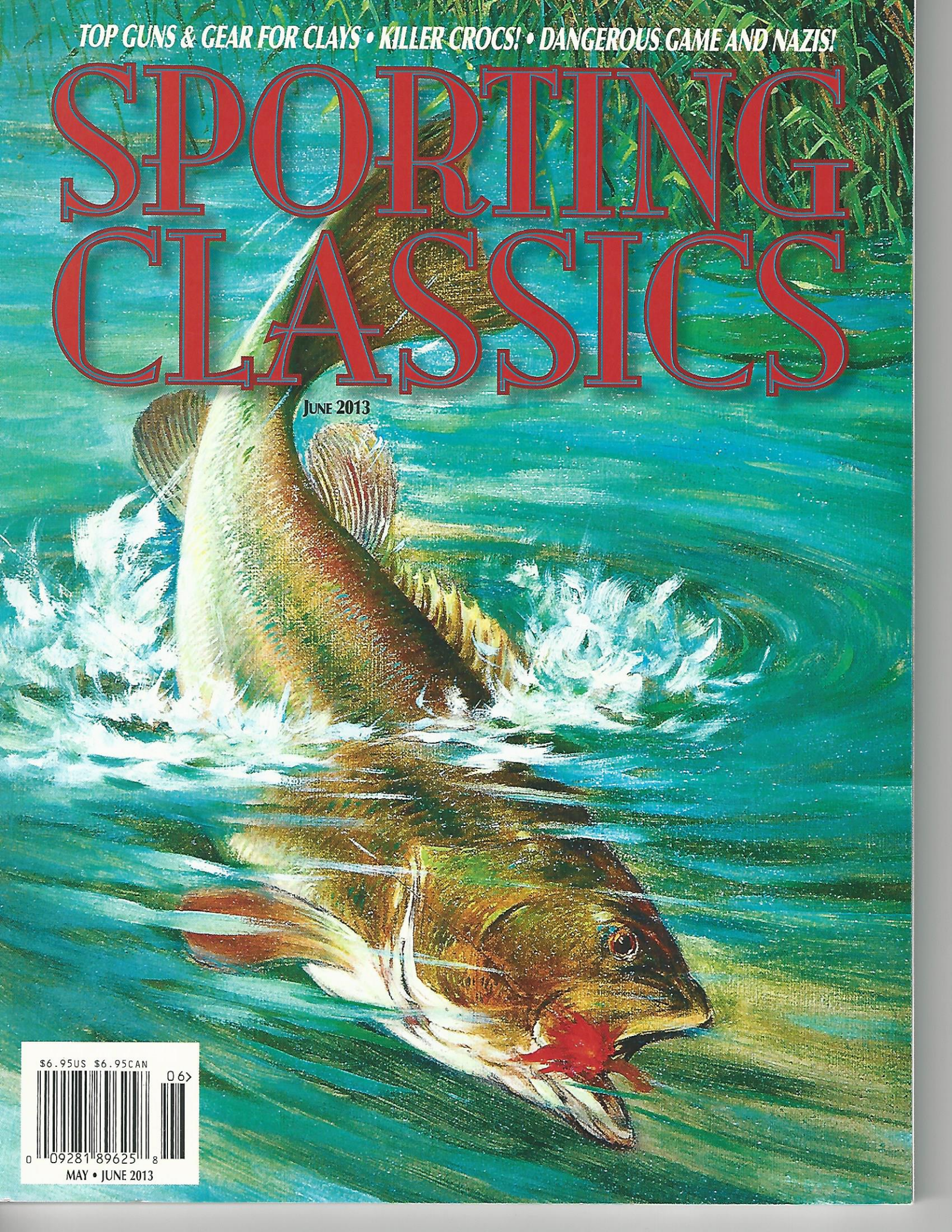


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# Travel

By John Ross

*Fishing and shooting at Biltmore estate is like being transported to an era when gentility reigned on the lands and waters of the Southern Appalachians.*

**Y**ou'd been chums with George Washington Vanderbilt III since boyhood in New York City. Your family's mansion was just up 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue from that of his father, William H. Vanderbilt, who'd inherited and expanded much of the Commodore's railroad empire. Earlier this year George invited you to a hunt on his estate in Asheville, North

Carolina, to which he brought his new wife Edith four years earlier in 1898.

George, you know, was not much of a hunter or angler. He preferred books and collecting, and his chateau of 250 rooms were plush with paintings, sculptures and other *objet d'art*. Though he would become one of the nation's leading philanthropists for conservation, he knew that his friends



enjoyed a good day afield. He'd seen to it that his 125,000-acre estate was well stocked with pheasants, turkey, quail and deer and that its ponds teemed with bass and trout. He'd hired rangers, wardens really, to protect his game and fish from poachers.

You and half-a-dozen other close friends and business associates from Manhattan were to be his guests for the gunning season from mid-October to mid-November. George was to send his private railway car, the Swannanoa, to collect you at Grand Central Station. Two weeks before your departure, you'd had your man run you over to Abercrombie and Fitch, there to pick up your new Lefever custom fit to your frame. One sidelock carried a fine setter, the other a pointer. You were eager to use it on George's birds, which would be driven toward you in the Scottish way. Before leaving with the gun, you'd arranged for two cases of mixed shells, #2s, #4s and #6s, to be shipped to Biltmore.

Today, the Biltmore estate is vastly reduced from its size in 1902. After George died in 1914, Edith sold 86,000 acres to the federal government to provide the core of Pisgah, the first national forest in the East. Other than the annual management of its herd of whitetails, there's no hunting on Biltmore today. Yet as you take the drive along its fields bordering the French Broad River, little imagination is needed to see a squad of gunners, outfitted in tweed breeks and Norfolk jackets and aligned on their shooting sticks waiting for flushed pheasants.

The incoming birds on stations 2 and 5 on Biltmore's sporting clay's course give you the same shots those gunners saw more than a century ago. They spring from traps hidden in the woods, rises and cross to the left. You'll take them when your intuition tells you to pull the trigger. The five-station sporting clays course and its sibling, the five-stand course, each offer 50 birds, which you can mix and match to your liking.

That incoming, diving, left-to-right crossing shot, like a driving teal on afterburners, is my nemesis. Want to

work on that shot alone? That's fine with your trapper; he's a National Sporting Clays Association certified instructor as well. Biltmore's courses are, by no measure, championship in nature. Traps aren't torqued to fire birds at super velocity. Instead, they're set to throw clays at about 45 mph. The idea is to approximate as closely as possible field shots and hit targets.

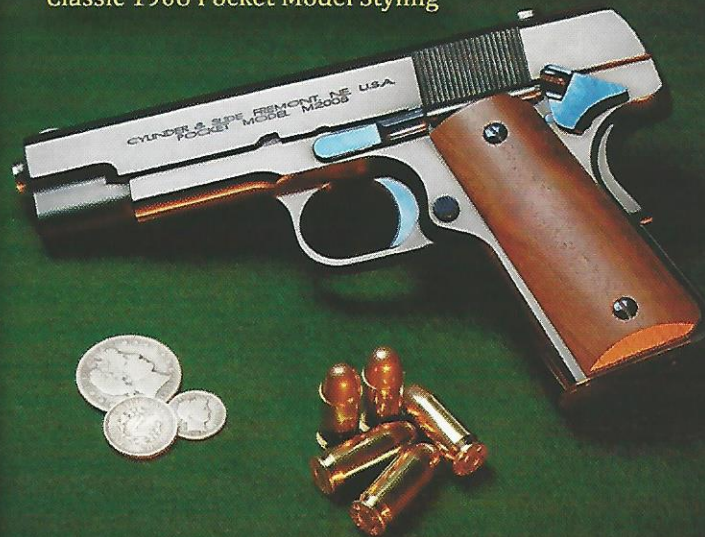
Says Dale Klug, director of recreational activities at the estate, the philosophy behind Biltmore's clay

sports program, affiliated with Beretta, is straight-forward.

"We want to help shooters improve their skills, no matter whether they've never fired a shotgun before or whether they're experienced gunners," he explains. "Many who shoot here are couples, vacationing at the Inn at Biltmore. We also cater to corporate groups. Sure, there's friendly competition among shooters, but that's not our purpose. We want them to shoot safely, break some birds and have fun."

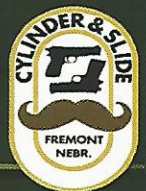
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In addition to shotgunning, Biltmore offers fishing for bass, crappie and bream in the same pond favored by Edith and her daughter Cornelia. Designed by Frederic Law Olmsted, who planned the grounds after supervising the layout of New York's Central Park, the pond – the “Lagoon” in Biltmore parlance – is dotted with two islands. Darren Moore, Thad Surrent and Dustin Stanberry teach basic fly-fishing here. The Lagoon's record bass, incidentally, weighed 12 pounds; three- and four-pounders are caught every season.

Across a berm from the pond flows the French Broad River, justly known for exceptional smallmouth, occasional muskie and a rare brown or rainbow. When water conditions permit – heavy rain can turn the river the color of latte – Biltmore guides on the river. However, most of the anglers who stay at the inn want to fish for trout, and the estate's guides head for a private run of the South Mills River. Like the philosophy underlying gunning for clays, fishing is all about getting a little bit better and having a lot of fun.

When I visit Biltmore, I'm transported to an era where sportsmen were gentlemen, women were ladies who shot or fished like Edith and Cornelia, and guides were equally gracious and differential and avoided, like the plague, anything that might intimidate their charges. Gentility reigns here in the basin surrounded by the Southern Appalachians.

### If You Want To Go

Biltmore is an Orvis-endorsed fishing lodge. The season begins as March blossoms into spring and continues into November. A North Carolina license is required to fish the Lagoon or the French Broad. You'll need a state trout stamp for trout on the South Mills. Biltmore can provide complete equipment or you can bring your own. Ditto with gunning sports. Half- and full-day sessions are available as is instruction if you want it. For more information, visit Biltmore's Outdoor program at [www.biltmore.com/visit/](http://www.biltmore.com/visit/) activities or call (828) 225-1425.