

Tracking history: When horse racing came to the Haven

A Peek at the Past

December 4, 2010 - MATT CONNER - mbconnor4265@gmail.com

Today the most prominent noise one hears at the William T. Piper Memorial Airport is the sound of small plane engines as they come in for a landing, but on that same stretch of property there once could be heard the thunder of hooves and the roar of a crowd of hundreds.

A few living Clinton County residents may be able to recall the days prior to the establishment of Piper Aircraft on East Bald Eagle Street in the 1930s, when a silk mill stood at the location of the current Piper Museum. But before the silk mill, hundreds flocked to the location on a regular basis to watch, cheer and bet on their favorite steeds in the days when horse racing had a home in Lock Haven.

"The land around the old silk mill (was) formerly the site of a popular race track and occasional airplane flights by visiting airmen," wrote Rebecca Gross and Elizabeth Achenbach in their book "Another Peek at the Past."

Indeed Race Street appears to be named after the track that once stood on the spot where today small aircraft take off and land on a regular basis.

"Horse racing in the late 1800s had an incredible boom, and the scale of it was as broad as it is today," said Washington Post writer Andrew Beyer in a History Channel program on gambling in America. "In 1897, there were 314 race tracks in the United States, triple the number today. It was a huge, booming industry."

And it boomed in Lock Haven as well.

"Everything in the shape of a fine looking horse, sporty looking men, men who like sports and a goodly number of ladies wended their way to the driving park Saturday to witness the initial races of the season," reported the Clinton County Times in its May 8, 1903 issue. "The interest centered on Orange Chief and Joe Wilkes who were matched for a purse of \$175."

That was a substantial purse in those days, the equivalent of \$4,400 today based on the Consumer Price Index.

"In the toss for the pole Orange Chief won and at the word from the judges both horses sped down the track closely watched by an almost even number of admirers," wrote the editors of the Clinton Times. "Orange Chief broke once, giving Joe Wilkes the lead which he kept until the end of the heat and came in the winner."

This particular race - or, rather, series of races - was particularly memorable for a technical foul up that left race patrons scratching their heads and the horse owners frustrated by an inconclusive ending.

It seems, according to the Clinton Times, the second and third races of the day (which also featured the two aforementioned prize horses) both went to Orange Chief. It was the fourth race featuring the two steeds that turned out to be so controversial.

Then-Lock Haven Mayor John T. Cupper was responsible for both sounding the official start and ending to the races, but immediately after he shouted "Go!" to initiate the race, he sounded the gong to end it.

Orange Chief's handler, clearly realizing there was some kind of mistake, immediately returned to the starting gate. But Joe Wilkes completed the circuit, and his driver claimed the race under national rules.

"The second and third seats were won by Orange Chief and Joe Wilkes alternatively but in the fourth, through an inadvertency of starter Mayor Cupper, a misunderstanding arose and the race was declared off for the time being, all money having been returned to the takers," the Times reported.

"There being no code of rules at hand, the heat was declared a dead one and by mutual agreement a second race was run Monday, which resulted in a victory for Orange Chief, won in three straight heats," the paper reported.

It should be noted that this was a period of widespread corruption in the racing industry and one has to wonder on which horse Mayor Cupper had placed his money. Cupper was that same year indicted for conspiracy by a Federal Grand Jury in Washington, D.C., for paying a commission to a high-ranking postal employee in return for lucrative contracts to paint letter boxes in various eastern cities. He clearly was not averse to a little graft in the interest of feathering his own nest.

And that might have been part of the problem for Lock Haven's own version of Saratoga Springs. According to gambling historian Richard Sasuly, eventually dirty dealings between horse owners, bookies and track managers brought the racing industry under the scrutiny of moral watchdogs and reform advocates.

Those who indulged in vices like alcohol consumption and gambling would within a few years find themselves on the wrong side of the law.

"By 1910, except in a few states, horse racing, the principal national form of gambling, was outlawed," Sasuly said as part of the History Channel program.

Pennsylvania may have been one of the few states that managed to avoid the widespread closure of horse tracks, however. As late as 1911 The Express reported that more than 500 people attended the races on a June day of that year, where the top event involved George Harvey's "Wahee Boy" and John Pfenninger's "Bud O'Real."

So at least for a time the race track on the east side of town thrived.

"Horsemen tell us that Lock Haven now has more good races than any town in the state of Pennsylvania," the Clinton Times reported in October of 1903. "Some of these horses have won national fame during the season, while others have won first and second money at every entrance."

The horses that participated in Lock Haven races that month had typically colorful monikers like Hanissairs, Jim Saup, Village Boy, Cardigan Girl and Free For All.

Earlier that year, the Times reported that track managers were improving bettors' services and security by taking tickets at the grand stand entrance and enclosing the track in a sturdy fence.

When the last race was run at the Lock Haven track is unknown, but by the end of World War I the land upon which the track once stood was owned by the Pennsylvania Railroad, which sold the property to a silk manufacturer in 1919.

In September of that year, The Clinton Times reported that an application for charter for the Madison Textile Company had been filed in the city, "the most definite information to be had regarding the erection of a large building on the old race track ground for a silk mill.

"For some time the representatives of this concern were in this city looking the field over and rumor had it they had decided to purchase a piece of land from the Pennsylvania Railroad Company," the paper reported. "When the gentlemen left this city the intention was to call upon the railroad company's land agent to ascertain what could be done regarding the purchase of a part of the driving park in the First Ward."

The tenure of Madison Textiles at the location was brief, however. In 1924 it was taken over by Susquehanna Silk Mills of Sunbury, which went out of business in the early 1930s, a victim of the hard times of the Great Depression.

Then, in the weeks after the flood of 1936 devastated the city, a group of Lock Haven aviation enthusiasts - including J. Willard "Jake" Miller and John Widman - formed a club and purchased a small aircraft from a little firm then located in Bradford.

"One day Miller and John Widman rushed into the newspaper office; they had big news to tell," Gross and Achenbach wrote in "Another Peek at the Past." "They had needed a part for their Cub and that morning they had called Bradford to arrange a flight to pick it up, only to be told that the aircraft plant at the airport had been destroyed by fire the night before. Something should be done, they said, to get the Pipers to come to Lock Haven to restart the

airplane business in the empty silk mill. The editor, checking with the Associated Press for more news on the fire, also put in a call to Mayor (Edgar) Heffner."

Heffner was encouraged to fly to Bradford with Miller and Widman "to make an official offer to the homeless aircraft company. He was the first such emissary to arrive on the ground, although more than 50 towns and cities entered the competition to entice the Piper Company."

Heffner's pitch was successful, and, Gross and Achenbach wrote, "The old race track did, indeed become an active airport, not only for test flying the aircraft manufactured in the old silk mill, but ultimately for airmail pick-up and delivery, and for regular, scheduled flights by Allegheny Airlines, to Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, making as many as four round-trip flights daily for a couple of years."

And that was how, separated by two decades, two very different but one-time burgeoning industries - horse racing and aviation - came to occupy the same spot of land in the city of Lock Haven.

Matt Connor can be reached at mbconnor4265@gmail.com. Two of the original Peek at the Past books, including "Another Peek at the Past," mentioned in this week's column, are available for purchase at Ross Library.