

## New Members

### Life

Jane & Michael Kearney

### Patron

Mankato Business Products/Mr. Robert Dale

### Couple

Mr. & Mrs. Edward Epple  
 Mr. & Mrs. J. Pfau  
 Mr. & Mrs. Lee Snlberg  
 Dr. & Mrs. R.J. Townsend  
 Mr. & Mrs. Waldo R. Jaax

### Annual Individual

Scott Taylor  
 Dr. William E. Lass  
 Marilyn J. Lass  
 Mrs. Martin A. Jenson  
 Ms. Kathleen Rosen  
 Mrs. Harry Meyering  
 Jane E. Van Sickle  
 Phyllis George  
 David Cowan

\* \* \* \* \*

## Special Thanks

We sincerely wish to thank a very special group of tour guides for being "superior" ambassadors for the Blue Earth County Historical Society. Their energy, enthusiasm, adaptability, and willingness to learn has been greatly appreciated. We salute these "special friends of the Blue Earth County Historical Society:

Ruth Nuessle	Brad Eichstadt
Delilah Keenan	Marion Harten
Pauline Hassinger	Mike Wiig
Chuck Campbell	

**Special thanks** to Ms. Sharon L. Kimble, a student in the Parks and Recreation Dept. at MSU, for contributing her project on "National Register Historic Sites Dinner." This was a mock project for a class requirement.

**Special thanks** to Mr. Elmer Goodrich for allowing us to use his portable display panels.

**Special thanks** to Al Mathes for his valuable contribution for our new membership brochure.

## AROUND THE COUNTY



The Blue Earth County Historical Society is pleased to be sponsoring a "Box Social Auction" and two performances of the "Homestead Players" readers theatre troupe on Saturday, June 29, 1985. The "Homestead Players" will perform at 3:30 p.m. and at 7:00 p.m. The "Box Social Auction" will begin at 5:00 p.m., at Summit Center, 518 South 5th St., Mankato.

In the traditional sense, a box social was intended to be a mixer or courting event. Young ladies brought a boxed supper for two and the young men bid on their "favorite" ladies culinary contribution. The winning bid or highest bidder got the boxed supper, as well as the girl to share supper with. In order to entice the young men to bid on their particular box, the young ladies would decorate the boxes in a festive manner. It is suspected that pre-arranged agreements about which box to bid on may have been made by amorous couples.

In keeping with this traditional form of mixer, we would encourage the ladies to bring a box supper prepared for two and encourage your "special" fella' to bid on it. Sloppy Joe plate supper with dessert will be available at the cost of \$1.50 per person if there is a shortage of bidders to boxes. Bidding on the box suppers will begin with a minimum bid of \$1.50 for each prepared boxed supper.

A contest for the most festive decorated box will begin the bidding. Prizes will be offered to the first, second, and third place winners. We wish to encourage young and old, couples, singles, and families to participate. Come to the early "Homestead Players" performance and stay for the Box Social Auction, come for the Box Social Auction and stay for the performance after, or join us for the performance only.

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If you wish to submit an item for the "Around The County" section of the newsletter, please write or call Jan, 345-4154 before the 10th of the month preceding publication.

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### Sources (Horse Racing)

*Mankato Free Press*, Special Illustrated Edition, December 1895, February 19, 1949, December 29, 1955; *Mankato Independent*, February 17, 1859; *Mankato Review*, June 30, 1892, June 25, 1901, June 25, 1907; Interview with Ernest Hanson; Research assistance, Audrey Hicks; Illustrations, Blue Earth County Historical Society archives.

Blue Earth County  
 Historical Society  
 606 South Broad  
 Mankato, MN 56001

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BLUE EARTH COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

July 1985

## Calendar of Events

- July 29 Homestead Players, "*When We Were Young*" - Summit Center, Mankato  
 3:30 p.m. Performance  
 5:00 p.m. Box Social/Auction  
 7:00 p.m. Performance
- July 14 *Bend of the River Festival Parade* (watch for the Blue Earth County Historical Society float)
- July 21 "*Tator Days*" - Eagle Lake  
 Homestead Players, "*When We Were Young*"  
 American Legion Post #617  
 3:30 p.m. Performance
- July 23 *Dinner Theatre* - Amboy  
 Homestead Players, "*When We Were Young*"  
 American Legion Post #276  
 6:30 p.m. Social  
 7:00 p.m. Dinner  
 8:00 p.m. Performance  
 Reservations Suggested: 674-3800
- July 24 "*Gathering a Family History*",  
 Children's Wednesday Workshop
- August 1-4 *Blue Earth County Fair* - Garden City Fairgrounds.  
 BECHS exhibits and films
- August 3 *Minnesota Valley Regional Library*  
 - Mankato. Homestead Players,  
 "*When We Were Young*"  
 2:00 p.m. Performance

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## Horse Racing

### The Early Years in Blue Earth County

The opening of Minnesota's new track at Canterbury Downs recalls an interest in horse racing enjoyed in Blue Earth County as early as the 1850's. By the 1880's enthusiasm had grown to such an extent that the Mankato area was able to host the largest racing event ever known to Minnesota at that time.

Before tracks were built for racing, horse owners took to the streets. During the winter in the late 1850's, horse races were a Sunday event on Broad or Front Streets in Mankato. A. Anderson, a Mankato artist who sketched the scene, said that as a boy he had witnessed the Broad Street races, even as late as the 1880's after the Driving Park and Sibley Park tracks were built. Among the horse owners he remembered were Dr. J.C. Curryer, R.H. Pay, and Bill Spornitz.

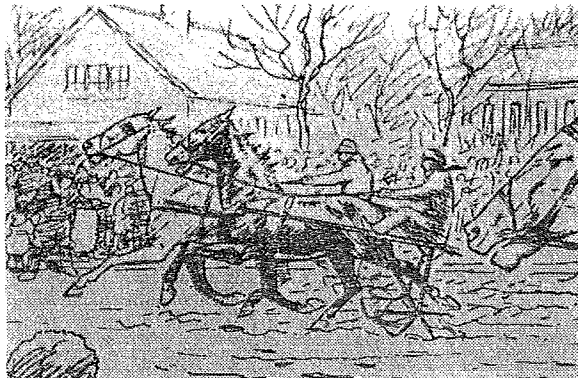
Not everyone shared the excitement of the races, however, as expressed in an editorial comment in the February 17, 1859, *Independent*:

The practice of some of our owners of fast horses of racing through the public streets is one attended with great danger to pedestrians and is becoming of such frequent occurrence as to demand public notice and condemnation. It is an offense punishable by stringent penalties in most towns and cities of the population of Mankato, and doubtless would be here, but for the fact that we have no municipal organization.

And particularly does it deserve the most unqualified condemnation of the community when the day selected for a trial of speed through the public streets is the Sabbath. If we are correctly informed as to the proceedings at the match on Front Street last Sunday, it was an exhibition that would have impressed a stranger very unfavorably as to the morals of the community. A decent respect for public sentiment, if they have none for the day, should be sufficient to induce owners of fancy stock to select a more appropriate day and thoroughfare for their trials of speed.

According to an undated news article from the Blue Earth County Historical Society's archives, "the noble horse was in the prime of popularity during the 1870's, and anyone who professed to any sporting blood at all talked wisely of 'the races.'" At this time the Driving Park Association incorporated, maintaining a mile track in Germania Park for races, usually held in conjunction with fairs.

Fairs and horse racing interests appeared to work together for reciprocal benefit. The races helped bring crowds to the fairs, and the fairs provided the opportunity for horse owners to compete for honors. Fine blooded stock raced on the Driving Park track, with good prizes given the winning horses. Local management even arranged hurdle races for the English patrons attending. A Mankato fair in 1915 recorded 74 entries, the largest in the history of any fair or racing event in the county to that date. Among the entries were two descendants of the Great Dan Patch: a trotter, Bright Patch, and a pacer, Mert Patch. Horse races were an attraction at the Blue Earth County Fair and a new track was built in 1899. The races were discontinued, however, in the 1920's when a child ran on to the unfenced track and was struck and seriously injured by a horse. Shortly after the incident, all race tracks were required to be fenced.



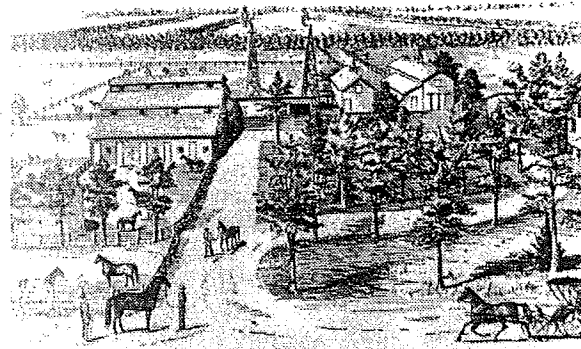
Horse racing on Broad Street in Mankato - 1880

Besides fairs, various other celebrations or gatherings scheduled horse races. Slated for the Fourth of July celebration at Lake Crystal in 1885, for example, was the racing of two classes of trotters with a purse of \$150 to be portioned to the winners and national rules to govern; A free-for-all running race with a \$60 purse and Jockey Club rules to govern; and a matched running race for \$25 a side between William McLaughlan's Baldy and Peter Swenson's Swissboy. At an M.B.A.\* annual picnic in Sibley Park June 1901, 10,000 people witnessed excellent horse racing, with Harry Halstead winning the plaudets of the crowd for handling his horse in a manner comparable to young jockey Rieff, who recently rode the horse that won the English Derby.

But horse races were not confined to being fair and festival attractions. They were also promoted by racing circuits, organizations of horsemen who scheduled

\*Complete name of the organization unidentified.

races in a circuit of towns. A southern Minnesota Circuit formed in 1891 included Tracy, Winona, Rochester, Owatonna, Mankato, Albert Lea and Austin. Purses and stakes at that time amounted to \$2500. Officers of the Mankato contingent were Henry Himmelman, Jr., president; C.H. Saulpaugh, vice-president; W.B. Davis, secretary; and George Pond, treasurer.



The J.C. Curryer farm near Lake Crystal (from *The Standard . . . Atlas . . . of Blue Earth County, 1895*).

It was an earlier 1886 Minnesota Circuit that held a record-breaking three days of races. The 70 entries totaled the largest ever known to that date in Minnesota, with horses entered from New York, Manitoba, Dakota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Nebraska, and Missouri, as well as Minnesota. As a featured attraction, four of the fastest horses in the United States competed for purses of \$500: the world renowned pacer Mike Wilkes from New York with a mile record of 2:15¼; the pacer Silver Tail (2:16¼); and trotters Phyllis (2:15¼) and Belle F (2:20¼). The June 15, 1886, *Mankato Review* claimed the three-day event to have "the best field of horses ever gathered west of Chicago."

Perhaps one reason for the high interest in horse racing in the Mankato area's earlier days was the abundance of good breeding farms in Blue Earth County. In a *Mankato Free Press* Special Edition, December 1895, Dr. R.M. Dodd, a Northfield veterinarian, lists a number of creditable horse farm owners that bred and trained race horses: Martin Jordan, N.P. Lee, John E. Neff, E.P. Rutan, C.D. Seeley, Dr. J.C. Curryer, Henry Himmelman, Jr., and C.H. Piper. In later years Clifford Thro became prominent, entering many of his pacers and trotters in eastern United States events.

Of the above horsemen, two who are often mentioned in accounts of fairs, horse racing, or breeding are Dr. J.C. Curryer and Henry Himmelman, Jr. Dr. Curryer was a Mankato dentist, who with his son owned a horse farm in Lake Crystal. For several years, he published a

monthly journal, the *Minnesota Horseman*, which he sold in 1893 to a Minneapolis syndicate, preferring to give his attention to horse breeding and other interests. Dr. Curryer had a reputation for being most competent in the handling and development of the horse and lectured in several states on the subject. He imported a number of fine bred sires from Kentucky, thereby improving the stock in the county. Dr. Dodd said of him, "We cannot estimate the value of the blood the doctor has introduced into Blue Earth County, and no breeder has been more zealous in this direction."

Henry Himmelman, Jr., operator of the old City Hotel in Mankato, was also a leading horseman in Blue Earth County. He was a promoter of the Southern Minnesota Livestock and Fair Association (1884), the Mankato Fair and Blue Earth County Agricultural Association (1905), and was president of the 1891 Southern Minnesota Circuit. Much involved in the racing world, he owned at one time an 80-horse stable and a 12-horse breeding stable. Most famous among his horses was Senator Wilkinson, foaled in 1892. An article in the *Mankato Free Press*, February 19, 1949, describes him as a "seal brown beauty, trained and driven exclusively by Charles Seeley . . . who developed him into the best trotter in Blue Earth County." He set a record for the mile trot at the Indiana State Fair in 1897, his time of 2:13½ standing for many years and bringing national honors to the horse, its owner, and Mankato. A special stable which Himmelman built for Senator Wilkinson with his name and number over the entrance stood across from the armory until it was demolished in 1949. After his death, the forelegs and hide of the famous horse were preserved and displayed, eventually coming into the possession of Himmelman's daughter, Mrs. Jay Mickelson.

In the early years of horse racing, the Mankato area was considered a good breeding, training and racing center. In his previously mentioned article about horses, Dr. Dodd concludes, "Mankato's horses have a national reputation through the performances of her pacers and trotters on many a race track, in the stables of nabobs of cities, and lovers of fine bred horses at home."

With such a heritage at this, Blue Earth County's horse racing enthusiasts should take quite readily to the grandstand or turf of Canterbury Downs.