

Panhandle Magazine

Your Guide to the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia

The Legend of Dan Patch

Author Unknown, Panhandle Magazine, Autumn 1969

A DILAPIDATED barn, birthplace of Dan Patch, still stands adjacent to the Messner home a few blocks from the Oxford town square. Emblazoned on the roof are the numerals 1:55, Dan's fastest time for the mile, accomplished in 1906 at the Minnesota state fairgrounds. Oxford's authority on Dan Patch is Richard Messner, left, son of Dan Messner, the horse's original owner. Messner, as did his father and grandfather before him, operates a clothing store in the small Western Indiana community.

The allusion to Dan Patch by Harold Hill, the fast talking musical instrument salesman in Meredith Willson's "Music Man," may have been lost on a generation of horse racing fans tuned in to the exploits of Seabiscuit, Twenty Grand, Whirlaway and War Admiral. But the message came through loud and clear to the old-timer who could recall the glorious thrill of a harness race, and to the folk of Western Indiana, where the legend of Dan Patch was born.

A jockey boy on Dan Patch indeed! The very thought was repugnant, for even the mortal astride the frail sulky trailing Dan's flying feet — however talented he might be — was but an extension of this magnificent pacer who three score years ago reigned as a symbol of everything that was noble and courageous in the equine world.

Perhaps no other horse in the history of harness racing was as well known and revered as Dan Patch. Performing just after the turn of the century, Dan never lost a race. Even today, when two-minute miles by pacers are more common, no horse has even approached his series of 30 within that magic figure. When he retired in 1909 he had nine world records to his credit. Sixty years ago he paced two miles in 4:17 at Macon Georgia, a mark still engraved in the record books. And during his lifetime he made an estimated \$2 million for his three owners.

But Dan was more than just a runner. Over and above his ability to win races, he had a seemingly infinite capacity to elicit adoration from those whose lives he touched. Everybody loved Dan Patch. They included the screaming thousands who cheered him to victory at race tracks from Windsor, Canada, to Memphis, Tennessee, and who scrambled and fought just for the opportunity to touch the regal bay. They included his first owner, who parted with Dan Patch only to save the stallion's life, and finally his last master, whose love for the horse was akin to human devotion.

Dan Patch was foaled in 1896 at Oxford, a small Indiana town of 1,100 population some 10 miles east of Trunkhne Gas Company's Ambia, Indiana, compression station. He took his name from Dan Messner Jr., his owner, and Joe Patchen, a stallion who was his sire. The long legged awkward colt with the white star on his forehead was carefully brought along by Messner and his trainer and did not enter his first race until he was four. He easily won that encounter at Boswell, Ind. There followed a tour of the tracks at state, county and regional fairs — "pumpkin vining" it was known as in those days — in such towns as Brazil, Lafayette and Crawfordsville, Ind., where he made a shambles of the competition.

In 1901, Dan was entered in the Grand Circuit, the "big leagues" of harness racing. He quickly established that he was a horse many years ahead of his time by showing his heels to opponents at such places as Providence, R. I.; Hartford, Conn.; Cincinnati, Ohio; Lexington, Ky.; and Memphis, Tenn., running ahead of Myron McHenry, one of the all-time great harness racing drivers.

Following his 1901 season triumphs, Dan returned to Oxford — for the last time, as it turned out. An incident there involving the poisoning of Dan's sister, Lady Patch, would take him from the Hoosier state forever. Messner had strong suspicions that a jealous neighbor had committed the act, with Dan as the intended victim. He was convinced there would be more attempts, so reluctantly, to protect the pacer; he sold him to M. E. Sturgis, a Buffalo, N. Y., sportsman, for \$20,000.

Dan literally ran himself out of competition in 1902. There were simply no horses to match strides with the strong mahogany bay pacer. He was consistently running the mile in two minutes and had tied the world record of 1:59 ¹/₄. By now the stopwatch had become his only challenge.

Another significant change had occurred in Dan's life. He had been purchased for \$60,000 by M. W. (Will) Savage, a one-time Iowa farm boy who was founder and owner of the International Stock Food Company of Hamilton, Minn. (Savage's influence on the community was so profound that the town was subsequently renamed Savage.) Dan's new owner possessed a magnificent horse-breeding farm on his estate, complete with outdoor and indoor tracks, and his stable housed many of the best pacers in the country. But Dan was his favorite.

He accompanied the horse on many of his exhibition tours and once raced from his home to Topeka, Kan., to minister to a seriously ill Dan Patch. No amount of money could pry Dan from Savage; he once turned down an offer of \$180,000 for the horse. Savage and Dan were an unbeatable combination, both artistically and financially. Dan toured the country in a palatial railway car, performing in exhibitions before huge crowds and breaking records in the process. His owner, an entrepreneur of no small ability, profited handsomely from exhibition fees and booming sales of his company's stock food.

Dan Patch, now being expertly driven by a former groom named Harry Hersey, reached his peak in the 1905 and 1906 seasons. On an October day in 1905 he ran the mile in 1:55 ¹/₄ at Lexington, Ky., a record that would stand for 33 years. A year later, before 90,000 fans at the Minnesota state fairgrounds, he was clocked in 1:55, running behind a pacemaker equipped with a shield to protect Dan from flying dirt. By now, however, the runner in front with the shield on the rear was declared illegal and his 1:55 ¹/₄ went into the record book as his fastest mile.

The charismatic Dan was a star - and he knew it. Like a mortal he responded to the plaudits of the crowd. Before a race he would stroll past the grandstand, lifting his head to survey the crowd. "Dan's countin' the house," they used to say. He was a photographer's delight; it was said he would stop and turn full face toward a camera at the first telltale click of a shutter.

The famous horse's name became a household word. There was a Dan Patch tobacco and Dan Patch cigars. A hobbyhorse, coaster wagon, sled and other toys bore his name. Housewives did the family laundry in a Dan Patch washing machine, and the younger set whirled around the ballroom to the rhythm of the Dan Patch two step. In later years Dan's exploits were chronicled on film.

Dan was retired at the end of the 1909 racing season and returned to the Savage stables where the curious from all over the nation came to see him. The final chapter of the legend was written in Savage in 1916 and was as dramatic as had been the life of the famous pacer. Both Dan and his owner took sick on July 4. Both appeared to rally from their illness, but suffered relapses. Dan died on July 11, his hooves flailing the air in one final dash down the home stretch.

His devoted master died the following day.