

THE HISTORY:

Long Distance Riding on the Biltmore Estate

by Elizabeth McLean, Cheryl Newman, and Stagg Newman

When George Vanderbilt created the 125,000 acre Biltmore Estate in the 1890s, horses were the primary mode of transportation. Thus, long distance riding has been integral to the history of the Biltmore Estate from the beginning.

Vanderbilt had constructed the 16.3 mile "Shut-In Trail" through tunnels of rhododendron that climbed from the French Broad River Valley to Mt. Pisgah. George and his guests rode the Shut-In Trail from the Biltmore House to his Buck Springs Hunting Lodge. The trail, now for hiking only, has close to 5000 feet of total climbing and 2000 feet of descent and is now a section of the North Carolina's Mountains-to-Sea Trail. Today the trail hosts of one of the toughest foot races in the country, the Shut-In Ridge Run.

George Vanderbilt modeled his plan for the estate on the Chateaux with working farms in Europe. He wanted the estate to be a sustainable agriculture business guided by science. He founded the first school of forestry, now the site of the National Forest Service's Cradle of Forestry, where horses provided the power for logging. After George Vanderbilt's death in 1914 his wife sold 86,700 acres to the federal government for Pisgah National Forest.

As horses transitioned from a logistical travel necessity to an athletic leisure pursuit, the family has continued to foster equestrian partnerships. Mimi Cecil, the wife of Bill Cecil, Sr., the grandson of George Vanderbilt, created the Biltmore 3-Day 100-Mile Competitive Trail Ride (CTR) in 1964. She created the ride to recognize and foster equestrian skills and demonstrate the value of long distance riding to all disciplines and breeds. That ride continued until 2004. Mimi's and Bill's son Bill Cecil, Jr, the current CEO of The Biltmore Company, completed the 3-day 100 at the age of 10. Bill at the time became the youngest person to do a 3-day 100 in the country. Mimi sponsored the ride for 40 years.

The CTR had quirks that took advantage of Biltmore Estate amenities. For example, new riders were instructed by ride veteran Web Coleman to carry \$10 the second day. That was so riders could purchase an ice cream cone to eat at the outdoor Dairy Bar while horses grazed. That had to be built in the time plan for the ride. Riders had fun!

AERC Hall of Fame (HoF) rider Steve Rojek and his spouse Dinah Rojek starting doing the ride in the mid-1970's and then competed every year through 2004. Both won championship ribbons.

Web Coleman for many years rode the legendary Arabian-Belgian cross appropriately named Arabel. Arabel on the top 3-day 100-mile horse in the country 3 times over a decade and retired

with over 10,000 miles of CTR and AERC endurance. Arabel completed four AERC 1-day 100 mile rides, including the tough Old Dominion and Vermont 100s.

One of the authors' favorite memories of the Biltmore CTR was in 1989. Arabel came up the longest climb with a carrot hanging from a stick tucked under her bridle. Web said to the judges that he just had to provide incentive to keep the old mare going. Arabel through her look clearly said to the judges: "Ignore the embarrassment on my back. I have carried him through 10,000 miles. I will get him through this ride even if he, the rider, is not fit to continue."

AERC's first Double Decade horse and Hall of Fame recipient Ramegwa Drubin did the 3-day CTR 10 times.

Anne Ayala, the trail master for the Biltmore 3-Day CTR for many years, started the Biltmore AERC Endurance rides in 1994 with a 100-mile with 28 entries, a 50-mile with 57 entries, and a 30-mile with 28 entries. That first year AERC HoF rider Steve Rojek won the 100-miler on his Anglo-Arab Peregrine ("Hawk") with his wife Dinah placing second on Asterix. Hawk earned Best Condition (BC).

Steve Rojek, Claude Brewer, and Patsy Gowan have each ridden Biltmore almost every year since 1994.

For her partnership with her horse and her service to the sport, Anne and her horse Beau were later honored with the AERC Pard'ners Award. The Anne Ayala Scholarship given to an AERC Junior or Young Rider each year is named for her.

Anne introduced Federation Equestrian Internation (FEI) competitions to Biltmore in 2001. During the 2000s the 100 mile ride drew 50 to 80 competitors including numerous international riders. Jayel Super, ridden by Stagg Newman, who later became the trail master / course designer for the Biltmore rides, earned the most wins and BCs, doing so in 2001, 2002, and 2004.

In the mid-2000s Anne groomed Cheryl Newman to be the next ride manager. Cheryl has now managed the ride for over 15 years. Cheryl grew the ride to a two-day format with 6 events. In 2019 the combined entries had grown to almost 300 starters, the most entries for any AERC event in the country. Nicki Meuten riding Not Tonight went under ten hours by 1 minute to set the Biltmore Course 100-mile record in 2013. The ride became a truly international ride, typically drawing 10 to 20 international riders from a half-dozen countries.

Elizabeth McLean, the Director of the Biltmore Equestrian Activities, LLC, now co-manages the ride with Cheryl Newman.

The distance roster for 2026 has 25, 30, 50, 55, 65, 75 and 100-mile events. Furthermore, Biltmore will host the AERC Young Rider National Championship, a 75-mile ride, and the AHA

Region 12 2026 100-mile Championship. Ken Marcella will be Head Control Judge. The longer AERC open rides will be held in conjunction with FEI rides.

Come join the competition and fun at the 2026 Biltmore Challenge! Riders, volunteers, crew: all are welcome!

Fun Attractions at Biltmore

Non-equestrian attractions:

Tour the Biltmore House

Tour the gardens, grounds, and shops

Visit Antler Hill Village

Visit the winery

Outdoor activities include hiking, biking, sporting clays, river float trips, fly fishing, Land Rover driving experiences, and more

Equestrian Activities:

Carriage rides and guided trail rides at the Deerpark Carriage and Trail Ride Barns:

biltmore.com or 828-225-6398

Bring your horse for a day or weekend at Biltmore Equestrian Center: equestrian@biltmore.com or 828-225-1454

Stay at the Inn on the Biltmore Estate (biltmore.com/stay/the-inn) or the Village Hotel (biltmore.com/stay/village-hotel). Please go to biltmore.com for full information and availability. Some attractions operate on limited hours seasonally.