

Twenty Years Later at the Big R

Fans Arrived in '40 by 2 Dirt Roads, Levy Recalls

Special to The New York Times.

WESTBURY, L. I., March 21—Not all roads led to Roosevelt Raceway for the opening of the harness racing season tonight. Those that did, though, were smoothly paved and inviting.

It was not always thus, and the first to admit it was George Morton Levy, the general counsel and guiding genius of the track, called by some the "Double R." In a reminiscent mood, as he awaited the start of the twenty-first year of standard bred racing here, Levy recalled the ups and downs, particularly the downs, of those early years.

"There are twenty-two lanes for vehicles leading to entrances to our beautiful 300-acre plant," he said. "They're all smooth and direct. Back in 1940, the year we started, we had only two unpaved, indirect dirt roads."

Two hours before post time, the 72-year-old Levy, who was an outstanding trial lawyer before he began devoting most of his time to the horse-and-buggy sport, was seated in his lavishly furnished office here. He was gazing, not without trepidation, out the window.

"Are the people going to come?" he asked, half to himself.

That could have been the picture on that Sept. 2 night in 1940 when Roosevelt Raceway opened.

Along about 8 P.M. on March 21, 1960, every indication was that Levy had no reason to fret. The "people" were showing



George Morton Levy, founder of Roosevelt Raceway, at track yesterday.

up, and before the daily double closed it was estimated that 25,000 were in the stands.

"Harness racing," Levy said, "has progressed and is continuing to progress. In 1939, Bob Johnson and I agreed that night harness racing would be a success. We reasoned that any game that could survive 150 years with the drivers and trainers putting up their own money for purses and without public support would flourish under improved conditions and proper management.

"So we immediately set out to prove it. We knew little about the sport except from what we had learned as spectators at the country fair meets. But we

Westbury's 'Guiding Genius,' 72, Still Counts House

learned fast. We learned, for example, that one-mile tracks were too long; that improved lighting was a must; that return heats were obsolete, and that more rapid starts were necessary.

"We learned, too, that a minimum of \$100,000 would be needed for the first year. We raised that figure, learned by trial and error other factors, and we were in business—a losing business, but a business, nevertheless."

"The going was rough through the first four years," Levy recalled. "We lost money through 1943. But late in 1944 we saw daylight ahead. We encouraged, financially and otherwise, Steve Phillips in his development of the starting gate. The first car with the 'folding arms' was constructed at a cost of \$62,000, although at the time we had only \$71,000 on deposit in the First National Bank of Mineola."

He spoke of a crucial period in 1942, when the wartime brown-out prevailed. He spoke of the need for more and more money during the early years, and he spoke of his never-waning confidence in the future of the sport.

But all the while, Levy continued to gaze out the window. He found it hard to stop wondering, and worrying, even though he is well aware that every original investment in Roosevelt Raceway back in 1940 has returned, in nice, round figures, 125 to 1.