

Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

The Petersburg Racing Association

By

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"One Saturday afternoon in 1840, a number of Kentuckians were assembled on the principal street corner of Petersburg for the purpose of devising ways and means of organizing a racing association, and of constructing a course, over which weekly races between the horses of the vicinity could take place. Prominent in this assembly were John Norris, Captain Thomas Porter, A. E. Piatt, John Fowler, James Early, Neil Riddell, Harvey Parker, and Robert Mosby, -- all well-to-do farmers, each the proud possessor ~~was~~ of one or more thoroughbreds. Their unconventional deliberations resulted, a week later, in the completion of a track on the farm of John Norris, a half a mile above town. As the months passed, the new association thrived in a remarkable manner. Its grounds became a popular resort for sporting men from miles around. Each of them had some or other sort of a horse to enter in the races, and a diminutive dandy to ride it. They drank whiskey, fought occasionally, bet on the races, and enjoyed themselves hugely. In this manner a full year passed away, and the second annual racing season opened auspiciously one Saturday afternoon in early August.

As may be imagined, the accommodations were of a very crude order. Seats were constructed of planks placed across angles of the "worn" fence inclosing the field; and when these were filled, late arrivals were obliged to content themselves with lolling about upon the sward, or with moving about in restless anticipation of coming events.

An aged dandy, named Dave, the property of John Norris, kept bar. His establishment was unpretentious and unique. Across an angle of the fence, about waist-high, he had placed a couple of broad planks, upon which the remainder of his outfit -- consisting of a number of gourd dippers and a large stone jug -- was conveniently arranged. Standing in the triangular recess behind the bar, Dave served "John Barleycorn" to all who cared to drink, which were the entire assembly, himself included.

The racing races waxed exciting, the participants alternately miserable and happy, and the spectators increasingly boisterous. Near the middle of the afternoon, wild hilarity prevailed, and several fights took place, one of which resulted in the complete demolition of the bar.

John Norris became involved in a quarrel with Tom Rozell, the bully of the neighborhood, whereupon the latter struck him. In retaliation for this indignity to his beloved master, who, owing to too generous patronage of the bar, was unfit for active service, Dave raised the heavy jug, shouting, "I'll tek Mars John's pa't, ef I dies fo' hit." With those words heflung the vessel with unerring force, striking Rozell, amidship and sending him reeling. Then he fled for his life across the field, with the enraged bully in hot pursuit.

Norris, becoming incensed at some adverse criticism on the part of the reckless crowd, cut a green buckeye club, and plunged into the assembly, delivering stunning blows right and left. This aggressive action on his part precipitated a long-pending free-for-all fight, and pandemonium reigned for the space of an hour. Men who had no participatory interest in the progress of the affray sought a more congenial atmosphere. A number of typical "Kentucky Colonels" plunged over a precipitous bluff overlooking the river, and, upon regaining their equilibrium, fought until they were in water considerably over their heads, having their ardor some what cooled during the immersion. Captain Porter, ~~an~~ a veteran of 1812, who had obtained a position of vantage on the topmost rail of the fence corner so lately and expeditiously vacated by the colored bartender, was struck by a random boulder, and over-turned among the rank growth of horseweeds beyond, where, deeming discretion the better part of valor, he concluded to remain.

That day witnessed the end of the Petersburg Racing Association, as well as the amicable relations of several prominent families. The sport was never resumed in that neighborhood. The good old days of copper-distilled intoxication, fisticuffs, and kindred pleasures faded slowly away and forever; and today live but few men, who, as boys, stood upon that long forgotten race-course."