Can a famous horse save a fading Indiana town?

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By Doyle

OXFORD – More than halfway to Oxford, somewhere on the old country road, it occurs to me what I've done: Driven all this way to write about a racehorse. Not a thoroughbred, but a pacer. What's a pacer? That's what I'm saying! More than halfway to Oxford, I realize I don't even know what this horse is. But I know this: The horse died 100 years ago.

U.S. 52 gives way to Ind. 352, and Benton County (population: 8,854) unfolds like a book with no words on the page. It occurs to me I'm wasting my time. A horse, a pacer, born in 1896. That's my story. That's my story? Could be time to turn around.

A sign in the weeds along Ind. 352 welcomes me to Oxford. There's a picture of a beautiful black stallion on that sign. In the distance, there's a water tower. Welcome to Oxford, it says. Home of Dan Patch. I keep coming.

Dan Patch was born in Oxford on April 29, 1896, a wobbly colt bred by Daniel A. Messner, who owned the general goods store on the square. Messner's Folly, they called this horse named Dan Patch, until he was trained to be a pacer. Pulling a rider in a carriage called a sulky, a pacer strides with both left legs moving in unison, then the right legs, and so on. Dan Patch started racing in 1901, and became a national star.

Dan Patch was foaled on 29 April 1896, in Oxford, Indiana in Benton County. Patch set the world's record for the fastest mile by a harness horse (1m:55s). Oxford is proud of the great horse as noted with the many tributes to him throughout the city. (Photo: Gregg Doyel)

But in 1902, pestered to sell the horse by an East Coast gambler and spooked by the unexplained poisoning of another horse in his stable, Messner sold Dan Patch for $20,000. That was a fortune in 1902, but pennies on the dollar for a horse that in 1906 became the world's fastest pacer, setting a record for the mile — 1 minute, 55 seconds — that stood for 32 years.

Dan Patch toured the country in a private train car. He raced other pacers head-to-head, and when competing trainers stopped challenging him, he ran solo time trials. More than 100,000 came to the Minnesota State Fair in 1906 to watch him run.

Before Babe Ruth, if you can believe this, Dan Patch was quite possibly the most famous athlete in America. His name and likeness sold whiskey bottles and shot glasses, cigars and cigar boxes.

Coffee tins? Yes. With Dan Patch coffee. This got silly, like the Dan Patch billiard cue and the Dan Patch sheet music, teaching the Dan Patch two-step. How could a collector keep it all safe? With a Dan Patch padlock.

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"He endorsed everything," says Wayne Sproull of Noblesville, a 1968 graduate of Oxford High School.
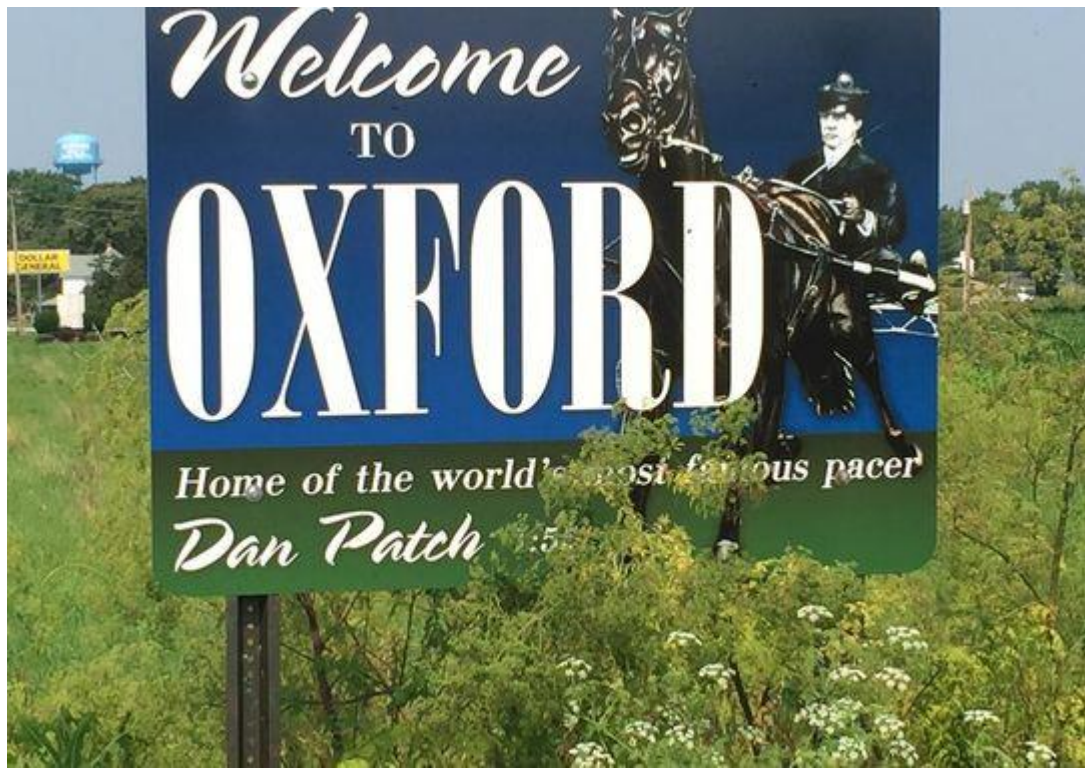
And there are people who collect it all. I'm looking at one of them now. His name is Bob Glaspie, and Sproull and I are sitting in the 90-year-old's kitchen in Oxford, where the owner of the world's biggest Dan Patch collection wonders the same thing I'm wondering.

"What," Bob Glaspie says, "am I going to do with all this stuff?"

The answer to that question could save Oxford. Unless this town is past saving.
Once upon a time, Oxford was the Benton County seat. It had a high school. It had a bowling alley and a movie theater and a café on the square with a speakeasy in back, where men blew off steam playing pool and poker.

It had a world-famous horse.

Gone, all of it. The county seat is now Fowler, and Oxford High School closed in 1968, consolidated into Benton Central. The bowling alley, shotgun theater, café/speakeasy, even Messner's general store — gone from a town square that is mostly empty buildings and vacant lots. Oxford has one bank, one gas station and three cemeteries.

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This is a town that looks back, not forward, and when Oxford gazes into the past, it sees Dan Patch. I ask Bob Glaspie why, 113 years after Dan Patch left and never returned, the horse remains the fulcrum upon which Oxford teeters.

"I don't know," he says. "I guess that's the only thing we have to brag about."

Not true, you know. Steve Graves grew up here and is a respected architect in Lexington, where he designed the Kentucky basketball team's weight room and Rick Pitino's house. Another 1960s high school graduate, Gregory Scott, is a powerful attorney in West Palm Beach.

But the town reveres Dan Patch. You enter on the Dan Patch Highway, pass the sign that welcomes you to Oxford, "home of the world's most famous pacer Dan Patch," and drive under the water tower that reminds those who haven't been paying attention that you've entered the home of Dan Patch.

On ahead is Dan Patch Drive, but turn right on Michigan — one block before you get to the Dan Patch Café — for the Indiana Historical Bureau marker that notes this is where the great horse was born. Behind the marker is the barn where it happened. The barn has something painted on its roof, enormous words written in cursive: Home of Dan Patch 1:55

The number is his record time in the mile, but from Michigan Street, the barn appears to be sporting a Biblical verse. Which I suppose it is.

In the Dan Patch Cafe, they're drinking coffee and talking nonsense, which makes this day like the rest. It's a charmingly humble café, unable to accept credit cards. My wallet has no cash. The waitress says my $1.35 coffee is on the house, sugar.

At the closest table, a man who gives his name as Ray — "I don't give my (last) name to strangers," he says — is about to start some trouble about Dan Patch.

"Here comes some bull----," Garry Johnson says, breathing through an oxygen tube.

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"Six, seven years ago, I'm visiting (Purdue's) Duhme Hall — the one where Amelia Earhart supposedly bunked —and I'm sitting around, talking, and I mention Dan Patch," Ray says. "OK, it was 'Dan Patch this, Dan Patch that.' Someone says, 'Ray, who's that Dan Patch? He a football player?' "

Garry Johnson takes a drag of oxygen.

"That's a bunch of bull----," he says.

Who's that Dan Patch? Blasphemy. His barn's still standing, still owned by a Messner – John and Pam Messner, a grandson (and his wife) of Daniel A. Messner. They've lived behind that barn for more than 30 years, and about a decade ago, they restored it. When they did, they found a wooden bucket more than a century old, holding three or four dozen rusted horseshoes. Worn by, you know. Him.

John Messner called Bob Glaspie and gave him a horseshoe that may or may not have been worn by the famous horse. Glaspie, whose prized collectible was a piece of Dan Patch billiard chalk in the original box, started to cry.

The weirdos are out there. They search for actual brushes used on Dan Patch, hoping for a strand of the great horse's hair. A clipping from a hoof would fetch thousands of dollars, if it could be verified. They seek the holy grail: Dan Patch DNA.

John Messner doesn't understand the mania, but then, this horse has starred in family lore for more than a century. He's not exactly "over" it — more like, resigned to it — but his wife, Pam, is the enthusiastic one about Dan Patch. She beams as she shows me around the barn and says, "This should be a movie."

She leads me to a stall where the slats have been chewed away.

"Cribbing," Pam Messner says. "That's when the horse chews on the slats. This was Dan Patch's stall."

I rub the wood and venture into weirdo territory. I keep rubbing — make me stop — and say, "I'm touching where Dan Patch once chewed?"

"You are," Pam says.

Then I ask a dumber question: Can Dan Patch save Oxford? Maybe a Dan Patch museum to attract tourists? Glaspie has offered to loan his collection to someone who would set up a museum on the square — ideally, Glaspie says, in the empty storefront that held Messner General Store — but John Messner says it's too late. For the museum, I think he means. Not for the town.

"With every year, there's less and less interest," he says. "Dan Patch will never just be gone, but (the mania) is not what it was."

I listen to John Messner, grandson of the man who gave to Oxford this great horse — and then let the great horse move on, where he became a legend in Minnesota — but I'm thinking of the mural on the decaying town square. It was painted a decade ago on the side of the Oxford Café building, before it went empty.

From right to left — from the front of the building to the back — the mural tells the chronological history of Oxford, founded in 1843: a red windmill, farmland, a gray barn. Then it's Dan Patch, then a train. Next are three buildings, cars on a highway, and Purdue's sprawling Wind Energy Center.

That's where the mural ends, but the building goes for several more feet. There are vines creeping up the wall. An electric meter that isn't running. Faded, crumbling bricks. This building's best days are behind it.

I'm standing in a beautiful old town and trying not to see the symbolism. I'm trying really, really hard.

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