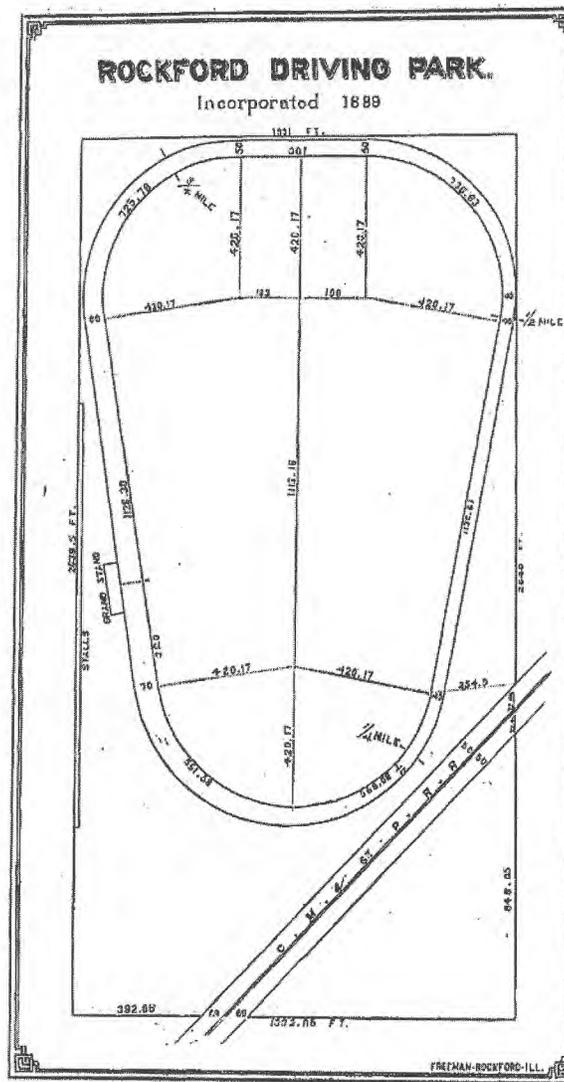

NUGGETS OF HISTORY

VOLUME 51 JUNE 2013 NUMBER 2

OFF TO THE RACES THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NORTH END DRIVING PARK Part 1

By Amanda Becker



The layout of the Rockford Driving Park in 1889.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

This is Amanda Becker's forth contribution to the *Nuggets of History*. She is a history teacher at Auburn High School where she teaches a unit on local history to her students. Amanda is enthusiastic about teaching young people about their home town and making it interesting. This article is about the North End Driving Park. Although little known today, it was a popular source of entertainment in the late 1800s and early 1900s. As Amanda always does, she did a great job researching how the Driving Park was established and its early history. She plans on continuing this story in a future issue of *Nuggets of History*.

We all remember special teachers who inspired us and sparked a special interest in a particular subject. After reading her article, I felt that Amanda is one of those special teachers who inspire their students.

Amanda attended Auburn High School in the late 90s, graduating in 2000. She attended Rock Valley College, graduating with an Associate's Degree in 2002. She went on to Rockford College, graduating in 2005. While at Rockford College she wrote her senior seminar paper on Rockford Industry. Since graduating she has been teaching at her alma mater, Auburn High School.

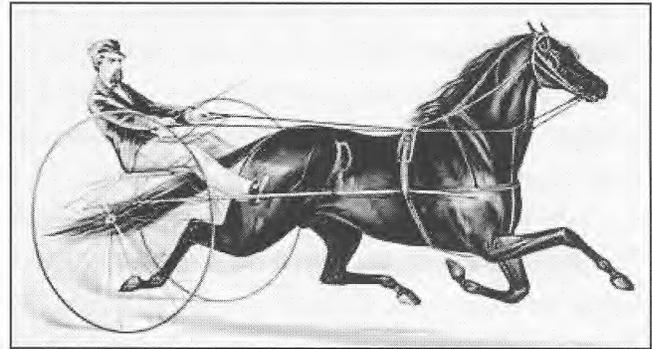
NOTICE TO RESEARCHERS

If you have a subject that you have researched, or an idea for an article that you would like to pursue, give me a call. I would like to encourage original research into some aspects of local history that have not been adequately pursued. I can be reached at 986-4867 (evenings) or 987-5724 (day).

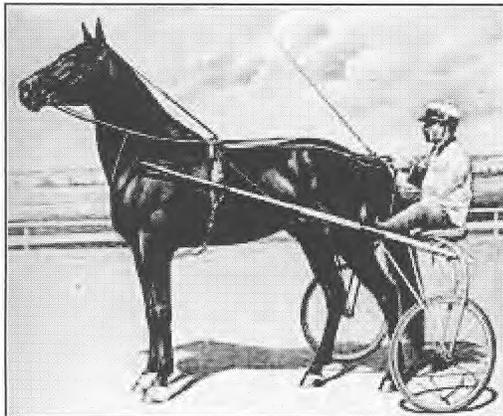
Thomas Powers, Editor

Development of the North End Driving Park Part 1

Rockford has many differently-named subdivisions such as "Glenny View," "Edgebrook," "Churchill's Grove" and the like; but none sound as exciting or unique as "Driving Park Subdivision."¹ During the late 1800s it became fashionable and popular across the



country to build horse-racing tracks. Sulky racing (known today as harness racing) has roots dating back to ancient times.² Sulky race tracks were called "driving parks" because the men who raced the horses were and are still known as "drivers" and not jockeys. Originally the sulkies (carts or wagons) that were pulled behind the horses had either four or two large wheels. The sulkies also generally lacked springs which created more exertion for the horse. The sulky design was changed in 1892 when Bud Doble created a sulky with smaller pneumatic tires and a lower profile.³ The new design



became the standard sulky due to its smoother ride and aerodynamics (allowing for less stress for the horse).

The Standardbred is the breed of horse used for sulky racing because they have shorter legs and a longer body than a Thoroughbred. These characteristics are better suited for trotting or

¹ The top picture is of "Governor Sprague."

http://www.springfieldmuseums.org/the_museums/fine_arts/collection/view/669-governor_sprague. This horse was from Rhode Island. Unfortunately, there are no known pictures of sulky racing in Rockford, but a descendant of "Governor Sprague" did race on opening day in Rockford. "Business at Driving Park Begins Tomorrow." Daily Gazette, August 25, 1890, Pg. 3.

² The origin of the word "sulky" is not actually known.

³ The sulky is referred to as being a "bike" as well today because of its "bike-styled" tires. Drivers were also nicknamed "tail-sitters" because of their proximity to the horses' tail while driving. The picture below is of "Dan Patch," a horse bred in Indiana that became a national sensation by pacing a world record mile in 1:55 in 1906. The record remained unbeaten for 32 years.

padding.⁴ Standardbreds are also less "high strung" than Thoroughbreds which makes the breed more suitable for sulky racing because there is more strategy involved than in jockeyed racing. Races were conducted on roads throughout the late 1700s through the mid 1800s, until building tracks became popular. The start of the race had no start gate or "rolling gate" as is used today. Instead, horses trotted alongside each other on the backstretch until they came to the starting line. An official would yell "go" if the horses were evenly aligned, and the race start would then be official. If not, a "false start" was declared generally by ringing a bell. Most races in the 1800s, as they are today, ran the length of one mile, and winning times varied between two and three minutes.⁵

There were sulky race tracks already in Freeport, Dubuque, and in Chicago. Frank Barnes, Bine Sturtevant, George Keyt, Dr. Page, H. H. Palmer, Let Halsted, and Cash Jones helped create the Driving Park Association, in order to build a driving park for sulky horse racing in Rockford. On December 18, 1889, Bine Sturtevant had raised 12,000 dollars needed to construct a "driving park."⁶ The location of the park was assumed to be placed on the Westside of Rockford, but the exact site was not to be determined for a month after the Association was established. By December 27th, the Morning Star reported:

While it is entirely certain that the Driving Club will be established, considerable hard hustling is still required to obtain the \$25,000 required [to build the track]. Bine Sturtevant took the subscription paper Christmas day and before nightfall had collared \$3,000, and yesterday Let Halsted succeeded in raising \$650. This makes \$20,650 already subscribed, and with extra exertions the balance can be cornered by Saturday, when the option on the Carney and Rice farms expires.⁷

On December 28th, the Driving Park Association held its first meeting of investors. It had raised 24,000 dollars as of that night when the location for the park was to be decided. The investors were divided in two camps- half were in favor of buying the Dan Carney farm and half in favor of the Rice farm. Both farms were located in Northwest Rockford, which was "booming" with development in housing. After Frank Smith, who

⁴ The trotting gait of a horse is when the horse's left front and right rear legs are moving forward, and the horses' right front and left rear legs are moving backward. A pacing gait of a horse is when a horses' left front and left rear legs are both moving forward, and the horse's front right and rear right legs are moving backward. If a horse gallops, or is "off stride" during a race, the horse actually runs slower. Horses must be "on-stride" across the finish line in order to win.

⁵ Most of the information about 1890s sulky racing was found in the 2012 Boone County Fair Racing Program. The race finish times mean that the horses generally trot or pace at an average speed of thirty miles per hour.

⁶ *Morning Star*. December 18, 1889. Pg. 2.

⁷ *Morning Star*. December 27, 1889. Pg. 3. The Dan Carney and Rice farms were located off of Auburn Street. Streets in the area were named after Carney and Rice.

called the meeting to order, informed the investors that the Agricultural Society was in favor of the Carney site and could rent it out from the Association for 600 dollars for their annual fair, the investors agreed on the Carney purchase.⁸

Dan Carney came to Illinois in 1845 from New York. He was employed by Frink and Walker as a stagecoach driver. Carney's routes included a Rockford to Chicago, Galena to Elizabeth, Shabbona grove, and then to Dixon lines. In 1848, Carney made Rockford his permanent home.⁹ His farm was located on the Northeast corner of Auburn Street and Rockton Avenue. Throughout the 1870s until his death, Dan trained horses for sulky racing. He even had a mile track on his own farm, and was offered \$3,000 a month from a Kentucky stable owner to train his horses.

In January of 1890, a Chicago Real Estate developer offered Carney 18,000 dollars for sixty acres east of his farmstead. The offer was declined. On January 8, 1890, *The Daily Register* reported that, "H.H. Palmer, acting as trustee for the driving park club, had recorded in the circuit clerk's office the agreement signed by Dan Carney, by which they claim that they bought his farm for a driving park. It is hinted, [...] that Carney will be sued if he does not live up to his agreement."¹⁰ To the Driving Park Association's surprise, the Carney farm was sold instead to city attorney Edward H. Marsh (backed by H. W. Price, Myron Bruner, and Charlie Fox) for around 16,000 dollars, placing 5,600 dollars down. The *Morning Star* reported on January 10 that, "It is expected that Mr. Price's intention is to run the street car line way out, erect houses along the line for rental, make the street car line help his property and the property help the line- in short, to build up a Pullman town to the north of Rockford and all things tend to prove the correctness of the theory."¹¹ Marsh continued to buy land around what is now Huffman Boulevard and the subdivision that grew around it became known as E. H. Marsh's Park View Subdivision.¹² Carney stated that he knew nothing about the driving park "matter," and that the driving park club had not "produced" any money towards him for the sale of his property.¹³

The Driving Park Association members were furious- they stated that Carney should be barred from the track wherever they would decide where it would be.¹⁴ Possible alternative sites included acres around the Buckbee Greenhouses, or buying Lathrop's farm on the eastside of Rockford. These sites were quickly tossed aside.

⁸"The Die is Cast." *Morning Star*. December 28, 1889. Pg. 2.

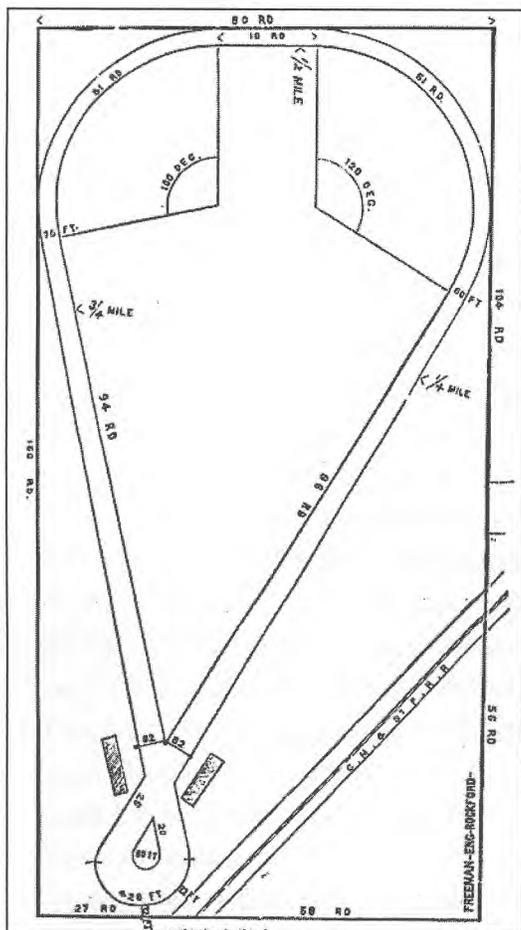
⁹*Portrait and Biographical Record*. Pg 302.

¹⁰"The Carney Farm Sold." *Daily Register*. January 8, 1890.

¹¹"His Word No Good." *Morning Star*. January 10, 1890. H.W. Price also invested in the Harlem Boulevard neighborhood.

¹² According to the 1905 Rockford plat map, the street boundaries for the subdivision were Auburn Street on the south, Rockton and Huffman in the west, Burton and Fulton in the North, and Huffman and North Main Streets in the east.

¹⁴ Despite their anger, Dan Carney entered a horse called "Kate Dunn" in the opening days of racing at the Rockford Driving Park. He trained at least 3 other horses for other races at the park as well.



The Driving Park Association met at the Opera House on January 14th. It was at this meeting that they decided to locate the race track close to the original Carney tract. On January 16th, the Daily Gazette announced that the "Driving Club" had bought the Sylvester B. Wilkins farm for 9,000 dollars.¹⁵ The Wilkins farm was bordered by the modern streets of Ridge Avenue, Overdene Ave, Huffman Boulevard, and the railroad tracks to the south. According to a brief statement in the Daily Register on July 12, 1890, Dan Carney liked the new Driving Park location. The editor wrote after the statement, "That's natural." The Driving Park Association also bought a ten acre strip of land along what is now Fulton Avenue in order to extend their property to Main Street. Despite these purchases, the final location for the driving park was still in question.

In February, two Aldermen (Harbison and Trahern) offered the Driving Park association bonuses of 1,500 dollars to relocate the Driving Park to the south side of Rockford. These offers were declined. On February 13th, *The Daily Register* reported that the Driving Park Association Directors drove to the Wilkins site in order to inspect the land that they had bought.¹⁶ There were no buildings on the property, corn stood on five acres of the land, and there was a huge pile of straw left (which they decided they could potentially use for opening day). They determined that the land was actually better than the Carney tract because it was a little sandier (which meant that it could dry out faster). The track originally was thought to be built in a "pear-shape" because J. P. Sauber (who owned the land west of the park) refused to sell any of his land to the association, and because the railroad was located at the southern end of the park.¹⁷ Other reasons behind the original proposed tracks' unique shape were the fact that the spectators would see the horses more clearly during the race, and the straight-a-ways would allow for faster track times.

¹⁵ *Daily Register*. February 15, 1890. Pg. 6. Wilkins owned the Rockford Mitten and Hosiery Company. J. P. Sauber tried to convince Dan Carney not to sell to the Driving Park Association because he did not want the park to be so close to his land. When Carney did not sell, and Wilkins did, Sauber was upset because the park's boundary was right against his land.

¹⁶ "Their First Meeting." *Daily Register*. February 13, 1890. Pg. 2. The picture is of a track design that was considered but rejected by the association.

¹⁷ "A Two Minute Track." *Morning Star*. March 27, 1890. Pg. 2.

By April 12th, the association decided against the shape and agreed on a traditional oval.¹⁸ The grandstand was located on the west side of the track and was modeled after the Washington Park grandstand in Chicago.¹⁹ The spectators would not face the sun and could have a great view of the home stretch. Spectators were comfortable too because the stands could seat 2,000 people, and there were 1,000 easy, opera-styled chairs for ladies.²⁰ Underneath the grandstand (out of sight and of hearing) were "pool seller stands" for betting.²¹ In front of the grandstand was an area for reporters. On the other side of the track in front of the grandstand was the octagonal-parasol-covered judge's stand.²² They built 150 stalls on the west side of the track and south of the grandstand. The main entrance was located southeast of the park (around where Fulton Avenue runs into Huffman Boulevard). The location of the entrance meant that spectators would have to walk around the south-end of the track to get to the grandstand. Association directors believed that the entrance could later be moved to the Southwest side of the park, but the change in location never happened. The St. Paul and Milwaukee Railroad was supposed to build a small depot around the main entrance, but the depot was not constructed by the time of opening day on August 26th. The street car ran from Auburn Street, north on Huffman Boulevard and stopped to drop passengers off at the main gate.²³ It then continued east on Fulton Avenue and on to North Main Street.



Throughout the month of April, there was a great amount of discussion as to where and how the street car would be funded in the booming North End. A deal was made between several parties (such as the real estate developer H. W. Price, realtor W. F. Huffman, and the Driving Park Association) in which they divided the 15,000 dollar cost for the extension. Construction of the park began on April 23rd and was completed

¹⁸ "No Pear Shaped Track." *Daily Gazette*. April 12, 1890. Pg. 3. See cover for illustration.

¹⁹ The picture at right is of Chicago's Washington Park Race Track.

²⁰ "To Seat 3,000 People." *Morning Star*. April 19, 1890. Pg. 3.

²¹ George Wild of Chicago was in charge of betting at the race track. "Book-making, Paris Mutual's, Combinations, and auction pools" could be found.

²² "A Carload of Trotters." *Daily Register*. August 15, 1890. Pg. 3. The starter for the races was H. D. McKinney. He was the secretary and treasurer of the Northwestern Breeders and Trotters Association, and was also president of the Janesville Driving Park Association. Due to his involvement, 14 horses were brought to Rockford from Chicago's Washington Park in order to race. Jim McKee served as the clerk. McKee was in charge of keeping all of the records involving times, protests, and suspensions.

²³ Today, Huffman Boulevard ceases to be a true boulevard at Fulton because that is where the gate to the driving park was located. The street car ran down the middle of the street, and horses, carriages, and pedestrians walked on the other sides.

by August 26th. Throughout the construction process, approximately 200 men worked on putting the stalls, fences, water pipe, judge's stand, the track and other details together.²⁴ The lumber was easily brought in by the railroad. By May 23rd, the track was completely dredged and ready for racing.²⁵ Fresh water was available for the horses and the spectators through the 1,000 feet of water pipe that had been laid. A windmill was built just south of the grandstand in order to develop pressure for the system.²⁶ A state-of-the-art "sprinkling" wagon was also purchased in order to water the track down in case the dust became intolerable.²⁷ By the end of July, there were over 20 horses stabled and practicing on the track (by mid-August that number had doubled), and the grandstand was in the process of being built.²⁸

On August 2nd, it was reported that H. H. Palmer (the designer of the track) spent all day and possibly night at the track making sure that progress on the track was being made.²⁹ It was thought that the famous horse, "Hambletonian," would be registered for the races, but his stardom must have been too high to have appeared in Rockford. Instead, some of the local horses that were training daily on the track in early August were, "Harry Kelly, Sailor Girl, Senator F., Charles A., Tommy Root, Prince Walkill, Eugene Wilkes, North End [ironic] Maid, Mambrino, Clay, Bashaw Maid, and Calamity Jane."³⁰ Two owners could not wait for opening day and raced their horses for twenty-five dollars on August 7th. Doe Walsh's "Sailor Girl" raced against "Cherry Picker" owned by B. F. Kimlin. "Sailor Girl" won the race, but Walsh was nice enough to give Kimlin the twenty-five dollars back.³¹ By August 17th, *The Morning Star* was worried for the Driving Park director's sanity.

If somebody, anybody, everybody don't take hold of Cassius Columbus Jones, Frank Gustavus Smith, Lester Brunswick Halsted, George Melanchton Keyt, Benjamin Franklin Barnes, Thomas Diametricus Reber, Hoar Hound Palmer, Bartonnis Baredo Page, Zebulon Biology Sturtevant, they will go crazy. Of course, this doesn't mean that they will lose their mental balance,

²⁴"Will Do the Work." *Morning Star*. May 15, 1890. Pg. 3. It took 101,000 feet of lumber for the stalls, 47,000 feet for the fences, and 1,400 for the track. The work was completed by the Rockford Lumber and Fuel Company.

²⁵ *Daily Gazette*. May 22, 1890. Pg. 1.

²⁶ "Our Record Breaker." *Daily Register*. August 9, 1890. Pg. 5.

²⁷ "At the Driving Park." *Morning Star*. July 23, 1890. Pg. 3.

²⁸"The Best in the Land." *Daily Register*. July 31, 1890. Pg. 3. The grandstand had two decks. On the top deck there were two restrooms for the ladies, and two restrooms for gents on the lower level. Though on August 7, the *Daily Register* commented that the grandstand was actually built too small for the expected crowds (which were projected as high as 20,000). With this number in mind, Will Huffman leased a "tally-ho" wagon from Chicago that could seat up to forty people in order to transport private parties to the opening day races. "The Boomer's Tally-Ho." *Morning Star*. August 12, 1890. Pg. 2.

²⁹ "The Horse Corner." *Daily Register*. August 2, 1890. Pg. 2.

³⁰ "Now We Go." *Morning Star*. August 3, 1890. Pg. 2.

³¹ "Sailor Girl Won." *Morning Star*. August 7, 1890. Pg. 2.

but it does suggest that their friends must look after them. Every day, every hour, every minute, and for the matter of time- every second they can be seen on the street corners talking hoss.”³²

August 26-29th were the days selected for the park’s official grand opening.³³ August 28th was selected as “Ladies Day,” and it was suggested that the ladies receive a picture of the Driving Park for attending the races. *The Morning Star* believed that factories should be closed and a holiday declared so that everyone in Rockford could witness the races.³⁴ The purses for the races averaged between 600 and 800 dollars, and there were two races each day with ten to fifteen-horse fields. The horses were from across Northern Illinois and from other states such as Wisconsin, Ohio, Michigan, and Kentucky. Hotels filled up. The Chicago-Milwaukee and St Paul Railroad offered round trip tickets from downtown (the train stopped at State Street) so people could come to the track for fifteen cents. The Dubuque Trotting Association President and the Stephenson County Fair Superintendent came to see the action and size up the horses. General admission was 50 cents, and an extra 25 cents was paid in order to sit in the grandstand. Seats along the quarter stretch were an extra 25 cents. Spectator carriages were parked inside the “paddock” or in the infield of the track for a dollar. The Rockford Watch Band played tunes in between the heats of races. Spectators could buy pretzels from Frank Schmauss, and cigars from another vendor. There was also the Driving Park Dining Hall that could seat up to five-hundred people.

Around two-thousand people came to see the first day of races on August 26th. In order to enter a horse into a race, there was a sixty dollar entrance fee. For the first race, on the first day, there were four heats. The first heat had thirteen horses. The horse, “Irene,” won all of the first race’s heats except the third heat. The averages of the heat times determined a race’s winning order. Therefore, “Irene’s” owners claimed a race purse of 300 dollars, second place won one hundred and fifty dollars, third place won ninety dollars, and fourth place won sixty dollars. The *Daily Register* cried foul about the first race winner because they believed that the horse should not have been fielded in those races since the horse led throughout by wide margins making the races not exciting to watch. The heats for the second race had eleven horses start. Unfortunately rain intervened, and not all of the second race’s heats were finished on

³² “Call Up Your Hosses.” *Morning Star*. August 17, 1890. Pg. 5.

³³ “They Will Run To-morrow.” *Daily Gazette*. August 26, 1890. Pg. 3. There was a small problem with the street car company during the opening week. There was supposed to be a shipment of new electric cars, but they did not arrive until the week after the park opened. So the street car company ran all three of the electric cars with two trailers behind each of them on the “Driving Park Circuit.” The rest of the city was serviced by horse-drawn cars. Workers worked on the electric car lines to the park until the last minute. Despite their best efforts, the electric wires were four blocks short of the park entrance. The street car company fixed this problem by providing horse cars from where the wire ended to the front gate.

³⁴ “The Coming Races.” *Morning Star*. August 19, 1890. Pg. 3

the first day, so they delayed them until the second day. Two drivers were fined five dollars for "crowding the pole," or "interference" during the heats. "Harry Kelly" was the only Winnebago County owned and trained horse that raced on the first day. The Daily Register commented that he "might as well have stayed in the stable."

The second day of racing on August 27th had clear weather. "Ella E." was the horse to claim victory for race number two. Race number three had seven horses entered. "Simmie" was the favorite in the betting pools and for good reason. The horse won three out of the four heats making him a clear race winner. Race number four had five horses entered. Out of the five heats run, "Red Flame" won three making him the winner of the race. There was controversy surrounding the driver of "Red Flame." It was believed that the driver held the horse back in order to not win the first two heats in order to split the prize money with "Gen. Buford's" driver. After the second heat, "Red Flame's" driver was advised to "let the horse go" and cruised to win the remaining three heats. The previous year the horse pulled a butcher's cart and was not even racing.³⁵

The third day of racing was ladies' day on August 28th. The attendance for that day was averaged around four to six-thousand spectators. Race number five had five horses entered. During the second heat, two of the driver's carriages collided against each other which made for some excitement, but the horse, "Prize," won all of the race's heats and took first place. The Sixth race had four horses entered. "Nobby" was favored to win by most of the ladies in attendance and easily won all of the heats except one. During the second heat, "Nobby's" driver was found guilty of interference and was placed fourth despite crossing the line first. Since the day's races concluded fairly quickly and the crowd was still rather large, the association decided to run an additional race for that day. The competing horses had not won any previous races. Only two heats were run, and "Bird" won them both.³⁶

The last day of racing, was a Saturday on August 30th. In the third heat of the first race, "B.B." and "Elmonarch," crossed the wire at the same time, but it did not matter because "B.B." was a clear race winner since he won all of the other heats. "Fred Arthur" was challenged to beat his best time of 2:12. He failed in front of a crowd of 6,000 people.³⁷ The Association decided to end the day with a consolation race. Two heats were run and "Ooloff" won all three.

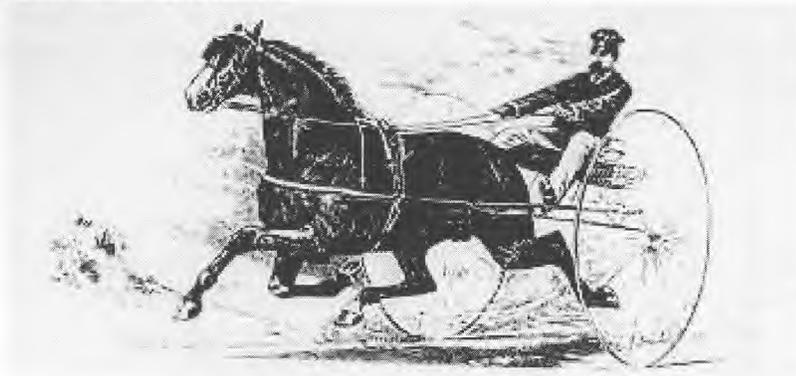
³⁵"Tis' Ladies Day." *Daily Register*. August 28, 1890. Pg. 3. Combined gate ticket sales for the first and second days had netted the association nine-hundred dollars. Some spectators avoided the gate fee and took in the races by watching from the top of a railroad boxcar parked along the park's fences. Two men ran a shell game just outside of the gate and were told numerous times to stop their activity. He only complied when there were no more customers to swindle. They were later arrested and fined 30 and 50 dollars on the last day of racing.

³⁶"The Maiden's Fair." *Morning Star*. August 29, 1890. Pg. 3.

³⁷"The Greatest Yet: A Big Day at Driving Park." *Morning Star*. August 30, 1890. Pg. 3. "Fred Arthur" paced the mile in 2:15 1/2.

If Rockford spectators had not taken in the day of races, the Barnum and Bailey Circus was in town to entertain as well. Members of the Driving Park Association netted 2,500 dollars in profits.³⁸ A few weeks later, the Winnebago County Agricultural Society were to have their exhibition. The Agricultural Society decided to repair their grounds and hold their horse and sulky races on their own grounds and not at the Driving Park. The Rockford Newspapers continued to print editorials begging the Agricultural Society to reconsider, but to no avail. Many of the horses that had run at the Driving Park during its opening days remained in Rockford in order to run in the Agricultural Society's races. "Fred Arthur" made another attempt to break his record and failed again at the Agricultural Society fairgrounds.

Throughout the months following the August opening, there were few mentions of activity for driving park. Freeman's Livery Stables mentioned the driving park in their advertisements for carriages. It was suggested that the driving park join the racing circuit between Dubuque and Independence, but the Association declined the offer because they believed that they had made a big enough profit from the August races. Improvements to the track, and a few races between locally-owned horses were raced to settle bets between horsemen were completed and raced until general races were conducted in June and in August, 1891. The driving park had competition for spectators on the Northwest side that year because Harlem Amusement Park and a Baseball Park opened to the public. As early as July 9, 1892, the *Morning Star* reported that the Driving Park Association would no longer hold general race meets due to low attendance numbers.³⁹ The *Morning Star* writer complained that Rockford was too small a town to support a race track and that the citizens were "too puritan" for racing. Despite this report, the story of the Rockford Driving Park did not end in 1892. The park continued in an on-again-off-again fashion throughout the 1930s. In part 2 of my article I will relate the changes in ownership, direction, and events that were held in the park during the remaining years.



³⁸ "A Big Profit" *Morning Star*. August 31, 1890. Pg. 3.

³⁹ "The Driving Club Retires From Business." *Morning Star*. July 9, 1892. Pg. 5.

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