

The Harness Horse

The Majestic Home of Dan Patch THE TAJ MAHAL OF STOCK FARMS

from December 14, 1966 [Harness Horse](#) by [Ken McCarr](#)

IN THE seventeenth century Shah Jahan, the Mogul emperor of Hindustan, built a beautiful structure called the Taj Mahal. It was erected as a tribute to his favorite wife, Mumtaz Mahal. The Taj Mahal is listed in the Seven Wonders of the World.

At the start of the twentieth century, [M. W. Savage](#) built a mammoth structure, on the banks of the Minnesota River, which could be classified as the Taj Mahal of stock farms. If there were a list of the seven wonders of the trotting world, this place would be listed.

[Marion Willis Savage](#) was born on a small farm in Ohio in 1859. He was caught in the westward movement of the time and the family headed for Iowa. There is a strange parallel here between [John Wallace](#), the founder of the [American Trotting Register](#) and [M. W. Savage](#), the founder of the [International Stock Food Farm](#). Both tried farming in the state of Iowa. Wallace conceived the idea that horses should have some type of a herd book to put [pedigrees](#) on record for future use. While in school, Savage dreamed of a stock farm where he could raise high class harness horses. While still in his teens he was raising some colts from the Bashaw line, which traced back to the Morgans.

It was with bitter disappointment that Savage was forced to sell his horses and take up a new type of livelihood. When he migrated to Minneapolis, Minn., it also seemed that his fondest dreams were never to be realized.

M. W. Savage's failure as a farmer was due to the fact that he was destined for greater things. His life was almost like one of the tales out of Arabian Nights. In the early 1880's he started to manufacture, in a small way, a stock food which he had concocted. From this point he prospered, for he was never intended for a farmer.

Like many great men he had the power of original conceptions and the ability to make them work. Much of his success was due to scope and effectiveness of his advertising as he was a past master in the art of publicity.

There were veterinarians at that time but the farmers had many animals and were in no position financially to pay large doctor bills. Like the older generation of trainers and grooms, they took care of the minor ailments and had their home made remedies and panaceas. Patent medicines and conditioning stock feed found a ready market. From a small start, M. W. Savage started to prosper and to amass a fortune.

As the fortune grew the old dream of a high class stock farm was revived. The first step toward the cherished idea came with the announcement in the fall of 1901 that the estate of William E. Spier would send all of his horses to auction. Among those listed in the

consignment was the champion trotting stallion, [Directum](#) 4, 2:05¼. Known as "The Black Rascal," the horse held the four-year-old record as well as the World's Record for trotting stallions.

Long before the sale, [M. W. Savage](#) had made his decision to buy Directum and start his farm. The man from Minneapolis was well prepared when he went to the auction as he took along a trunk full of blankets and equipment as well as a man to take care of the horse on the journey back to the Gopher state.

Savage was prepared to pay \$25,000 for the stallion but was pleasantly surprised when he held the final bid at \$12,100. He felt that he had a bargain and was convinced of this when he was offered \$25,000 for the horse inside of two hours after the purchase.

Much like the late [Henry Oliver](#) and [Peter Scott](#), here was an owner with a stallion and no farm. Oliver bought Poplar Hill Farm which was ready for occupancy. Savage started to look for his ideal spot.

He found the land which met his specifications about ten miles from Minneapolis. It was a tract of 700 acres with the Minnesota River running through it. There were many springs and a few little streams wandering through it to assure a plentiful water supply. The flat bottom land on one side of the river was ideal for the stable and track. A bluff on the other bank of the river was the location for a summer home as it overlooked the farm.

About the only thing on the land was a straw covered shelter for animals. But work was soon started on what was probably the most beautiful barn on any farm. There is an old adage among advertising men, there is no substitute for size, and this was a big one.

It was an unique structure with a big rotunda at the center and from this the wings of the stable came out like the spokes of a wheel. This hub was the focal point of attention. It was octagonal in shape with a diameter of ninety feet and was 100 feet long. It was topped by an oriental shaped dome which, as a kid, always brought the thought of a turnip placed upside down.

There was a similarity to the Taj Mahal here as the dome has the same shape and the entrance was flanked by two smaller domes. The ventilators on each of these wings also had domes. These surrounded the central part, much like the beautiful structure at Agra, India.

The dome on the big barn was more than an ornament as it contained a huge water tank to take care of the needs of the horses in the stable. Three nearby springs supplied pure water for this use.

The wings containing the stalls jutted out from five sides of the octagonal rotunda. Two of the remaining sides carried just windows. The front side was the entrance and here were built two projections, one on each side of the entrance. These two story affairs provided the offices and sleeping rooms for the men.

Each wing was 160 feet in length and it made it possible to house 130 horses. The wheel shaped structure was built with a purpose. This allowed each stall to have the use of a window, not only for better light but also for better ventilation in hot weather. The main ventilation was handled by the three dome shaped cupolas on the roofs of each wing.

Minnesota has some severe winters so a heating plant was built out of sight between two of the stable wings. The owner believed that hot water heat gave the most even temperature and that this would be more beneficial for the horses so the main part of the barn had hot water heat. One unusual part of the heating plant was that it also generated steam heat. This was for the men and it just went to the front offices and sleeping rooms.

The big central rotunda was not floored. It was covered with tanbark and had a big glass display case of the products produced by M. W. Savage. It was only right that these be given a prominent place for after all they had made the big barn a possibility. Around the case was an iron railing, a staunch affair so no horse could shy and knock over the display.

The tanbark was gentle to bare feet and in typical kid fashion, the ring around the case made a fine race track. It was great fun but some of the grooms just couldn't see it that way after they had so carefully raked and smoothed the place. It was easy to spot when the grooms were busy as a person could look along all of the lines of stalls from the center of the rotunda. This advantage worked both ways as they could also spot anyone racing around the display case.

A full time blacksmith was needed to take care of all the horses so a blacksmith shop was erected to the rear, between two of the wings. Ren Nash was the smithy and later Jack Seiter succeeded him.

The cost of the barn alone was given as \$50,000, an enormous sum even in those days. This amount would hardly get you shed stalls in these days of inflationary prices, and it would cost a fortune to try and replace this structure today. It is doubtful if it could be duplicated at the present time for architects and artisans seem to be able to build only a box shaped structure with cement slabs and a little glass for decoration.

The stable wings had board floors and at the end of every wing was an enlarged section which contained four big stalls. These large stalls were to hold the champion stallions which M. W. Savage intended to collect.

Everything was done to make this a dream farm. To train horses skilled trainers are necessary and with a farm this big more than one. Good trainers were loath to come to a place where there were no accommodations. There was a pretty little brook that went past the stable? and then made a turn toward the river. There was a small clump of trees here and this was the spot picked for the trainers. Two houses were built, each two stories high. Each had its own separate path and each had its own bridge over the stream. About fifty yards separated the houses. The only thing in joint use was an ice house built between the houses. The lakes would freeze deep in the winter and the ice was cut into

cakes and brought to the ice house and packed in layers with sawdust between the layers and covered deeply over the top and around the sides. It's a far cry from electric refrigeration but now it is still hard to believe how that ice kept from thawing during the summer.

Some distance farther on another house was built which was for the blacksmith. There was a pond nearby and this was handy to give the horses the feel of their new shoe calks before being raced over the ice at [Lake of the Isles](#) in Minneapolis.

The pond also figured in one of the happenings at the farm. Jack Seiter shot two wild geese on this pond. Ed Hanson had a poolroom and barbershop and it was one of the gathering places of the men. Jack wandered in and told of shooting the geese. It caused quite a furor as wild geese had never been seen in that section. It was [Ned McCarr](#) who solved the mystery when he came in and asked if anyone had seen a couple of geese which had broken out of a coop and strayed away.

The flat expanse of land toward the river was picked for the track. One of the famous builders of racing courses was Seth Griffith. He was picked to build a mile track. He suggested a sod track so the track was graded and then the pieces of sod were laid on end and packed tightly against each other, much like building the old brick walks in gardens. The theory was that this gave more life to the track as well as more elasticity. This must have been true as this was a fast piece of dirt and it did not sting the horses' feet as badly as the hard tracks.

The land was so even that only a small grade near the riverbank was needed for this mile oval. In spite of this it took \$18,000 to complete the track. The sod track may have had one other advantage. In the spring the river would sometimes overrun its banks and flood the lower portion of the course and the track never did wash away when the water receded. It was at these times that any of the fishermen among the grooms might be seen perched on the outer rail of the track, near the half-mile pole with his bamboo pole.

One of the buildings which many do not remember is the brood mare stable. This was a separate structure located to the rear of the big barn. It was about the length of one of the wings on the big barn and was a double row of stalls with an aisle down the center. Any barn is liable to have its share of rats due to the necessity of storing feed for the horses. At Savage the river rats would come up from the Minnesota River. They were larger and most daring. At one time the night watchman tried to chase out a pack of them and wound up getting chased out himself.

There were many lithographs printed to advertise the farm. In the early ones the brood mare barn was shown. It was omitted in the later prints, which were not too accurate. The building of the half-mile track threw things out of perspective for the men sketching the farm. They were limited to a certain space and in order to get the track in the print they had to use what is termed artistic license. This was something like the near beer of prohibition days. The old saying was that the person naming it "near" beer was an awfully poor judge of distance. The later lithographs had six wings on the stable instead

of five and had the half-mile track attached to one of the wings in the rear. The brood mare barn was eliminated altogether.

The late winters and the spring overflow of the Minnesota river created a problem in getting the horses ready for early engagements. The answer to this was a covered track which could be used in any kind of weather. Seth Griffith was called in again in 1907 to set up the unique structure. It was the only regulation sized half-mile track under complete cover.

The bed of the track was the good black soil from the bottoms but this would freeze in the severe winters. It created a problem which was solved by the use of a mixture of tanbark and salt. This was laid over the base of the track and it took sixty tons to get the job done.

The track was closed in on all sides and the entry was a short passageway attached to the end of one of the front wings. It was like going through a long covered bridge as it was not only covered by a roof but the sides were closed in as well. The track itself was thirty feet wide and the turns were banked. Like all tracks, it too had a grandstand. There was a small enlarged section midway on the outside of the homestretch. Here the owner or prospective buyers could stand out of the way and see the colts speed down the long straight section.

With both sides closed in so there was a problem of having sufficient light inside the track. To take care of this there were windows around the entire length of both the inside and the outside wall. It required 1,400 windows to give the track sufficient light. There was generally a haze of dust shown in the sunshine coming through the windows. Many may think that it would be dangerous due to the limited field of vision on the turns but anyone could hear the hollow echo, of the hoofbeats of any approaching horse. This closed in tunnel had its own warning system.

At one time high winds caused the collapse of one section of the track. Repairmen were rushed in to clear the wreckage and rebuild the damaged part. It was such a valuable asset to the training operations that it was necessary to have this in good shape again before the winter arrived. The original cost of the covered oval was \$17,000. This was \$35,000 spent on the tracks alone.

Across the river from the farm was a bluff 125 feet high. This was the spot picked by Mr. Savage for his summer home. In keeping with his building the best for his horses, he built an elaborate mansion for his family. Part of it was two stories, part was three stories high. It was 115 feet long and the main hall was 36 by 87 feet and it was a beautiful place with stained glass windows in some places.

Plate glass windows were used for the most part and on the side toward the farm there was a big porch. From this porch the owner could see the entire 700 acres of his farm. The horses could even be timed in their workouts on the mile track.

The river which bisected the farm was deep and the banks sloped sharply so that steamers from Minneapolis could dock at the farm and this made excursions possible by use of the big boats.

The only bridge to span the river was a railroad bridge above the farm but it was not suitable for the horses and wagons which made a ferry necessary. It was located on the road between the farm proper and the road leading to the summer home on the bluff. Automobiles were nonexistent so the ferry was large enough to handle a team and delivery wagon.

There was one tragedy connected with the ferry. A delivery team was on its way to the big house with a beautiful grandfather's clock. The ferry was not secured properly and as the team started to move the wagon onto the ferry it shifted outward. The wagon started to roll down the steep banks and pulled the horses under the water. The steepness of the drop off from the bank made them go under in a hurry and the driver could not even cut the team free. Grappling hooks were used and one of them hooked the clock. It caught in the rear of the clock in such a manner that the beauty was not marred even by a scratch.

Broodmares and foals were all over the place in the large fields. Passengers on the train, which ran through Savage, would be at the windows of the car long before they arrived at the town, they wanted to see the horses and the big stable.

The rich bottom lands were fine pastures but vines and bushes also liked the rich soil. At one time a herd of goats were brought in to clear out the underbrush. When the angoras had accomplished their task they were shipped out.

M. W. Savage was a kindly man and he thought that one of these would make a fine pet for the trainer's son. The first drawback was that the goat was so wild that no one could get near it. To make matters worse it was lonesome for the herd so it swam the river and wandered up to the big house on the bluff. The reflection from the windows was a challenge so in butting this reflection a number of plate glass windows were smashed. The goat then disappeared and mother explained that it was lonesomeness which caused the goat to hunt for the herd, but there was an angora pelt curing on Len Oldham's fence about that time.

The wheel shaped barn was the place where M. W. Savage could display his jewels. These were the champions which he collected and these stallions were placed in the enlarged parts at the end of each wing.

The first champion to be enthroned was Directum. He was rather a disappointment as he was a shy breeder and did not have too many foals.

About the time that the big farm was being built, M. W. Savage started negotiations for [Dan Patch](#) and another champion was added for a price of \$60,000. One reporter claimed that it was \$40,000 in cash and the balance in services to mares but this was never substantiated. The owner himself agreed that this was the cheapest horse he ever

purchased. This was the horse that made the farm famous and who made his owner over a quarter of a million dollars during the exhibition campaigns.

During his life at the International Stock Food Farm, Dan Patch became probably the best known pacer in history. Savage in his advertising often offered lithographs of his stallions. The most popular item was something on Dan Patch. One time a picture of Dan Patch was offered free and the advertising department stated that they had received two million requests for the picture.

The past season some of the reporters tried to get material to compare present winners with Dan Patch. This would be a difficult assignment. These have amassed a long string of victories before the age when Dan made his first start. The type of racing is different as now each dash, or heat is credited. Dan had to keep going until he won three heats. He lost two heats but he was undefeated in races. There is no comparison of purses as present day horses can race for more in one start than the total of all the purses for which Dan Patch raced. Comparisons of long winning streaks were the most frequent. Dan started off and won three heats before he lost one then there was a string of twenty-four before he lost his second heat. The final run of twenty-seven was made, until his retirement from competition cut it short. Although from different eras, these horses and Dan can be classified as great horses.

[Arion](#) was the last of the colt champions to a [high wheel sulky](#). At the start of the season the two-year-old record stood at 2:18 but Arion lowered it to 2:10¾. At the time the record for trotting stallions was the 2:09¼ by [Allerton](#). The remarkable mile by the two-year-old made him the talk of the horse world.

J. Malcolm Forbes of Boston, Mass., wrote to [Senator Leland Stanford](#) and asked him to quote a price on the colt. He received a message in return to the effect that there was no use setting a price as no one would pay it. This irked Forbes and he was rather curt in his demand that a price be set. Stanford promptly quoted \$125,000 and Forbes wrote out a check for the amount. It was the highest price paid for a trotter until fairly recent years. The previous record price was the \$105,000 paid for [Axtell](#).

Arion remained in the possession of Mr. Forbes until his death early in 1904. When the dispersal sale was held W. M. Savage was the successful bidder on Arion and the attractive bay stallion went to Minnesota. When the horses were sold after the passing of Mr. Savage, Arion was then twenty-eight years-old so he was given to a man in Kentucky who wanted to give the old horse a home for the rest of his days.

The hobby of M. W. Savage was collecting champions. G. H. Ketcham decided to sell [Cresceus](#) at the Old Glory Auction in 1904. The second bid made was for \$21,000 and it took [Cresceus](#) to the Savage Farm. This was the only stallion to hold the World's trotting record.

Although there was a record of viciousness on his sire's side, Cresceus was mild mannered during his racing career. It was only after he started his tenure in the stud that

his bad temper started. He was a beautiful chestnut color and to a kid this was really something. By crawling up on the trunk a good view could be obtained through the bars. Dad's strict instructions to keep the hands away from the bars made a lasting impression.

Cresceus was a shy foal getter and in 1908 he was sold for export to Russia. It was said that he did kill a man in Europe. He was mistreated after being exported; he endured some things which have killed an ordinary horse and lived until 1916.

In 1909 Directum died at the farm. There was another champion to replace him. [Minor Heir](#) had burst on the racing scene as an unknown and before the season was over he had taken a record of 1:59¼ and was the most talked about horse on the grand circuit. No green pacer had ever approached the feats of Minor Heir that season.

Knowing that Dan Patch had passed his peak, M. W. Savage was scouting for another star. He was successful in his negotiations and \$45,000 changed hands. This was a good buy for the man from Minneapolis as he now had two great horses for his exhibition tours. Both Dan and Minor Heir could beat two minutes. Minor Heir went on to take a record Of 1:58½.

George Gano 2:02 had set a half-mile track record so in 1910 Mr. Savage purchased him for \$20,000. That same year he leased the full brother and sister, Hedgewood Boy 2:01 and Lady Maud C. 2:00½. [Dan Patch](#) had retired so these four gave a series of exhibition races. They produced the first race mile in the charmed circle. When the season was finished the race record had been set at 1:59 by Minor Heir.

In 1910 Roy Wilkes 2:05½ died. A Minneapolis bred champion, Roy was the first pacing stallion to beat 2:10 to a high wheeled sulky. Roy Wilkes had not been too much, as a sire and had been rather a disappointment.

One sire at the farm never held a World's Record of any kind. This was Buttonwood 2:17, he had been brought in so that there would be a cross to Nutwood, one of the popular bloodlines at the time. Nutwood had some great sons but Buttonwood was not among them.

A youngster on a big farm soon learns that when the grooms saunter over to the track in bunches it means that something big is afoot. Early in the summer of 1912 the grooms swarmed to the track. Then came Ernie Barter with Minor Heir and Frank Bowman with George Gano. Ernie had curly hair and always wore a derby while Frankie always wore a slouch hat. The valuable pair of stallions were led to a pole cart to be hitched as a team. Minor Heir was quiet but Gano was inclined to be a little cocky and ready for an argument.

Jack Seiter had cut a broomstick to measure and had burned holes near each end so that snaps could be attached. The snaps were hooked to the outside of the bit of each horse to keep their heads apart. It was a ticklish moment for if one false move was made it could mean the ruination of \$65,000 worth of horse flesh.

It was a gamble as no one had ever given a series of exhibitions with a team of stallions. On October 1, 1912, at Columbus, Ohio, Minor Heir and George Gano set the pacing record for a team at 2:02 which is still a World's Record today. Probably the only one left from the great array of talent assembled by M. W. Savage.

It was about this time that it appeared that M. W. Savage had a potential champion without having to go out and buy him. One son that inherited Dan's natural speed was Dazzle Patch. The effortless way that the two-year-old handled fast quarters prompted the decision to give him a Standard record. The record in a time trial would classify the horse, so a difficult assignment was given the driver. That was to just stay in the 2:25 of the Standard record but make the colt look good. This was a superlative test of rating a horse and it produced a peculiar fractional time for the different quarters. Dazzle jogged down to the half in 1:25½ and then cut loose with the last half in :59¾ and the final quadrant in :28 for a mile in 2:24¼.

Dazzle was a clean going pacer. He wore no hobbles, as hobbles were barred for colts and were even frowned on for older horses. The colt only wore a blind bridle and a pair of pacing quarter boots in his appearance as a two-year-old in 1911. There were no colt races and a stable could not carry a colt for the few chances he might have to race. It was planned to hold the youngster over until he was a five-year-old. The old theory was that the four-year-old form was bad as it was when the colt was changing over to maturity and would not be good. If that were true then these people had never studied the records to see how many horses took their best record as four-year-olds.

Late in the year that he was a four-year-old it was decided to work Dazzle a good mile. Over the farm track he paced in 2:00, the last half in :57 and the final quarter in :27½. M. W. Savage could be a hard taskmaster where horses were concerned. The following day he brought out some of the girls from the office and demanded another 2:00 mile. Rather than see his favorite ruined, Ned McCarr made his plans for resignation of the head trainer's job that night. The fast mile had been better than the World's Record for four-year-olds, none of them had gone in even time, and wouldn't until the following year.

Dazzle Patch only made two appearances in the year book. His two-year-old record of 2:24¼ and his final record of 2:09¾ as a five-year-old before his ruination was completed. The crown prince and heir apparent to Dan's throne had been deposed.

With the loss of Dazzle Patch as a potential star it was necessary to dig down and come up with something new. This time the call went to George Gano. Gano was trained under saddle and went his exhibitions in this manner to reduce the World's saddle record on both mile and half-mile tracks.

Anyone that ever saw this great farm never forgot it. The champions were quartered in the enlargement at the end of each wing. These were the jewels in this crown of advertising. Dan Patch, Minor Heir and George Gano were quartered in the wing to the right of the entrance, Dazzle Patch in the next, and so on.

The feed wagons were pushed along the board floor of the wings at feeding time. It was a boxlike affair with a tray which carried the product for which the farm was named. The owner had a standing offer that he would pay anyone \$5,000 if they could show that he did not feed his stock food to all of his horses. With the tray attached to the feed wagon there was scant chance that any groom could accidentally forget to put it in with the oats.

Great horses, top trainers and good grooms were always in evidence during the heyday of the farm. One of the young grooms was Karl Recor. He was always interested in athletics and decided to take up wrestling. A match was arranged with a Minneapolis wrestler and it was a close affair and ended in a draw. The good showing prompted him to go into training in earnest and in time a rematch was arranged. The men from the Savage farm figured that this time they had a good thing going so they took along their bank roll and covered all bets. It was not so close this time as the Minneapolis man made short work of it when the money was down and pinned Recor almost before the match had started. It was a sad group that returned home. Ernie Barter had lost heavily and was rather irked over the whole thing. A few days later Recor made a flippant remark and Barter took after him. There was a freight train slowly picking up speed as it passed the farm. One of the doors was open, Recor made it in one jump and the farm was shy one groom.

The first catastrophe to strike the farm was in July 1916. Dan Patch, the star attraction, died. The following day the owner, M. W. Savage, passed away and the horses were shortly dispersed by the executors of the estate.

From this point the farm went downhill rapidly. A few horses were trained and Harold Savage raced a few for a short while. The covered half-mile track collapsed and was not repaired.

The final blow came through a thing dreaded by all horsemen, fire. A small hamlet had grown near the farm and it was named [Savage, Minnesota](#). Their fire fighting equipment was inadequate and the big barn was gone. It is doubtful that the equipment from Minneapolis could have saved it.

The farm changed hands and promoters tried dog racing but were unsuccessful. Finally in 1938 all of the remaining buildings on the farm were removed and it was planted in grain. The half-million dollar establishment had completely vanished.

In 1957 a visit was made to the site of the palatial establishment. Everything was gone. A red dairy barn had been built on the site of the wing which held Dan Patch. The only thing left was the spring near the end of that same wing. The water in this spring had been so pure that it was bottled and sold by M. W. Savage. The summer home is now a home for boys.

Somewhere in that 700-acre tract is a fence post near which Dan Patch is buried. Probably only one man could find the spot of the final resting place of the great star of his era, probably the only horse to have a railway named after him. Murray Anderson was head trainer at the time of the interment and it is hoped that he will reveal the spot so that

some type of a memorial can be erected to the great horse. A half-century after his death Dan Patch is still remembered. It would be hard to imagine any other horse that would have the number of requests for information which continually trickle in. Especially after fifty years.