

If you ride, be sure to thank a volunteer

By Laura Hayes, AERC Vice President

The Hornswaggle Hill ride was last weekend (May 8) in the mountainous but sleepy little section of southwestern New York where I reside. Good friends organized it and marked trails, and my husband was head control judge. I was in charge of cooking dinner for everyone.

It was a happy, "family" affair with lots of people pitching in to help. So many, actually, that the volunteers seemed to outnumber the participants. The ride manager's husband was filling water troughs, my 85-year-old mother was dishing out lunch from the perpetual pot of stew, and the timers and pulse takers were ever-ready with their skills. Ham radio operators were stationed around the course to keep riders from taking wrong turns and to alert base camp to any problems anyone might have on the trail. Volunteers. Many volunteers who don't even ride horses.

The volunteers really did outnumber the participants as the weather turned bad later in the day and those who rode fast or short loaded up and headed for home.

The rain storm raged, trees fell in the forest, and muddy horses and intrepid riders jogged in off the trail for the vet check and back out for their final loop. The volunteers held their posts. By now the stew was lukewarm because the flame wouldn't stay lit on the gas cooker, and everyone was soaked to the skin.

The women clutching clipboards under their ponchos with one hand and holding down the tent with the other were not even endurance riders. Many, judging by the embroidery on their jackets and hats, were members of a local recreational riding club that frequents the area trails. They stayed at their posts until all the riders were back safely and vetted through.

The operative word here is "volunteer."

The next day, more volunteers cleaned up camp and tidied the spots that some riders failed to clean in order to satisfy the State Park's requirements for using the campground. Later another set of friends will head out on the muddy trails to pull ribbons.

It took a village to put on this ride. Sixty riders, myself included, were treated to safe, marked trails with beautiful views, good parking and camping with potties and horse water and homemade food. There was veterinary care and the safety net that goes with that, and a national organization to track their accomplishments and provide liability insurance -- governed, by the way, by volunteers.

Not all rides are completely volunteer-run, I realize that. But even at many rides that are more professionally managed, many of the trails we enjoy are built and maintained by unpaid workers.

It would behoove us as riders to appreciate and cultivate the people who allow us to ride, have competitive events and enjoy our sport. If they disappear through neglect or indifference, we will find ourselves without the pleasure of endurance riding as an organized sport.

Never, never fail to say thank you. Those words go a long way toward offering a feeling of satisfaction to those who don't have to be there. Hail those wonderful people who gave their weekend so we could ride! You are our heroes!