

3-1-1985

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Recommended Citation

Cone, Carl B. "Those Wonderful Iowa Firehouses." *The Palimpsest* 66 (1985), 69-77.

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Those Wonderful Iowa Firehorses

by Carl B. Cone



A Shenandoah Fire Department hose wagon competing in a firehorse race, c. 1914. (SHSI)

In the early years of this century, until the entrance of this country into World War I, Iowa was the racing center of the nation. It was not, however, the center of thoroughbred racing, or auto racing, or harness racing, but rather of firehorse racing. The names of such animals as Bob and Bob of Clinton, Jack and Jack of Des Moines, Lou and Herb of Council Bluffs, Paddy and Prince of Sioux City, and those glamour girls, black Beauty and bay Bonny of Clinton, were almost as well known throughout the state as Marshalltown's famous son, Cap Anson of the Chicago White Stockings.

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The races were tests of the speed, intelligence, and obedience of the horses, the skill and speed of the firemen, and the coordination between horses and men. Other states held firehorse races, but the Iowa format was unique and offered a practical test of the firemen's fire fighting readiness. The Iowa bunk hitch race was an elaboration on the flying start straightaway half-mile run used in other states (as well as in Iowa after 1897). In 1903 the Iowa Firemen's Association adopted tournament rules for the bunk hitch race. They were generally accepted and the race, with the straightaway race, continued to be run until after the De Witt tournament in 1916, the last year of firehorse competition.

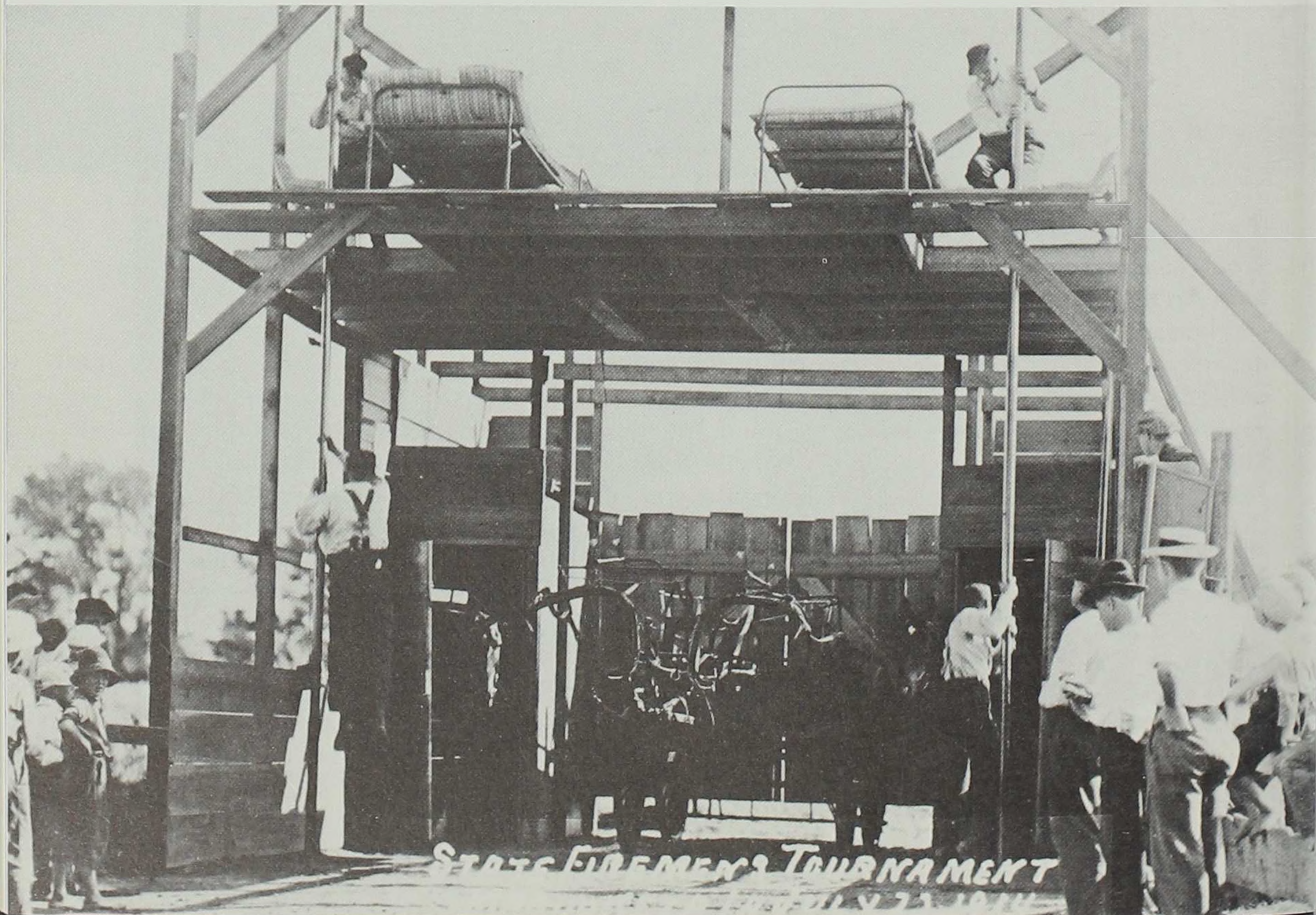
A team consisted of four men and two horses. In a mock station house, which angled onto the track about the middle of the stretch, the firemen lay flat in their bunks, fully dressed. The spectators could see what was happening inside the station. Modesty required that the firemen be dressed. When the gong sounded, the men jumped from their beds, slid down the pole, and met the horses coming out of their stalls, one on each side of the wagon. When the horses were in their correct positions, the harness settled upon them and was secured by buckling the collars and snapping the tugs to the singletrees. Following a lightning hitch, requiring only four or five seconds after the sound of the gong, the horses started and the hitchers jumped aboard the 1800-pound hose wagon. After a lap around the half-mile track, the men laid one hundred and fifty feet of hose, broke the coupling, and attached the pipe

ready for water. Time was measured from the sound of the gong to the moment the pipe dropped to the ground. Each team raced singly, against the clock.

The bunk hitch race, unlike the straightaway dash, required more than speed from the horses. Their speed was important but mattered little if the firemen lost precious seconds in hitching or laying the hose, or if the horses were not cooperative at the hitch and thus lost the race before it began. Perfect timing, amazing speed, and marvelous skill produced results that seem more unbelievable today than in the heyday of firehorse racing.

Considering all that was involved between the gong and attaching the pipe, the times were remarkable. At the Des Moines tournament in June 1904, the time in the first ever bunk hitch race, won by Des Moines No. 2, was 1:23 $\frac{4}{5}$. The same team won the straight-

When the gong sounded, the men jumped from their beds, slid down the pole, and met the horses coming out of their stalls, one on each side of the wagon. (SHSI)



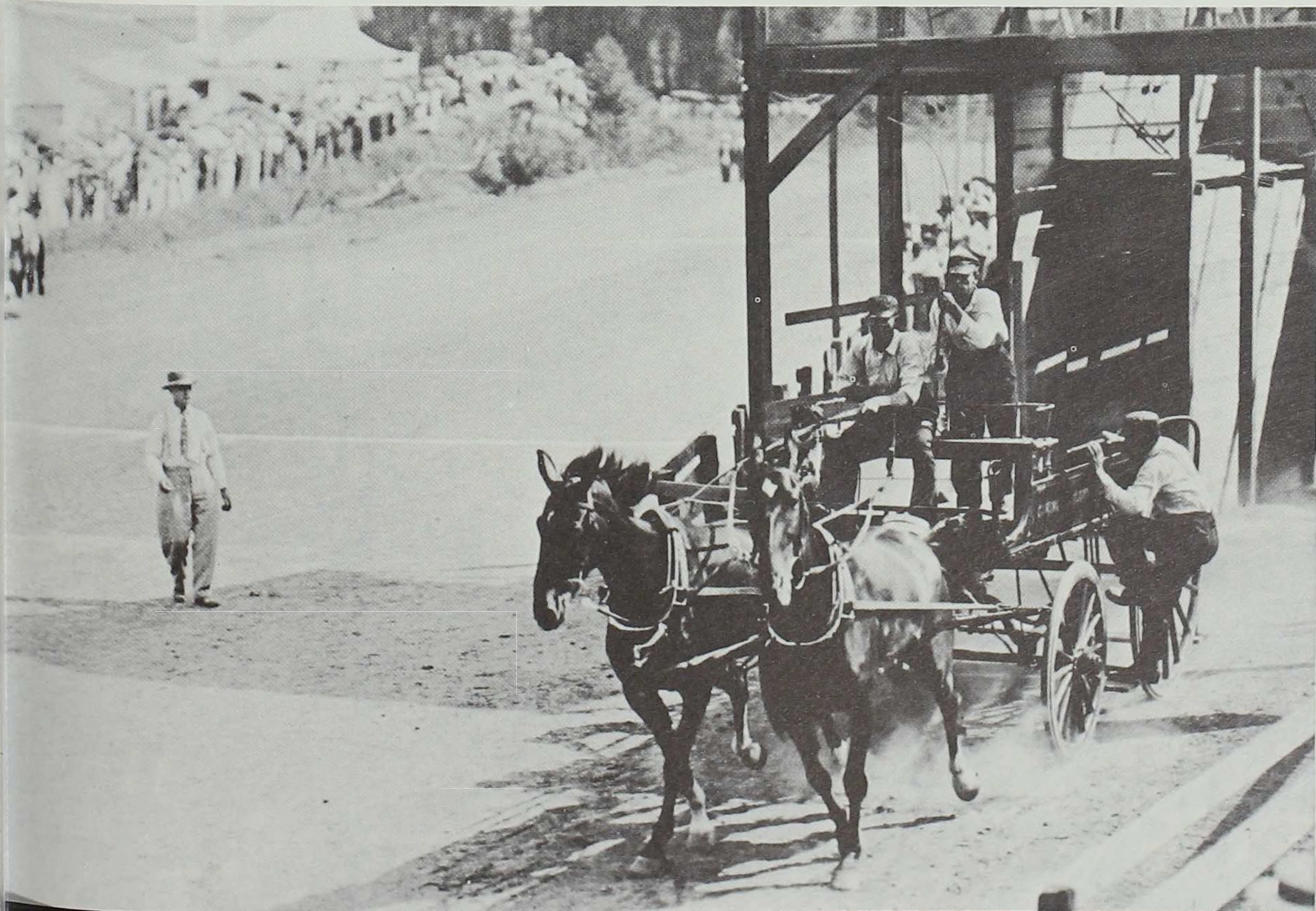
away event, a half-mile run only, in 1:06 $\frac{2}{5}$. Comparing the times of the two races, one can see that the hitching and laying of hose required approximately seventeen seconds. Improvement was inevitable. Jack and Jack of Des Moines, the first of the name teams, won the bunk hitch race at Council Bluffs in 1905 in 1:15 $\frac{2}{5}$. It seemed that the improved skill of the firemen more than the increased speed of the horses had shaved eight seconds off the 1904 time. Chief Hale of Kansas City, who saw the 1905 performance, didn't see how the new time could be improved upon. He was so impressed that he suggested that Jack and Jack be relieved of their regular duties and sent on tour, perhaps even to Madison Square Garden. But records were made only to be broken. In 1908 at the Clinton tournament, Paddy and Prince of Sioux City won in 1:15, a new record. The horses were faster than ever before, and so

were the firemen in the hitching and the hose work at the end of the run.

The nature of the competition was fierce as city after city champed at the bit to display the equine heroes and the accomplished fire laddies of their highly professional departments. They recruited horses with a keen eye to tournament competition. As they came to know the qualities they were seeking, they paid closer attention to the horses' bloodlines.

Firehorses were not just ordinary horses, produced through chance matings of anybody's stallions with everybody's mares. Jack and Jack, for example, were sired by a coach horse with a standardbred strain in their dam. Corbett and Sullivan, the pride of Sioux City, were of the famous Morgan strain. Bonny and Beauty, Clinton's lovely mares, had a thoroughbred sire and a standardbred dam which

Following a lightning hitch, the horses started and the hitchers jumped aboard the 1800-pound hose wagon. Lou and Herb in record-breaking form at Maquoketa in 1914. (SHSI)



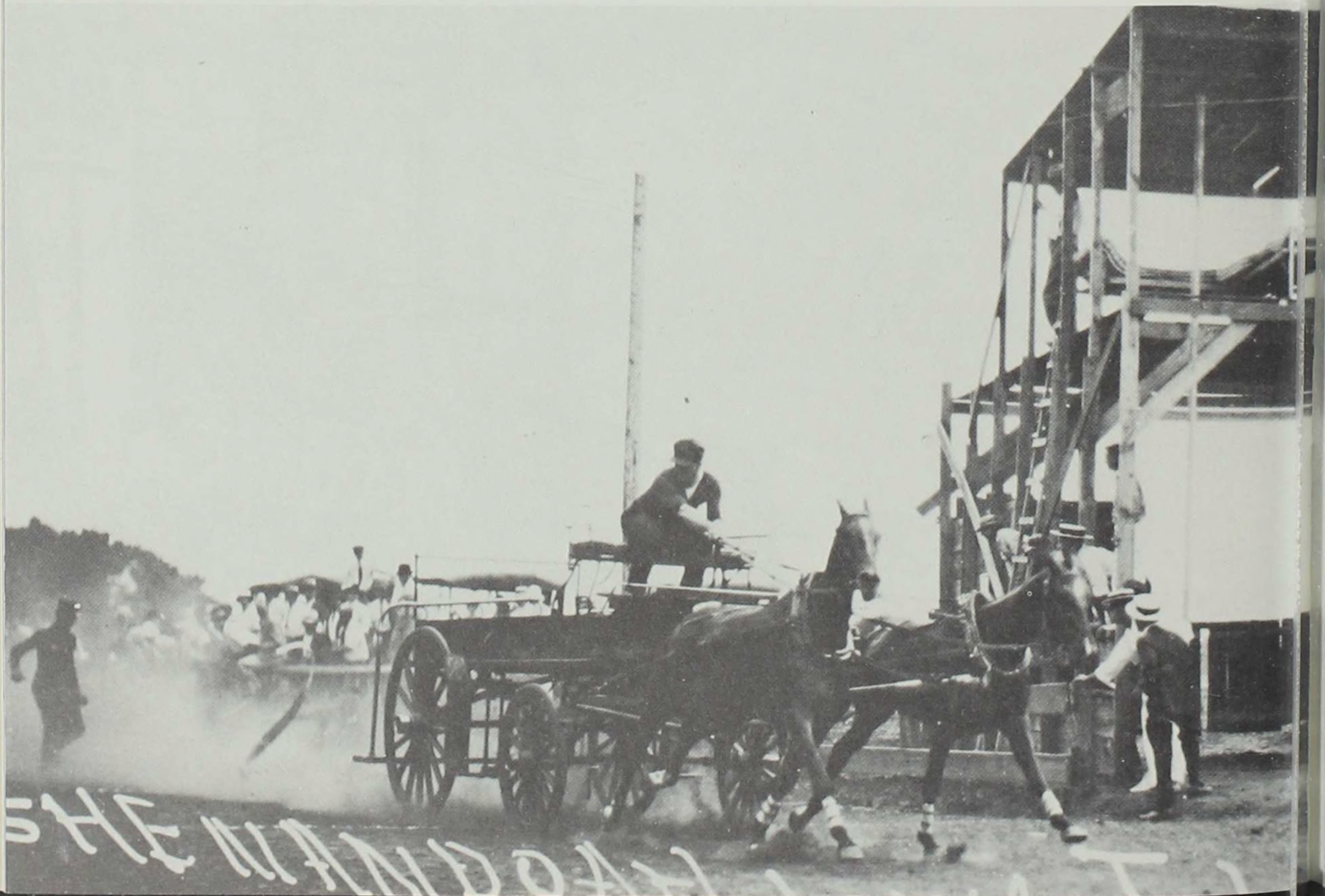
was a risky bit of breeding. Bonny and Beauty were prone to be unreliable at the hitch, but when they were not skittish and hitched well, they were a delight for spectators of firehorse races.

Bonny and Beauty were also a bit light. These fire teams had to pull 1800 pounds of wagon and some 600 pounds of men when they were going at full speed around the two turns of half-mile tracks. The right combination of speed, steadiness, and endurance was sought in these horses, and close attention was paid to bloodlines. Normally, horses weighing between 1250 and 1300 pounds proved about right for the hose wagons. Percherons pulled the heavier ladder wagons. The racing firehorses were noticeably heavier than all but unusually large thoroughbreds or standardbreds. They had to be big enough to do their jobs and light enough to be fast, trim

beauties. One might note that, as three-year-olds, Man o' War raced at 1150 pounds and Secretariat at 1155 and that each was larger than most of the horses he competed against.

These equine personalities, objects of such great admiration, were brought together at Davenport in 1909. The field was the largest and most impressive in the history of bunk hitch racing. As was anticipated, it was a thrilling tournament, and not only because of the bunk hitch race. Ever since the fire firemen's tournament in 1879 in Cedar Rapids, before the inauguration of the straightaway and the bunk hitch races, the gatherings of the brave fire laddies from the paid departments of the larger towns and the volunteer departments of the smaller ones were noteworthy annual summer events. With a zest characteristic of that era, the citizens of the host towns outdid them-

After a lap around a half-mile track, the men laid one hundred and fifty feet of hose, broke the coupling, and attached the pipe ready for water. (SHSI)





A firemen's tournament parade. (courtesy the author)

selves to welcome the visiting firemen. The firemen responded by enthusiastically displaying their highly developed skills. The gaily decorated streets were crowded with spectators, blaring bands, bright uniforms, and the latest in fire fighting apparatus, which was both displayed and paraded. With all the judges and distinguished visitors, there was speechmaking, a banquet, and a ball where, at last, after the strutting of all the peacocks, the neglected women could display themselves in all their finery and elegance. So it was at the first tournament. The *Cedar Rapids Times* rhapsodized over the firemen "of fine physique and noble appearance" marching to "the inspiring music of the various splendid bands" in a grander parade than had ever been seen in the state of Iowa.

Thirty years later, the scene in Davenport could be described in the same hyperbolic terms, but something new had been injected into the spirit of the occasion. There was in 1909 that spirit of friendly rivalry that had built up over the years of competition but, over and above that, there was an expectancy hovering over the tournament because of the bunk hitch

race with its larger and better field of entries. From the Missouri to the Mississippi, the state of Iowa seemed in a frenzy of excitement over its wonderful firehorse teams.

The big day was August 4. The volunteer companies performed until mid-afternoon with Villisca beating West Liberty in the hand drawn hose cart race. There were other notable performances, but the five thousand spectators were thinking mostly about the bunk hitch race to come. The order of running had been determined in a draw conducted by the team captains the night before. The order of running was:

1. Pack and Pack, Red Oak
2. Lou and Herb, Council Bluffs
3. Bonny and Beauty, Clinton
4. Jack and Jack, Des Moines
5. George and Dick, Davenport
6. Paddy and Prince, Sioux City
7. Pat and Bob, Clinton
8. Black and Tan, Des Moines
9. Barney and Barney, Davenport
10. Dick and Dan, Sioux City
11. Fred and Mack, Des Moines

Experts agreed that the record of 1:15 was in danger. Paddy and Prince were expected to better their own record. But there were other threats. Lou and Herb were fast but inexperienced. Barney and Barney were fast and reliable. Fred and Mack were steady performers. Bonny and Beauty were sentimental favorites among the uncommitted spectators. If they hitched well, said the Clinton people, "then look out." The mares had been bred for speed.

As expected, Lou and Herb, the big dun-colored speedsters, did not hitch well and the spectators looked ahead to the Clinton mares. Beauty might have come out of the stall and moved past the collar, or turned around before the harness could settle on her. But nothing like that happened. The hitch was completed in five seconds and as the mares flew around the track, people sensed that the record was in danger. It was, and it fell. The new record was 1:14 1/5. Just as the Clintonians were receiving deserved congratulations, Paddy and Prince hitched in four seconds and the Sioux City team completed its run in the record-breaking time of 1:13 4/5! Almost as an anticlimax, Dick and Dan of Sioux City also bettered the old mark by turning in a 1:14 4/5. It was a spectacular day. The old record, only a year old, had been broken by three of the teams.

Despite the great efforts of the two luminaries, Lou and Herb, and a new entrant, Bob and Bob of Clinton, the mark set in Davenport in 1909 by Paddy and Prince stood for five years. The Bobs became champions of Iowa in 1911 by winning a pair of bunk hitch races at Des Moines: a race for teams representing professional Iowa departments; and a free-for-all. In the former race they tied the record set by Paddy and Prince. The free-for-all was open to teams from anywhere but only Iowa teams entered it. The rivalry was now basically confined to the Council Bluffs and Clinton teams. In 1912 the weather was bad and the times were slow. In 1913 the rivals divided the races.

But in 1914, at Maquoketa, the Council Bluffs team did it. In a supreme effort, Lou and Herb set a bunk hitch record that would stand forever, 1:12 4/5. When the Council Bluffs department replaced their firehorses with trucks the following winter, Lou and Herb were sold to Marion, South Carolina. In the last two firemen's tournaments in which horses competed, 1915 at Iowa City and 1916 at De Witt, the Bobs (of Clinton) had it to themselves. But the zest was gone. The competition offered no challenge to them; in effect, the Bobs gave exhibitions. In the days of intense rivalry between the Council Bluffs and Clinton teams, each city could boast of something. In the final years of their competition, the better overall team was probably Lou and Herb. In a 1912 exhibition, however, Bob and Bob finished in the fastest time ever recorded, 1:12 2/5 — another record that will stand forever.

Some comparisons may aid in understanding the speed of horses involved in bunk hitch racing. Lou and Herb of Council Bluffs set a record of :58 4/5 seconds for the straightaway half-mile run from a flying start. Two-year-old thoroughbreds in April and May, at the beginning of their racing careers, run half-mile races out of a gate in times ranging from :46 to about :49 seconds. The ten-second difference would place the thoroughbreds, if competing with firehorses, some fifty lengths in front at the end of a half-mile. In 1984 in the much lamented Swale's Kentucky Derby, the time of the leader at the end of a half-mile in that one and one-quarter mile race was :47 2/5 seconds. In the Belmont in that same year at a distance of one and one-half miles, Swale led from the start. Setting a slow pace because no one challenged him for the early lead, he ran the first half-mile in :49 2/5. A pacer or trotter in a two-minute mile, does the half-mile after a moving start in about the same time as Lou and Herb. Comparisons of thoroughbreds and harness horses with firehorses in actual competitions

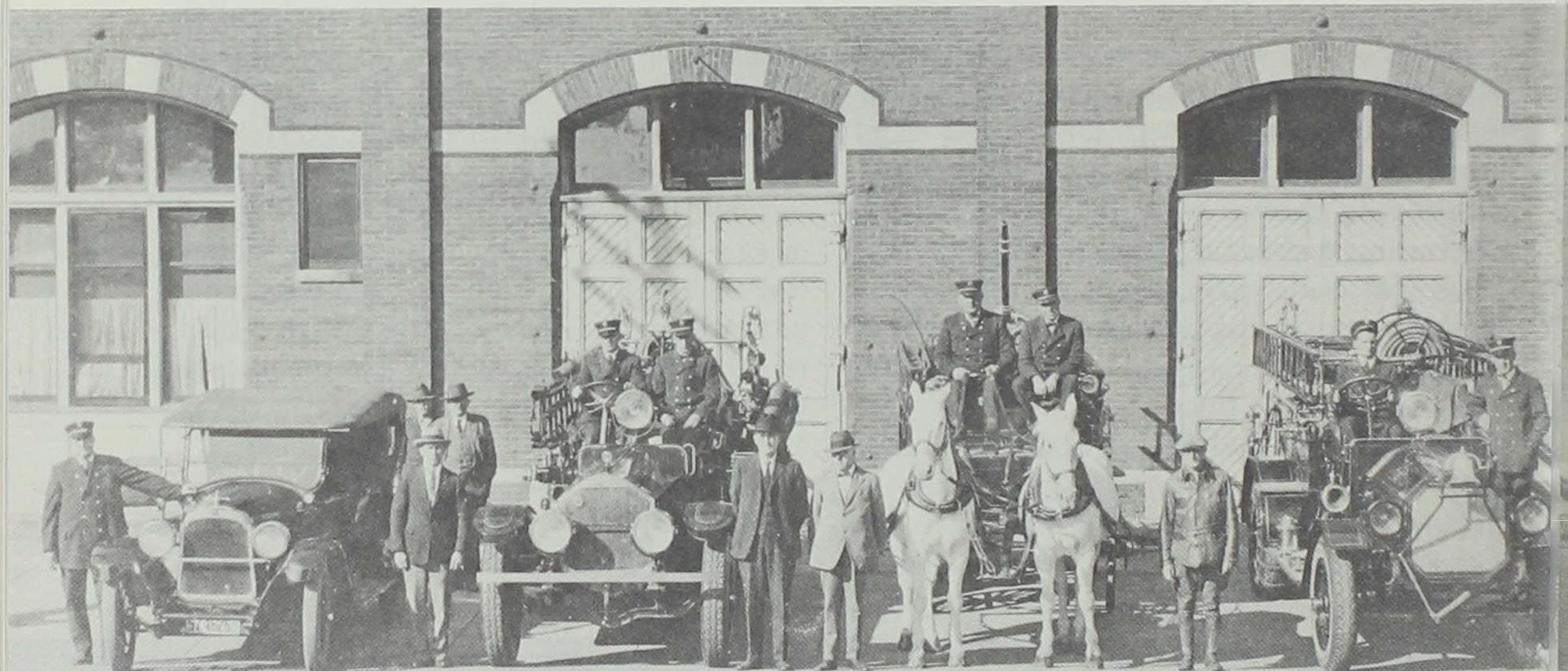
are not available. If they were, some qualifications should be recognized. The runners and standardbreds at the major tracks perform on mile or longer tracks with longer and wider turns; firehorse races were held on half-mile tracks with shorter turns, shorter stretches, and racing surfaces of inferior condition. The thoroughbreds carry one hundred twenty pounds, more or less, and are otherwise unburdened; harness horses pull light sulkies with a man or woman in the seat. In the bunk hitch races firehorses and firemen hitched, pulled twenty-four hundred pounds for half a mile around two short turns on a half-mile track and, nearing the end, slowed enough to permit the men at the back of the hose wagon to jump off,

lay one hundred and fifty feet of hose, break the coupling, and attach a pipe. They did all of this in something just over 1:12. If firehorses had been broken to ride, we can only guess how fast Lou or Herb could have run. It is safe to say that either would have finished a half mile more competitively than fifty lengths behind a thoroughbred. The firehorses and the firemen performed impressively to say the least, remarkably to put it mildly, and unbelievably well to be fair.

The firemen's tournaments were suspended during the two war summers of 1917 and 1918, and when they were resumed everybody knew the end of an era was at hand.



One of Clinton's best-ever firehorse teams, Bob and Bob. (courtesy the author)



Iowa City's firehorse team, Snowball and Highball, flanked by the trucks that would replace them. (courtesy the author)

The tournament at Marion in 1919 was the last one. Thereafter the Iowa Firemen's Association held conventions rather than tournaments, and they were autumn affairs. But that was not the reason the racing ended. Something else had happened. The firehorse had become obsolete; the clanging bell of the fire truck tolled the knell of its parting day. The photograph of the Iowa City team, Snowball and Highball, shows them flanked by trucks, harbingers of the motorized era. My father, a member of the Police and Fire Commission, can be seen in the center of the picture next to the horse. My father lived in Clinton in the days of Bonny and Beauty, Bob and Bob, and served as an official at several firemen's tournaments. When I was a small boy we had a large framed picture of Bob and Bob, an enlargement of the one shown here. Somehow when I was away during the war and our home in Iowa City was broken up, the picture of Bob and Bob disappeared. But the memory lingers on and calls to mind tales my father told me about Iowa's marvelous firehorses. □

Note on Sources

The most important source was the late E.E. Parsons' collection of annual Official Programs of the Iowa Firemen's Association. The word "program" suggests something less than the fulsome contents of the publication. Mr. Parsons of Marion, Iowa, served as vice-president, president, and longtime secretary of the association, between 1903 and 1928. Interviews with him, Chief Albert Krenz of the Clinton Fire Department, Chief Jim Clark of Iowa City, and Carl S. Cone who was a resident of Clinton and a tournament official in the days of firehorse racing added personal insights. Harvey Brown of the Des Moines Fire Department loaned me the scrapbook he compiled in those times. The interviews took place in 1942; my notes, miraculously, survived. Among newspapers consulted were: the *Cedar Rapids Times*, the *Iowa City Daily Republican*, the *Davenport Daily Times*, the *Clinton Herald*, and the *Des Moines Register and Leader*. Roy E. Brown's *Organization and Administration of Fire Departments in Iowa* (doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa, 1929) supplied useful background material. Among many books on the history of fire fighting, such as Herbert Asbury's *Ye Olde Fire Laddies*, none treat of Iowa's unique form of bunk hitch firehorse racing.

The original research was done in preparation for an article, "The Iowa Firemen's Association," that appeared in the *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, July 1944, and was reprinted in condensed form in the *Des Moines Register*, September 1944. The present article, written from the salvaged notes for the earlier article, came about after I saw in the archives at Transylvania University, Lexington, Kentucky, a vintage picture of a straightaway four team firehorse race held at the Red Mile Trotting Track in Lexington about the time when the Iowa races were sporting events of statewide interest.