

MEMORIES

Herb Rugg — local harness racing legend

Dec. 3, 1988

(George A. Parkhurst, a resident of Westford and Kennebunkport, Maine, is a well-known thespian and historian whose family has lived in the Chelmsford area since the mid-1600's. He knew Herb Rugg personally.)

By GEORGE PARKHURST

LOWELL — It has been approximately 50 years since the nationally-renowned harness racing figure, Herb Rugg, sat in the sulky behind his favorite horse "Gypsy Star," which he personally trained for stardom.

Rugg, a prominent Lowell businessman and sportsman, was a pioneer member of the Metropolitan Driving Club and a founder of the Golden Cove Trotting Park in Chelmsford, which thrived for many years at a site which is now the Chelmsford Mall parking lot, near the junction of Routes 110 and 495.

That track was a gravel oval. There was a small stable for the competing horsemen, along with a small wooden tower at the finish line which served as a judges' stand.

Racing meets were held on holidays and probably at other times, starting before World War I and through at least 1927. All heats were half-mile with a purse of \$150 in each class. According to press reports, a race on Independence Day in 1922 between five women drivers drew a crowd of



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some 2,000.

If you were to stand near the entrance to Bradlees very late at night with hardly any traffic on the highways, and let your mind slip into a time capsule, you might be able to hear the pounding of horses hooves as they sped toward the finish line.

And peering through the dust with binoculars, one could probably spot a white-haired gentleman, with cigar protruding from his bearded chin, in the sulky behind the lead horse.

One of the city's most colorful pre-World War II characters, Rugg was among those venerable horsemen that conducted the old sulky races on the ice of the Merrimack River.

He was familiar to Centralville residents, for it was in this section of the city where he trained his large stable of trotters at the "First Street Oval" — now the approach to the Hunts Falls Bridge.

For a good many years, Rugg operated an Army and Navy store in the Rugg Block, a downtown landmark which he owned. Located between Cherry Webb & Touraine and Jordan Marsh, it figured in a major business transaction around 1940 and was razed.

Rugg was an annual visitor to the Hambletonian — the Kentucky Derby of trotting at Goshen, N.Y. — and the seasonal trotting meets at the Goodtime track. He was considered a leading member of the Grand Circuit.

His horses raced on tracks throughout the country and he had a legion of friends in Orford, Fairlee and Burlington, Vermont; Boston and Lowell.

The most famous of his horses — "Gypsy Star" and "Napoleon Direct" — flirted with world records on many appearances.

Rugg was forced to retire from racing following a serious accident at a Bridge Street restaurant in 1937 at the age of 87 — the oldest active harness racing driver in the country at that time. After undergoing three operations and losing



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most of his sight, Rugg died at St. Joseph's Hospital in March of 1942.

During the latter stages of his life, Rugg, who most believe was a life-long bachelor, lived with a cousin at 67 Vernon St. He is buried in the Lowell Cemetery on Lawrence Street.

An amateur photographer from Chelmsford, George Axon, recorded some of the races at Golden Cove Park on July 4, 1923 on 16mm black and white film. A copy of that film, owned by the Chelmsford Historical Society, was made into a videocassette. — COMMISSION

The automobiles parked beside the track and the clothing of spectators might appear strange to the present generation