The hunters, always anxious for one more "point," asked young Alex if he knew where there was a covey of birds. Alex replied that he "sure did," and from that inauspicious beginning, Alex Cockman's hunting club grew to include such industrial magnates as Frances DuPont, I. DuPont de Nemours, Isaac Fogg, Atlas Ponder, and others.

### Cockman House

About 1920, the hunters began looking for other lodging quarters on Hickory Mountain. (Walter Siler married Lydia Alston in 1920 and moved into Aspen Hall; this may account for the hunters' search for other quarters.) The hunters spent one winter in a home near Aspen Hall, then told Alex Cockman that, if new quarters were not found for them, their annual hunt would have to be discontinued.

So, Alex began building a large, two-story house on 107 acres deeded to him by his father. Mrs. Cockman recalls that some of the volunteer workers couldn't drive a straight nail, but the house, complete with indoor plumbing, was finished in time for hunting season. The new house not only was distinguished by its indoor plumbing but also by the bathtub shipped to Hickory Mountain from New York City by the hunters.

In 1922, Alex Cockman and Sarah Rosser Ferguson were married and, for the next 16 years (throughout the Depression), they shared their home with the hunters each year from Thanksgiving to February 15.

## Cockman Stars In Sports Pictures

Big Sound-Picture Outfit Directed by Jack Eaton Makes Hunting Movies on Cockman and Woody Places.

It is estimated that six million people will see, in 4,000 theatres, sport scenes taken in Chatham county last week. The star of the cast is Alex Cockman of the Hickory Mountains Shooting Club, owned by rich New Yorkers. The Club's dogs also starred. However, the real marksman of the occasion was Mrs. Downing, a northern sportsman who seldom misses a shot at a flying bird.

Jack Eaton, nationally known director, was in charge of the six-ton outfit that took talkie-pictures of the hunting scenes. However, Grantland Rice, America's authority on sports, is the big boss of the sports movie corps, though he himself was not present. There were about thirty of the first kind of dogs in the field.

The state's conservation commission had given permission to shoot birds out of the legal season and had furnished about thirty birds, which were "planted" in an appropriate position to enable the dogs and hunters to show off at their best. Alex did most of the talking, as he directed the work of the dogs, and his voice will be heard and his smiling countenance seen in four thousand theatres and by an estimated total audience of 6,000,000 people, in all parts of the country. But we fear Alex will not be able to see all the presentations, though you may count upon his seeing just about all in fifty miles of Pittsboro.

Few of the birds were killed, as the hunters went through the motions of the deadly, and blank shots were registered later, with recovery of birds by the dogs.

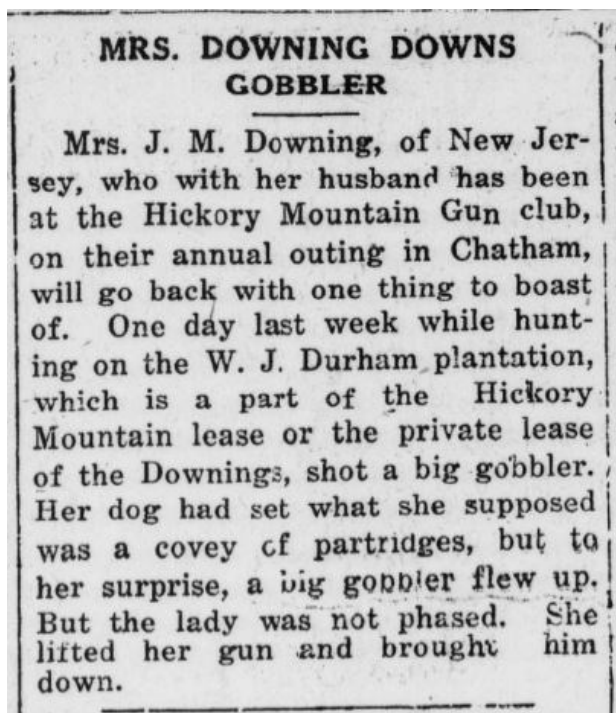
The outfit left Chatham Thursday for Augusta, Ga., where reels of Bobby Jones, champion golf player, in action were to be made. Mr. Eaton said that the reels made here were the best hunting scenes made by the Grantland Rice corps. Among the interested observers, and probably participants, was Mr. J. T. Johnson, of Aberdeen.

## Bird Season: Hunting on Horseback

The annual hunting ritual began each Thanksgiving with Alex Cockman meeting the Seaboard RR train in Sanford. There four hunters would disembark the train and load into his Willis jeep for a week of quail hunting on Hickory Mountain. Thereafter, Alex Cockman would deposit four hunters in Sanford on Saturday and pick up four more the next day. These hunters would spend the next six days roaming the 40,000 acres which the Club leased from local landowners. (Local landowners were permitted to hunt their leased lands from the 20<sup>th</sup> of December until January 1 of each year.)

The hunters would hunt on horseback, dismounting to get a shot when their dogs pointed. "Uncle Nath" Alston handled these dogs in the field, as well as the hunters' horses. These dogs, reputed to be among the finest in the country, were kenneled and trained on Hickory Mountain by Alex Cockman and Lacy Womble. Mrs. Cockman recalls that they often boarded from 35 to 40 dogs each year while Lacy Womble frequently boarded another 25 to 30 dogs at his place up the road. Alex Cockman also kept five hound dogs to run turkeys in case snow prevented the hunters from riding after quail. (Chatham winters seldom quarantined these hunters; even in deep snows, the Cockman's two-horse wagon was hitched up to carry the erstwhile quail hunters in search of wild turkeys, also then plentiful on Hickory Mountain.)

In those early days there existed no limit on quail and the hunters, instead of cleaning their quail, would string up their kills in long lines to take back home for display. Anyone fortunate enough to kill a wild turkey would pluck a feather from his kill and stick it into the window sill at the lodge alongside his name and the date.



9 Feb 1928 Chatham Record

## The Club

The Hickory Mountain Hunting Club consisted of approximately 25 members, mostly industrialists from the Wilmington, Delaware area. These members frequently brought guests to Hickory Mountain; occasionally, the members would bring along their sons and, sometimes even their wives. (Mrs. Cockman recalls that at least one wife accompanied her husband on the hunt, dismounting to shoot with the men. On another occasion, the members secretly loaded one guest's shells with corn meal upon discovering that he had never fired a gun before.) The members and their guests also brought their own supplies in case of inclement weather; in the event these ran low they would make brief forays into Dr. McBane's drug store in Pittsboro

for cigarettes and Canada Dry sparkling water. For the most part however, the members and their guests (who would often return several times during a season) spent little time away from their Hickory Mountain retreat.

### Home Cooking

The hunters relished their visits to Hickory Mountain, if for no other reason, because of the sumptuous repasts served at the Cockman House. The Club's first cook, "Uncle Henry" Sellers, was reputedly one of the finest cooks in the country. Frank DuPont subsequently hired "Uncle Henry" and took him back to Wilmington, Delaware, to cook for the DuPont family. Later, "Uncle Henry" returned to North Carolina serving as head chef at the Durham Country Club for years. After DuPont stole "Uncle Henry" away from the Club, Mary Alston, "Uncle Nath's" wife, took up the cooking chores for the Club.

### Hunting Lodge



Cockman Brothers' Hickory Mountain Gun Club lodge.

In 1938, Alex Cockman built the Club's red hunting lodge which stands in the shadow of the "Big House." The hunting lodge was designed by a Delaware architect with Oriental rugs, furniture, etc., shipped to Hickory Mountain by rail. The cabin now occupied by Mrs. Cockman's grandson Steve, still contains pictures, plaques, and other evidence of the Club's heyday. The lodge consists of a large sitting room, two bedrooms, and a bath complete with a shower. (The Northern

executives insisted upon the installation of a shower.) The large sitting room contains a great fireplace which was continuously fired by "Uncle Nath." Above the mantle hangs a six-point stag as well as pictures of club members, dog handlers, Alex Cockman, Henry Cockman, Lacy Womble, and a lone Delaware Gun & Dog Championship ribbon, dated March, 1940.

The Northerners continued to come to their Club on Hickory Mountain through World War II and up until about 1955. Advancing age and declining health gradually diminished their numbers and, in the early 1950's, several Winston-Salem physicians gained admittance to the Club. Despite Alex Cockman's death in 1969, these hunters continue to come to Hickory Mountain to hunt quail in woods still posted by the Hickory Mountain Hunting Club.