

# Journal Review

Crawford, Indiana

## Remembering the life, legacy of Dan Patch



When houses are built today a two- or three-car garage is attached to it. In the 1800's and early 1900's, there wasn't any need for a garage since cars had not yet been invented. However, there was a need for a place to house their horses.

Even in small town there were barns to house their horses. Of course, the horses

had to be fed so the barns were big enough to hold hay and the grain for the horses to eat. As time went on and cars were invented the need for these barns passed.

However, in many small towns you can still see the barns. Probably the most famous of these barns is located in Oxford.

Who was Dan Patch?

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In the 1800's and early 1900's nearly every family had a horse out of necessity. A family's mode of transportation was by horse for all of their errands. The farmers needed horses to provide the power needed to pull their plows and other farm equipment.

In the late 1800's there was a prosperous merchant in Oxford named Dan Messner. In 1894, he purchased a 3-year-old filly named Zelica for \$255, planning to use her as a buggy horse and possibly as a race horse. Her value dropped to \$100.

In 1895, Messner paid \$150 stud fee to breed her to Joe Patchen.

The resulting colt was born in Oxford. The colts legs were so crooked that at first he could not stand on his own and thus many of the locals called him Messner's Folly and even suggested he "put her down." However, in her first start in racing she came up lame.

Messner and his friends held the colt so he could ingest his mother's milk. His legs gradually grew straighter and he developed a cheerful personality and was noted for his intelligence.

His mother continued to be used as a buggy horse with Dan Patch running freely along beside her. The only redeeming feature about him was that he was friendly and cute. His owner though that his future would be to haul a delivery wagon.

However, a close friend of Messner saw potential in the colt and received permission to train Dan Patch and gradually developed his abilities.

When not in exhibition, they lived in Minnesota part of the time in an extravagant stable known as the Taj Mahal.

At that time harness racing was the most popular sport in America and most county fairs had a track for harness racing. The rules for these races were quite different than what we have for races today.

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These harness races consisted of multiple heats. A horse had to win a majority of heats, usually three out of a possible five heats to be declared the winner of a race.

During his career, Dan Patch never lost a race, but he did lose two heats. The first of his losses occurred in his second start against what was termed as “real competition” at the Lafayette fair.

He finished his first year of completion with four wins and earnings of \$625.

In 1901, Messner decided to test Dan Patch by entering him in the Grand Circuit, which was a series of valuable races in the north eastern United States. All totaled he won 12 races in 1901. He was supposed to finish the season at Terre Haute but no one would enter against him.

In 1902, Messner sold Dan Patch to Manley Sturgus for a record \$20,000. Sturgus was the part owner and operator of an illegal, but highly profitable casino. In turn Sturgus sold Dan Patch to Marion Savage of Minnesota for the unheard of price of \$60,000 (equivalent to \$1.7 million in 2017).

Dan Patch continued to set records and under Savage’s ownership, each appearance of Dan Patch was turned into a major event.

In 1905, he celebrated his ninth birthday, an age when most racehorses are considered past their prime. He continued drawing huge crowds at the Minnesota State Fair where he drew a crowd of 98,000. In Indianapolis 55,000 came to see him race and in Allentown 100,000 came to see him.

He continued racing and the New York Times called him the “Black Whirlwind.” He set a record of 1:55 1/4 — a time that would remain a record for more than 30 years.

His achievements made him the most famous athlete until Babe Ruth.

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At the height of his fame, he earned more than \$1 million for his owner, who was billed as “kind-hearted, generous and a staunch Methodist, who never had Dan Patch race on a Sunday.”

Thousands of people turned out to see him throughout his career, two famous fans were Dwight Eisenhower (as a boy saw him at the Kansas State Fair) and Harry Truman (remembered wiring him a fan letter).

In July 1916, Dan Patch suffered an attack of colic. He collapsed, thrashed his legs in a racing motion and then died after a massive heart attack.