THE STANDARDBRED

The Evolution of a Unique American Horse

A story of usefulness, speed, breeding and ingenuity, and of the people who kept trying to build a better horse.

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PART ONE: THE ROAD

My Horse Is Faster Than Yours

Before there was a Standardbred there was a road, and two men on it, going the same way.

Each was driving a horse. Neither horse had papers, or had ever heard of papers, or would have known what to do with them. Nobody had asked what breed they were, because the question would not have made sense. One was a bay out of a mare the driver's father had owned, by a stallion that stood at a tavern two towns over and was spoken of in that tavern with a reverence the stallion did nothing to discourage. The other had been taken in trade for a debt, a harness and some hard feelings. Both had been to mill that week, and to church, and one of them had pulled a doctor eleven miles through mud on Tuesday night without anyone thanking him for it.

The road widened. One driver glanced across at the other.

Nothing was said. Nothing needed to be. Each man was, at that moment, a sober citizen with errands to run and no time to waste, and each would have told you so. Both horses were already trotting. Now they trotted faster. And for a quarter of a mile two grown men, taxpayers, heads of families, leaned forward over the lines like boys and tried with their whole hearts to get to the next bend first.

Then they pulled up, and one of them made a remark about the other man's horse, and it began.

Nobody recorded that particular afternoon, because it happened ten thousand times on ten thousand roads. But that is where harness racing came from, and the breed that harness racing made. Everything else in this book grew out of it.

A long job description

It is easy to forget, from this side of the automobile, how completely the country ran on horses, and how much was asked of an ordinary one.

A family in New York or Connecticut or Ohio in 1820 might keep a single horse for everything that was not plowing, and that horse had no union. He carried a rider. He pulled a chaise in summer and a sleigh in winter. He went to market loaded and came home light. He stood tied in front of the store for hours while his owner discussed politics inside, and was expected to make no trouble about it. He ate what there was. He stayed sound on footing that would lame a goat, and he kept going at a steady clip for ten

or fifteen miles, because that was how far away things were, and nobody had consulted him about the distance.

Speed was part of it. A horse that could trot ten miles in an hour, where his neighbor took an hour and a half, gave his owner back a piece of every day he lived. Speed was not a luxury laid on top of usefulness. It was one more kind of usefulness, and a man who had it in his barn knew it, and so, he made sure, did his neighbors.

The trot was the gait that mattered. A horse can gallop only so far, and you cannot gallop a horse hitched to a carriage without shaking the carriage, the passengers and the eggs to pieces. The trot is the gait a horse can hold. It was the working gait, the road gait, the gait of getting there. So when Americans went looking for a faster horse, most of them were not looking for a horse that could run. They wanted one that could trot fast and keep it up, in harness, with a load, and be fit to do it again tomorrow.

Nobody set out to make a breed. There was no committee, no closed book, no recipe, and if there had been a committee it would still be meeting. There were mares, and there were stallions within a day's lead, and there were opinions, of which the supply has never run short. A farmer bred his good road mare to the horse whose colts he had seen go by. If the foal could move, he bred her back. If the foal could not, he blamed the stallion, tried the gray horse over the river next time, and said he had never liked the first one. Four years later the colt was in harness and the farmer knew whether he had been right.

Then he went and found somebody to try him against.

The first watches

For a long time the trials left no record, because they happened on roads and the only witnesses were interested parties. The earliest numbers are few and none too firm.

In June of 1806, on a half-mile track at Harlem, on the northern end of Manhattan, a horse called Yankee is reputed to have trotted a mile in 2:59. Hamilton Busbey, who covered the trotting turf for half a century and wrote its history, used exactly that word, reputed. He had known a great many horsemen and heard a great many times, and he knew what he was about.

The first mile that the old writers were willing to call authentic came in 1818. A gray gelding named Boston Blue was matched against time at Jamaica, on Long Island, on a wager that no horse could trot a mile in three minutes. He did it. A mile in three minutes is twenty miles an hour. It is not fast by the standards of anything that came later, and that is the point. Somebody had been confident enough that it could not be done to put money on it, and somebody went home that evening a wiser and a poorer man.

The three-minute mile became the first great dividing line. For decades afterward the slowest class at any trotting meeting was “the three-minute trot,” for horses that had never beaten it. The whole sport was built upward from the number Boston Blue laid down.

By 1825 there were enough men interested to form the New York Trotting Club, with a course at Jamaica. Philadelphia had its Hunting Park Association three years later. The early races looked little like what came after. Many were trotted under saddle, with a rider on the horse’s back, over two and three miles. In 1829 a horse called Topgallant went three miles in harness in 8:11, and it is worth knowing who he was: a grandson of an imported English Thoroughbred named Messenger on one side, and a great-grandson of the same horse on the other. That name was already turning up wherever something trotted fast. It has a chapter of its own coming.

Trotting had one large advantage over the older sport of running horses, and the advantage was respectability. In much of the North, running races carried a smell of gambling and gentry that the churches disliked and that the legislatures, from time to time, disliked on the churches’ behalf. A trot down the road was harder to object to. The horses were only doing their work, a little quicker than usual. A deacon who would have gone to the stake before he attended a race meeting saw nothing whatever wrong in letting the mare step along on the way home from town, particularly if another deacon was on the road ahead of him. In New York the fast drivers gathered on the long straight roads at the upper end of the island, and by the middle of the century Harlem Lane was the place where merchants, butchers and millionaires tested one another every fine afternoon, and then stopped at a roadhouse to explain why they had lost.

The garage

There is a later American figure who helps explain these people, and he will turn up now and then in this book.

Think of a man in a small-town garage in 1955, on a Saturday, with the hood up. He has a car that came from a factory the same as everyone’s. He has changed the carburetor and he is thinking about the rear end. A friend down the street swears by a different cam, and is wrong, and will be told so. Neither of them is an engineer. Both of them have theories. On Sunday they will take the cars out to a strip of pavement, and a clock will tell them which theory was right, and on Monday they will both start over, the loser with rather more enthusiasm than the winner.

The American horseman of the nineteenth century was that man. He could not change his engine once it was foaled, though he could, and endlessly did, try a different

cross next time. But he could change nearly everything else. He could change the shoes, heavier in front or lighter behind, to lengthen a stride or square up a gait. He could change the bit, the check rein, the weight of the vehicle, the feed, the work. He could buy a horse another man had given up on, and try the one thing the other man had not thought of, and enjoy telling him about it afterward.

And then he had to take the horse somewhere and find out.

Everything in this story comes back to one stubborn, cheerful question, asked by thousands of people who never met, over more than two hundred years.

Can we build a better horse?

The Old Gaits

To follow the story you need two words, and the horse will explain them better than a dictionary.

Watch a horse trot. The legs move in diagonal pairs. Left front and right hind strike the ground together, then right front and left hind. Between the two beats there is a moment when the horse is off the ground altogether, though nobody could prove it until a photographer in California settled the matter in the 1870s, to the annoyance of a number of painters. The trot is the natural middle gait of most horses, and it bounces. A rider must rise and fall with it or have his teeth loosened.

Now watch a horse pace. The legs move in lateral pairs: left front and left hind together, then right front and right hind. The horse rocks slightly from side to side, like a man carrying two full buckets and taking care not to spill. It is a little faster than the trot, on the whole, and under saddle it is far smoother. The rider simply sits there and is carried.

Some horses trot and never pace. Some pace by nature from the day they are foaled. A good many can do both. For most of the nineteenth century the trot was the fashionable harness gait, and the pace was looked on as a country cousin, tolerated at the family table and not introduced to company. That would change. Today most Standardbreds that race are pacers. But the pace is the older American story, and it begins in Rhode Island.

The horse that vanished

Along the western shore of Narragansett Bay, in the eighteenth century, a small class of wealthy planters raised cattle, sheep, cheese and a particular kind of horse. The horse

was small, usually sorrel, and no beauty. He had a gait that travelers wrote home about. He ambled and paced, and he could carry a man forty or fifty miles in a day, over roads that were roads only by courtesy, without tiring himself or his rider.

They called him the Narragansett Pacer.

Where he came from is not known. No stud book was kept and no reliable painting survives. He was probably descended from the ambling saddle horses of the British Isles, with something Spanish mixed in, and there are stories about a foundation stallion called Old Snip that are stories and nothing more. What is certain is that by the middle of the 1700s he was the most admired saddle horse in the colonies, and that Rhode Island did a brisk trade shipping him out.

The best market was the sugar islands. Planters in the West Indies wanted easy-gaited horses for riding their estates, and they paid well. The Narragansett planters, being businessmen, sold them the pacers, cargo after cargo, along with their beef and their cheese.

They sold too many. That is the usual explanation, at any rate, and it is probably part of the truth: a breed of horse was shipped out of existence at a profit. Tastes also changed. As roads improved and wheeled vehicles replaced the saddle, people wanted a horse that trotted in harness more than one that paced under a rider. The planter class that had bred the pacers declined after the Revolution. Whatever the mixture of causes, the breed thinned out through the early nineteenth century, and then one day people looked around and it was gone. The last horse anyone was willing to call a pure Narragansett is said to have died around 1880.

Many good tales attach to these horses. It is said that George Washington owned and raced one. It is said that Edmund Burke wrote from England begging a friend to send him a pair. It is said that Paul Revere was riding one on the night of his ride. Not one of these stories comes with a document that will bear weight. A vanished horse attracts famous riders the way an old inn attracts famous guests, and the tales are best enjoyed in the same spirit.

But a horse can disappear and leave his gait behind. Narragansett mares had gone to Canada, to Virginia, to the frontier. Their blood is somewhere in the American Saddlebred and the Tennessee Walking Horse. And it is somewhere, by routes nobody can now map, in the pacing families that surfaced in Kentucky, Tennessee and Indiana a generation or two later and fed straight into the Standardbred.

Pacers from the north

The second pacing stream came down from Canada.

The French settlers along the St. Lawrence had developed a tough, hairy, short-legged horse of great endurance and no pretensions. Some of these horses paced, and paced fast. Americans called any such animal a Canadian pacer, which was a description and not a breed. Even at the time people argued about where the pacing came from. John Wallace, the stubborn historian of the trotter, of whom a great deal more later, thought it had less to do with France than with Rhode Island, and that the Canadians had got their pacers by quiet trading across the border with the New Englanders, at hours when the customs men were asleep. He may have been right. It would mean the Narragansett went north, grew a heavier coat, and came back under an assumed name.

Whatever their origin, a handful of these horses went south and west with the drovers and traders, and a few of them became the heads of families.

One was a black pacer who came to Kentucky about 1831 and was known as Old Pacing Pilot. Nobody knew how he was bred. His son Pilot Jr. sired trotters, and good ones, and his daughters were among the most valuable broodmares of their day. Another was a horse called Copperbottom, brought to Kentucky a generation earlier. Another was Tom Hal, whose descendants, the Hals of Tennessee, were pacers to a horse, and would one day produce the first harness horse to go a mile in two minutes.

None of these animals had a pedigree a gentleman would have recognized. All of them could go. In the America that was building its road horse, the second fact was allowed to outweigh the first, which is not a thing that could have been said of every country at the time.

The schoolmaster's colt

The third old strain began with a single small horse in Vermont.

He was foaled in 1789, a bay, and he came north to Vermont in the 1790s with a schoolteacher and singing-master named Justin Morgan. The horse's own name was Figure. After Morgan's death people took to calling the horse by the man's name, as they did with horses then, and the schoolmaster, who was poor and consumptive and left little else behind him, has been mistaken for his horse ever since.

Almost nothing about Figure's breeding is certain. The Morgan horse people's best guess is that his sire was a Thoroughbred called True Briton. There are other candidates, and the truth was lost before anyone thought it worth recording. What is recorded is what he did. He was small, perhaps fourteen hands, and he out-pulled, out-walked and out-trotted bigger horses all over the Connecticut Valley while working for his keep. He was passed from owner to owner, never valued at much, and lived to be about thirty-two, which suggests that he took a more sensible view of his own worth than they did.

And he stamped his foals. They looked like him and moved like him, and so did theirs. That quality, the power to pass oneself on, is what horsemen call prepotency. It is the rarest and most valuable thing a breeding animal can have, and we will meet it again.

Figure's descendants became the Morgan breed. Before that happened, though, some of them became very fast trotters. His grandson Black Hawk was the best-known trotting stallion in New England in the 1840s. Black Hawk's son Ethan Allen was a national celebrity, a horse so pretty and so quick that people who knew nothing about racing went to look at him. In 1867, at eighteen years old, hitched to a wagon alongside a galloping Thoroughbred mate who took most of the load, Ethan Allen beat the champion trotter of America three straight heats on Long Island.

So by the 1840s the country had three old sources of harness speed. There were the pacers that traced, somehow, to Narragansett Bay. There were the pacers and trotters out of Canada. There were the Morgans of Vermont. They were not breeds in the modern sense, with closed books and inspectors. They were families of useful horses that happened to share an ancestor and a way of going.

It would be a mistake to picture the Standardbred as so many established breeds poured into a bowl and stirred. It grew out of overlapping populations of road horses, whose owners kept what worked and bred it to whatever else worked.

All of them were about to be overtaken by the descendants of one gray horse who had not been bred to trot at all, and who, if he had been asked, would very likely have considered it beneath him.

English Blue Blood Gets a Job

In 1788 a gray stallion was advertised at stud in Philadelphia. The notice in the newspaper said he was "just imported," gave his name as Messenger, and set his fee at three guineas a mare, with a dollar for the groom.

He was eight years old and he was an English Thoroughbred. That word needs a little care. The Thoroughbred was, and is, a breed made for one purpose: to gallop, with a rider, as fast as possible over a mile or two. It had been developed in England over the previous century from native mares and a few imported Eastern stallions, and by Messenger's day it had what almost no other kind of horse had. It had a stud book. A stud book is simply a register in which the parentage of every recognized animal is written down, so that a pedigree is a matter of record and not of memory. The Thoroughbred's aristocratic reputation rested on that book quite as much as on its

speed. The horse had ancestors, and could prove it, and in England that has always counted for a good deal.

Messenger had been a respectable racehorse. He won ten of his sixteen races in England in the middle 1780s. He was not a great champion. His sire was a gray called Mambrino, and it was remarked of Mambrino in England that he could trot uncommonly well for a running horse. This was regarded as a curiosity, like a duke who could juggle, and nobody thought any more about it.

Even the name of the man who brought Messenger over is less certain than it is usually made to sound. He is always given as Thomas Benger, and Benger certainly had the horse at his place in Bucks County a few years later. But Wallace, who looked hard, admitted he had no direct information on who imported him, and had pieced the name together from an advertisement. A good story has the horse charging down the gangplank after the voyage with two grooms hanging off his head, while the other horses on the ship, weak from weeks at sea, had to be helped ashore. It may have happened. It is exactly the kind of thing that ought to have happened. Nobody who was there wrote it down.

What is on the record is where he went. He stood at stud in and around Philadelphia, then at Pennington in New Jersey, then in Bucks County. In the 1790s he moved to New York, and he spent the rest of his life going back and forth between Long Island, Westchester and Orange County. He stood at Goshen in 1801. He was at Townsend Cock's farm near Oyster Bay in 1803 and 1804, at twenty dollars a mare.

He was not a pretty horse, by most accounts, and not a gentle one. He was big-boned and coarse for a Thoroughbred, with a large head and a wide nostril and a great deal of muscle. Thoroughbred breeders used him and got good runners. But the farmers of New York and New Jersey used him too, on their ordinary mares, because he was there and the fee was within reach. They were not trying to breed racehorses. They wanted a better horse for the road.

And his colts could trot.

Nobody had planned it, and for a long time nobody could explain it. The sons and daughters of Messenger, and more strikingly their sons and daughters, had a long, low, driving trot and the stamina to hold it. Something in that coarse gray horse, perhaps the same thing that had made his sire a curiosity, came out in his American descendants as harness speed.

So there is a pleasant irony in the foundation of the American trotter. The Thoroughbred was the most specialized, the most carefully documented, the most socially elevated horse in the world. He had a book. He had a peerage. America imported

some of that English blue blood and promptly put it to work. Messenger had been bred to carry a jockey around Newmarket Heath in front of the nobility. His great-grandchildren pulled doctors and butchers and Methodist ministers around New York State in all weathers, and the best of them did it faster than anything else on the road.

None of this is a slight on the Thoroughbred, who went on doing his own job superbly and gave the American trotter a great deal of his courage and his speed. The two simply had different job descriptions. The runner was asked one question, on a racecourse, a few times a year, and was then led away under a blanket. The road horse was asked a dozen questions every week before anyone thought to ask how fast he was, and got his own supper when the answers were satisfactory.

Messenger died on January 28, 1808, in Townsend Cock's stable, in his twenty-eighth year. Old men who had been there as boys told Wallace about the funeral. The horse was buried at the foot of a chestnut tree in front of the house, in his holiday clothing, and the neighbors got up a military company for the occasion and fired volley after volley over the grave.

They buried him like a general. They had some idea, already, of what he was.

Mambrino and Abdallah

Messenger's most important American son was named after his English sire. This second Mambrino was large and coarse and a failure as a runner, and, Wallace says, a good natural trotter. He was the sort of horse a racing man would have given away and thought himself well rid of. In the early 1820s he sired a colt who was worse.

Abdallah was a bay, about fifteen and a half hands, with a fine glossy coat and very little else to recommend him. He had a long homely head. He had a tail so thin that horsemen called it a rat tail. And he had, in Wallace's words, "an unconquerable will of his own," which is a historian's way of saying that he was a brute. When he was four years old his owner tried to break him to harness. Abdallah kicked everything to pieces. He was never hitched again until he was a very old horse, when somebody, in a moment of optimism, sold him for five dollars to a fish peddler. He reduced the peddler's wagon to kindling, and what the peddler said is not preserved.

He was sent to Kentucky for a time, and Kentucky sent him back. He stood here and there around Long Island and the Hudson Valley for small fees, including a couple of seasons at Chester in Orange County for twenty dollars. Farmers bred to him because, whatever else was wrong with him, and nearly everything was, his colts could trot. The best of them trotted like nothing else in the country.

His end is the sort of thing that makes one think less of the human side of this partnership. In extreme old age, when there was no more money to be had out of him, he was turned out on a bleak, sandy stretch of the Long Island shore and left there. He starved to death, Wallace wrote, “in the piercing November winds.”

He had been ugly and savage all his life, and it may be that nobody was sorry. But by then he had sired the colt at Sugar Loaf, and every Standardbred now living is in his debt.

The trotter from Norfolk

One more immigrant has to be introduced, and he came with a reputation he may not have earned.

In the eastern counties of England, in Norfolk especially, farmers had bred for generations a strong, active road horse that trotted. It was called the Norfolk Trotter, or the Norfolk Roadster, and it was England’s version of the same animal America was trying to make: a horse to carry a heavy man a long way at a good clip. Great feats were claimed for these horses, sixteen and seventeen miles trotted inside the hour, and the claims lost nothing in crossing the Atlantic.

In July 1822 a merchant named James Boott, of Boston, imported one. He was a bright bay with black legs, about fifteen hands, and his name was Bellfounder. His manager was a shrewd man who understood, as Wallace put it, the use of printer’s ink, and Bellfounder was advertised up and down the seaboard as the wonder of the age.

Wallace thought the whole thing was largely humbug. Bellfounder, he said, was not much of a trotter and did not get trotters. With one exception.

In Orange County, in the early 1830s, Bellfounder was bred to a one-eyed brown mare who was a granddaughter of Messenger. The foal was a bay filly.

We will come to her.

The Gray Mare

Great horses have a way of turning up in undignified places.

About 1837 a man named David Bryan was looking for a saddle horse on Long Island. In the village of Smithtown he came on a small gray mare, four years old, hitched to a butcher’s cart. One version of the story makes it an oyster cart. Either way she was delivering somebody’s dinner, and doing it, we may suppose, punctually. The butcher

had paid ninety dollars for her as a two-year-old. Bryan gave him $112.50, and the butcher very likely congratulated himself on the transaction for the rest of the week.

She had been foaled in 1833 and she was a great-granddaughter of Messenger, by a horse called Engineer II. Bryan named her Lady Suffolk, after the county.

He raced her for the first time in the winter of 1838, and he went on racing her for sixteen years. That sentence deserves a second look. A modern racehorse who lasts five seasons has had a long career. Lady Suffolk started in something like 160 races between 1838 and 1854, won about ninety of them, and was second in most of the rest. She raced under saddle, with Bryan on her back. She raced in harness to a sulky, which is the light two-wheeled cart, hardly more than a seat on an axle, that is used for racing to this day. She raced to a wagon, which had four wheels and weighed a good deal more. She went one mile, two miles, three miles and four. She was taken by road and by boat to every track of consequence in the country, and toward the end of her life she was still beating horses that had not been born when she started.

Bryan was by all accounts a hard and not very skillful driver, and people who knew horses said she would have been faster in better hands. It is the fate of a good many remarkable creatures to be managed by people who are not remarkable. She was fast enough.

The racing of her day was done in heats. A race was not a single dash but a series of them, each a mile or more, with twenty minutes or so between for the horses to be cooled out and scraped down. The winner was the first horse to take three heats. If five horses were good enough to win a heat apiece, the crowd might see seven or eight miles of racing before it was settled, and the horse who won was very often not the fastest but the one who was still standing. Heat racing was a test of bottom, which was the old horseman's word for stamina and courage together. It suited an animal that had been bred to do a day's work and not complain.

In 1845, at the Beacon Course in Hoboken, New Jersey, in the second heat of a hard race, the twelve-year-old gray mare from the butcher's cart trotted a mile in harness in 2:29½.

It was the first time a trotter had pulled a sulky a mile in better than two minutes and thirty seconds. She had already gone faster than that with a rider on her back, but harness was the test that counted, and 2:30 in harness became the second great number in the sport. Boston Blue's three minutes had defined a trotter. Lady Suffolk's 2:30 defined a fast one. For the next fifty years a horse "in the 2:30 list" was a horse to be reckoned with, and the phrase will come back in this story with a great deal riding on it.

She was retired in 1854, sent to Vermont and bred to the Morgan stallion Black Hawk. She died the next year. People have long said she was the mare in the song "The Old Gray Mare." It is a pleasing idea, and nobody has ever produced any evidence for it.

The master

One other figure of those years has to be mentioned, because his name stood for something.

Hiram Woodruff was born in New Jersey in 1817 into a family of horsemen, and he was riding trotters in public before he was grown. In 1839 he rode a horse named Dutchman three miles under saddle in 7:32½, a mark that stood for a generation. He trained and drove nearly every important trotter of the next quarter-century. He kept a roadhouse and stable on the Jamaica road on Long Island, and it was the unofficial capital of the trotting world.

Two things were said of him. One was that he could get more out of a horse, more kindly, than any man alive. He believed in slow, patient conditioning at a time when the usual method was to sweat a horse thin and drive him until he quit. The other was that he could not be bought. The trotting turf in his day was thick with gamblers, and a race that had been arranged beforehand, for the convenience of the gentlemen betting on it, was no rarity. Woodruff never sold one. In that company it made him as conspicuous as a lighthouse.

When he died in 1867, at fifty, his coffin was carried to the cemetery by sleigh through deep snow, and the monument put up over him says he was "alike conspicuous for his genius, his unswerving integrity, and his kindness of heart." It is not every man in the horse business who could have had the second item carved in stone without the neighbors smiling.

The year after his death his recollections were published as *The Trotting Horse of America*. It was the first real book the sport had, part memoir and part manual, and it preserved the working knowledge of a generation that had learned its trade on the road.

By the time Lady Suffolk went to Vermont, then, the pieces were lying about. There was a public that understood a mile time. There were tracks, and men like Woodruff who knew how to train for them. There were the old pacing strains, the Morgans, and everywhere in the East the stout, long-striding descendants of Messenger.

Nothing yet tied them together. There was no breed, no register, no single family that stood above the rest.

That began to change in a swampy field in Orange County, New York, on a spring morning in 1849.

PART TWO: THE HORSE FROM SUGAR LOAF

The Mare with the Butcher's Name

There was a butcher in New York named Charles Kent. He sold meat, presumably good meat, to people who presumably paid him, and he lived and died without doing anything else that history has seen fit to remember.

He did not breed the mare. He did not raise her, or train her, or drive her in her days of glory, or have the smallest notion, when he let her go lame for $135, of what he was letting go. He merely owned her for a while, the way a man owns an umbrella. And for this service, which consisted entirely of standing in the right place at the right moment, Charles Kent has had his name printed in every history of the American trotter for a hundred and seventy years, while the mare herself, who did all the work, never got a name at all.

She is the Charles Kent Mare. She was the mother of the most important stallion the breed ever had, and that is what they call her. It tells you most of what you need to know about how the nineteenth century kept track of mares.

What we do know of her comes largely from one determined man. John Wallace, whom we will meet properly later as the keeper of the breed's first register, spent years tracking down the old men of Orange County, New York, and writing down what they remembered. The account is oral history, gathered half a century after the events, and should be read as such. But it is detailed, it is consistent, and it is the best there is.

Start two generations back, with a mare called Silvertail. She was a daughter of Messenger, the gray English Thoroughbred whose blood had been seeping through the farms of New York and New Jersey since 1788. Silvertail's daughter was a brown mare, a little over fifteen hands, bred by Jonas Seely Sr. of Sugar Loaf. She lost an eye in an accident and was known ever after as One Eye, the horsemen of Orange County not being men to waste a christening. Her sire was Bishop's Hambletonian, a son of Messenger, which made One Eye, in Wallace's phrase, "equal to a daughter of Messenger in blood." The old men remembered one thing about her above all, and Wallace wrote it down. She had a grand, open trotting step.

One Eye was bred to Bellfounder, the much-advertised Norfolk trotter from England, and in 1833 or thereabouts she produced a bay filly with a star on her forehead. The breeder was Josiah S. Jackson of Oxford, in Orange County. Wallace would later call this filly practically the only trotter Bellfounder ever sired. It is a hard judgment on a stallion

who had crossed an ocean on his reputation, but it is also the only reason his name survives at all.

The filly could go. As a four-year-old she was reported to have trotted trial miles under saddle at the Union Course on Long Island in 2:43 and 2:41. Wallace doubted those times when he first heard them and came around to accepting them later. In the 1830s that was real speed, and real speed in a young mare meant then what it has always meant. People started paying more for her.

Peter Seely bought her at three for $300. A Mr. Pray of New York gave $400. William Chivis gave $500. Then a New York banker bought her to match with another fast horse as a road team, the sort of pair a wealthy man drove up the avenue in order to be seen behind them.

The team ran away.

Nobody recorded the details. A runaway in harness was the car wreck of its day, a tangle of poles and straps and frightened animals, and it happened often enough that it rarely made the papers. When it was over the bay mare was lame, and a lame mare was no use to a banker, who had not bought her for her conversation. She came down in the world the way horses did, and the way people did too. The banker let her go, and she arrived at last in the stable of Charles Kent, who bred her at least once and otherwise left no mark on her story except his name.

That is where Jonas Seely found her. Seely was the son of the man who had bred One Eye, and he knew the family. Mr. Pray, who had owned the mare in her good days and seems to have kept a soft place for her, urged him to buy her back. The two of them went to look her over, to see, as Wallace has it, whether she was “too badly crippled.” She was not. Seely paid Kent $135 and took her home to Sugar Loaf.

She was bought as a broodmare, which is to say as a mare whose own working life was finished and whose remaining value lay in her foals. She had a filly in 1843 and a gelding in 1845. Twice Seely bred her to Abdallah, that rough and ill-tempered grandson of Messenger who was then standing in the neighborhood, and twice she had fillies that died at four years old.

In 1848 he sent her to Abdallah a third time. It says something for Jonas Seely’s patience, or his stubbornness, and in a horseman the two are hard to tell apart.

On the fifth of May, 1849, she foaled a bay colt. Local tradition, preserved by the Chester Historical Society, places the birth in a swampy field on the Banker farm at Sugar Loaf. The colt had his mother’s star, and, the old men said, her hocks and hind legs exactly. He had Messenger blood from his sire and Messenger blood twice over from his dam, with the English road trotter Bellfounder set in the middle of it.

She would have other foals, the last of them in 1859, when she was about twenty-six. None of them mattered much. A daughter named Belle became the dam of a decent stallion. Then the record goes quiet. Nobody wrote down the day she died.

A stallion can sire a hundred foals in a season and be judged on the best five. A mare gets one a year if everything goes right, and a great many years it does not. The Charles Kent Mare had perhaps a dozen chances in her life. Two fillies died young. One colt changed everything.

The stopwatch can find a champion in two minutes. It took the better part of a century for anyone to understand what the crippled mare from the butcher's stable had done, and by then there was nobody left who could have told you what she liked to be called.

The Hired Man's Colt

William Rysdyk was forty years old and worked for wages.

He had hired on with Jonas Seely for the year, doing the work a farmhand did in Orange County in 1849, which was whatever needed doing, in whatever weather it needed doing in. He was not a horse dealer or a turfman. He had no stable and no reputation. He had no capital, so far as anyone has shown, beyond what a careful man could put by from a hired hand's pay, which is to say that he had the habit of capital without the substance. What he did have was a wish, and the Harness Racing Museum's biography of him records it plainly. He had long wanted a good road horse.

That wish deserves a moment, because the whole story hangs on it. A road horse in 1849 was not a racehorse. It was the horse you drove to town, to church, to the next county on business. A good one covered ground at a strong, steady trot for miles and came home sound. A very good one did all that and could also brush past the neighbor's horse on the way. To own such an animal was, for a working man, something like owning a fine automobile a century later. It was transportation, and it was also a statement, addressed to everyone who had ever driven past him.

Rysdyk had been looking at the bay colt all summer. He looked at him, one imagines, over the fence in the evening, when the work was done, the way a man looks at something he has already decided to have. In the autumn he asked Seely to sell. Seely named a price for the mare and the colt together, and Rysdyk paid it.

One hundred and twenty-five dollars.

A story has grown up that he had to borrow the money. It may be true. It is the kind of thing that would be true. But the sources closest to the event do not say so, and it is

safer to leave it as a story. What is certain is that the most consequential purchase in the history of the breed was made by a farmhand, for a road horse, at a price that would not have bought a matched pair of oxen and a wagon. The bankers and the turfmen of New York, who had every advantage, were looking the other way.

He named the colt Hambletonian, after the great-grandsire on the dam's side.

The trial

Rysdyk was not shy about his colt. At two, Hambletonian was allowed to cover four mares for nothing, a common way to get a young stallion's first foals on the ground so that people could look at them. One of those four mares produced a colt who would become famous in Kentucky as Alexander's Abdallah, and we will come back to him.

In the autumn of 1852, when Hambletonian was three, Rysdyk took him to New York to show at the fair of the American Institute. A neighbor, Seely C. Roe, went too, with a four-year-old called Abdallah Chief. The two colts were half-brothers, both by old Abdallah, and it is a fair guess that the two owners had been comparing them for some time, each to his own satisfaction. After the fair they took both horses out to the Union Course on Long Island, the best-known track in the country, and gave them a few weeks of light training.

Then they did what horsemen do.

They hitched the colts and went a mile against each other. Rysdyk's three-year-old beat Roe's four-year-old in 3:03. Roe, Wallace reports, was surprised, and it would be worth something to know exactly how he expressed it. He took his own colt out again by himself and got a mile in 2:55½, which must have been some comfort.

A few days later Rysdyk drove Hambletonian a mile alone against the watch.

Two minutes, forty-eight seconds.

Some of the watches held along the rail said 2:48½. Rysdyk, who by Wallace's account was "a remarkably careful man" and liked to stay on the safe side of the truth, advertised the slower figure for the rest of his life. In the horse business, then as now, a man who rounded his own colt's time in the wrong direction was a phenomenon.

To see what that number meant, remember that the fastest trotters in America, mature, seasoned horses in the hands of professionals, were then going miles in the high 2:20s. A three-year-old colt, barely trained, driven by a farmer, had come within about twenty seconds of the best in the land. It was not a record of any kind. It was a strong hint.

And that was the end of it. Wallace says flatly that those few weeks at the Union Course were the first and the last training Hambletonian ever had. He never started in a

race. The horse whose name is now attached to the most famous race in the sport never ran in one. People who say “Hambletonian raced” have the wrong picture. He went one mile against his half-brother and one mile against the watch, and then he went home to Chester and was put to work at the only job he would ever hold.

Not everyone believed the watch. Rysdyk had enemies in Orange County, as a hired man who gets rich will always have, and one faction insisted for years that the 2:48 was “a put up job.” A man may be forgiven a great deal by his neighbors, but not that he started below them and finished above. Wallace, who loved an argument better than his dinner, ran the thing to ground. He found Roe’s brother-in-law, who remembered Roe himself saying of that mile, “I held my watch and I know it is true.” The owner of the beaten colt is about as good a witness as a horse could ask for.

The ledger

What happened next can be followed in the stud fees, and Wallace preserved them season by season.

In 1852, the year of the trial, Hambletonian stood for $25. Seventeen mares came. The next year, with the 2:48½ on the handbills, 101 came. Rysdyk raised the fee to $35 and left it there for nine years while the mares kept arriving, eighty and ninety and a hundred a season, led and driven and ridden up the roads of Orange County from farms all over the region.

Then the foals grew up and began to trot.

In 1863 the fee went to $75. In 1864 it was $100, and 217 mares were bred, a number that would be considered heavy use for a stallion today, with every veterinary advantage. In 1865 the fee was $300. In 1866 it was $500, with $100 down and the balance due when the mare proved in foal, at a time when a farm laborer might earn a dollar a day. A hired man in Orange County would have had to work a year and a half, and eat nothing, to send one mare to the horse a hired man owned.

It was too much for any horse. In 1867, of seventy-seven mares, only forty-one got in foal. Wallace’s judgment was that the stallion’s powers had been overtaxed. In 1868 Hambletonian covered no mares at all. He came back for a few each season after that, a dozen or two, and the last two foals arrived in 1875.

Add it up and you get roughly thirteen hundred foals. The exact figure is argued over, and 1,331 is the number most often printed. The Harness Racing Museum puts Rysdyk’s income from stud fees at more than $200,000. The hired man became one of the wealthier people in Chester, and it is to be hoped that he sometimes drove slowly past the houses of the gentlemen who had called it a put up job.

He did not live to see the end of it. William Rysdyk died in April 1870, twenty-one years after he led the mare and colt out of Seely's yard. He is buried in Chester. The horse outlived him by six years.

What he looked like

It would be pleasant to report that Hambletonian was beautiful. He was not, particularly.

He stood a shade over fifteen hands and one inch, which is not a big horse. His head was coarse. His ears lopped backward. Wallace, who admired him enormously, said his muzzle would not have gone into anything smaller than a half-bushel measure. His front feet had been ruined by a botched operation, so that he stood on the soft underside of the hoof. And Wallace thought the barrel of the horse was two or three sizes too small for the two ends, as if he had been assembled in a hurry from what was on hand.

But the two ends were the thing. He was powerfully built before and behind, and he was two full inches taller at the rump than at the withers. Horsemen came to call that downhill build the trotting pitch. A horse made that way has an engine in the rear and a long, low reach in front, and when Hambletonian moved, the people who had come to sneer at the head stopped talking. Another writer of the day, who signed himself Hark Comstock, called him a horse of "immense substance, without a particle of coarseness." Both descriptions were true. It depended on whether he was standing still.

He died at Chester on a Monday in March 1876, twenty-six years old, going on twenty-seven. In 1893 the trotting-horse breeders of America put up a shaft of red granite nearly twenty-seven feet tall over his grave, on the street now called Hambletonian Avenue. It is still there. A second monument, at Sugar Loaf, marks the place where he was foaled. There is no monument to Charles Kent, and none is needed.

The number that follows his name came from John Wallace's register, where every recognized stallion was given one. Wallace had listed him in the first volume as "Rysdyk's Hambletonian," and later regretted it, because the fashion of putting an owner's name on a horse bred a confusing crop of other Hambletonians, each with a proprietor attached. The number sorted them out. He is Hambletonian 10.

His critics had one more argument, and it is worth hearing, because the answer to it is the point of the whole story. Of thirteen hundred foals, they said, only about forty ever trotted fast enough to earn a standard record themselves. By the arithmetic of the racetrack that is a poor average. Wallace called the argument foolishness, and he had the figures to say so. Those same thirteen hundred foals included 148 sons and 80 daughters

who went on to produce standard performers of their own, more than sixteen hundred of them by the time Wallace stopped counting in 1896.

Hambletonian's speed was not in his own legs, or even mainly in his children's. It was in what his children passed on.

Great racehorses can own an afternoon. Great breeding horses can own a century.

What the Colt Left Behind

A stallion's reputation is made by other horses. Until his foals are old enough to race he is only a theory, and the country is full of theories eating their heads off in box stalls.

Hambletonian's theory was tested early. Recall the four mares he covered for nothing as a two-year-old. One of them produced a bay colt in 1852, the first crop he ever sired. The colt was sold at seventeen months for $500, and in 1859 he was sold again, for $3,000, to go to Kentucky. His new owner was Robert A. Alexander of Woodburn Farm, the grandest breeding establishment in America, and the horse became known as Alexander's Abdallah.

He stood at Woodburn for six seasons and got some extraordinary foals. Then the war found him. On the evening of February 2, 1865, a band of Confederate guerrillas raided Woodburn and rode off with the best horses on the place, Alexander's Abdallah among them. He was recovered within days, but a Union soldier had ridden him to exhaustion in the chase, unshod, over frozen roads. He took pneumonia and died. One army stole him and the other killed him, and between the two of them they did not leave much for a historian to choose.

He was thirteen. Among the foals he left was a nervous little bay mare in New Jersey whom nobody had yet thought to break. We will get to her in due course. She became the most famous trotter in the world.

Four white feet

The horse who made Hambletonian's name with the general public was a gelding.

Dexter was foaled in Orange County in the late 1850s, a brown colt with a blaze down his face and four white stockings. His dam, Clara, was a daughter of a horse called American Star. Now, the old horse-traders had a rhyme about white feet, to the effect that a horse with one might be bought, a horse with two might be tried, and a horse with

four should be fed to the crows. Tradition holds that Dexter's breeder let him go cheaply on that account. If so, it was an expensive piece of poetry.

In the hands of a young driver named Budd Doble, who would handle three world champions before he was through, Dexter beat everything that would face him. He beat them under saddle, in harness and to wagon. On August 14, 1867, at Buffalo, he trotted a mile in 2:17¼.

The record he broke was 2:19¾, and it had stood for eight years. It belonged to a little bob-tailed mare named Flora Temple, who gets the next chapter.

Before Dexter had cooled out, he had been sold. The buyer was Robert Bonner, the publisher of the *New York Ledger*, and the price was $35,000.

Bonner is one of the more curious figures in the story. He was a devout Presbyterian who thought betting a sin and racing for money not much better, and he held these opinions sincerely and expressed them often. He was also quite helpless in the presence of a fast trotter. A lesser man might have been troubled by the contradiction. Bonner resolved it. He bought the fastest horses in the country, one after another, at prices that made the newspapers gasp, his own included, and then he never raced them at all. He drove them. Every fine afternoon he took a champion out on Harlem Lane behind his own hands, as a gentleman's road horse, and allowed the rest of New York to try to keep up. In this way he enjoyed everything about horse racing except the racing, and his conscience and his stable were both kept in excellent order.

Dexter never raced again. He lived to be about thirty and became, in retirement, more famous than he had been on the track. Currier and Ives sold lithographs of him by the thousand. Before his inauguration, General Grant went out for a drive behind him, with Bonner holding the lines. Copper weathervanes cast in Dexter's shape went up on barns all over the country, and some of them are still turning.

For Rysdyk the arithmetic was simple. The fastest trotter in the world was a son of his horse. That was the year the stud fee stood at $500.

The four sons

Geldings leave no descendants. What made Hambletonian the father of a breed was four of his other sons, each of whom founded a family that is still going.

George Wilkes was foaled in 1856, a small, dark brown colt with a bad temper. His dam died soon after foaling him, and he was raised by hand, which may account for the temper. He was the best racehorse of the four. He campaigned for years around New York, and in 1862 he beat Ethan Allen, the darling of the Morgan men. In 1873, his racing done, he was sent to Kentucky. There he was bred to the daughters of the best

local stallions, and the result was the Wilkes family, which for a time threatened to crowd out everything else in the trotting register. Remember him. In a little while a grandson of his will be found siring colts for a town in the Illinois corn belt.

Dictator was Dexter's full brother, by Hambletonian out of Clara, and for a while that was the main thing to be said for him. Then he sired a little black gelding called Jay-Eye-See, who became the first trotter to beat 2:10, and people found a good deal more to say.

Happy Medium was foaled in 1863. His dam was a mare named Princess, who had once crossed a continent and an isthmus to race Flora Temple, and whose story also belongs to the next chapter. Happy Medium raced a little and stood at stud for many years. His son Pilot Medium, out of a mare who went back to the old Canadian pacer Pilot, would sire a horse named Peter the Great. Nearly every trotter racing today descends from Peter the Great.

Electioneer was the fourth, foaled in 1868 at Stony Ford, the farm of Charles Backman, a few miles from where Hambletonian stood. He never raced. He went to California, and he gets a chapter to himself.

The great mother of trotters

Electioneer's dam deserves more than a mention, because she shows that the Kent Mare was no accident.

Her name was Green Mountain Maid. She was by a horse called Harry Clay, from another of the old trotting families, and Backman bought her in foal for $450. He tried to train her. She was so wild that the attempt was given up after a single lesson, both parties having learned all they cared to, and she never wore harness again.

She produced sixteen foals. By 1889 Backman had taken in $68,830 from the sale of her sons and daughters, which was a rich man's fortune, from a mare who had cost him less than a good carriage and had declined to pull one. He called her "the great mother of trotters." When she died in 1888 he buried her on the farm beside the Wallkill River and put up a monument over her.

Hambletonian's own monument did not go up until five years later. For once the mare came first.

The other families

Hambletonian's get did not sweep the country unopposed. There were other stallions with other partisans, and the arguments were ferocious. Men who would not have raised their voices over a point of religion grew purple over a pedigree.

In Kentucky there was Mambrino Chief, who also traced to Messenger through a different branch, and whose daughters were prized. There were the Clays, descended from a horse named Henry Clay, who gave the breed Green Mountain Maid. There were the Morgans, with Ethan Allen at their head. There were the Pilots, out of the old Canadian pacer. And in Indiana there was an astonishing horse called Blue Bull, a pacer with no trotting pedigree whatever, who for a few years in the 1880s had more sons and daughters in the 2:30 list than Hambletonian himself. Wallace, who kept the list, wrote that it was "not believed that he possessed a single drop of trotting blood." One can hear what it cost him to write it.

The Morgan men had their best day on June 21, 1867, at the Fashion Course on Long Island, when Ethan Allen beat Dexter in three straight heats in 2:15, 2:16 and 2:19. But there was a catch, and everybody knew it. Ethan Allen was hitched double with a galloping Thoroughbred who took most of the weight of the wagon, while Dexter pulled his sulky alone. It was a spectacle, and a great day for Vermont, and it settled nothing at all, which did not prevent it from being discussed for thirty years.

What happened to all these families is the real lesson. They did not die out. They went underneath. Breeders found that the surest way to get a trotter was to send a mare of Clay or Star or Pilot or Mambrino Chief or Morgan blood to a son of Hambletonian. Clara, the dam of Dexter and Dictator, was a Star mare. Green Mountain Maid was a Clay. Generation by generation the top line of nearly every pedigree, sire to sire to sire, came to run back to the horse at Chester, while the bottom of the page filled up with everything else America had.

Today there is no Standardbred alive whose male line does not go back to Hambletonian 10. The other families are all still there too. They are in the mares, where the work gets done and the credit does not always follow.

PART THREE: A NATION AT THE RAIL

Flora and the Princess

While the breeders were sorting out bloodlines, the public was falling in love with particular horses. The first of them weighed about eight hundred pounds and had no tail to speak of.

Flora Temple was foaled in Oneida County, New York, in 1845. Her sire was a horse of so little account that his very name is disputed. Somebody docked her tail when she was young, for reasons that seemed good to him, and it stayed a stump all her life. She was small, barely fourteen hands and a half. For her first five years she was passed from one owner to the next as an ordinary cheap driving mare, and not one of those owners, so far as is known, lay awake at night over having sold her.

A man named Jonathan Vielee bought her for $175. He hitched her to a four-wheeled wagon and found she could fly. In 1850 he sold her to George Perrin for $350, twice what he had paid, and no doubt went home thinking he had done a clever thing.

She came into the hands of Hiram Woodruff, who gave her the first real training she had ever had. In 1856, at the Union Course, he drove her a mile in 2:24½, the fastest ever trotted. Two years later a Baltimore man paid $8,000 for her, which was forty-five times what Vielee had given. His remarks on hearing of it have not come down to us.

A mare called Topsy

Her great rival began in even humbler circumstances.

A bay filly was foaled in Vermont in 1846. She changed hands several times as a young mare, once, according to the Harness Racing Museum, in a trade for a wagon and twenty dollars. She ended up in Chicago, where John Gage, proprietor of the Tremont House hotel, bought her for $500 as a road horse and named her Topsy.

In December 1855 the Chicago River froze, and the sporting men of the city did what northern horsemen had always done with a stretch of good ice. They raced on it. Topsy, hitched to a skeleton sleigh, was matched against a gelding owned by a rival hotel, and the honor of two dining rooms rode on the result. She won. It was her first race.

Early in 1858 she was sold and shipped to San Francisco, where gold had made a city that would bet on anything, including which of two raindrops would reach the bottom of a window first. She was renamed Princess. In California she twice beat a horse called

Glencoe Chief at ten miles, for purses reported at $35,000, and after that there was nothing left on the Pacific coast for her to race.

So in 1859 her owners did something no one had done before. They brought her back. There was no railroad across the continent. Princess went by ship down the coast to Panama, across the isthmus, and by ship again to New York. The Museum calls it the first time a racehorse was sent from the West Coast to the East.

She had come all that way to race Flora Temple.

They met thirteen times that summer and fall, at tracks all over the East and the Middle West, before enormous crowds. Flora Temple won every time.

That sounds like a rout, and it was not. Princess pushed the little bob-tailed mare harder than she had ever been pushed. Four times that season, with Princess at her wheel, Flora Temple lowered the world's record. The last time was in October at Kalamazoo, Michigan, hitched to a wagon. She was fourteen years old.

Two minutes, nineteen and three-quarter seconds.

No trotter had ever beaten 2:20. The mark stood for eight years, until Dexter. Sometimes the horse who matters is the one who made the champion find another gear.

Princess went home beaten and was bred to Rysdyk's Hambletonian. In 1863 she foaled the colt named Happy Medium. Robert Bonner, who could not resist a famous trotter even when she was past twenty, bought the old mare in 1870 for $1,000 and kept her until she died. Through her son, the mare who lost thirteen straight races to Flora Temple is an ancestor of nearly every trotter alive.

Flora Temple, who beat her thirteen times, is an ancestor of nobody in particular. The stopwatch never did do Princess justice. The stud book has been making it up to her ever since.

The bob-tailed mare

Flora Temple retired in 1861 with ninety-five wins in 112 starts. She lived out her days at a stud farm near Philadelphia and died there in December 1877.

By then she was part of the national furniture. Currier and Ives, the New York printmakers who sold cheap colored lithographs to hang in parlors and barbershops, had put her on walls all over the country. Trotting horses were one of the firm's great subjects. Something like seven hundred of its prints show them.

People also sang about her, or thought they did. Stephen Foster's "Camptown Races," with its line about betting on the bob-tail nag, has been connected to Flora Temple for well over a century, and the Harness Racing Museum repeats the connection. There is a difficulty with it. The song was published in 1850, when Flora Temple was a five-year-

old driving mare in upstate New York that no songwriter had heard of. What probably happened is that the song came first and the public later decided who it was about. That is not history. But it tells you how famous she was, that a whole country looking for the bob-tailed mare in the song could think of only one.

The Maid

On a farm at Deckertown, New Jersey, in 1857, a bay filly was foaled who would not be caught.

Her sire was Alexander's Abdallah, the horse the two armies would later ruin between them, from that first small crop of Hambletonian's. Her breeder, John Decker, had no particular plans for her. She was small, hot and suspicious. Nobody on the place could do anything with her, and after a time nobody on the place tried. The neighbors called her Decker's worthless mare, and said it to Decker.

She ran loose until she was eight years old.

That is the fact to hold on to. At eight, a modern trotter has usually finished racing and gone to the breeding shed. This one had never had a harness on her back. In 1864 Decker sold her to a nephew for $260, and was probably glad to see the last of her. She was sold again for $400. Then Alden Goldsmith, a horseman from Washingtonville in Orange County who had an eye, gave $650 and a second-hand buggy for her.

Goldsmith had her broken and trained. In 1865, in her first race, at Goshen, she won in straight heats.

She was called Goldsmith Maid after that. In 1868 a group that included Budd Doble, the young man who had driven Dexter, bought her for $20,000. A few years later a Wall Street speculator named Henry N. Smith paid a good deal more, by one account $37,000, and left her in Doble's hands. The worthless mare had now been sold five times, at a profit every time, and every seller but the last had thought he was getting the better of it.

Then she went on the road, and stayed there.

Goldsmith Maid raced for thirteen seasons. She travelled in her own railroad car, with Doble and her groom, from Boston to San Francisco and most places between. Earlier champions had been seen by the people of New York and Philadelphia. The Maid was seen by Milwaukee and Sacramento and Buffalo and Kalamazoo. For a great many Americans she was the first famous athlete of any species they ever laid eyes on.

She was not easy. She fretted before a race, and on the track she would look for any advantage, crowding a rival at the start if her driver let her. But she had a quality every

horseman who saw her remarked on. She seemed to understand what a race was. She knew where the wire was, and she did not care to have another horse reach it before her.

On September 2, 1874, at Mystic Park in Boston, she trotted a mile in 2:14.

She was seventeen years old.

In all she started in 123 races and won ninety-five, and she won 350 heats, which gives some idea of the mileage. Her earnings came to about $364,000. No trotter of either sex would win as much for something like seventy years.

She ran her last race at Toledo in September 1877, at the age of twenty, against a rising young horse named Rarus who would hold the record after her. Then Smith retired her to his Fashion Stud Farm at Trenton. She had three foals, none of whom could trot a lick, and she died in 1885. Smith put up a monument, and it is still there.

Think about what her career says. Her dam was nobody. Her sire died young, ruined by war. She herself was given up as worthless and left in a field until middle age. And she was the best in the world for a decade.

A breeder studying that record might well have concluded that he understood nothing at all. A few did conclude it, and were the wiser for it. Most of them concluded something else: that somebody had better start keeping proper track of all this.

Writing It Down

By the 1860s the trotting horse had outgrown the methods used to keep account of him.

A stallion was advertised by handbill, and the handbill said what the owner wished it to say. Pedigrees were a matter of local memory and commercial hope. A good-looking colt of unknown parentage would set out for the sale ring an orphan and arrive there the son of a celebrated sire, having acquired a father somewhere on the road. Two horses in different states had the same name. One horse had three, and used them as the occasion required.

Records were worse. A horse who had trotted in 2:28 at Boston in May turned up at a county fair in Ohio in August, under a new name and a coat of dye, entered in the slow class, with his owner betting heavily and looking as innocent as a man can look in a checked waistcoat. Such a horse was called a ringer, and there were plenty of them. The gentlemen who managed them were the same gentlemen who could be relied on to know, a little before the public did, which horse would win the third heat.

Two things were needed: someone to make and enforce rules for racing, and someone to write down who was by what.

The first came in 1870, when the owners of the principal tracks met in New York and formed what became the National Trotting Association. It printed a rule book. It set up a board to hear appeals. Its chief weapon was simple and effective. A man or a horse ruled off one member track was ruled off them all, so that a scoundrel expelled at Buffalo could no longer take the night train and resume business at Boston. We have a small-town dispute coming, in the next chapter, that shows how far down that authority reached.

The second came from Iowa, and his name was John Wallace.

The man from Muscatine

John H. Wallace was born on a farm in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, in 1822. At twenty-three he married and moved to Muscatine, on the Mississippi, where he farmed and became secretary of the Iowa State Board of Agriculture. That job put him in charge of the state fair, and the state fair meant livestock, and livestock meant pedigrees. Wallace discovered that he had a passion for them, of the kind other men have for cards or drink.

He started with Thoroughbreds. In 1867 he published an American stud book of running horses, and as an afterthought he put a section on trotters at the back. The afterthought was the part people wanted. In 1871 he brought out the first volume of *Wallace's American Trotting Register*, and from then until he was an old man the pedigree of the trotting horse was his whole occupation.

He was not an easy person. He was certain of his own judgment and suspicious of everybody else's, and he had a particular hatred of a pedigree that was too good to be true. When an owner sent in a grand-sounding lineage for his stallion, Wallace did not thank him and print it. He wrote to the neighbors. He tracked down grooms and widows and old men who had been boys on the farm, the way he later did in Orange County to recover the story of the Kent Mare. When he found a fraud, he printed that, with the owner's name attached. He made enemies in every state where trotters were bred, and it may be doubted whether he lost an hour's sleep over one of them. And he made the Register something people could rely on, which was a novelty in the horse business and was not universally welcomed.

He also had a theory, and he rode it hard. The fashionable opinion, especially in Kentucky, was that trotting speed came from the Thoroughbred, and that the way to improve the trotter was to add more running blood. It was a gentleman's theory. It held that quality came down from above. Wallace thought it was nonsense. Speed at the trot, he argued, was an inheritance of its own. It came from the old pacing and trotting

families, the ones without coats of arms, and it showed itself only in harness and against the watch. Messenger mattered because his descendants trotted, not because he was a Thoroughbred. In Wallace's view a pedigree was only an advertisement until the horse had done something.

That idea led to the most important thing he ever did.

The Standard

A register needs a rule for who gets in. For the Thoroughbred the rule was ancestry: a horse belonged if his parents did, and no amount of merit would get him in otherwise. Wallace could not use that rule, because the trotter had no agreed set of ancestors. He was still being made, out of whatever could trot.

So Wallace proposed a different test. A horse would be admitted on performance, his own or his close relatives'. He worked and fought for the idea for years, and fighting came naturally to him. On November 19, 1879, the National Association of Trotting-Horse Breeders adopted it unanimously. They called it the Standard.

There were ten rules. The first three give the flavor.

Any stallion that had himself a record of 2:30 or better was standard, provided one of his get had a record of 2:40 or better, or that one of his own parents or grandparents was already standard.

Any mare or gelding with a record of 2:30 or better was standard.

Any horse that was the sire of two animals with records of 2:30 or better was standard.

The other rules extended the same logic to the sons and daughters of standard animals. A separate and slightly faster mark was later set for pacers.

There is the number again. Lady Suffolk's 2:30, the mile that had defined a fast trotter since 1845, was now written into the constitution of the breed. A horse bred to the Standard was Standard-bred. In time the hyphen dropped out, and that is all the name means. It is the only major breed of horse in the world named for a stopwatch.

Something else follows from those rules, and it is the hinge of this whole book. The English Thoroughbred asked a horse who his grandfather was. The American Standard asked him what he could do. Under it, a horse of no known breeding at all could trot his way into the register, and so could his sons. For a few decades anybody's horse had a chance. The book was open to any animal who could go a mile in two and a half minutes, whoever his people were, and it is worth remembering how recently that was true, and what kind of country thought of it.

It could not last, and it did not. As more and more horses qualified, the rules were tightened, and tightened again. Bit by bit the weight shifted from what a horse had done to who his parents were. In the twentieth century the door was shut for good, and a Standardbred became what a Thoroughbred had been all along: a horse whose sire and dam were both in the book.

Wallace did not stay to see it. He quarreled with the Kentucky breeders, who at one point grew so tired of him that they started a rival stud book of their own. In 1891 he sold the Register, his monthly magazine and his annual year book to a breeders' association formed for the purpose, and withdrew to write. His last work, *The Horse of America*, came out in 1897, cantankerous and indispensable, with old scores settled on a good many of its pages. He died in 1903.

His Register is the ancestor of the one the United States Trotting Association keeps today. Every Standardbred foaled this year has a number that descends, in unbroken sequence, from the list John Wallace began in 1871. Hambletonian's is 10.

Standard, by Gosh

To see how far all this had travelled by the 1870s, leave the famous tracks and the famous farms and go somewhere ordinary.

Go to Marengo, Illinois.

Marengo sits in the southwest corner of McHenry County, about sixty miles northwest of Chicago, on the railroad that ran out toward Rockford and Freeport. In 1880 it had 1,264 people. It was dairy country, cheese-factory country, a depot town where farmers shipped milk and bought dry goods. It had a bank, an opera house, a weekly paper called the *Republican* and a hotel called the Pacific House, which was two thousand miles from the Pacific and not at all embarrassed about it. Nothing about the place would have led a visitor to expect a racetrack.

It had one anyway.

"In the year 1872," says the county history published thirteen years later, "a Driving Park Association was formed in Marengo." The book names the men behind it: J. M. Anderson, R. M. Patrick, T. H. St. John, L. W. Sheldon, A. H. Vail, Calvin Gilbert, S. K. Bartholomew, W. A. Boice and Calvin Spencer, "and others." Spencer was the first settler to take up a claim where the town now stood. Patrick was, or soon would be, president of the First National Bank. These were not sporting characters down from the city in loud vests. They were the people who ran the place, sat on its boards and passed its collection plates, and they wanted a racetrack.

They leased ground from Spencer for a term of years, graded a track at what the history calls "considerable expense," and built an amphitheatre, which is the county historian's word for a grandstand.

A driving park was exactly what the name says: a park for driving. It was a place where a man who owned a fast road horse could let him out without frightening the traffic on Main Street. A few days a year the gates were shut, admission was charged, and the fast road horses of several counties were sorted out in public, to the satisfaction of some owners and the lasting grievance of others. By 1872 towns all over the northern states were building them. Marengo was not early and it was not late.

The newspapers show how they went about it. The inaugural meeting was held on Wednesday, September 30, 1874, in weather the *Republican* called "clear, cool and invigorating," with the track "in splendid condition." A baseball game had been advertised as an added attraction and was a failure, the "Champion Club of McHenry County," from Harvard, having neglected to appear. Harvard is the next town to the north, and it and Marengo have been disappointing each other ever since. Their high schools play what the local paper calls McHenry County's oldest football rivalry, well over a hundred meetings by now, and it is pleasant to find that the tradition opened with Harvard declining to take the field. Marengo has never quite decided whether to put that down to a missed train or to prudence.

The following June the association tried again, on a scale that takes the breath away. The purses were $1,000 for the three-minute trot, $1,000 for the 2:30 race, $800 for the 2:40 and $500 for a running dash. This was in a town of twelve hundred people. The results went out by special telegram to the Chicago *Inter Ocean*, which printed them on its sporting page beside those of the meeting at Jackson, Michigan. "The races have been betted on quite extensively," the dispatch reported. A horse called Phil Sheridan won the 2:30 race, after "great excitement" over the withdrawal of the horse he had been expected to meet.

It was also not profitable, and with purses like those one can see why. After two exhibitions, apparently these two, the association found, in the dry words of the county history, that "the project was a financial failure." The property fell to a few of the original members, who hoped some horseman might be persuaded to buy it. No horseman was. So they did what small towns do with a good idea that has lost money. They reorganized it under another name. A Marengo Agricultural Board took over the grounds, ran them for three years, obtained a state charter, and sold 220 shares at ten dollars apiece. By 1885 the Board had held three fairs, paid out $2,000 in premiums at each, and still

returned a ten percent dividend to its shareholders. The banker, one gathers, had taken the matter in hand.

The grounds by then covered fourteen acres, with ninety box stalls, an agricultural hall, and an amphitheatre that seated more than a thousand people. In a town of twelve hundred, that is a seat for nearly everybody, with the rest presumably standing at the rail. The history boasts of a track "not excelled in the country." It calls it a mile track, but fourteen acres is about the footprint of a half-mile oval and would not hold a mile, and when the Marengo paper advertised races there in 1912 it gave the heats as "one-half mile," once around. A half-mile is what nearly every town of that size built. The half-mile track, twice around to the mile, with tight turns that cost a horse a few seconds, was the standard American country racetrack, and it still is.

The argument of 1875

The track had been open less than a year when it produced its first surviving controversy.

On July 27, 1875, the *Belvidere Standard*, the paper of the next county seat to the west, reported that "the mixed result of the Marengo horse trot" had set a great many people, "who never talk 'horse' much, to giving their opinions." It is a wonderful phrase. One sees them: the druggist, the minister, the man who sold insurance, none of whom knew a hock from a handsaw, all holding forth on the sidewalk. The trouble was the start of the second heat.

Here some explaining is needed. A trotting race in 1875 was not one dash around the track. It was a series of heats, each a mile, with the same horses going back to the start again and again, and the race went to the first horse to win three. An afternoon's race might take five or six miles to decide. And there was no starting gate. The drivers turned their horses up the stretch, came down toward the wire together at speed, and the judges in their stand either shouted "Go!" or rang a bell to call them back and try again. This was called scoring. A fair start was a matter of the judges' eyesight and the drivers' honesty, and since neither could be depended on absolutely, it was the richest source of argument the sport ever had.

At Marengo that day the judges had sent the field away with "Dow's horse two or three lengths behind." Mr. Dow's supporters thought that was no start at all. The *Standard* was careful to say that the judges were "conceded to be fair men, and above any suspicion of 'skullduggery.'" The dispute was about the rule, not the men.

And then comes the remarkable sentence. "The stakes are still held," the paper says, "for the National Board to say whether their decision was correct or not."

The National Board.

This was the National Trotting Association, formed in New York five years earlier, with its printed rule book and its board of appeals whose rulings every member track agreed to honor.

By 1875 that machinery reached Marengo. A dispute over a few lengths at a small-town driving park in dairy country could, in principle, be carried up to a national tribunal, like a case going to the Supreme Court, and a small-town editor could mention the fact without stopping to explain it. The *Standard* doubted the Board would actually take the case, "as the rules are printed which govern them in their decisions," and anything the rules did not cover "must rest with the local judges."

The local judges had rested. "They have decided," the item ends, "that Molony won the race."

Dow's opinion is not recorded. It can be imagined.

The Horse Fair

Jump twelve years. On Friday, September 16, 1887, the *Marengo Republican* carried on its front page a list of coming events that reads like a map of the season:

Marengo Horse Fair, September 17. Emancipation Celebration, Marengo, September 22. McHenry County Fair, Woodstock, September 20 to 23. The Sycamore Fair. The Illinois State Fair, that year at Olney. The Winnebago County Fair at Rockford, the paper noted, had been "an immense success" the week before.

Six fairs in three weeks, all within reach of one small town. A man with a decent trotter could ship from one to the next and race every few days until the frost, and a good many men did, and called it farming.

The Horse Fair was Marengo's own. "All the arrangements are completed," the *Republican* announced, "for the Horse Fair and Speed exhibition at the Marengo Driving Park to-morrow." Then comes a line that tells you something about how these affairs sometimes went in other towns, under other managements: "All premiums won will be paid on the spot, crowd or no crowd—exhibitors can rely on this."

The entries had not quite closed, since some were still coming by mail, but the management was already willing to say that every race was filled. A starting judge, John Newman, had been engaged from Elgin, recommended as an expert who had handled the Elgin races to the satisfaction of the horsemen. That detail matters. Twelve years after Dow and Molony, Marengo had learned its lesson and was importing a professional to say "Go."

The Saturday time-card began at ten in the morning with carriage horses shown single, then double, and went on through the day to ladies' riding and ladies' driving in the afternoon, with the trotting races and one running race worked in among them. It was a horse show, a race meeting and a town holiday at once. The paper did not explain to anybody what a speed exhibition was. Nobody in Marengo needed it explained.

Rocket

Two years later the Marengo track gave the Rockford papers the best story of their fall.

Si Manning was a farmer and a member of the Winnebago County board of supervisors, from the township of Guilford, just east of Rockford. The papers called him Supervisor Si, and "the Guilford statesman," and it is plain from their tone that he was the kind of public man a newspaper is fond of: solid, talkative, and good for a paragraph. He owned a big, blocky bay horse named Rocket, whom he had raised himself out of a mare he owned. Rocket's sire was a horse the papers called Old Blue Bull, "Wilson's great horse."

That was a name to conjure with. Blue Bull was the Indiana pacer of no fashionable breeding at all, who stood at James Wilson's farm at Rushville and sired so many fast trotters that in the 1880s he ran ahead of Hambletonian himself on the list of sires. He is a reminder that the breed was still being assembled from whatever worked. Rocket was one of his sons.

Rocket had speed, but not quite enough of it. His best mile was 2:40, and two trainers in succession had informed Mr. Manning that he would never go faster. Manning had told a reporter that he was "not much of a race-horse man." All he wanted was to see Rocket trot in 2:30.

Why 2:30? Because that was the Standard. The rule had been on the books for ten years by then, and it had been written a long way from Marengo.

Recall the first rule John Wallace's breeders had adopted ten years before. A trotting stallion who made a public record of 2:30 or better was, under conditions the register spelled out, a standard horse, and his standing passed to his foals. A horse who trotted in 2:31 was a nice horse. A horse who trotted in 2:30 was a sire of Standard-bred colts, and every colt he had already sired became more valuable on the spot. A second and a quarter, on the right afternoon, was the difference between a barnful of farm colts and a barnful of pedigrees.

Si Manning had seven of those colts at home.

So he gave Rocket to a third trainer. George McKesson was a Rockford man with a reputation: years before, he had trained a mare named Lady Mack, whom the papers

credited with the fastest five miles on record. McKesson looked Rocket over and told Manning he could make him trot under 2:30. At the time, the *Rockford Register* admitted, "the horse gave little promise of ever making such a record."

McKesson had one notable disadvantage, and he carried it with him everywhere. Drivers in a race were required to weigh at least a set amount, and light men carried lead to make it. McKesson needed no lead. He weighed, by the papers' count, about sixty pounds over the regulation. He was, in the plainest sense, a man of substance.

On Wednesday, September 18, 1889, Rocket went to the post at Marengo in the 2:30 class trot, for a purse of $150, with sixty pounds of surplus McKesson behind him.

A class race was the sport's way of making a fair fight. A 2:30 class was open to horses that had never beaten 2:30. The moment a horse won a heat in faster time he had a "record," or a "mark," and was barred from the slow classes for life. Owners therefore thought hard about when to let a horse show everything he had. McKesson was known for thinking about it. His method, the *Register* said, was to hold his horse back at first, as he had done at Racine with Rocket and on the Fourth of July with another horse, when he beat a local favorite called Star Hambletonian and relieved a number of Rockford sports of the money they had bet on a certainty.

He did it again at Marengo. A mare named Kensett Maid was allowed to win the first heat in 2:35. Then, in the *Register*'s phrase, McKesson "let out a few links of Rocket's speed."

Second heat, Rocket, 2:31¼.

Third heat, Rocket, 2:32.

Fourth heat, Rocket, in 2:28.

It was not a good day for racing, the paper said, and the horse was pulling a man sixty pounds too heavy. He did it easily.

The *Register* ran the story the next day under a headline that deserves to be carved over the door of the breed registry:

STANDARD BY GOSH!

"Si Manning Flys High To-day Like a Rocket—Because His Rocket is Standard Bred—He Trots in 2:28."

The purse, the paper explained, was not what had made Manning the happiest man on the grounds. "Rocket did a great thing for posterity when he trotted the heat in that time. By that record a number of promising young horses and colts become standard. The supervisor has seven blooded colts that can now arch their necks more proudly and lift their feet higher than ever for they are now standard bred."

Seven colts went to bed that night in Guilford township as livestock and woke up as aristocracy, and it is to be hoped that somebody gave them an extra measure of oats.

Another Rockford paper, under the heading "True to His Name," went further. "The earth is not good enough for Si. Manning to walk on to-day. He wants a velvet carpet—and a good wide strip of it too." Supervisor Si, it reported, no longer cared whether there were beds in the court house, or whether the city got $25,000 or $75,000 to build a bridge. "McKesson has got Rocket down into the 2:30 class and the Guilford statesman don't think that there is much else in the world of much consequence anyway."

The public business of Winnebago County, in other words, could wait. It generally can.

Then the paper gave the trainer his due. McKesson "took him with a record of 2:40 after two trainers had given him up as impossible to get down any lower, and brought him down to 2:28. McKesson weighs 60 pounds over the regulation weight but he makes up in skill what he lacks in lightness."

Read that again with a different machine in mind. A man buys, or in this case raises, an engine that everybody says is good for a certain speed and no more. Two mechanics have had it apart and given up. A third takes it into his shop. We do not know what McKesson changed. It might have been the shoes, the weight on the toes, the bit, the check rein, the feed, the work, or simply the way he sat behind the horse and what he asked him to do and when. He did not say. The *Register* observed that he "makes no boasts and talks little," which in a horse trainer is a rarer thing than a 2:28 mile. But he found twelve seconds that two other men could not find, and he found them on a day when it counted, with the watches running.

A later America would recognize the type at once. He is the fellow at the drag strip with grease to the elbows and a car that has no business being that fast. The trainer-driver of the nineteenth century was that man. The mile was the time slip.

Manning, having got what he wanted, announced he would take Rocket off the track. The horse had nothing left to prove, and seven colts to advertise.

The language of the mile

The Rockford and Freeport papers of those years are full of small items that only make sense to a reader who speaks trotting, which their readers did.

B. C. Kimlin's horses Mollie S., Little Sam and Jockey are entered at Marengo for the afternoon, and Umber "will trot to-morrow in the free for all." A free-for-all was the top of the card: no class limit, any horse, however fast. Lady Babcock, Little Sam, Kittie B. and Kensett Maid are in the 2:40 trot.

Kimlin's gray horse Napoleon Bonaparte "won two heats in the 3 minute trot at Marengo, making a record of 2:43." A three-minute trot was the bottom rung, for green horses that had never beaten three minutes. Napoleon Bonaparte had now beaten it by seventeen seconds, and would never see that class again. He had conquered the three-minute trot and was banished from it, which is more or less what happened to the original.

Lady Babcock "trotted a mile in 2:30 flat which gives her a mark of 2:30, and places her in the 30 list." The 2:30 list was the honor roll. To get a horse into it was the ambition of every owner in the county.

"Harry Kelly will trot in Marengo the 4th of July, but the colonel won't work him to lower his record." There is the whole class system in a sentence. Harry Kelly, one of Rocket's colts by the *Register*'s account, could go faster. His owner did not want the book to say so yet. The colonel was keeping his powder dry.

And in the same column, for those who think the nineteenth century had no sense of humor about its losers: "Ben Morse's running horse, Grover Cleveland, got distanced in the running race at Marengo yesterday and now Ben looks sad." To be distanced was to finish so far behind the winner that you were not allowed to start in the next heat. Grover Cleveland, the horse, was done for the day. Grover Cleveland, the statesman, had lately been turned out of the White House, and Ben Morse may have felt that the name was running true to form.

The Monday after Rocket's race, the *Freeport Daily Bulletin* reported "a brace of trotters" at Taylor's Park in that city. A match on Saturday between D'Aubigne and a mare called Clarence Girl, best three heats in five, had been stopped after the horse began to bleed at the nose. On the coming Friday there would be a race "for blood and money" between two rival stallions from Mendota. One of them, Charleston, was a chestnut by Bourbon Wilkes, "he by Geo. Wilkes."

George Wilkes was Hambletonian's son. Forty years after William Rysdyk led a mare and a colt out of Jonas Seely's yard, the colt's great-grandson was standing at stud in a town of four thousand people in the Illinois corn belt, and trotting for $200 a side at a driving park in Freeport, and the newspaper thought its readers would want the pedigree.

They did want it. That is the point.

One of many

There was nothing special about Marengo, and that is the reason to look at it.

Freeport had Taylor's Park. The town of McHenry, at the other end of Marengo's own county, had Gage's Driving Park, laid out by George Gage about 1884. Rockford had its fairgrounds and Elgin its races. The county fair at Woodstock ran a full card: a speed program adopted one spring in the 1890s offered three days of racing with purses from $250 to $500, in classes from a three-minute trot up to a 2:10 pace. Springfield, when the State Fair finally settled there for good, built a mile track of clay that became one of the fastest in the world. An undated rule book of the National Trotting Association counted some twelve hundred fairs held in the United States every year.

Multiply Marengo by a thousand and you begin to have it. In nearly every one of those towns there was a graded oval and a grandstand. There was a banker for a secretary. There was a Supervisor Si with a horse that could almost do it, and a George McKesson who thought he knew how. And there was a newspaper that printed the time to the quarter of a second, and printed, with equal care, that Ben looked sad.

The great stallions were foaled on a few famous farms. The reason anyone cared was spread across the whole map.

The Big Wheel

In the same years that Marengo's bankers were grading their track, a few men with larger tracks were trying to solve a problem of geography.

The best trotters in the country were scattered, and so were the purses. A stable might race at Cleveland one week and find nothing worth entering within three hundred miles the next. Track owners competed for the same dates and the same horses and cut one another's throats. In 1871 a Cleveland man, Colonel Billy Edwards, got together with the managers at Buffalo, Utica and Springfield, Massachusetts, and proposed that they stop. They would schedule their meetings in consecutive weeks, offer purses large enough to draw the best stables, and let the whole caravan move from one city to the next by rail.

They called it the Quadrilateral Trotting Combination, a name only a committee could have loved. It began racing in 1873. Other cities asked to join, the quadrilateral acquired more sides than the word allowed, and before long it was simply the Grand Circuit.

Horsemen, who do not talk like committees, had other names for it. It was the Big Wheel, and later, in the years when the purses and the crowds were at their height, the Roarin' Grand. It was the major league. Hartford came in, and Rochester, and Detroit. Lexington, where a mile track of red clay had opened in 1875, became its traditional last

stop each autumn, and the Red Mile is still the place where the fastest miles of the year tend to be trotted. Britannica calls the Grand Circuit the oldest continuing horse-racing series in the country. It is still going, more than a hundred and fifty years on.

A Grand Circuit stable in the 1880s was a travelling household. The horses went in their own cars, padded and partitioned, with the sulkies hung overhead and the trunks of harness, boots and blankets stacked at one end. The grooms slept with the horses. The trainer rode up front if the owner was paying, and with the horses if he was not. They would unload at dawn in a strange city, walk the horses to the track, race for a week and load again.

The ladder

Under the Big Wheel turned a much larger one.

For every Grand Circuit meeting there were dozens of state fairs, hundreds of county fairs and more driving parks than anyone ever counted. That was where the sport lived. It was where a farmer found out whether the colt was any good, where a young trainer got his first drives, and where a horse made the record that set his price.

The whole thing worked as a ladder. A horse started at home, on the road or on a half-mile oval scraped out of somebody's pasture. If he showed something he went to the county fair. If he won there, he went to the bigger fairs and the state fair, and if he kept winning, somebody with money noticed. Then he was sold, usually, to a man who could afford to send him down the line with the Big Wheel.

The ladder had rungs missing, and not every career climbed it in order. Rich men's colts from the big breeding farms sometimes went straight to the top. Plenty of good horses never left their own corner of a state because their owners liked winning at home. But the ladder was real, and it was open at the bottom. A man with one mare and a borrowed sulky could own, train and drive his own horse against anybody at the county fair. No other major sport in America let an ordinary person in at that level, and harness racing has never entirely shut that door.

Rocket never went to the Grand Circuit. He was not that kind of horse. But the 2:28 he trotted at Marengo was measured on the same kind of watch, under the same rules, as the miles that were making headlines in Cleveland. That was the genius of the arrangement. Everyone was speaking the same language.

Mr. Vanderbilt's road mare

The headlines, in the 1880s, belonged to a chestnut mare.

She was foaled in 1874 at Woodburn Farm in Kentucky, by Harold, one of Hambletonian's sons, out of a gray mare named Miss Russell. Miss Russell was a daughter of Pilot Jr., which is to say a granddaughter of the old black Canadian pacer nobody could trace. A Cincinnati man, Captain George Stone, bought the filly and named her for his daughter. She was Maud S.

In 1878, at four years old, she trotted a mile at Lexington in 2:17½. No four-year-old had ever gone so fast. William H. Vanderbilt, who had inherited the New York Central Railroad and most of a hundred million dollars from his father the Commodore, bought her for $21,000.

And then he drove her to the park.

It is hard to convey how strange that is to a modern mind. Imagine the fastest racing car in the world bought by a billionaire, who then uses it to go to lunch. Vanderbilt was the most conspicuous of the New York road drivers, the men who went out on Harlem Lane every afternoon behind the best horseflesh money could find. He wanted the fastest trotter in the world in his own stable, hitched to his own wagon, and for six years that is where she mostly was. In June of 1883 he drove her himself, paired with another mare called Aldine, a mile in 2:15½, and Currier and Ives made a print of it.

Meanwhile a threshing-machine manufacturer in Racine, Wisconsin, named Jerome I. Case had a little black gelding by Dictator, the full brother of Dexter. He had named the horse after his own initials, spelled out the way they sound: Jay-Eye-See. On August 1, 1884, at Providence, Jay-Eye-See trotted a mile in 2:10. It was the first time a trotter had reached that mark.

He held the record for one day.

Maud S. had been sent back into training, and on August 2, at Cleveland, she went in 2:09¾.

Soon afterward Vanderbilt sold her. The buyer, inevitably, was Robert Bonner, and the price was $40,000. Mr. Bonner's conscience was by now the most expensively maintained in New York. It was said at the time that Vanderbilt could have had far more from men who meant to race her, and took less from the one man he knew never would.

Bonner did allow her to go against the watch. A time trial was a different thing from a race: one horse, alone on the track or with a running horse alongside to keep her company, going a mile for the record and nothing else. No purse, no bets. Bonner's conscience permitted it. In the summer of 1885, on the Grand Circuit track at Glenville in Cleveland, Maud S. trotted a mile in 2:08¾.

It was the seventh time in six years she had lowered the world's record. It was also, as things turned out, the last record ever set by a trotter pulling the old high-wheeled sulky around an ordinary oval track. Something was about to happen to the sulky.

Jay-Eye-See had one more surprise in him. Years later, his trotting days over, he was put to pacing, and paced a mile in 2:06¼. He was the first horse to beat 2:10 at both gaits. He is buried at Racine.

The world's fastest trotter had spent the prime of her life as a rich man's driving mare, and saw nothing odd in it. The line between the road horse and the racehorse was getting wider every year. In 1885 it was still thin enough to drive across.

The Governor Wants to See

On the other side of the continent, a rich man had a question about a horse.

Leland Stanford had made his money building the Central Pacific Railroad. He had been governor of California and would be a United States senator. Like Vanderbilt and Bonner, he had the trotting disease, and he had it worse than either of them. They only wanted to own fast horses. Stanford wanted to understand them, which is a much more expensive ambition.

His first good trotter was a brown gelding called Occident, and Occident is a story by himself. He was by a pacing stallion out of a mare nobody knew anything about, and he had spent his early years hauling loads around Sacramento. He was originally called Wonder. Stanford bought him, had him trained, and in the early 1870s Occident trotted a mile in 2:16¾, which put a former cart horse from California level with Goldsmith Maid. When the two finally met, the Maid beat him. But the East had been served notice.

Watching Occident at speed, Stanford became fascinated by a question horsemen had argued about for as long as there had been horsemen. Does a trotting horse ever have all four feet off the ground at once?

The eye cannot tell. A fast trotter's legs are a blur. Painters had always shown the trot with at least one foot planted. Some trainers swore there was a moment of flight. Stanford thought so too, and believed that if he could see exactly what the legs did, he could learn how to train them to do it better.

Muybridge

He hired a photographer.

Eadweard Muybridge was an Englishman who had made a reputation in San Francisco with large views of Yosemite. He was eccentric and gifted, and he told Stanford frankly that what he wanted was impossible. Photography in 1872 required exposures of seconds. A trotting horse covers nearly forty feet in one.

He tried anyway. At the Union Park track in Sacramento, in 1872 or 1873, with white sheets hung behind the track to throw as much light as possible, he photographed Occident trotting past. The result, by his own account, was a blur. But it was a blur in which Stanford was satisfied he could see the horse clear of the ground.

Then the work stopped for several years, for a reason that had nothing to do with horses. Muybridge shot and killed his wife's lover, was tried for murder and was acquitted. He went abroad for a while. In 1877 he came back to Stanford and tried again, with faster shutters and better chemistry. That summer he got a single sharp image of Occident at full trot, every foot in the air. The picture that went out to the newspapers was not actually the photograph. It was a painting made from it by a retoucher, with a photograph of the driver's face pasted in. But the negative was real.

Stanford wanted more than one instant. He wanted the whole stride.

By then he had bought a large property south of San Francisco, which he called the Palo Alto Stock Farm. Along one of its training tracks Muybridge built a long shed facing a white wall marked off in numbered spaces. In the shed he set twelve cameras, side by side, twenty-one inches apart. Across the track he laid wires, one to each camera. The wheel of a sulky passing over a wire closed a circuit and tripped a shutter.

On June 15, 1878, with the press invited, Stanford's trotter Abe Edgington came down the track in front of the cameras, pulling a sulky. In the seat was Charles Marvin, the farm's head trainer. The horse was going at about a 2:24 clip. The sulky wheel crossed the wires, one after another, and in about half a second twelve photographs were taken.

There was the stride, laid out in order like words in a sentence. There was the moment of suspension, plain as day.

Four days later Muybridge photographed a running mare named Sallie Gardner with a jockey up, using threads across the track in place of wires, and those are the pictures that became famous. The galloping horse made a more dramatic image, and the gallop had its own old mystery, which the cameras also solved. Over the years the story was simplified, as stories are, into a tale about a rich man's bet on whether a racehorse flies. Historians have looked for that bet, usually put at $25,000, and have never found any contemporary trace of it. It appears to be legend.

The documented sequence is this. The question began with a trotter. The first photograph was of a trotter. And the first of Muybridge's successful sequences of a body in motion shows a Standard-bred horse pulling a sulky, with a trainer holding the lines.

Muybridge went on to mount his sequences on a spinning glass disc and project them on a screen, so that the horse appeared to move. He called the machine the zoopraxiscope. It was shown in 1880. The motion picture was still some years off, but anyone who saw that flickering trotter could see where things were headed.

He and Stanford fell out, in the end, over credit. When a book called *The Horse in Motion* appeared in 1882, it was written by Stanford's physician and treated Muybridge as a hired technician. Muybridge sued and lost. It was a poor return for what he had done.

The laboratory

The cameras were only half of what was happening at Palo Alto. The other half was breeding, and it was run in the same spirit.

In the 1870s Stanford went east to buy a stallion. At Stony Ford, Charles Backman's farm in Orange County, he was shown the pick of the place. He chose an eight-year-old bay who had never raced and whom nobody else much wanted. The price was around $12,000. The horse was Electioneer, son of Hambletonian and Green Mountain Maid.

Stanford's reasons were his own. He liked the look of the horse and he liked the dam. The neighbors thought the Californian had been sold a second-rater. Electioneer went west and became the most successful sire of his generation.

He did it under a system that broke with everything Hiram Woodruff's generation had believed. The old practice was to let a colt grow up and then put miles into him, long slow miles, to build bottom. Stanford and Charles Marvin thought speed was a habit, and that it was best taught early. At Palo Alto the foals were put on a small oval track, a miniature of the real thing, when they were only months old, and encouraged to trot around it loose. People called it the kindergarten. As yearlings and two-year-olds they were worked in harness, but only in short bursts at full speed, a furlong or a quarter of a mile at a time, which the trainers called brushes. They were never drilled to exhaustion.

Eastern horsemen, who had not been consulted, predicted that the colts would be ruined. Then the colts started going east.

A filly named Sunol trotted in 2:10½ at three years old. Robert Bonner, naturally, bought her, for $41,000, and in 1891 she lowered Maud S.'s record to 2:08¼. A colt named Arion went a mile in 2:10¾ at two years old, a figure so far beyond anything a two-year-old had done that people at first refused to believe it, and he was sold to a

Boston yachtsman for $125,000. That was the highest price ever paid for a trotter, and it stayed the highest for a long time.

And there was the horse named for the farm. Palo Alto was Stanford's pet project and his answer to John Wallace. Stanford believed in Thoroughbred blood, and to prove it he bred Electioneer to a pure running mare called Dame Winnie. The half-bred colt had terrible feet and was lame for much of his life. In 1891 he trotted a mile in 2:08¾, the fastest ever by a stallion. Wallace was unmoved. One horse, he said in effect, is not a theory.

Beautiful Bells

The greatest of Stanford's mares was a black one.

Beautiful Bells was foaled in California in 1872, by a horse called The Moor out of a mare named Minnehaha. She could trot herself, with a record of 2:29½, just inside the Standard. Stanford bought her and bred her to Electioneer, again and again and again.

She had eleven foals who made standard records, and five of them beat 2:20. No mare had done anything like it. Her daughter Hinda Rose set world records as a yearling and again at three. Her son Bell Boy was sold for a fortune as a young horse. Another son, Chimes, went east to a farm near Buffalo, where he sired three of the fastest trotters of the 1890s. He also sired a colt called The Abbe, who is going to matter a good deal in the next chapter. The Harness Racing Museum calls Beautiful Bells the premier trotting broodmare of her time.

Put the mare beside the cameras and you see what Stanford was after. He was studying speed from both ends at once. Muybridge's shutters cut a single stride into twelve pieces to find out what it was made of. The breeding barn tried to make that same stride come out again in the next generation, and the next.

Electioneer died in 1890. Stanford died in 1893. He and his wife had already given the farm, along with the rest of their fortune, to found a university in memory of their only son. The horses were sold off over the following decade to keep the university going. Students have always called the place the Farm, and most of them have no idea why. One of the old training barns, built of redwood, is still standing on the campus.

Before moving pictures learned to run, they learned to trot.

The Tinkerers

Between 1885 and 1903 the trotting record fell from 2:08¾ to two minutes flat. The horses were getting better, and so was nearly everything attached to them.

This was the golden age of the tinkerer. The weekend mechanic of the horse world came into his own, and for about fifteen years it was hard to say whether the next record would be set by a breeder, a trainer or a man with a new idea about a wheel.

The track

Begin with the ground. A horse loses time on turns. On a mile oval there are two, and on a half-mile track there are four to the mile, which is why records set on the small tracks were, and are, a few seconds slower.

In 1890 a creamery man in Independence, Iowa, named C. W. Williams, who had bred a great colt in his back lot and sold him for a fortune, spent the money on a mile track with only one turn. The horses went out along one straight side, round a single long bend, and back down the other side to where they had started. From above it looked like a kite, and that is what it was called. Kite tracks sprang up across the country. Sunol set her 2:08¼ on the one at Stockton, California. Then the fashion passed, because spectators could not see the half of the race that took place a third of a mile away, and a track that sells no tickets has other problems than speed.

The wheel

The great change came from the bicycle.

A racing sulky in 1890 had wooden wheels nearly five feet high with iron tires. The big wheels rolled easily over a rough track, but they were heavy, and on the turns they slid. In the same years the bicycle was sweeping America, and the bicycle makers had two things the sulky makers had not: wire-spoked wheels that turned on ball bearings, and air-filled rubber tires.

In 1892 a Massachusetts bicycle manufacturer named Sterling Elliott took a sulky, pulled off the high wheels and fitted a pair of low bicycle wheels on a braced frame. The thing looked ridiculous. The first horsemen to appear with one were laughed at.

They stopped laughing in about a month. The “bike” sulky was lighter, it ran almost without friction, and it held the turns. Horses went two, three, four seconds faster the first time they were hitched to one. By the end of the season there was hardly a high-wheeler left on the Grand Circuit.

On September 28, 1892, at Terre Haute, Indiana, a bay mare named Nancy Hanks, pulling a bicycle sulky with Budd Doble in the seat, trotted a mile in 2:04.

It was the third world champion Doble had driven, after Dexter and Goldsmith Maid. And the mare was a daughter of Happy Medium, which made her a granddaughter of Princess, who had come round by Panama to lose thirteen races to Flora Temple.

In a single year the record had dropped more than four seconds. It was as though the mile run had gone from four minutes to three and three-quarters over one winter because somebody had invented a shoe. No such leap had happened before, and there would be none like it again.

The straps

The other great invention concerned the pacer, and it changed the breed more than the bicycle did.

A pacer is fast, but the gait is easily lost. When a pacer is pushed, or frightened, or tired, he is apt to break into a gallop or get his legs tangled. A horse who breaks must be pulled back to his gait and loses ground while he does it. Bettors hated breaks, and so did owners.

In the 1880s horsemen began fitting pacers with hopples, which most people today spell and say as hobbles. They are loops, of leather then and plastic now, that hang from a light harness and connect the front and hind leg on each side. With the hopples on, the two legs on a side have little choice but to swing together. Tradition gives the credit to an Indiana railroad conductor named John Browning, though the idea of tying a horse's legs to fix his gait is far older than that.

The old guard despised them, as the old guard has despised everything that ever worked. Busbey called the hopple "the refuge of the lazy or incompetent trainer." There were efforts to ban them. But a hoppled pacer almost never broke, and a horse that does not break is a horse the public will bet on. A century later John Butenschoen, a trainer in Marengo, Illinois, put the matter to a reporter in two sentences: "With the pacer, you have the hobbles to help you. With the trotter you don't."

Add up what the pacer had going for him. The gait is a shade faster. With hopples it is far more reliable. Pacers tend to come to their speed younger and with less work. In the 1880s the pacer was a poor relation who was kept out of the best races. By the middle of the twentieth century he was most of the breed. Today roughly four of every five harness races in North America are for pacers.

The pacer got to the two-minute mile first. In late August 1897, at Readville, outside Boston, a big bay stallion named Star Pointer paced a mile in 1:59¼. He was one of the

Hals of Tennessee, a descendant of the old Canadian pacer Tom Hal. A hundred years of argument about whether those obscure pacing families had anything to contribute was over in less than two minutes.

Two minutes

The trotters took six more years.

Lou Dillon was a small chestnut mare, bred in California, nervous and light-boned. She was bought in 1903 for $12,500 by C. K. G. Billings, a Chicago gas-company heir who had retired young to devote himself to horses, and who drove his own trotters in amateur races. On August 24, 1903, at Readville, with her trainer Millard Sanders in the sulky, she trotted a mile in two minutes flat.

There was an argument about it, naturally. She had not gone alone. A running horse hitched to a cart went ahead of her as a pacemaker, and the cart carried a shield to keep the dirt out of her face. Critics said the shield broke the wind as well, and that what she had done was closer to bicycle racing behind a motor than to trotting. The authorities let the record stand, and soon afterward banned the shield. That autumn at Memphis she went in 1:58½.

Billings never raced her for money. He was Bonner over again, with a faster horse.

The Silent Man

One horseman's career ran through that whole period, and he tied its two ends together.

Edward Geers was born in Tennessee in 1851 and grew up among the pacers there. He came north with the Hals and became the leading driver on the Grand Circuit, a position he held, with interruptions, for forty years. He rarely spoke, so the other drivers called him the Silent Man from Tennessee. When he was old they called him Pop. He was one of the first of the leading drivers to take up the bicycle sulky. He drove his last race at Wheeling, West Virginia, on September 3, 1924, at the age of seventy-three. His mare fell and he was thrown, and he died that night.

In 1906 Geers had in his stable a three-year-old colt called The Abbe. The colt was by Chimes, the son of Electioneer and Beautiful Bells, and so came of the purest trotting blood in America. He trotted. He won a futurity at Columbus and took a record of about 2:10, very fast for his age.

Then he went lame, and went lame again. He could not stay sound at the trot.

Geers changed him over. He did it with nothing more than shoeing and rigging, the Museum says, which means he altered the weight and angle of the feet and the adjustment of the harness until the horse found it more comfortable to swing his legs in

lateral pairs than in diagonal ones. Any Tennessee horseman knew the trick. The Abbe could pace, as it turned out, and he could stay sound doing it. In 1910, at seven, he went through the Grand Circuit without losing a race and won more money than any other pacer in the country.

That would be a nice footnote if it were the end. It was not. The Abbe went to stud, and his foals paced. Nearly all of them paced, though he was a grandson of Electioneer and Beautiful Bells. His son Abbedale sired a horse named Hal Dale. Hal Dale sired Adios. From Adios and his close relatives came very nearly every champion pacer of the next seventy years.

So the main male line of the modern pacer does not go back to the Hals of Tennessee or to any old pacing family. It goes back, sire to sire, through a lame trotter whose driver got tired of patching him up, to Leland Stanford's stallion and Leland Stanford's black mare, and through them to Hambletonian.

The breed has two gaits and one family tree, and it has never kept them in separate columns.

PART FOUR: THE CENTURY OF THE STOPWATCH

Messner's Folly

In the spring of 1896, in the back of a livery stable at Oxford, Indiana, a mare named Zelica had a colt who could not stand up.

His legs were long and badly crooked, and for some time after he was foaled he had to be held up to nurse. His owner was Dan Messner, who kept a dry-goods store in town. Zelica was the first horse Messner had ever owned. He had paid $255 for her and sent her to a good stallion, a black pacer called Joe Patchen who was one of the fastest in the country and a grandson of George Wilkes. People in Oxford looked at the result and gave it a name. They called the colt Messner's Folly. A small town is always generous with that kind of help.

Messner called him Dan Patch, after himself and the sire.

The legs straightened, mostly. The hocks never did come quite right, and the colt's left hind leg swung wide when he paced, so that it struck the wheel of an ordinary sulky. John Wattles, who owned the livery stable and trained the colt, built a sulky with a wider axle so that it would not. That is the garage again. Change the machine to fit the horse.

Dan Patch did not start in a race until he was four years old. He began at the county fairs of Indiana in the summer of 1900, on the bottom rung of the ladder, and he won. The next year Messner sent him out on the Grand Circuit, and he won there too.

He never lost a race. In his whole career he lost two heats, one of them by a nose at a fair, and one at Brighton Beach in 1901, when the judges decided his driver was not trying. He won that race anyway.

The driver that day deserves a paragraph. Myron McHenry was an Illinois farm boy, born at Pink Prairie in 1856, and by 1901 he was generally allowed to be the best man with a pair of lines in America. He was also, by the same general agreement, difficult to work with, fond of a drink, and not particular about the company he kept.

In the 1890s he made his headquarters at Freeport, Illinois, fifty miles down the line from Marengo, and raced out of Taylor's Park, the same track whose doings the Freeport papers were reporting earlier in this book. The Freeport *Daily Journal* of August 5, 1891, preserves a specimen of his manners. During the last heat of the 2:22 trot, the driver of a horse named Brilliant "is said to have accused M. E. McHenry of never having won a square race in his life." When the heat was over, McHenry walked up to the man and asked for an apology. The fellow declined to give one. McHenry thereupon "hit him on

the head with the butt end of his whip, inflicting an ugly scalp wound." A warrant was sworn out, and Mac, as the paper called him, was fined seventy-five dollars and costs. It will be noticed that he did not answer the accusation. He answered the accuser.

At Brighton Beach, Dan Patch went off the favorite in that heat and finished fourth, and the gentlemen who had bet on him were incensed. McHenry explained that he had only held his horse back to see how the field would sort itself out. It was the explanation George McKesson might have given at Marengo, and with a horse like Dan Patch it may even have been true. The judges, a Boston paper reported, were very displeased. Nothing was proved, then or afterward. McHenry won the race, kept the horse, and kept his reputation, such as it was.

Early in 1902 Messner sold him for $20,000 to Manley Sturges, a Buffalo gambler with an interest in a Manhattan casino. McHenry stayed on as driver, and one may suppose the two of them understood each other. It was a record price for a pacer. Before the year was out the horse had been sold again, for $60,000, to a man in Minneapolis named Marion Willis Savage.

The salesman

Savage sold stock feed. His International Stock Food Company made a tonic that farmers mixed into grain, and he understood advertising better than anyone else in the Northwest. He would have put a testimonial on a tombstone if the family had allowed it. He had bought the fastest horse in the world, and he knew exactly what he meant to do with him.

By then there was a difficulty. Nobody would race against Dan Patch. Owners would not enter against a certainty and bettors would not bet. So Savage took him out of racing altogether and sent him against the clock. For the next seven years Dan Patch travelled the country giving exhibitions. He went in a private railroad car painted white, with his picture on the side, half of it fitted up for him and half for his grooms and the running horses that kept him company on the track. He would arrive at a state fair like a visiting head of state. There would be a parade from the station.

Then he would go out in front of the grandstand, with a galloping horse beside him and another in front, and pace a mile faster than most people there had ever seen a horse go.

McHenry did not last. He disliked being part of what he called Savage's "circus," and said so where reporters could hear him. Savage disliked McHenry's drinking and McHenry's friends. At the end of the 1903 season the best driver in the country was let go, and a quieter man named Harry Hersey held the lines for the rest of the horse's

career. Horsemen argued for years afterward that Dan would have gone faster still with McHenry behind him. McHenry retired in 1910 and died the following year.

The crowds were beyond anything the sport had known. At the Minnesota State Fair in 1906 one report put the attendance for his appearance at ninety-three thousand. In October of that year he came to the Illinois State Fair at Springfield and paced the clay mile in 1:59¼ before about forty thousand people. It was the first time anyone had seen two minutes beaten on that track.

His official record was made at Lexington on October 7, 1905. One minute, fifty-five and a quarter seconds. At the Minnesota fair the next September he went in 1:55 flat, but he did it behind a pacemaker's cart fitted with a dirt shield, and the trotting authorities, who had just outlawed the thing, refused to recognize the time. Savage recognized it. He renamed his establishment the International 1:55 Stock Food Farm and painted the figure on the barn.

The barn was something to see. It stood on the Minnesota River south of Minneapolis, with a great onion dome in the middle and long wings of stalls radiating from it, and people called it the Taj Mahal. The town beside it changed its name to Savage. It is still called that.

Meanwhile the horse's name was put on everything a name could be put on. There were Dan Patch cigars and Dan Patch coffee, Dan Patch playing cards, washing machines, manure spreaders and billiard cues. There was a dance tune, the "Dan Patch Two-Step." There was a Dan Patch automobile, and a Dan Patch railroad line that ran south out of Minneapolis. Children all over the Middle West named dogs and ponies and wagons after him. He was, without much exaggeration, the first American athlete to be a brand.

He seems to have liked it. Every account says he was a gentle, sociable horse who would turn his head to look at a crowd and stand quiet while strangers handled him.

He retired in 1909, unbeaten, and lived at the farm. On July 11, 1916, he died there of a failing heart. Savage was in a hospital in Minneapolis recovering from a minor operation. They told him the horse was gone. He died the next day.

Dan Patch's 1:55¼ stood as the record for thirty-three years.

Think of who was in those crowds. Most of the ninety-three thousand had driven a horse to get to the train that took them to the fair. Many of them had a colt at home they thought could go a little. They did not need to be told what 1:55 meant. They had held the watch on their own horses, on their own half-mile tracks, and seen 2:40 and been pleased. That is why a pacing horse from a livery stable in Indiana could be as famous as a president. The whole country knew what a mile was.

The Mare Nobody Raced

The trotters, in those years, were quietly being remade by a horse most people had underrated.

Peter the Great was foaled in Michigan in 1895, on the farm of Daniel Streeter at Kalamazoo. He was by Pilot Medium. That made him a grandson of Happy Medium and a great-grandson of both Hambletonian and the old mare Princess, with the Canadian pacer Pilot on his dam's sire's side. He was a big, plain bay, and he was a good racehorse without being a sensation. He won the Kentucky Futurity for three-year-olds in 1898 and was sold to a Boston man, J. Malcolm Forbes, the yachtsman who had paid $125,000 for Arion.

Forbes did not care for him. Mr. Forbes sailed yachts, and liked a horse to look like one. He thought this horse coarse, bred him to few mares, and in 1903 sent him to auction at Madison Square Garden, where he brought a small fraction of what Forbes had paid. The buyers took him to a farm in Kentucky called Patchen Wilkes.

There he was bred to good mares for the first time, and it turned out that Forbes had made one of the great mistakes in the history of the breed. Peter the Great's foals trotted, and trotted young, and their foals did the same. He was later sold again, for a reported $50,000, to a farm at Indianapolis, where he died in 1923 at twenty-eight. By then he had sired more than six hundred horses with standard records. Scarcely a trotter racing today lacks him in the pedigree.

A sire that good tends to hide the mares he was bred to. One of them should not be hidden.

Nervolo Belle

She was foaled in 1906, a daughter of a pacing stallion named Nervolo. She belonged to the Knight family, who farmed near Nicholasville, Kentucky, at a place that would become famous as Almahurst. The Harness Racing Museum's biography of her contains a phrase that says everything and explains nothing. She was, it says, "never destined for the races."

Nobody recorded why. Perhaps she was unsound, or had no speed, or the Knights simply wanted a broodmare. Whatever the reason, Nervolo Belle never made a start. She has no record at all. By the logic of the Standard, which judged a horse on what the watch said, she had nothing to recommend her.

In 1910 she was bred to Peter the Great.

The colt she foaled the next spring was named Peter Volo. He was the champion trotter of his age at one, at two, at three and at four, which had never been done, and in four seasons of racing he lost exactly one contest, a match race. Bred back to Peter the Great, Nervolo Belle had a filly, Volga E., who was a champion too. Later she had another good colt, Worthy Volo.

Peter Volo went to stud and in 1926 sired Volomite. Volomite did something unusual even for this breed. He became a leading sire of trotters and of pacers at the same time. His sons and daughters were at the top of both lists for years, and through them Nervolo Belle is in the back of half the pedigrees in the modern stud book.

Nervolo Belle was retired from breeding in 1928 and died at Almahurst in 1935. She was twenty-nine. In 1966 she was elected to the Hall of Fame at Goshen as an Immortal.

She never raced, and she is the foundation of a dynasty. A broodmare is judged the way Hambletonian was judged, by what comes after, and the judgment can take a long time to come in.

A race named for a horse

In 1926 the sport gave its new premier event a name.

It was for three-year-old trotters, it was worth more than $73,000, which made it the richest race ever offered for harness horses, and it was first run at the New York State Fair at Syracuse. They called it the Hambletonian. A colt named Guy McKinney won it.

In 1930 the race found a home at Goshen, in Orange County, New York, a few miles from Sugar Loaf and Chester, on a three-cornered mile track called Good Time Park. For the next quarter of a century the first week of August at Goshen was the center of the trotting world. Farmers parked in the infield. The best colts in America raced in heats, in the old way, for a trophy named after a horse who had been led down those same roads at his mother's side by a hired man.

One lung

Among the mares whose sons won it, one family stands out, and it starts with an improbable animal.

Margaret Parrish was foaled in 1908. She was fast on the track. According to the Museum's account she did it on one good lung. Then she became a broodmare, and lived to be thirty-one, and produced her last foal at twenty-six. That foal, Margaret Castleton, became a champion and then a famous producer herself. The Museum says it knows of no other case of a mare so old foaling a champion.

Margaret Parrish's daughter Margaret Arion was foaled in 1923. She had sixteen foals in eighteen years, which means that for most of two decades she was either carrying a foal or nursing one. In 1932 her daughter The Marchioness won the Hambletonian. In 1942 her son The Ambassador won it. No mare before her had produced two winners of the race.

The family went on. More than half a century after Margaret Parrish died, it turned up again in the pedigree of a colt named Valley Victory, who became one of the most influential trotting sires of the late twentieth century.

You can read a Hambletonian program as a list of fast colts and the stallions who sired them. Read it from the bottom of the pedigree up and it becomes a different story, about a few mares and their daughters, taking their time.

The Grey Ghost

In 1933 a gray yearling gelding was led into the sale ring at Indianapolis. He was tall and narrow and loosely put together, and he had already been gelded.

He had been bred at Almahurst, the Knight family's farm in Kentucky, the same place where Nervolo Belle was living out her old age. His sire was Guy Abbey and his dam was a mare named Elizabeth. The catalogue called him Greyhound.

He brought $900.

The man who paid it was acting for Colonel E. J. Baker of St. Charles, Illinois. Baker had inherited an oil fortune and spent a fair part of it on his town and his horses. He built the hotel in St. Charles that still carries his name. His trainer and driver was a quiet Indiana horseman named Sep Palin.

Palin found out what he had fairly soon. The awkward colt, once he was moving, had a stride that seemed to belong to a larger animal, long and low and so smooth that people who watched him said he did not appear to be trying. In 1935 he won the Hambletonian at Goshen. After that he mostly raced the watch, because, as with Dan Patch, there was nothing to race.

He was a pale gray then and got paler every year. The newspapers called him the Grey Ghost.

On September 29, 1938, at Lexington, Greyhound trotted a mile in 1:55¼.

To see what that meant, go back over the ground this book has covered. Lady Suffolk's 2:29½. Flora Temple's 2:19¾. Dexter, 2:17¼. Goldsmith Maid, 2:14. Maud S., 2:08¾. Nancy Hanks behind the bicycle wheels, 2:04. Lou Dillon, 1:58½. Each of those

was the limit of what a trotter could do, and each one stood for a few years. By the late 1930s the mark had been pushed down close to 1:56.

Greyhound's mile stood for thirty-one years. Nobody trotted faster until 1969. Horsemen who were boys when he set it were grandfathers before it fell.

It happened to equal, to the quarter-second, the 1:55¼ that Dan Patch had paced on the same track in 1905. A pacer named Billy Direct had finally beaten Dan Patch's mark at Lexington the day before, by a quarter of a second. So for one afternoon in the autumn of 1938 the two records of the breed, trotting and pacing, were a quarter-second apart, and both had been set within twenty-four hours on the same strip of red clay.

Greyhound won seventy-one of the eighty-two heats he started in and set fourteen world records of one kind and another. One of them was under saddle. In 1940, at Lexington, a young woman named Frances Dodge, an automobile heiress and a fine rider, got up on him and he trotted a mile in 2:01¾, as horses had done in Lady Suffolk's day.

Another was in double harness, and for that he needed a partner.

The girl's horse

Ben White was one of the great trainers of his time. He won the Hambletonian four times as a driver. In 1933 he bred a bay filly by a stallion called Scotland out of a mare named Alma Lee, and he gave her to his son Gibson.

That gift became one of the best-known stories in the sport, because of a book. In 1950 Marguerite Henry, who had already made a Morgan stallion and a Chincoteague pony famous among American children, published *Born to Trot*. It is the story of Gib White and his filly. In Henry's telling the boy falls ill and must follow the filly's career from a hospital bed while his father trains and drives her. The book is a novel for young readers and takes a novelist's liberties, but its outline is true. The filly's name was Rosalind.

She was the best of her age at two. At three, in 1936, she won the Hambletonian with Ben White in the sulky. At four she trotted in 1:56¾. Only one trotter alive could go faster, and he was a gray gelding from Illinois.

In 1939 somebody had the idea of hitching the two of them together. A team to pole is two horses side by side on either side of a single shaft, pulling one vehicle. It is harder than it sounds. Two horses rarely have the same stride, and the faster one is held to the pace of the slower. At Indianapolis that year, the gray gelding and the bay mare, the two fastest trotters alive, went a mile together in 1:58¼.

People who saw it said that the two of them moved like one horse.

Rosalind went to the breeding farm and had six foals. She died in 1950, the year the book came out.

The oak stall

Greyhound was retired in 1940. Being a gelding, he had no second career ahead of him. What he had was Colonel Baker's affection, which proved to be a considerable asset.

He spent his first years of retirement at Baker's Red Gate Farm at St. Charles. In 1949 he was moved a few miles west to the Flanery farm at Maple Park, Illinois, and there he held court for sixteen years.

His stall was fifteen feet by thirty, about the size of a living room. The walls and the ceiling were panelled in oak. Next to it was a sitting room for his visitors, hung with photographs and trophies, with a Dutch door between so that the old horse could put his head through and see who had come. There was a guest book. People drove out from Chicago on Sundays to sign it.

His coat had turned pure white by then. When he made a public appearance, at a fair or a racetrack, they dressed him in a red blanket and painted his hooves red.

He died on February 4, 1965, at thirty-three, and was buried at Red Gate Farm among Baker's other horses. The stall stayed as it was. Half a century later, when the Maple Park farm was to be torn down, the oak-panelled room was taken apart board by board, trucked to Goshen, New York, and put back together inside the Harness Racing Museum. It is there now, a few miles from where Hambletonian is buried.

A record tells you a horse was great. When people save his room, you know he was loved.

Under the Lights

The sport Greyhound retired from in 1940 was about to change more in ten years than it had in the previous seventy.

It had been losing ground for a generation. The automobile had done what nothing else could have. It had taken the horse off the road. A boy growing up in 1900 learned to drive a horse as a matter of course, and knew a good one when he saw it. A boy growing up in 1930 learned to drive a Ford. The driving parks closed one by one. The audience that had understood a mile because it had clocked its own was getting old.

Three things happened close together.

In 1939 the rival bodies that governed the sport in different regions, each with its own rules, merged into the United States Trotting Association. For the first time one organization licensed the drivers, kept the records and held the register that John Wallace had begun.

On September 2, 1940, a lawyer named George Morton Levy opened a harness track on an old automobile speedway at Westbury, Long Island. He called it Roosevelt Raceway. It raced at night, under electric lights, with pari-mutuel betting, which is the system in which all the money wagered on a race goes into a pool and is divided among the winners, with the track and the state taking a share. Levy's idea was that people who worked all day would come out in the evening. For a few years it looked as though he was wrong.

His problem was the start. Harness races still began the old way, with the field scoring down to the wire again and again until the starter was satisfied. At a county fair, with an afternoon to fill, nobody much minded half an hour of false starts. A crowd that had come out after supper and wanted to bet nine races before the last train minded a great deal.

The answer was built by an Ohio man named Stephen Phillips. He mounted a pair of long folding wings, like gates, on the back of an automobile. The horses came up behind the wings as the car moved down the stretch, the car accelerated to racing speed, the wings swung shut at the starting line, and the car pulled away. Every start was a fair start, the first time, every time. The mobile starting gate went into use at Roosevelt Raceway on May 24, 1946.

One wonders what Mr. Dow of Marengo would have given for it in 1875.

With the gate, the long afternoon of heats gave way to the single dash: one mile, one winner, on to the next race. Attendance exploded. Within a few years there were night harness tracks around New York, Chicago, Detroit and Los Angeles, and more people were watching Standardbreds race than ever had in the days of Dan Patch. Illinois legalized betting on harness races in 1946, and Maywood Park and Sportsman's Park and later Hawthorne and Balmoral gave Chicago some of the richest purses in the country.

It was a different sport. The horses were now professionals racing for strangers. The county fairs went on, and so did the Grand Circuit, but the money was at the night tracks. And the night tracks liked pacers, because pacers in hopples did not break stride and spoil a bet.

The solid gold sulky

Where a great deal of money is collected in a small space, at night, certain people will be found standing near it. The night tracks had not been open long before they began to attract a class of admirer that the county fairs had never had to worry about.

George Morton Levy explained to a committee of the United States Senate in 1951 how he had handled one such difficulty. Bookmakers had been working the crowd at Roosevelt Raceway, and the state was threatening his license over it. So he had engaged the services of Mr. Frank Costello, a gentleman generally understood to be the most influential figure in the New York underworld, to see that the bookmakers stayed away. As *Time* reported the testimony, Levy paid him $60,000 over four years, though other accounts give the figure differently. The bookmakers stayed away. Costello, for his part, is reported to have told the senators that he had done nothing in particular to earn the money, which, if true, makes it the easiest sixty thousand dollars in the history of the turf. Levy was never charged with anything, and he remained the leading man in the sport for another quarter of a century.

Worse followed. In August 1953 a union boss named Thomas Lewis, whose local had the run of Yonkers Raceway, was shot dead outside his apartment building in the Bronx. Governor Dewey announced that he had told his investigators to "turn harness tracks upside down and inside out," and when they did, a remarkable quantity of loose change fell out.

It appeared that Yonkers had been hiring whomever Lewis sent it, ex-convicts included, and had ignored the state rule requiring background statements from its employees. It appeared that the track had paid $165,000 over three years to four labor "troubleshooters," whose duties were not minutely described. The state shut the place down until all twelve hundred of its employees had been fingerprinted, which must have been a memorable afternoon.

And then there was the stock. Shares in the raceways, it turned out, had a way of drifting into the hands of gentlemen in public life, on the gentlest of terms. One county political leader had been allowed to buy four thousand shares on the installment plan at twenty dollars apiece. They paid him six and eight dollars a year each in dividends, and were worth about a hundred when the questions began. He resigned from his party's national committee. A lady was found to have paid $250 for stock later valued at $45,000. Other officeholders discovered that they wished to spend more time with their families. *Time* ran the story under the heading "Solid Gold Sulky."

So far as the record shows, nobody went to prison for any of it. New York replaced its three unpaid racing commissioners with one salaried director and raised the state's own share of the betting pool, which is the form repentance generally takes in a legislature.

None of this had anything to do with the horses, who went on trying their best every night, having no alternative. And it had very little to do with the man who owned one mare and drove her himself at the fair. He read about it in the paper and was not much surprised. He had always suspected that the trouble with the big tracks was the people around them who did not own a horse.

Adios

The pacer who defined that era was foaled on January 3, 1940, at Two Gaits Farm at Carmel, Indiana.

Adios was by Hal Dale, the grandson of The Abbe, which made him a direct male-line descendant of the lame trotter Pop Geers had turned into a pacer. His dam was a mare called Adioo Volo, and the second half of her name was a family name. Her dam was a daughter of Peter Volo. Nervolo Belle, who never raced, was in the pedigree.

Adios was a very good racehorse, a world champion, and he was owned for a while by a Hollywood studio head. In 1948 he was put up at auction at Lexington.

A young Pennsylvania horseman named Delvin Miller was at the sale. Miller had driven his first winner as a teenager, and would drive his last in 1996, at the age of eighty-three. The Museum calls him the only professional in any sport whose career spanned eight decades. He had a farm called Meadow Lands in the hills southwest of Pittsburgh, and he wanted a stallion for it.

The bidding on Adios stood at $20,000. Miller raised one finger. He meant a hundred dollars more. George Swinebroad, the auctioneer, either misread the signal or chose to. "Twenty-one thousand," he said, and knocked the horse down.

Miller paid it. He took Adios home to Pennsylvania, where the local mares were nothing special, and bred him to what there was.

Within a few years the sons and daughters of Adios were winning everything there was for a pacer to win. They were fast and they were handsome and they loved to race. In 1955 Miller sold the horse for $500,000, the most ever paid for a Standardbred, to Hanover Shoe Farms and a partner. By most accounts he soon bought back a share, and Adios stayed where he was.

Adios died in 1965. In twenty years at stud he sired fewer than six hundred foals. They included Adios Butler, and they included Bret Hanover, a big, cheerful bay who won sixty-two of his sixty-eight races and was Horse of the Year three times running.

One of the horses who chased Bret Hanover home in the big races of 1965 was a colt called Tuxedo Hanover. Earlier that season, in a three-heat fight in a race called the Great Midwest Pace, Tuxedo Hanover had been beaten by a mare named Active Donna V., trained and driven by a man named Glen Kidwell. We will meet Kidwell again, on a farm west of Marengo.

Adios' own line did not last in the male succession. The pacer was reshaped once more by his cousin Meadow Skipper, a grandson of Hal Dale foaled in 1960, whose sons Most Happy Fella and Albatross were so dominant that nearly every pacer racing today descends from one or both. But it was Adios who proved that a single stallion, properly used, could lift a whole division of the breed in ten years. Hambletonian had done it by the wagonload over a quarter of a century. Adios did it under electric light.

The trotters

The trotters had their own patriarch at mid-century, a horse called Star's Pride. He was foaled in 1947 and stood at Hanover Shoe Farms in Pennsylvania, the largest Standardbred nursery in the world. He sired eight winners of the Hambletonian.

One of them was Nevele Pride, a fierce little bay who bit his grooms and beat everything he raced. In 1969, at Indianapolis, with Stanley Dancer driving, Nevele Pride trotted a mile in 1:54.4. The watches were electric by then, and read in fifths of a second and then in tenths. Greyhound's record, which had outlasted the Second World War, was gone at last.

Star's Pride has a French chapter in his future. Hold on to the name.

The Hambletonian itself left Goshen after 1956. It went to the Du Quoin State Fair in southern Illinois, where the Hayes family had built a mile track of exceptional speed and were willing to put up the money. For twenty-four years, from 1957 through 1980, the most important trotting race in the world was run at a state fair, on a late-summer afternoon, in a town of six thousand people in the Illinois coal country. In 1981 it moved to the Meadowlands in New Jersey, where it has been since.

The pacers' great race never left the fairgrounds at all. The Little Brown Jug was first run in 1946 at the Delaware County Fair in Ohio, on a half-mile track, before a crowd of about twenty-seven thousand. It is still run there every September, in heats, at a county fair.

The Six-Hundred-Dollar Filly

Delvin Miller had one more good idea at an auction, and this one cost him a great deal less than Adios.

Go back to 1955, and to Illinois. At Reed-Yates Farm at Towanda, a few miles north of Bloomington, a trotting filly was foaled that spring. Her sire was a horse called Wayward. Her dam was Lady Ann Potempkin, and she was twenty-four years old, a great age for a mare to be having a foal. Nobody knew much about the family. The Harness Racing Museum notes that it was so obscure it could not be traced beyond the fourth dam, and in a breed that by then could follow most pedigrees back a century, that was close to having no pedigree at all.

They named the filly Lady Ann Reed and sent her to the yearling sale at Princeton, Illinois. She brought $600.

The buyer was Day Mangus, a horseman from Kirksville, Missouri. He took her home and trained her on the track at the local fairgrounds. This was the ladder exactly as it had worked in Rocket's day: a cheap filly, a small-town trainer, a fair track.

She could trot. At two she won ten of her twenty-three starts, including several of the important Illinois stakes for fillies bred in the state. At three Mangus sent her east to Painesville, Ohio, where the competition was stiffer, and she kept winning. In 1958 she trotted a mile in 2:02.1 on a half-mile track. The Museum says it was the fastest mile a three-year-old filly had ever trotted on a track that size.

Stanley Dancer, who was on his way to becoming the leading driver in the country, saw her race. He liked her enough to talk one of his owners into buying her.

Then she went lame.

It was a serious lameness, the kind that does not get better. The $600 filly from the Princeton sale, who had come up from the fairs to the edge of the big time in two seasons, was finished as a racehorse at three or four years old.

The obvious story ended there.

The important one did not.

She was sent to the big autumn sale at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, as a broodmare prospect, a lame mare of no family. Delvin Miller bought her.

He took her to Meadow Lands, where Adios was, and where Miller named his foals with the prefix Tarport. What followed took twenty years to unfold and is still unfolding.

Her second foal was a pacer who won nearly $95,000. Her son Tarport Devlin became a stallion and sired Shiaway St. Pat, who won the Hambletonian in 1981. Her daughter Lady Jamie founded a branch that produced Winky's Gill, a champion filly,

and through her the stallion Supergill and the mare Winky's Goal. Another daughter, Tarport Lady Ann, became the great-granddam of SJ's Caviar, who trotted in 1:53.4 and won more than a million dollars. The Museum's list of her descendants runs on through LeMans Chip and Deke Palmer and a horse named Leander Blue Chip, who made his reputation in Scandinavia.

Lady Ann Reed died in November 1979 at Blue Chip Farms in New York, at twenty-four, the same age her own dam had been when she was foaled. She was later elected to the Hall of Fame as a Broodmare Immortal.

If she had stayed sound, she would have raced two or three more seasons and perhaps won a major stake. She would be a line in an old record book. Because she broke down, she went to the breeding shed at four, to one of the best farms in America, and had two more decades to do the thing she turned out to be best at.

The stopwatch can find a champion in two minutes. A broodmare may need fifty years.

Fifteen years running

One more mare of that generation, because her sons will carry us overseas.

Flicka Frost was a daughter of Victory Song. She raced from 1956 to 1958 and was quick as a two-year-old, with a time-trial mark of 2:02 for the great driver Billy Haughton. Then she went to stud, owned by two partners, Don Millar and John Thro.

She had sixteen foals, fifteen of them in fifteen consecutive years. Any breeder will tell you how unlikely that is. Mares miss a year. They lose foals. Flicka Frost did not.

Her son Timothy T. won the Hambletonian at Du Quoin in 1970, driven by John Simpson Jr., who was twenty-seven and the youngest man ever to have won it. Four years later his full brother Christopher T. won it too. So Flicka Frost joined Margaret Arion as the dam of two Hambletonian winners. A daughter, Cora T., won the companion race for fillies.

She died in 1980 at Hanover Shoe Farms, twenty-six years old.

Timothy T. did not stay in America. After his Hambletonian he was sold to Italy.

And there the story has to follow him, because by 1970 the American trotter was no longer only an American matter.

PART FIVE: THE WORLD ANSWERS BACK

The Other Trotter

Americans tend to assume that the trotting horse is theirs. The French have never agreed, and they have a stud book, a racecourse and nearly two centuries of results to back the objection.

While the farmers of Orange County were breeding their mares to Abdallah, the farmers of Normandy were at work on the same problem, and they reached a different answer. They wanted a horse for the road and the army, strong enough to carry a cavalryman or pull a gun, and active enough to do it at a trot. They had good heavy local mares. In the first half of the nineteenth century the government studs, the Haras, began crossing those mares with stallions brought over from England. Some were Thoroughbreds and half-breds. Some came from Norfolk.

That is a name the reader has met. The Norfolk trotter, the English roadster that gave America Bellfounder and through him the Kent Mare, went to France as well. A stallion called Young Rattler arrived in 1820. Another, with the splendid name of The Norfolk Phœnomenon, came in 1851. Their blood ran straight into the horses of Normandy.

So the French trotter and the American one are cousins, and Bellfounder's people are the common grandparents.

Racing followed breeding, as it always does. In 1836 an officer of the Haras named Ephrem Houël organized the first official trotting races in France, on the beach at Cherbourg, as a way of testing which stallions were worth using. The idea was the one behind every driving park in America, with a French difference. The state ran it.

By the 1870s five stallions had emerged as the heads of the breed: Conquérant, Lavater, Normand, Niger and Phaéton. Every French trotter traces to them. A grandson of Conquérant named Fuschia, foaled in 1883, was France's Hambletonian, the sire whose sons and daughters seemed to be in every race.

A stud book was opened in the first years of the twentieth century, at first as a private register. In 1922 the state took it over and the breed was given its official name, the Trotteur Français. The French had adopted the American idea of a standard, too. A horse had to trot a set distance inside a set time to be admitted.

A different horse

What they had made was not a Standardbred.

The French trotter is bigger, later to mature and built to stay. American racing settled on the mile. French racing never did. The classic distances in France run from about a mile and a quarter to well over a mile and a half, and the horses often start from a standing line, with the better ones handicapped by being placed twenty-five or fifty meters behind.

There are no pacers. France has never raced them.

And a fair share of French races, about one in ten, are run under saddle. *Trot monté*, mounted trotting, is the way Lady Suffolk and Dutchman raced in the 1830s. America gave it up before the Civil War. In France it never stopped, and the best mounted trotters are stars in their own right. To an American horseman the sight of a field of big bays trotting flat out with jockeys standing in the stirrups is like finding a cousin who still speaks the old language.

The home of all this is the Hippodrome de Vincennes, in the woods on the eastern edge of Paris. Its track is dark cinders. It runs downhill for a long stretch and then climbs toward the finish, and that uphill pull has broken the hearts of a good many fast horses who were bred for a flat mile.

A race for the Americans

The great race at Vincennes is run on the last Sunday of January, in whatever weather Paris provides. It was founded in 1920. The First World War had just ended, and the French trotting society wanted to honor the country whose soldiers had come over in 1917.

They named it the Prix d'Amérique.

It is the richest and most coveted trotting race in the world, and for most of its history Americans have hardly known it existed. The French have known all along what it was for.

Its early winners included a mare named Uranie, who won it three years running in the 1920s while giving away long head starts, and who was the first trotter to be a national celebrity in France. Between the wars, American-bred horses racing for European owners won it several times. The French took note. Some French breeders had been quietly using American stallions in those decades to add speed, and the results were fast.

Then, in 1937, the French closed their stud book. From that year, no horse could be registered as a Trotteur Français unless both its parents were. The door was shut on

American blood. A leading French breeder later compared using it to planting weeds in one's garden.

It stayed shut for a generation. And then a mare opened it.

Artichokes

First, though, an interlude, because it is too good to leave out.

In the summer of 1959, Roosevelt Raceway on Long Island decided to stage an International Trot. The promoters invited the champions of seven countries. France sent the winner of the last two runnings of the Prix d'Amérique, a rangy horse named Jamin.

Jamin, it was explained to the American press, ate artichokes. They were part of his daily ration, and he would not do without them. A supply was flown over with him. On arrival at the airport in New York, it was impounded by the United States Department of Agriculture, which fears neither man nor vegetable.

What happened next was either a real emergency or the finest piece of publicity in the history of the sport, and at this distance it is impossible to be sure which. Even the accounts written at the time do not agree. Jamin was said to be off his feed. An appeal went out. A newspaper editor in Monterey, California, called a grower. The artichoke farmers of Castroville got together 120 pounds of their best, and the crate was flown across the country to Idlewild Airport and delivered to the stable by helicopter.

On August 1, more than forty-eight thousand people came to Roosevelt Raceway to see the horse who ate artichokes. He won. An Italian horse was second and the American favorite third.

Whatever the truth about his appetite, Jamin did something important that night. He showed an American crowd, in person, that the best trotter in the world might be a French horse the size of a hunter who had never raced a flat mile in his life.

Roquépine's sons

The mare who reopened the book was named Roquépine.

She was a great-granddaughter of Uranie, and she was the best of her time. She won the Prix d'Amérique in 1966, in 1967 and again in 1968. She came to America and won the International Trot. Her owner, Henri Levesque, was one of the leading breeders in France, and he was not afraid of a foreign idea.

When Roquépine's racing was done, Levesque left her in the United States for two years. He had her bred to Star's Pride, the great American trotting sire at Hanover Shoe Farms. Then he had her bred to one of Star's Pride's sons. She produced two colts. He named them Florestan and Granit.

Under the rules of 1937, they were not French trotters. They were the sons of the best mare in France, and they could not be registered in the French stud book or run in most French races. Levesque sent them to race in Germany and Italy.

Then he made the authorities an offer. It took some negotiating. In the end the French national stud agreed that the foals of the two half-American stallions could be registered, on one condition: Levesque must sell both horses to the state. For Florestan he received a modest sum and ten free breedings.

It was the best bargain the French state ever made. Florestan became perhaps the most influential sire in the modern history of the Trotteur Français. His daughters led the broodmare lists for years. Other selected American stallions were let in after him, a few at a time. The weeds, it turned out, grew beautifully.

Today the leading sire in France is a horse named Ready Cash, who won the Prix d'Amérique twice. His pedigree goes back to Star's Pride four separate times, two of them through Florestan. A writer for the trade press went through the field for a recent Prix d'Amérique and found that nearly every starter traced to Star's Pride.

That is a remarkable thing. The proudest and most separate trotting breed in the world, which closed its book in 1937 to keep the Americans out, is now carried in large part by the blood of a stallion who stood in Pennsylvania. And it happened because one owner loved one mare too much to waste her.

The mare made the difference again, as she has kept doing in this book.

North

The horse had been taken off the American road. In Scandinavia he never quite was.

Sweden, Norway and Finland came to harness racing by their own route, and it began on ice. Northern farmers had always driven small, shaggy, cold-blooded horses in sleighs, and when the lakes froze they raced them, village against village. Those native trotters still exist. They race in their own events, and in the far north they are loved as nothing imported ever could be.

But the Scandinavians wanted speed, and from the 1890s onward they went looking for it in the same place everyone did. They bought American horses. At first they crossed them with whatever they had, including French blood. The oldest Swedish track, Jägersro at Malmö, opened in 1907. Solvalla, on the edge of Stockholm, opened in 1927 and became the capital of trotting in the north.

In 1937, the same year the French shut their book, a Swedish buyer imported a four-year-old American stallion named Bulwark. He raced at Solvalla and then went to stud,

and he did for Sweden something like what Adios later did for the American pacer. He lifted the whole population in a generation. Mares came with him and after him, and their families are still at the root of Swedish pedigrees.

The result can be stated as a number. A study of the Swedish trotter published in 2016 found that its gene pool was about ninety-four percent American Standardbred and six percent French.

What the Swedes did with that American blood was their own. They built a sport on the pools. For three decades the national Saturday bet was a wager called the V75, in which the player tried to pick the winners of seven races, and for much of that time it was the largest regular betting event in the country. Harness racing in Sweden is not a fading rural pastime. It is on television every week. In a country of ten million people, trainers and drivers are household names.

And they have a race. The Elitlopp is run at Solvalla on the last Sunday in May. It was first held in 1952. It is a mile, the American distance, raced in the old American way, in heats, with the fastest horses coming back for a final the same afternoon. Everyone who matters in European trotting tries to win it.

The Americans come

Timothy T., the son of Flicka Frost who won the Hambletonian at Du Quoin in 1970, had been sold to Italy. Italy had its own deep trotting culture and its own heroes, among them a chestnut called Tornese who had run second to Jamin on the night of the artichokes. Timothy T. raced on in Europe for years. In 1974, as a seven-year-old, he won the Elitlopp. In 1975 he won it again.

So a colt foaled in America, out of a mare who had fifteen foals in fifteen years, by way of a state fair in the Illinois coal country and a stable in Italy, was twice the champion of Sweden. That is how far the roads ran by then.

The next American to do it arrived with more noise. Mack Lobell was the best trotter in North America in 1987 and 1988, Horse of the Year both seasons, a fierce, high-headed colt who had trotted a mile in 1:52.1 at the Springfield, Illinois, fairgrounds as a three-year-old. That was a world record, set on the same clay where Dan Patch had paced before forty thousand people. In the spring of 1988 he was flown to Stockholm and won the Elitlopp. That autumn a Swedish breeder bought him outright, for a sum reported at six million dollars, and took him to Sweden for good.

Mack Lobell won the Elitlopp again in 1990 and died in Sweden in 2016, at thirty-two.

The traffic ran the other way as well, and it carried people. Beginning in the 1970s a series of Swedish horsemen came to America, looked around, and stayed. Håkan Wallner and Berndt Lindstedt were among the first. Then came Jan Johnson, Per Eriksson, Jimmy Takter, Åke Svanstedt and, in the next generation, Marcus Melander and Takter's daughter Nancy. They brought European ideas about conditioning, about shoeing, about how much a horse should be asked to do between races. They have trained a striking share of the Hambletonian winners of the last forty years.

A century earlier the best horsemen in the world had been Yankee farmers with theories. Now a good many of the theories had Swedish accents. It was the same garage with different mechanics in it.

The filly nobody bought

Which brings us to the last of the mares.

In the mid-1980s a Kentucky couple, David and Fredericka Caldwell, bred a trotting filly at their Cane Run Farm at Georgetown. She was by a horse called Bonefish. They sent her to the yearling sale at Lexington, as breeders do, to be sold.

She did not sell. The Caldwells took her home.

For a commercial breeder that is a bad day. The filly has been fed and fitted for a year and a half, and the market has said plainly that it does not want her. The Caldwells did the only thing left. They kept her and raced her themselves. They named her Nan's Catch and sent her to Jan Johnson, one of the Swedes, who trained in Florida.

She won nineteen of her twenty-nine starts and was second in seven more. She won the Breeders Crown at two and the Hambletonian Oaks, the great race for fillies, at three. She was the champion three-year-old trotting filly of 1988 and earned more than three-quarters of a million dollars. The market had been wrong by about that much.

Then she went home to Kentucky and became a broodmare. Her third foal, born in 1993, was a filly.

They called her Moni Maker.

Moni Maker

She was a big, plain, long-striding bay, and she was not at first a champion. She won the Hambletonian Oaks at three, as her dam had. Then she was turned over to Jimmy Takter, and she got better every year she raced, which is not how it usually goes.

Her regular driver was Wally Hennessey, a Canadian from Prince Edward Island who sat behind her in nearly all of her races.

At five she went to Stockholm with Hennessey and won the Elitlopp. No mare has won it since without being compared to her.

On the last Sunday of January 1999 she went to the post at Vincennes, in the cold, on the cinders, over a distance far longer than the mile she had been bred for, against the best horses in France on their own ground. For that one race the lines were handed to a young Frenchman who knew the track, Jean-Michel Bazire. She won the Prix d'Amérique. It was the race the French had founded in 1920 to honor the United States, and she was the first American-owned horse to win it in a quarter of a century.

She was Horse of the Year in America in 1998 and again in 1999. She won sixty-seven races, on two continents, at every distance, on every kind of track. She earned more than five and a half million dollars, the most any trotting mare had ever won.

Her last public appearance was at the Red Mile in Lexington in October 2000. For the occasion they took off her harness and put a saddle on her, and Julie Krone, the most successful woman jockey in the history of Thoroughbred racing, got up. Moni Maker trotted a mile under saddle in 1:54.1.

Frances Dodge had ridden Greyhound a mile on that same track sixty years before, in 2:01¾. Lady Suffolk had gone in 2:26½ with David Bryan on her back, in 1843. It was the oldest way of racing a trotter there is, and it happened where Dan Patch and Greyhound had set their marks. The mare who did it was the daughter of a filly nobody would buy.

One horse, many countries

By the time Moni Maker retired, it no longer made much sense to ask whether a great trotter was American or European.

An Italian horse named Varenne, who won sixty-two of his seventy-three races, took the Prix d'Amérique and the Elitlopp twice each and came to New Jersey in 2001 to win the Breeders Crown. He was by an American sire. Swedish-bred horses race at the Meadowlands, and American-bred ones at Solvalla and Vincennes. The best stallions in France carry Star's Pride. The Swedish trotter is nine-tenths American by blood and wholly Swedish in his upbringing. French blood, in its turn, has begun to come back across the Atlantic, in the pedigrees of horses bred in Sweden and raced in the United States.

Other countries took the American horse and went their own way with him. Russia crossed him on its native Orlov, the trotter that Count Alexei Orlov had bred in the eighteenth century, and made a faster one. Australia and New Zealand became pacing nations, with a passion for the sport the equal of anything in Scandinavia. In 1968 a

tough old New Zealand gelding named Cardigan Bay, driven by Stanley Dancer, became the first Standardbred anywhere to win a million dollars, and was taken on the Ed Sullivan television show to be introduced to the American public.

The horse that came out of the roads of New York State, out of a gray English stallion and some nameless pacers and a crippled mare, is now a world breed. It has been remade wherever it went, by people who had their own ideas about what a trotter ought to be. And when those ideas came back to America in the persons of French stallions and Swedish trainers, the American horse changed again.

Rysdyk would have understood it. Find something that works, and breed to it.

PART SIX: HOME

Back to the Fairs

In the summer of 2026, for the first time in living memory, there was no horse racing of any kind in the Chicago area.

It is worth setting that down plainly, because a book that takes pride in a sport ought not to look away from its troubles. The night tracks that saved harness racing in the 1940s have been closing for thirty years. Sportsman's Park went around the turn of the century. Maywood Park ran its last race in October 2015, and Balmoral Park closed that December. The ground at Maywood is a warehouse now. That left Hawthorne, in Cicero, which raced Standardbreds for part of the year and Thoroughbreds for the rest and waited for a casino that was always about to be built.

The Illinois Racing Board suspended Hawthorne's harness license in January 2026. The track went into bankruptcy the following month. The harness meets scheduled for that year were not run, and over the summer the property was reported sold for redevelopment. "For the first time in forever," the head of the Illinois Harness Horsemen's Association told a reporter, "the third largest metropolitan economy in the U.S. is without horse racing." The horsemen's groups say they hope to see a new track licensed in the south suburbs. As this is written, nobody knows.

The causes are not mysterious. Casinos, lotteries and the telephone in everyone's pocket took the betting dollar that once had nowhere else to go. Land near big cities became worth more as almost anything than as a racetrack. And the public that understood a mile because it had driven a horse is gone, as it was always going to be.

It would be easy to stop there, with the grandstands coming down. That would get the story wrong. The sport did not begin at the night tracks and it does not live only there.

Still on the calendar

While Hawthorne's gates were shut, the Illinois Standardbreds of 2026 went on racing where Illinois Standardbreds were racing in 1887.

On the second of June there was harness racing at the Macon County Fair at Decatur, with a first post of half past ten in the morning. In late July there was racing at the Champaign County Fair at Urbana. On the thirteenth of August the Illinois State Fair opened at Springfield with a full card for horses conceived and foaled in the state, free

admission, on the same clay mile where Dan Patch paced in 1:59¼ and Mack Lobell trotted in 1:52.1. Du Quoin, where the Hambletonian was once run, held its own state fair meeting at the end of the month.

Something like two dozen Illinois county fairs still hold harness racing. The state Department of Agriculture runs a program for Illinois-bred two- and three-year-olds, with a points series through the county fairs and finals at Springfield. It is not rich. The purses are a fraction of what the Chicago tracks once paid, and the Racing Board's own report shows the total at a record low. A trainer told a trade paper in 2025 that fair racing had become the lion's share of what his horses could earn.

Lady Ann Reed came up through Illinois-bred stakes of just that kind, the $600 filly trained at a fairgrounds, and her descendants have won on two continents.

Illinois is the hard case. Elsewhere the fairs are thriving. Ohio races at more than sixty county fairs every summer, well over a hundred programs, and its biggest pacing race is still run at one of them. In Indiana, Pennsylvania, New York, Iowa, Maine and Michigan, a two-year-old trotter's first start is as likely as not to be on a half-mile track with a Ferris wheel turning behind the backstretch.

Go to one. The first thing you notice is how close you are. At a big track the horses are small figures across an infield lake, seen mostly on a screen. At a fair you stand at the rail and they go by a few feet away, and you can hear the breathing and the hoofbeats and the drivers talking to them. Dirt comes over the fence. The horses are young and some of them are green, and now and then one breaks stride at the start and is left, and a groan goes through the crowd.

Half the people along the rail seem to know each other. A good many of the drivers own the horse they are sitting behind. Some of them bred him. Somebody's daughter is leading a colt back to the barn, and an old man with a stopwatch is telling anyone who will listen what the half was.

A great deal has changed. The horses are a full thirty seconds faster than Rocket was. They are tested for drugs, and a veterinarian watches them warm up. The sulkies are steel and carbon fiber. The breeding behind them is a global industry with shipped semen and limits on how many mares a stallion may cover. A fair program in 2026 comes with rules that would fill a shelf.

But the fair is the one place left where the modern Standardbred goes back among the people he came from, and the scene is not so different from the Marengo Driving Park on a Saturday in September 1887. It still comes down to a horse somebody bred and trained, a track with a rail to lean on, and a watch.

The road horse

There is one more place the breed has not left, and it may be the most surprising of all.

On the back roads of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana and a dozen other states, you will meet a black buggy moving along the shoulder at a steady ten or twelve miles an hour. The horse in the shafts is lean, long-legged and usually bay. He trots with his head up and his ears forward, and he looks as if he could do it all day.

He very likely came off a racetrack. The Amish and the Old Order Mennonites, who do not drive automobiles, need exactly the horse this book has been describing from the first page: sound, sensible, used to harness and traffic, able to trot ten miles to town and ten miles home. They do not, as a rule, breed him themselves. They buy Standardbreds that were not quite fast enough to race, or have finished racing, at sales held for the purpose. A trainer in Marengo explained it to a reporter in 1987. Standardbreds that cannot make it on the circuit, he said, "are sold to the Amish," and they suit the work because "they are stronger boned and more gentle" than their running cousins.

So the wheel has come all the way around. The horse that began as a road horse and became a racehorse is still, tens of thousands of times over, a road horse. William Rysdyk wanted nothing more from his $125 colt than that.

Back to Marengo

The 1885 county history left the Marengo Driving Park with fourteen acres, ninety box stalls and a grandstand for a thousand. It did not say what became of it.

The newspapers do. The park outlived the century. On Friday, August 30, 1912, the Marengo paper announced the program for Labor Day under the headline "Horse Races, Motorcycle Runs and Base Ball." The managers of the Driving Park had arranged four races, to start promptly at one o'clock: a three-minute class, trotting or pacing; a race for 2:40 trotters; one for 2:30 pacers; and a free-for-all. "These races will be full of interest," the paper promised, "as the horses are owned in this locality." The heats would be a half-mile each, once around, best three in five.

Between heats there would be motorcycles on the track. After the races the Marengo Cubs would play the Union Rebels on the infield diamond.

There it is, in one afternoon. The classes are the same ones Si Manning's Rocket raced in twenty-three years earlier. The horses are still local. But there are pacers on the card now, there is a baseball team using the grounds every Sunday, and there are motorcycles. The driving park had become the town's general-purpose field, and the

machine that would empty the roads of horses was already running laps on the horses' own track.

The paper mentions the park through 1917. After that it fades from the record.

But somebody who raced there lived long enough to talk about it.

The Griebels

In August 1978 the *Marengo Beacon News* published a special section on harness racing. "Illinois is second in the nation," it began, "in the number of Standardbreds bred each year, and McHenry and Boone Counties can boast a large percentage of those." Marengo and its surroundings, it said, were home to several fine stables, and it proposed to introduce its readers to some of the people behind them. One was Floyd Griebel, who was then sixty-eight.

The Griebels, the paper said, were a well-known family around Marengo and had been for many years. The first of them to race horses was Floyd's grandfather, Fred.

"My grandfather was a farmer," Floyd told the reporter, "who moved to Marengo many years ago. He trained horses and raced in the fairs at Belvidere and Woodstock. There was even a track here in Marengo at one time, just along Rte. 176 headed east out of town. That's where I ran my first race as a matter of fact, when I was twelve years old."

Floyd Griebel was born about 1909. He was twelve around 1921. So the old Driving Park, or whatever was left of it by then, lay on the road east out of town, and it was still fit to race on when Warren Harding was president. The boy who drove a heat there was the grandson of a man who had been racing at the county fairs before 1900, when Rocket and Kensett Maid and Napoleon Bonaparte were in the Rockford papers. Fred Griebel may well have watched some of them.

Floyd's father, Roy, kept a small dairy just north of town. Floyd remembered his mornings as a schoolboy. He would take the milk into Marengo in an old Model A pickup and leave it at the milk factory, then go on to school. After school he went over to his grandfather's place, where there would be two or three horses already hitched. "We'd go over there on the other side of 176 and run a few heats," he said. He could not stay to help put the horses away afterward. He had to get home with the milk cans.

Milk in the morning by truck, horses in the afternoon by sulky. That is as neat a picture of rural America between the wars as one could ask for.

In 1946 Illinois legalized betting on harness races. The following year Floyd Griebel had a horse and a license to race at the pari-mutuel tracks.

By 1956 he was a man of some standing in the sport. That November the Springfield paper carried a dispatch from Columbus, Ohio, under the headline "Griebel Named To

Trot Post." Floyd Griebel, forty-seven, "third generation member of his family to own harness horses in Illinois," had been named a director of the United States Trotting Association for the district covering Illinois and Iowa. The appointment was announced by the district chairman, E. J. Hayes of Du Quoin, whose family had just arranged to bring the Hambletonian to their fairgrounds.

The article went on. Griebel made his home in Marengo, "where he heads a trucking and excavating company." He was president of the Illinois Harness Horsemen's Association. He trained and drove his own stock. He owned five racehorses and eight broodmares.

"He and his father, Roy, train at their home track which is laid out on their 500 acre farm."

So the small-town horseman had a seat at the table. The registry that John Wallace started, that made Rocket standard by gosh in 1889, was by 1956 governed in part by a trucking contractor from the town where Rocket had done it. Nine years later the Marengo paper reported that Griebel had been given places on two of the Association's principal committees. His district by then had more than seventeen hundred members.

The best horse he ever owned, he told the *Beacon* in 1978, was a pacer named Ed Byrd, who raced until he was nine and was then standing at stud. Ed Byrd's first two-year-old, Game Ed, had been the Illinois champion the year before. Floyd had only stopped driving in races two years earlier, at sixty-six. "But I could race tomorrow morning if I wanted to," he said. He had twenty-two horses, counting mares and stallions, some in Kentucky, some at Moline, a couple in Chicago. "But I break 'em and train 'em out here in Marengo."

The headline on the piece was a phrase of his. Once horses get in your blood, he said, there's not much you can do about it.

The neighbors

Griebel was not alone out there, and the same newspapers name the others.

West of town on Grant Highway, which is U.S. Route 20, lived Glen Kidwell. He had been born in South Dakota in 1921 and raised around horses at Sullivan, in central Illinois, where his father trained. By the time the *Beacon* wrote him up in December 1986 he had driven 1,120 winners and earned more than three million dollars in purses, and he had just been inducted into the Illinois Harness Racing Hall of Fame. Anyone who watched him could pick him out of a field coming for home. He had a way of pushing a horse with the lines, in rhythm with the stride, while he used the whip. "You

can help a horse quite a bit by pushing him if you get in rhythm with him," he explained, "but the horse must be striding forward to do it."

He had trained Active Donna V., the mare who beat Tuxedo Hanover in three heats in the year of Bret Hanover. He had trained her son Active Don, who was unbeaten in fifteen starts as a two-year-old and was the first Illinois-bred two-year-old ever to pace a mile in two minutes at Springfield. "Anyone who hasn't tried harness racing has just missed the boat," Kidwell said. "I like competition, and I love to race a horse. I've always considered it a real privilege to be able to race against my friends."

Between Marengo and the village of Union, in 1974, a man named Henry Berenz kept twenty trotters and pacers at a place called Inverness Farm, with what a Crystal Lake reporter described as a regulation half-mile track. He raced them at Sportsman's Park. Asked how he judged a young horse, Berenz gave an answer that Alden Goldsmith would have endorsed, looking at Decker's worthless mare. "Appearance in standardbred horses doesn't mean a thing," he said. "Until you get them on the track, you can't tell how good they are going to be."

And south of town, on Illinois Route 23, there was Harmony Oaks. In May 1987 the *Northwest Herald* sent a reporter out to see it. The stable was run by a father and son, Wally and John Butenschoen. Wally had got into the business by buying one horse. John had worked for his father through high school, gone to Florida to learn the trade at one of the big training centers there, and come home. Over ten years they had built the place up: a main barn for the mares and foals, a new training barn a hundred and twenty feet long, and, laid out the previous year just north of the main barn, "a 1/2-mile dirt and gravel track." They had room for fifty-five horses. Their first crop of homebred yearlings numbered eleven.

It was John Butenschoen who gave the reporter the line about hobbles that appeared earlier in this book. He would go on to a long career training on the eastern circuits. He also offered, unprompted, a one-sentence history of the breed that is hard to improve on. Today's harness horse, he said, "evolved from the horses that drove buggies in the 1800s and early 1900s."

And fifteen miles to the north, at Harvard, the town whose champion ball club failed to appear at the opening of the Driving Park in 1874, there are the Leonards. Bud Leonard is in the Illinois Harness Racing Hall of Fame. His son Terry, a Harvard native, began driving and training in the 1970s, for many years in partnership with his brother Gary, who died in 2001. He trains from a 103-acre farm near the town and has sent out more than a thousand winners. Terry's son Casey drove at county fairs in Illinois and Wisconsin as a teenager, went off to college and a job managing warehouses, and came

home in 2001 to help his father. He became the leading driver in Chicago, with titles at Maywood Park, at Balmoral Park and, by 2019, six years running at Hawthorne. Another son, Ross, trains and drives from a farm of his own in Indiana. The best horse the family has had was a pacer named Fox Valley Gemini, three times Illinois Horse of the Year. "The horse of a lifetime," Terry Leonard called him.

Horsemen around Marengo who know the Leonards will tell you first that they are kind and generous people, and only after that about the horses.

Casey Leonard also served, until recently, on the board of the United States Trotting Association, as a director for District Five, the district that takes in Illinois. It is the seat Floyd Griebel of Marengo was given in 1956. Seventy years apart, two towns fifteen miles apart, which have been trying to beat each other at football for a century, have each sent a horseman to the same chair in Columbus.

In 2019, in a season when his stable was winning nearly everything in sight, Terry Leonard was asked how the year had gone. "It's been a good year for us," he said. "The only bad part is there isn't more racing in Illinois."

Four ovals

What follows comes from two kinds of evidence, and they should be kept apart. The first is the printed record just quoted. The second is the firsthand knowledge of a Standardbred horseman who lives and trains in Marengo today. Where the two meet, I have said so. Where the local account stands alone, it is offered as local history, and it would be worth someone's time to check it against the county's old aerial photographs and land records.

Start east of town, on Route 176. The Driving Park of 1872, with its amphitheatre and its ninety stalls, is gone. Nothing marks the place where Dow and Molony argued over the start, where John Newman of Elgin said "Go," where George McKesson sat sixty pounds too heavy behind Rocket and let out a few links. That is the first oval, the public one, and it has disappeared.

The second was private. The Griebels' home track, laid out on the family farm, is documented in 1956. By the local account it lay north of the Harmony Road corner. It is not there now. The trucking and excavating business that the Springfield paper mentioned outgrew the horses. The family went into gravel, and in time the pit took the ground where the track had been. Descendants of the family run the gravel and trucking operations today. A training oval that helped put a Marengo man on the board of the United States Trotting Association is now part of a gravel pit. Gravel is what northern Illinois is made of, and a good deal of the county's history has gone the same way.

The third is fading. West of town along Route 20, by the local account, the oval at the old Kidwell place can still be made out, if you know where to look, as a faint ring in the field. It is no longer used, and each season it is a little harder to see. In time it will show only from the air, as a mark in the crops in a dry summer, the way the old driving parks sometimes do.

The fourth kind is alive. The half-mile track the Butenschoens built at Harmony Oaks in 1986, near Harmony Road and Route 23, is still there and still in use. West of town on Route 20, the oval at Windy City Farms is in use too, and the farm's name has appeared as the owner of Standardbred pacers in recent race records. And there are a few horsemen, not many, who live around Marengo and jog and train and ship Standardbreds from there now.

So one track has vanished, one has been swallowed by a gravel pit, one is sinking back into the landscape, and two are still being used. Horses are still being trained to harness in Marengo, Illinois, a hundred and fifty-four years after nine of the town's leading citizens leased a field from Calvin Spencer and went to considerable expense in grading a track.

Marengo was never important to harness racing. It had no Grand Circuit meeting and bred no world champion. That is the reason to have spent so long there. It was one of a thousand towns where the thing took root. What sets it apart is only that so many of the layers can still be read: the driving park in the county history, the race reports in the Rockford papers, a boy's first heat on the road east of town, a director's chair in Columbus, a Hall of Fame driver on Route 20, a new half-mile track in 1986, a family of champions in the next town up the road, and a horse in the crossties this morning.

The old track is gone. The question that built it is still being asked: how fast will this one go?

Still Evolving

The fastest mile ever trotted, as this is written, is 1:48.4. A gelding named Homicide Hunter did it at the Red Mile in 2018. The fastest mile ever paced is 1:45.4, by a stallion named Bulldog Hanover at the Meadowlands in 2022.

Set those beside Boston Blue. In 1818 it was worth a wager that no horse could trot a mile in three minutes. The breed has taken a minute and eleven seconds off that. It has cut the time by two-fifths. No other animal that people race has been improved so far, so fast, and with such good records kept the whole way down.

It is tempting to say the breeders did it. They did some of it. A modern Standardbred is the product of two centuries of selection, and of Hambletonian, Electioneer, Peter the Great, Volomite, Adios, Meadow Skipper, Star's Pride and a few dozen others whose names fill the top lines of every pedigree.

But follow any of those lines down the page and you come to the mares, and the mares in this book were not what a planner would have chosen. One had been crippled in a runaway and was living in a butcher's stable. One lost thirteen straight races to Flora Temple. One was too wild to train, and another, the neighbors said, was worthless. One had a single good lung. One was never raced at all. One sold for $600 and went lame, and one could not be sold. Their sons and grandsons are the breed.

And the breeders had help. The tracks did some of it, and the wheels and the starting gate. The hopples did a good deal. So did all the men like George McKesson, who took a horse stuck at 2:40 and found twelve seconds two other trainers had missed, and who left no account of how.

That is what the Standardbred is. It is not a breed someone designed. It is the running total of an enormous number of small experiments, most of them made by people who had no idea they were making history and wanted only to know if the colt could go. The farmer chose a stallion, and four years later he found out. The trainer changed a shoe, and by Saturday he knew. A man in Buffalo paid $35,000 for a gelding and a man in Indianapolis paid $900 for another, and both of them were right.

The clock has kept the score through all of it. That has been the breed's oddity from the start. It is named for a number, and its whole history can be written as a column of figures getting smaller. But the figures were never the reason. Nobody put up a monument to 2:17¼. They put one up to Hambletonian, and to Green Mountain Maid, and to Goldsmith Maid, and they took Greyhound's stall apart board by board and carried it eight hundred miles so that it would not be lost.

The clock tells us how fast they went. The stories tell us why we cared.

The sport is smaller than it was. It may get smaller yet in some places before it grows in others. The horse does not know that. He is foaled in a clean stall on a farm in Kentucky or Ontario or Sweden or central Illinois, with a pedigree that goes back in an unbroken line to a number in a book, and somebody looks him over on the first morning and wonders.

In a year and a half they will put a harness on him. A few months after that, on some small track with nobody watching, a person who has done this a hundred times will ease him up to speed for a quarter of a mile and glance down at a watch. That person may be in Lexington, or at Solvalla, or in Normandy. He may be on a half-mile oval of dirt and gravel off Route 23 south of Marengo, Illinois, on a cold bright morning, with the trucks going by on the highway and the frost not yet off the infield.

He will look at the watch, and he will think about a different shoe.

It is the same question the two men on the road were asking, before there was a breed. Can we build a better horse?

They are still working on it.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

This is a narrative history, and the notes are kept out of the way of the story. What follows says where the main facts in each part come from, and where the evidence is thinner than the prose might suggest.

Part One: The Road

The early records (Yankee's "reputed" 2:59 in 1806, Boston Blue's authentic three-minute mile in 1818, the New York Trotting Club of 1825, Topgallant) follow Hamilton Busbey, *The Trotting and the Pacing Horse in America* (1904). Messenger's advertisement, his stud itinerary, his death on January 28, 1808, and his burial are from John H. Wallace, *The Horse of America* (1897), as are the descriptions of Mambrino, Abdallah and Bellfounder. Wallace himself says the name of Messenger's importer rests on inference, and the gangplank story has no contemporary source. The Narragansett Pacer has no stud book; the Washington, Burke and Revere stories are undocumented. Figure's parentage is disputed, and the Morgan horse association's preferred account is given as such. Lady Suffolk's purchase and career follow the Harness Racing Museum and the Smithsonian's catalogue of Currier and Ives prints. The "Old Gray Mare" attribution is folklore. Hiram Woodruff's monument inscription is quoted from published biographies.

Part Two: The Horse from Sugar Loaf

The Kent Mare's ancestry and chain of owners, the 1852 trials, the season-by-season stud fees and the physical descriptions of Hambletonian are from Wallace, who collected them from Rysdyk, Seely and their neighbors many years afterward. They are oral history and are presented that way. The foaling date and place follow the Chester Historical Society; the $125 purchase and Rysdyk's wish for a road horse follow the Harness Racing Museum. The claim that Rysdyk borrowed the money could not be traced to an early source. Foal totals for Hambletonian vary between about 1,300 and 1,335. Alexander's Abdallah, Dictator, Green Mountain Maid and the comparison with Blue Bull are from Wallace. Dexter's sale to Bonner at $35,000 on the day of his record is from Busbey and the Museum; the story that his white feet lowered his price is tradition.

Part Three: A Nation at the Rail

Flora Temple, Princess and Goldsmith Maid follow the Museum's biographies, with sale prices also from nineteenth-century sources summarized in standard references. The Museum connects Flora Temple with "Camptown Races"; the chronology makes that unlikely, as the text explains. Sources differ on the price Henry Smith paid for Goldsmith Maid and on her exact earnings. The Standard's adoption on November 19, 1879, and the wording of its first rules are from Wallace. The date the registry was finally closed to outside blood is given differently by different authorities, so the text says only that it happened in the twentieth century. The Grand Circuit's founding follows Britannica and the Circuit's own histories, which do not entirely agree on 1871 versus 1873. Maud S. and Jay-Eye-See follow the Museum; Vanderbilt's reason for selling to Bonner is reported as hearsay. The Stanford and Muybridge account follows the Stanford University Libraries, the Library of Congress holdings, the 1887 Palo Alto catalogue and Sacramento newspapers of June 1878; the $25,000 bet is treated as legend, following the historian Phillip Prodger. Sources give Electioneer's price as $12,000 or $12,500 and the purchase year as 1876 or 1877. The bicycle sulky is credited to Sterling Elliott by the Museum, though other builders also have claims; the attribution of hopples to John Browning is tradition. Star Pointer's mile is dated August 27 or 28, 1897, in different sources. Lou Dillon's two-minute mile at Readville follows Busbey.

The Marengo chapters

The Driving Park Association of 1872 is described in *History of McHenry County, Illinois* (Inter-State Publishing, 1885), pages 748 and 749. All newspaper passages are quoted from the papers themselves: the *Belvidere Standard* of July 27, 1875; the *Marengo Republican* of September 16, 1887; the *Rockford Register* of September 19, 1889, and a second Rockford paper of the same week; the *Freeport Daily Bulletin* of September 23, 1889; the Rockford *Morning Star* of about 1890; the *Marengo Beacon/Republican-News* of June 7 and August 30, 1912, December 2, 1965, and December 3, 1986; the Springfield *State Journal-Register* of November 29, 1956; *The Herald* of Crystal Lake, August 16, 1974; *The Marengo Beacon News* of August 3, 1978; and the *Northwest Herald* of May 6, 1987. Every one of these concerns Marengo, Illinois, and not the town of the same name in Iowa. The inaugural meeting of September 30, 1874, is from the Marengo paper of October 3, 1874, and the June 1875 meeting from the Chicago *Inter Ocean* of June 17, 1875. The Leonard family of Harvard follows *Harness Racing Update* of September 11, 2019, the Illinois Harness Horsemen's Association and Casey Leonard's biography on the U.S. Trotting Association's list of

directors; the football rivalry is described as McHenry County's oldest, then in its ninety-eighth meeting, by the *Northwest Herald* of September 23, 2017. The identification of the track Floyd Griebel remembered on Route 176 with the Driving Park of 1872 is an inference. The present-day condition of the Griebel, Kidwell, Harmony Oaks and Windy City Farms ovals rests on the firsthand account of a Standardbred horseman who lives and trains in Marengo, and has not been independently checked against aerial photographs or land records.

Part Four: The Century of the Stopwatch

Dan Patch follows the Dan Patch historical organizations of Oxford, Indiana, and Savage, Minnesota, the Museum, and the Sangamon County Historical Society for the Springfield mile. Crowd figures for his Minnesota State Fair appearances vary. Myron McHenry's character, the Brighton Beach heat of August 16, 1901, and his dismissal follow the Museum's biography, D. R. Martin's article "The Most Wonderful Horse in the World" in *American Heritage* (1990), and newspaper reports summarized in standard references; no ruling against McHenry over that heat has been found. His assault on a rival driver at Freeport is from the Freeport *Daily Journal* of August 5, 1891. No report has been found of McHenry driving at Marengo itself. Peter the Great, Nervolo Belle, Peter Volo, Margaret Parrish, Margaret Arion, Greyhound, Rosalind, Adios, Delvin Miller, Lady Ann Reed and Flicka Frost follow the Museum's Hall of Fame biographies. Accounts differ on the date and buyer in Peter the Great's $50,000 sale and on the details of Adios's 1955 sale. The detail of Margaret Parrish's lung is the Museum's. *Born to Trot* is a novel, and Gibson White's illness is given as Marguerite Henry tells it. The starting gate follows the standard accounts of Stephen Phillips and Roosevelt Raceway. The Roosevelt and Yonkers episodes of 1951 to 1954 follow *Time* magazine of October 5, 1953, and March 15, 1954, and the New York State Archives; the sources report resignations and disclosures but no convictions, the amount Levy paid Costello is given differently in different accounts, and Costello's remark is reported at second hand.

Part Five: The World Answers Back

The French chapter follows the published histories of the Trotteur Français and the Prix d'Amérique. French sources give 1906 or 1907 for the first stud book. The Florestan episode and the Star's Pride count follow *Harness Racing Update*. Jamin's artichokes follow Standardbred Canada and *Sports Illustrated*, which disagree about how much of the affair was arranged. The Swedish figures are from a 2016 paper presented to the

European Federation of Animal Science and from Swedish trotting histories. Mack Lobell's sale price is a reported figure. Nan's Catch and Moni Maker follow the Museum.

Part Six: Home

The situation in Illinois in 2026 follows the Illinois Racing Board, *Harness Racing Update* and the U.S. Trotting Association's news service through August of that year, and may have changed by the time this is read. The fair dates are from the Illinois Department of Agriculture and local reports. The Amish use of Standardbreds is widely reported in journalism and by the horsemen quoted here, though no formal count exists. The records of Homicide Hunter and Bulldog Hanover were the fastest on the books when this was written.

This book is an original narrative. Sources were used to establish facts, and short quotations are attributed where they appear. Where sources conflict, or where a good story could not be verified, the text says so.