

9-1-1950

Rush Park

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Recommended Citation

Petersen, William J. "Rush Park." *The Palimpsest* 31 (1950), 374-392.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol31/iss9/5>

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Rush Park

The town of Independence had suddenly quadrupled its population. Over eight thousand people had swooped down on July 4, 1889, to help the town "swell the hallelujah chorus of freedom." Small boys were out in force, armed with large firecrackers, torpedoes, and squibs. Flags and bunting decorated the business district. Every one was brim full of patriotism, good nature, and red lemonade. A hose-cart race, a parade, and an oration were included in the morning program.

In the afternoon the spell of the turf left the streets of Independence deserted! The horse races at Rush Park served as an effective magnet and the fifty cents admission fee paid by over eight thousand spectators clearly indicated that men did not live for noise alone. The face of Charles W. Williams must have beamed with joy as he saw twenty-five hundred people jammed into his amphitheater, happy to pay an additional thirty-five cents for the privilege. Purses totaling \$2,400 had lured many of the fastest horses in the state to Independence, and the crowd was not disappointed.

Rush Park occupied the site of the old Buchanan County Fair Grounds west of Independ-

ence, but Williams had made so many changes that the place could scarcely be recognized. He had purchased the property in 1886 from Colonel Jed Lake and named it Rush Park in honor of Rush C. Lake of Kansas City. "The old rookery that hardly stood up under the name of amphitheater had disappeared and in its place has been erected a grand stand of magnificent proportions," reads the *Buchanan County Journal* of August 29, 1889. "Nice stables, built on the latest improved plan, ornament the grounds where one year ago half tumble-down sheds marred the beauty of the site for fair purposes. These stables are the homes of Axtell, Allerton and fashionably bred aristocratic horses that belong to the Rush Park horse family."

Axtell and Allerton had received their early training on the old Rush Park half-mile track which was said to be one of the best in the state. When Axtell was sold in 1889 Williams purchased 120 acres of land on the east and within a quarter mile of the city limits, increasing the area of Rush Park to 300 acres. On the new tract he decided to build a balloon or kite-shaped track.

The idea of a kite track was first advanced in 1887 by William B. Fasig, Secretary of the Cleveland Driving Park Association. It was designed in two stretches of one-third of a mile each with a connecting curve of the same distance. The start and finish were at the apex of the kite

where the two stretches met. A small loop at the apex was well adapted for scoring and finishing. The principal advantage lay in the fact that horses made only one turn instead of two as on the elliptical track. The longer stretches enabled the contestants to become strung out before reaching the turn, thus eliminating the dangerous struggle for the pole. The starter, timers, and judges stood in a small stand just inside the track at the apex. Foul driving, jockeying, and other unfair tactics could be quickly detected at this point. Scoring down for the word was also simplified. The grandstand was located opposite the starting point and another could be erected opposite the finish if necessary.

Williams had his new track surveyed and the ground prepared before snow fell. In the following spring, work was begun in earnest and by the first of June much of the track was in good condition for jogging. The judges' stand and even the big amphitheater were moved from the old Rush Park oval to the kite track without being taken apart. On June 17, 1890, when the first complete circuit of the kite track was made, it was found to be extremely fast.

The track extended north and south with the small loop to the north. Commencing at the turn of the small loop there was a straight stretch of 500 feet for scoring. The track was 75 feet wide on the straightaways and narrowed to 60 feet

around the great turn. This enabled ten horses to score up abreast. The stretches were 1574.743 feet and the turn 2130.514 feet long. Several surveys showed the track to be 1.76 inches over a mile. When finally completed, including resoiling and other general repairs, it cost no less than \$10,000.

The kite track, located on low swampy ground, had a peat-bed foundation. Over this was spread a layer of black spongy soil five or six inches deep. There were large ditches on both sides. When it rained the water soaked through the track making it soft and wet, but after the surface dried it remained springy and was very easy on the horses. The surface yielded readily to manipulation, so that the track could be put in superlative condition in half a day. Only a steady downpour on the day of a race could cause postponement. Old-timers declared it was as level as a billiard table. Teams worked the track continually and horsemen consequently found it a good training place.

The first meet on the kite track was held on July 4, 1890. Only local horsemen entered but some creditable performances were registered despite the weather. Allerton twice lowered his mark of 2:18 $\frac{1}{4}$, trotting the best heat in 2:16 $\frac{3}{4}$.

The grand opening day for the kite track was set for August 25, 1890. At least 225 horses valued at over \$1,000,000 were on exhibition for the price of one dollar at the gate. Season tickets, admitting the holder to all five days, could be pur-

chased for \$4; season tickets for a lady and gentleman cost \$7.

A dismal rain caused people to "look down their noses" and postponed the opening day, but fine weather drew an immense throng on August 26th, and fully ten thousand spectators were present on the following day. Among the visitors was a large contingent of Dubuque sportsmen with money to bet on Keno F., a flashy gelding who had just won important matches at Minneapolis, Rochester, and Chicago, bringing rich profits to his supporters. In the pools Keno F. sold for \$40, Mary Marshall for \$6, and the field for \$3 and \$4. When Keno F. won the first heat in 2:21 the Dubuque betters went wild and could not get their money up fast enough. Accordingly they made flat bets of \$50 to \$200 at big odds wherever they could find takers. Mary Marshall won the next three heats in 2:17, 2:17 $\frac{3}{4}$, and 2:18 $\frac{1}{4}$.

A few days later the Dubuque *Herald* made an astonishing revelation. "When residents of this glorious state of Dubuque go abroad to make a sure winning in sporting circles, they have sand and do not hesitate to put up their last dollar." When fortune smiles they "ride in palace cars," but when she frowns they walk home. "We had a trotting horse. He won. We bet. We won. The tide turned. We bet. We lost. And there are just 191,618 railroad ties between Dubuque and Independence."

Among the special races which caused the most excitement was the performance of Roy Wilkes, the great pacing stallion, who started against his own record of 2:09 and came home steady and true in 2:08 $\frac{1}{4}$, for a new world stallion pacing record. Altogether the August meet was one of the most successful ever held.

A seven-day meet which began on October 23rd closed the season of 1890. Although held rather late, the admission fee of fifty cents attracted a good crowd. There were nearly four hundred horses on the grounds and every available stall was filled. The track was in almost perfect condition. In the reporters' gallery were representatives of such magazines as the *Kentucky Stock Farm*, *Dunton's Spirit of the Turf*, *Iowa Farmer and Breeder*, and the *Des Moines Northwest*.

Many spectacular races featured the October meet but the special events elicited the greatest enthusiasm. Guy, the little black son of Kentucky Prince, failed to lower his record of 2:10 $\frac{3}{4}$ but gained the title of "champion equine crank of the world." While the patience of the spectators was being sorely tried by the erratic Guy, Allerton was trotted out to beat his record of 2:15 $\frac{1}{2}$. He was going level and strong on his first trip to the wire and Williams nodded for the word. Allerton trotted the first half in 1:07 $\frac{1}{2}$ and came home without faltering in 2:14, beating not only his own

record but the world four-year-old stallion record as well. A few days later he lowered this mark to 2:13½.

Two sparkling performances were executed by the celebrated pole team consisting of Belle Hamlin and Justina. These two sisters were the pride of their seventy-two-year-old driver and owner, C. J. Hamlin of New York. A cold damp wind was blowing when the racy pair were brought out and warmed up. After scoring down once Hamlin nodded for the word and the two were off like a "piece of perfect machinery." Trotting smooth and even the pair finished strong in 2:13¼ amid jubilant applause. The following Monday they flashed to the wire in 2:13.

According to *The American Trotter*, half of the ten best records broken during 1890 fell at the kite track at Rush Park. Beside the pole team record of Belle Hamlin and Justina, Allerton trotted a mile in 2:13½ for a new four-year-old stallion record. Among the pacers, Manager set the record for two-year-olds at 2:16½; Roy Wilkes reduced the mark for stallions to 2:08¼; and Cricket came under the wire in 2:10 to establish a new time for mares. No other track boasted of more than one new record in this list.

The influence of the 1890 races was apparent to all. Independence glowed with prosperity and pride at the accomplishments of the year. "The tracks contribute thousands of dollars to the local-

ity in which they are situated," declared the editor of the *Buchanan County Journal* on November 20, 1890. "There are always a thousand or more trainers, drivers and stable hands in and about a race track when a meeting is in progress. They live there entirely and what they eat and what they drink is invariably bought in the towns or villages roundabout. Five hundred or a thousand horses require an enormous amount of hay, oats, corn and straw, and this is purchased from neighboring farmers. Cash is always paid, and the money that comes to the people in this way is more than acceptable. Independence and Buchanan county have this year had a foretaste of these benefits, which in the future we are to enjoy in a much greater degree. Our citizens should do all they can to help on and encourage the work that is now being done wholly by one man."

The season of 1891 opened on July 1st with a meet that continued through July Fourth. The track was in perfect condition, the weather fair, music was furnished by the Toledo band, but only about 2,500 people witnessed the races on Independence Day. Enthusiasts generally were waiting for the great August meet when the champions would perform.

Fearful lest the weather might deter the more timid from attending the August meet, *The American Trotter* of August 13, 1891, assured its readers that every precaution had been taken to

insure a good track in case of rain. "A large number of big sponges that will hold nearly a pailful of water each have been secured, and immediately after a rain boys will go over the track with these sponges and take up all the water that is collected in pools. After this a large flock of sheep that is owned on an adjacent farm will be turned on the track and driven around several times; the horses and colts will be turned on from the pasture and also driven around, after which light harrows will be put to work and jogging on the track will begin. Within three hours the track will be fit for racing."

The August meet attracted horsemen from all over the United States. A group of "monied men" from Topeka, Kansas, chartered a special Pullman dining and sleeping car. Belle Fourche and the surrounding country in South Dakota sent a large excursion train. From every town and hamlet in Iowa, from distant California and the Atlantic seaboard, horsemen came to witness the "most important" meeting in the "annals of American harness racing."

While the announcement of the program in *The American Trotter* gives an adequate explanation of entries, purses, and rules of the meet, it affords no conception of the enthusiasm of the enormous crowds, the glamour of the betting, the thrilling races, or the record-breaking exhibitions. The special prizes of \$2,500, offered for the reduc-

tion of world records, attracted "fleet nags from the Golden Gate to Passamaquoddy Bay." Some of the most famous horses in America were seen in action, such as Margrave, Monbars, Direct, Mascot, Guy, Alix, Roy Wilkes, and Manager.

No doubt the climax of the occasion was the race of Nancy Hanks, Allerton, and Margaret S. for the championship of five-year-old trotters. Thousands were at the track all morning. Five hundred tickets for this race were sold at Dubuque alone. A stream of hungry mortals besieged the lunch counters and the demand for coffee and sandwiches led one to suspect that the entire audience was on the verge of famine. Nancy Hanks won in three straight heats though closely pressed by Allerton all the way.

On the Monday following the last race a few hundred owners, drivers, and personally interested people gathered at Rush Park to see some of the stars lower their marks. Owners and drivers welcomed such opportunities, and the results proved valuable both to horse and track alike. Thus, it may be recalled that the first trotter to negotiate a mile in 2:30 or better was Lady Suffolk in 1844. By the close of 1891 no less than 5,808 trotters and 1,665 pacers had entered this distinguished company.

Almost a fourth — 1,294 trotters and 414 pacers — entered the standard list in 1891. Of these, 231 made their records on Iowa tracks, more than in

INDEPENDENCE DRIVING PARK ASS'N.

AUGUST 24, 25, 26, 27, 28 and 29.

\$90,000

STAKES AND PURSES,

More by Twenty-Two Thousand Dollars than has ever been given by any Association for one meeting. The colts and horses entered in our stock farms of America & Canada.

656 Horses and colts are now entered in stakes closed and when the number of entries in class races to close Aug. 10, are added to this number there will no doubt be over 800 horses entered.

To be trotted and paced over the celebrated Kite-Shaped Track, acknowledged by all to be the fastest on earth. Without doubt many of the now fastest records will be broken during this week and perhaps all of them.

THIS WILL BE THE GREATEST TROTTING AND PACING MEETING MAN HAS YET SEEN.

MONDAY, AUGUST 24.

Yearling Stake for Trotters, (156 entries).....\$5,000
Pacing Stake for 3-year-olds and under, eligible to 2:30 class April 1. (25 entries).....1,000
2:21 Class for trotters.....1,500

TUESDAY, AUGUST 25.

Two-year-old Stake for trotters, (113 entries).....\$5,000
2:30 Stake for Pacers, (27 entries).....5,000
Three-year-old Stake for trotters, eligible to 2:40 class April 1; (74 entries).....1,000
Free-For-All, for pacers, to pole.....1,500

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 26.

Three-year-old Stake for trotters, (50 entries).....\$5,000
2:35 Class for trotters.....1,500
Four-year-old Stake for trotters, eligible to 2:30 Class April 1. (32 entries).....1,000
2:20 Stake for Pacers, (23 entries).....5,000

THURSDAY, AUGUST 27.

Four-year-old Stake for trotters, (16 entries).....\$5,000
Five-year-old Stake for trotters, (11 entries).....5,000
Free-For-All Pace.....2,000
Two-year-old Stake for trotters, eligible to 3:00 class April 1. (87 entries).....1,000

FRIDAY, AUGUST 28.

2:20 Stake for trotters, (17 entries).....\$5,000
2:25 class for trotters.....1,500
2:17 " " " ".....1,500
2:23 " " pacers.....1,500

SATURDAY, AUGUST 29.

Free-For-All for trotters.....\$2,000
2:17 class for pacers.....1,500
Trotters to pole, (Belle Hamlin and Justina barred).....1,500
2:30 Stake for trotters, (25 entries).....5,000

IN ADDITION TO THE ABOVE PROGRAMME, WE OFFER

\$2,500

In cash for yearling trotter to beat the yearling record of - 2:29 3-4
In cash for 2-year-old trotter to beat 2-year-old record of - 2:18
In cash for 3-year-old trotter to beat 3-year-old record of - 2:10 1-2
In cash for 4-year-old trotter to beat 4-year-old record of - 2:10 1-2
In cash for double team to beat the double team record of - 2:13
In cash for 3-year-old stallion to beat 3-year-old stallion record of 2:12
In cash for stallion to beat the stallion record of - 2:10 3-4
In cash for any trotter to beat the trotting record of - 2:08 3-4
In cash for 2-year-old pacer to beat 2-year-old pacing record of 2:18 1-2
In cash for any pacer to beat the pacing record of - 2:08 1-4

Should any of the above records be lowered before the hour of starting, the new record will be the one required to beat. In case of tie the money will be divided equally. No entrance fee will be charged in these specials, but all owners of horses and colts must notify the secretary of this association, not later than August 1, of their intention of competing in these specials, giving name and breeding of horses and colts to be started.

We are the first association in this country adopting the five per cent entrance for all class races. All of the above class races, namely: 2:21 trot, 2:35 trot, 2:25 trot, 2:17 trot, free-for-all trot, trotters to pole, 2:23 pace, 2:17 pace, free-for-all pace, pacers to pole, will close Saturday, August 10th, and the entrance fee is as per above, five per cent.

Five entries to fill and four to start in all class races.

Money divided sixty, twenty-five and fifteen per cent.

Right reserved to change the order of any or all of the above stakes and classes.

To be trotted and paced under the rules of the American Association.

C. W. WILLIAMS, Sec'y, Independence, Iowa.

A weekly advertisement in *The American Trotter* for 1891

any other state or Canada. Had it not been for the kite track at Rush Park, however, Iowa would have ranked tenth or below, for 175 of the 231 new performers (132 trotters and 43 pacers) entered that class at Independence. This was 35 more than the combined totals of the famous tracks at Stockton, California, and Lexington, Kentucky. It was one-tenth of the total entries in the United States and Canada. Truly, it was no idle boast that the "Fastest Track on Earth" was located at Rush Park in Independence, Iowa.

Jubilant over the success of the August meet, the Independence Driving Park Association held a racing carnival from October 19th to October 31st. Hundreds of horses entered, the attendance was good for that season of the year, and scores of horses entered the 2:30 list.

The salutary effect of the large purses, progressive futurities, liberal entrance fees, and long meets did not go unregarded, for horsemen throughout the country warmly praised the efforts of Williams and his Rush Park programs. According to the *San Francisco Post*, "The breeder of Axtell and Allerton is to be congratulated on his enterprise and the horsemen of America owe him a debt of gratitude, for he has done more to elevate the trotting turf and make the racing of the harness brigade profitable than all other men who have aspired to manage the trotting meetings of the world. In the short space of three years or less

he has resurrected trotting and pacing racing from a state of torpor, and raised it to an equal with the style in which the running of thoroughbreds is conducted at Coney Island, Brooklyn and Westchester."

To increase the earning capacity of the trotter, Williams offered \$200,000 in stakes, purses, and specials for the great summer meet of 1892. The opening was marred by a soaking rain which postponed the more important races. When the sun finally appeared the \$5,000 stakes and special races monopolized attention. Brilliant performances were executed by Conformation, Kentucky Union, Silicon, Flying Jib, Martha Wilkes, Mascot, Manager, Roy Wilkes, Online, Belle Acton, Jay-Eye-See, Lord Clinton, and a score of others. Hardly a day passed that a new record was not established.

Nancy Hanks was there at the height of her glory. Her dazzling speed, her purity of gait, and her sheer grit made her supreme in her day. A rhymester paid this tribute to the reigning queen.

Some men invest their money,
Some stow it in the banks,
But I have found a safer place;
I bet on Nancy Hanks.

The peerless daughter of Happy Medium seemed to warrant such faith as Budd Doble trotted her down the stretch at the "dainty pace" she affected when paraded before a crowd. The

ancient runner, Ned Gordon, driven by Charles W. Williams, and Abe Lincoln, driven by George Starr, appeared behind her. Thus the stage was set.

A thousand watches clicked as Nancy got off on the second score as true as an arrow. The runners were after her like scared rabbits. She reached the quarter in 30 seconds, the half in 1:01, the three-quarter post in 1:34 with Doble holding her well in check. "The runners came close and the game mare seemed to lengthen her long, gliding stride," an eye-witness declared. "She laid close to the ground and with the drivers of the two thoroughbreds urging their horses with yells that would have made the hair of an Arapahoe turn white, her eyes seemed to fairly blaze with excitement and determination as with a grand rush of speed she passed under the wire at better than a two minute gait, having trotted the mile in 2:05 $\frac{1}{4}$." Nancy Hanks the "invincible," the "unbeaten," the thrice crowned queen of the turf had eclipsed all trotting records by three full seconds and put the mark opposite the pacing record of the world where it was placed by Hal Pointer only a fortnight before. Many years had passed since a trotter had equalled the time of a sidewheel horse.

Within the space of two short weeks more records fell at Independence than were lowered "in the same length of time at all the tracks in the

world." After the meet of 1892 the following records were held by the kite track.

<i>World Record</i>	<i>Horse</i>	<i>Time</i>
Trotting	Nancy Hanks	2:05 $\frac{1}{4}$
Trotting in race	Martha Wilkes	2:09 $\frac{1}{2}$
Pacing in race	Flying Jib	2:07
Yearling pace	Belle Acton	2:22 $\frac{1}{2}$
Two-year-old pace	Online	2:16
Three-year-old pace	Manager	2:11 $\frac{1}{2}$
Stallion pacer	Direct	2:06
Five-year-old stallion trotter	Allerton	2:09 $\frac{1}{4}$
Fastest living stallion	Allerton	2:09 $\frac{1}{4}$

Beside these, the kite track held the fastest yearling race record ever made east of California, the fastest three and four heat races ever trotted, the fastest four and five heat races ever paced, and several other world records of minor importance. "Where on the footstool of the Almighty," demanded *The American Trotter*, "is the course that can beat it?"

Not content with this great showing the Independence Driving Park Association advertised a fall meeting to run from October 10 to November 5, 1892. Owners were urged to bring their horses to the "safest and fastest track in the world" to win money, to win races, and to obtain records. There seemed to be no limit to the operations of the enterprising owners of Rush Park. But sud-

INDEPENDENCE - DRIVING - PARK - ASSN.

LAST CHANCE IN 1892

To Win Money, to Win Races, and to Obtain Records over the

SAFEST AND FASTEST TRACK IN THE WORLD!

Three Races Every Day for Four Consecutive Weeks.

A Class Every Three or Four Days for Every Colt, Filly, Stallion, Mare and Gelding in America.

It Costs Only Ten Dollars to Start in Each of These Races.

The Track is located within half a mile of the city, and Electric Cars run directly by the entrance. First-class hotel accommodations for all, and at reasonable rates.

From *The American Trotter*, August 18, 1892

denly, in 1893, there came a sad reverse of fortune.

It was not merely the panic of 1893 that stifled activity at Rush Park. A combination of circumstances — the popularity of the bicycle, the invention of the bicycle sulky, high stallion fees, overproduction, too many breeders who did not support the stakes and class races, lack of interest in light harness horses, the practice of owners bidding on the stock consigned by them to public sales, and the exorbitant prices demanded by trainers for working horses— had caused a pronounced reaction in the trotting business. The editor of *The American Trotter* cautioned his readers early in 1893 not to put all their money in horses unless they had considerable experience with them, for fortunes were easily lost by the over-enthusiastic.

After Charley Williams left Independence a hundred citizens, who determined that the "Lexington of the North" should not crumble in ruins without an effort to save it, organized the Independence Driving Club, leased the kite track, opened generous stakes, and held races during the last week of August in 1894. Meetings were held each year until 1899 and every purse was paid in full. The largest meet occurred in 1898 when the free gate system was adopted. But the good old days before the hard times did not return to Rush Park — the guiding hand of the master builder clearly had been lost.

Early in January, 1899, the Independence Driving Club joined the newly organized Great Western Trotting Circuit, comprising ten associations. The club offered \$40,000 in stakes but the entry lists failed to fill. The death knell had sounded. An abortive effort to stave off the inevitable was made in 1904 when the greatest field of running horses ever assembled at Independence attracted a large and enthusiastic crowd. But the following year the grandstand was converted into a gigantic barn. The oft-repeated prophecy that Rush Park would one day be a pasture has come true, but memories still kindle a spark in the eyes of those who lived in those exciting times.

A solitary building now stands as a mute reminder of the days when teeming thousands swarmed the grounds to watch Allerton, Alix, Nancy Hanks, Jay-Eye-See, Manager, Margaret S., Mascot, Martha Wilkes, and a score of others valiantly strive for the title of reigning monarch of the turf. The youth of today may pause in tribute as an unsteady hand traces out for him the dimly visible path of the old kite track. Nor need he be surprised should he hear in imagination faintly, above the story of the "Williams Boom" when Independence was the "Lexington of the North" and Rush Park had the "Fastest Track on Earth," the dull thud of hoofs, the rumble of high-wheeled sulkies, the crack of whips, the sharp call of the drivers, and the wild roar of the

crowd as Doble, Starr, and Williams flash their phantom flyers down the long home stretch.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN