



A horse race on Lake of the Isles ice track during the early 1920s

HORSE RACING ON ICE

Was Popular in the Twin Cities

ROBERT M. IRVING
and
KENNETH CARLEY

FOR MANY YEARS the familiar summer dirt track cry of "They're off!" also signaled the start of winter horse racing on ice in Minnesota. The Twin Cities especially were a long-time center of the colorful sport that had as enthusiastic devotees as other cold weather pastimes like skating, tobogganing, skiing, and iceboating. The combination of frozen surfaces on lakes, rivers, or streets, of the necessary elements of cold and snow, and of fast horses added up to a form of recreation that was irresistible to many Minnesotans from territorial days until well into the twentieth century.

Horse racing on ice was probably coincident with the first permanent settlement in

the Twin Cities. Among the earliest participants doubtless were lumbermen who had moved from Maine to Minnesota and continued to indulge in the ice sport they had enjoyed in their native state.¹

One of the earliest winter races to make the press was described by the *Saint Paul Pioneer and Democrat* of January 14, 1856, when Minnesota was still a territory. "The sporting portion of St. Paul was tremendously excited," said the paper, by a Saturday morning race on the Mississippi River ice between a stallion owned by Captain William B. Dodd and a gelding, Tom Brown,

¹ The authors are indebted to Bruce E. Nowlen of St. Paul for furnishing considerable information, aside from sources cited, for this article. Mr. Nowlen, who recently turned ninety-one, was associated in several capacities with horse racing, dirt and ice, in this area starting in 1908. For years he reported the results of ice races for newspapers, especially the *Minneapolis Tribune*.

Mr. Irving is associate professor of geography at the University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. He received his doctorate at the University of Minnesota in 1966. Mr. Carley is editor of this magazine.

owned by John W. Cormack. "It is *said* that \$1000 was put up, on the result of the race, by the respective owners of the horses," the paper reported. An ice track was marked out from the bridge connecting Harriet Island with the west side of the river, "to a point opposite the Rotary Mill." Dodd's horse pulled a light cutter and Cormack's a sulky. "There were four or five hundred persons on the ice, and nearly as many on the bluff, witnessing the race," said the paper. "Tom Brown' was the winning horse, beating his competitor to the judges' stand about thirty feet. We have not heard the time." The reporter's parting shot was: "All this racing, we imagine, is merely intended to improve the breed of horses; and not to transfer money from the *flats* to the *sharps*."²

Although ice racing began early in St. Paul and continued there off and on for some eighty years, it was in Minneapolis that the sport had its largest and most consistent following. One of the favorite racecourses in Minneapolis once was along Hennepin Avenue. However, as congestion increased and it became more and more difficult to compete without interruption, races were moved to Tenth Street South and eventually to fashionable Park Avenue. For street racing on the snow, horses were hitched to cutters. As one might expect, owners and spectators often placed sizable side bets on the contests.

By 1886 the increased demand for some-

thing better than snowy streets for races prompted the Minneapolis Park Board to construct an ice racing track on Lake Calhoun at the cost of \$100. Maintenance was left to private parties. Calhoun's expanse accommodated an excellent half-mile ice path, but it also offered little shelter from the wind. Therefore Lake of the Isles soon became the ice course site. Except during the winter of 1896, when racing for some reason was shifted to Lake Calhoun again for a season, the Lake of the Isles course served as the chief center in Minnesota for horse racing on the ice. It played this role for some 40 years — through the 1929 season.³

Lake of the Isles, as its name implies, provided a lovely setting for a half-mile racecourse. As early as 1893 the *Minnesota Horseman* commented that "the Lake of the Isle course is one of the best located ice tracks in the world as it lies well protected from stormy winds and is also conveniently close to the city." In 1895 the same weekly said: "The ice track is the best possible location for the spectators as well as the speeders, as it lies quite a bit lower than the boulevard drive where the lookers-on mostly congregate." Another time the same publication observed that "it was almost impossible to get on or off the course" because "teams laden with merry loads were crowded together" on the boulevard drive surrounding the lake.⁴

The Isles course was situated in at least three different spots on the lake throughout the years. In 1925 the *Minneapolis Tribune* reported: "The track is located at the same place on the lake that it has been for several years, with the finish near the canal connecting Lake of the Isles and Lake Calhoun." Most of the time the track was curved as the lake was not considered large enough for a straightaway course half a mile long. In the last few years of racing, however, news stories referred to the Isles course as a "straightaway," so one must have been worked out.⁵

The horses were housed in a round tent

² *Saint Paul Pioneer and Democrat*, January 14, 1856, p. 2.

³ Theodore Wirth, *Minneapolis Park System, 1883-1944, Retrospective Glimpses Into the History of the Board of Park Commissioners of Minneapolis, Minnesota, and the City's Park, Parkway, and Playground System*, 221 (Minneapolis, 1945). For reports of racing on Lake Calhoun, see *Northwestern Horseman and Sportsman*, February 7, p. 3, February 14, p. 3, 1896; *Minneapolis Journal*, February 7, p. 12, February 13, p. 10, 1896.

⁴ *Minnesota Horseman*, December 16, 1893, p. 6, January 11, 1895, p. 3, January 5, 1894, p. 3. The title of this publication varied through the years and so did the frequency with which it appeared.

⁵ *Minneapolis Tribune*, January 1, 1925, p. 24. For mentions of "straightaway," see *Minneapolis Tribune*, January 13, sport section, p. 2, and January 20, sport section, p. 2, 1929.

with portable board walls. The tent was put up near the track at the start of every racing season and thus became a familiar sight in the Isles area. Bruce E. Nowlen recalls that the tent was heated by a large wood-burning stove and that the body heat of hot horses just through with a race added to the warmth. Between racing heats, fans would crowd into the tent to get warm on cold days.

Mr. Nowlen also remembers that the judges' stand was "an elevated affair of the type still used in summer at county fair tracks."⁶ The stand had windows on two sides for good viewing of the starters and the entire course. A kerosene stove kept it reasonably comfortable for the officials, a newspaperman or two, and honored visitors. It was the starters who had to rough it by standing on the ice all afternoon no matter what the conditions. In later years automobiles provided the starters a warm place between heats.

Crowds that frequently numbered into the many hundreds or even the thousands also stood on the ice on both sides of the course or watched from conveyances on the boulevards. Most people in the early days had sense enough to combat cold by wearing warm clothing, which probably included long underwear and an extra pair of trousers. Buffalo fur coats were also much in evidence in early years. According to Theodore Wirth, long-time superintendent of parks, the speedway had a grandstand during the winter of 1899–1900. That year there was an entrance fee of 25 cents to get into the track, Wirth said, and an additional charge of 10 cents for the grandstand. All other years, apparently, there was neither a grandstand for viewing nor a charge to see the races.⁷

TO PUT ON the Isles programs, Twin Cities horse owners and racing enthusiasts banded together to form the Lake of the Isles Driving Club. The exact time of the club's organization is not known, but the *Minneapolis Tribune* of January 1, 1928, indicated that "Forty years of continuous racing at the lake have made the Minneapolis club famous."

If accurate, this would put the club's beginning at about 1888.

The first races had horses pulling sleighs — a rather clumsy setup. The widespread adoption, in 1892, of the low-wheeled, rubber-tired racing bike really made serious ice racing possible. From at least the early 1890s until 1929, the Lake of the Isles Driving Club, later called the Minneapolis Driving Club, sponsored competitive horse racing every Saturday afternoon during the winter season, ice conditions and weather permitting. The afternoon races, called matinees, were usually for amateur members of the club, although professional reinsmen were allowed to compete once in a while in special events. In addition to Saturday matinees, races were held on such holidays as New Year's Day and Lincoln's and Washington's birthdays. Sunday races evidently were frowned upon in Minneapolis (not in St. Paul), but in the early days some families took their horses and sleighs out on the Isles ice for a Sunday afternoon brush.

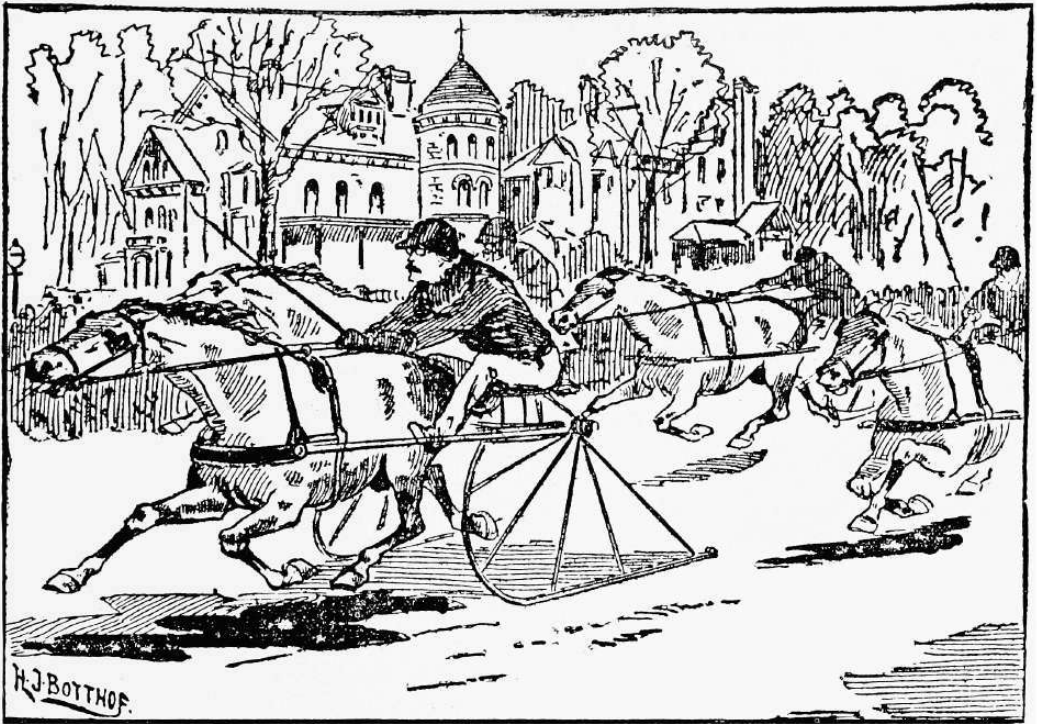
Meanwhile, a second ice racing organization, the Crystal Lake Driving Club, was formed in 1910 largely to give north Minneapolis horsemen opportunity to race near at home on the ice of Crystal Lake in Robbinsdale. An excellent half-mile straightaway was cleared off. To avoid conflicting schedules with the Lake of the Isles group, the Crystal club usually conducted races on Wednesday afternoons. Some horsemen belonged to both clubs and thus were able to race twice a week.⁸

Now and then, however, the clubs sponsored matinees on the same holiday. It was unfortunate also that the two groups differed in the time classifications they set for pacing and trotting races. These practices prompted the *Minneapolis Journal* to editorialize that "the organizations should make an effort to arrange their future dates and classes so they should not conflict with each other . . .

⁶ Interview on November 14, 1969.

⁷ Wirth, *Minneapolis Park System*, 222.

⁸ *Minneapolis Tribune*, December 15, 1910, p. 14.



Drawing of race on Summit Avenue during first Winter Carnival in 1886

there are enough horses in the city to provide good racing for both clubs, but with conflicting classes the sport at neither track will . . . be what it should." The two clubs eventually merged, and racing continued on Crystal Lake until the early 1920s.⁹

Horse racing on ice was a popular sport in St. Paul, too, although not to the degree it was in Minneapolis. Many of the races were staged in conjunction with the St. Paul Winter Carnival each year. For the very first carnival in early February, 1886, Summit Avenue was the scene of races that delighted "a large number of enthusiastic admirers of horse speed." The half-mile straightaway started at Alpheus B. Stickney's house at 288 Summit Avenue; the finish was placed a

few rods beyond Ramsey Street. The surface had "inequalities" and the temperature was many degrees below zero, "yet no complaint was heard." There was a 2:40 class trotting race in which five entries competed for a divided purse of \$75 and a 2:27 pace in which six starters tried for a divided purse of \$100. It took six heats in the trot before Capitola, owned by T. B. Marrett of St. Paul, was declared the winner. Frank S., owned by W. H. Ensign of Minneapolis, took the pace in four heats. For at least one other season, that of 1902–03, a track was laid out again on Summit Avenue.¹⁰

Another site of St. Paul racing, especially during carnival time, was the Mississippi River near Harriet Island. In January, 1916, the Mississippi course was the scene of a mishap that held down the number of entries for one racing card. Because of the weight of heavy snow, the shelter tent that kept horses warm between heats collapsed. Several owners who kept their steeds in the

⁹ *Minneapolis Journal*, December 26, 1915, sport section, p. 4.

¹⁰ *Minneapolis Tribune*, February 3, 1886, p. 2 (quotes); *Saint Paul and Minneapolis Pioneer Press*, February 3, 1886, p. 1.



A close race on Mississippi River ice near High Bridge during 1916 carnival

Hamline barns refused to start their horses for fear they would catch cold without the protection of the tent.¹¹

The most important and most frequently used ice track in St. Paul was on Lake Como where the Capital City Driving Club sponsored matinees for many years. In January, 1894, the *Minnesota Horseman* said that the "ice track on Lake Como was auspiciously opened. . . . The park board is to be congratulated on affording such a splendid place for the horsemen of St. Paul to enjoy an occasional ride behind their roadsters during the long and tedious months." The next year the same publication reported: "The Lake Como course is a straight-away ½ mile, 125 feet wide, and is kept in excellent condition by the St. Paul Park Board." A week earlier it said that the Capital City Driving Club "now numbers over two hundred members, and there is no reason in the world why there should not be some great sport over

the new course at Lake Como. It is a beauty and very convenient for the drivers of both cities."¹²

There was, in fact, considerable intercity rivalry on the Como course, especially in the early years. On Washington's birthday, 1897, for example, the St. Paul horsemen outdid their Minneapolis neighbors in most of the races and "joshed" the latter no little. Although many fine races were run at Como, there appears to have been much less regularity to the matinees held there than at Lake of the Isles or Crystal Lake.¹³

THE LENGTH of each racing season was clearly subject to the weather. In some years

¹¹ *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, January 30, 1916, sporting news section, p. 1.

¹² *Minnesota Horseman*, January 5, 1894, p. 4, January 25, p. 3, January 18, p. 3, 1895.

¹³ *Northwestern Horseman and Sportsman*, February, 1897, p. 3.

temperatures plummeted in time to permit matinee races on Christmas or earlier, and occasionally a season would hold on so that races could be run as late as St. Patrick's Day.

In 1897 Christmas races opened up the Lake of the Isles ice track for the season. The day was so pleasant that one reporter was moved to write: ". . . the balm of southern breezes and radiant sunshine rendered a charm that brought many to see the sport that had been advertised to come off over the silvery course." On Christmas, 1909, the Lake of the Isles Driving Club held its second matinee of the season, the first having taken place a week earlier. In spite of "a sharp breeze . . . a large turnout of lovers of the harness horses was on hand to witness the sport. Parties in automobiles were much in evidence and these displayed as much enthusiasm over the racing as did the horseman."¹⁴

Practically every season saw at least one racing program postponed because the weather was either too cold, or too snowy, or too mild. The *Minneapolis Tribune* reported one such postponement in 1907:

¹⁴*Northwestern Horseman and Stockman*, December, 1897, p. 4; *Minneapolis Tribune*, December 26, 1909, sporting section, p. 1.

¹⁵*Minneapolis Tribune*, February 3, 1907, p. 30.

¹⁶*Minnesota Horseman*, January 25, 1895, p. 3.

"After holding their ears, nearly freezing their noses, and running up and down the track for some time in an endeavor to get warm, the few faithful horsemen who went out to the Lake of the Isles yesterday afternoon gave it up in disgust and declared the races postponed until a warmer day."¹⁵

In January, 1895, there were no races at Lake of the Isles, the *Minnesota Horseman* said, "as the mercury had on its 'out-of-sight' harness and went down to the twenty below register several times during the week. The result is, no races for the week and very little speeding." Editor R. F. Jones, apparently affected by the cold spell, published this doggerel:

*The fellows with fast horses were
most always on parade,
At cool of eve, at dewy morn or
90 in the shade;
But there is one thing that stops
'em an' at a single roun'
'Tis old mercury when she's 10
below an' still agoin' down.*¹⁶

In January, 1916, blustery conditions frustrated horsemen for two consecutive weeks on the Crystal Lake track. "When race time came [on January 5], one lone horseman who had driven in from far outside the city limits was on hand ready to start," the *Minneapolis*

During the 1917 Winter Carnival, horses competed on the Lake Como ice course.



Tribune reported. Presumably he did not brave the high winds and subzero temperature for a workout. A week later the Crystal races were called off again when a foot of snow covered the track. Heavy snow quite often was a problem, especially when it fell near the time a racing program was to start. On February 1, 1917, for instance, St. Paul Winter Carnival horse races on the Como Lake course had to be called off because of snow. Park board officials said they could not get the track cleared in time for the program.¹⁷

Race tracks had to be cleared with horse-drawn scrapers that were much smaller and slower than modern motorized equipment. And snow blowers were scarcely dreamed of in the horse era. Scrapers pulled by horses could hardly cope with the snow in some years. In February, 1897, the Lake of the Isles track was "shortened and narrowed down by the heavy snowfalls to a pretty close quarter for bad actors or timid teamsters; still there is room for all kinds of sport and many take the keenest enjoyment in steering their steaming steeds down the smooth icy surface, which, while narrow, is still kept scraped smooth and hard for record breakers."¹⁸

Earlier, however, the winter of 1896–97 was too mild — warm spells also caused postponements. The *Minneapolis Tribune* of January 11, 1897, lamented: "There has been nearly a month of the winter wasted on account of soft weather, at which times the ice was covered with several inches of water and made driving on the track almost impossible." One of the last racing programs ever held on the Isles track — that of March 3, 1928 — was interrupted by warm weather. "The race was declared off after the second heat," said the *Tribune*, "as the track which was wet and sloppy generously covered the drivers from head to foot with slush." On at least one occasion — February 13, 1915 — rain forced postponement of Isles races.

The number of postponements through the years, though fairly high, would have been much greater had horsemen and spec-

tators not been willing to let races go on in spite of decidedly unpleasant circumstances. In December, 1903, the starting judges for one Isles racing program stood unprotected in severe cold at the head of the track, "but manfully stuck to their duties and got the horses away in magnificent style. The drivers themselves were forced to wear coats and blankets, and, in one of the heats, the pilot of one horse had his hands severely frozen." On another cold racing day at the Isles in 1895, "each horse covered himself with glory and white frost."¹⁹

On New Year's Day, 1916, Lake of the Isles races were held despite "rain, sleet and snow, driven by a stiff wind which almost blinded the drivers at times." The *Minneapolis Tribune* reporter added that "the miserable weather cut the crowd down but the brave ones were well repaid, for the time was fast and the finishes in almost every race so close that they kept the spectators dancing with excitement." There was another wet program at Lake of the Isles on February 20, 1915, when "fourteen game horsemen drove horses through ankle-deep slush. . . . A good crowd stood in the water for the entire program."²⁰

Once in a while an accident or some unforeseen circumstance would add excitement to a racing program. In the opening matinee of the 1925 season at Lake of the Isles, a pacer named Hal Royal fell to his knees some 20 feet from the finish line. The driver, Eddie Brown, acted quickly to keep Hal Royal from going all the way down and the horse slid across the line a winner by a scant margin. In another Isles race on February 3, 1916, a pacer named Alwood broke. The horse behind him, appropriately named

¹⁷ *Minneapolis Tribune*, January 6, p. 17, January 13, p. 20, 1916, February 1, 1917, p. 15.

¹⁸ *Northwestern Horseman and Sportsman*, February, 1897, p. 3.

¹⁹ *Northwestern Horseman and Stockman*, December, 1903, p. 6; *Minnesota Horseman*, February 1, 1895, p. 7.

²⁰ *Minneapolis Tribune*, January 2, 1916, sporting section, p. 1, February 21, 1915, sport section, p. 2.



A trio of trotters: Jerry L., driven by owner Dr. Harry E. Rowell, outran Clara P. and Alta on January 20, 1894, during a matinee at Lake of the Isles.

Trouble, could not stop. Both horses took a spill and their drivers were thrown. One driver was severely bruised and both sulkies were damaged, but the horses escaped injury. Another minor accident occurred in one of the last races on the Isles course during the February 23, 1929, program. A well-known trotter, The Exodus, broke at the wire in a close race and pulled his driver-owner, E. M. Roston, into a snowbank, breaking the sulky.²¹

A more serious mishap created quite a stir during the 1896 season on Lake Calhoun. One of the most highly prized pacers of the time, a bay gelding named St. Cloud, fell dead in his tracks during a match race against Johnny Smoker, another popular

pacer. Owned first by John C. McNaughton and then A. H. Hedderly, St. Cloud died because of a broken blood vessel, veterinarians said after an examination.²²

In another instance, a horse's owner did not live to see his horse win a coveted prize. Michael Twohy of St. Paul, a member of the Lake of the Isles Driving Club, died of cancer the night of February 2, 1917. He had told friends who visited him in the hospital that he would like to see his horse, Carlo, win the White and MacNaught gold cup offered to the free-for-all trotter who won two legs. Carlo had won the first leg on the cup in 1916, and on February 3, 1917, the day after his owner's death, again outraced the other entrants in straight heats to win the trophy. It was presented to Mrs. Twohy, whose husband had failed to live to realize one of the ambitions of his life.²³

MANY MINNESOTA horses raced in both summer and winter. Contrary to what might be expected, a significant number of horses

²¹ *Minneapolis Tribune*, January 4, 1925, sports section, p. 2, February 4, 1916, p. 12, February 24, 1929, p. 3.

²² *Northwestern Horseman and Sportsman*, February 7, 1896, p. 3.

²³ *Minneapolis Tribune*, February 4, 1917, sporting section, p. 1.

that became unsound for dirt-track racing were able to go at top speed on ice without any ill effects. In fact, some horses were cured of their difficulties by racing on ice and were able to return to summer racing after a season or two of winter competition.

Horsemen explained that summer racers had to wear plain, flat shoes that hit the ground solidly and without give at high speed. This caused some horses to break down. There was trouble with shoes for ice racing in early years until the neverslip variety was developed. It had long, sharp calks or grabs that sank into the ice and eliminated practically all jar. The grabs could be replaced easily when they wore down. Occasionally a horse would lose its balance on ice or throw a shoe, but ice accidents were not a big factor. If horses were cared for properly after each heat, they could race on ice indefinitely.²⁴

Ice racing reached its peak in the Twin Cities between 1910 and 1920. Those who could afford them purchased highly bred, fast horses at auctions in Chicago, New York, and elsewhere. Thus hardly a year passed without a new horse creating considerable interest by fast stepping on Twin Cities ice. Good horses were bred locally, too, and trained by experts in the area. Several descendants of the peerless pacer, Dan Patch, for example, were raced on Lake of the Isles ice, first by Dan's owner, Marion W. Savage, and later by Harold Savage, M. W.'s son.

Dan himself apparently was not entered in ice races, but he did pull members of the Savage family around the streets of Minneapolis in a sleigh. He also was the prize attraction of the first winter horse show put on in January, 1903, on Park Avenue by the Minneapolis Riding and Driving Club. Dan pulled his owner, who had paid a stupendous \$60,000 for him only a few weeks earlier, in a "handsome, high-gearred sleigh. . . . So eager were [*sic*] the crowd to see the champion that it was necessary to keep a squad of mounted police in advance to clear the street."²⁵

Edgar J. Kellay, then president of the Lake of the Isles Driving Club, wrote an article for the January 30, 1916, issue of the *Minneapolis Tribune* in which he pointed out that "Horses are now very highly bred, are extremely fast and cost altogether more, so that matinee and racing horses are very largely in the hands of up-to-date business men, who have means and time for recreation. . . . Years ago race tracks were filled with cheap men and cheap horses," Kellay observed. "Men would whip, slash and abuse horses as they liked. Profane and vulgar language, drinking, cheap gambling and general disregard for clean sport was tolerated. But how different today! The rules positively prohibit whipping of horses, or the use of profane language and the rules even describe just what drivers and caretakers must wear while on a race track, so that our women and children are now just as safe at a harness matinee as at any other form of amusement."

Kellay pointed out how lakes gave Minneapolis "the greatest natural advantages for winter ice racing." He said that at Isles matinees thousands watch "the 90 horses now in training, all mostly driven by Minneapolis business men, who try in a most superlative way for supremacy." Two years earlier the *Tribune* published the names of nearly a hundred fast horses and their owners soon to be "seen on the ice tracks of the city this winter." The inventory was taken by Kellay and J. Kirk Christy, then secretary of the Isles club.²⁶

Several of the business and professional men in the driving club were associated in some way with the horse industry. They included veterinarians like Dr. Harry E. Rowell, Dr. Charles E. Cotton, Dr. Elmer W. Berg, and Dr. Charles C. Lyford, and horse-

²⁴ Edgar J. Kellay, "Business Men Rule in Horse Racing," in *Minneapolis Tribune*, January 30, 1916, sporting section, p. 1.

²⁵ *Northwestern Horseman and Stockman*, January, 1903, p. 4.

²⁶ Results of the inventory were published in *Minneapolis Tribune*, January 4, 1914, sport section, p. 2.



The great Dan Patch pulled owner M. W. Savage in a sleigh at Minneapolis show in 1903.

shoe business representatives like James F. Paisley, William Allendorf, and Robert Larsen, long-time head of the Crystal club.

The unofficial headquarters for Minneapolis racing fans for many years was John Sayer's harness store. Sayer also put up one of the cups for which ice racers competed. Such businessmen as Maurice L. Rothschild and Charles F. Witt also presented trophies, but perhaps the most coveted loving cup was donated by Walter Palmer of Ottawa, Illinois, a noted horse enthusiast and member of the Isles club. Beginning in 1907, the Palmer Cup for some eight years produced some excellent racing in the free-for-all pace.

²⁷ The Palmer Cup is discussed in *Northwestern Horseman and Stockman*, January, 1907, p. 8. Hobbles, or hopples, are restraints put on horses' legs to control or change their gait.

Among rules that Palmer stipulated was that hobbles were barred and also that a driver had to win the cup twice before it became his property. Other prizes for which horsemen competed included blankets, various merchandise, and cash.²⁷

A typical ice racing program might include a pace and a trot for horses of specific time classes, plus a free-for-all. Sometimes there was a match race. Pacers usually outnumbered trotters. Normally a horse had to win three heats before being declared the winner. There were numerous five-heat races through the years and quite a few of six heats. But the records show that there was only one race of seven heats. That was a 2:15 pace on January 16, 1918, during a Wednesday matinee at Lake of the Isles. Liberty Flash, a black gelding owned by David Dorfman and driven by Kirk Brown, was the

winner. The summary for the race, as published by the *Minneapolis Tribune*, was as follows:

| | 2:15 Pace. | | | | | | |
|--|------------|---|---|---|---|-------|---|
| Horse and Driver | | | | | | Place | |
| Liberty Flash (Brown) | 1 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 |
| Bud Riley (Conboy, Allendorf) . . | 3 | 5 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 2 |
| Queen Arion (Kellay) | 4 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| Glen Rose (Bundy) | 5 | 4 | 4 | 1 | 2 | | |
| Easter Boy (Robinson) | 2 | 3 | 5 | 5 | | | |
| Time. 1:07. 1:05. 1:05½. 1:05¼. 1:07. 1:08. 1:05¾. | | | | | | | |

SEVERAL WORLD'S RECORDS were set, or at least claimed, during the ice racing era in the Twin Cities. Most of the records were made late in the season when ice was conducive to fast time and the horses were in their best shape. Horsemen say that softer ice of late racing days was better for record breaking than hard, brittle ice of midwinter.

A world's pacing record on a half-mile ice track was established at Crystal Lake on Washington's birthday, 1916, by Hale Chaffin, owned by Robert Larsen. The horse ran the first heat of the 2:10 pace in a record 58 seconds. In the third heat he also was under the minute mark at 58½ seconds. He was driven by the well-known trainer, Frank Bundy. For years the record for a half-mile pace was credited to Goshen Jim, who did a heat in 1:00½ at Lake of the Isles January 27, 1904. Alvin Gluck owned Goshen Jim and drove him in the free-for-all pace that produced the fast time.²⁸

However, another pacer, Seringa, owned by James F. Paisley of St. Paul and driven by M. R. Higbee, apparently had run a faster heat than Goshen Jim did at a meeting of the Capital City Driving Club at Como Lake on February 23, 1903. Seringa won three heats in a free-for-all pace in 1:03, 1:02, and 1:00. The heats "were undoubtedly the three fastest ever paced over a half mile on the ice," a reporter said.²⁹ On the same Como racing program in 1903, Cora B., a trotter owned by D.W. Thurston of Minneapolis, also ran what was said to be a record heat at that time — 1:04½. So much fast time raised the question of the Como track's length, although it had been surveyed at the start of the season by County Surveyor John B. Irvine. The course

was surveyed again after the record performances and was found to exceed the required minimum of a half mile by two inches. Thus the record claims seemed justified.

Another world's record, this time for unhobbled pacers, was broken at Lake of the Isles on January 17, 1914, by George Gano, a bay stallion for which Marion W. Savage paid \$25,000 in the fall of 1910. What was described by the *Minneapolis Tribune* as the "largest crowd in local racing history" — 3,000 excited spectators — saw the Savage horse run the third heat of the free-for-all pace in 1:01½, eclipsing the record of 1:02 for unhobbled pacers held by Harold Savage's Marion Patch and Frank Weyel's Hans M., both Minneapolis horses.³⁰

The greatest half-mile ever trotted on ice was run by the little black stallion, Silver Todd, at Lake of the Isles on February 23, 1920. Owned by F. A. "Ted" Danforth and driven by James Calder, the trotter raced a heat in 59¾ seconds, the only less-than-a-minute ice trot on record. The best previous trotting record for the half mile — 1:01 — was made by Bay Seth, owned and driven by Ed C. Best, at Lake of the Isles on January 28, 1911.³¹

A St. Paul trotting record — 1:03 for the half mile — was set by King Pepper at Harriet Island on February 2, 1916, during the Winter Carnival that year. The speedy trotter was owned by P. J. Gallagher and driven by Conrad Freund, a one-time barber who became one of the best horse trainers and drivers in the area.³²

Although they set no records, work horses

²⁸ *Minneapolis Tribune*, February 23, 1916, p. 13; *Northwestern Horseman and Stockman*, February, 1904, p. 7.

²⁹ *Northwestern Horseman and Stockman*, February, 1903, p. 4 (quote); *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, February 24, 1903, p. 4.

³⁰ *Minneapolis Tribune*, January 18, 1914, sport section, p. 1.

³¹ *Minneapolis Tribune*, February 24, 1920, p. 16, January 29, 1911, sport section, p. 1. Mr. Nowlen says Best brought more horses to Minneapolis for ice racing than anyone else.

³² *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, February 3, 1916, p. 10.



A George Luxton photograph of Prince Stevens, W. B. McLean's swift pacer, defeating Goshen Jim and other fast sidewheelers in February, 1905, at Lake of the Isles

sometimes outran pampered steeds used only for racing. This happened on New Year's Day, 1917, at the Crystal track. Beating a field of four highly trained speeders in the free-for-all pace was Hambert, Jr., "a race horse whose only training has been from 10 to 12 hours work day and night between the shafts of a buggy hauling its owner, Dan McLeod, about town."³³ Another working racer was Richard H., a laundry wagon horse owned by James Hoit.

After its peak decade of 1910-20, horse racing gradually faded as an ice sport in

Minnesota — but not before one of the best attended ice racing programs in the state's history was held at Duluth in February, 1927, as part of a midwinter carnival at the Head of the Lakes. A crowd estimated at twenty thousand saw some top horses make excellent time on a track just off London Road. This successful Duluth card serves as a reminder that ice racing took place in several cities in Minnesota aside from the Twin Cities. River towns like Stillwater, Red Wing, Mankato, Lake City, and Winona in particular had ice courses for racing at one time or another. Among other cities that enjoyed winter racing also were Fergus Falls

³³ *Minneapolis Tribune*, January 2, 1917, p. 13.

A popular horse for many seasons at Lake of the Isles was Hambert, trotter being driven by owner Sidney S. Johnston.





Winter horse racing in Duluth about 1909

(on Lake Alice), St. Cloud (on Lake George), and Northfield (on the Cannon River).³⁴

IN MINNEAPOLIS, ice races were held at Lake of the Isles through the 1928–29 season. In December, 1929, the Twin City Ice Driving Club was formed by a merger of the Minneapolis Driving Club and the Como-Fairgrounds Driving Club. Officers elected were Harold Savage, president; Florian L. “Bubbles” Nicolin, first vice-president; Louis Klugman, second vice-president; and Thomas B. Sarre (who like Mr. Nowlen wrote many newspaper stories about ice racing), secretary and treasurer.³⁵

The new organization discontinued racing at Lake of the Isles and shipped the familiar tent and judges’ stand to Lake Como, where races were held during the two seasons of 1930 and 1931. Como was closer to horse stables at the fairgrounds. Then winter racing was shifted to the state fairgrounds for 1932 and 1933, the last two seasons of organized horse racing on ice in the Twin Cities.

There were several reasons for the decline of horse racing on ice. As the automobile became more common in the 1920s, it almost literally drove horses from the streets. The paving of city streets made the transfer of horses from the stables to the tracks hazardous in the days before sophisticated carriers for horses. Then, too, many racing veterans

were removed from competition by death or old age, and there were too few youngsters to fill the void. A basic reason for cessation of ice racing at Lake of the Isles was that the area around the lake became a fashionable residential district. Many of the residents and the park board frowned upon ice racing and its attendant activities. They objected particularly to the large tent that stabled the horses.

Horse-oriented recreation activities have made a widespread comeback around the country. Since Minnesota is still not in the least lacking in ice surfaces, perhaps some enterprising horsemen might try sometime to resurrect the racing sport that for many years and many people was a principal means of whiling away the long, frozen winters.

³⁴ *Minneapolis Tribune*, February 20, 1927, sport section, p. 3. The *Minnesota Horseman* and its successor publications frequently reported the ice track activities of Minnesota localities other than the Twin Cities in the 1890s and later.

³⁵ *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, December 15, 1929, sec. V, p. 2; *Minneapolis Tribune*, December 29, 1929, p. 10.

THE DRAWING on page 375 is from *Saint Paul and Minneapolis Pioneer Press*, February 3, 1886, p. 1; that on page 379 is from *Minnesota Horseman*, January 26, 1894, p. 1. The photographs on pages 381 and 383 (top) are from *Northwestern Horseman and Stockman*, January 3, 1903, p. 4, and February, 1905, p. 1, respectively; those on pages 372, 376, 383 (bottom), and 384 are from the society’s picture collection.



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