

## Montezuma Hills Sheepdog Trials

You cannot talk about the Montezuma Hills sheepdog trials without talking about the Hamiltons-- Mrs. Eva Hamilton and her sons, Neil, Burrows, and David—for they were the instigators, as it were, in 1946 or so.

It started with a tragedy. On Friday, November 22, 1943, when 15 year-old Burrows was playing football at the Rio Vista High School, the whole family was at hand to watch except their father, Neil, who had come home early and gone to bed because he was sick. Near the end of the game, 11 year-old David decided to walk home and finish his homework. As he opened the door, his father called downstairs to him: “Call the doctor.” And thus ensued the calamity. Mr. Hamilton died two days before Thanksgiving from an aneurism, leaving Mrs. Hamilton a widow with two ranches to run and three young boys to raise. And this was a time when women did not pick up the work their rancher husbands had left—not in California, anyway, where the scale of ranching and farming was extensive and large from the very beginning.

Mrs. Hamilton had a good head for business, however, and she accepted the challenge. With her boys still in school (Neil Jr. left the next year for the University of California at Davis), she stepped into her new role and worked with her two employees to make the family business prosper. And in 1946 she bought the Hoyt Ranch on Birds Landing Road. It was large and distinguished by an olive orchard of several hundred trees—trees that amused locals because they had never produced olives, the original planter in the 1880’s having planted the wrong variety. What it did produce was lovely shade in the spring and hot summer, and it was a perfect place for picnics and watching sheepdogs round up sheep.

There had probably been a few dog trials at the Hoyt place before 1946 but those trials did not acquire the notoriety that subsequent trials did. The Rio Vista Farm Bureau, with Mrs. Hamilton’s blessing, sponsored the first trial in 1946 or 1947 with the intent of raising money to build a meeting place for Rio Vista and Birds Landing farmers. And they continued year after year.

Everyone pitched in at the dog trials on the Hoyt Place. One man contacted ranchers he knew with good dogs, someone else organized the placing of long tables under the olive trees. Harvey McDougal, famous cattle rancher and feedlot proprietor in Birds Landing, donated hamburger and steaks from Solano Meat in Dixon. Lyle Fraser of Fraser Food in Rio Vista donated the beans and bread and makings of salad. Someone else cooked the Portuguese beans. Mel from Birds Landing ran the beer concession. Admission was just a few dollars, and all locals came. Advertising was by word of mouth.

The sheep dog trials were wildly successful. Some years nationally famous dogs were featured but mostly they were well known dogs from Solano County. In those days, Solano County was the second largest sheep producing county in California, which was itself the second largest sheep producing state in the Union. The sheepdog trials

continued well into the late 1950's or early 1960's. The Rio Vista Farm Bureau surpassed their goal of raising funds for a building and decided instead to create a scholarship fund which still exists today.

In a sense, success killed the dog trials at the Hoyt Ranch. One year three tour buses arrived from San Francisco, bus doors opening to spill drunken passengers clutching beer bottles out the doors. This did not sit well with Mrs. Hamilton, who was if anything a lady. And by the time attendees numbered close to 2,000, it was decided to take a break.

Rio Vistans continued to clamor for a reprise of the dog trials, and periodically in the 1970's or 1980's one would be organized. But the original organizers were older, creakier, or more involved in other things, and the event never resumed with the same regularity and force.

In the 1990's and 2000's the Solano County Wool Growers held periodic trials at the Hoyt Place, but that attempt too died out.

Last year saw the first dog trials at the Dan McCormack ranch on Montezuma Hills Road. The event was sponsored by the National Border Collie Association, McCormack Sheep and Grain, and Rio Vista Soroptimist. This event is planned to be held annually for three days in late March or early April. This year the dates are March 27, 28, and 29. Admission will require tickets previously purchased. Ticket sales will start in early March. Information about the trials will be published in the local newspapers, on posters, and on Rio Vista Soroptimist and McCormack Sheep and Grain websites.