



Tribute To A Man, His Hounds And His Legacy

*The Wolver Beagles owe their 100 years
in the field to founder C. Oliver Iselin Jr.*

BY BARBARA RIGGS



In April, the staff and hounds of the Wolver Beagles gathered around the plaque commemorating C. Oliver Iselin Jr.'s contributions: (from left) Whipper-in Richard McWade, the late M.B. Barbara McWade, M.B. Susan Mills Stone, Whipper-in Lydia Donaldson and Whipper-in Emily Southgate. BARBARA RIGGS PHOTO

At the National Beagle Club of America's Institute Farm in Aldie, Va., a large stone with a commemorative plaque pays tribute to one of its founding members. The inscription reads:

To the Memory of

*C. Oliver Iselin, Jr., M.B., 1888-1979,
Founder of the Wolver Hill Beagles*

*A Devoted Beagler for over Seven Decades,
His Foresight, Dedication and Generosity
Make These Grounds
His Monument
to the Sport We All Love.*

On the first day of the 2013 Beagle Pack Spring Trials, held at the Institute Farm, the then-masters of the Wolver Beagles, Susan Mills Stone and Barbara McWade, made a special visit to this memorial stone, along with hounds and staff, to pay respect to the man fellow beaglers called "The Captain." It was their way of celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Wolver Beagles as a recognized pack and honoring the memory of Capt. Iselin.

Decades before the Wolver Beagles were established, the Iselin name was synonymous with sporting excellence.

The captain's father and namesake, C. Oliver Iselin, was one of the most famed yachtsmen in the latter part of the 19th century, serving as syndicate manager for four yachts that represented the United States in successful defenses of the America's Cup between 1893 and 1907.

From an early age, the younger Iselin learned from his father about the level of commitment necessary, both financially and personally, to succeed in any sporting enterprise. Although he didn't follow his father's passion for sailing, Capt. Iselin became one of this country's leaders in the sport of beagling in the 20th century. He was one of the original five investors in the Institute Corporation that purchased

Institute Farm has been the home of the National Beagle Club since Capt. Iselin joined the original investors in 1916.



Susan Mills Stone is only the third master in the history of the Wolver Beagles. BARBARA RIGGS PHOTO

the 508-acre farm in 1916 for the benefit of the National Beagle Club, established in 1887 to improve field qualities and type in the beagle breed. He served as the club's president from 1942-1971, then continued as chairman of the board. He financed the building of the facilities at Institute Farm for the benefit of his fellow beaglers, to whom he was a mentor.

Iselin's accomplishments and his impact on the beagle breed are hard to quantify, but the memorial stone stands as an encompassing tribute to him.

More Beagles Than Books

The Wolver pack had its genesis in the early 1900s, when the younger Iselin began hunting hounds that were half-foxhound/half-beagle on his family's estate, Wolver Hollow, in Brookeville, N.Y. In 1908, he purchased his first group of pure beagles from two iconic Long Island sporting figures, H.C. Phipps, master of the Wheatley Beagles, and Raymond Belmont, master of the Belray Beagles. Three of these hounds—Belray Cromwell, full brother Belray Chancellor and Belray Cora—set the standard for the beagle type during



this era. Belray Chancellor was the 1912 Peterborough (England) champion, while Belray Cora won two classes at the 41st Annual Westminster Kennel Club Bench Show (N.Y.) in 1917. These hounds became the foundation for the future Wolver pack.

The epicenter of the beagling community in the early 20th century was in the northeast, particularly around Boston. So when Iselin left home to attend preparatory school at St. Mark's in Southborough, Mass., and later Harvard College in Cambridge, he didn't leave his beloved beagles behind.

In a June 1971 interview with Josiah Child published in *The Chronicle of the Horse*, Iselin recalled how he and several classmates would sneak out of the St. Mark's dormitory at 5 a.m. to hunt hounds. Sometimes they had to ask a maintenance employee to catch hounds in the hall outside the chapel as they were trying to find their huntsman, who was required to attend the 7:30 a.m. prayer service. When Iselin matriculated at Harvard in 1910, he moved his hounds to Marlborough, Mass., where they shared a kennel with Richard Gambrill's beagles. Together, they hunted the country between Cambridge and Marlborough.

Iselin recounted those bygone days with nostalgia during the 1971 interview: "After hunting, we would all gather at the Wayside Inn. Sometimes we hired an orchestra, and there was champagne and dancing. [We] certainly enjoyed ourselves while at college. I guess our interests were far more in beagles than in books."

► Saving The Farm

The challenge for many hunting organizations today is preserving the countryside for their sports. Susan Stone, who succeeded her husband in 2000 as master and huntsman, is conscious of Capt. C. Oliver Iselin's legacy to all beaglers. She's a dedicated steward of Institute Farm, not only because it's the home territory for the Wolver pack, but also because she feels responsible for preserving the property for the benefit of future generations of beaglers, just as Capt. Iselin did for her generation.

Stone is currently president of the Institute Corporation, the entity that holds the farm for the benefit and use of the National Beagle Club. She's also joined Betsy Park, joint-master of the Sandanona Hare Hounds (N.Y.), as co-chairman of the Building and Grounds Committee. One of their principal objectives has been to groom the land to provide a natural habitat for rabbits and other wildlife. An enclosure of 80 acres, named after Capt. Iselin, is one of the features built to foster and protect the area's healthy rabbit population.

Jessica Anderson, the new NBC president who's also the master and huntsman of the Old Chatham Foot Beagles (N.Y.), praised Park's and Stone's efforts to maintain a viable venue for beagling.

"Without their efforts, we wouldn't be able to run the trials [at Institute Farm]," she said.

Institute Farm has been a key venue for beaglers since 1915, and it remains the only site in the United States where the 48 recognized beagle and bassett packs convene to participate in spring and fall pack field trials.





While he was still at Harvard, Iselin made another important decision for the future of the Wolver Beagles when he hired the respected hound man Joe Powell to help care for his hounds and to serve as his whipper-in. Powell had been the professional huntsman at the Worcester Park Beagles in England, and he brought the experience needed to further the education of both Iselin and his hounds. During Powell's tenure, the National Beagle Club officially recognized the pack in 1913.

It was also during this decade that the quality of the homebred Wolver Beagles began to be noticed. In 1916, Wolver Barbara claimed a reserve championship at the Westminster show. And in 1919, the Wolver Beagles carried home the Westminster championship with Wolver Barmaid, a hound for whom Iselin was offered \$1,000 after her prestigious victory. When Iselin told Powell about the offer, Powell informed his boss that he would leave his employ if Barmaid were sold. That ended the discussion, and Barmaid remained in the Wolver kennels.

Although conformation in hounds is important, the ultimate goal for most masters is superior performance in the field. Huntsmen seek drive, voice and biddability as they develop a pack that will work consistently as a team. During the 10 years of the Iselin-Powell relationship, they built a respected pack

that embodied these qualities, qualities that have been sustained for more than a century.

The pack won the National Challenge Cup six years in succession between 1927 and 1932, a distinction that has never been repeated at the national field trials. When the Wolver pack, known for its tremendous voice and consistency, came to the field, it came ready to hunt.

Marriage And More

The relocation of the Wolver Beagles to Middleburg, Va., was the result of several factors.

In 1905, the Virginia Piedmont received national attention when Harry Worcester Smith instigated the famous Foxhound Match between American and English foxhounds. During the decade that followed, several prominent sporting families migrated to the Middleburg area to hunt, to race horses, to play polo, and to participate in other field sports.

The Wolver Beagles' entry in the inaugural National Field Trials held at the Institute Farm first brought Iselin to Virginia in 1915. He spent several weeks in Middleburg with the master of the Sir Sister Beagles, Chetwood Smith (brother of Harry Worcester Smith), hunting hounds every day while preparing for the competition, and he fell in love with the area.

Recalled Fred Stone, the second Wolver huntsman and M.B., "On the first hunt in the fall of 1972, [the captain] handed me his horn and asked me to hunt 'my hounds.' This was, of course, a very emotional moment for both of us."

PHOTO COURTESY OF SUSAN MILLS STONE

A year later, he became vested in the community when he helped finance the farm's purchase and helped establish the Institute Corporation for the NBC's benefit. In 1917, after attending officer's training, he was commissioned a U.S. Army captain and assigned to Ft. Meade, Md., north of Washington, D.C. He bought a property just north of Middleburg—property that would later become the Glenwood Park race course—and he kenneled the hounds there. Powell continued to care for the hounds, and Capt. Iselin joined them for hunting on weekends.

But it wasn't only field sports and the landscape that captivated the captain's attention. During this time, he met and married Elizabeth Brown, an avid foxhunter and beagle enthusiast. In 1920, they purchased a 500-acre parcel of land adjacent to Middleburg that had been the homestead of the Chinn family, the town's original landowner. The Iselins and the beagles moved to their



new farm, Wolver Hill, in 1922.

The captain hunted the pack formally with a regular fixture card for about 10 years, after which he maintained the hounds as a private pack for the next four decades. The Wolver Beagles became the first recognized pack to originate from Virginia.

The captain's son, C. Oliver Iselin III, lives today at Wolver Hill. Although he grew up following his father's beagles, he was unable to succeed his father as master and huntsman due to career obligations in the foreign service that stationed him overseas. Still, he fondly recalls his father's hunting days. He describes his father as "soft-spoken," but a "great hound man who had extensive knowledge of the bloodlines and hunting ability of each of his hounds."

Similarly, Josiah Child wrote, "[The captain] had an easy, shy manner, which was appreciated by all who came into contact with him. We all watched him in the fields with his hounds. He always spoke to them in a low, gentle voice. His whistle at checks kept them together. As he grew older, he and his hounds got better."

For many years, Fred (right) and Susan Stone hunted the Wolver Beagles together.



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KIM GRAVES

kmgraves@cns.umass.edu
Equine Search R46368
Stockbridge School of Agriculture
University of Massachusetts
80 Campus Way
Amherst, MA 01003

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In 1932 Capt. Iselin won Wolver's sixth consecutive National Challenge Cup.

Dawn Of A New Era

In a letter to *Hounds and Hunting* in 1980, Frederick Stone, who first served as a whipper-in to Capt. Iselin in 1970, described how the master and staff prepared for the biannual field trials at Institute Farm: "As often as seven days a week (rain, shine, drought, sleet, hail or snow), he would take alternate four couples into the field to hunt. Gradually each pack would mold into a team, each hound's strengths and weaknesses known to him personally. As each pack's strengths changed, he would substitute from one pack to the other to bring forth the one four-couple of exceptional strength. This is the pack from which the two-couple pack was drawn. The extraordinary 'Wolver cry' evolved from the joining of the four-couple packs into an eight-couple, competitive and ready to hunt."

Stone also recalled his transition to huntsman of the Wolver Beagles: "On the first hunt in the fall of 1972, he handed me his horn and asked me to hunt 'my hounds.' This was, of course, a very emotional moment for both of us. His simple advice: 'Don't press the hounds' and 'Let them run and hunt.' [He] never chastised or criticized my handling of his hounds. In his calm and knowledgeable way, he viewed each hunt as a means of encouraging my



For more than 70 years, C. Oliver Iselin Jr. shaped the sport of beagling.

personal growth as huntsman."

Capt. Iselin often followed the hunt in the hound van. When he was no longer able to follow, he would invite Stone to the house to discuss individual hounds and their hunting efforts that day. What amazed Stone during these debriefings were the captain's recollections of specific hunting country.

Stone wrote, "He would pick up my description and ask, 'Did the rabbit cross the creek?', or 'Did it go under the barn?', or 'Did the hounds mark well at that hole?', and other specific questions of a particular area hunted."

Until his death in 1979, Capt. Iselin retained his keen interest in all aspects of his pack. Stone became the master after the founder's death.

Both Stone and his wife, Susan Mills Stone, devoted themselves to maintaining the quality pack the captain developed for more than 70 years, so their priority has been to breed and develop hounds with hunting drive. Their efforts have been validated over the last 25 years by significant field trial victories, the most recent in the five-couple Best Hunt at the National Beagle Club's 2011 Spring Field Trials.

When asked about competitive successes, Susan, who succeeded her husband in 2000 as master and huntsman, is reluctant to talk about

specific victories. She recalled that Capt. Iselin was always humble about his accomplishments with the Wolver pack, and she wants to honor that history.

Since its recognition in 1913, the pack has known only three masters/huntsmen: Capt. Iselin, Frederick Stone and Susan Mills Stone, a fact that Betsy Park, the highly respected master and huntsman of the Sandanona Hare Hounds (N.Y.), finds extraordinary.

Park, who's hunted foxhounds, bassets and beagles for 47 years in Millbrook, N.Y., explained, "Private packs come and go, because continuity is in short supply. It takes tremendous commitment, dedication and passion to keep a pack going. To maintain a pack for over 100 years requires long-range planning, vision, energy and funds."

The captain would likely have been proud of the way his successors have maintained the pack's continuity, reputation and stature in the beagling community, all the tribute he could have asked of them.

The masters, however, had one additional honor to bestow on their founder during this centennial year: They appointed the captain's granddaughter, Julie Iselin Diehl, as joint-master, continuing the family tradition as the Wolver Beagles begin their second century of hunting. 🐾

► The Oldest Packs

Only eight of the 48 beagle or basset packs in the United States have shown sport continuously for more than 50 years. They are:

- 1897: Sir Sister Beagles (N.H.)
- 1913: Wolver Beagles (Va.)
- 1924: Ardrossan Beagles (Pa.)
- 1924: Nantucket-Trewaryn Beagles (Va.)
- 1952: Skycastle French Hounds (Pa.)
- 1953: Tewksbury Foot Bassets (N.J.)
- 1953: Old Chatham Foot Beagles (N.Y.)
- 1961: Middleburg-Orange County Beagles (Va.)