



Gray Ghosts and Red Rangers: American Hilltop Fox Chasing (Jack and Doris Smothers Series in Texas History, Life, and Culture)

Thad Sitton

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Around a campfire in the woods through long hours of night, men used to gather to listen to the music of hounds' voices as they chased an elusive and seemingly preternatural fox. To the highly trained ears of these backwoods hunters, the hounds told the story of the pursuit like operatic voices chanting a great epic. Although the hunt almost always ended in the escape of the fox—as the hunters hoped it would—the thrill of the chase made the men feel "that they [were] close to something lost and never to be found, just as one can feel something in a great poem or a dream."

Gray Ghosts and Red Rangers offers a colorful account of this vanishing American folkway—back-country fox hunting known as "hilltopping," "moonlighting," "fox racing," or "one-gallus fox hunting." Practiced neither for blood sport nor to put food on the table, hilltopping was worlds removed from elite fox hunting where red- and black-coated horsemen thundered across green fields in daylight. Hilltopping was a nocturnal, even mystical pursuit, uniting men across social and racial lines as they gathered to listen to dogs chasing foxes over miles of ground until the sun rose. Engaged in by thousands of rural and small-town Americans from the 1860s to the 1980s, hilltopping encouraged a quasi-spiritual identification of man with animal that bound its devotees into a "brotherhood of blood and cause" and made them seem almost crazy to outsiders.

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