

# Hometown Horse

Story &  
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*unless noted*



The Oxford barn Dan Patch was raised in still stands.

Oxford, Indiana has never forgotten its beloved Dan Patch.



Walk around this small Indiana town of fewer than 1,200 residents — and he is everywhere. He has a small cafe named after him and you will find him on the top of the town's water tower. His likeness welcomes you on billboards as you enter the city limits and you will find him on varied murals, plaques and street signs throughout the town. And yet, he left town for good nearly 116 years ago.

Each decade across those many years has showcased legendary athletes who captivated America and often transcended sports by branching into popular culture. Their names are familiar to the average American



## Dan Patch - "The Epitome of Excellence in American Sports"



sports fan in spite of passing time. Babe Ruth, Jack Dempsey, Red Grange, Bobby Jones, Jesse Owens, Muhammad Ali and Michael Jordan.

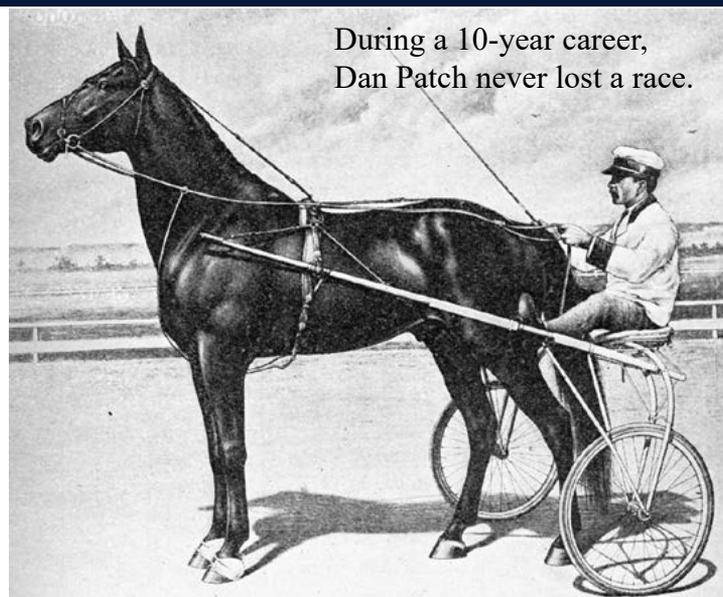
But more than a century ago, from 1900 – 1909, a superstar in the world of sports captured the hearts and minds of Americans unlike any before him. He was a household name who endorsed cigars, washing machines, automobiles, toys, watches and much more. More than 90,000 would routinely come from miles away and gather at local fairgrounds to see him compete. Today, however, his name and exploits are largely forgotten.

His name was Dan Patch and he was called the “Epitome of Excellence in American Sports.” And even though he was billed as “kindhearted, generous and a staunch Methodist who never performed on a Sunday,” this idol was truly not human. He was, though, arguably the greatest harness racing horse who ever lived.

Dan grew up in the small town of Oxford, Indiana in a barn that still stands today. The horse’s owner, Daniel Messner Jr., was a local storekeeper in Oxford who had aspirations of grandeur when he bred his five-year-old mare Zelica to the champion standardbred stallion Joe Patchen. Those dreams were quickly shattered on April 29, 1896 when the newborn foal arrived with legs so crooked and knees so knobby that some thought it would be a blessing if he didn’t survive the night.

But survive he did. In the winter of 1899, three-year-old Dan Patch would often be seen pulling a cart through Oxford’s snowy streets, trailed by young boys who grabbed on the back and were pulled on their sleds for a free ride. Residents of the small town always thought of Dan as their own.

At Dan Patch’s racing debut at a nearby fair during the late summer of 1900, it was reported every store in Oxford shut their doors so residents could journey to see him race. During the next two years, Dan’s



During a 10-year career, Dan Patch never lost a race.

Photo credit: Types and Breeds of Farm Animals. U.S.-1906

## One thing remains... and that is local pride in Dan Patch.

fame grew as he raced at tracks throughout the Midwest and East Coast at summer fairs and exhibitions. At the conclusion of each summer's Grand Circuit, he would return to Oxford and the adulation of hundreds who would cheer his arrival at the train station. He would lead the walking procession back to his barn and those who were there stated he knew exactly how to navigate his way back to his stall.

Like so many small towns across America, Oxford has suffered during the past half century from the completion of the interstate highway system. People no longer needed to travel secondary roads that took them through the business districts of small towns in order to get to their ultimate destination. And unlike previous generations, baby boomers have often

Dan Messner would routinely turn down offers to sell the horse but in early 1902, an offer of \$20,000 was too tempting and Dan Patch was sold. On March 18, 1902, the beloved hometown champion left Oxford by train and journeyed on to immortality. Dan would race across America during the next seven years and be viewed and loved by thousands. He never lost a race and set a world record in the mile that would stand for 32 years.



moved on from the towns of their birth to brighter lights, different lifestyles, and better jobs. Passing time in Oxford has seen the closure of the high school, bowling alley, movie theater, speakeasy and even Dan Messner's general store. One thing remains, however, and that is local pride in Dan Patch.

Each September, the hometown horse is remembered during the town's annual Dan Patch Days festival. His original 60x44 foot barn continues to sit nearly 75 feet from the Messner home. Dan Messner boarded up the structure before he bought his first automobile in 1914. The Messner family has continued to reside in the home to this day, yet never entered the barn's interior that remained boarded up for nearly 100 years. The family did, however, keep up the exterior. Messner's son Richard lived in Oxford until his death in 1992 and repainted the barn's roof every few years with the phrase that is still present today, "Home of Dan Patch 1:55."

The barn was finally opened in February 2006 when Dan Messner's grandson and the home's current resident John Messner and his wife Pam began a major renovation to the structure. Discovered in its interior were, among other things, remnants of two sulkies, three horse stalls, and Dan Patch's tack trunk, bear-

*Dan's name and likeness were used to sell varied merchandise during the beginning of the 20th Century.*

ing the horse's name in faded letters. And on the slats within what once was Dan's stall, you could look closely and see evidence of cribbing marks. While the barn is only open to the public on special occasions, this permanent landmark draws a steady number of passersby throughout the year who will stop their cars and take photos. And try to imagine a time, a place, a man and a horse.



**About the Author:**

*Tom Ferry has traveled throughout North America in pursuit of a lifelong passion for the horse racing industry. His published writing and photography has been seen in the pages and websites of The Thoroughbred Times, The Blood-Horse, Horse Racing Nation, International Racehorse, America's Best Racing, New York Breeder, Midwest Thoroughbred, Illinois Racing News and the 2010 book, They Call the Horses.*

*Tom's proudest moment came on November 15, 2008 when a framed enlargement of his published photograph of the late, Hall-of-Fame champion Princess Rooney was placed alongside her grave during a memorial service held to celebrate her life at the Kentucky Horse Park.*

*Born and raised in Waukegan, Illinois and a graduate of Western Illinois University, Tom has built a successful career in the advertising industry for more than 30 years. But while advertising pays the bills, the world of horse racing feeds his soul.*