



The History of Dan Patch

By Nancy Huddleston

Savage, Minnesota has been a one-horse town ever since Marion W. Savage brought his beloved racehorse, Dan Patch, to live in a palatial barn along the banks of the Minnesota River.

Although the village was known as Hamilton when the International Stock Food Farm was built, folks became so enamored with Mr. Savage and Dan that they decided to rename the town Savage in 1904. And the rest, as they say, is history.

History is still what drives the story of Dan Patch, as the 100th anniversary of his world record mark for pacing a mile in 1:55 at the Minnesota State Fair is celebrated this year. Dan Patch Days has been celebrated in Savage since the 1950s and this year runs from June 23-25. Then on Sept. 2, the Minnesota State Fair will honor Dan Patch with a special day filled with activities and give-a-ways. And on Sept. 8, the day 100 years ago that Dan Patch set the world record, the Dan Patch Historical Society will mark the occasion by dedicating a commemorative brick walkway built with individual donations from the community in front of the historic Savage railroad depot, which was relocated back to the city this summer.

A great story

Dan Patch's story has been told and re-told over the years, and to commemorate the 100th anniversary of his famous race, two books are coming out. The first one, championed by the Dan Patch Historical Society and written by author Tim Brady, is "The Great Dan Patch and the Remarkable Mr. Savage" and will be released June 24. It is set during the first decade of the twentieth century when the sporting world was enthralled by the exploits of Dan Patch as he was breaking racing records with ease throughout the nation. Brady tells the story not only of Dan Patch, but of his owner, M.W. Savage, who made the most of the horse's reputation to promote a variety of products sold by his International Stock Food Company.

Jens Bohn, president of the Dan Patch Historical Society, believes Dan Patch's story surpasses other racehorse stories – to include the famous Seabiscuit. "This is not just a story about a horse, but about an owner and a horse," Bohn said. "People say that all the things that happened with Dan Patch never happened, but they did."

There's also the matter of the relationship between Dan Patch and Mr. Savage that makes the story unique. "Did he make the horse or did the horse make him?" asks Bohn. "If not for him, no one would have heard about Dan Patch and if M.W. had stayed in Indiana, the world may have never heard of him if he hadn't bought Dan."

That interesting topic, any many more, are the subject of a second book, by Charlie Leershen, which is due out next year. Leershen, an executive editor at Sports Illustrated, said his goal is to make Dan Patch's name familiar again – "to get him back up on the pedestal he deserves." Leershen says readers can expect a story full of mystery, intrigue and drama. "It's my mission to tell the untold story and bring alive the sense of the sports world at that time," Leershen said. And, the book will be for a wider audience than "Dan Patch nerds like me," he said. "It's kind of like

Seabiscuit, in a way, but the Dan Patch story is a better story because Dan Patch was much more popular.”

And it’s those elements that Bohn thinks helps to keep the Dan Patch and M.W. Savage story alive. “It’s also a unique story because of the way Mr. Savage promoted Dan – he was way ahead of his time on that,” Bohn said.

Dan Patch is widely considered the greatest harness racing horse of all time and is most famous for his appearance at the Minnesota State Fair in 1906. By that time, no one would race their horse against Dan, so he mainly raced in exhibitions and against the clock. Savage boosted that Dan would set a record at the fair and 93,000 people packed the grandstand at the fair to see if it would happen. Dan Patch was 10 years old at the time and did not disappoint the crowd when he set the record at 1:55 that day.

But the story of Dan Patch isn’t just his crowing achievement of setting a world record. It’s about how the world almost didn’t get to enjoy him because when he was fouled in 1896 in Oxford, Ind., he had a deformed left hind leg and had to be held up to his mother to nurse. His owners wondered whether the horse would ever be able to walk, let alone race. But that worry was overcome, for when he raced, he had a custom cart to keep his legs from hitting the wheels and custom-made shoes to balance his stride.

Dan Patch won his first race in 1900 and he never tasted defeat. He took the winner’s purse every time, losing only two heats in his career. Unfortunately, his success prompted other horse owners to refuse to enter races against him.

When Savage bought Dan in 1902 for an unheard of sum of \$60,000, it sealed Dan’s place in racing history. Savage housed the famous pacer in palatial stables on the banks of the Minnesota River. The stables and farm were often referred to as the “Taj Mahal.” It had steam heat, ventilation and electric lights – all unheard of for a horse race stable in those days. The central dome rose 100 feet in the air and five 155-foot long wings projected from it in a 180-degree arc. At one end of the wings was Dan’s stall, which measured 20 feet by 20 feet, with window shades and monogrammed woolen blankets. Outdoors was a one-mile track and indoors was a steam-heated half-mile track for winter workouts. Beyond it were 700 acres of pasture.

Savage’s summer home, Vista View, was position above the farm, on a bluff in Bloomington. The home still stands and is used today as the Masonic Home, a senior care facility. Although the stables are long gone, the track can still be seen from satellite images.

Dan’s races were promoted heavily by Mr. Savage and the pacer traveled to races in his own rail car. Savage also made Dan Patch a household name by putting his name on everything from chewing tobacco tins to washing machines to promote his business, the International Stock Food Company. People loved to see the mahogany horse with a small white star on his forehead. It was said that Dan loved the crowds by raising his head to them and almost talking to them, so many Americans viewed the horse as almost human.

Dan’s popularity also stretched into religion, as he became the only non human member of the Wesley United Methodist Church in downtown Minneapolis. And popular culture picked up on Dan’s celebrity status, as two songs were written bearing his name: “The Dan Patch March” and “The Dan Patch Two Step.”

But what seals this story for many folks is the way man and horse bonded and stayed that way until the end. As the story goes, the pair died within 32 hours of each other in 1916.

According to written accounts, Dan was the first to fall ill, with what was thought to be a bout of indigestion. In a few days, when he was thought to be recovering, the great pacer suddenly became very ill. As he grew weaker, his famous legs gave way and he sank down to the floor of his stall. For a few minutes, he lay still then he began to pace frenetically for a few seconds, just as if he

were in a race. The pacing slowed, stopped and Dan Patch was dead. His heart, twice the size of a normal horse's, was said to have been weakened by all those years of racing.

At the same time, Mr. Savage was in this hospital recovering from minor surgery, but had to be told of his beloved horse's death. "The shock and grief he experienced," reported the St. Paul Pioneer Press-Dispatch, "were almost unbearable." Thirty-six hours later, Mr. Savage died and his doctors concluded his untimely death was brought on by the shock of losing Dan Patch.

Twin funerals to observe the last rites were held. Savage was laid to rest in Lakewood Cemetery and Dan Patch was buried on the banks of the Minnesota River in a secret location and unmarked grave, on the orders of Mr. Savage's widow. His exact burial spot was only known by a few and has been passed onto select others over the years.

Keeping history alive

The Dan Patch Historical Society works hard to keep the history surrounding Dan's story alive today. Bohn's barbershop, the Razor's Edge in downtown Savage, is a testament to that, as the walls are covered with pictures of Dan Patch and shelves with Dan Patch tins, books, and other collectables. Members of the historical society make appearances in classrooms and at other historical events throughout the state to keep Dan's memory alive making it one of the most active historical society's in the state.

Even so, many folks who live in Savage today don't know the origin of their town's name or realize the most famous resident was a horse. Although, Dan Patch's name can be found on many businesses, a high school football stadium, a bowling alley and on one of the city's liquor stores, there is no statue of the horse or Mr. Savage or even a historical marker in the city indicating where the International Stock Food Farms once stood. But, there are other indicators in the town that highlight the city's heritage. The weekly newspaper's name, the Savage Pacer, pays tribute to the city's horse racing history. At city hall, the city council's chamber design replicates the octagonal hub the International Stock Food Farm, with eight sides and topped with an ornamental dome that is illuminated at night. And at the city's library, the Heritage Room is a treasure trove of information about Dan Patch, Mr. Savage and other historical aspects of the city.

Nevertheless, one of the most interesting ways the historical society makes residents aware of the town's heritage is to sponsor a horseshoe hunt in the weeks leading up to Dan Patch Days. Clues to the whereabouts of the "lost" horseshoe are woven around bits of history about Dan Patch, Mr. Savage and the town. So, horseshoe hunters often learn about Dan Patch and some facts about the town in the process of laying claim to finding the horseshoe.

Then for the past two years, the society has found yet another way to breathe life into the story, as descendants of Dan Patch and relatives of Mr. Savage are invited to Dan Patch Days. Mary Phyllis Savage Colwell, 87, the oldest grandchild of Mr. Savage and daughter of Harold Savage, rides in the parade with several of her children. Great-grandchildren of Erle B. Savage, Mr. Savage's other son, also partake in the festivities, by showing up for a variety of events and riding in the parade. And horses from Dan Patch's blood line also participate, including Bonana Anna, a 10th and 12th generation descendant and Hurricane Jekyll, a 10th generation descendant, both owned by Beth Dale and Bruce Tostenrud of New Ulm.

For more information on Dan Patch, go to www.danpatch.com, the official Web site of the Dan Patch Historical Society.

Where to find Dan Patch in Savage

Dan Patch Historical Society – formed for the purpose of collection, preservation and dissemination of historical knowledge and artifacts about the horse, Dan Patch and its owner, M. W. Savage. Web site is www.danpatch.com and the mailing address is P.O. Box 1:55, Savage, MN 55378.

Heritage Room – in the Savage Library – a place where historical information about the town is catalogued and stored for library patrons.

Razor's Edge – a barbershop in downtown Savage, owned by Jens Bohn, president of the Dan Patch Historical Society.

Savage Pacer – a weekly newspaper which began publishing in 1994. The newspaper has a “Remember When” photo feature and a bi-weekly column written by members of the Dan Patch Historical Society.

Savage Depot – is moving back to town this summer, in the old town square. The depot is where the mail was delivered and much of the town's mail in the early 1990s was destined for the International Stock Food Farm on the banks of the Minnesota River.

Dan Patch

Color: Mahogany Bay with black points and a small white star on his forehead

Weight: 1,165 pounds

Height: 16 hands

Girth: 73½ inches

Shoulder Measure: 60 inches