

# The Caretaker

A Profile of Namon Corley

by Lois Britten

If you jog the open trails in the Hitchcock Woods, thank Namon Corley. If you gallop over the soft turf along the Cathedral Aisle fences, thank Namon Corley. If you enjoy a quiet walk down Devil's Backbone or canter fences on the emerald grass at the Horse Show in the Woods, thank Namon Corley. Above all, if you hunt with The Aiken Hounds, thank Namon Corley. No matter how you enjoy the beauty of Aiken's crown jewel, take a minute now and thank another of Aiken's true treasures—the Hitchcock Woods' caretaker, Namon Corley.

Namon Corley has been taking care of the Woods for a full 48 years—from Monday, March 30, 1959, to the present day.

"I remember exactly what day I started," Namon explains, "because my daughter, Essie Mae, was born the Sunday night before." (Namon and his wife Elease have five girls and one boy.) "That next day I was at work. I never left since."

Back in 1959, Namon's predecessor, Cleveland Heath (for whom "Cleveland's Line" is named) had hired Namon for two weeks to help him prepare for a party at the Tea Cottage and get ready for the Horse Show in the Woods. Namon's work ethic and energy were so apparent that Cleveland offered him permanent employment. "Those two weeks turned into 48 years," Namon says with a smile.

Namon only had about a year to learn from his mentor before Cleveland Heath was tragically killed.

"It was when Hurricane Grace came through," Namon explains. "One tree was leaning on another, and when they cut that first tree it fell away from us. But the other tree, the one that was leaning, fell the other way and hit Cleveland right on the head and killed him. There was a big fork in the tree branches and I ended up standing right in the fork. I was only two feet away from him." From that day forward, Namon has cared for the Woods. Hard work, for sure. But Namon, young, strong and dedicated, was the perfect man for the job.

Namon was raised by his grandparents, James and Alice Hampton Corley, on their farm on Route 302 in Aiken.

"That road used to be called Route 215. A lot of people don't know that," he says. "The one thing I learned on the farm that I still use today was I learned to work, and to work hard. I like it that way. I like to work by myself, and I know how to work hard. Aren't many who can work as hard as I can."

And it is hard work. Namon is the man who keeps every trail passable. "The ice storm about five years ago was the worst," he says. "You could hardly even walk down the drive to the South Boundary gate. No way could a car get down it. The whole





**Above and Right:** Namon (the hound) breaks first on the scent during the 2007 Master of Fox Hounds Association Centennial Hound Trials meet in January. Namon won the competition, making him a Centennial Champion Hound.

**Bottom:** Namon (the man) playing jazz at the MHFA cocktail party at the Aiken Center For the Arts.

Woods was broken apart. That was the worst, and I had no extra help. I cleared it myself.”

At least he had a power saw to help him, he comments. “Me and Cleveland just had a crosscut hand saw, the kind with two handles. When Cleveland passed, I still had to saw through the trees by hand. I was glad when that power saw came.”

Maintaining trails and clearing trees are far from Namon’s only duties. He cuts the grass, checks for washouts after hard rains and prepares the showgrounds for the Aiken Horse Show, seeding and tending the show ring’s glorious green rye. Namon knows the rhythm of the seasons and understands what each one requires. “It’s just like you know what needs done in your house. I know what to do and when to do it.”

And where would The Aiken Hounds hunters be without Namon? He keeps the hunt lines clean, maintains and repairs all the fences and even lays the scent for the drag hunt. “It’s fox urine,” he explains. I put it on old towels and drag them along the trails wherever the Master tells me the hunt’s going to go that day. I’d walk maybe a couple of hours to lay the line.”

“Now I drag the rags behind a tractor. But sometimes I still walk it. The funny thing about it is that the Master draws it all out on a map. Then he or she calls me on the phone to tell me the route for the hunt. They think I’m looking at a map, too, but I’m not. I don’t need a map. They just tell me ‘We’re going up the Border Line to the Loop, through Rabbit Valley to the Ridge Mile Track.’ I know exactly where everything is.”

“They been runnin’ after that fox for 48 years,” he adds with obvious delight. “Still haven’t caught him.” He laughs out loud. “I am the fox!”

One of Namon’s greatest joys is the success of the foxhound that bears his name. “Namon” won the regional hound trials this January in Aiken, making him a Centennial Champion Hound. It only seems appropriate. Two Namons, each a champion, each a tireless worker, each the best at what he does.

Namon Corley, looking barely 55, turns 72 this June. His attention to the care and tending of the Hitchcock Woods has kept both his mind and his body in remarkably fine fettle. “I can still outwork any man out there!” he exclaims. Then he quietly offers a final thought.

“I kept the Woods going, all those years. A lot of people don’t know that.” Well, Namon, now they do. God bless, and thank you. 🐾

